

J. Adam Lefever

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of the  
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## **Fallen Gods of the Old World**

by J. Adam Lefever



### **INTRODUCTION**

My editor told me if there's any chance for young people to read this, I should not mention the Third World War. Young people do not like to read much as it is, and I'm told war is too depressing and off-putting in our era of peace. But when I finished writing this story, I realized it is impossible for my generation to discuss anything without framing it in context of the War. It was exactly what compelled me to write in the first place, so I'll mention it, but only in this introduction.

When I was six or seven years old, my family was obsessed with American victory. My father followed the news of every global conflict, scrutinizing everything and get angry if anything would suggest something other than an undisputed win. My mother and two older brothers were no different; America was the central force of every battle in a world that revolved around our success. Cheers of unadulterated glory would erupt for even the most trivial news, even the reports of our machines destroying their machines.

Two years after the War, when I was twelve, I attended a groundbreaking for a monument that included a memorial service for an uncle whom I had never met. He died during a surge on the Pacific front, very early in the war. I was a particularly quiet kid, but I was so bored that I had started to ask adults around me about things I remembered: the two dozen soldiers beheaded in the streets of Bangkok when Southeast Asia was consumed by the Asian Proliferation, the number of rioters in Egypt when the Commonwealth of Africa was formally recognized, homes burning in Paris when Europe nearly collapsed, the velocity of debris that tore through the U.S. space station, the terrible purple polka-dotted blisters on rows of bodies from Chinese NanoMD hacking that decimated the Pacific Northwest.

When approached with such questions or comments, most adults would nod and change the subject. Then they would ask about school, my friends or my family. Back then, I was flabbergasted by how stupid they were; why even attend a memorial when they had forgotten all of these terrible things? Everyone knew someone affected by the War. Looking back, I think perhaps they felt they were protecting me by avoiding those conversations, a vain attempt to move my thinking away from the details of the tragic past.

For an adult, those details are tragic trivialities, a single brick in a pile of grief that exists somewhere between our esophagus and stomach. But as a child, you always remember these things. They become a part of who you are, even if you're too young to understand them.

On the afternoon of the memorial service, I had two realizations that shaped my perception of tragedy. First, it is most often the scale of the tragedy that is remembered. "Billions died," is what most tell their children if asked about the War. Most of the 'where', 'how', and 'why' 2.67 billion people died, the valiant acts of bravery, and the lifelong regrets of those who lived through it will all fade into obscurity. For our children, their children, and their children's children, the scale is what will be remembered.

And, perhaps, they'll wonder about the debris floating in orbit around our tiny planet. Every generation will look up at the remnants of space battle as a monument dedicated to our own stupidity and scoff at the mess for as long as it takes us to figure out how to clean it up.

The second realization I had that afternoon was that the very purpose of a monument is to compensate for our forgetfulness. National monuments are constructed so we never forget, because forgetting is something we are so good at. Don't get me wrong; forgetting is not always a bad thing. Forgetting can be therapeutic, especially for those who have lived through traumatic experiences. We are programmed to move on, we tell each other to move on, and we shelter our youth from our horrors so they can have the chance at a better life than the hand we were dealt.

Numerous adults today, with their own children to shelter, have never experienced the scale of a tragedy such as the third World War. The same goes for every other American tragedy: the Burning of Washington, Pearl Harbor, Nine-Eleven and NanoMD hacking, to name a few. From the youth's point of view, a crazy old man like me seems mythological. I speak from personal

experience that has no meaningful bearing on their lives. Many will learn the facts from a less intimate source: museum tour guides, academics, or if they're lucky, an old first-gen Protocol One programmed with memory recall during wartime.

But the War is unpopular with young people, so says my editor. And if today I were attending a memorial, and if I were approached by any child who asked about a particular beheading or a pile of bodies, I would ask them about school, their friends, or their family.

I will leave mention of the War on that note, because the point I want to make is about forgetfulness. Tragedy is not the only thing worth remembering, and it is not the only thing we construct memorials for. We have built monuments to Gods, heroes, and important people, all worthy of admiration for their will and influence in shaping our world. America, like other nations, has had many such people. We hear them referenced rhetorically when it suits the discussion, usually to embody some ideal that seems worth living up to.

There are also darker, hidden influences in our lives. These individuals are never recognized; no matter how tragic and important the events of their lives may have been, they will be forgotten. Children will never ask about them, and whether we are worse or better off because of it is really a matter of perspective.

One such person is Rita Saya. The event I am referring to is the Saya Incident of 2158. In a science classroom, it is usually discussed as an accident in bio-engineering. In history classrooms, it is most often seen as the final blow to a dying American institution. In philosophy classrooms, it often represents an ironic, serendipitous ushering in of a new cultural era for America. In reality, it was a massacre. Everything that happened that August night was intentional, and I learned from Rita Saya how to kill a God right before witnessing it with my own eyes. It was in that moment I had become part of something much larger than myself, the repercussions of which I was too young and too stupid to have seen the significance of until this point in my life.

It has been thirty years since the Saya Incident. This story is my personal memorial to the end of the Collectors and the reign of their terrible, most sacred God. It is my firsthand account of the final battle in a silent war and the beautiful widow who orchestrated it. She saved my life for reasons I will never understand.

I was the only human being to walk out of the Saya Estate on August 17th, 2158, and for the first time, I will tell the story.



## INVITATION

It was by accident, or dumb luck, that I received an invitation to the Saya Estate. In April of 2158, I was strolling through a museum exhibit about bio-engineering in the 21st century when a well-dressed visitor hastily told me he was unable to attend an event in the far wing of the museum. Aware the museum's banquet room had a full bar serving top shelf liquor, I gladly took his ticket.

When I arrived, the recently widowed Ms. Rita Saya was giving a presentation on some of the discoveries her company, SayaTech, had made in regenerating prehistoric flora using bio-structures found in fossils or frozen in permafrost.

At the time, I was a lead creative strategist for Nexus Corporation. While my ego large enough to fill the room, my attire was not impressive enough to convince anyone of anything. I wore very average khaki pants, dark brown loafers, and a green polo shirt that lumped out just far enough to make me look horribly out of shape. The room was a flourish of suits and gowns and there was nowhere to stand without looking like a parrot in a banquet of penguins. I pretended not to notice, and nobody else seemed to pay any mind. I tucked into the back corner of the bar and sucked down martinis at an Olympic pace.

Ms. Saya was speaking from a portable stage in the far end of the room. Her jewelry glimmered in spotlights that aimed directly at the narrow podium where she stood. Numerous SayaTech-commissioned Protocol One robots were directly behind her. They stood motionless, as if they were mannequins modeling the traditional black-and-white uniforms that SayaTech scientists were so proud of. Each held a ceramic pot with a glass dome that contained some unique reconstructed version of prehistoric plant life.

Most of her words were far above my level of education and interest but I do recall her charisma. Her smile exuded beauty, wealth, and intelligence. The crowd seemed genuinely captivated, by style or substance I could not say. Her late husband, Doctor Richard Saya, was one of the most well-respected founding fathers of modern robotics, most well known for his part in American infrastructure development: the Bismarck Project, public integration of the *Mainframe Operating System for Assets, Infrastructure and Communications* (MOSAIC) as well as the founder of the Indigo Mills recycling facility just outside of Memphis. His death was a tragic accident. When he died, Rita was the sole inheritor.

Two years before his death she had founded SayaTech, a corporation with bio-tech so ahead of its time I'm not sure Rita could have quantified their value in any meaningful way. She was the young queen of a dead American saint, and admired all the same.

Although many years my senior, I was far more interested in checking her out and navigating the drink selection. I flagged down the museum's catering robots when they strolled by to nab cheese hors d'oeuvres from the platters they carried. Precariously, I sipped no less than two beverages at once and clapped politely with the crowd.

"Excuse me, Mr. Reginald Holt," said a Protocol One who approached me carefully.

I swallowed the cheese morsel I was chewing and shook my head. "Sorry, friend," I said, "You've got me confused with someone else." I slapped him on the shoulder with alcohol-induced amusement and turned away.

The robot leaned forward and responded inquisitively, "Are you not Mr. Reginald Holt, as your ticket states?" He held up the ticket and pondered it. The shiny nametag on his jacket said KENNETH.

"Oh no, Kenneth, I'm not Mr. Holt. I'm his esteemed guest," I announced proudly.

"What is your name, sir?"

"Bennet Kapshandy."

"Mr. Reginald Holt did not state he was bringing a guest, Mr. Kapshandy."

"Well, I'm sure he didn't, Kenneth. Mr. Holt was in a hurry and couldn't stay. He instructed me to attend this for him. Here's the ticket."

I was counting on having a few more drinks, so I handed over the ticket stub with a look of befuddled ignorance on my face as to not arouse any suspicion.

Kenneth stood still for a moment, concentrating. His expression ticked into a smile and he said, "Thank you, sir, for your polite and calm compliance. If you do not mind me asking, what is your relationship with Mr. Holt so I may adequately complete our guest list?"

"I..," I stammered and paused. I knew nothing about Mr. Holt or an acceptable title, but I didn't want to appear stupid or insincere and risk ejection from the bar.

"I'm a close associate and his personal assistant," I lied.

Kenneth paused again to process an answer to appropriately deal with the circumstance. I gulped my drink and quickly raised my index finger to signal for another. First generation Protocol One was a particularly slow robot to have a conversation with, but they were excellent at taking orders. This meant the bartender would be far more efficient than Kenneth at figuring out what to do with me. Maybe Kenneth was contacting Mr. Holt to ask him personally. I had

enough time to get one more beverage in front of me before the fifty-fifty chance I would be asked to leave. I grabbed the fresh lime martini right from the bartender, gulped at least half of it and immediately asked for another.

By now, I was slightly intoxicated. I clapped loudly with the crowd and ignored the obnoxiously still robot next to me.

"Sir?" asked Kenneth, his animated head coming back to life. I intentionally ignored him and sipped my drink. "Sir?" he asked again, slightly louder, and tapped my shoulder.

"Yes?" I responded, emphasizing just enough impatience for a Protocol One to take notice.

"I apologize for the repeated intrusion, Mr. Kapshandy," he bowed slightly to eye-level, "I only kindly wish to inform you that I have ensured your name has been added to our guest list as an official attendee. Subsequently, I have added your name to the attendance list for the Saya banquet as Mr. Holt's guest on August seventeenth of this year."

"Wonderful," I said, nodding with approval, "Great Job, Kenneth! Thanks for taking care of that. You've been most hospitable."

That night, I gleefully staggered home without much thought; never had it crossed my mind that I would be going to the Saya residence. By July, I had entirely forgotten about the invitation. It was then I received a request from an assistant of Mr. Holt stating that he would like to speak with me.



## BUYING A REACTION

Mr. Holt lived just outside of Ann Harbor, Michigan. He had already arranged travel for me, and the offer to visit his elaborate estate had piqued my curiosity. I dug my favorite wool suit out of the closet and agreed to meet him in mid-July.

Holt Estate was a gratuitous place, even among the wealthiest. It was built in a traditional style without the pre-fab walls you find in most modern homes. The front door was nearly a half-mile from the gated entrance, and I was transported down a lengthy boulevard of elaborate flower gardens that stretched from end to end. Along the way, various Protocol One robots in tight orange uniforms either pruned leaves or hefted bundles of yard waste. I wondered how often Mr. Holt, or anyone, appreciated such attention to detail. What kind of man was Mr. Holt to utilize such resources purely for the sake of vanity?

At the door, I was greeted by a gorgeous young blonde Protocol One who introduced herself to me as "Kelly". Kelly had a voluptuous shape that made the usual P-One hip swagger as femininely attractive as possible, with the aesthetic face and complexion that made women so intensely envious. I've never shared the same attraction towards robots that many men have, but I found it impossible not to look. She noticed my leering, as P-Ones usually do, but rarely were they programmed to be confrontational about it.

I was escorted through the wide French doors leading to the back of the estate. I took the passenger's seat in a golf cart and Kelly keyed in the coordinates. We were quickly transported down the marble pathway, through a tunnel of rose trellises, up a ramp and onto platform where the eighty-year old Mr. Holt stood. He was hunched over with his head to the ground, conspicuously firing golf balls into an expansive green fairway below.

As I approached, he did not turn his attention away from his leisure. I squinted and peered down the lawn. In the distance, eight to ten P-Ones in bright blue baseball uniforms were in position with mitts in hand, attempting to catch Mr. Holt's golf balls as they whizzed past. First Generation Protocol One was not an athletic robot. Their hips jerked to-and-fro as they hastily chased the balls, occasionally losing their usual sensibility and bumping into each other comically like eager dogs. Mr. Holt guffawed at their vain attempts.

I considered asking why he would drain the life of such elaborate machinery on pointless athletic tasks they were not built for, but someone's home is no place to question their habits.

"So, you are Bennet Kapshandy," he said without looking up. He smacked another golf ball into the far left side of the field. Admittedly, I was impressed; he was quite spry for his age.

"Yes, sir, that's me. Reginald Holt?" I spoke with confidence and stepped forward to shake his hand. My gesture was ignored, so I stuffed my hands into my pockets and teetered on my heels.

"Call me Reggie," he said. His eyes were still intently focused on his entertainment. He tapped his club on the tee and a pneumatic tube spat a freshly fabricated golf ball at his feet. "How was your trip from Chicago? I trust my staff took good care of you?"

"As adequate as travel can be," I said, shrugging. "The food was very good."

"Adequate," he said, shaking his head with disappointment, "Nobody respects travel any more."

"Oh, I mean no disrespect, sir," I apologized, "I appreciate the hospitality. Netherica just makes travel pointless most of the time."

Reggie frowned and shook his head again. He glanced at me briefly and tapped the tee. The ball had barely stopped rolling before he fired it fifty or so yards to the left. A pair of P-Ones chased after it, then stopped to stare at one another before imminent collision. They both followed it with their heads and stopped to watch it bounce past. One waddled over to pick it up, promptly put it into his pocket, and assumed ready position.

"Worthless robots," said Mr. Holt disparagingly, "Disobeying my override commands again. Probably another MOSAIC update. I'll see those two off to the Mills tomorrow. Kelly, bring us each a drink, would you? Steven should be in the cellar. We have a guest, so bring us something vintage. Bennet, red or white?"

He looked at me expectantly.

"Wine?" I asked.

"Of course wine!" he exclaimed, "Don't be dense, or daft, or whatever it is you are being."

"Red," I responded assertively.

"A Pinot noir, Kelly. Make it extra rare. Something Pre-War, from the Northwest. Bennet, grab a club. Let's play."

My only experience with golf was with putt-putt and vague memories of X-treme Naked Sports in Netherica. Cautiously, I picked up a club that looked as close to Mr. Holt's as possible. I observed as he swung and watched the ball bounce across the green. As the robots began to chase it, he quickly whacked a second ball down the fairway, utterly confusing them about which way to go.

"So, what exactly is this game we are playing?" I asked.

"I'm teaching them baseball," said Reggie.

"With golf?"

He ignored my question yet looked me in the eye, "Watch them try to do as they're told," he said, "despite all of their flaws. They're horrible at out fielding. But a little exercise never hurt anybody and I get to practice my swing."

After two embarrassing attempts, I managed to smack a golf ball into the field. I squinted in the sun to watch. The robots stood stupidly, frozen in position as if nothing happened. "They're not doing anything," I said.

Mr. Holt smiled. "They're not supposed to. They only chase mine. At least something is still working right in their tiny heads."

"Why robots? I mean, why teach robots how to catch?"

"Obedience, Bennet. Plain and simple. Every afternoon I take a break to come out here, hit a few golf balls and watch them do as they're told. It reminds me to always expect what I want."

He hit another. A P-One caught it and promptly dropped his prize into a front pocket. The others faced Mr. Holt and golf-clapped for him. Mr. Holt looked at me and laughed, genuinely amused to show me this. For an old man, his strength was intimidating and I was certain he would live for many more years. The elderly do seem to stick around much longer these days.

"Do you know what I do, Bennet?"

"I'm not entirely sure, sir."

"Call me Reggie," he reminded me. "I'm a Collector. You may have heard of the Collectors. We're a small group. We collect things."

"What kinds of things?"

"Lots of things. Money, first and foremost, but also antiques, wine, rarities, and pre-war artifacts. When you and I crossed paths at the Winfeld Museum, I made offers for several pieces. Some of them I've been after for years. After two decades of waiting I finally had my chance at the Monet I wanted. It was large enough to fill fifteen tissue boxes."

From his pocket, he procured a square of painted canvas. He wiped his brow with it, blew his nose and tossed it behind him.

"Why would the museum want to sell its collection?"

"It's not because they want to. They have to keep the doors open. Running a museum is costly, so sometimes they'll relieve themselves of a few things."

"How noble," I thought, looking at the wad of parchment on the ground. Museums as antique stores. Subjugation as a hobby. Golf as baseball. I gulped and said nothing. I was too sober to handle this.

The beautiful Kelly returned on her golf cart with two absurdly ornate gemmed goblets on a platter. In her other arm was a bottle of wine swaddled in a towel. She cuddled it against her body as if it were an infant.

"C'mon," Mr. Holt said. He motioned for me to follow him to the table and chairs on his patio deck. The elaborate rose garden surrounding us had been as carefully pruned as the entrance to the Holt Estate. The aromas gave the air a crisp freshness. Birds chirped in the trees. It was a peaceful, elegant and classy place, for the most part. A statue of Reggie Holt stood ominously on the top of a fountain. His pale, pupil-less eyes were reminiscent of a Greek God, positioned proudly over a circular waterfall that perpetually pumped chlorinated water fifteen feet into the enormous pool below. It produced a light mist that traveled in our direction and cooled our skin in the July sun.

Kelly poured a tasting portion of Pinot Noir into Reggie's goblet. He sipped it thoughtfully and nodded. She dutifully filled the two goblets of the dark, opaque wine and placed the rest of the bottle into a temperature controlled reservoir under a trapdoor within Reggie's reach.

"Kelly, I'm taking a break from baseball lessons," said Mr. Holt, "Would you instruct my jewelry I wish to wear them now?"

What was he talking about? This place, the games, the wine, the strange language; I was more confused than impressed like I had hoped to be. And still, the pressing question in my mind was: why had he brought me here?

Of all the crazy things I have experienced, nothing in all Netherica could have prepared me for what I was about to witness.

"Mr. Holt, um..., Reggie, I'm sorry," I said, clearing my throat. "I appreciate the hospitality, but I'm not entirely sure why you've brought me here."

He savored the question. He inhaled deeply and took his time to sit down and get comfortable. He crossed his legs, sipped his wine and swished it in small rotating circles.

"Mostly," said Mr. Holt, "I wanted to meet the man who described himself as my personal assistant."

His eye cocked suspiciously at me.

"For that, oh yes...", I apologized half-heartedly, "Good liquor. Someone asked who I was and I didn't really know what to say."

Perhaps I should have been embarrassed, but I wasn't. After all, he did give his ticket to a complete stranger.

In the distance to my right, the French doors of the mansion flew open. Kelly stepped out alongside another entity. Human, I presumed, by his gait. Kelly told the cart where to go and they were headed our way. As they neared, I could see it was indeed a person. He was costumed in some elaborate, colorful garments you may have expected to find in some sort of 20th century Vatican sex club; tall, gold-trimmed headwear encrusted with fine gems and diamonds. His revealing robe fit tightly and accentuated his most personal body parts. He had the genes of an underwear model, and presumably the fitness regimen. In fact, it was possible his physique may very well have Mr. Holt's fountain statue. Smooth skin. Mascara. Well-groomed sandy blonde hair. Quietly, he approached Mr. Holt from behind, placed his uncomfortably jeweled hands around Mr. Holt's collar and connected his thumbs and middle fingers around his neck. Graciously, he looked down upon Mr. Holt's thin hair.

Speechless, I watched from my seat, utterly confused as to what this ritual could be.

"My human necklace, Bennet," said Mr. Holt with assured confidence, "I have several more available. Would you like to wear one this afternoon?"

"Um, no thanks."

Mr. Holt was relaxed despite being only a grasp away from strangulation. He sat back in his seat, put his hand on his chin and watched as I struggled to maintain my composure. I was a little frightened. I imagined just what could be in store for me on this strange man's property who seemed it appropriate to walk around his home subjecting another person to adorn him.

"Suit yourself. Isn't he a beautiful creature?" said Mr. Holt. He gestured at his jewelry, and without looking back, reached over his own head to pat him on the cheek.

"A human necklace?" I leaned forward, amazed, and struggling with the urge to laugh. I was confused as to whether this was a joke or not. And if it was a joke, should be laughing at Mr. Holt? With Mr. Holt? Should I laugh at his human jewelry? I exhaled a breath of fine wine through my paralyzed, dangling jaw.

"He is only jewelry, Bennet. Have you never seen jewelry before," he asked, and looked at me expectantly. "Really, is there something wrong with you?"

It was as if it were as ordinary as bread. His wine swashed in his goblet. He was enjoying the attention.

"Why? I mean, what?" I looked at the man with his hands wrapped around Mr. Holt's neck. Only the goblet in front of my face could hide my befuddled amusement.

"Does this shock you? Or offend you?"

"Well, a little," I admitted.

"Consider it hazing. Oscar willfully submits himself, and I choose to wear him. He must be in my presence if he is to learn how to be a part of this world. He follows me anywhere I take him around the estate and digests every word. Don't you, Oscar?"

Reggie cannot see Oscar nod submissively. For Oscar's sake, silence was probably the only appropriate response.

"I told you, Bennet. We are Collectors. Oscar is training to be the next generation of our kind. Only those with the right knowledge and connections can keep the traditions alive."

"What traditions?"

"Maintaining power structure, Bennet. Money is the crux of power. Did they not teach history in your Netherica classrooms? Money built this place. It won the war, built the first robots, employs the banks, employs the markets and wins elections. It keeps museums and parks alive. It affords Ms. Saya the access to perform her research that you so obviously neglected to appreciate."

"But why? Money is so old," I said, "Public systems are easily managed by MOSAIC. Water, food, power, shelter, travel, SENS are practically given away. I haven't paid for anything in at least three years. What importance is money when you do not need it to live?"

"Typical point of view from someone like yourself, and an advantageous one for me. 'Mother MOSAIC directs production, Mother MOSAIC ensures stability.' Mantras of the masses," said Mr. Holt sarcastically. He circled his hands as if he were directing an invisible orchestra.

"Money still buys some things, Bennet. Don't be so naïve; you grew up in the old world, and you surely must know this. Haven't you ever wondered how the wealthy still exist when nobody you know pays for anything? Have you ever thought about how the economy works?"

"I really don't think about money, Reggie. I actually prefer it this way."

Mr. Holt scoffed and looked at me like a dumb child who had just disappointed him. Of course, I was old enough to remember money. I just hadn't cared in so long.

"There are things of value aside from your basic needs," said Mr. Holt, "Money is the undercurrent of government and corporate power. Neither could exist without it. It is very simple: Congress must win elections. To win elections, they need votes. To get votes, they need status. Status needs attention. Attention requires marketing. Marketing requires resources. Those resources come at a price. Nexus Corporation pays tremendously to their constituents to keep Netherica under their management. American Robotics pays large sums for a seat at the table when Protocol One development is discussed. Kindred Industries for energy. Sun Comm for communications. Simistry Blue Gold, my own company, pays generously to maintain SBG logo on every piece of American pipeline that comes out of Memphis. This is an economy of power. MOSAIC may manage it all, but it is still the people who make the decisions on what is managed, how it is managed, and who is accountable. And when money is needed, a Collector is needed. Like me."

"Why would corporations pay so much to government?"

"Oh, mostly to maintain the brand. It is best to avoid nasty split-offs," he explained, "At Simistry Blue Gold, some employees used to threaten to create a competing water supply. But someone still has to sign the check, and they're a fledgling with no capital. They'll need that capital to convince anyone in government to put their name anywhere. They step out with lots of ambition, but no money. I have the money, so I think perhaps you can see where this is going."

"Simistry Blue Gold stays?"

He nodded, "Forty-three years and running."

"How many Collectors are there?" I asked, intrigued.

Mr. Holt ignored the question, whether intentionally or not I was not sure. He continued where he left off, "You have spent far too long in Netherica, sucking the MOSAIC teat. And why not? Automated food, water, recycling, buildings, energy, plumbing, repairs, transportation, roads, hospitals," he rattled them off on his fingers. "We are wholly dependent on this system to keep ticking along. If they fall apart, if they fail for any reason, who is on top? Who makes the decisions? This is why money still exists. It is the glue of all leadership and the back-up plan for failure."

Mr. Holt looked at his jewelry and his field of Protocol Ones, "What a lovely back-up plan it is. What do you think, Bennet?"

"When MOSAIC was built, the wealthy fought against it becoming public. But turns out it was a good thing. It works!"

Mr. Holt chuckled under his breath and said, "I wholeheartedly agree with you - MOSAIC is a good thing. This is all a matter of perspective. MOSAIC was bad for some. Very, very bad. Many fought against it, and they lost. After MOSAIC was instituted, most of them simply quit and retired somewhere comfortable while they still could. But not me. Not a Collector. They couldn't think about money like a Collector thinks about money. And I never gave them my secrets. Oh, no. I would wait for the right moment and simply buy them out. Oh, how I miss those days."

Mr. Holt reminisced for a moment. He recovered the wine bottle from the reservoir and poured a healthy refill. Oscar followed his movements with eyes turned to the pavement. The diamonds on his rings sparkled brilliantly as he made the effort to never disconnect his thumbs and fingers from Mr. Holt's neck. Mr. Holt tipped the bottle in my direction to offer more. I obliged.

"Obviously, there are some tangibles worth considering," he said as he poured, "Everything you see here is made possible by money collection. When is the last time you've seen a bottle of Pre-War wine? Or the last time you've stepped on something other than MOSAIC pre-fab Fungifoam or compressed B-Plank? Real wine. Real marble. Real land, real golf. Virtual games and virtual homes are smoke and mirrors. Netherica is a distraction; entertainment wrapped around life. When it's time for bed, when it is time to eat, when an individual steps outside of that fantasy existence, they open their eyes to the same tiny home and tiny life. They crave that illusion because they know what I have achieved will never be obtainable. Netherica is a consolation prize of what every generation has jealously pursued. MOSAIC. *'Mainframe Operating System for Assets, Infrastructure and Communications'*," he pondered for a moment, "Such a long, silly name. Some call it 'Mother Mosaic'. I call it 'The Great Enabler'. It is the perfect excuse to make it possible for me to enjoy what they never will, and wear what they could never wear. And in my shoes, there is nothing more wonderful than that."

My mind was overwhelmed; brazen arrogance coupled with the generosity of vintage wine and the amusement of endless eccentricities.

"But if money produces nothing," I pondered out loud, "of what value is it? If we can all focus on making MOSAIC produce everything we need to the best of our ability, why would we even need money to make decisions about MOSAIC? Can't we figure out how to make decisions and hold elections without money?"

Mr. Holt sighed. "Don't be so altruistic about needs," he said, shaking his head disapprovingly, "Have you not been paying attention to what I'm telling you? Money produces this," he says, and spread his arms to embrace his estate. "Power to make those big decisions. Privilege and access to the world's rarities. The biggest hoodwink on the American people is that Netherica and MOSAIC made the American Dream possible for all. That dream has never changed. Most

people are content to settle for what is handed to them. Collectors lead the country. Rita Saya knows this, and her husband Richard did as well. We are the leaders. This is why we are invited to her events. This is also why she is throwing a party at her estate on August seventeenth. She inherited everything from Richard and gave everything away except for SayaTech. She is still the sole owner and has spent everything she has to keep it going. Since Richard's death, our friends in Congress keep asking her for more, more, more. Others have pressured her into selling. I'm certain this party is a stage to woo us into making an offer. I know several Collectors are poised to do so. SayaTech is a prize for the taking, and I want it."

Reggie poured the remaining wine from the bottle, downed it, and stood up to continue his oratory. Oscar held his fingers tight, following Mr. Holt's motions. "Collecting is a game, Bennet," he said, "You play it. Like baseball. And like any game, only a handful can be truly exceptional at it."

"Baseball is a team sport," I said cynically. I gazed at the silent, still robots.

"We are a team, when it suits us to be," said Mr. Holt, "A very competitive team. I told you, Bennet, this is American tradition. Let me enlighten you. Come meet the Collectors. Come to the Saya Estate in August."

"I will not be your jewelry," I said with disgust.

"Bah! You don't look the part, anyway," he laughed. Oscar smiled. I smiled.

"What do you get out of bringing me with you?" I asked inquisitively.

"Absolutely nothing," said Mr. Holt non-nonchalantly. "I'm bored. Consider it a perk to being my 'personal assistant'. Call Kelly to make arrangements. Now go away. I have baseball to teach." He shoo'ed me off, picked up a golf club and walked away.

I was escorted off the estate by Kelly, who kindly offered herself to me on the way out. I'm unclear as to whether old Mr. Holt extended this to me personally or to all of his guests, but I'm certain my refusal amused him all the same. On the way home, I pondered why he had asked me to come to his estate. Perhaps he wanted to show off and flaunt his wealth. Maybe make me jealous or try to intimidate me with it. Neither worked. But perhaps it was even more simple than that. I think it was entertaining for an old Collector to get a reaction from a stranger. With every luxury in the world yet surrounded only by robots and human jewelry, I can imagine life becoming lonely and predictable. In our post-scarcity world, money could still buy three things from a complete stranger: rarities, experimental medicine and a reaction. Mr. Holt seemed healthy. He had plenty of rarities. Perhaps a reaction is the only thing left for him to buy.



## MAIN EVENT

Mr. Holt may have had the largest home I had ever seen, but the gated entrance for the Saya Estate was easily the largest and most elaborate entryway. Solid gold plated engravings on the front featured a full-sized Richard Saya. He was imprinted into the left panel like Han Solo frozen in Carbonite, tall, with his shoulders back. He donned a MOSAIC uniform and gazed optimistically into space to see further than any man who have ever lived before him. His left hand reached towards the center crease of the gate, where his finger met with that of an equally-posed bust of a Protocol One robot on the right panel.

Together, with the gate shut, it reminded me a little of "The Creation of Adam". Centered above the engravings was a metallic SayaTech logo hanging with proud approval over Mr. Saya and his humanoid companion.

For the past hour, I had been sitting directly across Mr. Holt in his armored limousine. His concierge had picked us up at the airport. The permanent pout on Mr. Holt's face and utter lack of reaction made it obvious he was unimpressed with the ride and his surroundings.

Mr. Holt told me that my suit was 'trash' and insisted that as his guest, I was to wear the clothes and shoes Kelly had tailored to my measurements. I vaguely remembered her sizing me up when we had met in July. The suit was more comfortable than the one I had arrived with, I must admit, but the ultra white pants and jacket were a grave concern for my clumsiness.

It was around eight o' clock. We were told to arrive at eight o' clock although the banquet did not begin until nine. The sun was beginning its descent below the horizon. Cool hues of yellow and blues emanated from accent lamps on the property, welcoming guests and directing them towards the front door.

More luxury vehicles rolled in behind us. I dropped the window and the smell of petroleum from the old vintage vehicles brought back memories of my childhood. To the right, a couple was being helped out of a personal helicopter on the property's landing pad. Other guests shuffled around the property in automated service carts.

I felt a tinge of anxiety on our way to the entrance. These people were my company for the evening; what do Collectors talk about at a party, or even think about? How could I relate to someone whose idea of a good time is discussing the finer points of champagne fountains and topiaries? Or talk about museum exhibits and zoos with people who only care if a wing is

named after them? I don't know anything about opera, personal bodyguards, yachts, human jewelry or private art collections. I felt lost in translation without having spoken a word.

Mr. Holt and I stepped out of the limousine and into the cul-de-sac. Several attendees huddled just outside of the mansion's entryway, chatting quietly below a classy ambience of string instruments and brass that came from inside. Wary of drawing attention, I walked with my head down.

Mr. Holt tapped my left shoulder with the ball tip of his cane. "As my guest," he said, "I insist you allow me to introduce you to my competition."

"Your competition?" I asked.

"Yes, Bennet," said Mr. Holt, "We're all Collectors here. I told you there is only a handful of us. We always take from each other."

"Sounds like a brutal way to have a friendship."

His grin was likely intended to make me feel stupid. "You know nothing of money, do you? We're cordial, of course. But we're always strategizing. Emotions are weakness, so don't expect to see much of it."

I wanted to be anywhere else than standing idly next to Mr. Holt. I wanted to wander the property aimlessly, maybe find a bathroom, use my OptiLens, or walk assertively in one direction as if I were doing something desperately important. I thought a drink may loosen me up. "How about I find us some drinks?" I asked cheerfully.

"Reggie Holt!" bellowed a portly man with a long goatee, bald head and blotchy red face. He chuckled as he waddled over in his tuxedo like a bloated penguin. He had a smile permanently attached to his face with a chin that jostled with every guffaw, pushing out the odors of whiskey and hummus from deep inside his enormity. "I haven't seen you in person for over six years! You shouldn't build a home so large if it means you'll never leave."

"Sal Lannard!" exclaimed Mr. Holt, ignoring the comments entirely. It was quality of his I realized wasn't personal. "Have you lost weight? You look so much larger on conference walls," he asked whimsically.

I barely knew Mr. Holt, but I gathered this was his way of being condescending.

"Ingrid, come here," said Sal Lannard, "Reggie thinks I've lost weight. What do you think?"

A young twenty-something stepped to his left, struck a sassy pose and stared him up and down. Protocol One. Blonde. Sort of reminded me of Kelly.

She moved behind him, pressed her unnaturally large bosom against his back and wrapped her hands around his waist. Sal Lannard grinned, expressing a goofy false surprise as her youthful hands ran up his waist and across his chest. She flipped her hair aside, stepped around the wide man and reported back to him, "Since our introduction, I'd guess you've put on about 20 pounds. But I like you large, Sal. I want to watch you eat. When do we eat?" She frowned a little and shifted her weight, flirtatiously anxious.

I turned away to roll my eyes and quickly observed my surroundings. I gathered two peculiar facts: first, every Collector was male. Secondly, every one of them except for Mr. Holt had brought a P-One escort. Female-gendered mostly, except the sparse few it was safe to assume were gay. No wives, companions, or chums. No associates. No apprentices. No jewelry. I may, in fact, have been the only human guest.

"It seems to me you may be the one needing the larger home, Sal," said Mr. Holt. He prodded Sal Lannard in the gut with his cane.

Mr. Holt then quickly turned to me, placed his arm on my shoulder and walked me quietly to the front door of Saya Mansion. "Let's go inside," he said quietly, "That man is miserable. I haven't forgiven him for what did to baseball. Sal Lannard has single-handedly made a mockery of the sport by buying up every professional league and naming every single team after a sandwich. Sandwiches! Houston Hoagies. Saint Louis Subs. Philadelphia Cheese Steaks! Boston BLTs! Absurd, all of it. And worse, if you stick around long enough, he will even gloat about it. No respect for tradition. He can rot in hell."

"At least they still play it correctly," I thought to myself before saying to Mr. Holt, "I have a question, if you don't mind, Reggie."

He cocked his eyebrow and turned to face me, "Hm?"

"Am I the only human guest here?"

"Yes. Absolutely," said Mr. Holt, nodding nonchalantly.

"Why has everyone brought an escort?"

"Well, obviously, there are reputations to look after! Nobody wants to be seen with a wrinkly old naggy-saggy wife, or some nitwit friend who talks too much. Escorts are far more attractive, but most importantly, they are predictable. They'll fill the room and stay mute about your business. Just talk to one. Like idiots, they're only interested in what they see around them and they'll wait around all night for you if you want them to."

"Wouldn't human jewelry do the same?" I asked.

"You have completely misunderstood the purpose of jewelry. Jewelry are objects. They are not guests. Besides, they get tired and need to be fed. And the more I drink, I just get tired of wearing them. I left my jewelry at home."

"But why me? Why not Kelly?"

"Kelly bores me, and besides," he said, admiring his cufflinks, "your presence is a curiosity to them. If I'm lucky, I will have offended them by bringing you here. They will spend the evening wondering who you are. In this echelon of society, there's nothing more eccentric than that."

"I'm not your damn monkey," I said, stopping in place.

"Of course you're not a monkey, Bennet," said Mr. Holt, laughing. He spoke with a hint of bitterness, "If I wanted a monkey, I would have brought a monkey. Haven't you heard of Holt Zoo?"

I hadn't heard of Holt Zoo.

"I believe you were misinformed about the nature of this event," said Mr. Holt matter-of-factly. "This party is for Collectors. Not for guests. You're a stranger and that fact is precisely why I brought you. Strangers make collectors nervous and uptight. As for you, just relax. Be yourself. Make them uncomfortable."

I stood at the door, gawking.

"Oh, get that stupid expression off of your face. Why not ask yourself why you came? Certainly not because you and I are such great friends with so many nice people to meet. No! You came because you were curious. So, go be curious. Ask the others about themselves. Be confident, and if you choose not to be, just get drunk and act a fool if that is what suits you best. I really don't care. It will amuse me all the same."

Mr. Holt blew his nose on what I can only guess was a piece of hundred-plus-year-old French art. He not only craved reaction, he had a voracious appetite for it.

"So, what should I tell them if they ask about me?" I asked.

"Say anything you want," said Mr. Holt as he waved me off. "If you don't know what to say, just tell them Reggie Holt brought you. Nothing more."

And with that, Mr. Holt went to greet a handful of guests in the corner.



## THE GARDENS

Inside, orchestra filled the room, doused with the occasional outburst of laughter or heels of escorts as they clopped across the marble floors with the signature P-One trot. An elegant chandelier hung above us, shaped as a birds nest, which was more than metaphor; it actually was a large, multi-chambered nest. To my delight, dozens of luminescent hummingbirds hovered and fluttered above the lobby. My eyes flicked to follow their movement beyond the fine screen that cordoned them from the guests. They zipped across the top tiers of the room like moving rainbows, darting to and from their nest and the enormous honeysuckles that dripped sweet, air freshening nectar.

I assumed these creatures were designed in a SayaTech lab, perhaps by Rita's request. I watched carefully and appreciated that I was only one of a few to have witnessed such a unique reinterpretation of nature.

"Beautiful, aren't they?" a woman's voice asked behind me. I nodded rhetorically, assuming that someone's escort had wandered over to deliver a programmed icebreaker in an attempt to socialize with me. I turned to find Rita Saya standing merely inches away.

Rita wore a stunning black cocktail dress under a translucent lace top that dropped loosely from her slender shoulders and down to her waist. Her smooth black hair was carefully constructed into fine curls and pinned with white gold. A sweet smelling purple flower corsage gripped her wrist and forearm with vine-like stems; another SayaTech creation, most likely. Around her neck was a gold necklace and a pillow-shaped locket that sat just above her bosom.

Rita held out her arm to me with hand turned downward and cocked her head with an inquiring elegance, "I don't recall meeting before, Mister...."

"Kapshandy. Bennet. I mean, Mr. Bennet Kapshandy. You can call me Bennet," I stammered like an idiot. There have only been a few occasions in which I have met someone that I had previously only seen on screens and at speaking events. Awkwardly, I took her hand and shook it.

She smiled politely. "I'm Rita, Bennet," she told me, "and it's a pleasure to meet you. Welcome to my home."

Perhaps she was preoccupied by the others, or trying to figure out how I came to be here, but I couldn't shake the feeling that she was either bored or annoyed by my presence. Neither reaction made me feel welcome. Had I been rude? Did she expect a kiss to her hand, or give

her one of those quick European smooches on the cheek? I wasn't entirely sure of proper etiquette among the culture of wealth, but I'm certain it was obvious I didn't belong here.

Rita's eyes glazed over the crowd and she asked, "So tell me, Bennet. You're not a Collector. Just out of curiosity, whose guest are you this evening?"

"Reggie Holt brought me. As his guest."

"Did he?" she asked and looked at Mr. Holt contemplatively for a brief moment. Her attention snapped back to me. "Come tour the gardens with me, would you? Before I open them up for everyone else. You'll get the first look. What do you think?"

"Really? Wow, sure, I'd love to," I said enthusiastically. I was genuinely excited; it was truly one of the greatest privileges I had ever been offered.

"This way, Bennet," said Rita, pointing down the central hall, "Third door on the left."

She took my arm and leaned slightly against me as we walked through the lobby. I've never been sure of where to put my arms when a woman held me like this. I stuffed them into the shallow pockets of Mr. Holt's trousers which were barely deep enough to fit my fingers. Numerous Collectors eyed us as we walked past; only in weddings had I felt this much attention in such a formal setting. Mr. Holt stared at us with the same cold amusement I had noticed when he showed off his jewelry. The warmth of Rita's body against mine made it impossible to tell if I was sweating because of body heat or the persistent glare of rich old men.

The thick double doors to the gardens were constructed of intricate wood parquet-style patterns. They were well-protected with reinforced steel beams, yet locked from the outside with a simple keyhole. Rita pulled a large, vintage looking key from a black-silver clutch she carried, slipped it into the lock and turned it with a click. Curious onlookers watched as we stepped into the dim garden and Rita closed the door behind us.

Inside, the gardens glowed with a myriad of botanicals that I had the pleasure of witnessing before anyone else; flowers with closed pedals that glowed in purple and blue hues like floating orbs. Vast networks of mycelium flowed in gradual curves along the path, producing a soft, steady glow to light the way. Green luminous fungus clung to the thick trees that lofted high to the very top of the room, perhaps five or six stories above. Above them, a retractable roof was closed for the evening. The air was oxygen rich, moist and smelled like pine and honey.

Rita and I walked down the left path. Several steps inside, the music and murmurs of those outside were replaced with only the fluttering of more luminescent birds, the chirps of crickets, and the click of Rita's heels along the decorative brick pathway.

"Wow," I said with amazement. It was all so very intentional, articulate and beautiful. It was a place of tranquility. A place of Zen.

Rita walked ahead and turned to face me, "Would you like a personal tour?"

I nodded.

"Two acres of custom designed foliage," Rita began, "Mostly hybrids of exotic flora that have been extinct for at least one-hundred million years. One-hundred and eight scientists including myself have worked for nearly eight years acquiring and processing this genetic knowledge into living flora. This garden is a showcase of our finest work. Together with fifteen of my staff, we combined our most successful reincarnations into a resilient and fully functioning indoor ecosystem."

Rita had built the very first Designer Garden.

We stopped around a bend. "Let me show you something incredible we discovered last year," said Rita. She bent over and pointed to a single plant rooted near a prickly bush. The plant was small, only reaching as high as the knees, with lots of thick and waxy leaves. "Touch a leaf, but do so carefully. Only use a single finger. Go on; brush it very quickly and very lightly."

I stroked my index finger along a leaf of the plant and pulled my hand away. As if I had awoken it, vines immediately pushed outward towards my finger. It quickly curled upon itself, as if it were constricting prey.

"What was that?" I gasped.

"We called it the Greenthumb," she said, "It reacts to oils on the skin and rapidly grows. If you were to hold your finger there, it will wrap its vines around as tightly as its size will allow. The more you struggle, the further it creeps up the body and tightens. As it continues to collect oils the vines will swell and grow. Obviously, it must be handled with extreme care. It could very well strangle a person."

"Seems like a rather dangerous species to keep at home," I said.

"Oh yes," said Rita, nodding. "If poorly handled, the Greenthumb is a very dangerous species. Strangely, it is most reactive to humans, something we haven't figured out yet. There are a lot of mysteries in here. Be careful of what you touch."

I shuddered, holding my finger and looking at the hideous, evil plant. Perhaps some things were better off extinct.

Rita showed me tulips the size of basketballs, hexagonal bamboo stalks as thick as trees, and cherry-sized apples that grew on squat trees and produced a different flavor in every piece of fruit they bared.

"Are they safe to eat?" I asked, pointing at one of the gnarly little trees.

"They certainly are," Rita said cheerfully. She picked a few from the branches and tossed me one. "Try a few. Always a surprise."

Thoughtfully, I crunched down and tried to determine the flavors. "This yellow one is great," I said, "Tastes almost like... vanilla pudding. But the texture is a little gritty."

Rita held out her apple to me and said while chewing, "Bennet, try this one. Sour cake icing, maybe?"

I crunched down on the uneaten half and grimaced, "Oh! It's horrible!"

"The Tree of Good and Evil, I suppose," Rita said humorously, and lead me further down the path.

"If that is true, I should be very, very cautious of eating what you're giving me."

She laughed; it was the most sincere thing heard from anyone since my arrival. The light wrinkles around her eyes dropped her guard and alluded to the wisdom of a mind that could conceptualize a place like this. This garden was magical to her. Lovingly, she introduced me to her plants. She placed her hands on several trees as we walked along, as if she were checking their pulse or greeting them. And for the first time since I had arrived, I felt relaxed.

Although twelve years older than me, she held herself well and was fantastically attractive. I am a complete stranger; why had this beautiful, rich and intelligent woman brought me here before everyone else? There was nothing special about me. I had nothing insightful to say about her work. Was I being set up for a joke? Part of me hoped this was some effort to separate me and flirt. I hadn't the slightest how these affluent people think.

"Rita, there's something I've been wondering about."

"Ask away," she said.

"Why would you throw a party only for these old rich Collectors? Where are your scientists, friends, business partners?"

"Richard was a very influential man. The Collectors would regularly scout for up-and-comers in the academic world to find new projects to fund. Many years ago, in his early twenties, Reggie Holt met Richard and groomed him to be part of the Collectors. Many of the men here tonight funded Richard's work and saw it through Congress. Obviously, they saw the opportunity. For laying the groundwork, they have benefitted tremendously."

"How did you meet Richard?" I asked.

"When I was completing my PhD at the Dullins Academy, I was asked to speak on a panel about the future of bio-enhancement for MOSAIC Protocol series robots. Richard spearheaded the project, so he was also on the panel. Not long after the panel discussion, he asked me to dinner. After that, he would call me when he was in town. Those occasions grew more frequent as time went on. He was fifty-two when we married and I was twenty-eight. After twenty-two years of marriage, he died six years ago. Since then, I've dedicated my inheritance to continuing his vision and direction. So, I guess you can say I felt I owed a party to the Collectors."

"What was his vision?" I asked.

"To free humanity from manual labor and diminish error from our supply of basic needs so we can live more productive, creative lives. It was the core goal of his work and the very purpose of MOSAIC. Assets, infrastructure and communications. Integrating MOSAIC as a public institution was a dream far beyond what he thought was achievable in his lifetime, but it happened. He had a way of getting that timing just right. This garden represents my own extension for that vision; these plants may hold solutions for a sustainable future. That knowledge is invaluable. There are many problems we may not yet know, and of course a few that we do."

"Like what?"

Rita smiled. "This garden is full of mystery," she said. "Perhaps some things are better left unknown until the time comes that we need them. We have a lot of work to do. You've had plenty of questions, and now I have one for you. How did you become acquainted with Reggie Holt? He rarely leaves his estate long enough to socialize with strangers and you don't seem like the type of person would associate with someone like him."

"Well, it's a funny story. I was at the museum the night of your exhibition and ended up with a ticket," I spouted before realizing it made me sound petty. "No offense. I really didn't know anything about your work at the time."

"No offense taken," said Rita, "So you're not his apprentice and you're not an escort, why did he bring you? It's rather peculiar to me."

"Tell me about it," I said, laughing it off. "To be completely honest, not a clue. He said he brought me because I'm a stranger, and nobody here likes a stranger. My very presence is amusing to him. I don't get it."

"Hm, yes. Collectors are uniquely reclusive types," said Rita. "I have spent two years building this place and dedicating it to Richard just so I could have something impressive enough to

draw them all here. If you want their attention, you must astound them. It has to be an offer they can't refuse."

"It's none of my business, but it seems to me everyone has it in their mind that you're going to sell SayaTech."

"Well. It's amusing they would think that," said Rita. We strolled around another bend, past an alternate set of solid doors that stood on our left. She pointed toward them. "That's the banquet hall. Shortly, we'll have a toast and serve dinner as well as open the gardens for everyone else."

"These gardens will definitely astound," I said, "but you had better make sure they know about those Greenthumb plants and anything else lurking in here. That thing is dangerous. It kind of makes me nervous."

"It's very simple, Bennet," she said, "Be mindful and stick to the paths. You'll be alright."



## OPULENCE

Rita's mention of a toast reminded me of my sobriety. Returning to the lobby, all I could spot were the estate's Protocol One staff dishing out snacks and non-alcoholic beverages. The room was dry. The Collectors were right where we left them, standing in their social circles with escorts behind their respective patron.

Mr. Holt took notice of our return.

"Ah, Rita!" he said cheerfully, "And Bennet, my gracious guest! There you both are! Rita, I'm thrilled to see you've met Bennet, my guest for the evening."

"Bennet," she responded, "is quite the character, Reggie."

"The decor is exquisite," complimented Mr. Holt, "I am certain your gardens are just as stunning. What say you, Bennet?"

"It's a nice place," I said. "Big trees, flowers, apples. But just look out for the Greenthumbs."

"Reggie," said Rita, "I can ensure you will have many surprises this evening. But for now, I have something to show you. Please follow me, would you?"

They left me standing awkwardly in the lobby. Sal Lannard, the only human being who might recognize me, was standing with several Collectors. I wandered over and eavesdropped.

"...far as I see it, those executives are no different. Threats work, at the very least. Obviously, bribes are faster and far less expensive."

"Oh, stop the rhetoric and bragging, Sal," bickered another gentleman, "you teach us nothing. Remember how badly you wanted Sun Comm right after President Channing was elected? It's mine. No threats or bribes necessary."

"Your ego makes you short-sighted, Eric," said Sal, waving him away.

"I don't know why either of you care about Sun Comm," chimed in a surly gentleman, "Useless old media. And further ruined since the day you took control. I was glad to get rid of that trash."

I recognized one of them; Eric Olsen the Third. He was a short and skinny fellow with a pointed chin and nose. He wore a dark fedora with thick sideburns trimmed with careful precision to meet his jaw line. If all American news and information was a flood, Sun Communications was the levee that managed the flow. Eric owned it all. I thought he would be taller.

"Tell me, Sal," said Eric, "What have all of those threats and bribes achieved for you in the past three years? Hm? You are incapable of finishing a deal. And as for your 'trash', Oscar, making the Sunn Comm deal gave me leverage during the entire Channing Presidency! Oscar, the only reason you haven't been bought out is because Reggie Holt seems to think you're the only one who could convince Sal to give you baseball. Call me short-sighted, but just know your impotence makes you worthless. That goes for both of you."

"Bah! I would never sell baseball!" Sal exclaimed as if someone had demanded his first born child. The Collectors noticed me hovering behind Sal. Several murmured to each other. A few others sauntered off.

"Sir, what is your name?" asked Oscar. He wore a purple-tinted monocle, had the mouth of a bullfrog and dual neck wattles that lumped over his collar. They bounced when he spoke.

"Bennet Kapshandy," I said, "And you are?"

"Oh," he said disappointingly and turned away with disinterest. He whispered something to the two generously-aged gentlemen next to him and shuffled away.

An uncomfortable silence arrested the vicinity. Sal Lannard chewed on the slobbery end of a cigar that he hadn't lit, or even cut for that matter. Without a drink in my hand, it seemed frivolous to discuss alcohol, so I defaulted to the next icebreaker I could think of.

"Those are incredible shoes! Are they made of alligator?" I complimented the man standing next to Sal.

"No, they're not," he responded and looked away as if my words were an offending odor.

"Oh, what are they?" I prodded. I figured at the very least I could get him to brag about his material goods. Alas, he continued to look the exact opposite direction. His nostrils flared and he coughed as if I had just told him I was testing for a hernia.

Sal Lannard pulled a flask from his jacket and took a swig. I couldn't muster the courage to ask.

"Do you know which way the bathroom is?" I asked. The room may as well have been empty.

"Ok. No problem," I said, holding my hands up in surrender, "I'll just go find it now."

I sighed and walked off my frustration. Mr. Holt would have appreciated my attempts at conversation and their pretentious responses. One of Rita's P-Ones directed me to the bathroom at the end of the hall. The red carpet path extended from the lobby and into the bathroom, which subsequently had its own lobby. Around the corner, a line of gold-plated urinals were installed, with an adjacent row of enclosed stalls featuring thick mahogany doors and brightly polished handles.

I chose the furthest urinal. My idling mind meditated on two parallel thoughts: first, the absurd realization that I was pissing into gold, and secondly, my conversation with Rita. Why would she want to impress these old snobs? I understood her late husband's connections, but she seemed so apart from them. SayaTech was well-respected by the public, so there seemed no need for politics. If she was interested in selling it for any reason, then why the big show? Any wise collector could see SayaTech was a good investment or they wouldn't have come in the first place. Everything seemed so unnecessary.

The Protocol One bathroom attendant Bac-Flashed my hands, massaged my shoulders, adjusted my back, sprayed mouthwash, offered me a courtesy wet towel and a peppermint. His suit collar bore a small white embroidered SayaTech logo. His nametag was printed STEVEN.

"So, Steven, you live here in the estate?" I asked him curiously as I wiped my brow.

"Yes, sir," he acknowledged.

"How often does Rita throw parties like this?" I questioned.

Steven's eyes looked upward for a moment as he concentrated, then said, "In twelve years of my time at the Saya Estate, this is the first party."

"Interesting," I said, wadding up the towel and tossing it to him. "Thanks, Steven."

I returned to the lobby and was pleased to see Rita and Reggie had returned. Despite not really knowing them, they did acknowledge my presence, which made me feel slightly better about being there. They were both pressed into a tight group composed of Eric, Sal, Bullfrog-Smiler, Hernia-Cougher, and a couple of other men. Their heads were down, preoccupied with some object of interest. I planted myself just behind Reggie and Rita, squeezing in between them and the escorts.

"Hi guys, I'm so glad you're back," I said.

"Bennet!" said Mr. Holt in a tone of enthusiasm I didn't realize he was capable of, "Feels like I haven't seen you in days! How are you, my friend?"

Flabbergasted, I said, "I'm, um, fine, Reggie. Just returning from the golden urinals."

Reggie laughed raucously, "Bennet, you must see this. See what Rita has. A sample from her garden."

"What is it?" I asked.

"Opulence, she calls it," said Mr. Holt, "A botanical with some interesting properties. Extremely rare. Of course, I was inclined to try."

In Rita's hand was the locket she had been wearing. It was twisted partially open and a lime green powder filled the deep groove inside. Carefully, she tapped a very tiny portion onto the fingertips of each Collector. They dabbed it on their tongue.

"We uncovered it in Brazil," she announced, "It is an extremely potent derivative of something quite ancient we uncovered," she explained, "A flowering plant. It's unlike anything else we've ever found in nature. We presume this species must have died off entirely."

"What does it do?" I asked.

"Well, I'll just say this," Rita said as she tapped a portion onto Sal Lannard's finger, "No matter what happens tonight, we will all feel great doing it."

It sounded good to me. I extended my finger.

"None for you," said Rita as she closed the locket. The Collectors chortled.

"One in ten plants mature enough to produce it," she said, "And they can only be grown in costly lab conditions. Gathering this much took nearly a year and twelve of my best staff. It shouldn't even exist. If there were a price, Reggie is probably the only one here who could afford it."

My heart sank as she put the pendant back around her neck. I felt like a dog. The Collectors were equally pleased with their privilege as they were amused by this rejection.

Sal reached over to envelop Rita in a big bear hug. She quickly dodged his attempt. Eric tapped his fingers contemplatively and asked, "Rita, how much for SayaTech? All of it. Just name your price."

"How bold of you, Eric," she said, "But I'm afraid you're too late. It's not for sale anymore."

"Who bought? Gregory Hemmings? He has been an incessant thorn in my side. I swear he has an infatuation for whatever it is I want. Always outbidding me at the Glory Auctions," complained Eric. He glared at the tall, lanky character in the opposite corner.

Gregory Hemmings wore a wide-rimmed cowboy hat. On his waist was a flashy belt buckle featuring the bold, shining emblem for Handsome Meats. Handsome Meats was the only remaining natural cattle ranch in the country, proudly under his sole ownership. He had made the intelligent decision to start buying up the budding Meat Growing industry when the prohibition on lab cultivated meats had lifted. At the time of the Saya banquet, he had conglomerated ninety-percent of the industry under a plethora of brand names. The other ten-percent were owned by another gentleman in the room named Vim Bruley, also in attendance. The other Collectors paid Vim to keep it, just to keep Gregory from owning it all.

"I decided," said Rita assertively, "To keep SayaTech for myself."

"Quite an investment for a debutante," said Eric. He looked at the other Collectors, "Could be risky, you know. There are people here who will try to take it from you by any means necessary. One favorable President, a few willing Congressmen, a lengthy campaign of negative press," he passively threatened, "You do understand that you'll need allies if you intend to keep it yours in the long-term. Would you consider a partnership?"

"I'll consider it, Eric. Thank you for the offer," said Rita, flashing a polite smile. I could tell it was false; once you've seen a sincere smile on a person, you can easily tell when they're faking it.

"Whatever Eric would pay, I would double it," said Sal.

"Double? Hah!" Eric hollered, "You would probably name it after sandwich. And besides, you don't even have the kind of money nor the intellect to manage this kind of company."

"The Hell I don't!" Sal spat back.

"...and even if you did," Eric said, "You wouldn't deserve it!"

"Rita," chimed Mr. Holt with humble sensibility, "There is far too much ego in this room for mature and productive discussion. I'm not inclined to make an offer if you want to keep your company. I'm really not interested in this sort of deal, anyway; I'd much rather stir the pot. Richard and I were close, you know. Whatever your intentions may be, I want to ensure you're well taken care of for a long, long time. We should talk about your plans for the future."

"Thank you, Reggie. You will know my plans soon enough, as well as the rest of you," said Rita, tapping her necklace pendant. "If you would excuse me, I must be a proper host and ensure the others are accommodated."

Twenty minutes had passed since Rita had opened her locket. Accepting my sobriety, I waited patiently for dinner and assumed the role of observer along with the escorts. The tone of conversation had become comically brazen; Collectors lobbed egotistical challenges about who was more rich, capable and competent. The ambience had grown into a hedonistic romp, frenzied by the designer drug.

Bitterly, with feelings hurt, I watched as Collectors sought out Rita for second and third helpings of Opulence. Several were dancing with escorts to the orchestral version of *Increduloso* by the 2120's pop star *Sinsiduous*.

The band switched to an inoffensive tune. The wide doors at the far end of the lobby swung open and a flurry of Protocol One staff marched in to usher everyone to their respective seats. Eerily, as if every part of their being had been decreased to half-speed, the Collectors concentrated carefully on basic motor skills. I found Mr. Holt meandering meticulously in the general direction of the banquet hall.

"Reggie," I called out, "Are you alright?"

"Feels like I'm underwater," said Mr. Holt. He gazed at his own hands. A toothy smile crossed his face and he said, "...in a good way."

"Recreational drugs! Really!" I exclaimed, "I didn't realize you were so adventurous, Reggie."

I held out my hand, offering to help him inside.

"Bah!" scoffed Reggie. Ever so slowly, he pushed his hand against my chest and moved me aside at non-threatening speed. His speech was coherent but sluggish and his face tensed to

pronounce every syllable, "Uniqueness and novelty are the nature of a Collector. Nobody turns down such an opportunity. Do you realize how jealous they are that Rita took you to the gardens before the rest of us?"

"They won't bat an eye at me," I said. It was difficult to hide my frustration.

"Of course not! Do you want to know who they thought you were? A janitor, or a landscaper. Maybe a distant cousin or a family member. When they knew I had brought you, when they knew that, two of them asked if you were the mythical 'Protocol Two'. They thought I had acquired through some bribe or campaign. Oh, the looks on their faces! I am so very glad I brought you." He raised his hand, the same hand for petting his jewelry, and tried to pat me on the cheek. I backed away, disgusted.

"It was the best part of my night," laughed Mr. Holt, "Until Opulence."

Through the doors of the banquet hall, we were promptly directed to our seats. There were fifteen large round tables, each with a nametag placed evenly around a centerpiece vase filled with a colorful bouquet. Eighty-four seats in all. Forty-one for Collectors, forty-one for guests, and another table set for only two individuals. I glanced at the nametags as we walked by: Richard Saya and Rita Saya.

In the front of the room was the central stage. It was a tree, rather, conformed from its very roots into the shape of a stage. Holes carved into the bark were carefully plugged with accent lighting to brighten the stage and highlight the person standing on it. A root system along the far back of the stage framed a large solid door on the back. Tendrils gripped along the walls, reaching high to the ceiling. The tree was a living stage, an exquisite piece of work combining nature, art and design.

With childlike wonder and infatuation for novelty, the Collectors gazed at the decor as they meandered to their seats.



## HOW TO KILL A GOD

The applause for Rita was a polite one as she approached the podium. It grew into a cheerful clap, and soon escalated into a roar of pure Opulence-induced affection that muted her footsteps.

The staff signaled everyone to take their seats and quiet down. Rita activated the podium's console to position the Vocal Amplifier, leaned forward and said, "Greetings, Collectors. Thank you for coming this August evening."

Many applauded. The others murmured across the tables or were still ogling the centerpieces.

"I've brought you all here on this glorious evening to demonstrate what we have been able to achieve at SayaTech, and more importantly, the journey ahead. I promise by the time I'm finished, I will have explained the part you play in this new direction. But before I begin, I would first like to honor the brilliant SayaTech scientists and our friends at the Dullins Academy who have been invaluable in making all of it possible. All of the Living Art I will reveal tonight has been possible only because of them."

Opulence was indeed taking hold of the room; the Collectors glowed with appreciation. They were no longer mere observers; they were part of the show. In their minds, perhaps they were the star. Not a single one of them seemed to notice there were no members of the Dullins Academy present.

"If my late husband Richard were here today," continued Rita, "he would be honored by your kind reception. He would also find it quite remarkable that I had managed to get you all into the same place at one time!"

A few chuckled at her dry attempt at humor. Others sat on the edge of their seats.

"Perhaps, just perhaps," she said, "He would have been more amazed by this than the gardens I built to lure you here."

More guests laughed. Escorts chimed in musically, a strange sound since so many had been configured with an identical vocal tuning. Other Collectors slapped their tables and knees, laughing so hard it brought tears to their eyes as if Rita were delivering a stand-up routine.

I'm certain Rita had expected this; she had to be aware of what Opulence does to a person. She seemed as sober as I was, so I could only presume she hadn't indulged with her guests.

"Many of you knew Richard well," said Rita. "Many of you believed in him. Richard and I shared a vision for a better world, to free humanity from the confines of manual labor, and to eliminate waste and error through productive computation. And what we have achieved, I can assure you, is far beyond his wildest expectations. In his honor, I've set a place for him."

Rita gestured towards her dinner table. Applause.

"Richard lived in the present and dreamed of the future. But the success of my work depends on the past. Our planet is filled with untapped biological bounties, and every time we find new code, we unlock answers. SayaTech research is laying the groundwork for progress in every branch of science: biology, ecology, archeology, geology, paleontology, and aeronautics, just to name a few. SayaTech brings them together, and I have no doubt we'll find solutions to problems that will touch all life on our planet. This is the new revolution of biotech. Our evolutionary past is only the beginning of this new future."

Rita's robot staff scurried one by one through double swinging doors on either side of the banquet hall, each holding a bottle of wine. They promptly halted at a table. Carefully, they poured precise portions of wine into each Collector's glass, and thankfully, my own. A portable bar self-assembled on the right wall and two robots stocked it with a variety of beverages. Within twenty seconds, the room was served.

I grasped my glass with anticipation and resisted the temptation to drink before the toast.

"A toast my friends," said Rita, raising her glass, "To life. To the future. To Opulence!"

"To Opulence!" the Collectors bellowed with no respect for tone and timing. They chugged their wine in large painful-looking gulps. Rita's staff promptly refilled their glasses. She placed her own glass on the platter held by the tuxedoed robot behind her and raised her arms.

"The night has only begun!" she exclaimed, "There is so much to show and tell. Please, drink," Rita encouraged, "Dinner will come shortly and we'll open up the gardens."

Rita glanced at me for a moment. I raised my glass to her but was ignored. The Collectors, thirsty for wine, called out for second and third refills. Rita's P-Ones ran hastily to and from the bar to procure more bottles. Dinner was also served, and oddly enough, her staff placed an entire three course meal before each of us.

"My friends and colleagues, mankind's goals are ambitious ones. Today, our lifespan is six-fold from our earliest ancestors. Food is in such abundance that no American starves without trying to. The water is clean and we cannot find enough ways to use and store all of the energy we produce. But overcoming our weaknesses and dependencies do not come without cost. We must accept responsibility for our destiny. This responsibility was once attributed only to the will of Gods."

"I do not imply the Gods are dead, because we still suffer. And when we suffer, the Gods are strongest. We return to them for the strength to endure and prevail against what we cannot control. Yet when we are prosperous, fed, and safe, we depend on ourselves. Never before in history have we depended more on ourselves."

Lights dimmed, except the spotlights aimed at the podium. Collectors swayed gently in chairs as if they were seaweed anchored to the ocean floor. Wide grins and blank expressions made it difficult to tell if anything said made sense to them. Were they hallucinating? I could not tell.

"We abhor humanity's weaknesses. For ages we have struggled against fear, hunger, disease, death and darkness, the very things that give Gods their strength. When we depend less on them, the Gods are weakened. With enough time, the traditions of worship are distorted or forgotten. The teachings become myth and truth becomes lore. Their purpose becomes irrelevant. Divine symbols are given new meanings. The Gods may watch and weep, but they cannot prevent their own demise; by their very nature, they are incapable of change. By their very nature, they must be resolute if they are to be depended on. Humanity must suffer if they are to be remembered. A forgotten God is a fallen God."

Sal Lannard pushed his chair back from the table and rose from his seat. Like mindless cattle, the others soon followed. I curiously watched as Mr. Holt wandered towards the back corner of the room; what were they seeing and hearing?

"Collectors, the object of your affection is not different from these Gods," continued Rita, "Money must be resolute if it is to be depended on. To have any value, it must be trusted. Money must serve a relevant purpose. It is a symbol of power and prosperity. It is revered by those who have it and coveted by those who want it. Money is an obsession so powerful that every holy book ever written is forced to acknowledge its importance. Like Gods, many currencies have fallen along with the civilizations that harbored them. But the idea of money has remained."

Clap ---- clap ----- clap. Incapable of normal motion, many applauded slowly and cautiously. Escorts matched their unorthodox applause. The Collectors grinned wide, like Cheshire cats, as if their smiles would tear right through their faces to spread even wider. Rita stood patiently, waiting for the applause to cease. After several minutes, Reggie Holt and the others had stopped clapping and roamed aimlessly about. They wafted in clumsy, lumbering motions, as if they were trapped in a bowl of molasses.

"Money is certainly a powerful idea. To understand it on these terms, we must look at the human weakness that compliments its strength. This weakness is economical. Scarcity. A limited supply of food, water, energy and medicine has plagued humanity since the very beginning. Yet today, there is no financial need to produce. Why does money persist? Why do the people not do away with it once and for all? Why do we strengthen this horrible God with

these games of power and greed, and thereby weakening industry and government, the very source of our strength? Is it possible to kill an almighty, parasitic God such as this?"

Rita leaned forward on her podium and spoke assertively, "It is possible. First, we act when it is weak. We eradicate its purpose. We distort tradition. We make it irrelevant to our livelihood, and useless in our politics. And then, we must forget it entirely." She paused briefly to watch the spectacle of many as they shuffled about like dumb animals. "And Collectors, it pleases me to see that you are all well on your way to forgetting."

It was impossible to tell if they were cognitive enough to grasp her words. They ignored their meals, drifting blindly like jellyfish with slow, meticulous propulsion that lacked predictable intention. Some men embraced and kissed random escorts who didn't seem to mind the attention. One man came to greet me, shook my hand and introduced himself to me as "The Cranky Dog".

Dilated eyeballs. Mumbles of gibberish. Flushed faces. Opulence was very, very strong. The addition of booze seemed to make them more active.

POP-POP! Rita clapped loudly into the microphone and startled me to attention. Slowly, the Collectors turned and stared in her general direction. "I see you all have grown bored of my rambling. Raise your hand if you would like a little music? A visit to the gardens?"

Rita raised her hand. The Collectors followed suit. I sat, dumbfounded.

"This is the new era; we can no longer resist it. You, the disciples of money, drag your God selfishly through existence, covering behind it for strength when it is truly a weakness. This is the end. This is the logical extension of Richard's goal. There is no room left for this establishment. I do hope you now understand why I threw this party. Thank you for indulging me; the gardens are now open."

Rita's modest, warm eyes stirred into pools of darkness with an inky blackness that only absorbed the light that shined upon her stone complexion. There was a calculated, rehearsed coldness about her. Her lips tightened and she gave a hand signal to her Protocol One staff with militant assertiveness. The staff nodded and retrieved stacks of leis, wigs and party hats from boxes along either side of the stage. One by one, we were each given headwear and each guest was directed towards the garden.

"Yes, yes!" encouraged Rita with gleeful exuberance, "Remember - hold nothing back, and feel GOOD about it!"

Many carelessly wandered into the garden. Others, seemingly unaware of their surroundings, had simply ignored her. They chewed at the food on the tables around them, stabbing at steaks and vegetables with the tableware in their vicinity. They unpredictably contorted their bodies into erratic and unusual poses, others mimicking what they saw them doing.

A song faded in; something classy. I didn't recognize it; maybe two centuries old. As if prompted by the sound, Rita's staff immediately stopped what they were doing. They stood motionless as if they had been deactivated. A new process queued and four of them simultaneously sprung into action. Each walked to a respective door, punched a code into the panel and locked them with a loud *thunk* like a vault. They sealed every door but the garden.

My eyes darted about, confused and anxious. The rest of Rita's staff handed out Flavor Chips to the escorts. Every robot inserted the chips into the taste ports under their tongues. Their eyelids fluttered. As if possessed or remotely controlled, every last one of them climbed the stage and lined up shoulder to shoulder as if participating in an army drill. Together, they stood motionless.

*And now, the end is here  
And so I face the final curtain  
My friend, I'll say it clear  
I'll state my case, of which I'm certain  
I've lived a life that's full  
I traveled each and ev'ry highway  
And more, much more than this, I did it my way....*

POP. POP, POP-POP. Loud bangs resounded from the stage. One by one, each robot signaled a report and their heads flew backward as if someone had shot them in the face. They fell lifeless onto the stage floor, their limp limbs chaotically braided over one another.

"Pop chips," I thought. Pop chips, in the early days of Protocol One, were much like flavor chips used to appreciate flavor and socialize with humans. Pop Chips have an entirely different purpose. Pop Chips override Protocol One independence to force maneuvers and safely destroy them. They were a voluntary kill switch a robot would use if they were aware they had become defunct, dysfunctional, or beyond repair. Once inserted, a countdown begins. A transmission is forced to MOSAIC to assume the best coordinates to self-destruct and signal a clean-up crew. A loud pop signals an overheated core that literally fries the synapses and produces a signature synthetic burning odor.

Why would so many young, full-functioning robots voluntarily destroy themselves? And why would they move to the stage? These Pop Chips couldn't have been standard issue, or the robots would have marched outside before popping. They were either hacked or custom programmed.

The Collectors who noticed were laughing and clapping at the spectacle. Two Collectors had followed the robots onto the stage and were hunched over the piles of robo-corpses, amused as if it were some kind of performance.

Things were out of control; fear overwhelming me, I looked to Rita for answers. She stood silently in a dark corner, near the door on the back of the stage. "Rita," I said, "What is this? What the hell going on?"

She shot me a look and frowned, turned and passed through the solid stage door. The same deep, audible click of a door lock signaled above the music. Every exit but the gardens were locked tight.

It was in that moment I realized everything, all of this, was expected. I was in extreme danger, and that bitch knew it. She planned all of this and abandoned me here; my heart pumped so hard my face became numb. I panicked and worried it was the onset of something that would cause me to behave like the Collectors.

By now, the Opulence and booze drove the Collectors completely mad. The garden emanated a chilling mix of laughter and the gargling of painful strangulation. Actions had escalated into mostly irrational and increasingly violent behavior. Someone knocked a wine glass off the table. Another man who noticed began throwing glasses aimlessly across the room. Another man watched the glass break against the wall and began to chew on his own. His eyes grew wide with satisfaction when he crunched down. A trickle of blood dripped down the side of his mouth. He chewed, swallowed hard and began coughing.

Eric Olsen the Third was stomping his steak. He excessively twisted his heel on it with satisfaction, as if it were a cockroach he had been hunting for days.

Sal Lannard plopped down onto the stage like a beached whale alongside his defunct escort. "Ingrid, Ingrid," he said, and proceeded to make out with her, his fat tongue lashing out across her melted face. He ran his fingers through her hair, which due to melting, fell out in clumps. He grabbed harder and tore it from her dead scalp with long, painful rips.

*Regrets, I've had a few  
But then again, too few to mention  
I did what I had to do and saw it through without exemption  
I planned each charted course, each careful step along the byway  
And more, much more than this, I did it my way*

My adrenaline surged. I had to act before something happened to me. With every ounce of courage I could muster, I climbed the stage, stumbled across Sal and the pile of dead robots. With all of my might, I twisted the latch on the door. I pounded until my wrists and hands ached, screaming for help, asking Rita why she would leave me with those animals, and shouting obscenities until my voice went hoarse.

From the corner of my eye I realized I was drawing attention. None of the Collectors appeared to be in any condition to cause me physical harm as long as I avoided them. Their attention spans were worthless and they quickly moved on to something else. Carefully avoiding them, I

walked the perimeter to test ventilation shafts, but the ducts were unreachable and sealed from somewhere deep behind the wall. Helplessly, I draped a tablecloth over myself, grabbed a steak knife and hid behind two upturned tables in the far corner of the room opposite the garden. Two Collectors, observing me, responded in kind by grabbing tablecloths, but quickly forgot why they had done so and wandered elsewhere.

What happened next was the most disgusting, unimaginable horror of my life which has haunted my dreams ever since.

Reggie Holt, sitting on the floor, had also dragged a tablecloth from a table. Its contents crashed to the floor. He blinked at the mess and sorted through the pile. Laughing, he picked up a fork and stabbed at the chair cushions while muttering incomprehensible nonsense. Another Collector sat next to him and followed his actions. Had they regressed to childhood? Become zombies?

*Yes, there were times, I'm sure you knew  
When I bit off more than I could chew...*

Mr. Holt glared at his new companion and howled like a feral animal. He grabbed him by the tie, pulled him close and bit a piece of flesh from his neck. I gasped, but the other man didn't squirm or struggle; instead, they both laughed, as if sharing a joke.

*But through it all, when there was doubt  
I ate it up and spit it out  
I faced it all and I stood tall and did it my way*

Mr. Holt spat the flesh into the man's face. The other man, ignoring bloody neck wound, reached across the floor and grabbed a large steak knife in his left hand and the steak it was intended for in his right. He clutched the ball of filet like a baseball and shoved it into Mr. Holt's open mouth. He grinned wide as he pushed it deep down his throat until his furthest knuckles touched Mr. Holt's lips. Mr. Holt gagged uncontrollably until the morsel passed beyond his gag reflex. His arms flailed with lethargic desperation and contorted amusement that made it unclear if he understood he was dying.

*And now, the end is here  
And so I face the final curtain  
My friend, I'll say it clear  
I'll state my case, of which I'm certain  
I've lived a life that's full  
I traveled each and ev'ry highway  
And more, much more than this, I did it my way*

Mr. Holt was now twitching on his back. The other man straddled him, brandishing the steak knife in his left hand. Meticulously, with no sign of pain, he shoved the knife into his own

abdomen and twisted it from right to left as if he were carving a pumpkin. A bloody mess dumped onto Mr. Holt before keeling over next to him.

I was huddled in a far corner, frozen with fear. Fans above oscillated the odor of death and melted plastic from popped robots. No Collectors were nearby. My head spun and I vomited uncontrollably.

Beyond the garden doors, I only knew of a portion of the dangers within. I didn't dare cross the threshold and brave the darkness beyond. But like lemmings, the others were drawn inside by the noise. The last thing I noticed were Greenthumb vines slowly creeping into the room, along the walls of the banquet hall. And then, everything went black.



## **DARKNESS**

*I've loved, I've laughed and cried  
I've had my fill, my share of losing  
And now, as tears subside, I find it all so amusing  
To think I did all that  
And may I say, not in a shy way,  
"Oh, no, oh, no, not me, I did it my way  
For what is a man, what has he got?  
If not himself, then he has naught  
To say the things he truly feels and not the words of one who kneels  
The record shows I took the blows and did it my way!*

The song had ended over an hour ago. The lights had turned off, and the fans had stopped. I sat in darkness, clutching the steak knife, sweating intensely from constant concentration of every noise around me.

By now, most of the noise had stopped. Aside from crickets and the pounding of my heart, only a few Collectors still remained, drawn to the light of the garden fungi and moonlight that pierced through the foliage. Occasionally, I would hear the shuffling of Rita's victims beyond the garden doors and my imagination swirled to visualize what could be happening from the

Hell within. Shadows of movement would pass by, only to disappear. I felt safer in the darkness.

My stomach turned but I had no appetite. I was exhausted but restless. Persistent fear made me wonder if I had become delusional; the increasing periods of silence were deafening. I began to wonder if all Collectors were dead or if they had just passed out. Impossible to tell. And still too dark to look for an escape. I would have stumbled about like the rest of them, risked attack, being bitten, strangled or poisoned by one of Rita's deadly garden creations.

It made little difference if my eyes were open or not. My eyes grew heavy, so I shut them, and my consciousness sailed somewhere far away from this place.



I awoke to a loud whir coming from somewhere in the garden. Natural light poured in through the long tangles of vines that had grown through three to five feet through the doorway and into the banquet hall. The tick-tick-tick of water sprinklers kicked on for a brief moment and stopped. Birds chirped and leaves rustled.

The retractable roof must have been set to automatically open at dawn.

Angry at myself for passing out, I looked at my hands. I was still clutching the knife. My knuckles cracked as I loosened my grip. Cautiously, I rose to my feet and surveyed the scene.

Putrid odors of the onset of decay had overwhelmed the smell of burning Protocol Ones that had filled the room the night before. A draft circulated the stale air, oscillating and intensifying the odors. I dry-heaved, then placed my shirt over my mouth and nose.

My shoes squished in the carpet and crunched broken dinnerware. Various articles of clothing were strewn about. The walls and upholstery were stained beyond repair, smeared and splashed with incomprehensible fluids.

Carefully, I stepped around Mr. Holt, whom I could barely recognize under the pile of innards gifted to him from the disemboweled gentleman next to him. Their faces and bodies were pale and stiff with the onset of rigor mortis. Others in the banquet hall were strewn about in some manner of gore, all as motionless as the P-Ones who popped the night before.

Helplessly, I kicked a wine glass across the floor. It clinked against a chair and rolled into a plate. It was only one hell of a party, and only I was left to burden the hangover.

Greenthumb vines had overwhelmed the entrance of the garden, so I would have to cut my way through. Cautious not to touch the vines with my bare skin, I grabbed the freshest

tablecloth I could find and draped it over every inch of my body. I cut eyeholes into a clean jacket, wrapped it over my face, and tied the arms in a knot behind my head.

Before attempting to step through the tangled mess, I tested the Greenthumbs. Nervously I brushed my covered hand against a leaf and pulled away. Nothing. I grabbed a vine, and still no activity. I took a deep breath, stuck my hands through the bush and pulled it aside.

Several feet in, I reached a small clearing where the most terrible, unforgettable scene was waiting; dozens of Collectors, mounted against the trees in a web of foliage. Their faces were blue and contorted into deathly depictions of amusement and anguish. I could tell which had been the first victims; their faces were bloated in lumps that pushed out between tendrils of the Greenthumb vines that wrapped intimately around them like tourniquets.

I evaluated my options; wait for help to arrive or to find my way out of here. I couldn't stay here any longer. The heat and humidity were steadily increasing and wearing the hood made it hard to breathe. I looked through the opened roof and the sky beyond persuaded me to continue my quest for freedom and fresh air. I couldn't see a ladder, stairs, or even a tree to climb my way out, so I continued onward. I reached a larger clearing near the center of the garden and removed my hood for a look around.

Instantaneously, I keeled over and vomited again, clutching my abdomen from the painful convulsions.

A grotesque display of Rita's hard work surrounded me. It was a scene I can only describe as a stage of Hell: a large, presumably carnivorous plant had grown downward into the Earth, using its root system to push the soil away and create a large pit for its prey to fall into. Two Collectors were face down inside, their skin torn and pleated from struggling against the thick spines.

On the other end of the clearing, three helpless snobs were entangled in thick bushes of thorns. Their clothing was torn almost entirely off, leaving not one ounce of dignity to the victims. The congealing pool below expressed they had likely bled to death trying to wrestle themselves free.

Others had stepped into ferns that dismembered limbs with powerful, sharp barbs that had closed upon them like bear traps. Dark crimson paths in the soil trailed from their maws that lead to the amputated victims that had crawled along before suffering enough blood loss or going into shock.

Numerous others were clearly victims of each other or themselves. Many were stabbed to death. Others appeared to have climbed trees and had clumsily fallen to their death. Others were still, as if sleeping, covered only in dirt and the paleness of death. Perhaps they had eaten something poisonous. Perhaps the Opulence was a fatal poison. Just in case, I checked to see if any of them were breathing, but to no avail.

As far as I could tell, I was the only survivor.

I placed the hood over my head again and squeezed through the brush to the far end of the room, looking for a way to escape. I found a service ladder tucked behind a benign species of vine. Before climbing, I almost put the knife between my teeth and remembered for the past twenty minutes I had been cutting through vines of dubious toxicity. I placed it inside of my jacket's pocket instead.

The climb was easy, and when I reached the top, I gulped in the air as if I had been drowning. I was standing on the edge of a maintenance balcony just above the retractable roof. I faced the back of the estate where acres of flat, trimmed grass faded quickly into the shadow of woods in the distance.

The horrors below were now out of sight. Relief washed over me, and the newfound freedom coupled with the anxiety was surreal; much like waking from a nightmare on a Sunday morning. I tossed off layers of cloth, bunched them into a big wad to toss them down into the garden when I had a realization: I was still alive. Only myself and maybe Rita. Thinking clearly for the first time in hours, I recollected everything that had happened the night before; Rita had shown me this garden before anyone else. She wanted to know who I was. She told me about the Greenthumb and the dangerous plants in the gardens, but gave no indication of danger to anyone else. She liberally doped up the others on Opulence while refusing me and not partaking herself. To Mr. Holt, I was a tool, but to Rita, I was a wrench in her plan. She followed through, and I while I could not deny the fact she had endangered me, she also gave me clues to survive.

I still hated her for it. I wondered where she could have gone. The party was private, and with every P-One dead in the banquet hall, there was no record of what had happened, or me having been there. I was the only record.

That is when it occurred to me: What would happen if I stayed here and waited for the police to arrive? Law enforcement could show up any moment, for any reason. Perhaps a call or a routine check. Perhaps a bodyguard for a Collector or someone's jewelry had expected them and contacted the authorities. If they found me anywhere near the property, I would have been endlessly hounded with questions about Rita's whereabouts or intentions. Maybe accused of conspiring since I was the only survivor, or perhaps seen as an accessory because Rita connected with me prior to drugging and killing everyone. Reporters would follow me for months, asking me questions about Rita or Eric Olsen the Third, throwing accusations or telling lies about me. I would have to go to court. And if they found Rita I would have to testify against her. She was obviously capable of killing. Would she come for me if I talked to the police?

Scared and overwhelmed, I made a split decision to leave and never talk about it. Hours had passed since it started, and it wouldn't be long until the estate would be forcibly entered and

crawling with an assortment of police and investigators. It was likely suspicious robots or people were already banging on the gate and buzzing the intercom.

Daylight was almost in full swing. With wads of clothes under my arm, I hastily climbed down an outside service ladder and ran towards the wooded area on the back of the estate, through the lavish courtyards, past the pale white busts of Rita and Richard, past the rows of colored tulips and topiaries, the swimming pool, the water fall, the pool house, the horse stables, and the cattle ranch.

The back fence was much too tall. In vain, I jumped and tried to reach the ledge, anyway. Wary of surveillance drones, I frantically searched the woods for a way out. I found a sewage tunnel at the end of a small creek that appeared to run under the wall. Squatting, I moved forward inside and my heart sank when I saw solid steel bars and a padlock blocking my escape. In desperation I tugged the padlock anyway, and to my surprise it slipped right open.

"Rita", I thought out loud. Had she escaped through here? Had she expected me to find this and prepared the lock for my escape? Maybe, maybe not, but for all the effort to secure this place, I could think of no other reason why the gate would have been unlocked.

The gate creaked softly as I opened it and slipped through. I rubbed the tablecloth across the lock, being careful not to leave fingerprints, and snapped it shut behind me.

I escaped the Saya Estate.



## AFTERMATH

After about a half-mile of travel through flood sewers, I slipped through a manhole in a public park near a manmade lake. Either nobody had seen me or paid any mind. I smelled awful and looked worse. Mr. Holt's white pants were predictably stained beyond recognition. I threw the tablecloths and undergarments into a nearby Organi-Bin and hopped on the next Vacutrain to Chicago.

By the time I had showered that evening, the media had already gnawed the story for hours. It was breaking news in its own right; many Collectors were well-known Socialites, almost Celebrity status. Sun Comm gave special attention to Eric Olsen the Third. The often short attention span of network news was held for weeks as investigators were baffled by the endless mysteries of it; Rita was never found, and nobody knew the motive.

To an outside observer, it was never even clear if she was responsible or not. Her closest friends and SayaTech employees who helped her build the garden showed no signs of guilt or involvement with her scheme.

As time went on, conspiracies and rumors grew; some speculated Rita was kidnapped, but there was never any ransom or evidence. Others believed she had escaped to hide somewhere deep in Bismarck, protected by groups of old robots for some make-believe reason. Others believed that none of the Collectors had died, and that they all had crafted the whole event with living clones so they could all live on some offshore island together. Others believed Rita had died long ago and she was, in fact, one of the dead robots.

None of it made much sense. While I don't know where she went, I did understand the motive, but I kept it to myself. It seemed best to allow history to make those interpretations.

Rita's disappearance was an admittedly amazing feat in our modern surveillance society. I wasn't so lucky. Exactly three weeks after the massacre, I was plugged into Netherica when I was alerted of visitors. Pounding on the door were two officers. One male, human, and one female gendered Protocol One. Typical 'Human Cop-Robot Cop' routine.

"Hello, sir. Are you Bennet Kapshandy?" asked the human officer.

"Yes, that's me," I said.

"Mr. Kapshandy," he said, "We're investigating the Saya Incident on August seventeenth. We had a few questions to ask you."

I knew if they were coming to me after this much time, they must be digging deep for any connection. It made me nervous nonetheless. Obviously, something was traced back to me, but I wasn't sure what it could be.

"Sure, ask away," I said.

"Did you attend the SayaTech Banquet at the Winfeld Museum on April sixteenth of this year?"

"Yes," I said, "I was there."

"And did you receive a ticket to attend the event from a Mr. Reginald Holt?"

"Yes, that was him."

"Did you have any prior connection to Mr. Holt?"

"No, sir, I did not."

"Could you please explain to us how you came across this ticket?"

The officer pulled out Mr. Holt's museum ticket. The museum likely kept record of every name from the event, including mine as Mr. Holt's guest, and they're contacting everyone. They must have not known anything about my connection with the Saya Estate or with Rita. It seemed they assumed I wasn't there. "Mr. Holt told me he couldn't go, so he gave it to me on his way out. I sat at the bar and had a few drinks. That was pretty much it."

"Were you ever contacted by Mr. Holt after the event?"

"Yes, I was, a couple of months later he asked if I would visit him at his home in Ann Harbor."

The two investigators looked at each other quizzically. One asked, "And you went?"

"Yes, I went. He was an eccentric fellow."

The officer scrunched his brow and asked, "So what did he want?"

I shrugged and said, "I really don't know. Fed me wine, talked a lot about his money. He wore human jewelry and asked me to play baseball, which was really driving golf balls into a field of robots. That was about it. My opinion? I think he was just bored and wanted to impress someone. Get a reaction from me, maybe. Is this important?"

The officer sighed and blinked twice to turn off his OptiLens recorder. "Probably not," he said, "Just one more question because we have to ask. Were you at the Saya Estate on August seventeenth of this year?"

"From the look of how things went down," I said, shaking my head, "I'm pretty sure if I had been, I wouldn't be standing here right now."

"Thank you for your time, Mr. Kapshandy," said his P-One partner, "We're sorry to bother you. I've added our information to your contact database. If you can think of anything, please let us know."

They turned to walk away.

"Any luck finding Rita Saya?" I asked them.

"We're still looking," the male officer said, "Good day, sir."

And that was the last time anyone ever asked me about it.



In the coming weeks, it became more obvious to everyone that Rita's massacre had ushered the end of the old America. Without effective leadership and purpose, banking institutions quickly dissolved. Activists, mostly young people, burned any money they could find in community demonstrations that police tolerated about half of the time.

Nobody seemed particularly angry about the collapse of finance or the devaluation of the money. Some participated just to be activists, but the rest were glad to see the banks gone.

Individuals working in banking and finance were instantly without jobs. Many were laid off while others had quit to join the anti-money protests or to avoid the growing resentment towards the financial economy. With the government already relying on MOSAIC for production, politicians who relied on campaign financing and kickbacks from Collectors were forced to adopt a new campaign model. They called it PPM, or 'Personal Political Marketing'.

Estates of Collectors, including the Saya Estate, were either inherited by family or seized by public officials. In either case, apathy led to most of the assets being squandered, wasted, or stolen by dishonest people. The honest people returned many pieces of art and antiques to local museums.

Corporations that survived the banking collapse scrapped their financial regulatory wings and business models to quickly shift focus towards full integration with MOSAIC compliant resource management. Corporations who were not as nimble by either refusing to change, or incapable of change, were conglomerated into those that did.

Smart Corporation, which had already been undergoing integration for full MOSAIC compliance years before the collapse, was in the best position of any industry. They convinced the board at the much smaller SayaTech that their survival depended on cooperation. Considering Rita's notorious image, it was a decision that produced a lot of bad press for Smart Corp, but Smart Corp swallowed them whole, and SayaTech has long since been forgotten.

UA-34 was the official name given to the substance Rita had called 'Opulence'. It was deemed a toxic hazard and scheduled against production and distribution, said the news. It was noted that even a small amount of alcohol produces 'irrational and violently suggestible feelings in the patient'. Today, ImmuNano has an identifier and neutralizer that will work instantly if it is ever ingested.

The song she played as the Collectors ate each other was written and performed by a man named Frank Sinatra. He was a memorable American.

For many years, I've tried to block all of this out of my mind. Forget the past. I may have never thought about it again if I hadn't tried so hard to write this. Of all the horrifying, painful images that come back to me, nothing stands out as much as the final moment Rita had abandoned me. It was the only part of the whole experience where I feel I could gatherer any indication of what her intention might have been. That intention is the only closure I ever cared about. I've come to accept I'll never get it.

So, it's best to just move on.

I wonder how Rita felt about how these events unfolded since August of 2158. Was this what she wanted, or what she expected? Was it worth risking her life, tarnishing her accomplishments, business and reputation?

Most people will never hear about her. To challenge an institution as she did meant risking everything she could have ever cared about. And perhaps her approach was cowardly; there may have been other ways to achieve the same goal.

No tears are shed for Rita Saya. Rita was not 'the good guy'. Neither were the Collectors.

No tears are shed for money, either. When purpose is lost, there is no grief or empathy left. Like the other fallen Gods of the old world, it has been forgotten.

And someday, if my children's children ever ask me about it, I'll ask them about school, their friends, and their family.