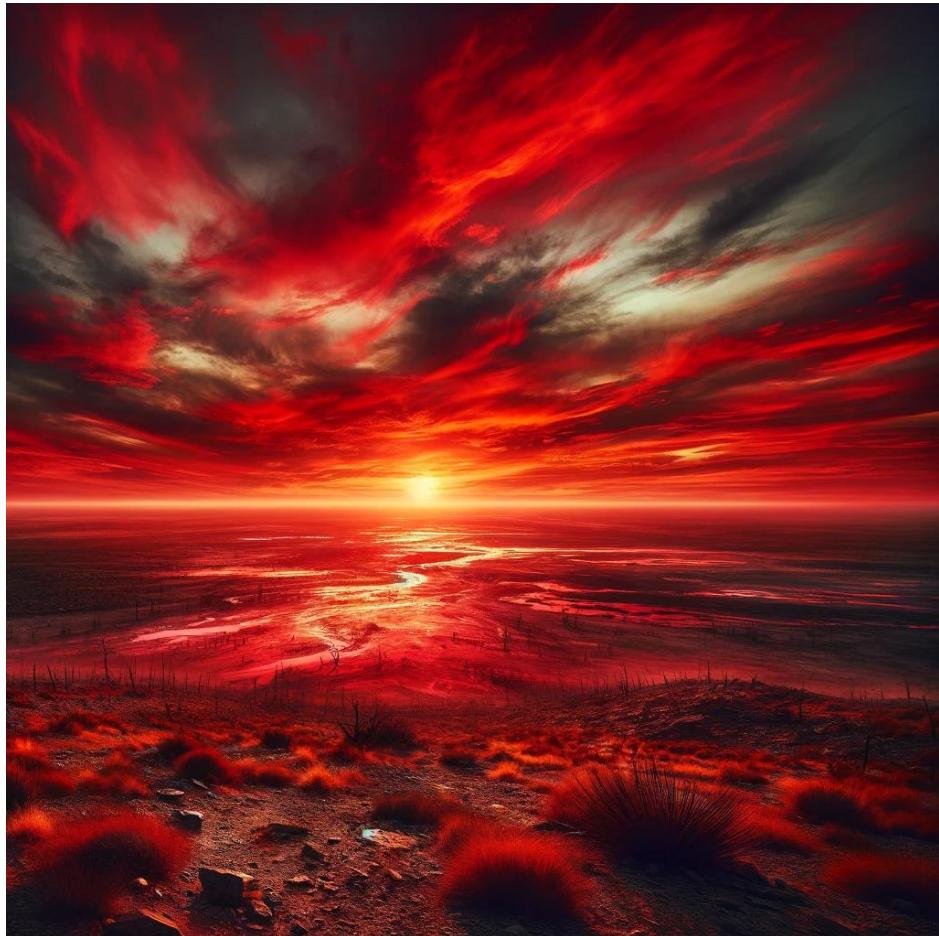


# SCARLET DAWN



Reagan Larsen

*Illustrations by DALL-E 3*

*For my little sister, Ashtynn,  
who has always been too clever for her own good.*

*Merry Christmas, 2023!*

Faye scratched along the inside of her left forearm and snapped her bubblegum, which caused several nearby students—all of whom were focused on the Cold War documentary—to jump. Mr. Calico, her history teacher, glanced up at her, but said nothing. Unlike some of the other students, Faye was actually interested in the history behind the standoff between the United States and the Soviet Union, and the constant threat of nuclear war. Even though nothing really happened, the “war” woke American citizens up to their place in world politics. And not that watching nuclear missiles and rockets to the moon being built wasn’t keeping her engaged.



Sometimes something needs to go *pop!* In this case, that meant her gum.

The loudspeaker crackled to life and the vice-principal’s voice echoed through the room and hall outside. FAYE STERLING, PLEASE COME TO THE FRONT OFFICE. FAYE STERLING TO THE OFFICE.

“What did you do this time?” Stacey whispered. She was reading an old Superman comic book hidden underneath her desk. The few panels Faye could see featured Superman jumping off a tall building and flying off to go rescue somebody in danger.

“Guess I’ve forgotten about it already.” She slung her backpack over one shoulder, a move she had done thousands of times so her muscle memory allowed her to make such a smooth art of the act, shrugged at Mr. Calico, and left.

The walls of the all-too familiar office were filled with cheery decorum, posted to and strung across. The moment Faye entered, a secretary at the main desk looked up from her keyboard and smiled. But what gave Faye pause was the thin woman in a black suit. Her dark auburn hair was pulled into a tight bun. She smiled at Faye the same way a happy baby doesn’t. At her high-heeled foot rested a leather briefcase.

The secretary—Faye could never remember her name—said, “Ah, Faye. Good to see you.” Faye seriously doubted that. “This is Ms. Tanya from Mind Corp, and she has an exciting offer for you.”

Ms. Tanya extended her hand. “Pleasure to meet you, Faye.” Faye shook the woman’s hand and felt a slight tug as Ms. Tanya jerked her a little closer. She let go, and Faye scratched her forearm, stepping back. “I represent Mind Corp. and have been sent to extend a proposal to you. We work closely with the authorities and there’s a case we believe you can help us with.”



“A ‘case’ you believe I can help you with?” Faye asked. “What do you mean case and how could I possibly help?”

Ms. Tanya’s smile didn’t reach her eyes. “Let me show you something first.” She set her briefcase—which actually looked like it was made of plastic now that Faye got a closer look—on the secretary’s desk and pulled out a whiteboard and a black marker. She then opened a stopwatch app on her phone and said,

“This is less of a test for me and more a proof for you. I want you to add every number from one to one-hundred together. Go.” She began her stopwatch.

“Wait, right now? You’re having me do math? I don’t have my calculator. I’m not good at math.” The woman was as still as a refrigerator left in the garage. Faye sighed. “Fine. Every number from one to one-hundred?” Ms. Tanya nodded. “Hmm. Let’s see. Adding each number one at a time will take too long. Ooh! I got it. If I work from the outside ends to the middle, there’s a pattern. One and ninety-nine added make one-hundred, and so does... No, that’s not as easy. One and one-hundred make one-hundred one, and two and ninety-nine make one hundred one. There are fifty of these combinations, so multiply one-hundred one by fifty... That’s like one-hundred times fifty, which is five-thousand, plus fifty times one, which makes for a total of five-thousand fifty. Final answer.”

“You did that in less than a minute. I thought you said you weren’t good at math.”

“I’m not. I just found a pattern and broke it down.”

“That’s all math is.”

“Whatever.”

“We’ve already contacted your parents and they’ve given the okay. We asked them to keep this a secret until we could contact you ourselves. If you agree to help us, we will pay you five-thousand fifty dollars, and if we’re able to catch the criminals with your help, you will receive an additional five-thousand fifty. What do you say? Care to help?”

Over ten thousand dollars. Faye, being only a high-school freshman, had never seen so much money in one place before. What would she even do with that kind of money? Pay for college? Build her own rocket? Invest in the stock market and real estate? Or, even better, she could buy three-thousand taco supremes from Taco Bell. That could be fun.

“What kind of case?”

**A** man in sunglasses opened the car door for Faye, and she stepped out to behold a large concrete facility. Only one building—the one they pulled up to—was mostly gray and had no windows. Plastered in size eighty-thousand point font was the logo for MIND CORP. They were in a complex of sorts. Other buildings looked to be made entirely of glass, some towered high above and cast long pointed shadows, while the rest were squat and covered a wide span of land. Ms. Tanya walked ahead of Faye towards the double doors leading into the concrete building that were being held open by a couple of men in white shirts.

“So what do you know already about Mind Corp? And What we do?” Ms. Tanya asked.

Faye turned the Day Pass that hung around her neck over a few times, getting a good look at her name in bold letters on the small card. “I know you’ve got a lot of money, apparently. But you’re a business that specializes in brain research, right?”



My friend Stacey says you can read minds and do mind control." Would they be able to read her thoughts as soon as she stepped inside that building? Could they already read her thoughts? Chicken nugget chicken nugget chicken nugget chicken nugget. That'll throw them off.

"Well, I wouldn't say mind control. We can't tell people what to do. But our research as a subsidiary of FRAIM Labs has allowed us to advance our understanding of the

human brain almost to the point of replicating its thought processes. We can scan a human mind and search for people very similar, eliminating the need for background checks."

"That's kinda scary." Faye snapped her gum.

Ms. Tanya smirked at her, as though she'd heard people say that same thing thousands of times. "We work hard to abide by government laws. That's why we haven't been able to move outside of the United States at the moment, but we're working on it." They entered the building. Inside was a sky-lit atrium covering a large open area. In the center of the room were several trees and bushes around a small water fountain. Walkways for higher floors surrounded the center room and ran along each of the walls. People in business suits and lab coats walked and ran every which way. It was quite a pretty place on the inside. Faye hadn't been too sure of what she would find on the inside, considering how ominous and dull the exterior had been.

"So, are you going to scan my brain? See if I'm a criminal or not?" She didn't think she was. But maybe. She tried to think about some of the crazy things she had gotten herself into, but at the moment couldn't think of any. "Could I see what you use to do the scans? Is it a series of tests or how does it work?"

Ms. Tanya hesitated. “I suppose I could show you. Follow me.” She pursed her lips. Following closely by her, Faye almost thought she looked nervous for a second. Was she not supposed to ask about the machine? She said yes pretty quickly, all things considered, so it couldn’t be that big of a secret. They walked to the east side of the building. A handsome young man with black hair, a square jaw, and a lab coat with an orange stain on his lapel passed them. Faye smiled as she caught herself staring as he walked. He stopped in his tracks, looked left, then right, then continued on. He didn’t notice her at all, unfortunately. In fact, as Faye looked around the atrium, nobody paid them any mind. No glances in their direction, nobody stopping to talk to them. It was as if they weren’t there.

Ms. Tanya led her through a series of white hallways. “You, Ms. Sterling, match perfectly with a high-ranking member of the evil organization, ‘Scarlet Dawn.’ This particular member we caught was one of the founding members of this organization. What we want you to do is walk us through the process of how you would go about organizing something such as this. And we’ll get you the necessary details about what they’ve done and what we think they’re going to do, so don’t worry. Where would you hide your base? How many people would you hire, and how would you do so? Things like that.”

Scarlet Dawn. Dang, that was a cool name.

They came to an enormous set of double doors. Faye herself was only half as tall as the doors, which made her think large equipment would frequently come in and out of here. Yellow and black striped tape lined the edge of the door and a big red LED at the top, currently off, was labeled “IN USE.” Ms. Tanya pulled an ID card from her belt and swiped it through a little box on the wall, then let the ID card get pulled back to her belt by a little elastic. She bent over and looked into a retina scanner. A light turned green, a buzzer buzzed, and the doors slid into the walls.

Inside, it looked a lot like a command center at NASA, illuminated by dim lights on the corners of stairs and blank monitors. Computers and TVs were set all along three rows of curved tables, each one a step lower than the last. Positioned at the very center of the room’s lowest point, there was a machine that Faye found to be the strangest she had ever seen. At the bottom, Faye saw a pool filled with three feet of water and illuminated by turquoise lights, resembling a fancy hot tub. A few

feet above that was a complex of wires, pipes, and gears that ran from the high ceiling like an upside-down pyramid. At its point on the bottom hung what looked like a scuba mask connected to a dangerous-looking needle on the back.

“What on earth is that?” Faye pointed to the machine.

“That is the mind machine. It’s how we scan someone’s brain.”

“Why is it so scary looking? I was picturing more like a doctor’s office, you know? Bright. White. Happy. An infographic of a brain on the wall, not...” she trailed off, unsure of how to describe this. Maybe she shouldn’t judge something before she understands it. “So, how does it work? You know, so I can know what thoughts of mine to compare to this criminal’s. I’m going to be honest, I have no idea how to proceed with this.”

“That is understandable, as I haven’t given you any details yet. But let me show you.” They walked down a central flight of stairs to the machine. The pool was open—she could have jumped in if she wanted to—and the machine loomed overhead. Ms. Tanya pointed to the mask. “You see that there? We put that onto the patient. That needle you see is the most uncomfortable part, but all it does is pop into the base of their skull and connect to the brain stem. All our information filters in through there. Oxygen tubes connect to that mask, and we lie them down in the water. We put sleeping agents into the air to help them fall asleep so we can monitor their brain when it isn’t very active. Since people sometimes move in their sleep, the water



helps control that, and we can monitor bodily temperature, breathing rate, heartbeat, and everything else you might want to know this way.

“As far as what specific things you might need to know, I don’t think I can help you there. The brain scan is very thorough. Almost like putting the person in imaginary scenarios, then recording how they respond. So have as much freedom with this as you can, though try to remain realistic.”

Faye cleared her throat. “Can I meet this criminal? Talk to them, perhaps?”

“Not needed.”

“What about—“

“Ms. Sterling, we have little time. Now, I think I can log into one of these computers and show you the details.” She practically proclaimed that last part, as though she wanted someone else to hear it. Faye looked around, but they were alone in the room. Ms. Tanya typed away at one of the nearby computers, each click from the keyboard echoing through the oddly quiet chamber. How loud would the mind machine be when it was running?

She scratched along her forearm from her elbow to her wrist, uncomfortable. Just how ethical was it to use a device such as this? It looked terrifying, sure, but she couldn’t base how ethical something was based on how scary it looked. If that were the case, then Mr. Calico would have been thrown in prison years ago. The needle looked like it hurt, but so did Covid shots.

Ms. Tanya struck a key, and one of the large TVs on the wall matched her display. “Ms. Tanya,” Faye said, “How do you know that my brain matches the criminal’s? I don’t recall being scanned. You’d think I’d remember something like this.” She gestured to the mind machine.

Ms. Tanya grinned. “Test scores. Hobbies. Class interests. Things like that.”

Hobbies. What sorts of hobbies did Faye have? She tried thinking about what she normally does after school or after homework, but it was all a blur. There was so much going on right now that this was her only priority right now. Wait, shouldn’t school be her highest priority? But then again, they would pay her ten thousand dollars if she got this right. Five thousand regardless.

“Now, Scarlet Dawn,” Ms. Tanya opened an image on a TV. It showed several metal canisters stacked on top of each other in some sort of factory. The canisters

looked like elongated propane tanks and were labeled with something too small for her to read. But she recognized the black and yellow nuclear symbol of three trapezoids surrounding a dot in the center painted on each of them. “They arose about a year and a half ago and have been smuggling uranium from transport trucks and taking these canisters to their secret base. We don’t know where that is, and that’s the main thing we want you to tell us. As far as what they plan on doing with it, we doubt anyone would steal so much uranium just to make a new power source—we’d be able to see that on radar—so we can only assume they’re using it for nuclear weapons.”

Nuclear weapons, huh? And why on earth were they trusting a freshman with this information? If it was anyone else, she was sure they would panic right now. If Scarlet Dawn really was building nuclear weapons, that probably meant another war would start, and no matter what happens, thousands, perhaps millions of people would die. And they wanted a freshman to figure out such an organization capable of building such things.

Neat.

“So how do you know their name is ‘Scarlet Dawn?’ And why do I get the feeling you don’t like your job very much, considering your lack of patience with me.” Faye was already thinking about what she would do if she wanted to steal uranium.

Ms. Tanya grimaced. Faye had pushed all the wrong buttons, which made her smile. “The criminal we captured told us. We can only infer it has reference to a

nuclear blast, which, if it were to ignite at night, would be as bright as the sun and give off a brilliant red—scarlet—color.” She pulled a laser pointer out of her gray briefcase and pointed the green light at something behind the canisters. “This picture was taken before these very canisters were stolen. Can you make out what this is behind them?”



Faye squinted. It was blurry, especially on the large TV, but she thought she could make out a person in a yellow high-vis vest. “A worker? Of some kind? I don’t know.”

“Exactly. Or so we thought. But Scarlet Dawn employed spies to work at Bonifácio Mining in Bahia, a state in eastern Brazil. They hired the spies as sleeper agents, then all at once stole a ton of uranium and disappeared without a trace.”

“How much uranium?”

“A ton.”

“I get they stole a lot, but how much exactly?”

“No. A metric ton, the measurement.”

“Oh! I see now. I thought you meant—“

“This is all the information we can give you.” Ms. Tanya totally interrupted her. Again. How rude. “And so, all we need you to do is tell us why you would steal so much uranium. Don’t be afraid to give us exactly how you feel. Try to be yourself, not them. Go.” She pulled out a piece of scratch paper on a clipboard and a pen. She clicked the pen, set it to the page, and looked at Faye expectantly.

“Oh. Right now? Here?” Same thing as the math problem. “Well, may I walk around as I think? I think out loud, too, as you saw this morning.”

Ms. Tanya nodded.

“Hmm, let’s see...” She started up the stairs, and Ms. Tanya followed her out the door. Faye held her chin, thinking, and walked back the way they came through the white hallways, passing doors to other rooms holding who knows what. “If I got it in me that I wanted to steal a ton of uranium—a metric ton, not just a lot of the stuff—why would I want to do that? I suppose I could resell it to the black market, but then that would be putting it in the hands of uncontrollable criminals. I don’t want to be the one to give someone else reason to bomb me.”

Ms. Tanya scribbled away with her pen, noting everything she was saying. Faye couldn’t see what she was writing, but with as furiously as the pen moved, it couldn’t be any more legible than a doctor’s note. A doctor could draw a picture of a snake having a seizure and you could take that picture to a pharmacist and they’d bring you the ten milligram pills of Montelukast Sodium the doctor prescribed you.

“But maybe I could use it to generate a power source? I feel like paying the electricity bill would be easier, but with all the money I save, I could buy a pony or something, I don’t know. Say, Ms. Tanya, what would you do with a metric ton of uranium?”

“Please, focus on what you would do. Not me or anyone else.” The woman looked up from behind her bangs. Wasn’t she in a bun before? She had probably taken it out when Faye wasn’t looking.

“Okay, geez. Let me think for a minute. Scarlet Dawn probably had more time than a couple minutes to come up with this plan. If they’re as organized as they are, they probably have a lot of money to work with to hire all those people.” Or are very persuasive. What could persuade all those people to steal so much uranium?

Faye already knew what she would do with that much of the radioactive metal. It was silly enough that she didn’t want to tell Ms. Tanya about it. In fact, Faye didn’t know if she trusted this lady or not. Something—she couldn’t put her finger on it—felt off. She felt uneasy in this place, and seeing the mind machine put her off even more. So she wasn’t about to tell Ms. Tanya that she would use the uranium as a threat to local and national governments and start her own country. She could do what she wanted, she would be her own boss and change things to how she wanted them to be. The education system would be of her own design. It would be nice. Stressful, but if she gathered a large enough group of people with similar ideals and promise them positions of power and substantial reward, theoretically, it might be possible.

“Off the top of my head, I don’t know what products you can make out of uranium, so I’d have to do some research if that were the case. But let’s just say, hypothetically, that I did use them to generate power. Or maybe I invented a way to make small nuclear reactors. Maybe one that could fit in a household? That would



be cool, but inventing such a device would be difficult, I'm sure. I'd have to use ChatGPT to help me with that one."

Threaten the government and the people. She wouldn't want to use them, but if it came down to it and she really believed in her new country, she would have to. She was certain other countries and groups had threatened the use of nuclear weapons, but none of them were successful. To make sure the people knew she was serious, she would bomb a small town along a highway, thus making that portion of the road virtually unusable. Then she would threaten to bomb major cities if the government didn't allow her independence.

"I wonder if I could sell them to the US military. Or maybe to North Korea. I know I just said I wouldn't give them to other criminals, but I could at least trust other civilized countries—if you can consider North Korea to be civilized—to not make ridiculous decisions. Put the generators in homes, in tanks, in fighter jets. That would be difficult, but I'm sure Scarlet Dawn could figure something out. It was World War Two that got the world out of the great depression as weapons were being sold to countries and everyone was united in a purpose. That would instantly put everyone involved in an elite status, assuming they can get out of jail for the theft of the stuff. Wouldn't that be tragic? Go through all this trouble to get uranium only to be thrown in prison by the people you stole it for?"

But where would she start her new country? Couldn't she just move out in the middle of nowhere, fake her death, and do her own thing there, anyway? Starting her own country would give her publicity so she wouldn't have to hide or be stuck farming to survive. And it would allow her to build a military in case of invasion from whoever wanted to absorb her land. Would it be on an island somewhere? It would be incredibly difficult to do it landlocked.

"Ms. Tanya, do you know how much that uranium would cost? To produce or even to sell?"

Ms. Tanya looked up from her paper. "We've estimated the ton of uranium stolen costs under two-hundred thousand dollars."

Faye raised an eyebrow. "Is that a lot? It doesn't seem like a lot. You could buy a small house for that amount."

"You tell me."

“Now, what’s that supposed to mean?”

It means it’s a cover-up for something else. She would steal a lot more, smuggling small amounts at a time, and rob the mine of a metric ton to attract attention. Enough to get the authorities who care to notice her actions, but not enough for them to find and shut her down immediately, believing her team to be a low threat. That way, when she acts on what she says and reveals her power, she can scare them into listening much faster than before. The sudden rivalry will attract a lot of attention, both support and enemies. Where were these thoughts coming from?

“Never mind,” Faye said quickly. They exited the hallway and were back in the main atrium with the rose bushes surrounding a pool in the middle. People still walked about, paying them no heed. She looked up, feeling a slight sense of vertigo at the height of the building. They walked by some windows that shined light in from the outside from the afternoon sun. School was almost out. Had she missed lunch? Faye shrugged to herself, not feeling hungry.

“Has Scarlet Dawn stolen anything else? I feel like that isn’t enough to do anything big with. How much uranium does it take to make a missile?”

“Why are you talking about missiles? Weren’t you just talking about reselling the uranium and building power generators?” Ms. Tanya leaned in, suddenly very curious.

Think. “I don’t know. Just something that popped into my mind as one of the things I could make. Maybe that was why I thought of selling it to the military.”

“You say the thought ‘popped’ into your mind? I’m very interested in this. If you were to make missiles instead of inventing small generators, what would you do with them?”

“Wasn’t I supposed to be creative with this? Maybe I should...” she trailed off. There was that handsome young man with the square jaw, passing through the same



door she saw him come from earlier. And there was that orange stain on his—no, it was yellow. It had been orange earlier, she knew that for sure. She had watched him long enough to take in those cute features, stain and all. Was this a different lab coat? How could he be careless enough to let a stain end up in the exact same place on his lapel? He stopped walking, in the same place he stopped before, looked left, then right, then continued walking.

Something flickered from the corner of her eye. She spun to see what it was,



but nothing was there. Just Ms. Tanya and her clipboard. “Ms. Sterling?” she asked. “Is everything alright? Would you like me to get some lotion for your arm?”

Her arm? Faye looked down at her left forearm, which she had been scratching ever since she walked out of the hallway. Red marks lined her skin from her elbow to her wrist. It didn’t sting as bad as it looked. She

hardly felt any pain at all. She squinted. The scratches almost looked familiar, but unlike any scratch she had ever seen before.

Flicker. She spun around, sweat gathering on her face. Nobody looked at her. Nobody stopped to ask if she was okay. Nobody but Ms. Tanya. Faye swallowed and watched the concern on Ms. Tanya’s face. Until she saw it. Fear. The woman was afraid of something. Faye didn’t think.

She ran.

Ms. Tanya screamed after her. "Faye! Get back here!" She continued saying something, but not directed at her. Still, nobody in the room cared or saw that anything was happening.

Faye burst through a set of double doors on the other end of the room, now in a stairwell. She ran up the steps two at a time. To her surprise, she didn't start panting or even feel fatigue. There was only a mild pressure felt in her legs. She kept going up twelve flights of stairs and opened the door at the top. She was outside, the sun high overhead and the horizon everywhere she looked. Buildings, mountains, forests, oceans, deserts lay all around her in every direction. She was alone.

Faye studied her arm, which was all red now, the markings no longer as fresh as they were just after she scratched them. If she didn't feel pain... Knowing if she thought about what she was going to do, she wouldn't do it, Faye stuck the tip of her right index finger between her teeth and bit down, drawing blood. Then she looked up and tried to think about something, anything, to get her mind off of scratching her arm, and allow muscle memory to take over.

This roof is nice and big. How far down is it? Gummy bears are delicious. So are gummy worms. Especially the sour ones. What on earth is going on? That scientist was pretty cute. What was that flickering? There it was again. That tree way down below just flickered. Is it certain objects? Is she having a migraine? A seizure. Why does her arm feel hot? Don't worry about that. It's just like a warm shower. When was the last time she showered? Why can't she remember showering this morning? Was she even home? She can't remember what home looks like. If she was at school, how did she end up here? What's her mom's name? Her dad? Who are her parents? Now isn't the time to cry. Well, it's actually the perfect time to cry, but she'll have to do that later.

Her index finger reached her wrist, and her hand fell. Faye tried to swallow, but her mouth was dry, terrified of what she would find. She looked down and read the two words she had written on herself in her own blood.

#### *WAKE UP*

It was very difficult to move, and she felt drenched. Her clothes looked dry, but she could feel them sticking to her skin as though she had jumped into a

swimming pool with her clothes still on. Something pressed against her face and the back of her neck. The universe flickered, and she shut her eyes. It was gone.

“Faye!” Ms. Tanya yelled. Faye turned to see her standing behind her. The doorway didn’t exist anymore, and they were alone on the roof. “Listen to me! If you were to build atomic missiles, where would you keep them? What would you do?”

“You really expect me to answer? Why don’t you tell me what you’re doing with me?”

“Perhaps the fate of the world is at stake. I know you thought about this when we were talking. Time is up. You need to tell me now.” Ms. Tanya spread her hands, and inky colors spilled from her feet, drawing something on the rooftop. Faye stepped back, trying to dodge the ink, but its spread was inevitable until the entire rooftop looked like a world map. She stood somewhere on Canada. “You don’t need to speak. Just point to where you would go. First instinct. Believe me, I’m trying to help you. After all, there’s nowhere for you to run anymore.”

The rooftop flickered, and Faye couldn’t help but look around at the different places on the map. But one spot stood out to her. She almost felt something when she looked at it. Eastern Washington. There was a set of islands there. Was that it?

“Washington?” Ms. Faye asked, then wrote something on her clipboard. Faye jerked her gaze to look elsewhere, but it was too late. She had given away a piece of information she herself didn’t know about.

She looked at her arm, the blood now spreading, the letters spilling into each other. Wake up. She felt the flickering, the sluggish wet sensation again, and tried to reach up to pry whatever it was off her face. She was too slow. Her muscles didn’t respond to what she told them to do, though she could feel her body trying. She needed something a little more to help her.

“How do I wake up, Ms. Tanya?” Faye asked, walking backwards.

“What do you mean?”

“You know exactly what I mean, Ms. Tanya. How do I wake up?”

“You can’t.”

“I beg to differ.”

“You’ll die.”

“Good thing I don’t think I’m living at the moment.”

She stepped back one last time, and her foot caught on the lip of the roof. She fell backwards off the building. Any sound was lost in the rushing of wind, like

sloshing bathwater.

The world continued flickering. She tried to move, but it was like trying to wake yourself up from a nightmare. She tried opening her eyes and felt her face move, but her eyelids remained closed. The ground rushed up to meet her. She should have hit to bottom by now, but despite feeling the rush of falling, she hadn’t hit



the floor yet. She felt like she was falling faster, but moved disproportionately slow. Slow enough to make up for her sluggishness. She grabbed something on the back of her neck. She was almost to the ground. With a last effort, exerting all her strength, she pulled, and woke up.

Faye splashed in the pool underneath the mind machine, gasping for air. In her sleep, she had pulled the scuba mask free. Now she sputtered, splashing until she rose above the warm water. She wore a



hospital gown, buttoned in the back, and was drenched from head to toe. Her hair was wet and matted to her face and neck. The command center, which was now illuminated red from warning signs on the TVs displaying "LUCIDITY ALERT." Scientists panicked and pointed, running. Some of them ran for her.

One of them, a beefy bald man with a bushy beard, dove for her. She tried to get out of the way, but slipped on the glass surface. The man dove

right over her and fell into the water. That was close. She scrambled out of the pool, practically rolling as she fell out, then stood up.

She didn't know what it was, but everything was so much clearer to her now. The people saw her. She felt pain instead of a dull pressure. The room was the same layout as she had seen earlier, though some colors and positioning of some of the computers were different. Faye was young, still a freshman, and was much more agile than these old geezers in lab coats.

She ran, dodging left and right, careful not to slip. She was barefoot and felt the cool concrete underneath her feet. Her legs burned as she ran up the steep steps and out into the long beige hall, but she welcomed the pain. It meant she was a wake. She was alive. And she learned the building's layout. She knew where to go from here.

Faye entered the atrium. An alarm was blaring and people were running around. Some tried to exit the building, but where the doors had been were metal slabs covering them, blocking anyone from trying to leave. Those must have come down when she started waking up. She smiled and ran to the corner where the

stairwell was. She heard people shout “Hey!” and “Get back here!” Why on earth would anyone trying to run away listen to someone when they shouted “get back here?” Had that ever worked before?

She pushed some very real people out of the way as she made her way up the stairs. Now her legs felt tired. Extremely tired. How long had she been asleep? Maybe a few minutes, when she thought about it. Perfect. Each step left her feeling tired, but her only thought was focused on going up. If she stopped, she would be caught and thrown right back into the machine.

At last, she made it to the top. She pushed on the final door, and it didn’t open. Locked. “No,” she muttered. “No, it can’t be locked. So stupid. I’m such an idiot!” She threw her body against the door. She could hear a mechanical whirring outside. Wind blew in from the crack underneath the door.

“You need a key to get in.” Faye whirled around and her heart faltered. Her arms crossed, Ms. Tanya stood a few steps down from her.

Between ragged breaths, Faye asked, “how did you get up here so fast?”

“We have elevators.”

“Oh yeah. Duh.”

“Faye, you gave it your best, but you don’t have to keep trying, wasting your strength. It’s over. We caught you.”

“No, Ms. Tanya, if that is your name. Even if I never leave this building again, the things I’ve done, they’ll continue regardless. I’m no longer necessary.”

“That doesn’t mean I’m going to let you go back to them.”

“But you could join us. Someone with your skill and knowledge; we could use you. You’d be important. When was the last time you were recognized for all the hard work you’ve done?” Faye was going on a limb here, but she had to try.

Ms. Tanya pursed her lips and shook her head. “I don’t do it for the glory. I have a family to feed, and this pays the bills. I’m sorry, but I can’t go with you.”

"Then don't. Stay here. But please, I need you to unlock this door before it's blasted apart by something bigger than us. Do it for your family. I don't want to hurt you. Right now, I can dive tackle you and we'd both break our backs falling down these stairs."

The woman paused. A single tear fell down her eye. "Why? Why are you doing this?"

"In second grade my teacher had a poster that said, 'If it is to be, it is up to me!' I'm just taking that seriously." Faye reached her arm out, palm up. "Please. Come with us. You can take your family. They'll be safe."

Ms. Tanya shook her head harder. "No, they won't." Something crashed against the door. Someone was trying to break it down from the other side. But now other people were rushing up the stairs.

"Ms. Tanya, please. Give me the key, and nobody gets hurt."

Ms. Tanya wiped her tear away, then ripped her ID card off her belt. "Remember our faces when you do it."

The door banged again, and the whirring became louder. Before it could hit again, Faye swiped the ID card across the box and heard a click. The door opened. Stacey, holding a police battering ram, stepped back. "Come on! Hurry!" A helicopter hovered a few feet above the rooftop, a rope ladder dangling underneath it. The cityscape surrounded them and police cars with sirens blaring lined the base of the building.

Stacey jumped onto the ladder, climbed into the helicopter, and reached down to help Faye up. She climbed onto the ladder, and the helicopter rose high into the air. Wind blew at her gown, chilling the water on her skin. As she rose into the sky, dozens of people flooded onto the rooftop and watched them go. Ms. Tanya was not among them.

Stacey threw some clothes at her. "Put those on. We came as soon as Washington told us where you were. Glad to see our timing was on point." Faye



looked at the pilot and smiled when she saw it was Mr. Calico. He hadn't ever been her teacher, but was instead her personal pilot.

"Thanks for coming."

"Are you okay?"

"I'll be fine. We might have to move ahead of schedule a little bit. I gave away we're based in Washington State, but I think I kept where a secret. It won't take them long, though."

Stacey nodded.



Faye sat down on a seat and began changing. She tried to wrap her head around what had happened. The memory of it all was fading fast, like a dream. The mind machine didn't scan people's brains at all. It allowed people to create and enter other people's dreams, and they got information out of them that way. She was pretty sure she had seen a movie about that. But now she was a part of that movie. Compared to the dream, everything now felt so concrete, so real. She chuckled,

remembering that handsome scientist with the stain on his lapel. Had he been someone real or just a creation of the dream? And why was she able to interact with some people, like Stacey, but not with anyone else? Were they avatars created by the mind machine workers like Ms. Tanya's had likely been?

She would have to process it all later. Right now, they had to get to Whidbey Island in Washington State as fast as they could. Her country would have independence. And if anyone resisted, she would ensure the entire Earth woke up to a scarlet dawn.

THE END