

CHAPTER ONE

The Recruits

* * *

Jason Primrose



ALLISTER ADAMS

Washington, DC, April 2026

Allister ran into a hulking soldier on patrol while exiting the tram.

“Sorry, sir,” he mumbled. Of decent size himself, he hoped an apology would avoid confrontation. The city’s hired help had been on edge lately. A random number flashed across the screen of a titanium alloy communication device; a different one had appeared every morning at the same time for the past four days. The call went to voicemail as Allister reached the top of the escalator with his hands in the front pockets of his sleeveless, zip-up hoodie. Uncomfortable stares from strangers who shared his morning route annoyed him that day, even though they weren’t out of the ordinary. He always thought it was because they secretly knew he was different, but his mother told him it was because he was handsome. Mothers tend to say those types of things.

Methane and petroleum, predominant smells of a city focused on military force and manufacturing. Allister navigated the crowd impatiently, hoping to get out of toxic open air as soon as possible. Plus he was late to a minimum-wage job as a barista. If only he hadn’t missed the first tram. Desolate gray skies of an April morning reminded him what fall used to look like, minus the heat. Subtle shifts in seasons due to climate change left eight months of summer and four months of something like limbo between fall and winter.

Jason Primrose

An obnoxious chime sound prompted him to check the device affixed to his wrist. What could be said in a five-second-long voicemail? Not a thing, it sounded like trying to find a radio station while driving through the mountains.

The Cynque watch was a genius invention that had taken cellular technology to the next level. Although government issued, it felt like US citizens chose to have it because “Cynque made life easier.” An animated billboard above the tram station reiterated a half-assed marketing tag line for the watch, while highlighting its recreational features.

If it weren't for thousands of military workers scrambling for caffeinated beverages to start their day or keep their day going, the coffee shop where Allister worked wouldn't exist. Most days he arrived to a line of workers waiting. Lucky they were only particular about how their beverages were served and not when. It helped that many of them had known him since his junior year of high school as the owner's first hire. The shop's popularity had grown over the years because Allister remembered *exactly* how everyone liked his or her beverages.

He arrived at 7:15 a.m. There was no line. Anxiety, mixed with spring heat and poor wardrobe choice, had formed patches of sweat on the short-sleeved white Oxford. He probably didn't need the hoodie, sleeves or not. The shop owner, Mr. Skinner, stood behind the counter like a father waiting for his daughter to show up after missing curfew. Allister bypassed a few stragglers sitting at elevated booth tables with eyes on the floor.

“What am I supposed to do with you?” Mr. Skinner

The Andromeda Project

asked.

“My alarm didn’t go off.” Lie. “Then I missed the train this morning.” Truth. “Then I got stopped by one of the patrols.” Lie. He shrugged. “I’ve been having trouble at home...I don’t know.”

“You know what? You’re fired,” Mr. Skinner said. He removed a few metal mugs and packets of raw brown sugar from the counter. “You don’t appreciate this opportunity.”

Allister felt a strange sense of relief, but it transformed into panic before becoming enjoyable. Those excuses normally worked.

“Please don’t fire me. My mom is going to be so pissed.” Allister’s fists hovered in front of his chest for emphasis.

“No more chances,” Mr. Skinner said, moving away. “I warned you last week.”

“I promise I won’t ever be late again. You don’t understand; I *need* this job.” The back of his hand covered an accidental yawn. A foreclosure notice alongside letters from lawyers in yesterday’s mail had caused a restless and brief sleep.

“You should’ve acted like it.” Mr. Skinner held a handful of ministraws. “I’m sorry.”

A replacement minion had already filled his shoes and nodded sympathetically while brewing a fresh cup of coffee. “No, that’s decaf,” Allister overheard his former boss say as he exited the shop. At least he wouldn’t be outperformed.

Allister sat alone on the railing outside, watching soldiers audit passersby about information on their Cynque watches. Their inquisition was less than gentle,

and anyone without an occupation was typically apprehended. Loitering in the area had become a huge crime after the bombings. Two street patrols approached him and the unknown number called again.

“You should answer your phone. Might be somebody important callin’,” a third uniformed man shouted, walking in front of the approaching patrols. “He’s with me.” They acknowledged the captain’s authority and retreated. He wore a chic jacket, buttoned to the neck, and trousers fitted to his formidable frame, both the color of cabernet. Golden medals accented the jacket’s rich color, but Allister had identified the man’s military ranking from the hat on his neatly shaved head.

“Is this what you wanna do with your life?” the captain asked, with an accent you’d only find on a farm in southeast Kentucky. There was a distinct intelligence to it.

Another annoying chime distracted Allister from studying the stranger in more depth. Direct deposit of his last paycheck. The national minimum wage had hit \$25 that January and it still wasn’t enough. “Are you talking to me?” Allister asked.

The captain pulled out an archaic brochure. Archaic compared to the glass tablet tucked under his arm. “No, I’m talking to the other unemployed kid about to get arrested.” *The Andromeda Project* was printed in big bold letters across the top. “My superiors have an interest in you.”

Allister opened it and skimmed the text. “This isn’t for me.”

“You don’t know what’s for you,” the captain muttered. “I’ve got an opportunity that’s gonna change your life.” He rocked back on shin-high, lace-up boots with his

The Andromeda Project

wrinkled forehead and smirk carefully hidden under the hat. “Tell ya what, the test is at one this afternoon. If you pass, it’ll get you off the hook for a couple of weeks with these losers.” The stranger’s head cocked to armed soldiers in the street. “No obligation to go through the process.”

“How did you find me?” Allister asked, as if he didn’t know the answer.

“Take the test; then we’ll talk.” The man flipped the brochure and pointed to the address on the back. It was two stops away. “And, Allister, don’t be late.”

ALLISTER ADAMS

Washington, DC, April 2026

After performing well during the initial testing, there came a second consultation and a phone interview. The Andromeda Project’s recruiter, Captain Jay Brandt, invited him in for an in-person meeting. It had been a few days but a rigorous process.

You’re the only hope! Join the Andromeda Project Today. Allister scanned the once-glossy inside flap for a deeper set of details in the vague brochure. Hadn’t seen one of them in five or more years, printing on paper was banned. *HELP SAVE HUMANITY* was spelled in caps on the back. Strangely generic language, not even specific to the United States. He expected to read something, somewhere, about serving his country but found only babble for a sucker without purpose. In this case, it was him.

Allister went to place the brochure back in his drawer, next to the letters he’d plucked from the mail over the past

week. Eyes landed on his seven-year-old self cheesing next to his father, Patrick, in a photo. Patrick's shirt had the same intricate logo as the one plastered all over the brochure. Minor details. It was like looking at a magazine with a stranger on the cover. Allister hadn't ever really known him; one day he was just gone. Nostalgia, sorrow, even admiration were absent during role call for his feelings about the situation, but indifference always managed to show up on time.

Allister popped out of bed without stopping the automatic blinds from retracting. The bright but cloudy sky invaded his room as he got dressed. He tripped over his hoverboard but grabbed the desk before he face-planted into a pile of dirty laundry on the floor. The smell of a southern breakfast filled the hallway outside his room, and he bounded down the stairs wearing his best slacks, church shoes, and a partially wrinkled white button-down.

All of his former classmates were enlisted in the military or off at one of the top schools in the nation. At twenty years old, it was about time he did something worthwhile, and he was excited for his mother's reaction. Their relationship had become strained over the years. Allister assumed it was because of his performance at work and lack of a future plan, but he was wrong.

"You're planning to what?!" Dolores screamed in a fading southern drawl. Her face was contorted with fear. The corners of her beautiful eyes were lined with crow's feet but carefully applied makeup hid years of worry. She stood in the kitchen with a remote in her hand, eggs scrambled on the stove behind her. "You, you have no idea the lengths I've gone to, to keep you," Dolores whispered, "away from those people."

The Andromeda Project

The other hand moved to her hip, waiting for his response.

Allister was a little hurt she didn't recognize the effort he'd put into his outfit. "Mom, what could they do to me?" He struggled to tie one of his father's old ties then gave up. The black belt didn't match the brown loafers; he cursed under his breath.

"Cut you up into pieces, study you like an experiment..." Dolores turned the heat on the stove down using the remote. Overall she'd aged well, cheekbones as strong as her will and a jawline as loyal as her heart. Her wavy hair was a field of caramel and honey-colored strands with a few gray streaks in the front.

"Are you listening to yourself?" Allister asked her. He hated when they talked about his anomalies. "Who cares if they're looking for me? Maybe it's a good thing."

He towered over her but shrank back when Dolores rushed up to him and grabbed his shirt. "You think it's a *good thing*? Wait until they find out what you can do. They'll want to duplicate you!" She was hysterical and threw her hands up, walking away.

Allister fixed his shirt then sat down and took another shot at the tie.

"Little Allister clones," Dolores said. Gesturing like each hand held an action figure, she lined them up side-by-side. "I'm not being dramatic. I know how this works. Trust me." She returned to cup his chin. Dolores softened at the sight, going over his neatly combed hair with her hand, remembering how he used to prefer it messy. She tied his tie for him. "I don't want anything to happen to you."

"Awww, geez," Allister said, unable to take her worried

stare any longer. “I get a free education and I can help pay off the car, help with the house. You can relax a little bit. You work too hard to support us. It’s gotta stop.”

Dolores looked away. There was guilt in her face he couldn’t place. Parents knew how to lie too. Allister’s curiosity rose, but with his sense of urgency. He was late.

“If you want to help, clean your room, wash your clothes, or take out the trash once in a while. You don’t need to get mixed up with *them*.”

Allister blamed their constant relocation for his social inadequacy and decision not to go to college, but he was tired of feeling worthless.

“Did you clean your room yet?” his mother asked him.

“I’ll do it when I get back, I promise.” He kissed her on the cheek and left.

The sun was midway through the morning sky, and it was already over ninety degrees. He took a deep breath, wishing for fresh air, but got the smell of a city that was overworked and underpaid. Humidity stuck to his skin like a jacket he couldn’t take off.

Allister bypassed two security patrols with his head down. The station’s kiosk computer deducted funds from the Cynque watch and opened two glass doors to let him through. Catching the train as “doors closing” echoed from a woman’s computer voice had less to do with timing and more to do with luck.

Allister traveled on the tram through the new Washington, DC, crammed like a white dandelion in a grass field between a horde of new-age military workers. A strange sensation filled his body when he locked eyes with a middle-aged woman dressed in civilian clothing. They were surrounded by G. I. Joe action figures, same

The Andromeda Project

color palette but more sophisticated attire. At least Allister wasn't the only misfit in the bunch. He decided to cool off by moving his shirt up and down by the buttons.

Washington, DC, had transformed considerably since his youth. He looked out the window at the monochromatic color scheme of the city. The United States had kept up the questionable habit of invading countries without democracies, and North Korea had thought it best to show how serious they were about having foreign military on their land. "Think twice" accurately represented the verbal translation of the warning bombing in 2020, and the American people said good-bye to the White House in an explosion that killed the vice president, plus four hundred or so tourists. Many prominent government agencies, along with the president-elect and all members of the House, Senate, and Supreme Court, were moved out of DC permanently. The critically damaged Capitol building and any other places where government affairs once transpired became museums.

Allister shuffled off the tram with the crowd of people heading into work and followed them above ground. They scanned their Cynque watches a second time as they entered the street, patrols commanding them to slow down and move one at a time.

"You there, stop pushing," one of them yelled to Allister. Allister put his hands up defensively. Looking aggressive was the curse of being tall and muscular. Curiously, he searched for his fellow oddball but couldn't find her.

DC's core had turned into a military recruitment and training hub, also hosting a booming business in weapons development via large manufacturing plants and testing

sites. Anyone smart enough took their money, businesses, and families, and fled to other parts of the country. Anyone who stayed was snuffed out or absorbed into the life. Suburbs like Alexandria, Arlington, Burke, and Bethesda naturally transitioned into miles of identical housing where only the families of those associated with the military or secret government operations lived.

An intimidating circular fortress before him blocked the morning sun. Glass windows covered its front, giving it an air of transparency, but the back and sides were lined with metal panels. It stood out against older buildings in the area like royalty. There were no identifying markers save for “400 Pennsylvania Avenue” in block metal letters. He entered the enormous revolving doors and scanned through the machine in the lobby. His watch read 8:57 a.m.

“Welcome, Allister Adams,” it said.

The security guards frisked him aggressively before sending him through a body inspection. Allister adjusted the device on his wrist to wipe nervous sweat from beneath. It read 8:59 a.m. Without a confirmed arrival time, his interview would be canceled.

The machine dinged with joy. “Allister Adams appointment arrival confirmed,” the computer said and directed him to the elevators.

The woman from the tram was stopped before entering the building. Between closing metal doors, Allister watched the commotion of her being detained.

DOLORES ADAMS

Washington, DC, April 2026

The Andromeda Project

Allister went through unnatural physical and mental changes a few years after his father's untimely death. Dolores's concern was well placed; the changes were way too early for puberty. Dolores consulted the top doctors in London; they'd never seen anything like it.

Phone calls from unknown numbers flooded in after those few visits, and Dolores's worst fears were realized when she saw strange people lurking outside of the entrance to their Southampton flat. They left the country.

Before Allister entered high school, they'd moved from London to Moscow to Seoul to Hong Kong to Rio. She'd spent enough in prepaid phones to purchase a luxury vehicle, and had to cut off all ties with family and friends. It was more for their protection than hers, and the relief of not looking out the window for trespassers outweighed the sadness of isolation.

Dolores finally settled on Washington, DC, despite her worries about being found. The Mandatory Identification Act of 2022 put Dolores and Allister back on the radar. Cynque watches carried all personal information plus a tracking chip. They brought entertainment, social sharing, and media to life via holographic projections for younger generations. Their more practical uses for banking, scheduling, and communication catered to older ones. But Dolores knew Cynque's true purpose: an omniscient government.

Dolores wandered around the kitchen, pushing in two chairs at the dining-room table and rearranging centerpieces. The eggs had been done for some time, but the feeling in her stomach reminded her of the day her late husband, Patrick Adams, received his offer letter from the Andromeda Project in the mail. She didn't think the

alien that landed in Cumberland Falls in 1995 was serious about having Patrick build a ship to get back to the Andromeda galaxy. But the fallen king of Uragon was more than serious, he was adamant, determined. Patrick was the one to complete the task and in return, Neight Caster offered to give them something they desperately wanted but couldn't have. A child.

Dolores opened the cupboard and carefully moved all of the wine glasses. Behind them was the remainder of their savings in neatly folded bills. She wasn't ready to explain to Allister what it all meant. She'd have to accept some facts as well.

There were many reasons for their detachment from each other. As a family they worked like an atom... Perhaps Patrick was meant to be the neutron. Everyone knows what happens when an atom splits. Dolores's devastation led her to an emotional shutdown. Material possessions, accompanied by exotic travel, were meant to fill the void. Dolores never spoke about the man she considered her soul mate. By the time she started feeling again, Allister wasn't interested. He'd been denied the opportunity to deal with the loss of his father, and it was too late for him to go back.

At first the effects weren't noticeable, but changes in her son crept in like arsenic poisoning. Allister continued to excel in grade school, but his intelligence alienated him from the other children. By the age of fourteen he'd mastered all Roman and most Nordic, Germanic, and Slavic languages. By sixteen he'd added all Southeast Asian languages and Hawaiian to his impressive roster. By age seventeen his knowledge and understanding of mathematics, science, and history was far beyond human

The Andromeda Project

comprehension. He knew things about planets and civilizations that hadn't been discovered yet; his memory of the solar system and Earth's past was the most accurate in present day.

Learning no longer excited him because he *knew* everything they knew and more. In parent-teacher conferences the main topic of discussion was his disruptive behavior. Aside from correcting the teacher during lectures, sometimes he went off on tangents about "the truth." Allister's favorite story was the one involving the extinction of dinosaurs; second to it, he loved explaining why there were nine planets in the solar system, not eight. Eventually his days filled with a high-school curriculum were replaced with dodging his mother as she left for work, and avoiding the horrors of senior year to study at a level suitable for his superior brain function.

Physically, Allister grew faster than other kids and was phenomenal at athletics. It was cool at the beginning, gaining him school-wide popularity, but like his intelligence, it reached a point where the other children taunted him.

Dolores didn't know how to make him apply himself again, physically or mentally, without unveiling to the world side effects no one would understand. She wanted to believe his experiences as a child had warped his imagination and his grasp on reality was gone, but she knew he wasn't crazy. The coffee shop was her last attempt to give him a sense of purpose. But with her son surrounded by nothing but military influence, what had she expected? He would find some other interest? That *they* wouldn't find him? She laughed out loud at herself.

Dolores put the wine glasses away before becoming

aware of her tardiness. Her hair was arranged neatly in a side ponytail, and she wore a fitted, black, knee-length skirt, complete with sensible flats and her light-gray button-up uniform top; she was ready for another double shift. Her Cynque watch lit up. She looked at the number as it rang and answered it on the last one.

“Where are you?” the voice said.

She recognized it immediately. “I told you something came up.”

“I’m doin’ you a favor,” the voice said. “My time is valuable.”

“I regret ever asking,” she said, holding her keys so tightly her thin fingers lost circulation. “I’ll be there shortly.”

LEESA DELEMAR

Washington, DC, April 2026

“They finally found him.” Leesa Deleamar woke from a daze holding a glass tablet with all the files she needed for the day. Once-blue walls had been painted gray at her request. She hated bright things, colors and personalities alike. The entire space was a hexagon split down the middle to form two trapezoid-shaped rooms. She’d arranged her desk across the pointed back corner facing the entrance; she wanted it to feel as intimidating as entering the headmaster’s office of a boarding school. They referred to her as “the Lieutenant” because of her military experience but she served as the head of Recruitment, Training, and Field Operations for the Andromeda Project. In three short years, after a two-year tour overseas, she’d returned and worked with perfectly

The Andromeda Project

trained assassins, secret soldiers, and spies who furthered their overall combat force. But they always fell deathly short of completing their mission.

The recruitment program was the last attempt by the directors to give the project the upper hand in the race against their rival organizations. Once funding was approved, she'd screened dozens of underqualified "superhumans" over the course of twelve weeks. Potential recruits were given two options: shape up or be terminated. Thus far no one had passed the tests, putting her back at square one.

The image on her glass desk of the newest one hadn't changed all afternoon. Pending his acceptance of their offer, her next interview was in an hour. Leesa spent the most time on his main information page, skimming over the boyishly handsome face before analyzing the other details. She zoomed in on his file.

"Allister Adams, only one living parent...relatives scattered around the United States...clean record," Leesa mumbled to herself in her high-backed office chair, "exceptional stamina with no formal training, and exceptional intelligence with no formal education."

Most superhuman recruits they got had no other choice but to join the program; they were former criminals and dangerous to society due to lack of control over their gifts. Whether they died for their crimes or because they couldn't be put to good use became irrelevant. Leesa didn't think he'd sign on. A shame because he looked so good on paper.

She navigated to the notes section and opened a new window to type "Patrick Adams" into the search bar of the database, hoping to pull up some information on what

he'd accomplished at the Andromeda Project. No existing files on Allister's father manifested. Missing information—it felt like Allister might know things she didn't about the type of work Patrick had performed there. Seemingly related to her frustration, a flash of anger crossed Leesa's makeup-free face.

"I knocked four times; you obviously didn't hear me," Florence said, standing in her entryway. "It's urgent." Her low booties clicked across the concrete floor.

Leesa squinted. "Next time wait until I give you permission."

Florence shifted her weight, letting the comment slide by her. "It's regarding the test results of Bridget Sparks, the recruit I reviewed yesterday afternoon."

"Dr. Belladonna," Leesa sighed, "I had her removed from the batch. She's a waste of my time."

Florence nodded again, turning the other cheek to Leesa's condescending tone. "I vetoed your decision."

Leesa clenched her near-perfect jawline and stared at Florence through ocean-blue eyes.

"You know *I* don't make emotional judgments. I have detailed findings to support her potential. We need to go over them before close of business," the woman in front of her said.

Leesa took the glass file from Florence's hand and placed it on her desk, linking the two tablets together. The selected information transferred, and Leesa handed back the useless device.

"I'm seeing Dorian Xander this afternoon and should have his paperwork complete by tomorrow," Florence finished and tucked the device under her arm.

"He looks slightly more promising," Leesa mumbled. "I

The Andromeda Project

hope you've made a considerable case for Bridget Sparks." She pursed her lips, accentuating her high cheekbones.

Florence nodded stiffly. "Of course, Lieutenant. She's manageable, even with the strong connection between her power use and unstable emotional wavelengths. With proper training she can be invaluable to the program."

"Thank you for your unprompted insight," Leesa said. She eyed Florence's outfit, which consisted of a fitted tan top and green pants, both engineered with lightweight bulletproof fabric. "I am certain you were issued a standard uniform to wear during operating hours."

"You try wearing heels and suits for ten years to fit in with the boys on the hill; then we can chat." Florence glanced at the locked sliding door that led to Leesa's spotless living quarters. The barely used bed rested against the farthest wall in the middle. Fatigue wasn't the explanation for Leesa's demeanor.

"You're dismissed." Leesa resumed her research on Patrick Adams.

"Any updates from the field on the status of the gems?" Florence asked.

"You will know when I know," Leesa replied without making eye contact.

CAPTAIN JAY BRANDT

Washington, DC, April 2026

"You're a special young man," Brandt announced as he entered the moderately sized office. "And we got a special mission for you within the Andromeda Project."

Brandt stood six foot two inches and looked as though he'd spent enough time in the gym as a youth that he

could coast for the remainder of his days. It was more his job to *look* confident than to *be* confident, and he'd practiced for years at hiding his lack of certainty.

Allister stood up to shake his hand. "I really appreciate this opportunity. I have so many questions."

Glass walls doubled as video screens that flickered with images of world maps mixed with video footage of the world's most recent catastrophes. Brandt walked past Allister, pausing nervously at his superior size. "You shouldn't be speaking," he managed to deliver convincingly.

Allister retracted his hand awkwardly and sat down. Brandt touched the glass, revealing Allister's profile. He was about the same age Brandt's son would've been if he were alive. Brandt pushed away painful memories of the life he'd left behind after that night in his hometown of Cumberland Falls, Kentucky.

"I've been around a long time, kid, and I've...we've never seen anything like this," Brandt said.

A video played of an accident in Moscow circa 2019. The truck hit a thirteen-year-old Allister straight on, the front end smashed in, but he flew back. Dolores dropped the bags of groceries and rushed to his side. An ambulance arrived as Allister stood up, the spy camera zoomed in to the exposed bone of his broken arm fixing itself. It ended like a silent film, abruptly.

Allister swallowed.

"I'm sure you're askin' yourself, why me? Why now?" Brandt said with the sympathy a doctor gives when delivering a fatal prognosis.

Allister remembered the incident. Fighting through the crowd to get away from paramedics. They moved to Seoul

The Andromeda Project

within the week.

“You piqued the interest of our directors. For obvious reasons.” Brandt smiled and swiped through the detailed analysis of Allister’s physical structure, performance, and brain activity. He gestured for the young man to stand up. “Why don’t you use those tools for success in your active life?”

The captain gave him the once-over and walked back to the desk, typed some notes into the file, and looked up to receive his answer.

Allister kept mindful of his posture, back straight as a ballerina. “Truth is, Captain, I was taught not to excel at anything. Academics or sports.”

“Terrible way to live.” Brandt reviewed the results a second time. “We’re at a very critical point...and you might...”—his voice trailed off when he reached the physical test—“be able to tip the balance.”

“How long have you been watching us?” Allister asked quietly.

Brandt’s autumn-brown eyes rose to meet Allister, who sat at the edge of his seat. He placed the glass tablet on his desk. “Since way before you got that”—he pointed to the Cynque device—“if I’m being honest.”

Allister didn’t know what to say next. He wondered about the anonymous phone calls and what else they’d seen in their surveillance.

“You can’t fly under the radar anymore, son. Offer’s on the table. Or you can go beg for your barista job back, but we know that won’t fix your finance trouble.”

Brandt executed his straight-to-the-point, no-nonsense dialogue exceptionally well that day. People called him harsh, unforgiving, and blunt, but it was all part of the

act. The world was the stage.

“I’m ready.” Allister smiled.

It reminded Brandt what “good” looked like. Restoring a little faith in his otherwise cynical mind. “Sorry for my”—Brandt cleared his throat and shifted character roles—“rudeness earlier; seein’ you opened old wounds. This one to be exact, and a few others you can’t see.” He rolled up a sleeve to show a severe scar enveloping his forearm. There was more pain in his heart than there ever was in his arm.

“Gnarly,” Allister said, avoiding a wince.

Brandt sifted through a series of documents on the tablet. “Only catch is, you gotta report to the project now for briefin’ and paperwork.”

“Will I be able to go home at all?”

“Not for a while.” Brandt leaned back in his chair.

Allister rubbed his left arm. Telling his mother over the phone seemed wrong. The captain saw hesitation and presented him with sign-on paperwork via the glass tablet, which detailed a bonus. Surprise flashed over the boy’s face; it was enough to pay off their house in full.

“Whoa,” Allister stammered, “I—I have no experience. How can you pay me this much?”

“I can do whatever it takes. We got a lot to learn from each other,” Brandt replied.

Allister signed the page in excitement. He trusted the captain, something felt familiar, like a distant uncle.

“I knew you’d do the right thing.” Brandt motioned for Allister’s left arm to update the occupation information on the Cynque. “My assistant will show you where to go.”

Allister had nearly reached the door when the sound of an electrical device shooting wires reached his ears. A split

second too slow to react, and they attached to the base of his neck. High voltage surged, and Allister sank to the ground.

Brandt smiled for the first time in days, as if receiving a standing ovation for his performance. “You see, Mr. Adams, it’s not about what you have but what you do with it.”

ALLISTER ADAMS

Washington, DC, April 2026

Allister’s brain tried to make sense of the blurred gray ceiling above. It was like blacking out with a bunch of friends and not knowing what happened after you left the bar, then waking up in the drunk tank the morning after, presumably arrested for disorderly conduct. The metal cot amplified the pain throughout his neck and back, an obvious side effect of the attack. It subsided as he got up and walked over to a concrete wall, which bled into a thick, bolt-locked door.

“Hello?” Allister said, careful not to apply any strength while knocking on the thing between him and freedom. A few minutes went by and nothing happened. Allister’s sense of accomplishment was replaced by a sense of doom.

The Cynque watch connected to the wireless network of the building but with limited available Internet access. The device read 11:00 a.m., two hours since his brief interview. Allister held his arm up, frantically pacing the small room for a better connection, even though he knew his mother would be at work for hours.

The bolt lock moved aside before the door swung open

and banged against the concrete wall. Four identically dressed soldiers stood there, but only one of them stepped forward. Silver two-piece uniforms had the white Andromeda Project logo across the chest. He'd never seen that getup on the tram before.

"Are you here to take me somewhere else?" Allister asked, approaching the door. "I need to call my mom; she's gonna worry." Semiautomatic weapons at their sides came into view. His movement wasn't an approved course action. They didn't know what to expect after reading the reports.

"I'm assigned to escort you to your first appointment," one soldier said, keeping the weapon aimed at Allister's midsection. The other three backed out of the doorway and dispersed into the hall. "Come with us."

The armed soldier took the lead, and Allister followed him down the narrow corridor. Shiny metallic walls lined his peripheral; nothing looked out of place but the facility didn't feel clean. Dungeon lighting described its poor excuse for an ambience. Another freestanding concrete structure, with doors exactly like the one he'd been held in, caught Allister's attention. "Anyone in those?" he asked as they walked. The other three followed behind him with their weapons raised toward his back.

"Don't ask questions," the soldier mumbled.

THE ANDROMEDA PROJECT MAIN HQ

Washington, DC, April 2026

Leesa would've been attracted to him if she felt that sort of thing for other people. Attraction was among other emotions locked in the basement of her robotic mind

The Andromeda Project

along with compassion, empathy, and love.

Allister, a young man clearly determined to appear worthy, was poised and calm even with weapons aimed at various body parts. It added to a desire for him Leesa longed to feel. She gently navigated the sharp edge of her desk; Allister was taller than her by four inches. Her violet cape draped over her right shoulder and glided behind her. She sized Allister up a second time before directing her attention to the officer. “A little extreme.”

“Sorry, Lieutenant, following protocol for all incoming.” The soldier saluted and lowered the weapon.

“I’ll take it from here,” Leesa said, waving them away. “Come in.”

Allister walked forward, stopping in the middle. Hazel eyes peeked from below a thick head of wavy, dark-brown hair down to his ears. Leesa drew in a breath and slipped behind her desk to resume their meeting from her seat. His body, sculpted like a Greco-Roman statue, was visible through the fitted undershirt and the clean-shaven, model-esque face held nothing in the way of guilt.

“You must be Private Adams. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

Allister gazed at her but said nothing, his smirk more shy than sarcastic. Leesa extended her hand over her desk, but he didn’t notice. She raised it a bit higher and reached his line of vision. “I am Lieutenant Delemar.”

Allister snapped out of his trance. “Hi Lee—I mean Lieutenant,” he corrected himself anxiously.

Centimeters before shaking hands, they repelled from each other like two electrons. The telekinetic explosion was an autoimmune response to danger. Leesa gripped her arm near the wrist, and Allister recovered from

beneath a damaged wall.

“Are you okay?” he asked, standing up. He was barely fazed.

Leesa, bewildered, didn’t answer immediately, needing to process both that he’d stood up like he hadn’t flown into a wall and the unshakable image echoing in her mind.

“Lieutenant?” he asked again.

“Yes, I’m fine.” Leesa nodded, adjusting her gold-buttoned uniform top and smoothing the fabric covering her bottom before taking a seat. Allister stood a safe distance and waited for her next instructions.

Leesa offered the chair in front of her desk. Her movements had as much grace as an automatic weapon. “This is the Andromeda Project. You are in the final assessment stage of—” She took a breath to continue speaking. Leesa felt like a few wires had gotten crossed, and she was malfunctioning.

“What happens if I don’t pass?” Allister interrupted.

A recruit had never interrupted her before. Leesa leaned forward with her hands clasped together. “Private Adams, do you know why you’re here?”

He wasn’t sure how to answer the question. “No.”

“If I can continue without interruptions, you will know everything you need to know.” Rage roamed freely inside her hollow psyche, but none of it came to the surface. Leesa paused, remembering the reason she’d terminated the last recruit. A lesser mistake. Allister mumbled an apology as Leesa found her train of thought.

“You are in the final assessment stage of our recruiting process. Our expert psychiatrist will do a psychoanalysis to determine your mental stability, mental health, and any risk factors you may present in a field-combat situation. If

The Andromeda Project

you can't pass, there is no reason to move on to the next step, which is a DNA analysis by one of the world's top geneticists. He will determine the source of your abilities and figure out how we can make sure they stay under control while you are at the facilities."

Allister held his mouth open without speaking. *What do they mean, "control"?* he thought to himself. His mouth closed again as if the thought was spoken out loud.

"Lastly, you must complete a successful training session with me. Typically, under the condition this goes smoothly, i.e., 'you pass,' you meet my superior who is head of the entire project."

"I don't get it. The captain said they wanted me?" Allister didn't mean to speak out loud.

Leesa fed on his anxiety like a demon. "We do. But I still have to be sure you're the right choice. The waiver you signed earlier alerts you that if you're not admitted, you'll be terminated and we'll notify your family of your death. The signing bonus is a life-insurance policy, which your family gets whether you're admitted or not. It's unlikely you'll see them for some time, if ever."

She'd performed her monologue a few dozen times based on the speed and accuracy of her speech. Allister's eyes darted left and right while the glass screen in the middle of Leesa's office lowered to eye level. The chair rotated to face it and she stood behind him. *What the hell did I get myself into? This is nuts*, Allister thought. "I don't think I'm in the right place. I'd like to speak to my mother."

Leesa stopped pacing in her gray uniform boots and placed her hands on the back of his chair. "Private Adams, you're no longer under supervision of a parent or

legal guardian?”

Allister shook his head without turning around.

“And legally you’re fully responsible for your own decisions?”

He nodded; his signed waiver form appeared on the screen.

“That is *your* signature?”

“Yes...”

“Yes what?”

“Yes, Lieutenant.”

Leesa leaned down, her hair as straight as her point and dark as her intentions. It fell over her shoulder and into Allister’s line of sight. “Good. I’m glad we’re clear. There will be no communication with your mother, especially if you want her to stay safe.” She moved her hand to the right, and the screen populated images of three glowing shapes.

“We called it the Andromeda Project because it started with communication from a planet called Uragon in the Andromeda Galaxy.” Leesa went on to describe how their top-secret mission involved locating three alien artifacts. “They’re known as the Gems of Evale by the people who created them,” she said. “We only know for certain that two transporter gems and a disruption gem are here on Earth. They’re equally powerful and dangerous in the wrong hands.”

They were trying to solve a problem that couldn’t be discussed and expected the proposed “problem” to fully destroy Earth in the next twenty years. The project’s onset was back in 2000, and they hadn’t found anything. Funding returned in 2016, and solid leads on the artifacts surfaced between 2024 and 2026. Leesa blamed hesitation

The Andromeda Project

from the directors, when knowledge of the artifacts reached C20, a rogue agency. While at first the threat was low, they lobbied for money from private investors and gained technology and manpower. It only took six months for the threat from C20 to go from minor to serious competition. Only time would tell which organization played the tortoise and which played the hare in their race to acquire the gems and “save the planet.”

The Andromeda Project had support from the most powerful nations in the world; there was no mercy for opposition. Allister took in the knowledge he was given as Leesa strode with her hands tucked safely behind her back. He stared at the screen after she finished, reading until he reached the last page of the document. Leesa’s cape floated behind her in the stagnant room. According to the file, the location of one of the artifacts was close to being uncovered by C20.

“We don’t know where they are,” Leesa said solemnly. The Andromeda Project’s satellites weren’t picking up anything in the way of concentrated activity. C20 jammed inbound and outbound signals, but undercover agents managed to get updates back to her in the form of encrypted messages alongside existing C20 transmissions. “Every infiltration has ended in death; human soldiers aren’t equipped with the skills or abilities needed to survive in such situations. That’s why we need people like you. Do you have any questions?”

Allister wondered if she was more upset about the loss of lives or the repeated failure. He shook his head again. The gems and the abilities they granted were only grazed over at a base level, perhaps due to limited human comprehension. Words escaped him as he went over the

information and how it was completely incorrect. He might as well have been sitting in a classroom again.

The Gems of Evale were legendary cosmic artifacts, considered sacred by the Alliance, known as the Infinity Cluster. The Cluster included numerous solar systems and civilizations spanning the Andromeda and Milky Way galaxies. In order to activate, each gem was required to have a host. Once bonded to a gem, the only way to break the bond was to kill the wielder. Three on Earth were hidden for the purpose of existing far away from any other civilization's reach, and the other six were scattered about the universe.

"Our appointment is over," Leesa said, interrupting his thoughts. "It's unorthodox, but the head of the program wants to meet you now."

They walked in silence. Leesa wanted to ask Allister about his father but ran out of time; it was unprofessional of her to lead him into a meeting late as a result of her inquisitiveness. A thought ran through her brain.

Leesa had spent much of her time around her father and the project growing up but couldn't remember if she'd met Allister's father. Her mind wandered dangerously, back to places and memories people told her not to go. Leesa tried to pinpoint when all of those emotions were smothered seemingly out of existence; it was right around the time she enrolled in George Washington University. She'd been a scholar student, brilliant, in fact, but she avoided relationships and friendships to pursue her studies. Graduated valedictorian in two-and-a-half years, nearly impossible for a girl who wasn't supposed to live to adulthood. Making her father proud was always top priority; naturally it led her right to

The Andromeda Project

a position at the Andromeda Project, filing paperwork.

“You seem capable...” Allister started cautiously. “Why don’t you go in there and wipe C20 out?”

“It’s not that simple,” Leesa sighed as they reached the elevator.

NICOLAS DELEMAR

Washington, DC, April 2026

“Your performance has become increasingly disappointing,” the North Korean director said. The Andromeda Project’s support system was made up of a board of nations and wealthy private investors to fund research and development. Key players included Brazil, North Korea, Russia, the UK, China, and the United States. There were six directors, one representative with a net worth of \$10 billion or more from each country.

Six television screens hummed with grayed-out silhouettes. They ranged from political leaders to royalty to diplomats. Nicolas was in the center of the dark room providing his weekly update. He’d rather consider it a weekly prosecution. His work ethic, their progress, it was always on trial. They judged Nicolas with no better knowledge of what to do to accomplish their mission. Money equaled power; they’d given a lot of it over the years, and after the latest injection of cash they’d become even more impatient.

“We were able to bring in Allister Adams as you requested. I’m meeting with him momentarily.”

“He’s useless unless he passes assessment,” the Russian director remarked.

“Why are you seeing the recruit before he is properly

vetted?“ the Chinese director asked. “Allister could be dangerous. What if he is angry because of what happened to his father?”

Nicolas looked down. “I’d prefer to find that out before we run him through the recruitment process.”

“I support minimizing time wasted,” the Brazilian director said lightheartedly. “Your action is approved.” No one echoed his sentiment.

The UK director chimed in, “We expect your team to have found a way to circumvent C20 technology and lead an infiltration mission.”

“My lead officer isn’t permitted in the field. What am I supposed to do?”

“*Whatever it takes,*” the North Korean director said. “And that doesn’t mean disobey our restrictions.”

“It is bad enough you Americans are taking the lead,” the Chinese director said. “We could’ve finished this mission alone twenty years ago.”

“Irrelevant,” the US director scoffed. “General, you have one week. You’re dismissed.”

Nicolas exited the secret door hidden by a wall behind his desk. He hovered his wrist above the keypad, letting the Cynque watch lock the area. The black filing cabinet in the corner stood out against his granite chair and responsive glass desk. It was the only place with room to display the awards he’d received in his military service and a few photos of his family. His office resembled an enclosed bowl from the outside: completely glass, round in the middle but flat on the top and bottom. Ironic, because he often felt like a goldfish swimming around in circles without direction. Nicolas waited for something to come from somewhere above him to stimulate forward motion,

The Andromeda Project

like swimming toward flakes of fish food each morning and afternoon.

Since it began, Nicolas had been responsible for executing missions under the Andromeda Project as the sole point of contact with the directors. In the last six years, the project's focus shifted, and they sourced specialists to complete outstanding initiatives.

The military-green uniform slimmed his aging figure. A matching general hat, as large as his ego, covered a thinning head of hair. He leaned a shoulder against the wall. Nicolas's desk lit up with an email notification and read it aloud. Their last undercover agent to report on the status of C20's initiatives was killed before he revealed their precise location; it was a miracle he'd made it so long behind enemy lines. There was never any good news.

The superhuman recruits they sourced were officially their last chance to get it right. Images of those going through the screening process replaced the email. It was their seventh round, and Nicolas decided to cultivate them rather than terminate them like the ones before. Criteria set forth for the program was specific: they needed a unique ability, no family ties, and no way out.

Dorian Xander, nineteen, had leveled his parent's entire neighborhood, killing over three hundred people. Bridget Sparks, twenty-eight, worked as a stripper and killed a group of clients when one of them pulled a gun on her and commanded she perform oral sex. As an added bonus she suffered from bipolar disorder, but her powers were like nothing in recorded history. Nicolas swiped and came upon the recruit they'd been looking for since the accident in Cumberland Falls. Allister Adams, twenty, no criminal record and mentally stable outside of childhood trauma.

A trio of superhuman misfits to add to his already dysfunctional team of managing partners, all of them tormented by some mental hindrance: severe depression, anxiety, or post-traumatic stress disorder. Nicolas closed the files and checked his watch; he was nervous about encountering his former colleague's progeny. *What does Allister already know about me?* Nicolas thought as Leesa and Allister entered.

ALLISTER ADAMS

Washington, DC, April 2026

"Your father was a brilliant man, Private Adams," Nicolas said.

Something about the general's voice made Allister angry. "I don't know much about him," he said, shooing away frustration.

Nicolas raised an eyebrow, looking for dishonesty. He was relieved, and it explained Allister's calm demeanor. "In any case, I'm glad we found you when we did." Nicolas studied Allister's posture, square shoulders, and unconventional haircut. They stood eye-to-eye, arm's length apart. Leesa huddled near the door on her tablet, reading details of their latest failure.

"Thank you for having me," Allister said, during a brief handshake. They both became light-headed. Nicolas nearly fainted, stumbling back to grab the side of the desk and catch himself. Allister's mind flooded with information, like unfiltered water overflowing into a carefully managed reservoir.

Leesa rushed toward him at subsonic speed. Allister dodged her attack before he knew what he was doing,

The Andromeda Project

before the information could process, pivoting behind her and slamming her against the desk without shattering it. He held both of Leesa's hands behind her back.

"I'm not sure what's happening," Allister said.

"Let go of me before I..." Leesa struggled to get free, snarling like a wolf. Her pupils shrank into tiny dots, and Allister's grip released. He rose off the floor, remaining airborne until she flipped around and punched him. He flew across the room.

Outside of temporary fatigue, Nicolas didn't appear injured. Leesa's chest moved rapidly up and down, prepared to carry out another assault. The general calmed her with a hand gesture. "This anomaly wasn't listed in his file," Nicolas said.

"General, if I may, you don't normally see recruits until they complete the process. Dr. Giro hasn't done his genetic analysis." Leesa straightened out her cape. Nicolas should've stuck to protocol.

The door opened, and the resident psychiatrist, Florence Belladonna, entered. "I came a little early to make sure..." She looked around the room for the new recruit. "Are we training in here now?" she asked as her eyes finally reached his body, relaxed on the floor.

Allister's brain went to work categorizing and prioritizing what he'd absorbed, discarding what was unnecessary. Florence leaned down to help him. "No, no don't. I'm okay," Allister said, standing up on his own.

"It's important we get him through the next phases of his initiation, Dr. Belladonna. We expect that, like his father, he'll be one of our most valuable assets," Nicolas said.

Leesa's body might as well have been made of the same

golden metal as her buttons; she was cold to the touch. Disturbing as it was, some part of Allister wanted to bring warmth to her.

“Are you ready?” Florence asked him.

Allister turned to apologize. Leesa’s arms crossed when their eyes met, angry about her unsuccessful homicide. He thought better of it and left the room.

Florence’s navy trench coat trailed behind her. He eyed the sword on her back. Once they were a safe distance away, she faced him. Allister recognized her from his tram commute that morning. “You were...” he started.

“Relax.” Florence paused, staring into his eyes. “Your mind is a mess...” She turned away. “Still surprised a good kid like you signed on; you haven’t killed anyone... stolen anything. What brings you here anyway?”

Allister was behind her checking his Cynque watch, displaying two service bars but no missed calls. Florence turned around to address his silence, and her eyes widened; she snatched his wrist and pulled out a tiny metal pin. A trained pickpocket couldn’t have detached the device faster and slicker.

“Hey!” he said.

“This didn’t get updated after your acceptance.” Florence looked it over. “How did you manage to sneak this past your recruiter?”

“Sneak!? What?” Allister’s face flushed red, a little upset but mostly embarrassed. “I was attacked after I signed my papers and woke up in a jail cell, thank you.” He touched the part of his neck where the wires had penetrated his skin, no evidence. No one would’ve known it had happened unless he told them.

She activated her own Cynque watch. “Dial Control

Room.”

The phone rang four times before a high-pitched woman’s voice answered. “The new recruit had an uncalibrated Cynque watch connected to an unmonitored cell tower within range.” Florence paused, listening to the voice on the other end speak. “I only turned it off. I need the signal jammed; it’s been active for hours. Let the general know.”

Florence taking the device felt more like death than it should have. Without it, Allister was nothing. He had no identity, no connection to anything outside the walls.

LEESA DELEMAR

Washington, DC, April 2026

“Increase security around the perimeters, especially in the entrances by the loading docks and hangar bays. Alert me if he’s seen wandering the premises.” Nicolas ended the call.

“We need to—” they said at the same time. Leesa stopped first.

“Figure out what he did to me,” Nicolas finished. She nodded in agreement. He looked up at the ceiling for nothing in particular. “I’ve been instructed to assemble a group to go after C20 in the next week.”

“I need at least thirty calendar days of training before I can think about putting these recruits on a battlefield,” Leesa said.

“That was an order, Lieutenant. I don’t want to hear any more excuses!” Nicolas yelled, out of patience and energy at the same time. “Make it happen.”

Leesa stiffened. A recon mission six months earlier had

gotten out of hand, and many of her best-trained agents were killed. The directors confined her to the base until the case was reviewed. She spiraled into an obsessive regime of hand-to-hand combat training and vigorous workouts to increase her body strength, in case her powers failed her again. Her mouth opened.

“You’re not an option to lead this team,” Nicolas interrupted.

Leesa inhaled and adopted an emotionless expression. “I understand that neither of us is in control of the timeline. I will make other arrangements.” She couldn’t shake her fear that Allister’s attack was intentional; his availability as a recruit and clean record unsettled her. A knight disguised as a pawn in their game of chess with C20. Normally she would’ve terminated him under suspicion, but futility stopped her from suggesting it. Leesa had purposefully hit Allister hard enough to put her hand through his chest. It hadn’t even knocked the wind out of him. “Do you think he works for them?” she finally asked.

“He dodged your first attack, survived your second one”—Nicolas picked at the leather of his calf-high combat boots—“and he wasn’t even paying attention.”

“I’m aware.” Leesa didn’t want it to get around she’d been bested by a new, untrained recruit; it would ruin her reputation as the caped queen.

“Find out who Allister’s recruiting officer was and bring them to me.”

Leesa saluted him; she didn’t mention what happened during the initial interview. Nicolas sat down and returned to his work, a silent dismissal. But she hovered a moment, letting her frustration build into a complete sentence.

“Can’t you ever call me Leesa?” Her lip quivered as she

The Andromeda Project

struggled to maintain her robotic demeanor; the basement where she also kept “vulnerability” was unlocked.

“You’re my daughter and the best thing to ever happen to me.” Nicolas kept his eyes focused on the details of their next shipment to the facility. “But you know how this works.”

Leesa returned to her office and opened the sliding door leading to her living quarters. Pictures of the mother she’d never met rested on a dusty nightstand next to childhood photos of Leesa in a wheelchair. The debilitating disease almost killed her, but it didn’t. No one cared about the triumph she’d overcome. They only cared about what she did for them *now*. If there was a time to cry, it’d passed already. Her mind shifted like gears to the dilemma at hand.

Leesa knew they weren’t ready to go up against C20, especially on their own turf, but at that point success or failure didn’t matter. The Andromeda Project was the only thing she’d known in her adult life, and she didn’t know what to do without it. After being fired by her father for snooping through confidential files and taking the high-salaried position overseas, Leesa learned that she didn’t belong around civilians. She couldn’t live as a wife, as a mother. She didn’t know how to be a friend. She didn’t know how to be a daughter.

Leesa stood in the room’s center, fighting to keep it all in, a full-time job in itself. More thoughts led to anger, sadness, then to uncontrolled power manifestations. Dressers, old college books, the mattress, all hovered at shoulder level. She exhaled as they returned to their proper places. They would need to turn the power dampeners up in her office if she didn’t get a handle on

her telekinesis soon. She left her feelings behind the locked door.

FLORENCE BELLADONNA

Washington, DC, April 2026

“Tell me about what happened to your father,” Florence said, preparing to record the statement.

“I’m not sure,” Allister said, puzzled. “My mom said I was traumatized from the accident; she took me to four different doctors because I didn’t talk for a year. Do you know what happened?”

Florence wrote *Repression* on her note pad. Her jet-black hair, with the right amount of curl and length, moved with her head. “No. No record of anything in our database. Can you try to remember?” she prodded. “Think back to the day...”

Allister shrugged as if he’d lost interest in a toy he didn’t ask for on Christmas Day. “Couldn’t tell you the day. Can’t even tell you the year, really.”

Florence puckered her lips; they were coated in a red one only sees in a West Coast sunset. “Let’s move on.” She watched his body language change, bracing himself as she walked over.

“Does this mean I failed?” Allister sat back.

“Not yet,” she said calmly.

Florence adjusted the armchair so it faced him on the couch.

“Does everyone have to do this?” Allister asked.

“Shhh.” She crossed her legs and tilted her neck down; the outside of her body glowed a light purple. Allister fell asleep as telepathic energy pulsated around his body as

The Andromeda Project

well.

Florence combed the surface of Allister's mind for thirty minutes before she probed deeper, which caused her psychic form to manifest inside of his subconscious. She stood in an infinite field of electric-blue grass. Closest to her, a set of stairs, anchored to the ground, led up to a decent-sized house. The manifestation was not unusual; it was commonplace for the brain to hold secrets and information inside familiar structures, objects, or people they identified with. She headed there.

The house resembled the one he'd shared with his mother at the time. An astral form of Dolores stood next to its front door, hands at her side, staring at the oncoming woman. Florence met no resistance from the astral form, who wispily gestured for her to continue through the open door. She perused the house, taking in everything about Allister's life and memories, then searched for secrets in walls, rooms, and even furniture. She found nothing but young-adult angst from constantly moving, poor performance in school and life, and dealing with his abilities. She was curious about what contributed to such a comfortable lifestyle, but the house only held life events from the past twelve years.

Outside of the obvious incident regarding the Cynque watch in the real world, there were no suspicious associations. Allister had no friends, and the shop owner was the only other person he'd interacted with consistently besides his mother. No former customers stood out. She exited the first house as a second house appeared in the distance.

It was farther from her point of origin, and an astral form of Allister's father waited outside. Much older

architecture resembled housing models built at least a decade earlier and in less-densely-populated areas. Patrick's figure stopped her from entering. He told her the contents of the house were gone; someone had moved everything. She was allowed to pass once he finished. The barren house, worn down from neglect, held only a large picture of Patrick Adams hanging over a mantle. No information save for the faint memory of his existence. She left and stumbled over a small hedge in the front yard; it hadn't been there when she entered.

Allister's brain resisted the effects of her power, causing a forest to sprout. Her carefully planned exit needed reworking. More forest surrounded her in every direction, and peeking over the treetops was a third structure. Wind blew her hair and trench coat behind her as she trudged through, swiping away long branches that blocked her advance and wrapped around her. Florence reached the base of the stairs and gasped when a massive fortress came into view.

An eight-year-old version of Allister occupied the stairway's entrance, but he wasn't alone. "You can't come in," he said apologetically. His tiny hand was buried inside the clawed fist of the monstrous figure next to him.

Florence bent down without taking her eyes off the glowing wall of light surrounding the protected fortress. "I won't move or change anything. I promise. But I need to see what's inside."

"You cannot enter." The figure stepped in front of the child, forcing Florence to straighten up.

It was Neight Caster, the alien she'd heard so much about. There were no records of him in the shared database after 2014. "You're dead," Florence commented,

The Andromeda Project

then held out her hand. “But I can sense you.” Neight was the reason the Andromeda Project began.

Everything protected within the fortress was sacred; Neight promised she wouldn’t come out alive. Florence was amazed and intimidated. “Did he do all of this? Or did you do it to protect yourself? What does he know?” There was no answer. Fighting to get past the hostile alien’s astral projection would take more energy than she had. She’d never failed a simple probe before.

Allister looked up at Neight with soft, pleading eyes but received no recognition and turned to Florence. “I’m sorry I can’t help you,” he said.

Florence outstretched her hands and flattened the forest with the last of her psionic energy. She returned to her point of origin and vanished.

In the dimly lit room Florence gasped for air, made the mistake of standing too early, and fell. Allister’s eyes fluttered open to her resting against the chair as the psychic energy shimmered into nothing.

“I’m sorry, Doctor, I don’t know what happened.”

“Not repression,” Florence mumbled, ignoring his apology. “Something else.”

Soldier escorts arrived, and she dismissed Allister to his next step in the process. There was more work to be done but none that would prevent him from entering the program. Florence wanted to unlock Allister’s fortress if for nothing else than her own pride.

She had gotten her start as the right hand in all operational capacities for one of New York’s top senators. Her leadership catapulted the success of his government work and his external businesses until he was appointed secretary of state. The former senator brought her on to

serve as one of the deputy chiefs of staff. Tensions rose between world powers, and he created a private company to collect intel on both domestic and international initiatives in weapons development, economics, and trade. Florence served as chief intelligence officer for the agency and worked closely on infiltration projects.

Scarcely matched beauty, stemming from her half-Italian and half-African-American heritage, coupled with the weight her family name carried in the business world gave her supreme fluidity. She was routine but whimsical in her hunting, like a panther. She met with behind-the-scenes influencers and leaders of the world, discovering their motives and their stages in development. It was astonishing how many of them were traitors. No one knew about her telepathic ability except for the senator-turned-secretary. After a few less-than-ideal situations, she took up training in martial arts and weapons mastery. In the event her innocent green eyes, shapely figure, and blinding smile didn't save her, she'd fight her way out.

In mid 2020, she got wind of a potential attack from a meeting with the North Korean ambassador. By that point the secretary had been recently elected President of the United States. A mandatory order from him to have the capital evacuated saved millions of lives. Controversy surrounded the mental immobilization of the entire North Korean base just before a missile hit DC, and she went under the radar with some help.

The Andromeda Project came at an inconvenient time, but politics was all about favors, doing them and asking for them. It was her turn to do. It had been two years since she'd joined to help them find the gems more quickly. She claimed the title CPO or chief psychic officer. So much for

The Andromeda Project

a “quick favor.” It didn’t take long to discover that the technology being used by their enemies scrambled telepathic signals, making it difficult for her to discover information by jumping from mind to mind. Her priorities shifted to making sure recruits were mentally capable and all staff members were loyal, and that moving forward, briefing and missions were carried out according to compliant project-operating standards as set forth by the United States government.

Florence’s office was as beautifully crafted as the fashion suits she used to wear. There was a messy order about things. She kept filing cabinets and wrote down most of her notes by hand then transferred things to glass tablets. Archaic methods of communication and combat were ingrained in her DNA; she’d resisted the Cynque watches for as long as possible.

The sheathed sword caught her eye. A story was etched in detail on the leather exterior of its holster; planetary shapes and the unidentifiable creature gave her pause no matter how often she looked at it. The sword’s 24k solid-gold handle was reminiscent of her family’s crest, a dragon of some kind. It followed her like a curse, reminding her of the thing she hated the most, her father.

Her Cynque watch received a message: “Infiltration mission to C20 brewing.” She closed the door to her office and checked the room. Another notification came up: “Take the lead. Lieutenant is still grounded.”

“Are you kidding me?” Florence said. It typed the words out but she deleted before it sent. “Will work on it,” she sent instead.

“Tonight still good?” she read as she gathered her tablet.

“On the way.” She erased the conversation after the reply was received.

Florence headed up the ramp to the elevator she used to exit, which led to office buildings that served as decoys around the facility. She ran the outside of her wrist along the scanner, “Not permitted off premises.” She checked it then tried again. “Not permitted off premises.”

“Excuse me, sir?” Florence interrupted the conversation of four soldiers on duty. “Can you help me?”

The others dispersed, and the biggest of them checked notes in the system. “Your offsite privileges have been revoked.”

Her eyes widened, “They can’t...they can’t do that.” She went to walk past him and out the door to the elevator; he stopped her swiftly with his large forearm across her chest.

“Insubordination results in termination.”

Florence scoffed, attempting to read or control his mind into letting her through, but it didn’t work. There had to be a misunderstanding. She placed both hands on her slim waist. “I need to speak with General Delemar immediately.”

“He requested not to be disturbed this evening,” the soldier replied.

“Little coward.” Florence turned around to activate her watch and remembered she’d deleted the conversation. She calculated it would take less than a minute to disarm the four of them. Multiply forty-five seconds from her conclusion by one billion and that was how long she needed to regain her integrity. Fourteen years was longer than her first bankruptcy; Florence decided not to risk it. “This is a violation of a signed contract. These bottom

The Andromeda Project

feeders have no idea the world I come from.”

“I’ll escort you to your living quarters for the evening,” he said, motioning for a couple of other soldiers to assist him.

She wiggled away after they grabbed her arms on either side. “I know how to walk.”

“Then do so.” One of them gestured for her to follow them, and she obeyed; the other two fell in line behind her. In all her years of employment, she’d never faced such hostility, especially from subordinates. She already mapped out in her head the ways she’d rip Nicolas a new one. There was a clever saying back in her days in Washington: it only took a phone call, text message, or email to ruin a life.