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Wadsworth, OH

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Cover art by R. J Dyson. Cover and interior layout and design by Absolutely Unprofessional.

First Printing: 2022  
ISBN 978-0-9997832-6-9  
Absolutely Unprofessional  
Wadsworth, OH 44281  
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to my kids, and all those following  
the glow on the edge





## 1 It Begins

**"R**each for it!" cried Joanna.

"My shoulder's...gonna pop...out of joint...if I stretch...any...further." Heschel's uniform began pulling apart along the shoulder seam. Sweat seemed to travel directly into his eyes.

"We won't get another chance!" she said. "It's now or never."

"Aaaagghhhh!" Heschel grabbed hold of the half-buried object, grit his teeth, and fell back into the side of the hill with a rush. Clinging to the rope with one hand while holding the object firmly with the other, he yelled, "Got it!"

Joanna cinched the line, took a deep breath, and pulled tight as her friend navigated the steep hillside in the dark.

“I’ve never been that close to the waterfall,” said Heschel, one hand squeezing the rope and the other pressed by his side with the jagged object wedged beneath his armpit.

“I’ve never been to the edge,” she said. “How far do you think the drop is?”

“I don’t know, but I can’t feel my fingers,” he said, trying to make a fist. “What if I never type again? What if I can’t press on the device in session? What happens when I’m called on to...”

“Are you hyperventilating? You’ve done more difficult exercises in training,” said Joanna. “Are you feeling okay? Tell me, can you feel this?” she said, pinching the soft meaty flesh on the back of his arm.

“Ouch!” Heschel jumped back with a whimper, nearly dropping the item. He wasn’t a wimp. After all, the whole adventure was his idea. It’s just that he had never done anything rebellious before and couldn’t tell if he was wildly excited or terrified.

After a few deep breaths and a snort that made them both laugh a little too hard, he asked, “So, what do you think it is?”

“A relic of the past. I’ve never seen these symbols before,” she said. “Do you think this was done by hand? Could it be that ancient? Definitely before paper and

tablets.”

“It’s strange, isn’t it?” he said, tossing his sore arm around to get the blood flowing into each tingling digit. “We’re holding a piece of history. A defunct and forgotten language. If we’re not careful, we might even be in possession of an illegal idea.”

“Look, we don’t know what it is,” said Joanna, tucking the object into a secret panel within her waist pack. “And we have no idea what it says. Illegal or not, we’d better get back before they notice we’re missing. Do you think monitors patrol this far out?”

Heschel looked around the woods. The moonglow was exceptionally bright, making their venture more dangerous. Upriver, he saw a flash along the shore, like the reflection of moonlight off of a monitor’s belt buckle. *Why does everything in the forest appear more sinister at night?* After a moment of staring, he decided it was nothing more than water splashing from the rocks.

“I doubt it,” he said with a deep breath. “In fact, what are the odds we’d find something game-changing on our first exploration? After all, everything was destroyed, right? We’ve heard all the history The Chamber decided was worth knowing. Besides, why would they hide the past from us? Who would benefit?”

“I heard something about it once, I think,” she said cautiously. “A few years ago, one of the hall monitors

began to share a memory about an old family tradition.”

“They actually said *family tradition*?” asked Heschel, looking into the treeline.

“They must have panicked when they saw me standing nearby because they demanded I drop and do fifty push-ups on the spot.”

“Maybe you misunderstood them. *Handy munitions? Fancy rendition?* Have you heard them slip again?”

“I haven’t seen that one since.” Joanna looked back over both shoulders. She was beginning to feel uncomfortable outside the dorm at night. What if they were being tracked?

Heschel crouched low, pulling Joanna down onto the soft moss. “You didn’t mention a disappeared monitor! That changes things. That changes everything!”

“Deep breaths, Heschel. Deep breaths. They were reassigned,” she said, placing her hand on his shoulder without knowing why. After all, there were unspoken rules against that sort of camaraderie. Touching another human outside of training was unacceptable.

His chest heaved in and out. He sat up a little taller. “How do you know?”

“0561.”

“Wait, what time is it? It’s almost roll call!”

Joanna grabbed his sleeve mid-leap, pulling him back down to earth. “Their serial number. Not the time. I heard the replacement say that #0561 had been reassigned to the



edge.”

“You can let go of my jacket now,” he said, dusting off while scurrying to his knees. “0561. Family tradition. The edge.” His pupils dilated in the moonlight. “Wait a second. We’re on the edge right now. What if they’re watching? They’re always watching.”

“No one’s watching. They have no reason to believe we’d be anywhere but our flat,” said Joanna, running her hands through the soft patch of moss between the forest line and the waterfall. Once again, she looked over both shoulders into the dark forest. “Have you heard anything like that before?”

“Family tradition? No. Well, tradition, yes, it’s all we do around here. Follow orders. Do what the students before us did. Don’t change a thing. Don’t be curious. Don’t ask.”

Joanna began to laugh. “Wow, I’ve never seen a face contort like that. What do you call it?”

“I call it my face. It’s full of muscles. It takes a lot of muscles to communicate.” Heschel’s voice rose and cracked, the sort of crack a voice does at his age. “Yours has been pretty fluid as well, ya know.”

“Expression. That’s what it is. Your face is all contorted and big and mushy. I’ve never seen you act so expressive before.” Immediately Joanna began feeling her cheeks and forehead for lumps and wrinkles.

“Yeah, well anyhow, I don’t know what the family part

is. How do families have traditions of their own?” He sat back down on the moss and began running his hands through it like hair. “I mean, all of our families sent us here. That’s what parental units do. It’s what we’ve always done. I don’t know my biological faction, and I don’t think about them. Do you?”

A quiet but steady beeping sound from a distance shook them both from their pondering. It was Joanna’s alarm. She had set it just in case they lost track of time.

“Four hours ‘til sunrise,” she said. “Time to go. If we’re not fully rested, they’ll suspect something.”

“I’ll grab our devices beneath the leaf pile,” Heschel said. “Let’s hope they weren’t tracking any of that.”