



DEWLOGIC

ROMA&RETINA

The Iris Evolution

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Roma&Retina:

The Iris Evolution

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Chapter One

The wind phases. The wind phases in plain sight, as the endothermic compound N in real time. Compound N is absorbed by PkYn33, a heterogeneous catalyst of no known catalytic poison. The resulting rapidly replicating composite maintains swift, soundless sublimation of every carbon based and inorganic existence in its path. It's functioning, limited by the mass of the initiating heterogeneous composition in relation to the mass of the material it consumes, is perilous.

On August 23rd 2063, the world's first silent bomb touched the *Solstice*, the Spiritualist Coalition Building in Ithaca New York, and completely obliterated it within a minute. Nothing but the emptiness where the building once stood witnessed the incident. 137 men, women and children, the Spiritualists claimed it housed. 137 people dusted into oblivion overnight in Ithaca. There was no myth or mystery to the war the Christians started, the Atheists had to finish. The Spiritualists paid the deadly price.

When in 2037, Giovanni Bianchi, the Pope's brother, a monk, renounced Catholicism, Christianity and any religion that necessitated a medium to God, deeming the soul the ultimate God the human can find, the world didn't see it coming, a new religious order, the Spiritualists. His

assassination in 2042 was predictable. But his religion was established, and those who had doubt about Atheism and theism rushed towards it.

Being a Spiritualist had its price. They were the growing scum of this earth stuck between the Must-Gods and the No-Gods. The No-Gods were represented powerfully in the bodies of the intellectual atheists at QueXtgen, the topmost scientific research Institute in the nation. And in 2063 when three of QueXtgen's top scientists were assassinated within the same hour, the eventual *Solstice* event was initiated.

Jack Gunk was implanted into the Ithaca Spiritualist core by the *Solomon Seekers*, a Christian extremist association that believed Atheism was corrupting the school system and needed to be eradicated. He gave the police the location of the Icrep187 semi autonomous rifle in the Solstice building and named the shooter, Steven Hedger. The next assassination was an attempt on the founder of QueXtgen and it changed history.

Every good reason pointed to QueXtgen as the source of the silent bomb. But no one could prove it. The endless search of QueXtgen facilities was fruitless. Federal agents and local police department didn't know what they were looking for. No one had or had heard of that kind of technology. Some Christians deemed it an act of God, to show the Spiritualist path as false.

Reporting the N discovery was no longer an option for QueXtgen. Such, the intellectual Atheists of QueXtgen Institute became the new silent world power elite. The Christians will not bother them for fear of such terrible retributions. Governmental bodies and other nations of the

world feared the cutting edge endothermic sublimating processes of N. It could be anyone, anywhere, gone without any redeemable trace.

Ten years after the Solstice Event, the consequence of the event was considerably minimal at QueXtgen. Forty eight years old six feet tall, heavily bearded, caramel toned Dr. Roma Hill and his research assistant of five years, twenty eight years old blonde haired green eyed Dr. Retina Blade of the same height stood in contemplation. They stood in front of the office of the man who made the ultimate call on the Solstice event, the founder and head of QueXtgen, Dr. John ZenSmith.

They stood there for a while, reflecting on the heaviness of the situation they were in.

Retina exhaled, stared at Roma beside him. "Of all the people in the world to have as colleagues, we end up with the two most evil men in the world. And it's your fault Dr. Hill. I didn't choose them. I chose you."

Roma wondered briefly then as he sometimes did, why Retina, the Particle Physicist graduate of Oxford came to work for him and why he never left for some other Institute all those years. He held Retina's eyes. "Shut your rants up Retina. They chose me right out of Yale. You're lucky you didn't get chosen at all."

Retina shook his head. "All that the monster Shin reportedly said afterwards was that N puts that useless Uranium to shame. There was no hint of sentiment towards the innocent victims."

Roma scratched the tip of his nose, held Retina's eyes intently. "The next bullet could have been for him, which wouldn't have been so bad. But it also could have been for me. He sees it simply. The Christian Extremists killed one thirty seven people. He's just a physicist appreciating his handiwork."

Retina shook his head. "He's no physicist. He's a QueXtgen physicist. That's what he is. That short and ugly bastard is—"

"Why do you keep forgetting that I can hear you behind these walls Retina?" they heard as the translucent door retracted to the side.

Roma headed the Department of Progressive Physics within which every branch of physics except Nuclear Physics existed. The head of the Nuclear Physics Department, the man who discovered and isolated Compound N, short, bald, less than averagely attractive Chinese American Shao Shin faced Roma and Retina.

Shin spent almost as much time in the Biogenetics Engineering department as he did in his. He had his hands in as many departments as he could. And Roma remembered unfavorably, fighting him off his researches and experiments.

John ZenSmith was the most powerful head of QueXtgen, but Shin was the most lethal. Roma considered them best friends. Shin's nickname was Superman and his latest super power was Dissel audio implants that allowed him amplified access and interpretation of sound waves from long distances and physical barriers.

Shin turned to Retina. "And Retina, don't blame Roma for my deeds. He knows too intimately what you're yet to figure out. The science of emotions is merely biological and biochemically influenced. Physics always reaches beyond the four corners of a given. And its influences are unlimited. True physicists eventually understand that."

Retina pondered on his words briefly and returned fury for understanding. How I hate his freaking guts and his small breakable neck, this physicist understands that, he thought, before he forced a full fake smile and said, "Hi there Dr. Shin."

"Come in," Shin said and they walked the large office towards the semi circular shaped glass table.

Behind the table sat Dr. John ZenSmith, the short bald Caucasian man, fine looking at best. He raised his head as they approach and turned it Retina's way briefly before holding Roma's eyes. "Why must the boy tag along everywhere with you?"

Roma shrugged. "I'm not sure I can answer that if you can't tell me why Superman..." he nodded in Shin's direction, "...there must always be with you."

John hesitated.

Roma concluded. "Why don't we send both of them out?"

"That sounds fair to me," John replied.

Retina frowned. "How can that be fair when Superman can still hear you outside?"

“Please do as I say Retina,” Roma said.

Retina and Shin walked out.

Roma paced the floor of the large office, unwilling to pretend he did not know what the conversation would be about. “I need you to trust me on this John. It’s not too much to ask, is it?”

John relaxed into his seat, stared at Roma for a few seconds. “You’re right. I should be able to trust you. And I do...but...” his lips quivered as he hesitated. “...but this is different. You’ve given me no useful result, nothing to say that the enormous amount of money we’re investing in the project is worth it.”

Roma stopped pacing, faced John. “I made Zomara happen.”

John nodded. “Yes you did mainly, with some help from Retina, and perhaps Shin.”

Roma stretched his arms sideways. “You know I’m too smart for you to claim Shin in my projects...I and Retina you mean...The most fluid pathway to knowledge resonance and A.I. processing.”

John nodded. “Concise data retaining, better fluid processes and swift returns... I know.”

Roma heaved. “I almost single handedly discovered Pinkthium!”

“With a lot of help from Retina of course...”

Roma nodded. “Of course...”

John drew back in his seat before he exhaled. "But Zomara is different."

Roma squinted. "How is that so?"

"With Zomara's processes, the progress was easier to track. This new project is taking time, taking us nowhere."

Roma swallowed some saliva, drew in a breath. "You mean it's taking us towards the unscientific?"

John held Roma's eyes, hesitated. "I mean that you're yet to figure out what Pinkthium is."

Roma frowned. "You saw the element react with something in the air! It is unmistakable. The resulting compound or whatever it was had fluorescence."

"It is barely a compound. It seems more unstable than Pinkthium itself. Worst of all we cannot factor what use it will be to the science community."

Roma maintained a few seconds of silence before exhaling. "You know you can't fool me John. You know this is how the scientific process works. It may take fifty years to find a use for anything researched. I'm almost there..." his voice receded into silence before he spoke again. "...I know it." The last statement came out in the tone of a plea.

John shrugged. "You've known it for a long time now, about ten years to be exact."

John leaned forward in his seat, his elbows on the table. "Well...it's not just that the Pinkthium research is going nowhere, it's also you."

Roma drew his head back as if startled by the statement, "What about me?"

John leaned back into his chair and his hands disappeared under the table. "Your emotional life wanders into your personal life a little bit too much."

John hesitated. "Well...everything you do revolve around her. If I were to be precise, everything in the cosmos, the sun, the other stars, galaxies, planet—"

"If these cosmic giants revolve around her, then you're assuming she's a part of it all aren't you?"

"No Roma. Don't play smart with me." John shook his head. "I assumed that you assumed it. And I'm not going to talk about any nonsensical metaphysical notions of existence. You act like it's the year 2053 all over again. It seems you wake in the mornings to live those days over. Is it such a coincidence that you named the element Pinkthium because Pink happens to be Mara's favorite color?"

The conversation was tending towards discomfoting grounds, and he knew that as fact. Mara had always been the one shortcoming everyone knew about but no one but Retina ever discussed with him. When Roma, the renowned Physicist married Mara, the Spiritualist, he had committed a sin he could never be redeemed from. Most of the employees at the Institute were Atheists. Anything other is tolerated in the name of the constitution.

What was worse was marrying a Spiritualist. As Atheism grew more ground with academics, The Spiritualist way of

life was also developing in the twenty first century. They were both threats to Christianity. The Spiritualists had, towards the second half of the century been defamed and deviled by Christians and Atheists alike as practicing Voodoo worshiping, self worshiping, witchcraft and demonizing.

And when he met Mara, he found the opposite of all of those accusations and insinuations. He found that the Spiritualism Mara practiced, wasn't a proclamation of judgment or distinctions but of progressive internal bliss. He did not adopt her spiritual practices, but he fell hard and irrevocably in love with her. Pink was Mara's favorite color because she believed it was the color of the bridge between the earthly and spiritual realms. And she could not be silenced about her beliefs. She flaunted but never imposed them at parties.

"What's wrong with the name?"

"What sort of scientist names a groundbreaking discovery Pinkthium? It's so girly."

Roma frowned. "Girly...in opposition to?"

"Strong, not-girly, more scientific."

"Pinkthium is not strong. It is unstable. And it is girly, virgin-like, unwilling to react. It wouldn't react with most known elements."

"Except whatever it is it is reacting with that fluoresces. You say it's not nitrogen, or oxygen or any of the other elements in the air?"

"It must be something else yet undiscovered."

“Is it also a coincidence you named one of the best machines of our time Zomara, a name easily made fun of?”

They were back to Mara again. She was the one thing that truly belonged to him in his life and the only thing viable enough to stain his career. Retina was close to certain the Institute had taken care of her, and eventually confessed he had meant that they assassinated her. His reason was that the timing of her death coincided almost too perfectly with the time Mara had theorized that the color pink had a distinct smell possibly detectable through superior olfactory senses. Roma had held on to the theory loosely and had set out to test it. Retina felt they must have thought taking care of Mara would cure Roma of his insanity, release her hold over him.

But Roma found it hard to believe that the Institute found him so important, they would have been willing to kill his beloved wife to save him. Mara had died in an accident and the cause, a law abiding citizen on his way home from work had died as well. It was impossible to believe the driver could have tried to kill someone with the intention of killing himself in process. That was insane. “So is the world we live in Dr. Hill,” Retina had replied.

In the moment, Roma squinted as he stared at John. “Don’t patronize me John. Mara can not be the reason you’re calling off the research.”

“It’s costing a fortune.”

Roma shrugged. “Scientific researches cost fortunes. We both know that’s the way these things go.” He was tired of the go around. He knew why he was summoned into

John's office, and he was growing impatient, waiting for John to get to it. "Presumed lighter than hydrogen, Pinkthium is the closest thing to sub-atomic existence we know today. Are you stopping the project or trying to move it elsewhere?"

John widened his eyes, and hesitated as he stared at Roma. "You think I'm trying to cheat you out of the project? Let someone else take credit for it?"

Roma squinted, remained silent.

John readjusted his sitting position. "Absolutely not!"

Roma was unaffected. "What exactly are we fighting against? That there is a God or that there is a soul?"

John kneaded his chin with his left hand. "How is anything we do relevant to either of those?"

Roma held his eyes steadily. "Because we keep trying to disprove them. That's not what science should be about. It should be about the nature of the truth, no matter what that truth is...even if it displaces the most dignified of scientific holdings."

John interlocked his fingers, unable to disguise his growing discomfort with the nature of the conversation. "We're always exposing the nature of truths. If while in the process of exposition we disprove anything, it's also a matter of the nature of truths."

Roma was unrelenting. "By doing this, are you not much looping the world upside down, acting like the Christian church of ancient time? Trying to shut down a decent

exploration of nature, devalue it, and claim it according to conventional scientific beliefs?”

‘Facts Roma, scientific facts.’

“Since when has fact been so freaking scared John? How is it different from the Christians of old?”

John massaged his right wrist with his left hand. “It is different.”

“How is it different?”

John’s eyes had a flare of renewed life when he spoke. “They did it to serve a mythical purpose, the belief that there is something, a higher order existence beyond the heavens.”

Roma’s frown deepened. He dropped his head before he raised it slowly. “And that is different from what you’re doing now? You’re not serving what you believe to be non mythical purposes, taking a non scientific approach towards these things, trying to sustain everything the Atheist believes, manipulate the Pinkthium Project your way?”

“This institution prides itself on—”

“About eighty percent of the employees in this Institute are Atheists. Ninety percent of the fundraising comes from such affiliates. They—”

“That explains why most of our referrals come from such affiliates, why we have so many Atheists here. Christians do it too.”

Roma narrowed his eyes. "Uhn." He shook his head. "I guess this is the century the Atheists and Christians can claim commonality. The world really has changed. Hasn't it? Intellectuals are the new religious order. Their decisions are now ordained by something outside of nature or even of reason."

His statement got John off his seat. He stood, his hands holding the edges of the table, His tone was subdued when he spoke indicating his attempt to control his growing anger. "We're in no way affiliated with any sort of religion."

"But it is undeniable that Atheists are the new intellectual elite. Isn't it true what they say...that those who control the education of youths rule the world? Education, they used to say, was the key to a better future. Were they wrong or right John?"

Saddened, it is not so far unthinkable, Roma thought, that the next world war will be between the intellectual Atheists and Christians. But what was undeniable was the fact that the Spiritualists will be the ones in concentration camps.

John held Roma's eyes. "It's been over twenty years since anyone considered you one of us."

And it was all Mara's fault, he thought. He lost his damned Atheist mind to a Spiritualist schoolteacher. It was true he was losing his mind, but it was not while Mara was alive. She had never imposed her beliefs on him. He had considered a slight insanity on his behalf briefly, when he adopted the possibility that people go on after they died. He did it to hold on to Mara.

He felt a psychosomatic rush of emptiness before he spoke. "Since we are getting to the real point, I am not stupid John. And it would be foolish to think me ignorant. Isn't this about the *Science Nation* interview? Isn't this because I mistakenly used the word "soul?" Isn't this about you and the others thinking somewhere along the lines, I had gained an imaginary soul? We all know when you gain a soul, you lose a mind. Don't we John?"

John hesitated briefly staring at Roma. "I believe so yes. Souls are luxuries for speculative minds. Real scientists can't afford such luxuries. They have the world to save."

Roma narrowed his eyes. "Or destroy."

John held Roma's eyes briefly before he withdrew them to open the drawer under his table, removed the notorious copy of the *Science Nation*, opened it, and sighed. He read it before he looked up at Roma. "I was going to get to this." He began to read it out loudly. "Pinkthium may be the breakthrough we've been waiting for. It may be the element that will expose the complete nature of human existence. It may be the true window to the soul."

"My emphasis was on the word 'true'."

John exhaled as he took his seat. He was silent, for a few seconds. And when he spoke his voice was low. He seemed unwilling to engage Roma's eyes. "We are shutting down the research lab. The Board thinks you need at least a year off to clear out your mind. You have one week from today to clear out of the lab."

Roma watched John reluctantly engage his eyes. He was determined to remain cool no matter the implications of what he just heard. He had been partially recruited in his sophomore year at Yale. He had known QueXtgen for over thirty years and had worked as an intern and a lab assistant at the Institute all through college and graduate school. He had been recruited by John ZenSmith, now almost sixty five years old but looked fifty with the Lunar Age Defying Technology tryouts he volunteered for.

And he called Pinkthium girly, Roma thought. His craving to look younger than his age was girly, the only girly aspect Roma could attribute to him. Too bad they couldn't yet cure his baldness. The man was ruthless when it came to the smooth running of QueXtgen. Retina called him "The Hawk," made him out to be one who hovers over preys. But Roma never thought his ruthlessness will ever apply to him. A much younger version of John was the one that offered him the internship in his sophomore year. A gravity-beaten, time victimized, synthetic looking John was now firing him without the guts to say it.

Roma struggled to hold on to his inner calm. "You mean you want me to take a year off to figure out that being a scientist in this institution is more or less the same as being an Atheist?"

John shook his head. "You're always free to practice any religion you want here."

Saddened by the moment but unwilling to show it, Roma closed his eyes as he felt the tremor within. When he spoke, his voice was strained with misery. "Mara once told me that soulless men can never truly be free."

John drew his head back, narrowed his gaze.
“Humankind can never truly be free then, because there is no such thing as a soul.”

Retina stood as Roma walked into the Research Lab, anticipating some good news. With a doctorate degree in Particle Physics, he was somewhat too right for the job. The boy’s knowledge was vast. And afterwards, when Roma still hesitated, he practically begged for the job. Besides, Roma always felt he deserved the more pay QueXtgen was unwilling to pay an assistant. But Retina was hardly bothered about the pay. It was the research, at least Roma believed, the reason he came, that made him stay.

Roma had never regretted Retina. But forlorn in the moment, he walked over to stand in front of him. “It’s over. They gave us a week to clear out.”

Retina raised his eyebrows, stretching the muscles of his face. “You’ve got to be kidding!”

Roma shook his head. “Unfortunately not.”

Retina’s eyes remained wide. “Have they lost their minds?”

To retain composure, Roma put his hands in his pants pocket as he rested against one of the longer tables in the

lab. “Unfortunately not, as well. In fact, quite the contrary, they think I’m insane.”

“But that’s not new,” Retina blurted out before he realized it. He paced his next statement. “I mean that since...” Holding off what he was about to say about Mara, said instead, “But you can’t let them do this.”

Roma removed his hands from his pocket, held them on the table. “I don’t have the power to stop them.”

Retina began to pace. “What do you mean you do not have the power? You’re Dr. Roma Hill.”

Roma exhaled. “John makes all the big decisions here.”

“This is your research. They can’t just take it.”

Roma lowered his head, his palm against his forehead. “They can. It is my lab, but their money is what financed it all those years.”

Retina raised a fist to his chin, released it before he began to pace again. “Damn these Atheists! They’re playing God, you know.”

“Playing that which they believe does not exist. Isn’t that ironic?”

Retina stopped pacing and held Roma’s tired eyes. “We cannot just give up. We’re close. Why don’t we just dump the forbidden word, so they won’t be scared to death anymore? We tell them we believe what they believe. There’s no such thing as even the mere possibility of a soul.”

Roma frowned. "You got me into this mess Retina. I said sub-atomic existence. You said soul. Before I got any further I was telling *Science Nation* about the possibility of a soul."

"You can blame me as much as you want Dr. Hill. But you met me somewhere along the way. This is not a time to fight over spilled milk. We have to figure out how to make this go away."

"I'm afraid we can't do that. They're not just closing the lab they're also giving me a year off, which is more or less a termination."

Retina's frown deepened. "They can't do that. Who can they ever get to replace you?"

One eye half closed, Roma shook his head. "It doesn't matter. What matters is that you're still young. You're better than my assistant. You can find a lot better out there."

Retina sat on one of the lab chairs, his palms rubbing his face. "You don't understand Dr. Hill. Working with you is the greatest honor I'll ever have."

Chapter Two

Roma stood amidst the chaos at 3:45am and had never felt more alone in his life. As firefighters worked around him, he watched decades of his hard work go down in flames. He stood there, his pain increasingly burdensome, almost as acute as it had been the day he lost Mara.

There was only one way the investigation into the cause of the ruin around him could start. Who did it? The firefighters were not needed at QueXtgen. The Institute had one of the best fire prevention tools ever designed built into the walls of the building, engineered by none other than Dr. Franklin, one of the Institute's very own. The fire, every knowledgeable person in the Institute must know, was arson. Whoever did it knew the workings and intricacies of the fire prevention system well enough to have been able to disable it.

But the more predominant question in Roma's mind was why it was done. Destroying him was one thing, but how could the Institute destroy over two decades of his

hard work their money had paid for? How unfair was it that someone will ruin someone else's life's work knowing what researches entailed? There he stood drenching in self pity until the flames were quenched and Detective Walter; a tall attractive bald man introduced himself to him.

When he spoke, Roma was still stuck in his self pity daze. He pondered on for a while why it must come in handy that Detectives should be attractive. It could affect their power of persuasion. But wondered further why they had to be bald?

He barely paid any attention to what Detective Walter said until he was taken into one of the larger offices where he was fed water and coffee. When they were sure he was intelligible and ready for interrogation, they asked him questions.

Detective Walter cleared his throat. "Did you work late last night Dr. Hill?"

Roma stared at John ZenSmith, who was seated beside the Detective in the room before he answered. "No. I worked the usual hours around the same time."

The Detective nodded. "What time was this?"

"Around 7pm."

The Detective leaned onto the table, his arms resting upon it. "Are you sure you didn't work late?"

He can't possibly think he did it, Roma thought as he held the Detective's eyes fully. They couldn't really think he was that stupid, could they? They couldn't think he would

burn his decade's worth of work down to flames just because he got fired. They couldn't possibly think it that he couldn't have reasoned it that he would be the number one suspect afterwards. "I'm certain."

Detective Walter studied Roma who refused to blink. "A staff in your department's building says the light in your office was on till late in the night."

Roma drew his head back and frowned, contemplative as he realized he had left Retina in the office. He didn't believe the boy was capable of arson despite the fact that he lost the job he loved. Besides, he was never going to give the boy up. He suspected highly that John had sent someone to disable the fire prevention system and then had the place torched. They definitely took everything that was useful. They took the only sample of pure Pinkthium he had. They certainly took Zomara and everything else associated with it. He should have known they were coming. He should have listened to Retina's constant distrust of the Institute.

"What is the name of this staff?" Roma asked the Detective.

Detective Walter squinted as he stared at Roma. "How is that important?"

Roma shrugged. "If you tell me who, I may be able to tell you if this person is credible or not."

Detective Walter took his back to his seat as he studied Roma. "Are you a mind reader now Dr. Hill?"

Roma shook his head. “Not really, but there are always tell tale signs.”

Detective Walter tilted his head. “And you’re able to read this tell tale signs?”

Roma locked his fingers. “I can certainly try.”

Detective Walter grunted something inaudible. “Do you think this is some sort of mind game Dr. Hill? Or is it true that your facility was just burnt down and we all know someone did it?”

Roma forced a sarcastic smile. “Don’t state the obvious Detective. I believe I’m too smart for that. I am sure they must have taught you in your Detective school or whatever—”

“There’s no such thing,” Detective Walter interrupted.

Roma drew his head upward. “Then you’re relying on instincts mostly. You have to be able to find who’s credible and who’s not to get somewhere.”

When Detective Walter spoke, there was a tinge in his tone that made Roma feel it was accusatory. “Great. Are you credible Dr. Hill?”

Despite the fact that Roma expected such accusation, he felt overwhelmed by the insinuation. He readjusted his sitting position, muscling up some strength. “If you’re suggesting I destroyed my very own decades of hard work because I got fired, you are way out of line!”

The Detective gained silence for a few seconds. “Was Mr. Retina in the facility when you left it?”

“No, he wasn’t. And he’s Dr. Blade Detective.” Roma felt the lie was on pure instinct. But the truth couldn’t be reasoned. He was sure John did it.

“Then you won’t mind telling me who else besides Mr. Retina had direct access to the facility?” Detective Walter asked.

Roma frowned, stared from the Detective towards John. “Is this where I ask for a lawyer, or he is going to stop the grave misuse of a first name for a last and the complete disrespect for educational achievement?”

John stared the Detective’s way. “Retina’s name is Dr. Blade.”

Detective Walter squinted as he drew his head backward. “Is there anyone, other than Dr. Blade, who had access to the main facility?”

Roma stared John’s way. “John must have forgotten to fill you in on all the details. You see Detective...” when he continued, his voice was solemn and accusatory. “...John has a master key.”

John frowned, shook his head. “You can’t possibly think I did it?”

Roma shrugged. “Everyone is innocent until proven guilty or is that rule discretionary.”

“Dr. ZenSmith is not a suspect,” the Detective said.

Roma raised his eyebrows. “Humph.” He turned towards John. “Of course not! That way he can never be found guilty.”

John shook his head. “What can I possibly gain by burning down one of my own facilities?”

Roma squinted, drew backward to put his back to his seat. “We’ll never know that. You cannot be proven innocent either.” He stood. “Now Detective, if there is no evidence with which to charge me with this horrendous crime, I should be on my way. It’s been a tiring day.”

Detective Walter nodded. “I’m sure it is indeed a tiring day. You can go Dr. Hill. I’ll call on you when I need you again.”

Roma tilted his head toward a light bow. “Sure, anytime.” He stared towards John. “You intended to fire me in one week. Now, there’s no reason not to quit. I quit.”

John stood as Roma exited. “We didn’t fire you. We gave you a year to get yourself together. When you realize there’s nowhere else for you to go, you’ll be back with your senses.”

Roma didn’t look back. “Over my dead and buried senseless body.”

Chapter Three

The day after the fire, Retina had been staring at Roma's house for a long time, and had the time to realize that the house was made too close to the form of a scientist's test tube facing downward not to be recognizable as such. It was a prototype for QueXtgen's fall-proof anti-gravity architecture. It was also painted in white, with pink stripes and Retina thought it must have been a compromise between the scientist and his Spiritualist wife. Theirs was a match to which the likes of heaven or earth could not have consented, but two mortals made work almost too perfectly.

He pulled hard on the lever that controlled the swing of the pendulum bell again. Some moments later, he saw the brown curtains of the tall windows slip to the side. The blue robe Roma had worn two days in a row could not be mistaken, and he didn't need to ask himself if he had been drinking. The bottle of scotch was held gingerly between his fingers as he opened the windows.

He waited, a little while, before Roma opened the internal door, raised the inner curtain and was unmistakable behind the glassed door.

It pained Retina to see him standing there looking pale and half alive. He couldn't help but ask the stupid question in the moment. "Are you drunk?"

Roma stretched the tired muscles of his forehead, held the bottle of scotch up as he staggered back and forward. “Nope, I’m not drunk.”

Retina closed his eyes as he shook his head. He opened his eyes, “Really?” he asked.

Roma nodded. “Yes really. Does it look like I’m drunk Retina? Why don’t you just go and get a life?”

“I have a life.”

Roma took the bottle to his mouth, drank some, staggered backward, before gaining some balance. “You have a job in two days?”

Retina shook his head. “No, I mean that I’m fine with my life. I’m not hopeless. I have an offer for you.”

“Really?” Roma took the bottle to his mouth. “I was just telling...” He raised the bottle “...Scotch here that I have a favor to ask you too.”

Retina exhaled. “You were communicating with a bottle of scotch?”

Roma nodded. “More accurately, we were having a conversation.”

That’s worse, Retina thought, and debated the lucidity of Roma’s mind before he continued. “Okay, you go first.”

Roma shook the bottle he held. “I need more of these.”

Retina frowned, let out a “ah,” before he became silent for a few seconds. “You can’t possibly mean that.”

Roma staggered forward, getting as close to the glass partition as he can be without touching it. "You think?"

"Let me in," Retina said pulling the pendulum bell again and this time hearing it chime.

Roma barely flinched.

Retina knocked on the glass door that separated them. "Dr, Hill, let me in right now!"

"Dr. Blade, go get a job," Roma said as he pushed the button to lower the curtain that covered the glass door.

Retina knocked, called Roma until he was sure his efforts would be fruitless.

He left to wait in his car, hoping Roma wasn't thinking about killing himself. He wouldn't want to discover Roma's body when he could have saved him. He hoped instead that his instincts were right. Having the need for more alcohol, Roma was going to have to come out sooner or later.

When Roma did come out, Retina was deep in a reverie. He looked up to find the living room lights out, and Roma hurrying away down the road, hooded. But Retina could recognize the way he walked anywhere, with or without

clothes. He got out of the car and dashed after him. “Dr. Hill,” he called.

Rather than turn around, Roma did something unexpected. He started to run away from Retina as fast as he could. Retina ran after him, faster, from one street to another and another until the beckoning flashy lights of the Liquor store Roma proved unable to resist confirmed his destination.

Retina dashed in after him, and in circles they went around the carefully displayed alcoholic products until Roma, unable to contain his unsteady sprint, knocked down a couple of liquor bottles.

This caught the attention of a Chinese man, who seemed the storeowner. “You pay, you pay,” the man repeated as he rushed towards them.

The storeowner dived between them. “Go and get a life,” Roma told Retina. “My life is over already. All I worked for all my life in flames, in a flash. But you can still have a life. You’re young.”

Retina frowned, moved toward Roma who moved away from him, making the storeowner move as well. “You pay, you pay,” the man said.

Retina stopped moving and exhaled. “Dr. Hill, you’re just forty eight years old.”

“And you’re half my age. You—”

“I’m twenty eight.”

“Still, you have most of your life ahead of you. Mine is over.”

Retina moved toward Roma once more and his reaction was the same. He moved away from him. The storeowner did the same, to bridge them. They now stood facing each other separated by rows of liquor bottles.

“You pay, you pay,” the storeowner repeated.

“I pay,” Retina answered to silence the storeowner. He turned to Roma and in a low but firm tone said, “I have it.”

Roma frowned, sensing the sincerity in his tone. “I have what?”

“Give me it,” the storeowner said.

Retina hesitated, wondering if Roma was sober enough to handle what he was about to say. “Not, you,” he told the storeowner before he turned to Roma. “Dr. Hill. I have it.”

Roma drew his head backward. “You have what?”

Retina moved forward leaning on the array of alcoholic bottles as if to bridge the impenetrable distance between them.

“You pay, you pay,” the storeowner repeated.

Retina ignored the storeowner this time, holding on to Roma’s eyes. “I have Zomara.”

Roma frowned, staggered two steps back as if blown by the wind. There was no indication he was drunk enough to

stagger back uncontrollably. His scotch had run out for a while.

But Retina still worried. "Are you okay?" he asked.

Roma walked forward, this time without much staggering. "You mean you have some of Zomara's files, a duplicate core drive we never made?"

Retina exhaled, leaned over to pick up two wine bottles and inspect them. He did not hold Roma's eyes when he said, "I have Zomara."

"You pay or I call the police," the storeowner shouted.

Retina removed some money from his pocket and gave it to the man. "I pay."

This silenced the man, but he remained in position between them, wary.

Roma was having a hard time remaining still. He held a frown, his mouth in a twist as he pointed at Retina, visibly shaken. He staggered back lightly. "You son of a bitch! You did it!"

Retina leaned closer on the stacks of bottles.

"You pay more," the storeowner said.

Retina shook his head while ignoring the storeowner. "Dr. Hill calm down," he told Roma. "Can we talk about this somewhere private?"

Roma tilted his head, indifferent. "Is the nearest police station private enough for you?"

Retina released his hold on the bottles he held and his lean on the stacks of bottles. "You wouldn't."

Roma shrugged. "Someone burned down everything I worked decades for. Why wouldn't I?"

Retina remained silent for a few seconds as he rambled for the appropriate way to say what he was about to say. "Because this time you'll really lose everything to people who do not care about you."

Roma squinted. "And you care?"

"Enough to be here, enough to take everything we need to continue the project."

"Enough to burn down my things?"

Retina drew his head back. "Enough to know I needed a cover or you'll lose everything."

Roma was silent.

Retina continued. "You have a choice to make Dr. Hill. Continue your life's work or flush it all down the hopeless drain in order to punish me. If you choose the reasonable way, I will do everything I possibly can, to make things up for anything else valuable the fire took."

Roma walked forward to lean on the stacks of bottles too.

"You pay too," the storeowner said.

Roma studied Retina, assessing his sincerity. "You can never make my decades of work up to me boy."

Retina leaned closer to engage Roma's eyes with the intent to make his sincerity known. "But I can try. I'll give my services free and all the pennies I have in the world."

Roma released his lean on the stacks of bottles, scanned the room before he picked up two bottles of scotch. He raised the bottles to Retina's view. "Well then, we start here. You pay for these and get me some food on your way back. I've not eaten all day."

DEWLOGIC