

Evan's scuffed knuckles, a fetching post-fight shade of eggplant, ledged the steering wheel. His nose was freshly broken, leaking a trickle of crimson. Nothing bad, more a shifting along old fault lines.

He inspected his nose in the rearview, then reached up and snapped it back into place.

The Cadillac's alignment pulled to the right, threatening to dump him into the rain-filled roadside ditch. The seat springs poked into the backs of his thighs, and the fabric, dotted with cigarette scorch marks, reeked of menthol. The dome light housed a bare, burned-out bulb, the brake disks made a noise like an asphyxiating chicken, and the left rear brake light was out.

He should have stolen a better car.

Rain dumped down. That was Portland for you. Or – if he was being precise – a country road outside Hillsboro.

Big drops turned the roof into a tin drum. Water sluiced across the windshield, rooster-tailed from the tires.

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He sledded around a bend, passing a billboard. A moment later smeared red and blue lights illuminated the Caddy's rear window.

A cop.

The broken brake light.

That was inconvenient.

Especially on this car, since a BOLO had likely been issued. The cop would be running the plate number now if he hadn't already.

Evan blew out a breath. Leaned harder into the gas pedal.

Here came the sirens. The headlights grew larger.

Evan could see the silhouette of the officer behind the wheel. So much like a shooting target – head and chest, all critical mass.

Hillsboro prided itself on being one of the safest cities in the Pacific Northwest. Evan hoped to keep it that way.

As he popped the brakes and jerked the wheel, the heap of a car rocked on its shocks, fanning onto an intersecting road.

Two more cop cars swept in behind him from the opposite direction.

Evan sighed.

Three patrol cars lit up like Christmas, sirens screaming, spreading out across both lanes and closing in.

That was when the thumping from the trunk grew more pronounced.

1

No Version of Being Too Careful

Evan moved swiftly through the door to his penthouse suite at the Castle Heights Residential Tower, his RoamZone pressed to his ear. The phone, encased in hardened rubber and Gorilla glass, was as durable as a hockey puck and essentially impossible to trace. Every incoming call to 1-855-2-NOWHERE traveled in digital form over the Internet through a labyrinth of encrypted virtual-private-network tunnels. After a round-the-world tour of software telephone-switch destinations, it emerged through the receiver of the RoamZone.

Evan always answered the phone the same way.

Do you need my help?

This time, for the first time, the voice on the other end was a familiar one.

Jack Johns.

Jack had plucked Evan from the obscurity of a foster home at the age of twelve and placed him in a fully deniable black program buried deep inside the Department of Defense. Jack had turned Evan into Orphan X, an expendable assassin who went

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where the U.S. government would not and did what the U.S. government could not. Jack had fought for Evan to stay human even while teaching him to be a killer.

The only father Evan had ever known was calling this line now, a line reserved for those in mortal danger. And he had answered Evan's question—*Do you need my help?*—with a single syllable.

Yes.

Evan and Jack had an elaborate series of protocols for establishing contact. Never like this.

For Jack to call this number meant that he was up against what others might consider world-destroying trouble.

All Evan had gotten over the phone so far was that one word. Static fuzzed the line infuriatingly, the connection going in and out.

He was gripping the phone too hard. "Jack? Jack? *Jack.*"

Eight years ago Evan had gone rogue from the Orphan Program. At the time he'd been the Program's top asset. Given the sensitive information in his head, the bodies he'd put in the ground, and the skills encoded into his muscles, he could not be allowed to exist. The most merciless of the Orphans, Charles Van Sciver, had taken over the Program and was hellbent on tracking down and eradicating Evan.

Vanishing was easier when you already didn't exist. The Orphan Program lived behind so many veils of secrecy that no one except their immediate handlers knew who the Orphans were. They were kept in separate silos and deployed through encoded comms that preserved plausible deniability at every level. Double-blind protocols ensured that even the handlers' whereabouts were often unknown by higher headquarters.

And so Evan had simply stepped off the grid, keeping only the operational alias he'd earned in the shadow service, a name spoken in hushed tones in the back rooms of intel agencies the world over.

The Nowhere Man.

He now helped the desperate, those with no place left to turn, people suffering at the hands of unrepentant and vicious abusers.

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His clients called 1-855-2-NOWHERE. And their problems were solved.

Antiseptic. Effective. Impersonal.

Until this.

Evan's tense steps echoed around the seven thousand square feet of his condo. The open stretch of gunmetal-gray floor was broken by workout stations, a few sitting areas, and a spiral staircase that rose to a loft he used as a reading room. The kitchen area was equally modern, all stainless steel and poured concrete. The views up here on the twenty-first floor were dazzling, downtown Los Angeles shimmering like a mirage twelve miles to the east.

Despite all that space, Evan was having trouble breathing. He felt something wild clawing in his chest, something he couldn't identify. Fear?

"Jack."

The reception crackled some more, and then—finally—Jack's voice came through again. "Evan?"

It sounded as if Jack was in his truck, an engine humming in the background.

"I'm here," Evan said. "Are you okay?"

Through the receiver he could make out more road rolling beneath Jack's tires. When Jack spoke again, his voice sounded broken. "Do you regret it? What I did to you?"

Evan inhaled, steadied his heart rate. "What are you talking about?"

"Do you ever wish I'd never taken you out of that boys' home? That I'd just let you live an ordinary life?"

"Jack—where are you?"

"I can't tell you. Dollars to doughnuts they've got ears on me right now."

Evan stared out through the floor-to-ceiling, bullet-resistant Lexan windows. The discreet armor sunshades were down, but through the gaps in the woven titanium chain-link he could still see the city sparkling.

There was no version of being too careful.

"Then why are you calling?" Evan said.

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"I wanted to hear your voice."

Over the line, tires screeched. Jack was driving fast, this much Evan could glean.

But he couldn't know that Jack was being pursued—surreptitiously, yet not so surreptitiously that Jack didn't notice—by five SUVs in rolling surveillance. Or that a Stingray cell-tower simulator was intercepting Jack's signal, capturing his every word. That within five minutes the *thwap-thwap-thwap* of rotor blades would stir the clouds and a Black Hawk attack helicopter would break through the night sky and plummet down, fanning up dust. That thermal imaging had already pegged Jack in his driver's seat, his 98.6-degree body temperature rendered in soothing reds and yellows.

All Evan knew right now was that something was terribly wrong.

The static rose like a growl, and then, abruptly, the line was as clear as could be. "This is looking to be my ninth life, son."

For a moment Evan couldn't find his voice. Then he forced out the words. "Tell me where you are, and I'll come get you."

"It's too late for me," Jack said.

"If you won't let me help you, then what are we supposed to talk about?"

"I suppose the stuff that really matters. Life. You and me." Jack, breaking his own rules.

"Because we're so good at that?"

Jack laughed that gruff laugh, a single note. "Well, sometimes we miss what's important for the fog. But maybe we should give it a go before, you know . . ." More screeching of tires. "Better make it snappy, though."

Evan sensed an inexplicable wetness in his eyes and blinked it away. "Okay. We can try."

"Do you regret it?" Jack asked again. "What I did?"

"How can I answer that?" Evan said. "This is all I know. I never had some other life where I was a plumber or a schoolteacher or a . . . or a dad."

Now the sound of a helo came through the line, barely audible.

"Jack? You still there?"

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"I guess . . . I guess I want to know that I'm forgiven."

Evan forced a swallow down his dry throat. "If it wasn't for you, I would've wound up in prison, dead of an overdose, knifed in a bar. Those are the odds. I wouldn't have had a life. I wouldn't have been me." He swallowed again, with less success. "I wouldn't trade knowing you for anything."

A long silence, broken only by the thrum of tires over asphalt.

Finally Jack said, "It's nice of you to say so."

"I don't put much stock in 'nice.' I said it because it's true."

The sound of rotors intensified. In the background Evan heard other vehicles squealing. He was listening with every ounce of focus he had in him. A connection routed through fifteen countries in four continents, a last tenuous lifeline to the person he cared about more than anyone in the world.

"We didn't have time," Evan said. "We didn't have enough time."

Jack said, "I love you, son."

Evan had never heard the words spoken to him. Something slid down his cheek, clung to his jawline.

He said, "Copy that."

The line went dead.

Evan stood in his condo, the cool of the floor rising through his boots, chilling his feet, his calves, his body. The phone was still shoved against his cheek. Despite the full-body chill, he was burning up.

He finally lowered the phone. Peeled off his sweaty shirt. He walked over to the kitchen area and tugged open the freezer drawer. Inside, lined up like bullets, were bottles of the world's finest vodkas. He removed a rectangular bottle of Double Cross, a seven-times-distilled and filtered Slovak spirit. It was made with winter wheat and mountain springwater pulled from aquifers deep beneath the Tatra Mountains.

It was one of the purest liquids he knew.

He poured two fingers into a glass and sat with his back to the cold Sub-Zero. He didn't want to drink, just wanted it in his hand. He breathed the clean fumes, hoping that they would sterilize his lungs, his chest.

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His heart.

"Well," he said. "Fuck."

Glass in hand, he waited there for ten minutes and then ten more.

His RoamZone rang again.

Caller ID didn't show unidentified caller or blocked caller.

It showed nothing at all.

With dread, Evan clicked the phone on, raised it to his face.

It was the voice he'd most feared.

"Why don't you go fetch your digital contact lenses," it said.

"You're gonna want to see this."

2

Dark Matter

The burly man forged through fronds and the paste of the jungle humidity, his feet sinking into Amazonian mud. A camouflaged boonie hat shadowed his face. A cone of mosquito netting descended from the hat's brim, breathing in and out with him. The ghostly effect—that of an amorphously shaped head respiring—made him seem like a bipedal monster flitting among the rotting trunks. Sweat soaked his clothes. On his watch a red GPS dot blinked, urging him forward.

Behind him another man followed. Jordan Thornhill was gymnast-compact, all knotty muscle and precision, his hair shaved nearly to the skull, a side part notched in with a razor. He'd taken off his shirt and tucked it into the waistband of his pants. Perspiration oiled his dark skin.

They'd left the rented Jeep a few miles back, where dense foliage had finally smothered the trail.

They kept on now in silence, mud sucking at their boots, leaves rustling across their broad shoulders. Strangler vines wrapped

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massive trees, choking the life from them. Bats flitted in the canopy. Somewhere in the distance, howler monkeys earned their names.

Thornhill kept tight to the big man's back, his movement nimble, fluid. "We're a long way from Kansas, boss. You even sure this dude has it on him?"

The invisible face beneath the boonie hat swiveled to Thornhill. The netting beat in and out like a heart. Then the man lifted the netting, swept it back over the brim. Surgeries had repaired most of the damage on the right side of Charles Van Sciver's face, but there remained a few feathers of scarring at the temple. The pupil of his right eye was permanently dilated, a tiny starfish-shaped cloud floating in its depths.

Souvenirs from an explosive that had been set by Orphan X nearly a year ago.

As the director of the Orphan Program, Van Sciver had the resources to eradicate most of the physical damage, but rage endured just beneath the skin, undiminished.

Thornhill grew uneasy under Van Sciver's gaze. That shark eye, it had an unsettling effect on people.

"It was on his person," Van Sciver said. "I have it on good authority."

"Whose authority?"

"Are you actually asking me?" Van Sciver said. The scars didn't look so bad until he scowled and the skin pulled taut, stretching the wrong way.

Thornhill shook his head.

"The real question is, is it still there?" Van Sciver said. "For all we know, it could be riding in the belly of a jaguar already. Or if there was a fire—who the hell knows."

"Sometimes," Thornhill said, "all a man needs is a little luck."

Yes, luck. For months Van Sciver had lived inside a virtual bunker built of servers, applying the most powerful deep-learning data-mining software in computational history to finding some—*any*—trace of Orphan X. The recent directives from above had been clear. Van Sciver's top priority was to stamp out wayward Orphans. Anyone who'd retired. Anyone who hadn't made the cut. Anyone who had tested questionable for compliance.

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And most important, the only Orphan who had ever—in the storied history of the Program—gone rogue.

The Program's large-scale data processing had at last spit out a lead, a glimmer of a fishing lure in the ocean of data that surged through cyberspace on a daily basis. Even calling it a lead, Van Sciver thought now, was too ambitious. More like a lead that could lead to a lead that could lead to Orphan X.

The story behind it had quickly become legend in the intel community. It went like this: A midlevel DoD agent had once, through a labyrinthine process of extortion and blackmail, acquired a copy of highly sensitive data pertaining to the Orphan Program. A few aliases, a few last-known addresses, a few pairings of handlers and Orphans. These key bits and pieces had been captured from various classified channels outside the Orphan Program in the seconds before they autoreddacted.

The agent had hoped it would hasten his rise inside the department but quickly learned that he'd caught a hot grenade; the data was too dangerous to use. He'd kept it as an insurance policy despite standing orders to the contrary that originated from Pennsylvania Avenue that any and all data pertaining to the Orphan Program *must* be expunged. Rumors of this shadow file persisted over the past months but had remained only rumors.

Until the powerful data-mining engines at Van Sciver's disposal had caught the scent of this shadow file and verified its existence by shading in bits of surrounding intelligence—like gleaning the existence of invisible dark matter by observing gravity effects around it. The midlevel agent had sensed the crosshairs at his back and had gone to ground.

In more ways than one.

In the end it hadn't been an Orphan or a fellow agent who had brought him down but an unexpected trade wind.

Van Sciver had promised himself that when the time came, he'd leave his bunker and get his boots muddy for a lead that might bring him to Orphan X. So here he was, squelching through the boggy muck of another continent, reaching for that shiny lure.

They smelled it before they saw it. A slaughterhouse stench lacing the thick, heavy-hanging air. They crested a slope. Up ahead

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the snapped-off tail rotor of a Sikorsky S-70 was embedded in the trunk of a banyan, cleaving the massive tree nearly in half.

Thornhill waved a hand in front of his face. *"Goddamn."*

Van Sciver drew in a lungful of aviation fuel and rotting flesh, a reek so strong he could taste it. They shouldered through a tangle of underbrush, and there it was. The downed fuselage rested on its side, nudged up against an enormous boulder like a dog trying to scratch its back. A tired seventies army-transport chopper repurposed for private charters, sold and resold a dozen times over, now being slowly devoured by the jungle.

The pilot had been thrown through the windscreen. His body, held together by the flight suit, was cradled tenderly upside down in the embrace of a strangler vine twenty feet off the ground. His flesh seemed to be alive, crawling with movement.

Fire ants.

A rustling came from the fuselage, and then a desiccated voice: "Is someone there? God, please say someone's there."

Van Sciver and Thornhill drew close. Van Sciver had to crouch to see inside.

The NSA agent hung lifeless from the sideways seat, his arms dangling awkwardly, a roller-coaster rider in the twist of a corkscrew. The shoulder harness bit into a charcoal suit jacket and—given the heat—seemed to be making some headway through the underlying flesh as well.

The agent's fellow passenger had managed to pop his own seat belt. He'd landed with his legs bent all wrong. A shiv of bone jutted up through his pants at the shin. The skin around it was puffy and red.

Tears glistened on his cheeks. "I thought I was gonna die here. I've been alone with . . . in the middle of . . ." His sobs deteriorated into dry heaves.

Van Sciver looked past him at the dead agent and felt a spark of hope flare inside his chest. The body looked reasonably well preserved hanging there. Van Sciver forced his excitement back into the tiny dark place in his chest that he reserved for Orphan X. He'd been close so many times, only to have his fingertips slip off the ledge.

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"The harness kept him off the ground," Van Sciver said to Thornhill. "Away from the elements. We might have a shot."

The passenger reached toward Van Sciver. "Water," he said. "I need water."

Thornhill darted inside, hopping gracefully through the wreckage until he stood beneath the agent, practically eye to eye.

"He's fairly intact," Thornhill said. "Not gonna place at the Miss America pageant, but still. We got us a good-looking corpse."

The passenger gave with a dry, hacking cough. "Water," he whispered.

"Let's get the body out," Van Sciver said.

"I'll unclip the harness," Thornhill said, "and you ease him down. The last thing we need is his festering ass disintegrating all over the fuselage."

"Please." The passenger clutched the cuff of Van Sciver's pants. "Please at least look at me."

Van Sciver removed the pistol from his underarm tension holster and shot the passenger through the head. Taking hold of the passenger's loafers, he dragged the man clear of the fuselage. Then he returned to the downed helo, and he and Thornhill gently guided the agent down. It involved some unpleasant grappling. The stench was terrible, but Van Sciver was accustomed to terrible things.

They carried the corpse gingerly out into the midday blaze and laid it on a flat stretch of ground. Thornhill's eyes were red. Choking noises escaped his throat. They took a break, walking off a few paces to find fresh air. When they got back to civilization, Van Sciver realized, their clothes would have to be burned.

By unspoken accord they reconvened over the body. They stared down at it. Then Van Sciver flicked out a folding knife and cut the clothes off.

The bloated body lay there, emitting gases.

Thornhill was ordinary-looking by design, as were most of the Orphans, chosen so they could blend in, but his smile was unreasonably handsome. He flashed it now.

"This shit right here? We are livin' the dream."

Van Sciver reached into his cargo pocket, removed two sets

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of head-mounted watch-repair binoculars, and handed one to Thornhill.

“Any idea where it would be?” Thornhill asked.

“Fingernails, toenails, hair.”

They tied their shirts over their mouths and noses like *bandidos*, got down on all fours, and began their gruesome exploration.

The first hour passed like a kidney stone.

The second was even worse.

By the third, winged insects clustered, clogging the air around them. Shadows stretched like living things. Soon it would be night-fall, and they could not afford to wait another day.

Thornhill was working the agent’s hair, picking through strand by strand. Finally he sat back on his heels, gulped a few quick breaths, and spit a wad of cottony saliva to the side. “Are we sure it’s on him?”

Van Sciver paused, holding one of the agent’s jaundiced hands delicately. It was goosenecked at the wrist, ready to receive a manicure. The skin shifted unsettlingly around the bone.

Sweat trickled down into Van Sciver’s eyes, and he armed it off. He could still see through his right eye, but after so much meticulous concentration the blown pupil and bruised retina gave him trouble focusing. He could feel the muscles straining. He did his best to blink free the moisture.

Then he froze, seized by a notion.

Leaning forward, he parted the dead man’s eye. Its pretty blue iris had already filmed over. He thumbed at an upper lid, splaying the lashes. Nothing. He checked the lower lid next.

And there it was.

A lash hidden among others. It was glossier and more robust, with a touch of swelling at the insertion point.

It was a hair, all right. Just not the agent’s.

With a pair of tweezers, Van Sciver plucked out the transplant and examined it more closely.

The lash was synthetic.

This was not the future of data storage. It was the *original* data storage. For billions of years, DNA has existed as an information repository. Instead of the ones and zeros that computers use to ren-

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der digital information, DNA utilizes its four base codes to lay down data complex enough to compose all living matter. Not only had this staggeringly efficient mechanism remained stable for millennia, it required no power supply and was temperature-resistant. Van Sciver had reviewed the research and its big claims—that one day a teaspoon of synthetic DNA could contain the entirety of the world's data. But despite all the outlandish talk of exabytes and zettabytes, the tech remained nascent and the costs staggering. In fact, the price of encoding a single megabyte with digital information was just shy of twenty grand.

But the information on this single eyelash was worth more than that.

To Van Sciver it was worth *everything*.

It contained nothing directly related to Orphan X—Evan was too adept at covering his trail—but compared to the expansive data Van Sciver had been sifting through, it held a treasure trove of specifics.

Holding the lash up against the orange globe of the descending sun, Van Sciver realized that he had forgotten to breathe.

He also realized something else.

For the first time he could recall, he was smiling.