

January 3rd

World Population
918,992,056

1

“THE TIME IS four p.m., GMT. Shall we begin?”

As expected, there was no dissent.

“It has now been over ten hours since our last communication with NB219 or Principal Director Perez,” Celeste Johnson told the others partaking in the video conference. “Due to this silence, and per Project guidelines, this emergency meeting of the directorate has been called.”

The irony that this was the first meeting of the directorate since Perez had taken charge of the Project was not lost on them. He had turned the group into merely an advisory council—one he had yet to call on—and the members had little doubt he had been planning on disbanding them completely.

The current group was actually the second incarnation of the directorate, since the members of the pre-pandemic board had all been killed at Bluebird on Implementation Day. Out of that initial post-KV-27a-release directorate, only two members remained: Dr. Henry Lassiter, stationed at NB772 in southern France; and Erik Halversen at NB405 on the outskirts of Hamburg, Germany. The rest had all been appointed to their positions by Director Perez: Johannes Yeager at NB338 outside Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; Kim Woo-Jin at NB202 near Seoul, Korea; Parkash Mahajan at NB551 in Jaipur, India; and Celeste at NB016 in New York City, USA.

“If I may,” Dr. Lassiter said from his monitor.

“Go ahead, Doctor,” Celeste said.

“As ranking Project member, I believe the role of principal director falls to me. I suggest we all agree to that immediately so we can move on to more important matters.”

Celeste looked at the different screens in front of her. Yeager, Kim, and Mahajan were all trying very hard to keep their faces neutral. Halversen, on the other hand, was nodding in agreement.

“I understand your thoughts on the manner,” Celeste said. “As we all do.”

“Excellent. Then we’re agreed.”

“No,” Kim said. “We are not.”

The doctor looked surprised. “Mr. Kim, we can work out a solution to whatever problem you’re—”

“Dr. Lassiter,” Celeste said. “Mr. Kim is not the only one who has an issue with your suggestion. I believe you will find that Mr. Yeager and Mr. Mahajan share a similar point of view.”

“For God’s sake,” Lassiter said, “this is not the time for infighting. We are at a critical point in the plan, yet for the second time in two weeks we have lost our leader. We need a smooth transition to someone familiar with how things work at the top. What we don’t need is a split vote.”

“Split vote?” Celeste said. “I think you’ve misunderstood. I would not vote for your ascension to principal director, either.”

“No. Absolutely not. You four are only on the directorate because Perez needed bodies in seats so that the membership felt everything was fine. You wouldn’t even be on this call otherwise.”

“The fact is, we *are* on this call,” Yeager said. “Whether we should be here or not is no longer an issue.”

“Doctor,” Celeste said, “we may not have been on this board very long, but, if I may remind you, that means we were not part of the directorate that allowed Perez to take full control.”

“You’re saying that like Erik and I had a choice,” Lassiter said.

“There is always a choice,” she said. “And you two made the wrong one. You went against the best interests of the membership and allowed Perez to become the dictator. If he hadn’t been eliminated, I don’t even want to imagine what would have happened to the Project.”

“I think you are being a little premature there,” Halversen said. “We do not even know what happened. It is very possible he is still in charge. We should *all* remember that.”

“Principal Director Perez is dead,” Celeste said.

“And how could you possibly know that?” Lassiter asked. “We have not heard back

from the investigation team yet.”

“Actually, we have. I spoke to them thirty minutes ago.”

“We’ve received no report of this,” Lassiter said, waving his arm to indicate the other directorate members. “Any information should be shared immediately.”

“It was shared,” she said. “Mr. Yeager, Mr. Kim, and Mr. Mahajan have all received a full briefing.”

Lassiter’s face turned red. “This is out—”

“Principal Director Perez and all those stationed at NB219 are dead. Not only were the central elevators destroyed, and everything up to and including the ground-level warehouse completely burned, it appears that some kind of poisonous gas was released within the base itself.” She pushed a button on her keyboard, and the feed from her camera was replaced by a picture of Perez lying on the floor of his office, surrounded by a pool of blood. “As you can see, in addition to whatever effects the gas may have had on him, he was shot.”

Lassiter remained silent as he watched the footage. When it was over, he said, “I can’t say I’m not glad he’s dead, but this is something you should have shared with Erik and me immediately.”

“You clearly don’t understand what’s going on here, Dr. Lassiter.” She leaned back. “I’d like to vote on the first motion.”

“What motion?” Lassiter said.

“What are you talking about?” Halversen said.

“Item A: the removal of Dr. Henry Lassiter and Erik Halversen from the directorate. All in favor?”

A chorus of four yeas.

“What the hell is this? You can’t remove us!”

“I believe we just did.”

“For what cause?” Halversen asked.

“Dereliction of duty. Endangering the Project. Inaction resulting in the deaths of the personnel assigned to NB219. Shall I go on?”

“This is absurd,” Lassiter said. “You are all to confine yourself to your quarters. You are relieved of your duties and no longer a part of the directorate.”

“We’re not the ones who let the Project down,” Celeste said. “And I think you’ll find that the membership agrees with me.”

“The membership doesn’t care. They will follow what I say.” He reached forward to disconnect the call.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you.”

He snickered but pulled his hand back a few inches. “Oh, really? You think anything you say is going to change my opinion?”

“We don’t care about your opinion. We just want to watch what’s going to happen.”

Lassiter’s brow furrowed. “What are you talking about?” As he finished asking the question, he turned toward a noise off camera. “I’m in the middle of something right now. Whatever you need can wait.”

Someone out of sight said something the microphone didn’t pick up.

“Get out!” Lassiter said. “All of you!”

“Dr. Lassiter,” Celeste said calmly. “There’s something I probably should have mentioned right at the beginning of our meeting. I took the liberty of broadcasting our discussion live to all Project facilities. I believe you’ll find that those there at NB772 will be more than happy to escort *you* to your quarters, where you will await trial.”

Several people moved into the picture behind Lassiter.

“Get out of here! Leave me alone! You don’t understand!”

Men on either side grabbed his arms. He tried unsuccessfully to shake them free as they lifted him out of the chair and carried him out of the frame. In the feed from NB405, Halversen had been joined by his own group of self-appointed deputies, but, in contrast to the doctor, he went quietly.

Celeste killed the two feeds, looked directly into her camera, and said, “Members of Project Eden, we have all been through some unexpected bumps since Implementation Day. To keep that from happening again, Mr. Yeager, Mr. Kim, Mr. Mahajan, and I have agreed to split the responsibility of principal director, so that no one person will have ultimate power. Project Eden has never been about that. We are about creating a sustainable, successful human society free of the old world’s problems. Thanks to your support, we are back on track.”

2

CENTRAL TEXAS

CURTIS WICKS HAD watched his friend die from the cover of the arroyo as the blaze lit up the night and consumed NB219.

Though he didn't know it, there was nothing he could have done. Matt Hamilton had been fatally shot before he stumbled out of the emergency tunnel doorway. Wicks could tell his friend was hurt, though, and knew he should have left his hiding place to see if he could've helped in some way. But no, he had stayed in the arroyo even as Matt fell to the ground. Others— members of the Resistance—moved in quickly, but their efforts had been for naught.

Wicks could have gone over to them then, could have grieved at his friend's side—should have done both—but instead he watched as Matt was carried to a vehicle and driven away.

The flames burned for hours, working their way through the thousands of tons of supplies that had been stored at the base. Finally, as the sun rose and dissolved the shadows, Wicks crawled out of the crease in the land and forced himself to walk over to what was left of the facility.

The warehouse was gone, piles of burnt wreckage surrounding a gaping hole in the center, where the elevator shaft had been. Scattered outside were the bodies of security personnel killed by the Resistance, and a few Project personnel who'd apparently been close enough to one of the exits to get outside, but not close enough to avoid breathing in smoke or the poison gas. Though Wicks didn't want to, he checked each for a pulse and found none.

He, Curtis Wicks—Project Eden member and Resistance informant known as C8—was the sole survivor of the destruction of NB219.

There was no question of reporting to another Project facility. Given his still-healthy status, he would forever—and rightly—be suspected of participating in the assassination of Principal Director Perez and the murders of hundreds of Project members.

As he surveyed the destruction, he wondered if the remaining Project Eden leadership already knew something had happened. Chances were, after failing to establish communications with the base, teams were already on the way.

He couldn't help looking at the skies.

They were empty, but for how long?

He needed to get out of there. Now.

He went half a mile before he found a car with keys still in the ignition. He pulled out the body in the driver's seat, rolled down the windows to counteract as much of the smell as he could, and then went in search of an auto dealership where he could find a vehicle free of any rotting corpses.

He spotted a Ford lot, and liked the looks of the F-150 trucks out front. After dumping the temporary car at the curb, he headed for the sales office to find the keys to the vehicles. But before he reached the door, a speck in the eastern sky caught his attention.

A plane.

Project Eden was coming to town.

He could hardly breathe as he realized he'd waited too long to leave. Taking a truck was out of the question now. They would spot it in no time. Hell, they'd spot anything.

Plan B, then—collect some supplies and find an out-of-the-way place he could hide in until the plane was gone. There was a market several blocks back. He could probably find everything he needed there.

He ran, afraid to drive even that short distance. Two blocks from the store, he slowed when he glanced down a side street and spotted something that was potentially even better than hiding.

A motorcycle, parked in a driveway.

He should have thought of that first. A motorbike had a much smaller profile than an F-150.

He switched course.

The bike was old, its chrome and paint dulled from years on the road, but otherwise it looked in pretty good shape. The tank was near full, but the keys were missing. He glanced at the house, steeled himself, and ran up to the door.

It was locked. He looked around and spotted a weathered garden gnome tucked between two leafless bushes. He used it to smash through the living-room window.

Wicks jumped through the opening and began his search. In addition to the keys that he located in a cabinet near the door, he found a helmet, a pair of riding gloves, a scarf, and a winter jacket that was about his size and would help keep him from freezing to death.

It had been years since he was last on a motorcycle, so it took him six attempts to get the engine started. When he finally did, he checked the sky again.

The plane was low now, maybe five miles out of town. The only consolation was that it was a small jet that probably held no more than ten people.

He considered heading right out, but knew the smart play was to wait a bit.

As the aircraft drew closer, it adjusted its course to the north, putting it on a direct path for NB219. Though Wicks couldn't see the base from where he was, the column of smoke rising above it was clearly visible.

When the plane neared the plume, it began circling the base.

Again, the urge to run hit him, but he remained where he was.

After a third go-around, the plane lowered its landing gear and flew toward the nearby airport.

Wait, Wicks told himself.

The plane was only a few hundred feet above the ground now.

Wait.

Five stories up.

Wait.

Tree level.

Wait.

Down.

Go!

He twisted the accelerator and almost fell off the bike as he shot out of the driveway, but he didn't slow down. With the plane barely on the ground, it was his best—perhaps only—opportunity to get out of there. Not only would they be unable to see him, but the plane's engine would drown out the initial burst from the motorcycle.

He took the southbound ramp onto the I-25 and sped out of town.

When he hit the I-10, he continued south, every few minutes sneaking a peek over his shoulder at the sky and the highway, sure he would see people coming after him. It wasn't until he was somewhere in the vast nothingness of west Texas that he started to think maybe he was going to be okay.

He spent that first night in Abilene, and began considering his next move. If he avoided Project Eden locations, most of which he knew about, nearly the whole world was open to him. Finding a place where he could live out his life undetected shouldn't be that hard.

A voice woke him at four a.m.

What choice do we have? We're the only ones who can do anything about it.

Matt's voice. The words from so many years earlier, before Matt had faked his death and left to form the Resistance. And though the Resistance may have failed at its main objective, it hadn't failed completely.

The original directorate was dead. And now the new principal director, Perez, was also dead. Project Eden may have unleashed its unholy hell, but the organization had been rocked, too. And if there was any chance of keeping the Project from controlling the resurrection of mankind, it had to be rocked again, in as big a way as possible.

The urge to pull the blanket over his head and hide from everything was so strong that Wicks's hands trembled. The weak part of his mind said, "You've already done your part. Find a beautiful beach or a cabin by a lake. Anywhere. You have your pick. For you, the fight is over."

But the blanket remained under his chin. The fight was *not* over.

"Do I really need to do this?" he whispered.

Matt's words again. *Yes. You do.*

January 5th

World Population
862,727,366

3

WARD MOUNTAIN NORTH, NEVADA 8:15 AM PACIFIC STANDARD TIME (PST)

A COLD WIND blew down the barren mountain, passing through skin like water through cloth and chilling the bones beneath. Teeth chattered, hands were stuffed in pockets, necks were buried under scarves, but no one said a word in complaint.

The grave was dug on high ground, well away from the flash-flood channels and dry riverbeds that latticed the area. The coffin was a pine box hauled in from a mortuary in Ely. A fancier one, with metal handles and ornate scroll work, could've been chosen, but Rachel Hamilton had said Matt would have wanted things simple.

All but the most essential personnel had made their way out of the warren of rooms and tunnels that made up the Resistance's base, and trekked the quarter mile to the gravesite. Despite the frigid air, there was no snow, only the dirt and the shrubs and the wide-open sky playing home to a tiny, distant sun.

Ash glanced at Rachel. Her eyes were locked on the pine box that held her brother. Ash let her mourn in silence for several more seconds, and then moved to the head of the grave.

"As you can imagine, I've thought long and hard about what I was going to say here today, but I realized no matter what words I chose, they would be inadequate. To say Matt has been an essential element of our cause would not do him justice. Matt was the embodiment of why we are all here. Without him, it's doubtful any of us would be alive today. He was our leader. Our friend." He looked at Rachel. "Our brother." He paused. "It would be easy to say we are now lost without his guidance, that our only choice is to give up. But if we are going to truly honor Matt's memory, then we can never give up. We *must* fight on." A silent beat. "I will miss him every minute of every day."

He nodded to the men standing next to the coffin. They moved the box over the hole, using cloth slings, and gently lowered it inside.

"If anyone has anything they'd like to say, please step forward," Ash said.

One by one, people shared their stories and thoughts and wishes. When the last finished, Ash caught Chloe's attention, silently asking if she wanted to take a turn. For a moment, he thought she was going to say something, but then she shook her head.

"Go in peace, my friend," he said, looking down into the hole. "We'll take it from here."

Slowly the mourners began to drift back to the base. Once most were gone, the men who had lowered the coffin picked up shovels and started to fill in the grave.

Ash walked over to Rachel and put an arm around her shoulder. "We should go back."

"Not yet," she said.

He could feel her shiver.

"You're going to get sick if you stay out here any longer," he told her.

"Not yet."

As he started to take a step back to give her privacy, she touched his arm.

"No. Stay."

Ash caught Chloe's attention, and motioned with his eyes toward where his children were waiting with Ginny Thorton. Chloe nodded, collected the kids, and led them toward the base.

Soon, the only ones left by the grave were Rachel, Ash, and the four men burying the casket.

"Walk with me," Rachel said.

She started down a path leading away from the base into the empty desert, Ash walking at her side.

"I can't do this," she said after they were out of earshot of the others.

Ash said nothing.

"I'm serious. I'm not qualified. I don't know what he knew, I didn't have his experience. I can't...it's too much."

"None of us is qualified," he said.

She turned to him. "You are. You have a military background. You should take his place."

"No one is going to take Matt's place."

“But that’s what everyone’s expecting *me* to do.”

“No, they’re not. They are expecting you to lead us, yes, but they know you’re not Matt.”

“It’s the same thing.”

“It’s not.” He paused. “The people here look up to you. They always have. They wouldn’t accept anyone else in charge but you.”

“But I can’t do what my brother did! I wasn’t inside the Project. I don’t know what he knew.”

“I don’t, either. And neither does Pax or Chloe or anyone else. That’s something we’ll have to move forward without.”

“But Matt always knew what to do.”

“Just because you’re in charge doesn’t mean you have to lead the same way he did. You can rely on others to advise you and help decide courses of action.”

She turned back to the desert. In a near whisper, she said, “I don’t know. I just don’t know.”

CHLOE WAS WAITING near the entrance when Ash escorted Rachel inside thirty minutes later. She was pretending to inspect some equipment, but he knew she was waiting for him.

“Where would you like to go?” he asked Rachel. “Your room?”

Rachel thought for a moment, and then nodded. “Please.”

As they headed toward the tunnel leading to the residential sections, Ash caught Chloe’s eye and patted the air with his hand, telling her to stay. She frowned, but he knew she would do as he asked.

The few people he and Rachel passed on the way to her quarters moved quickly to the side, muttering their condolences. Rachel greeted the first two with a “thank you,” but seemed to lose steam after that so Ash took up the task.

When they finally reached her room, he said, “If you need anything at all, want to talk or whatever, have someone find me and I’ll come right away.”

She put a weak hand on his arm. “I know you will, and I appreciate it.” She opened her door and disappeared inside.

The moment the latch slipped into place, he headed back the way they'd come.

As soon as Chloe saw him, she said, "Okay?"

He nodded.

But before they could leave, they heard steps coming toward them from one of the other hallways. They held their position and were joined a few seconds later by two men from engineering, toting tool boxes and dressed for the outside.

"Captain," the lead man said. "Chloe."

His partner nodded.

"Morning, Caleb," Ash said. "Problems?"

Caleb Matthews stopped next to the outside door and adjusted his scarf. "Stupid solar panels," he said. "One of them decided it didn't want to work today."

He opened the door and let a blast of cold air into the room.

"This is going to be fun," the other man—Devin—said as he pulled his hood over his head.

"This is not my definition of fun," Caleb shot back.

"Hello, it was a joke," Devin said.

"Not a funny one."

"Be careful out there," Ash said.

"Oh, I'll be fine," Caleb replied. "Devin's doing all the work."

"I don't think so," Devin said as they stepped outside.

Caleb said something back but it was lost behind the shutting of the door.

"Come on," Ash said to Chloe.

They returned to the residential section and stopped in front of Matt's room.

Until that morning, it had been where their friend's body was kept. As a show of respect, members of the Resistance had taken turns sitting watch. All very thoughtful and good, except it meant the room had not been vacant since Ash, Chloe, and the others had brought Matt to Ward Mountain.

Augustine. Dream. Sky.

Those had been nearly the last words Matt had spoken before he died. He had been desperate for Ash to remember them, but had failed to explain their significance.

During the journey back to Nevada, Chloe was the only one Ash told about the

words, but she'd had no more ideas than he did about their meaning. What they did know was that the words were important or Matt wouldn't have wasted his last breaths passing them on. And since he'd kept them secret, they agreed to be careful about who they asked about the words' significance.

Rachel was the obvious one to talk to, but she had been in a deep depression since they'd radioed ahead about her brother's death and was having a hard time focusing on anything. So Ash had been reluctant to approach her and had even considered putting it off. It was Chloe who finally convinced him it was not something that could wait. With her help, he'd arranged a few moments alone with Rachel the day before.

"I don't mean to bother you," he'd said, "but I need to ask you something."

It took her a moment to look at him, as if his words were traveling at a fraction of the speed of sound.

"What?" she asked, even that single word a struggle.

"Matt said something to me before he died."

She looked confused.

"I didn't understand what he meant, but thought maybe you would."

"What did he say?"

"Augustine dream sky."

A blank stare, then, "Sounds like gibberish to me."

"He was very insistent. Wanted me to remember."

"I have no idea what he meant," she said, her face hardening. "If it's not gibberish, then it's probably something that will get our people killed. Forget it. Forget he said anything."

"I thought it might be good if we—"

"I said forget it."

He should have waited, he realized, let a few days pass, maybe a week or two. Her brother's death was still too fresh. He could see all she wanted to do was curl up in a corner and he couldn't blame her for that. But he couldn't ignore Matt's message, and a delay of a week or two could very well be too long.

The only other person who might've known something was Rich Paxton. But while Ash was relieved to hear Pax was alive and had returned from northern Canada, Matt's

old right-hand man had left for Latin America to help a group of survivors, so a private conversation with him was currently impossible.

The only option left was for Chloe and Ash to check through Matt's things to see if they could find an answer.

Obtaining a key to Matt's room had not been a problem. With Rachel overwhelmed by her brother's death, and Pax off site, Ash had been seen as the next in command. No one noticed when he kept one of Matt's keys.

The hallway empty, they slipped inside the room and closed the door.

The bed where Matt's body had lain was rumpled, the top cover off center from when the pallbearers had come to carry him out to the casket. Piled against the back wall were the four boxes and two large duffel bags containing all his personal possessions from the Ranch, waiting to be unpacked. Though in death Matt had occupied the room, he had never lived there.

Working silently so as not to disturb Rachel in her suite next door, Ash and Chloe started going through the boxes. Sweaters, long underwear, socks, T-shirts, buttoned shirts, pants, and shoes—all four boxes full of clothes.

They carefully taped the boxes back up and moved on to the duffel bags. The heavy one was stuffed with books—a survivalist's how-to treasure trove of instructions on how to do everything from simple farming to advanced electronics. Ash could imagine Matt sitting up late reading through them.

The lighter bag held a box of photos, a few pictures in frames, and several journals, each tied closed by strings. Chloe pulled the top one out, untied it, and opened the cover. On the front page was a thirteen-month date range from several years earlier.

Ash motioned for Chloe to flip through the book.

Every single page was filled with handwriting they recognized as Matt's. She randomly stopped at one of the pages and held the book out so they could both read.

Monday, Sept. 23rd

Prep for winter almost complete. Have left most of those details in Rachel's hands. Heard from G1 this morning. No real news, which I guess is good. Pax is still out on the recruiting run. When we spoke, he said things with the group in Singapore looked promising. If he's able to bring them aboard, that'll up our

organization by another thirty-seven. They will also hold a strategic position that we desperately need. I stressed to him how important it is that he succeeds.

At the end of the entry were several numbers, in distinct sets.

00317 43 4388 9629 20153 6 7219

A quick glance at some of the previous entries revealed a few of them also ended with numbers. Ash could discern no obvious meaning, so told Chloe they could figure out later if the numbers were important or not.

They quickly went through the rest of the books, eight in all. Each was filled front to back like the first.

“We’re missing one,” Chloe whispered.

Ash nodded. He’d noticed it, too. The journal covering the last four months wasn’t there.

He stepped over to the pack Matt had taken with him on the trip south to New Mexico, and searched through the pockets. He found the journal wrapped in a shirt at the very bottom of the main section.

“Done here,” he whispered, showing her the book.

They closed the duffel bags and arranged them and the boxes exactly as they had been before. At the door, they paused to make sure the corridor was quiet before leaving with their old friend’s journals.