



BOOK FOUR

THE



DEEP

R.J DYSON



rjdysonsblog.com | absounpro.com

Wadsworth, OH

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Cover and interior layout and design by Absolutely Unprofessional.

Print and distribution through IngramSpark at ingramspark.com.

First Printing: 2026

ISBN 979-8-9997367-3-4

Absolutely Unprofessional

Wadsworth, OH 44281

rjdysonsblog.com

you who were in darkness, stand in the
Light—walk as students in the Light



New Vorkutlag

“It’s raining,” she groaned, stiff and bored and stuck in class.

“Mumbling again, Scarlet? And just as session is about to begin. Hmph”

Professor Ilyich was hailed as the most brilliant human in the modern era by The Southern Chamber of Trust. Praised not only by the elites, but all fellow comrades of the Alphabet Coup. Students and leaders alike. Everyone. With only one exception—Scarlet.

Scarlet was a Seeker, equivalent to a sixth grader in the West before the great transition. “It isn’t that I think Professor Ilyich isn’t intelligent,” she would whisper to her youngest sibling, Iya, late at night after a hard day in

session, “only that I feel some terrifying waves of bleak and bitter cruelty simmering beneath his surface. Please don’t tell anyone I think that.”

Unlike other students, Scarlet had the singular ability to read the inner intangible portion, the non-material, thicker than emotion, hidden traits of a person’s core being.

While everyone else appeared to accept the premise of the Southern Rail—what the elites referred to as their newest vision for their newest world order—Scarlet’s conscience revolted against the idea of simply conforming to the rules and ways of New Vorkutlag.

She didn’t know any better, but the darkened ideas of the Southern Rail produced a culture in New Vorkutlag that seemed at odds with the beauty she witnessed in nature when laboring on the community farm or along the forest’s edge.

The decrepit state of New Vorkutlag with its crabgrass lawns, sagging storefronts, flickering street lamps, nighttime hordes of disobedient students, and generally depressed ethos left her feeling uneasy around town even in broad daylight. While cameras, scanners, readers, and finders covered every inch of the town, she knew there were plenty of students who managed work-arounds for nighttime shenanigans.

It was an unsettling mix of an old industrial town with the prowess of the latest cyber-chain secure technology

that tokens could buy. Like the classic communist villa, New Vorkutlag's elites lived in sprawling homes with endless water, electricity, food and power, while the rest of the willing and eager population rationed day by day. "Milk for the upper-crust, crust for the milkers," the students learned to repeat from an early age—seeds sown for order.

But that wasn't the worst of it for Scarlet. It was the anomalous physical malformations of the most ardent Southern Rail adherents that didn't sit well with her. Professor Ilyich was always strange to Scarlet, but even so, new hideous deformities crept in over time. His dramatically curved back, like a bent tree in a storm. His elongated, alien-like skull revealed by his enlarged forehead. His small, pointy horns like cathedral spires protruding from his shoulders. And his corpse-like skin that grayed and withered.

Hunched over and embittered, the professor embodied what Scarlet imagined true evil to look like. The Southern Rail, however, flagrantly taught that his appearance was the result of free-form obedience to progress. Professor Ilyich was the model citizen of the new era.

Scarlet wasn't up for the new reality. And she really, really didn't want shoulder-talons. But even more so, she hungered for truth.

"You're old enough to know the truth. We entrust you, Southern Rail leaders of the future, with plain talk of the

purest form,” Professor Ilych began, with his nightmarish voice, what Scarlet described as a drowning frog, in his typical self-aggrandizing tone.

“I believe in you,” he assured once again, “unlike those Deplorables many of you were rescued from. Those unintellectual oppressors with their mindless incantations, raw-hand trades, horrid campfire songs, their dumb-faced laughter and...and beliefs too unenlightened to discuss.”

Professor Ilyich looked around the room at the young class in various stages of deformity. He knew they would hang on his every word, no matter how tall the tale or gassed up the lie. “Compound Forty, the pinnacle of the compound experiment, inevitably fell because a traitorous student refused to accept reality with a leadership incapable of leading!”

Scarlet felt her chest tighten as she instinctually raised her hand. She couldn’t help it. Something had been stirring within her during the most recent lectures on The Modern History of Re(al)-Education.

“Professor Ilyich, sir,” she said in a thin voice, “You’ve mentioned their fall several times now but...um...uh...”

“Spit it out!” he demanded with the hiss of a water snake.

“Um...well...how did it fall? There are rumors—”

“Lies!” he snapped, before carrying on in a fit of rage about the necessity of listening to approved sources

from studied specialists. “And this whole rat’s nest about unlocking the poltergeists of long-buried myths and phantasms on the very property of C-Forty! Or the babbling nonsense about ancient texts with ancient truths with divine powers—Trash!”

His dead-panned glare at her as he shouted “trash” was a not-so-subtle reminder of how he felt about her.

It was happening more and more. Her “ridiculous questions” with an internal stirring to know more about the world. This time was different. She *had* to know more. In fact, the first time Compound 40 was mentioned, she knew she would have to dig deeper.

Digging deeper, however, would soon be part of her problem. The older students worked in what had been dubbed The Minds. Mineral mines directly beneath New Vorkutlag were a boon for the elites and the future plans of the Southern Chamber. Scarlet had only just taken a tour of The Minds as a primer for her future work sessions deep in the darkened bowels of the town.

Once her rotation began, she knew it would be nearly impossible to sneak off in search of the mysterious glow whenever it decided to show itself. Scared yet excited, she knew her time to discover whatever it was trying to show her was coming to a close.

“You don’t need to know the details, they’re un-im-poor-tant—” Professor Ilych stressed before suddenly pausing, and with pursed lips and shifty eyes, changed

the subject altogether. “*Ahem...come to think of it, it... it’s time we move on to the Economics of New Vorkutlag and the Consequences of Free Thinking for the Future of the South-Eastern Hemisphere. A wildly engaging study on...*”

Scarlet had already checked out. She noticed his pause and that look. She always noticed those things. In fact, he looked directly at her after the fact as if to try to catch her noticing. Scarlet, however, had become a master at faking the dull-eyed look of a student fully willing to be spoon-fed whatever the chef-professor decided to serve in the moment. Only, as he stared at her, she noticed something that both grossed her out and sent a chill up her spine, a liquid sort of ink-blot in the whites of his eyes moving in and out from behind his eyelids like a sea creature hiding in a reef.

What in New Vorkutlag is that? Had to be a shadow. I really need more sleep. Wait, if Compound Forty is so unimportant, why mention it all? What ancient phantasms would they have unlocked? And of all the rumors to mention, why that one? Why bring it up only to panic and squirm at the thought of it?

While the professor droned on, Scarlet zoned out. *It has to be the same source. I don’t know about the people of the light, but whatever that orb is and that glowing humanoid I keep seeing, it has to be the same supernatural thing that shook up Compound Forty. I feel it. I have—*

“Young Scarlet!” Ilyich barked, slamming his hand down on the metal lectern. The ringing blast shocked the silent room the way a crackling paddle would at the town center during a Public Attitude Adjustment Session. The students rolled their eyes again. “What do you think Willow’s going to say about this? Or should I hold *her* accountable for your disregard for my education?”

Willow was Scarlet’s assigned W.A.F.E., or Wide Awake Fully Empowered mentor. She was a junior officer and one of the most eager to ascend to her future commission.

Scarlet’s cheeks glowed a vibrant red. “I’m sorry, Professor. I was—”

“Enough with the endless, insipid excuses, you infantile rat!” he screeched to everyone’s surprise. “Out of my class. To the commons. Onto the center stone. Stand there. Contemplate your declining role in the town. Ask yourself, ‘Am I regressing or progressing?’ Now march!”

Scarlet’s legs could hardly manage as she slunk out of the lecture hall. Her mind raced, struggling against every muscle, desire, and instinct to run. She passed through the empty halls like a ghost. Horrified at the attention drawn to her in session. Sweating at the thought of what Willow would have to say about it. Her thoughts were a tangled string of Compound 40, glowing orbs, being labelled a trash rat, the black ooze in Professor Ilyich’s

eyes, and, of course, the social punishment she was marching toward.

Suddenly, her legs froze and her tongue felt like sandpaper.

“Scarlet? What are you doing in the hall during session? Without a pass. Aaghh! Say something!”

“Well...Willow, it’s just that...I...”

“Don’t tell me you’ve been ejected. Again,” Willow shot back, clenching her fists.

“I didn’t mean—”

“Did he send you to The Minds early?”

Scarlet’s eyes sprung wide. “No! The commons.”

“You’re selfish, and not in a good way. A trait incompatible with New Vorkutlag,” she growled, grabbing Scarlet by the upper arm, squeezing tightly, and shuttling her to the center of the commons. “You’re a curse on my reputation, Redrum. Why you were ever assigned to me...Agghh! Progress before people, well, I’m stuck with a person when I should be progressing.”

Scarlet gasped at Willow’s blunt rejection. Particularly the nickname, *Redrum*. She didn’t know who coined it, only that Willow had never used it before.

From the reflection in a glass panel, Willow caught a glimpse of the girl’s sullen face. She was torn. It was her duty to shape Scarlet into a model citizen. To tear her down and rebuild her in the image of The Southern Chamber. But she also couldn’t help having a soft spot for her.

“No whining,” demanded Willow, her voice breathy and biting. “I’m reviewing your Stream-Wear footage now. Seriously, Redrum, a squirrel would have seen you zoning out. Look at that face!” she said, flashing the screen of her device toward Scarlet. “Does that look like the face of a determined Seeker?”

Scarlet’s shoulders heaved as she struggled to control herself. She didn’t like seeing footage of herself. Maybe it was because she only saw the photos when she was in trouble.

“You’ll be stronger. Maybe even more submissive on the other side. Stand. Stay. Silence. Maybe, just maybe your skin will gray with the others. See you at first session.”

“Willow? Don’t leave me,” Scarlet whispered, voice trembling. “Am I really gonna stand here all night? Even when everyone leaves at lockdown?”

“That’s not up to me, Red. The Prof. will evaluate his punishment once session ends,” Willow shot back. “Stand. Stay. Silence. Got it?”



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