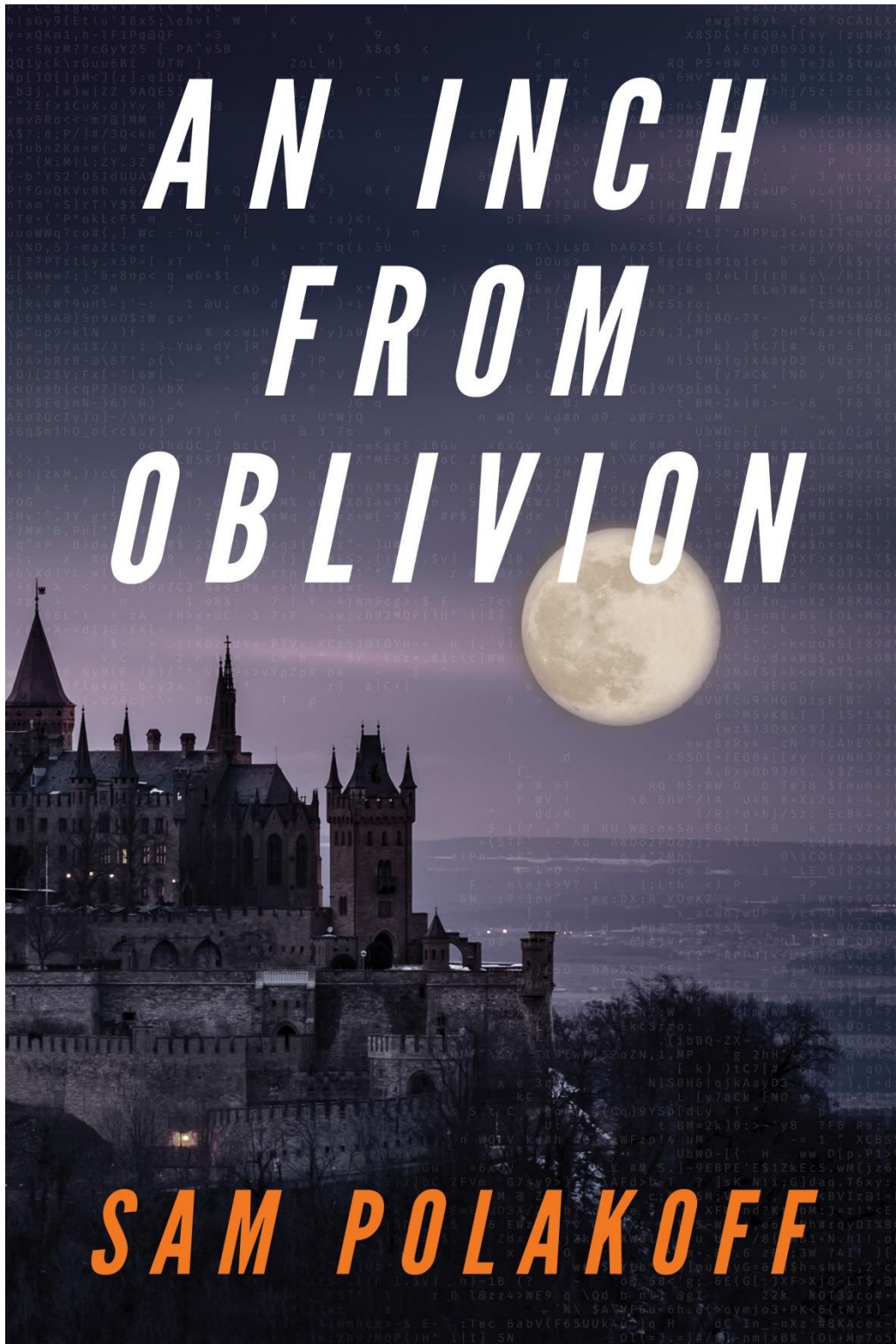


PRE-PUBLICATION EXCERPT



AN INCH FROM OBLIVION

Published by Komodo Dragon, LLC
Forest Hill, Maryland

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ISBN (print): 978-1-7338898-4-1
ISBN (e-book): 978-1-7338898-5-8

Library of Congress Control Number:

FIRST EDITION
Printed in the United States of America

www.sampolakoff.com

Oblivion – The state of being unconscious or unaware; the state of being destroyed.

Merriam Webster

PART I

CHAPTER 1

9:47 pm, the lonely array of cubicles quietly choked Dave's senses. Or maybe it was exhaustion. Six hours of overtime drained his reserve. Thelma went home to her husband. Since the divorce from Deb, Dave had nowhere to go after hours except the ruddy one-bedroom apartment he kept above the secondhand furniture store in Patterson Park. The place was a shithole, effectively serving as a temporary rest stop to sleep and shower. All in all, Dave figured it was better to stay at work. Less chance of getting himself in trouble. What were the alternatives? The bar scene annoyed him; he wasn't a big drinker. Once upon a time, before they shut it down during the Covid-19 pandemic, he would hang out at Poochie's, the pool hall in Greektown. He liked spending time with his son, Travis, but their schedules never seemed to align.

Dave sat back in the old creaky office chair, groaning under his weight. He stretched skyward and then rubbed his bloodshot eyes. Dave sorely needed a cup of coffee. Meandering over to the Keurig, Dave chose the bold Rainforest blend and hoped it would grant him a second wind. Piping hot coffee in hand, he returned to his desk and viewed the 137 unopened emails. Dave considered deleting most of them without opening, but that would turn up the heat for no reason. Sergeant Cooper, his superior, always told them to view email through the lens that it was the lesser of two evils. Dave hated meetings. Email was at least tolerable. There was always evidence that someone had received and read the information. Dave mastered the art of physical meeting attendance. Sit straight in the back of the room, staring in the boss's direction, and let your mind go wherever it wants. He gently chuckled. He was sure he could sleep through a meeting with his eyes open. Dave inhaled and took a sip of the hot beverage. Then the high-pitched tone in his right ear took over. Doc said it was tinnitus triggered by stress, a harmless manifestation of too many hours on the job. They called the condition "ringing in the ears," but it blared like the noise from TV and

radio's emergency broadcast system. As always, he closed his eyes and let the squealing noise pass. It usually ran its course within thirty seconds. In his present state of exhaustion, it felt like someone jabbed a pen through his eardrum.

“Ostrinsky, are you okay?”

Dave looked up at the sky-high frame of Sergeant Cooper. In his day, Donald Cooper had been a standout forward at Dunbar High and starred at Georgetown before flaming out in the second season of a brief NBA career.

“Don't I look okay?”

“You look like shit. Go home and come back in the afternoon. You're no good if you're running on empty.”

Dave gave Cooper a mock salute with three fingers. “On my way in a few.”

The bright light from the monitor seared into his eyes. The emergency broadcast tone was back. *God, this sucks!* The tone subsided, and Dave blew through the dozens of emails. Most of it was superfluous; volunteers wanted to speak at a local elementary school, revisions to HR policy, warnings about budget cutbacks, and his personal favorite, the latest suggestions on “gentle policing.” After he had deleted the first two dozen messages, he saw something unusual. The subject line read, “Ostrinsky Commendation.” Dave had received commendations in the past. Headquarters consistently communicated along the chain of command. In his case, Sergeant Cooper would be letting him know in person. He thought about chasing Cooper down, but he was tired and wanted to get out of there. Maybe the email was bogus. He couldn't recall how many warnings they had received from IT about opening suspicious messages. This one had his name in the subject line. It had to be legit. To be sure, Dave checked the sender's email address. Damned if it wasn't from the PC's office.

Everything was changing so fast these days; maybe this was something new. Dave opened the email.

Detective David Ostrinsky:

I am pleased to inform you that you will receive a commendation for achieving the highest arrest/closure ratio for the current calendar year. Click the link below for the details.

Yolanda K. Polk

Police Commissioner

Arrest/closure record? What the fuck was that? Dave laughed out loud. *Guess I actually slept through the meeting when they announced that one.* Commendations didn't come along often. If they wanted to honor him and send a little recognition his way, who was he to argue? As hard as he worked, he deserved it.

Dave clicked on the link for the details of his commendation. The computer screen turned blue and filled with lines of random letters and numbers. Dave's eyes bulged. A gray sheath swallowed his vision, and his entire body suddenly felt cold and rigid. His upper torso fell forward. When his forehead smacked into the monitor, his vision returned, and the odd sensation in his body subsided.

"Ostrinsky, I thought you were going home," said Sergeant Cooper. "You don't look well."

Dave shook off the remaining chill on his bones and tried his best to appear normal. "I'm good. Hey, how come you didn't tell me about the commendation?"

"Commendation? Is this a joke?"

"For best Arrest/Close ratio or something like that. I got an email from the PC."

“Ostrinsky, I think you’re exhausted. Go home and get some rest.”

“No, wait. I’m not shitting you. Look at this email.”

Cooper gazed at the monitor. “Looks like you’ve been ignoring your in-bin for too long. Must be a hundred or more in there.”

“Well, yeah, but look at the email from the PC.”

Cooper looked at the screen once more. “I don’t see what you’re referring to.”

Frustrated, Dave pointed to the monitor. “There, right there!”

Cooper just shook his head. “Ostrinsky, I don’t have time for games. Go home.”

With that, the sergeant retreated to his office. At the same time, Dave stared in disbelief at the inbox with the message clearly saying, "Ostrinsky Commendation." Why he wondered, could Sergeant Cooper not see it?

Before Dave could leave the chair, Sergeant Cooper busted out of his office and raced back toward him. Dave knew the look. Sarge was breathing fire.

“Ostrinsky, did you click on malware? Our whole system is down.”

Taken aback, Dave instinctively went into a defensive posture. “I didn’t click on anything, honest.”

“Except for the link in the bogus email about your commendation. The one that vanished after you clicked on it.”

“It seemed innocent enough,” Dave stated a little too defiantly.

“Well, it wasn’t. Look at your computer screen now.”

Dave's stomach knotted. On every monitor in the department, including his own, an animated laughing hyena mocked them. Its jowls were wide open, and its long, rubbery tongue danced over teeth too large. Seconds later, a cartoon voice shouted, "Your system has been jacked. All files now belong to us. Pay a ransom of ten million dollars by midnight tomorrow, or we will destroy your files."

"I can't believe this," an ashen Dave said to his supervisor.

"You better believe it. This shit is real. Happens all the time. I have an emergency call into IT. The PC is going to be pissed. I can assure you that the mayor will also be displeased. Forget that commendation, Ostrinsky. You are on suspension until further notice."

CHAPTER 2

Dave flew around the trail's uneven surfaces. The hikers had long since vanished for the day. He discovered a smooth patch and let the mountain bike, a Cannondale Habit, glide while the cool air slapped him silly. *So much more relaxing without those confining helmets.* He blew by an overt sign screaming its dire warning:

DEEP CREVICES

It was quiet this time of day. A woodpecker knocked her Morse code on a nearby Oak. Dave glanced at the flaming red crest and thought how you never see a woodpecker on the burdened streets of Baltimore. The sounds of nature were nourishment, a welcome escape from the trappings of his mind. Feelings of worthlessness never left. Concealing it was easy. His greatest undercover achievement was getting through the daily routine of life on the force. Sharing feelings was just something other people did. He was the rock upon which everyone depended. When the rock wore down, a ride recharged his spirit.

Reaching Cunningham Falls by sundown was within his grasp. Dave wanted to sleep under the starlight. The sound of falling water near the modest lakeside beach was a comfort. He couldn't think of a better place to be with the unplanned time caused by his suspension. In Baltimore, a city without a dull moment, homicide detectives never relaxed.

Thoughts of the evening to come spread through his mind like a spider's artistic web. Suddenly, without warning, the front wheel of the Habit caught a crevice. The bike jammed into the path's jagged opening. The tire twisted while the rear of the all-terrain cycle abruptly rose. The muscles in Dave's back rotated hard right. A spasm shot through his leg. The Habit settled down on the hardened dirt path before going sideways and causing a spill. Dave lay on the ground rubbing his sore lower limb.

In his late forties, Dave found the old body rebounded slower. He got up gingerly, brushed himself off, and lifted the bike to inspect for damage. Remarkably, nothing seemed out of order, just a few scrapes. He congratulated himself for buying the Habit. There were less expensive brands, but Dave figured he owed himself a splurge after Deb took him for all he was worth, slight as it was. He glanced at the painted sky and then at his watch, three more miles to Cunningham Falls. He had an hour of daylight left—plenty of time. Dave adjusted the backpack, mounted the Habit, and resumed pedaling.

There were many recreational trails in and around the city. Still, Dave enjoyed western Maryland's serenity, especially when stressed. The town of Thurmont, home to Camp David, was an hour's drive from Baltimore. Despite Thurmont's large weekend crowds, its promised beauty never betrayed Dave on his infrequent off-hours' trips. After encountering the path's crevice, Dave concentrated on the trail, known for overgrown tree roots and abundant rocks. It was easily navigable on foot but not on a boneshaker, a term he picked up from his son.

Up ahead, Dave spied a rock. He slowed his speed gradually and noticed it was a mole, balled up to protect itself from danger. Dave smiled and gracefully rode around the frightened animal. He sat straight, left one hand on the handlebar, and stroked his classic graying goatee with his other. Dave closed his eyes for just a second to experience the rush of mountain air on his face. The wind whistled through his thinning salt and pepper hair. It made him feel like he was flying, a daring escape from the stress of the job. In the split second his eyes were closed; Dave's sense of smell became transfixed on the unmistakable scent of musk. His eyes opened to the sight of an Eastern Spotted skunk performing a fear-based handstand. The tail bent forward, covering four broken white stripes on its back. The stench was overpowering. Dave applied the brakes, but not too forcefully. He wanted a quick stop but not so fast that he would fly over the handlebars.

“Whoa, little fellow. Get off the path.”

The skunk remained in formation, releasing its musk. Dave felt the front tire of the Habit roll into and then over the scared critter. The collision caused the bike to flip forward, throwing Dave headfirst into the trunk of an oak tree at the path's edge. Barely conscious of his surroundings, the momentum carried Dave over the side of the trail and down the rock-laden hill. His body barrel-rolled hard over roots and rocks, coming to a stop on an unsteady tree branch brushing against the side of the cliff.

Six hours later, Dave regained a state of semiconsciousness. *Ugh, what's that horrible smell?* The stench of the musk was still on him. Dave moved his sore right shoulder, and the tree branch began to sway. A slight cracking sound pierced the fog in his brain. Then he remembered. *The accident! How long had he been out?* Realizing the gravity of his situation, Dave worried the branch would not hold him in place against the cliff. Dave slowly took his left hand up to his forehead and wiped away early scabbing. Blood from an open temple wound trickled into his eye. He turned his head to the right and vomited. Dave tried to assess the situation visually, but he was too dizzy. He called for help, but nothing came out of his mouth but a slurred plea no one would hear in a deserted state park. Reaching for his cellphone, Dave discovered there was no service. The phone fluttered from his hand and rattled down the cliff as consciousness retreated into the black of night.

CHAPTER 3

The masked paramedics unloaded the patient on the roof of Baltimore's Shock Trauma facility.

“What have we got?” inquired Dr. Ivy McDermott, the on-call neurosurgeon.

The lead paramedic responded meticulously. "Male victim, approximately forty-five to fifty years of age, major head trauma with an open wound on the right temple, a possible broken rib, and multiple contusions."

“Ugh, the stench. What is that?” asked Ivy.

“Skunk, apparently a pretty heavy dose of musk.”

Two interns trying to ignore the odor quickly took the gurney and yelled back over the chopper's noise, “We've got it from here.”

Ivy followed the gurney to the elevator and quickly issued instructions.

“As soon as we get inside, cut off his clothes, send them to the hospital incinerator and have the nurse create a solution of 3% hydrogen peroxide, baking soda, and a small amount of dishwashing detergent. That'll get the musk off. While she's mixing the solution, we need to stitch the open wound and get a head CT. Let's find out what we're dealing with.”

An hour later, Ivy entered the trauma room to examine her unconscious patient. The clock was ticking. The man they identified as David Ostrinsky needed an emergency craniotomy, and he needed it soon. Ivy checked his vitals and turned to leave. A frantic woman and a young man barged into the room in emotional distress.

“Are you his doctor? Is he going to be okay?”

“I’m Dr. McDermott, the neurosurgeon taking care of the patient. And you are?”

“I’m Deb Ostrinsky, his wife...ex-wife. This is our son, Travis.”

“How old are you, Travis?”

“Twenty-one,” replied the tall, lanky young man. Ivy had to ask. Travis Ostrinsky had the kind of face stuck between adolescence and adulthood.

"Your father sustained serious head trauma. We know he had an accident with a mountain bike near Cunningham Falls in Thurmont. We don't know the details. He's been unconscious since he arrived early this morning."

"You don't know any details?" asked the ex. "How did he get here?"

Ivy inhaled deeply. This woman would be a handful.

“A hiker found his cellphone, heard some moaning above, looked up, and saw him propped on a tree branch jammed against the cliff. The first responders were able to get him to safety and then airlifted him here. We ID’d him from his wallet. We removed the contents when we burned the wallet and his clothes.”

“You burned his wallet and clothes? What on earth for?”

Ivy thought the ex-wife was near hysterics. “Mr. Ostrinsky had an encounter with a skunk. We bathed him in a hydrogen peroxide solution to remove the odor. We had to burn his clothes. The nurse is holding his other possessions.”

“Will he be okay?” inquired the son. The young man was torn between an emotional breakdown and assuming control of the situation.

"Too soon to tell. Your dad was not wearing a helmet. As a result, he sustained severe head trauma. There is swelling and an intracranial bleed on the right side of his brain. We will need to operate as soon as possible. Will you consent to the procedure?"

The distraught ex-wife replied, "Before I consent to brain surgery, I need to know much more about the procedure. Can't this wait till Dave wakes up? We can ask him."

"With all due respect, Ma'am. If you are no longer married to Mr. Ostrinsky, the decision is not yours unless you have medical power-of-attorney." Ivy turned her attention to Travis. "It's going to be your call, but we don't have much time."

The young man appeared petrified. His voice quaked, "About what my mom suggested...can't we wait for Dad to wake up and just ask him?"

Ivy shook her head and tried to empathize with the conflicted youngster. "Travis, I don't know how else to say this. Without the surgery to stop the bleeding and reduce the pressure on your father's brain, he may never wake up."

"Oh my God," wailed Deb. "Oh my God."

"Mom, keep it together. Dad would want us to be strong. Dr. McDermott, could you please go over the procedure in detail and explain the risks?"

Ivy smiled reassuringly, impressed with the young man's ability to rebound and take charge in a stressful situation. "Sure, here's what's happening."

Ivy turned to a screen on the wall where she illuminated the CT results showing Dave Ostrinsky's brain. She pointed to the right side. "You see this formation? It looks like a cloudy mass. That's the pool of blood getting larger and larger. If we don't operate soon, the bleeding combined with the edema and related contusions will kill him."

Travis nodded his understanding. "And the risks involved?"

"I won't lie to you. Any brain surgery is risky. These procedures have become more routine, but there are real risks. Based on the affected brain region, your father could lose abilities to speak, walk, or hear. He could die during the procedure. It's all detailed in the consent form. Read that over, and I'll be back to answer any additional questions."

"When would you want to operate?" he asked.

"As soon as you sign the consent form, we will get him ready."

Ivy watched as Deb began to cry. Travis placed an arm around his mother's shoulders.

"It'll be okay, Mom. Help me read through the papers."

"I'll give you two some time," Ivy said as she watched two people barrel around the corner.

"Can I help you?"

"I'm Sergeant Cooper. This is Detective Greene. I understand you have one of our men here. Detective David Ostrinsky?"

"Yes, we do. He sustained a major head injury. You can't go in, but I will let the family know you are out here."

"Thank you," replied Greene. "We'll wait over there," pointing to the family lounge.

After informing the family of the visitors, Ivy meandered into the doctor's lounge. Six hours into her shift, the tension was already building. The Keurig machine was calling her name. While waiting for the coffee to brew, she noted her always pale complexion in the mirror above the coffee station. Disgusted with her haggard appearance, she removed the scrunchy holding her blond hair and tightened everything up. She pulled a lipstick from the

pocket of the white coat and applied a subtle shade of pink against her full lips. She sighed as she checked her look in the mirror. She hated her small, upturned nose. She took a sip of the black coffee and retreated to a nearby lounge chair to think through the plight of her newest patient. The next few hours were critical. Time was not on his side. Although there was only one true path, she empathized with the young son. For him, the decision would be agonizing. The ex-wife was a wreck. She would be a challenge, particularly if the procedure resulted in complications.

Ivy closed her pale blue eyes and inhaled the aroma of Starbucks Sumatra.

Ostrinsky's procedure would be tricky. She was anxious to get going.

"Hey, wake up!" chided her colleague, Dr. Alan Oliver.

"I'm awake. Just contemplating a procedure," Ivy replied, not wanting to discuss anything important. She and Oliver had a one-night stand a year ago. It had been a weak moment following a hospital holiday party. Two lonely, divorced people sought comfort during what should have been a festive season spent with loved ones. Now, she couldn't stand the sight of Dr. Oliver. He was arrogant to the point of being annoying and not particularly good-looking either. His graying, black hair parted to the side, swept across his forehead, and seemed to accentuate a bulbous nose pressed into rounded cheekbones. She hated herself for going to bed with him.

"Do you want to meet up tonight?"

God, this asshole never stopped trying. "No, Alan. I don't know how many ways to explain it. I'm just not interested."

For a flickering moment, Ivy considered consulting Oliver on the Ostrinsky case but thought better. Oliver would view it as an invitation to a personal relationship.

A moment later, her cellphone vibrated violently. There was an emergency. Dave Ostrinsky was crashing.

CHAPTER 4

Adrenaline propelled Ivy through the craniotomy. The flatscreen computerized tomography commonly referred to as a CT, guided her through removing the subdural hematoma. The small pool of blood rolled effortlessly into the collection tray. She clamped the bleeding artery and tied it off before taking a final survey of Ostrinsky's brain. The three-dimensional images from the CT enabled easy distinction between healthy and abnormal tissue. Ivy was satisfied. Everything looked good. She prepared to replace the bone flap removed at the start of the procedure. Suddenly, a monitor cried out for attention. A red light flashed on the top of the box.

"Dr. McDermott, what's happening? I don't see anything on the CT that would trip the alarm."

"Neither do I," she replied to the resident she was mentoring. "Switch the alarm off, and let's take another look before we close."

Ivy turned to get a better look at the flatscreen. "I don't see anything out of the ordinary."

Ready to chalk it off as an equipment malfunction, Ivy instructed the resident to change the 3D view of Ostrinsky's brain. Then she saw something odd. It was nothing more than a speck of white, but it did not belong.

"Do you see that?" Ivy asked the resident. "Looks like one of those small, round hearing aid batteries I used to replace for my grandmother. We have to go back in."

Speaking to no one in particular, Ivy narrated her actions. "The object is slightly below the open section of the brain. I am making an incision in the dura just below the current site."

Ivy carefully cut the brain's outer membrane to reveal the skull. "Drilling to excise another bone flap." A few seconds later. "Removing the bone flap." Ivy placed the second section of Ostrinsky's skull to the side and looked carefully at the brain until she saw it.

"There we go. Poking its little head right out." She carefully extracted the round white dot from the lobe where it had been hiding. Ivy held the strange item before her eyes and wondered what it was or, more importantly, how it got there. The growth didn't resemble anything she had ever seen or studied. After placing it in a containment tray, Ivy looked at the lead surgical nurse. "Get this cleaned up and give it back to me."

After surgery and briefing the family, Ivy always retreated to her office for a cold bottle of mint tea. It helped her unwind after long periods of intense concentration. It would be hours before her patient would awaken. She was near the end of her shift, and it was closing in on dinnertime. Her house in Ellicott City wasn't far. Although she had a luxurious kitchen and loved to cook, there was seldom time. When she divorced Paul, she got the big house. They never had kids. She was too busy working, and he was preoccupied with sleeping around. Still, she loved the old Victorian and its finely manicured gardens.

"Excuse me, Dr. McDermott. An OR nurse just dropped this off for you."

Ivy thanked her assistant and took the small plastic specimen bag. When she was once again alone, she held the tiny package toward the light. Ivy examined the unremarkable nature of the item. She locked the small plastic bag in her desk and resolved to ask David Ostrinsky about it during rounds the next day.

CHAPTER 5

In times of stress, memories of Glasgow illuminated his mind. He pictured the farm and rolling meadows of his homeland. Now, at sixty-two, Zed Baynes found himself stuck in an uninspiring factory on the east side of Berlin. Baynes ran his hand over his bald head and scoffed. Manufacturing solar panels were never in the cards. However, the money was good, and he played his current role well. Baynes GmbH was now the world's market leader in solar panel sales. As managing director, he stood proud at having built such a successful effort in less than a decade. Seeing his young production manager approach, Baynes braced himself for the bad news. It was always something. Krantzler presented problems but rarely solutions. Baynes wondered how much longer he could survive with the incompetence.

“The day is young, Lars, like you.” He added without forethought. “I can see it on your face. What is the problem?”

Lars Krantzler flinched. “There is a global supply chain issue. Suddenly, we cannot get shipments of cadmium telluride wafers.”

Baynes stiffened at the news. “Our inventory is depleted?”

“Just about. Our production line will grind to a halt after today's second shift.”

“And what do you propose to do about it?”

“Our Sourcing Department has checked every vendor on the planet. No one has excess inventory at any price. I am afraid we must begin to issue backorder notices to our customers.”

Baynes slammed his fist into the wall. “Unacceptable,” he bellowed. “Find me a solution, NOW!”

Krantzler cowered in fear. In a shaky voice, he replied, "I can get silicon wafers here by this evening. They are available by the truckload from a supplier here in Germany."

"Silicon? Are you crazy? Our solar panels can't be like everyone else's. Do you propose we forfeit our differentiator? Bah!" He waved his hand in disgust.

"No, no, it's just . . ."

"Out with it!"

"We have no better solution."

Baynes just shook his head. He could feel his harelip tighten with stressed facial muscles. With a wave of his hand, Baynes dismissed the inexperienced production manager. This problem was only temporary. Baynes hadn't yet informed Krantzler of the upcoming change from cadmium telluride to gallium arsenide. The new wafers would harness far more of the sun's energy and convert photons at an astonishing rate. Their product would become superior to its predecessor. More importantly, the new wafers would enable the achievement of the owner's plans. Baynes was pleased. The owner would handsomely reward his success.

CHAPTER 6

Dave's head pounded. He tried to adjust his eyes to the light. It was like reaching his arms out for guidance through the fog on a dark, rainy night. He tried to lift his head off the rock-hard hospital pillow. But it felt glued to the damned thing. Slowly, Dave rotated his head left, which was less painful. Travis was sound asleep in the guest chair. *What time was it?* The sight of his son warmed his heart. *God, I love that kid.* Noticing the three days of growth on Travis's face, Dave conceded his little buddy had become a man. In many ways, the job prevented him from being the best dad. Dave resolved to make up for the lost time. Travis was a senior at the University of Maryland. In less than a year, he'd graduate with a degree in supply chain management. Then he'd settle down, start a family, and time for his old man would vanish.

"Dad, you're awake. Do you remember the accident?"

Dave tried to smile through the jackhammer in his head. "I remember the goddamned skunk."

Travis laughed. "Heard about that."

"Yeah, ran right over the little bastard as he was dousing me with musk. Not sure what happened after that."

"According to the paramedics who brought you in, they found you in a tree lodged against the side of a cliff. You must have been there quite a while. A hiker found your cellphone on the ground below and looked up."

"Oh shit." Dave gently felt the right side of his head. The IV restricted his right arm, but he could feel the shaved head and incision. "What the hell did they do to me?"

“The neurosurgeon can explain, but you hit your head during the accident, and your brain was bleeding. They needed to stop the bleeding to save your life.”

Dave tried to laugh. “Guess I gotta start wearing those helmets I hate.”

“Only if you don’t want to kill yourself.”

They sat in silence for a few minutes. Dave was exhausted from the brief conversation. Finally, Travis got serious, stood up, and said, “I’ll go find the nurse and tell her you’re awake. You scared us, Dad.”

“Us?”

“Mom’s been very worried. She’s been here with me the whole time.”

“How long have I been here?”

They flew you in yesterday morning. Thelma has been in and out since yesterday. So has Sgt. Cooper.”

Dave appreciated his partner and boss’ concern. After four years on the job together, Thelma was like his little sister. They looked out for each other. Before Dave could reply, Travis went into the hallway to find the nurse. Seconds later, he wandered back in with an attractive blonde in her mid-forties. She was wearing a white coat and commanded the room. Her presence was regal but not in a snobby way. Before she even spoke, Dave could tell this lady had class, just from how she carried herself. It was the detective in him. After so many years, he instinctively sized up everyone when he met them.

“Good morning, Dave. I’m Dr. McDermott. You’ve been in my care since you arrived here yesterday.”

“My head is splitting,” he replied. “Frontal lobotomy?” he asked in a weak attempt at humor.

Dr. McDermott smiled, acknowledging his effort. “Nothing quite that dramatic. You hit your head pretty good and had a hematoma, a pool of blood in your brain. We cleared you before any part of the brain was permanently affected. You should make a full recovery.”

“Thanks, Doc. How long do I need to be in the hospital?”

“We’ll see how you do. Based on the severity of your injuries, I’d say at least a day or two.”

“And returning to work?”

“That’s another story. I understand you are a detective. You’d probably be okay for desk work in two or three weeks, back out in the field in a month or two.”

“That long?” Suppose I feel better sooner?”

“Dave, you had a serious accident. If they hadn’t found you and airlifted you here when they did, you would have died on a tree limb in the Catoctin Mountains. I’d urge you to rest up and take it one day at a time.”

“Dad, listen to Dr. McDermott. We want to keep you around for a few more years,” interjected his son.

Resigned to a long and arduous recovery, Dave backed off. At the doorway to his room, he saw his ex-wife approaching with coffee.

“Hey, you’re awake. How are you feeling?” Deb asked in a matter-of-fact tone.

Dave appreciated her concern, but the sound of her voice grated on his nerves. He tried not to let it show. “Doing okay, Deb. Thanks for being here.”

Dr. McDermott reassumed control. “Dave, I need to discuss one other thing with you.”

“Shoot.”

Dr. McDermott reached into the hip pocket of her white coat and removed a small bag. “This had nothing to do with your injury, but I found an unusual object while operating.”

She held the bag up toward the light. Dave could see a small circular white object the size of a pea. “What is that?”

“Well, it looks like an innocent calcium-type growth. According to our lab here at the hospital, it’s a conductive device.”

Dave still didn’t feel like himself, but his brain shifted into detective mode. Questions to a subject matter expert involving a crime were often crucial to solving a riddle. “Conductive? What do you mean?”

“You know. Material that receives and sends electric signals, as one example.”

Dave scrunched up his brow in contemplation. “Is this a natural growth?”

Dr. McDermott shook her head. “Never seen anything like it before. I was curious to learn what you might know.”

Deb broke in. For a minute, Dave forgot she was even in the room. “What? Are you suggesting someone implanted that thing in his head?”

Good question. Dave was thinking the same thing. Deb beat him to the punch.

“It seems that way, although you have no overt scar tissue from such an incision.”

Dave looked over at his ex. She looked dumbfounded. Travis, same thing.

Admittedly, this whole thing was so outlandish; he didn’t know what to make of it himself.

“Doc, I have no idea.” He paused to gather his thoughts, then, pointing to the bag, said, “Can I have that?”

Well, legally speaking, it came out of your body, so yes, you are entitled to have it.”

“I’d like to have it examined down at HQ. Maybe they can shed more light on the object.”

“Sure. If it’s okay with you, I’ll hang on to it for safekeeping until you are released.”

Dave didn’t object. It would give him a reason beyond post-surgical care to see the good doctor again.

CHAPTER 7

Her bare feet, invariably covered in sculpting dust, scraped across the ancient stone floor, oblivious to its harsh, rigid feel. Agnete Hasler abhorred footwear and always had. She padded along the meandering corridor in the bowels of Das Vergessene Schloss; a castle most had assumed long since abandoned. Glancing at the stone walls, she admired her work. The faces of unknown families brought her tranquility. The mothers, fathers, sisters, and brothers, young and old. The faces she had never known. Although today was ramping up her anxiety, Agnete stopped to fix a slight imperfection on a little girl's cheek. Removing the ever-present chisel from the smock pocket, she applied the sharp beveled edge to perfect her creation. It only took a minute, but it had to be done. Perfection must always be completed on time.

When she arrived at the chamber, she saw him, the prized figure of Dr. Franz Hasler. Her grandfather lay still on a metal table. The scene reminded Agnete of a hospital operating room. The chamber's sterile smell stung her sinuses. Ordinarily, the room carried a musty odor reminiscent of the caves she explored in her youth on the outskirts of Vaduz. She was always alone. There was a sister she barely knew and parents she had never met. Agnete's primary tie to family was the grandfather, who died a year ago. Today would be a momentous day in her lonely life. She looked forward to it. Outside of her sculpting and the work that came easily, her life was empty.

"I apologize for the overpowering smell. The room must be free of germs and bacteria that might harm your grandfather."

Agnete looked on at the short, stocky figure speaking to her. A mahogany cane propped up the man. She paid a king's ransom to bring this renowned scientist to Liechtenstein and wondered whether it would be worth it.

“Germs?” she replied. “My grandfather has been dead for a year. Nothing in this room can kill him.”

She gazed over the table at the barrel-shaped device mounted to the ceiling. The scientist looked up at the strange device with one good eye and red, pockmarked cheeks.

“It is called a Liferay. It will awaken your grandfather from the preserved state of hibernation and enable him to be with you again.”

“Are you sure this will work, Dr. Rinaldi?”

“Quite sure. These devices are illegal in most countries, but I have the original mechanical drawings and the formula for the preservative. I had the device replicated by a Swiss engineer for a few million euros.”

Disinterested in science, Agnete cared only for results. “How long will this take?”

“Once we begin, just a few minutes.”

“Well, get on with it,” she commanded.

Agnete waited impatiently while Rinaldi completed his checks on the standard array of life-monitoring equipment. She could tell from the man’s expression that he wasn’t accustomed to being ordered about. Agnete didn’t care. She swept long, stringy, unkept, graying black hair over her shoulder and threw him an authoritative stare.

“The Liferay device will pass over your grandfather’s body twelve times. The process will consume approximately two minutes. Shortly after, we should be able to detect a pulse.”

“And he’ll be able to communicate? Lucidly?”

“In all likelihood. Nothing is guaranteed.”

Agnete looked down at her grandfather. His small decrepit body had given out. He died of old age a year ago at 94. Months before he passed, she recalled reading about the technology and the company that employed it across North America. It was called Hiatus Centers. She couldn't contact the founder, Dr. Ben Abraham, his reputation for honesty preceded him. But that Rinaldi fellow, that was another story. Although he had been presumed dead, Rinaldi surfaced in Patagonia on a dark website offering to sell the Liferay technology to the highest bidder. For Agnete, money was never a consideration. Winning that bid also won her the Liferay, preservative, and the services of Dr. Anstrov Rinaldi.

“We're ready to get started. Why don't you stand there?” Rinaldi suggested, pointing to the opposite side of the table from where he stood.

Agnete walked to her designated point of observation and inhaled deeply. She had her doubts. This was a “seeing is believing” type of thing. If it worked, her grandfather would play a pivotal role. After all, wasn't she carrying his work forward from World War II? Rinaldi pressed a button on a remote control, and the barrel-shaped device lit up. Agnete studied the unit carefully as it began to rotate clockwise. Slowly, one at a time, smaller side cylinders began emitting what Rinaldi called a femtosecond laser over the body. Once each cylinder completed its mission twelve times, the unit became still and the room quiet. Agnete looked at Rinaldi as he steadied himself using the mahogany cane.

“What now?” she asked.

“We wait.”

She watched as Rinaldi lifted her grandfather's eyelids, checking for pupillary activity. Rinaldi turned his head toward the machine registering blood pressure and heart rate activity. Another device, Rinaldi had explained, would tell them when the lungs began taking in air.

Not known for her patience, Agnete drilled into Rinaldi with a tone usually reserved for the help. “I knew this was a joke. Obviously, you have failed.”

He said nothing in response. Agnete was sure she pissed him off but didn't care. Her bare feet suddenly felt uncharacteristically cold when Rinaldi returned her stare. His glass eye bore a hole through her. Agnete held her tongue, at least for the moment. She would bury her grandfather in the makeshift cemetery behind the castle if this failed. Then, she would carry his mission forward as best she could. She had most of his work papers dating back some seventy-five years. The more recent technology was not so well documented. If she were being honest with herself, if left to her own devices, she wasn't sure she would know how.

This had to work! Wake up! She thought as she stared at the lifeless form of her hero, whose work inspired her every move. *Wake up!*

An audible beeping sound penetrated her thoughts. The beeps became frequent and steady. Hope slowly washed over the malaise of despair.

“The process is working,” proclaimed Rinaldi.

Agnete saw her grandfather's eyelids trying to lift. His facial muscles contorted.

“Stats are coming into normal ranges. He should regain consciousness any moment.”

This Rinaldi character was so smug. His low, gravelly voice annoyed her. If she didn't need him to complete her grandfather's work, she'd likely berate him in the manner she spoke to most people.

“Dr. Hasler, I am Dr. Rinaldi. Can you hear me? Can you open your eyes?”

Slowly, his eyes opened with the pain of an old crypt sealed for eternity. The color returned to his cheeks, and his lips gradually separated, revealing yellowed teeth stained from a lifetime of neglect.

“Agnete?”

He looked confused, but at least he knew who she was.

The heavily lined face shifted, and Agnete saw those blue-gray wolf eyes stare down Anstrov Rinaldi. “Who the hell are you?”

To her surprise, Rinaldi remained composed. “I am the person who just brought you back from the dead. You should feel strong enough to sit up in a few minutes.”

“Dead?” the old man inquired.

“Opa, you died one year ago. Natural causes. Dr. Rinaldi had the technology to preserve your body and reawaken you.”

“But a year? Where have I been?”

“Before you passed, your granddaughter contacted me. When you expired, I treated your body with a preservative and placed you in a special, temperature-controlled casket where you will return at the end of this day,” Rinaldi explained.

“Return? Are you mad? Why would I do that?”

“Unfortunately, the technology only enables you to awaken once a year for twenty-four hours. If we abuse that timetable, your body will literally rot, making future awakenings untenable,” Rinaldi elaborated.

“Opa, we must use this time carefully. Our work requires your guidance. You will advise me on how to proceed. After today, we will be unable to speak for a year.”

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