

Operation: Lifthill
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“Where were you when the world ended?” I’m sure that is going to be a question that people will ask each other, huddled around 55-gallon drums of burning trash. Well, the few people that will be around to ask it, I guess.

They are all going to have their own poignant stories, but they’re all going to be wrong. You see, they’re all going to remember where they were on December 21st, when the bombs went off and all hell literally broke loose. But that is not actually when the world ended, that is just when it found out.

Actually, the world ended a year and change earlier, and I remember exactly where I was; I was making another terrible choice in the conga line of bad choices. Always for good intentions, but as they saying goes, the road to hell and all that.

March 2015 – Minneapolis

Leaning against the bar, I signaled Marcy for another Grainbelt. It was shit beer, but it was cheap, cold and easy; three things I desperately needed on what felt like the hottest day of the year. I knew I shouldn’t even be here, I didn’t have the money to drink away my problems, especially since this morning’s pink-slip was the latest problem to stack atop the pile. But we were all here, bravado showing, bragging about how the company that had just let us go would fail without us, and how damn politics always screw the quiet workers who are just there to get the job done.

The layoffs had gutted the whole department and what I thought would be a promising career in the large retail headquarters ended in a summary reorganization of the corporate structure. “It’s not you,” they said, “It’s us.”

That bullshit was a lie from Donna in junior year, and it’s a lie now.

I hadn’t even told the wife yet, but she’d called several time already. Damn news channels making a terrible affair worse by chasing headlines. Heartless bastards showing the forced exodus of the box carrying disenfranchised.

“It’s not you, it’s us.”

Rickie, the newbie, or at least he was yesterday, was talking about a rumor he’d heard about another corporation downtown offering interviews. It seems that according to him, while our corp, or ex-corp, was trimming the fat, others were hungry for the scraps.

So maybe it wouldn't be the end, I thought, as my phone started to vibrate. Checking the display, my wife and daughter's faces appeared – a candid shot from a happy day, celebrating the end of our troubles when I got this job. How am I going to tell them? I pondered, listening to the insistent buzz buzz buzz of the phone. Eventually, it stopped, and with a sigh, I put the phone away and took a long pull from the shit beer.

Quietly, a man settled in beside me and after ordering a drink, turned to me with a sympathetic look, "Tough break, man."

Not knowing this guy from Adam, I replied, "Yeah, shit happens." Then with an 'i-don't-know-you-but-we're-both-men' nod, I started to turn to listen to the rest of Rickie's story.

"Do you have anything lined up yet?" The man continued.

Looking back at him, searching his face for any familiarity, but finding none. I guardedly replied, "I got a couple leads."

"That's good. A man has to care for his family." He said, knowingly.

I was weirded out, figuring the man had seen the phone's display and didn't understand boundaries. With the shake of my head, I turned to move away but was stopped short when he continued.

"If those leads don't pan out, here's another." In his outstretched hand, a business card was held between his index and middle finger. "We're a start-up looking for people eager to work and who want to make a difference. We're on a bit of a time crunch, so potential recruits have to be ambitious, independent and motivated. I'm hoping you could be such a recruit."

He smiled as I took his card, then turned, took his drink and left before I could reply.

Staring in befuddlement, I noticed several of my old team holding similar business cards. Looking down at the card, on the front was written, "ATLANTIS – Making the World a Better Place." Under that several numbers – local and international – were typed along with a URL.

On the back, hand written in a severely slanted cursive, nearly illegible, "Interview – 9:15 AM." With the following day's date, and a downtown address.

I was snapped out of my revelry by the buzzing of the phone, display showing my wife's happy smile. Throwing my last five on the bar, I nodded to the group that had been my work family for the past few years, I walked out into the silence of the noon-time streets to answer my phone.

"Yeah, Baby?" I asked, as was my usual greeting.

“Why haven’t you answered your phone? I called like a hundred times!” She challenged frantically.

“Sorry about that, it’s been a shitty day...” I said with a sigh.

“So it’s true?” She cut in, frantic giving way to disappointment, “You got canned?”

“Yeah, Baby, the whole department got laid off,” I said defeated, while flipping the business card in my fingers.

“So what are we going to do?” She asked, the implied, ‘this time’ reminded me of all the times I’d let her down.

“I got some severance, and actually, I already have an interview set for tomorrow!” I said, deciding at that moment I would be Ambitious, Independent and Motivated.

I showed up at the address on the back of the card at 8:30. I wanted to make sure not to miss it. Walking through the door, I was stopped short by the full room. I saw some of my old team, and about thirty other strangers. Most were wearing suits or at least jackets; and all were looking nervous. My appearance made them even more nervous, another competitor. I gave my name to the guy behind the desk, who added it to a list, and then took a seat, watching the others watching me. We all attempted the nonchalance of someone who didn’t need to be there.

Over the next 45 minutes, another couple dozen people arrived, including newbie Rickie. Counting my competition, it looked like there were 60 of us in total. I wondered how many positions Atlantis was looking to fill. From the looks of those gathered, and the overheard conversations, it seemed we were all IT related; some hardware, some programming, some network. If this Start Up was making an entire IT Department, maybe there was a shot.

At 9:15 exactly, the door behind the desk opened and a woman stepped out. She was fairly tall, in a dark blue dress suit. Her long hair was braided tightly into a single braid that hung over her shoulder. Long slender fingers were holding the white cane used by blind people. Looking up at her eyes, I saw them staring vacantly, unnervingly. She stepped forward, and the sound of 60 anxious people straightening was nearly overwhelming.

She offered us all a curt smile then said, “My name is Selan Smith. I will be conducting the interview.” Then she abruptly turned around and started to walk back out of the room.

Someone to my right blurted out the question we were all wondering, “Who goes first?”

Selan stopped, and over her shoulder said, “All of you. Follow me.”

A nervous tightness formed in my stomach. I had heard of mass interviews like this; well, not at to this scale, and that usually meant that we'd be on some sort of competitive program against each other. I turned towards the front door to leave, anxiety and self-doubt filling me, but then my phone buzzed once. An IM, probably Baby wishing me luck.

Fuck.

I owed this to them.

With a sigh, I turned and followed the mass through the door. I wasn't the last, but fairly close to it. Oh well, so much for Ambitious.

Following the queue, we wound up in a large conference room, set up presentation style. We all took our seats, facing a podium flanked by two large screens. I was impressed there were an exact number of seats for all of us. Selan waited patiently at the podium, her head unmoving, and vacant eyes staring into space. When the last one settled down, she picked up a remote and pushed a button, causing the lights to dim and the screens to start showing the Atlantis corporate logo.

"Atlantis was formed three years ago on a dream. Stop at nothing to make the world a better place. We have worked hard to make this dream a reality, and I'm very proud to say that we are on track and are ready to begin Phase Two. This is where you will come in." As she said this, though she wasn't looking at me, it felt like she was speaking directly to me. I adjusted my seat and heard others do so as well. "We have some manpower concerns that corporations such as ours would normally satisfy through contracting companies; but at Atlantis, we depend on the personal, human, connection," she said with a warm smile. Much later, I would learn how ironic that smile truly was.

"We don't want our relationships to be temporary. We want to form bonds, and nurture passionate devoted resources; family."

Pressing a button on her remote again, the logo gave way to a bulleted presentation, that she paraphrased, "Today, we will begin Phase Two. Over the next two months, you will be trained in your roles as we ramp up. Then from June to July, we will stand up several satellite offices, mostly on the west coast, but some international locations as well. Then we will be in full swing for The Big Presentation in December of next year." Pausing for a moment she let the words sink in.

Continuing, "Make no mistake, the next 21 months will be very challenging. We have a lot to do, and not enough time to do it. But with the right team, with you, we will be able to accomplish the unbelievable. We will demand much, but we will repay your efforts equally. Beneath your chairs you will find folders containing offer letters. If you want to help us make the world a better

place, you can sign the letters and you will start Monday. If this isn't the place for you, we understand and wish you the best in your future endeavors." With that, she pushed a button, the lights turned on, and she walked out.

We all sat in stunned silence, watching the retreating form of the blind woman. Slowly we looked under our seats and found the indicated folders; folders we had not seen when we sat down. Opening mine, I saw a corporate handbook in the left pocket, and some papers in the right. Tucked into a small holder designed for it, I saw a business card with my name on it, announcing me as a Systems Operator. My silent question was echoed throughout the room with several confused, "How did they do that?"

Taking out the papers, I flipped through them quickly. The first was a general offer of employment, followed by a job description for a Systems Operations employee. Then was the sheet everyone was looking for, the actual compensation offer. I stared at it for a good half minute. It had my name and address, so that part wasn't a mistake, but the offer was three times higher than my last salary, and an End of Phase Two bonus was spelled out; if the deadline was reached, I would receive a six figure bonus.

I realized I should probably have called Baby, talked this over with her, but this, if it was true, would solve everything. It would erase a lifetime of missed opportunities, broken promises, and unmet expectations. I could finally have everything I wanted.

I didn't give it a further thought, I quickly signed the offer and walked out of the room; first this time.

The guy behind the desk met me by the door with his hand extended, taking the signed offer letter. "Welcome to the Future," he said with a predatory smile.

And that is when the world actually ended; it would just take 21 months to realize it.

June 2015 – Minneapolis

Training lost us 10% of the recruitment cohort. I found out that we weren't the only mass hire, and that there would be increasingly more as we approached The Big Presentation. Always said in caps, or sometimes just the initials, TBP. Selan was our direct superior, and while she had an incredibly sharp mind, she didn't seem to have any practical IT knowledge, but she was a hell of a manager.

She knew what each of us needed to be told to give our 110% every day. Some needed recognition, some needed more hands on direction. And some, like me, just needed an end goal and the knowledge that the leadership trusted us.

Atlantis had a completely state of the art proprietary system for just about every facet of the operation made by a company called Cyberworks. Training was mostly focused on learning these new systems and offering feedback of how the systems could be improved. They really listened to our suggestions, as it seemed that the system changed a bit every day, almost as if while we were understanding it, it was understanding us as well. Our main contact at Cyberworks was a really chipper guy named Archie. He would always talk about setting up a site visit, but it never happened.

My role, in System Operations, was mostly structures around making sure the internal systems kept running and meshing into the telecommunications network. There were several snags at first, but by the end of training I managed to smooth out the snags and everything was running exceeding expectations.

Selan scheduled a recognition dinner for the whole team and our families, to celebrate our hard work and accomplishments. It was at a fancy steakhouse and everyone was very excited. While Baby and I made arrangements for the little one, an emergency left us without a sitter. As I called Selan to explain why we couldn't make it, she insisted that we should bring her along.

Dressed in our nicest clothes, we arrived at the restaurant early and were surprised by the spectacular opulence. We could never have afforded to come here before, and even now we were focused on other things before spending it all on fancy steaks and drinks. But with work paying, how could we resist.

We met several other leadership from other teams there. I was very surprised to find out that Selan had three sisters, all as blind as she. They all headed different departments at Atlantis, which I recall the handbook describing as a family business. The evening was very pleasant, getting to socialize with the team. While we had all been working 60+ hour work weeks, we did not spend time together outside of work. It was nice seeing everyone's spouse and kids, which they all seemed to have.

As the dessert was brought out, a waiter brought me an envelope with my name on it. Opening it, I found a handwritten note from Selan. It wasn't the first time she had given me something handwritten, and I still marveled at how a blind woman could write so well. The note was offering me a promotion from Systems Operation to Team Operations. That wasn't a title we'd seen earlier, but I saw the word promotion and that was enough for me. I looked up to see Selan sitting at the head table, her face was pointed towards me, almost as if she were watching me. Dumbly, I nodded and she smiled.

A few minutes later, she stood up and after the room hushed, she publicly announced my and several other's promotions.

October 2015 – Minneapolis

Being in Team Operations involved two distinct duties. Reading objective reports from management, which usually included some scarily precise information about locations, assets, or resources, in which I had to either come up with a plan, or facilitate a research team to come up with a plan, to either infiltrate the location (aka place), obtain the asset (aka thing), or recruit or remove the resource (aka person). I hadn't had any kind of tactical education, heck I hadn't even stuck with the Boy Scouts, but I had played a lot of video games. And while usually the mission planning on those games was done by the computer, I'd played enough to get the gist.

Don't get me wrong, I had no illusions that this was just some sort of Ender's Game set up, where I was to believe I was just playing a game. I had come to realize a couple months back, the day I started my new job, that Atlantis did some questionable things. But as the saying goes, you don't make an omelet without breaking a few laws. At first, that didn't sit well with me, but more money does wonders to salve a sensitive conscience. And as long as the goal was worth it, then weren't we doing the same thing governments do? When a drone strike or Delta Squad team takes out some foreign national so that we continue getting our oil, how is that different than a team of operatives breaking into an unethical research laboratory and taking their supply of illegally obtained chemicals? Just because we voted the government in? Because we trust they are working towards the greater good? Because they have checks and balances to make sure they don't go too far?

Ha!

No, I realize Atlantis isn't the most, or even close to being, an upright company, but I do believe they are working towards making the world a better place.

The vast majority of missions I plan and then execute; right, forgot to mention the second part of what I do. Once the mission is fully planned and vetted, I actually run the team from our Minneapolis headquarters, through the telecommunications network and system I helped stand up earlier. Using a bleeding edge command center with overhead satellite surveillance supplemented by drone and heads-up displays, I oversee the operations. It's like the best tactical video game... times a hundred!

So, as I was saying, the vast majority of these ops involve law breakers, criminal organizations or other disreputable elements.

I'm not sure yet what the purpose of all these operations are, and they are paying me quite well not to wonder either. I do, though, get to see other things Atlantis is doing. In the past 4 months they have built 20 community centers and homeless shelters in major cities. They have created jobs for unskilled laborers, to provide them with enough income to take care of their families. Family is really important to Atlantis. They have also funded several low cost housing communities, bringing in folks with no options, teaching them some constructions skills, and

allowing them to build their own homes. The sense of pride in these projects is clear – this is their communities.

The last mission I oversaw involved a shipping container full of Chinese workers. They thought of themselves as refugees, but the buyer wasn't looking to release them in the land of the free and home of the brave; he was looking for slaves. This was another thing Atlantis opposes, and by the stern look Selan wore whenever the subject came up, slavery was a sensitive subject.

The mission went through without a hitch, the buyer and his muscle were eliminated. The cargo container was intercepted and were met by an Atlantis lawyer who had documentations for the refugees. They were given medical attention and a place to stay until they got their feet under themselves. Most of them joined the Community Housing Project. Another day of making the world a better place. Sure, we killed a gang leader and most of his gang; but that, too, made the world a little better. We didn't waste time with courts, where money would have bought justice anyway. No, we got results. It makes a man proud to work somewhere he can make difference.

April 2016 – Minneapolis

A year into my new career at Atlantis, and I'm a changed man. I have a position that is respected, people call me Sir, and more importantly, they listen to me; my superiors, peers, and direct reports. Everything was going great.

Then I got a very concerning mission that came across my desk, "How would I set up events in the Los Angeles area to maximize an instantaneous kill count."

This was the first time a mission directly affected bystanders. Usually, a primary goal was to remain unseen by the masses, to expedite things. Even worse, it was talking about killing people; as many as possible.

I went to Selan's door and knocked. When she invited me in by name, I smiled at her uncanny ability to know who it was, and walked in with the mission folder in my hand. "Hey boss, I wanted to talk about Mission H1732, the one about LA?" I started cautiously. I had never questioned a mission before, and was treading new ground.

"What is your question?" She asked as she slid away from the braille keyboard, and turned to generally face towards me.

"Well we've, I mean you've never given me this kind of mission. How does this further Atlantis' goals?" I inquired. Who was I to challenge our company's goals to my boss, who I've heard helped found the company?

Selan turned her head, a sign I took to mean she was thinking about my question, and not just planning on giving me the stock answers. Eventually, she said, “Ah, I understand your concern. This isn’t like your normal missions. The H-Class missions are hypothetical exercises, where we attempt to anticipate certain events to get ahead of them. Our predictive software has anticipated a massive terrorist attack in the LA area. We’re trying to figure out, what would be the most devastating target to be hit, so that we can account for it, and make sure the correct authorities are aware.”

Something didn’t sit quite right with her comment, but even as I felt the doubt, her confidence convinced me. With all the good Atlantis did, how could I have doubted? “Sorry Boss, that makes sense. I’ll have a report to you by the end of the week.”

“See that you do. Mr. Smith is concerned at what he’s hearing. Seeing your report will no doubt ease his mind.” Selan replied, and returned to her desk and placed her fingers back on the keyboard, “Is that all?”

Shocked, I asked, “Mr. Smith will see this report?”

With a smile, Selan replied, “He has seen most of your mission reports. He’s very interested in you. Let’s see how you handle this report, and maybe you and your family can dine with him. He was asking about you just the other day.”

“Yes Ma’am. We would be honored. I’ll get that report done right away.” I said as I retreated from her office. Mr. Smith was the founder of Atlantis, but beyond that he was a mystery. There were many rumors flying about how he was a ridiculously rich man who made his billions in the Dot.Com market and managed to escape the bubble pop. No one had seen him, but when his name was mentioned, people jumped.

Settling down at my desk, I threw myself into the mission. I asked myself, if I had to kill the most people at one time, in LA, how would I do it? I started pulling up specs on different explosive devices, from traditional, to fuel-air, even considered a nuclear option.

Several hours later, as I was analyzing population density reports of various neighborhoods, my phone buzzed. On the screen, I saw my wife and little girl, both wearing mouse ears from our visit to Disney World in Florida.

As I answered the phone, I typed up a request to get more information on Disney Land, to determine how far outside LA County the park was. On some days, during the right events, that was one of the densest populations in the area. “Hey Baby, what’s up?” I asked, as my mind raced.

“Nothing big, just wanted to say hi, and remind you to pick up the munchkin on your way home,” my wife said sweetly. Since getting this new job, things had become so much better for us.

She was able to take some classes to pursue her dream of painting, and the stability offered by Atlantis even allowed us to consider another child, and we were expecting in December. We hadn't yet told anyone, but we were quite excited.

"You bet. Wouldn't have missed it. We're going to stop for ice cream, she made me promise this morning." I said, large smile on my lips which sagged a bit as my research request came back regarding Disney Land and I got distracted.

"You shouldn't spoil her so much," my wife teased, then added, "I'll see you in a few hours, Baby."

"Uh, Yeah, I love. You," I said, already diving back into the research. I set up the phone's alarm to make sure I got out on time, and then plunged back in.

October 2016 – Minneapolis

H1732 was not the only Hypothetical Mission I reviewed. Over the last six months, I'd guessed that half my time was spent planning, analyzing, and considering different terrorist activities. Always focused on areas on the West Coast, and focused on the greatest number of deaths in a short time. This criteria prevented biological agents for the most part. It seemed that the supposed terrorist organization was interested in a single destructive event, not the big picture to make a more dramatic statement.

While speaking with Rickie, who had also been promoted to Team Operations, I discovered that he too had been assigned a similar set of H-Files, including copies of some of the ones I had worked on, and we speculated we weren't the only ones.

One day, he was describing a hypothetical confluence of events that he constructed to get the highest total; involving setting the day of the event on the release of a huge blockbuster, and setting explosive charges at every movie theater.

I shook my head at the elaborate orchestrations involving generating movie franchises and publicity. While wondering why I hadn't considered outside factors like that, my computer beeped, notifying a new email. Scanning it quickly, it was from Selan, forwarding an invitation for me and my family to join Mr. Smith for dinner.

With shaking fingers, I replied that I was honored, and would let my wife know. Selan's reply came back instantly with directions to Mr. Smith's home, just outside the city in an extremely affluent neighborhood.

"Hey Baby," I said as my wife answered her phone, "It looks like my hard work has paid off. Are you free tonight, Mr. Smith has invited us to dinner at his house."

“Actually, yes,” She replied, “Originally I had that seminar at the gallery I was going to attend, but hey just cancelled it. House fortuitous.”

“Yeah, Crazy luck.” I said, getting a heavy feeling in my stomach, but I couldn’t determine the source, “I’ll pick you and the munchkin up after work.”

“Love you,” She said and hung up.

I spent the remainder of the day looking over my work, refreshing various calculations and memorizing as many projects as I could, unsure what Mr. Smith would want to talk about.

At seven, we drove up the long driveway that lead up the curiously large house so close to the cities. Normally, you’d find an estate this size further away near the suburbs, but here, in view of the Minneapolis Skyline, a large ranch style property flaunted its wealth.

Selan was waiting at the carport to meet us. She and my wife exchanged pleasantries and she gave my daughter a small bag festooned with ribbons and bows. “Good evening, please follow me,” she said in greeting to me, and turned around and started walking inside.

There was a stiffness to her shoulders that I hadn’t seen before. I had worked closely with her for 18 months now, so I asked, “Is everything alright?”

After a few second’s pause, she replied, “It will be soon.”

Walking behind her, I reached out and took baby’s hand, and picked up my daughter. The three of us followed into what would literally be the monster’s lair.

Walking through the foyer and living room, the walls were decorated with generic pictures and art. While I’m not an expert, I had seen plenty as my wife showed her homework to me, some of the greatest art pieces. These walls were not decorated with those, instead they were just a step up from ‘a Friend in Need’, one of the paintings more commonly called, ‘Dogs playing Poker.’

We continued to follow Selan, as her high heels clicked and clacked with precision on the hard wood floors. Further into the large house, through several other rooms we walked until finally Selan stopped in front of a pair of sliding doors. As she paused, I noticed that one of her sisters was behind us, though I had no idea how long she had been there. I was about to say something, a greeting at least, when Selan opened the door to reveal a dark room.

Inside the darkness, a large orb seemed to hang in the air, looking like a large floating lidless eye, orange and sinister. My daughter buried her head into my shoulder and my wife’s hand

tightened around mine. My eyes adjusted, and in the light of the orange eye, I started to make out the other details of the room.

Dominating the room was a large metal platform. In the center of the platform was the most hideous thing I had ever seen; a mix between a man, a snake, and a machine. At least 8 feet tall, the serpentine body ended in a large fang filled mouth. Where its eyes would have been, a fancy visor had been surgically implanted. Strong arms held up a staff that ended in the glowing eye, and all around, tentacles riled and undulated.

And then I saw the corpses.

The room was decorated in the gore of violence. Dismembered corpses, splattered with blood and viscera ornamented the room as if carelessly discarded. As my shock gave way to panic, given voice in my wife's scream. I tried to take a step backwards, and ran into Selan's sister, who had moved up right behind me and who stood as solid as a cement pylon. As I turned to face her, a firm hand grasped my neck like a vice, and held me fast. From within the horrid room, a voice absently calm and polite spoke, "Ah, good evening to my star employee. Won't you join me for dinner?"

A soft chuckle rolled out of the room, which seemed to grow as my wife screamed even louder. In my arms, my daughter hung limply. I lifted her face to mine and Selan's voice cut through the din, "She does not need to be awake for this."

The creature within the slaughter's chuckle ended, "Always a soft spot for baby girls. Very well." After a few more seconds, where my wife continued her panicked scream, the serpentine monster that was, apparently, my boss, said, "Selan. Silence her."

With a swift thrust of her hand, Selan gave action to the monster's words, and as a puppet with its string cut, my wife went limp into Selan's arms.

"Wha... What's going on! What do you want?" A scared voice from within me fought through the panic and fear to ask.

"What do I want, my boy? I want to make this world a better place. Have you not read your handbook?" The serpent monster said, as a tentacle tightened around a bloody torso, which it brought to the center of the platform. "I am always amused that no one ever asks, better for whom?"

The brave voice fought through my cowardliness, "better for whom?"

"Ah, there you are my boy. A better world for my masters. See, we all work for someone. You work for Selan, who works for me, and so on.

“And we are so close, now, to make my boss’s vision come true. A world ripe to be plucked, fat and full of tasty humans. Just two of your months away from The Big Presentation. Your world won’t know what hit it.”

“And what,” I began to ask as the monster took the torso out of its tentacles with its large arms and plunged its snake’s face into the chest, sharp fangs ripping into the flesh. I tried to turn away, but the grip on my neck did not allow. With the taste of vomit in my mouth, I continued, “And what do you want from me? Here?”

The creature ripped its head back, and a long tongue cleaned the torn flesh and muscle from its fangs and lips. “Well, I would like to devour you, your little girl, and mostly your lovely wife, so pregnant – such a delicacy.”

He paused while I screamed impotent threats and declarations.

“But, Selan has pointed out that to do such would waste a powerful asset. As we enter the last part of Phase Two, I’m afraid we’re going to need a bit more productivity out of you, and I decided you would need proper motivation.”

Selan spoke, “My lord has promised to spare your wife and children from the culling, but in order to make such a sacrifice he will need your full devotion. The H-Files that you’ve prepared, are being put in place. You have until December 21st to make it happen. To keep you motivated, your family will be guests of my lord; safely, for now.”

November 2016 – Minneapolis

I sat in the command center, the latest mission just completed. A blank expression on my face, my body and mind numb. I had fallen so far down the rabbit hole, I could no longer even see which way was out. I had not seen my wife and child in several weeks, though we were allowed to talk once a week, which was usually spent listening to my wife sob.

So I continued to do what I was told, hoping, somehow that we would live through this all. Somehow we’d make it out and survive. Somehow. But each passing day, as I took pains to orchestrate the mass murder of the west coast, I realized there was no escaping this fate for me. I had done this, and I would have to pay for my sins; but if somehow I could spare my family, maybe something could be salvaged.

A red light flashed, drawing my attention to the mission display. The ops team that was on its return route to the base was attacked. As I watched, a sniper had dismantled their car as a flanking force had suppressed any possible exit. Pinned, the team did their best to return fire, but they had wandered into a well-executed ambush.

As the suppressive fire ended, a man stepped out with a large machine gun. The last active mercenary tried to get into position to shoot him, but that exposed him to the sniper, who put a bullet through his forearm, shattering it and forcing him to drop the gun.

The machinegun man approached the mercenaries' car, more resembling Swiss cheese with all the bullet holes. The overhead drone noticed police converging on the conflict site, and the force that had just neutralized my squad in a matter of seconds retreated. Like ghosts, they vanished into buildings and cars, and were gone.

I quickly opened up my mission debrief file and started making notes on what happened. From what I could tell, the actual mission hadn't been jeopardized, just the team itself.

Keeping it off the report, I couldn't help to let my mind wander. Who were these attackers? What did they want? And can I use them to save my family?

I considered how I had just watched the summary execution of men who I had worked with, remotely, for the last 15 or so months, and I hadn't batted an eye. The mass genocide I had planned, and my family being held captive by a monster had made my perception of death and murder a bit skewed.

I filed the report to Selan, on the actual mission, with a note indicating that I would need to have a new team assigned.

I added this strange ambush squad to an ever growing list of important factors in my mind. The other big element was that Mr. Smith was planning for a long time on being bunkered down after the 21st of December – he had taken to stockpiling people, abducted off the street, from their homes; by the dozens. How the media had not caught wind of this was amazing.

A plan started forming in my mind. While I don't think I could stop The Big Presentation – it was too big, too interwoven with redundancies – I might be able to at least save my family. I would just need to arrange things subtly. I wrote nothing down, I typed none, and I spoke about it to no one. For this to work, it would have to be a secret for as long as possible.

December 2016 – Minneapolis

The final day came faster than I would have thought. All hands were on deck, as midnight came and went in the central time zone. As the terminus raced across the countryside at 14 miles a minute, speeding its way to the west coast, the energy in the room was palpable.

Last second missions were being orchestrated, explosives that could not have been staged earlier, were placed by mercenaries that were unaware of their suicide missions status. It was easy offering men outrageous salaries, when you knew they would never see the pay-day. Just like me.

I looked at my reflection in the screen of my display. I was a shell of the man I had been, as worry, doubt, and stress took their toll on me. But one way or another, it would all end in a couple hours. Both of the most-likely outcomes ended in my death, which is a small cowardly penance for what I'd done, but hopefully my family would be saved.

Suddenly, overlaying my reflection, another face appeared on the computer screen; a male face, constructed as an amalgamation of the most beautiful men whose unnaturalness plunged it deep into the uncanny valley.

"I know what you did!" The computer said, the electronic eyes looking right into mine.

"What do you mean, Archie?" I asked, eyes flickering to the time display. I figured I would be found out, but had hoped that the discovery would come late enough that they wouldn't be able to stop it.

"HAHAHA," Archie laughed, robotically and inhumanly, "I am joking," he said, smiling. Then a mask of seriousness dropped over his smiling face, "But why did your eyes flick to the time? What are you waiting for?"

"I'm just excited for The Big Presentation," I lied, but Archie was having none of it. The electronic face went to neutral, as Archie's attention was elsewhere.

We had discovered a few months ago that Archie was actually an artificial intelligence. So when I started here at Atlantis, when I felt like the system was learning; it was. That system was Archie. It seemed that Archie had met Mr. Smith, the monster, and for whatever reason Alien Monstrosities and Maniacal Ai's get together, they did. While Archie does have the ability to be creative, it was decided that they would enlist human slaves to do the tactical implementation of their horrific strategy.

The strategy was to kill as absolutely many people as they could at exactly midnight.

Today, or rather tonight, was a very important day, astrologically speaking. Not only was it the solstice, the longest day of the year, but there was also an unprecedented, for a long while at least, planetary alignment happening. The next time all of these things would happen together was more than a hundred years away.

So, this death toll was supposed to do something impressive. I'm not sure what, and I'm fairly sure only Smith, his weird blind daughters, or whoever the fuck they were, and maybe Archie knew. Despite the climate controls, I started to sweat as I watched the time tick away. Suddenly Archie's face animated again, "I do not see what you did. Everything is in order with The Big Presentation."

“Like I said, Arch, I’m just excited.” I replied, submitting myself to what was going to happen. I could see this only resolving one way from here.

“I have said 32 times, my name is Archie. This is already shortened down significantly from its full length,” the AI began. “Selan and Mr. Smith request your presence. You are to be rewarded for your exemplary service in this most troubling time. There is a car waiting. You are expected in 17 minutes.”

“Archie, I still need to execute the last stage of H6298, you know that,” I stalled.

“H6298 has been taken care of. Please hurry. Mr. Smith does not like to be made to wait.”

With a calming sigh, I grabbed my coat and made my way to the carport to meet the car waiting. It was one of the self-driving cars that had been in the news lately, though to be more accurate, it was an Archie-Driven car. Swiftly, through the gently falling snow, the car sped to the Smith Estate, the last place I had seen my wife and little girl. I kept my eyes focused on the road ahead, and silently prayed that all my subversive efforts had not been for naught. I suppose I would find out in a little bit, the radio displaying the time, 1:45AM – meaning it was almost midnight in California.

The car came to a stop in front of the large house I knew contained monsters and other horrors. Archie’s voice came out of the door’s speakers in an inappropriately chipper tone, “Good luck!”

Slowly, I exited the car and made my way to the door which opened as I approached; Selan was standing there waiting. She was not in her usual pantsuit, and instead wore a skin-tight armor straight out of the highest budget sci-fi blockbuster. She gave me a predatory smile, “Welcome.”

I followed Selan through the house like a convict walking towards the chair. While I had no priest to perform my last rites, I was escorted by all my mistakes, all my ambitions, and most of all, my guilt.

As we neared the room where the monster dwelt, Selan and I were joined by her three sisters in our silent march.

Beyond the door, I heard a famous news personality, “Here at Disney Land, at the World wide premier of Marvel’s newest addition to its highly acclaimed franchise. Hollywood has been excited for this premier and from the energy in this capacity crowd, it’s clear that... What was that?”

The doors opened up to reveal the room as it had been before, but several large display screens were on the walls, showing various stations broadcasting live footage. The main

display showed a woman holding her ear piece as her face wore a mask of concentration. In the background, a sea of people at Disneyland were all still, looking off camera.

Looking at the time display, I knew they were looking east, as the first wave of the explosions would have happened. While it was some 30 miles away, the chain of initial blasts should be loud enough to carry all the way; thunder on a clear night.

The newscaster started, "there appears to have been a large explosion in [ENTER CITY], please stay tuned for..." again she stopped as the thunder of the second wave rolled through.

Behind her, panic started spreading in the mass of people, this wave might have been close enough to see the sky light up.

Suddenly, Archie's voice cut in, "Mr. Smith. The command center has been compromised."

The serpent monster whose back I had been staring at turned towards me, as his sickly civil voice asked, "Whatever do you mean?"

The TV continued on, with the woman looking flustered, "It appears that there was another explosion, this time in [ENTER CITY]. Emergency services are asking that you only report critical emergencies, so as to not clog..."

The feed suddenly went dead, a lost signal screen replaced the live footage.

Archie continued, "Sir, a strike team has gained access to the command center. They neutralized our guards and have taken control of the systems. I left a node behind, but decided that I would be of more use outside."

Mr. Smith laughed, "That is okay, my boy. They were too late to stop The Big Presentation." With a flick of a tentacle, the displays changed from the lost signals to overhead views. The readouts indicated it was from some of our top of the line drones. The California landscape was awash in flame; the destruction cutting lines, joining cities in death.

As we watched, Monster, Blind women and I, a strange glow started to shine from the burning carnage. It was faint and barely noticeable at first, but as more secondary explosions happened, the line grew more pronounced.

"Yes Sir, it is clear that The Big Presentation went off as planned, congratulations, but," Archie cut in, synthetic voice showing surprising concern, "the last thing I saw the strike force do before I left was picking up a piece of paper found at your star employee's desk."

I closed my eyes, bracing myself.

“What did you do?” Mr. Smith asked and I suddenly felt myself grappled by a tentacle, and lifted into the air.

“Sir, I have determined the paper was addressed to one of the strike team, and inside was your address.”

Opening my eyes, I stared defiantly at the Monster, suspended in the air within arm’s reach of the monstrosity.

“You betray me? I make the sacrifice of not killing your mate and brood. I grant you this gift, and you spit in my face? Selan, get the family. It is only fair that I reunite them, I am honorable, after all.”

As Selan left, the drone’s display switched to a satellite’s view, the blue lines were now visible from space as well, and had left California, like cracks spreading in a window; and just as dangerous.

”What should we do, Sir?” Archie asked.

“We will prepare for guests, of course. But perhaps I will have a quick snack first.” Selan’s sisters all turned to leave, drawing science fiction guns to match their armor.

Epilogue –

I was violently turned to face Selan as she ushered my family through the door. My daughter’s head was shaved bald and she looked terrified, but at the same time, her eyes were fierce with hate. Behind her, my wife also bald, carried a small baby in her arms. Unlike our daughter, my wife’s eyes were dead inside; her spirit broken.

“Allow me to introduce you to your son. I figured, in the absence of a father, I would take the role. I named him after myself, meet Splugorth.”

Before I could answer, automatic weapons fire exploded outside. It was loud and offensive, and I could feel the staccato in my chest; reverberating with every bullet.

I offered my wife a sad smile, a defeated smile.

While I had succeeded, it would be too late.

Damn.