

The background of the cover is an abstract composition of light streaks and bands. The top half is dominated by deep blue and cyan tones, with some streaks of magenta and purple. The bottom half transitions into warm orange and red tones, with a bright white glow at the very bottom. The streaks are curved and layered, creating a sense of depth and movement.

# THE SEAM

WADE WILLIAMS

It was a strange but beautiful place.

The rain forest spanned for as far as he could see as he soared high over the landscape. Below him, thick rivers snaked through the lush green canopy, with occasional roaring waterfalls along the way that sent up white clouds of spray. It was a view that was deeply pleasing, and he felt as free as a bird. However, instead of a sky above the forest, he saw what appeared to be a reflection of the forest below him. There was no blue sky, just forest surrounding him, like being in an enormous green tunnel. The tunnel seemed to continue into the distance endlessly, and he felt insignificant. Just a small floating body in a huge cave. There was plenty of light that illuminated the amazing scene, but there was no sun because there was no sky. It was a feeling like none other. He was soaring through the sky supported by nothing but the air. He felt as light as a feather and felt surges of pure bliss from the freedom he had to fly anywhere he wanted. He looked down at the scenery below him and smiled from the joy he felt of seeing such a pristine and beautiful environment.

The antique alarm clock suddenly rang to life, disturbing a peacefully sleeping teenager into a state of bleary-eyed consciousness. The teen slowly reached across and canceled the persistent ringing. He glanced at the clock face, which showed 5:45 AM. He took a deep breath and lay in his bed for a few minutes trying to prepare himself to roll out of bed. As he stared up at the ceiling, he thought about the dream he had just been awoken from. Though he often couldn't remember what his dreams had been, this morning a particular dream was still in his consciousness. As he lay in bed and savored his pleasant dream, above the ceiling of his bedroom there was a sparkling array of stars which was slowly beginning to fade away from the first light of the rising sun.

After a few minutes of laying in the stillness, he finally forced himself to get up and pull on a shirt and old pair of jeans. He walked out of his bedroom and washed his face with some cold water from the bathroom sink next to his bedroom. He stood and looked in the mirror for a second and saw a tall and trim teenager named Chris Khan looking back. He looked into the reflection's eyes for a second, before grabbing the towel hanging next to the mirror and drying his face. He quietly walked down the remaining steps and turned around to walk into the kitchen. The glowing clock on top of the stove showed 5:53 AM. He paused to grab a mason jar from the glass cupboard and drank a full glass of water before continuing to the laundry room next to the kitchen. As he walked through to go outside he grabbed a worn-looking brown jacket and green hat hanging on the coat rack and pulled them on. He

checked that he had his ring of keys in his pocket, then opened the laundry room door and stepped out into the morning.

There was a slight chill in the air, and there was some condensation on the grass which made Chris's boots sheen with wetness. The birds had begun to sing and chatter as the purple sky above began to fade away as it was replaced by an orange glow continued to grow in the sky, beginning another spring morning. Khan walked away from the house and across the wide gravel driveway, his boots making a crunching sound as he stepped on the driveway of loose road millings. He glanced behind him to look at the house, which he had lived in since he was an infant. The house was a classic farmhouse design, with a wide wrap-around porch on the bottom floor, and fresh white paint and green shutters. Across the gravel drive from the house was a huge red barn, along with several other large red farm buildings in the background. Most of the buildings on the farm were old, dating back to the early 2000s. Despite their age, the farm had been well maintained by the Khan family for many generations and had withstood the test of time. Chris stood still for a minute, breathing in the cool morning air and drinking in the beautiful scenery around him. As he stood and looked up at the vast clear blue sky a sleek white aircraft silently soared over the farm. Chris and his family were used to seeing air traffic, as they lived under the busy airspace of Baltimore and Washington DC. Most of the space industry in modern times had their main headquarters and manufacturing hubs in Baltimore and Philadelphia. As technologically advanced as the rest of the world was, somehow that technology had not yet invaded the Khan family's rustic and modest farm life. Chris would occasionally see a couple of low flying hover drones sliding through the sky, but not much that suggested that outside the protective forest canopy wrapping around the Khan's farm, the world was a much different place.

He heard a door creak open at the old barn across the driveway, and a voice called out from within the barn.

"Chris Khan!" called a tall man standing in the barn doorway "Come give your father a hand!"

Chris smiled and he walked quickly across the gravel driveway to the barn. All around the farm, birds continued to chirp and soar around. Chris reached the threshold of the door and stepped inside the large dimly lit room. The room he entered was large and dusty from the dirt floor. This part of the barn was so old that it been built in the early 1980s. Almost half of the room contained large round bales of hay. Some early morning light leaked in through the tall wooden door on the right of the small doorway Chris was standing in. His father,

Armaedus Khan, stood in the far corner of the room, using a pitchfork to peel layers off the hay bale.

"The horses and chickens need water, and the ornery goats need to be fed," said his father, "and don't forget to fill the water tub for the ducks". Chris nodded and walked through the various rooms in the barn to do his usual chores. He hung a bucket on the water spicket after turning the valve and let it slowly fill up while he gathered some grain from a storage bin for the goats. The goats called for him with annoyed bleats through the open wooden door leading outside to the goat pen. Chris smiled as he heard them, knowing they were growing impatient to be fed.

After they finished taking care of the farm animals, Chris and his father walked back up to the main farmhouse to get breakfast started. As technologically advanced as the rest of the world was, somehow that technology had not yet invaded the Khan family's rustic and modest farm life. Chris would occasionally see a couple of low flying hover drones sliding through the sky, but not much that suggested that outside the protective forest canopy wrapping around the Khan's farm, the world was a much different place.

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They were kicking off their boots when Chris heard a rustling sound in the cornfield across the driveway. He stopped and watched for what was making the noise. His father also paused with his boots half off. Then suddenly an older man emerged through the tall corn, dressed like he was from a museum. He was dressed rather strangely and wore a bowler hat and tweed jacket while carrying a cane. He saw Chris and his father staring at him on the front porch, and he waved.

"Good morning chaps! Please do excuse me, but I am a bit lost at the moment. Can you please direct me to the nearest road?" the man said. He had a thick white beard and a round cheerful face, and his accent was strongly British.

"Uhhh," Chris said, but his father graciously accepted the sudden stranger's appearance.

"Morning to yourself! As a matter of fact, we live very close to the main highway, just a few minute's drive out that way" he said, pointing in the direction of the highway "Do you need a lift?"

"Thank you good sir! And that is a kind offer, but a good walk will do me well! I am expected soon – " he paused to check his pocket watch "- but you gentlemen have a fine day!"

Chris's father waved and Chris also did, but somewhat shyly. He was still getting accustomed to people appearing on their farm. It happened rarely, maybe three or four people in a year. His parents were completely comfortable with it and never talked about it with anyone outside the farm. Chris assumed it wasn't a very strange thing, so he never discussed it with his friends either. They watched the man happily walk down the driveway until he was out of sight.

"Well, you hungry?" his father asked lightly as if nothing strange had happened.

Once they were back inside the house, Chris started to make breakfast while his Dad took off his coat, laid it on the couch, and flipped on the television for the morning news. The news desk appeared on the television set, surrounded by boxes of moving text. Chris's father watched for a few minutes before talking out loud.

"Oh boy, there's a hurricane forming off the coast of Florida. Looks like it is traveling up the east coast this week"

Chris was very familiar with natural disasters as they had become a regular occurrence ever since his childhood. Hearing about a hurricane or a wildfire didn't faze him anymore, as they seemed to happen weekly during the warm months of spring and summer.

Chris filled up a ceramic bowl with oatmeal and added some granola and began slicing a banana. He added the banana slices, then added a spoonful of peanut butter, and poured some almond milk over the mixture. He smiled at his creation, which he had discovered by accident during a particularly slow and bleary-eyed morning when he had accidentally added some extra ingredients. As he sat at the table to begin eating, his father spoke aloud while simultaneously reading the newspaper and listening to the news coming from the TV.

"I need you to jump in the sprayer after eating and go out to the Bryon field and give them a dose of the organic pest agent. Then when you get back, we need to make a delivery to Henry Johnson."

Chris nodded and ate his breakfast. Any day he got to drive equipment was a fun day on the farm. Once he was finished eating he grabbed his large ring of keys headed back outside. He stepped out onto the front porch and pulled his boots back on. The temperature had warmed

up considerably, and the sky was a beautiful deep blue with small puffy clouds sailing gently past. Chris breathed deeply and felt the joy he had always felt about living in such a beautiful place. He walked out to the tall tractor barn, which was an aged looking wooden structure that housed most of the farm equipment. He walked up and unpinned the latch for the large doors and began rolling them open. The wheels on the large door creaked in their track as they were pushed away from the center of the barn. The morning sun spilled into the wide alley that hosted a collection of gleaming farm machinery. A few floodlights shined down from various spots in the barn, making the place look like an old fashioned museum for brand new farm equipment. Chris' boots made loud thumps on the thick oak board floor as he walked towards the tallest machine parked at the front of the assembly. He grabbed the metal handrails on the ladder and climbed up the steps to reach the cab of the sprayer machine. The machine was unique looking, and on either side of the center-mounted glass cabin were folded booms. Behind the cab were several large stainless tanks, which contained the solution that was to be sprayed. The machine sat on very tall and thin wheels, with enough space underneath the machine to park a small car. The two sprayer booms were folded up neatly on each side of the machine but together could spread out in an open field to be 15 meters wide. Chris walked along the small handrail towards the cab and unlocked the door. He bent down and stooped inside the cabin, smiling at the smell of greasy rags and the dusty floor. He plopped down in the air-cushioned seat and inserted the small red key. He twisted the key until the entire dashboard came alive with lights and sirens. He paused as the engine preheated, then turned the key to START. The engine immediately fired up and the machine made a small lurch up as the suspension began filling up with compressed air. The gauges all lit up and Chris began pressing buttons on one of the screens to his right to check the amount of fluid in the rear tank. He saw that he would have enough spray to do the field his father had asked him to do. He put the machine in the forward drive gear and slowly pulled out of the old barn. Once out onto the gravel driveway Chris smoothly accelerated the machine towards the road. He drove the machine through the tree line that surrounded the farm and pulled off the farm road. He hammered down on the accelerator pedal and the hydraulic motors on the wheels instantly accelerated the machine down the road. Chris smiled to himself, enjoying the thrill as the tall machine sailed smoothly down the road. This was by far his favorite machine to drive. He loved the unique look of it and the feeling of being the tallest vehicle on the road. He also enjoyed the shocked look of motorist's face as they saw his young face behind the steering wheel of the huge machine. On most of the paved roads around the farm, the sprayer took up both lanes so people had to slow down and

usually stop to let Chris pass. But this morning the roads were clear as Chris traveled on the roads that snaked around the edge of the forest. He put the machine in high gear and raced down the road, having a blast. He had to slow down a few times to watch out for power lines and tree limbs that looked like they hung down over the road. He knew these roads by heart and had passed all the obstacles unscathed, but he still liked to be careful. His father would beat his ass if he got a scratch on any of the machines while doing something stupid like driving too fast. The sprayer softly bounced left and right as the large wheels below rode over the winding curves of the road. Meanwhile, Chris had turned his eyes to the large GPS screen near the front of the cab. He began typing in the address of the fields he was planning on spraying so he could download the map of the fields. While he was distracted he didn't see the motorcyclist racing toward him on the other side of the road. Chris finally heard the sound of the bike and turned to face the front just as it disappeared under the hood of the sprayer. Then he whipped around in his seat and saw the bike come shooting out from underneath the bottom of the sprayer's undercarriage and up the road. Chris was amazed somebody had dared to drive under his machine, and he was also a little disappointed he hadn't gotten to do it yet himself. The biker disappeared and Chris slowed down to make the turn onto the next road. A few minutes later he carefully pulled onto the rocky driveway that led to the fields he needed to spray. The driveway made a turn through a thick line of trees then after a few minutes of driving it opened up to reveal huge gently sloping hills of lush green crops that lead down to the blue water of the Chesapeake Bay in the background. Chris paused to take in the view. He loved being able to experience all of this as part of his job and swelled full of pride from working for his family farm.

Chris popped open the rear windows and the inside of the cabin filled with the warm sweet air which was abundant in the late springtime. The grass and the flowers releasing their pollen often created such a smell that wafted through the air, reminding him of the beautiful time of year it was. He sat comfortably in the big cushioned seat, directing the tall lanky machine through the rows of soybeans. Once he was away from the tree line he stopped the machine then pressed the button to begin opening the sprayer booms. He watched as the booms on each side lifted up and then began to unfold into their full length. Chris had always been fascinated by this machine and imagined that invisible hands were carefully unfolding the long booms. Once the booms had finished opening and were extended to their full length, Chris touched another button that lowered them to just a few feet above the plants. Then he switched on the tank mixer and drove the machine forward as he saw the glimmer of the spray being emitted from the nozzles on the booms. He watched the screen next to him that

displayed a virtual view of the sprayer and the areas he had sprayed. He kept his attention split between the crops in front of him and the screen that showed what crops he had just covered. As he drove, the air vents blew cool refreshing air onto him as the outside temperature climbed. As he directed the machine nimbly in-between crop rows, he began to see more of the blue waters of the great Chesapeake Bay through the sparse tree line. Ever since he had first started driving equipment this had always been his favorite field to work. He quickly reached up and turned on the radio to listen to music and he fell into the familiar routine of crop spraying.

After an hour he finished spraying the field and he parked the machine in a large grassy area right on the edge of the water. He shut off the machine and climbed out of the cab and down the stairs. The sun was starting to reach the top of the sky which meant it was about noon. He did a slow visual inspection of each of the dozens of spray nozzles on the machine booms, making sure that they weren't clogged or damaged. After inspecting the system he walked away from the machine and down to the edge of the water. The tall grass tickled his underarms as he walked down to the trees, then he ducked between them and stood at a point that overlooked the Bay. He had an amazing view and could see up to the gleaming metropolis of Baltimore. He saw that the city had all kinds of aircraft flying around it, which from a distance looked like small white specks that were in a flurry of activity. He stood and looked out at the view for a few minutes before hiking back up to the hill where his machine sat parked. He climbed back up into the cab and started the engine. He glanced at the clock on the screen then pressed the buttons to raise and collapse the booms. He would make it back to the farm just in time to help his father. Once the booms were locked back into place he raced back to the farm.

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Fifteen minutes later, the sprayer crested the hill of the farm driveway and Chris could see that his father had already pulled the truck up to the house and was waiting on Chris. He quickly drove the machine next to the barn and parked it outside so he could wash it off later. Then he grabbed his keys and then quickly ran over to meet his father who was waiting with a load of hay in the truck. Chris hopped in the passenger side of the truck and his father handed him a bagged lunch.

"Your mom packed us lunch today," he said as he put the truck in drive and they sped off out of the farm. Once they had veered out onto the road they rolled the windows down and his

father played an old music tape with some classical music. Chris had never paid much attention to his father's choice of music, but his friends all thought it was strange that his father didn't listen to only country music. Chris unwrapped his sandwich and smiled at the handwritten sticky note that his mother had concealed inside the wrapper.

*Do your best today, you make us proud – XOXO*

He bit into the peanut butter sandwich and was delightfully surprised that it contained small pieces of banana, as well as chocolate chips. He chewed slowly to savor the handmade meal and watched the farms outside the truck flash by. Many people that lived around the Khan farm were doing similar tasks this time of year, either spraying or planting different crops. Most of the people he knew lived within an hour's drive in any direction from his home. He couldn't imagine not being able to see his friends or neighbors any longer than at least every other day.

He glanced to his left and saw his father cramming the sandwich in his face while driving with one knee under the steering wheel, which was a typical sight. When his father was working, he was only focused on work and made little time for anything else except for the occasional call from a customer or equipment mechanic. Chris aspired to be his father, but some days he just couldn't see the fun in always being busy. As he stared out the window lost in his thoughts he heard the music tape begin a new track that he instantly recognized as Beethoven. His father leaned forward and slightly increased the volume. Instantly his father's shoulders relaxed and he seemed to lose the tension that he was holding in his body. The scene was familiar to Chris, but he never understood why classical music had such an effect on his father.

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Once they arrived back at the farm it was late afternoon and Chris helped his father with a few more tasks before they finally went inside for dinner. The television was on again, and now the hurricane was a top story.

"... And we have been closely watching this storm over the course of the day, and it is keeping us on our toes. So far she has swallowed up a bunch of energy in the warm southern waters and now is riding the coast up towards New York. By this time tomorrow, she could make landfall in Virginia or the outer edge of Maryland..."

Chris glanced at his father, who had stopped eating and was now watching the television reporter with his full attention. The rest of the family had picked up on the reporter's words and the usual chit chat of the dinner table had dwindled to dead silence as the words from the television echoed through the room.

"... The models show, that there is a small chance this thing will head straight up the Chesapeake Bay, but that seems very unlikely at this point. Still, a mandatory evacuation has been put in place for Virginia Beach and Ocean City. The National Weather Service assures that it will be watching this storm 24/7, and will be updating every news station with the latest. Back to you Donna"

Chris swallowed and looked to his father. *What does this mean? Are we going to be in danger?*

His father looked knowingly at Chris as if he had read Chris's mind. "We will wait for the call. If she continues up the coast then we probably only get some rain, which will be good for the crops."

Chris nodded to agree, but deep down he felt a growing sense of dread in his gut.

His father changed the channel to the sports network and Chris helped clean up the table. Once he had finished washing the dishes he put on his boots and walked outside to look up into the night sky. Tonight he noticed there were many more stars than usual, or maybe he was just imagining it. He walked away from the light of the house and walked behind the barn and stood staring up at the sky. He imagined what it would be like if a spacecraft just appeared next to him and if he blasted off into space, what that would be like.

*What worlds are out there? What galaxies have we still not discovered?* Chris desperately wanted to know and created all kinds of stories in his mind about traveling to visit undisturbed planets of natural beauty and the different creatures that lived there. He liked to dream about the possibilities of life besides Earth, but he also felt that not fixing the problems of the planet they lived on was wrong.

*If the human species can't become a sustainable species on Earth, then how will moving to a new planet produce any different results?*

He would often lose track of time standing out underneath a starry sky, thinking deeply about the future and philosophic topics. Tonight, in particular, his thoughts shifted to the horizon

and he thought about the hurricane that the entire east coast seemed to be talking about. He couldn't see how on a night so beautiful there could be a monster storm barreling down on his home. He thought about all the people in the evacuation, sitting in their cars on the coastal highways fleeing the incoming hurricane. He felt blessed that he didn't live on the shore. Chris honestly felt like his home was the safest place he knew.... He enjoyed clean air, fresh spring water, and clean soils untainted by agro-chemicals. And the best part was that being on the farm never felt like work. He breathed deep, the cool air filling his lungs and clearing his head. He heard the screen door slam and knew his father was coming outside to check on the animals. Chris walked around the front of the barn.

"Shit! Chris don't scare me like that" his father exclaimed as Chris appeared from the shadows of the barn.

"Ha, sorry" Chris replied. It wasn't the first time Chris had accidentally scared his father while he was star gazing.

"See anything good tonight?" his father asked as they placed flakes of hay bales in the empty feeders.

"Just wondering what is out there" Chris replied. He usually didn't discuss the deeper thoughts of his time out at night, even with his family. He liked to keep his wandering mind to himself. The less that people knew about all of his unconventional qualities, the better.

They closed up the barn and as they walked back to the house Chris gave one last glance towards the sky before finally walking back inside.

"Why don't you get to bed, in case we have to haul ass for this storm," his father said, kicking off his boots.

"Yeah, alright," Chris said, his mind still thinking about the huge storm bearing down on the coastline. He wondered what something of that size and power looked like up close, but he hoped never to find out at home. He walked upstairs and got ready for bed, brushing his teeth and looking in the mirror, wondering if he was attractive to girls. His mind shifted to girls until he finally climbed in bed and turned off his light, and he pictured the scene at the coast. In his mind, he saw rolling black seas under an even blacker sky, waves as high as houses and lighting bolts angrily cutting through the sky. Heavy winds pounding the beach

and buildings, ripping away anything that wasn't heavy or secure enough to survive the abuse. He let the scene become darker and darker until he finally drifted off to sleep.

## > CHAPTER 2

The hurricane was the main point of conversation for every meteorologist and climatologist in the United States. In just a few days it had formed off the coast of Florida in the Atlantic Ocean from the remains of another hurricane, and then it had raced up the northeast coast with amazing speed and power. The storm gained strength as it traveled directly towards New York. Then in a few hours, the storm suddenly made a hard left turn directly towards Maryland, bearing up the Chesapeake Bay. The computer models raced to catch up as the hurricane continued to outsmart and outperform even the most disastrous predictions.

Meanwhile, most of the residents in Maryland slept through the night as the violent and massive storm bore down on them. As the sun rose in the morning, the storm broke up and unleashed its torrent of rain in a matter of hours, the winds ferociously pushing the huge swell of water up the Chesapeake Bay.

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Dean Evans was a recent college graduate and had achieved a master's degree in meteorology in just four years. Even with his impressive work ethic, he was still treated as "the intern" in the NOAA office building and often given grunt work that no one else wanted. Since he had started working at the NOAA weather center he had been given the task of analyzing the incoming satellite images of the storm and posting them to the NOAA social media pages. The hurricane that everyone in the weather center had started talking about a few days ago was now on every major news network in the country and had the eyes of the nation watching and waiting for what the huge system was going to do. Even though Dean had been ordered to post pictures, he secretly kept his own storm models running in the background on his computer. Ever since taking some computer modeling classes he had fallen in love with programming and running models. He knew that much more capable hands were running models on the system supercomputers, but he had brought to work his own high powered laptop to run his models. As he downloaded images from the satellite currently over the storm he checked his latest model run and noticed something ... strange. Up until this point, almost all of the models had predicted the path of the storm continuing up towards New York and even Greenland. However, on Dean's model, there was one path that showed

the storm making a sudden turn inland out of the dozens of paths following the coastline. For most scientists that ran weather models, the few outliers that went in completely different directions on model runs were often ignored as there was a very slim chance they would develop into anything. Dean reset the model and ordered it to run a new calculation. After a dozen of fresh models, Dean felt his blood turning to ice. With each model run that Dean did, more and more storm tracks were making a sharp turn into Maryland. He rubbed his eyes and took a long drink of his cold coffee, then looked back at the screen. The clock on the computer showed 0345. Even though he had been at the weather center for 18 hours straight, he was sure that he wasn't delirious of imagining the projection in front of him.

He stood up and immediately walked over to his supervisor.

"Hey Mr. Davis, I have something you should look at..."

After a few moments, the large man finally turned his eyes from his computer monitor and looked at Dean.

"Yes? What is it?" he asked slowly.

"I -uh- have an issue on the computer, sir. It's something you should look at" Dean said. Secretly he knew that saying he had a computer problem was the only way to get the large man to move out of his desk, so Davis could fix the problem and show off to Dean how much he 'didn't know' about computers. Dean waited for Davis to clamber out of his office chair and then led him over to his desk.

The large man reluctantly waddled behind Dean over to the intern's desk.

"Is this new about new imagery?" he huffed.

"Well, um no, not exactly, well, I've been running this in the background" Dean replied.

Davis' eyes narrowed as he looked at the screen.

"What are these? Some amateur models?" he chuckled.

"I've been running my own models, sir, and they have been accurate of the storm so far, matching all of our models here at the center" Dean replied, "But the recent run shows a dramatic change in the direction of the hurricane - and it appears to be heading straight into Maryland."

"Well, that's very ... interesting. But we have two floors of programmers and a supercomputer in the basement predicting the path of this storm, so if anything like this was going to happen then I would hear about it" Davis said.

Suddenly a senior analyst with thick-rimmed glasses came running over

"Hey Jean, we just got the latest model back... you're not going to believe this..." said the balding man.

"What is the latest?" Davis asked, slightly annoyed that his first name was used in front of Dean.

"Well, the computer just spit this out and now the majority of all the models agree- the hurricane is headed directly for the Chesapeake."

"Wha- How sure are we?" Davis asked, flabbergasted.

"99.7% confidence interval," said the analyst, handing a printed report to Jean.

Davis pulled at his beard as he scanned the report, then he turned towards his desk.

"You two stick your heads together. Run as many models as possible in the next half hour. I have to make some calls" Jean said as he ran back to his desk.

He stumbled over to his desk and picked up the phone.

"This is Jean Davis from Storm Center. We need to issue a statewide emergency for Maryland. Yes, immediately."

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Chris woke with a start as lightning flashed outside his window, immediately followed by an explosion of thunder that rattled the house.

He leaned forward and peered out his window, seeing that a violent storm was raging outside. He checked the time and saw it was 0445.

*I wonder if this broke off from the hurricane...,* Chris thought.

He fell back into his bed and listened to the storm for a while before drifting off back to sleep.

Chris woke up and saw that the sky outside his window was overcast with dark gray clouds. He rolled over and looked at his clock and saw it was 0617.

*Shit. I must have slept through my alarm after being woken up by the storm.*

Chris groggily rolled out of bed and pulled on his clothes and got what he needed for the day. He thumped down the stairs and walked into the kitchen where a full mug of hot coffee was waiting for him. He picked up the cup and blew on it for a few seconds to cool it down before taking some sips of the black beverage.

He heard the screen door slam and his father stomped through the house, still wearing his mud-covered boots.

"Morning..." Chris said, a little off-put by his father's behavior.

"I heard the radio in the barn say they are watching a swell of water heading up the Bay from Thomas Point," his father said as he turned on the television in the living room.

"Huh? A swell.... from the hurricane?" Chris asked, still not fully awake.

"They said she's pushing a shit load of water up the Bay. Might flood the entire lower basin."

"Are they going to issue an evacuation?" Chris asked, becoming more alert.

"They just did" his father replied grimly, and he stepped away from the TV set and walked through the house, and Chris could see the yellow letters flashing on the TV.

FLOOD WARNING: ALL COUNTIES SOUTH OF BALTIMORE CITY, EVACUATE AS SOON AS POSSIBLE. 20 FOOT FLOOD WATERS IMMINENT.

"Meredith!" Chris heard his father's voice yelling through the house, "Meredith!"

"Yes?" came her voice from the front screen door.

"Where were you?! ... The news people said we have to evacuate, the hurricane is pushing a giant swell up the Bay" he said.

"When?" she asked, opening the door and stepping inside, her pants dirty from early morning garden work.

"Right now," Chris's father said, grabbing her arm and pulling her upstairs.

"Chris! Grab what shit you need, we are leaving in 2 minutes!"

Chris looked back at the TV and watched the reporter looking at him, an expression between concern and pity on the man's face.

"...and like I was saying before, the residents in most of the counties bordering the Bay have only minutes left to evacuate. May all the viewers keep them in your prayers, and good luck to those in the path of the tsunami."

*Tsunami.* The word hit Chris like a freight train. *A tsunami in Maryland?*

His thoughts were interrupted when he heard his father yelling at his sister upstairs.

"Naomi! Get out of bed! We've got to go!!" he yelled.

There were lots of heavy, fast footsteps on the second floor and Chris rushed out of the living room and up to his bedroom. At the top of the staircase, Chris's father rushed past him, carrying a small canvas gun case, which contained the .357 revolver which was a prized family heirloom.

"I'm getting the truck!" his father yelled as he stumbled down the steps.

Chris glanced down the hallway and saw through the open bedroom doorway that his mother was frantically pulling clothes out of her dressers and closet, desperately trying to decide what articles were the most value to her.

Chris noticed her white wedding gown had been crumpled up and tossed in a corner next to some other dresses.

Chris ran into his bedroom, overwhelmed by the stuff he saw, and the choices he had to make. Finally, he grabbed a small LEGO spaceship he had built when he was 8 years old, and his wallet off of his bed, and tossed them both into a backpack along with some random clothes. Then he ran into his sister's room and saw she had just finished getting dressed.

"Naomi! We've got to go!" he yelled.

"What the fuck is going on?!" his teenage sister yelled back.

"A tsunami is headed right for us, from the hurricane!" Chris said.

His sister froze at his words, then she quickly scanned her room and grabbed a backpack from her floor.

Chris ran into his mother's room and saw she was trying to press on her suitcase to get it to close.

"Mom! Leave it, we don't have time!" Chris begged his mother.

She looked up at him, and Chris was startled to see her eyes were filling up with tears.

"These are my mother's dresses" she started to sob.

Chris grabbed the suitcase and stuffed the dresses as tight as he could then slammed the lid down and latched it. He carried it out of the room and dragged it down the steps toward the front screen door. He heard the sputter of his father's truck start up outside, and he opened the screen door and dropped the heavy suitcase onto the wooden porch.

His father drove the red truck straight towards the house as fast as he could, then slammed on the brakes at the front porch, sending wet gravel everywhere. He flung open the driver's side door and ran around the front of the idling truck and opened the screen door of the house.

"They said the tidal wave just passed the Bay Bridge! Grab your shit and get in the truck!"

Chris heard his father yelling into the house. Then his father whipped around and ran across the driveway and into the barn. A few seconds later he appeared holding a goat in his arms.

"Help me, will ya son?" he grunted to Chris.

They loaded up as many animals as they could in the bed of the large pickup truck, and then Chris's father climbed into the driver's seat of the truck. The rest of Chris's family came running out of the house, Chris's mother carrying a small bag that had some jewelry in it. Naomi appeared next, her backpack bulging with stuff. The family dogs Cassie and Diesel followed closely behind and took up the rest of the space in the crew cab. Chris stood outside the driver's side door of the truck, looking at his family and dogs trying to get situated in the cramped cab. His father turned to, a look of urgency on his face.

"Run into the barn and bring the blue truck," he said, "it's got the first aid kit and the other important shit."

Chris nodded breathlessly then bolted to the large barn.

He rolled open the large wooden barn doors and ran to the shiny blue pickup truck sitting in the shadows of the barn. Chris flung the driver's door open and grabbed the key from under the floor mat, then hoisted himself up and into the seat. He turned the key and the diesel engine started with a gruff cough. Chris pressed the clutch and shifted the truck into first gear and pushed the accelerator to the floor. The truck snorted black smoke as it lurched forward, spraying gravel as it tore out of the barn.

Chris saw that his family had already left and would be headed to the highway. He shifted gears and continued hammering on the throttle, making the truck roar as he redlined each gear. After a few minutes of flying down the backroads, he turned onto the straight double lane highway and saw the red family truck a few miles ahead. He floored the truck in high gear and soon was rolling at top speed on the pavement. He turned on the radio to listen for any updates, but he only found static.

*Where are the other cars?*, Chris thought.

Chris and his family were the only vehicles on the road, which felt very ominous. The tall trees on both sides of the road swayed in a strong breeze beneath the dark gray sky. Ahead of them, the highway rose up over the side of a huge hill then disappeared. Chris's family was just a mile ahead, and he saw them crest the hill then disappear on the other side.

Chris's phone began ringing, and he instinctively fetched it out of his pocket, unconsciously reducing pressure on the accelerator and slowing the truck.

"Hey! Who is this?" Chris yelled into the phone "Hello?!" Chris said again but received no response. He looked down at the number on his screen, then decided it wasn't important. He looked at his speed on the dash and then dropped a gear so he could floor the truck up to the top of the hill. As Chris crested the hill he was given a commanding view of the landscape below him and saw the thin highway below, straight as an arrow shooting off into the distance until being broken up by small towns and interchanges. On either side of the road were green crop fields and thick splotches of trees. Chris noticed at the bottom of the hill the red truck had gained distance on him but was slowing due to a line of stopped cars heading the same direction. Chris could see the line of cars on the highway snake for miles ahead, and he realized that their neighbors must have left several minutes before they did.

As Chris began descending the large hill he suddenly slammed on the brakes. The truck skidded to a stop, sliding sideways on the road. Chris watched in horror as the biggest wave of water he had ever seen rushed towards the highway.

Chris frantically fumbled with his phone and searched for his dad's number. Just as he found it, he heard a bunch of cracking sounds, then watched petrified as the frothing mass of mud-brown water pushed over trees surrounding the highway like toothpicks and quickly overtook the road and the cars on it that were stuck like fish in a barrel. Chris screamed as he saw the red truck disappear underneath the fury of the water. The flood wave spread out over the entire landscape, covering everything in 20 feet deep of muddy water. The edge of the water crept up the hill Chris was parked on, then stopped just a few feet from the truck.

Chris opened the door and ran to the edge of the water, and stared hard at the surface of the raging water, looking for any sign of the red truck. After waiting a few minutes, he jumped back in the truck and slammed it into reverse, and drove back over the hill to the side towards his family's farm.

*Maybe the roads aren't as bad... I can try to follow where the water is taking them...*

He whipped the truck around to face the opposite direction. Again he stopped the truck and stared open-mouthed at a similar scene. The flood-waters had completely surrounded the hill he was on, leaving him trapped on a small island of what had been a large hill in the landscape. Chris turned off the truck and walked down to watch the water rush by, wiping the land clean of houses and trees. He sat down on the wet asphalt and watched, numb to the pain of everything that had just happened.

*My family is fine, they are fine. This is a dream,* he thought to himself, staring emptily at the huge flood-waters. Then he noticed something white being carried towards him by the current. As it got closer, Chris could see it was some kind of clothing. Then it passed by Chris, a few feet away, and he could clearly see what it was- a white wedding dress.

Chris watched it get swept away with the flow of water, then he put his head between his knees and sobbed.

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The news agencies the next morning went crazy to cover the horrific scene of the flood. The blame was passed around to different government agencies about the lack of advanced

warning, to poor disaster planning, to even not dredging the Bay which allowed the flood to travel faster through the giant estuary.

As soon as the light of day broke, the news helicopters took the skies to cover the aftermath of the disaster from above. There was so much activity and chaos that there were almost two mid-air collisions between helicopters. The scene from the air was tragic. The floodwaters had receded overnight leaving an unfathomable amount of debris and silt for as far as the eye could see, starting from the mouth of the Bay flying north. The thick mud covered hundreds of square miles, and survey teams on the ground estimated some areas to have as much as 20 feet thick of silt deposit. And then there was the horrific job of adding up the death toll. The earliest estimates were 10,000 deaths and three times that as missing persons. Experts concluded that this was one of the worst natural disasters in modern times, and was the peak event of a recent string of natural disasters all over the world.

An iconic image was captured by a Baltimore photographer from his helicopter as he was flown over the Bay during the flood. The top of a hill had become an island during the flood and a single blue pickup truck sat parked on the hill, and a figure of a man sat on the road next to his truck, looking at the disaster around him.

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Chris woke up early the next morning to the sound of several helicopters buzzing overhead. He sat up, realizing he had fallen asleep on the wet asphalt. His back ached from laying on the road and he winced as he lifted himself to his feet, realizing his whole body was stiff. He looked up and saw the swarm of aircraft in the sky buzzing everywhere, taking live shots and video of the scene. Chris looked at the area below him and felt his heart sink as he saw the utter devastation that had been caused by the floodwaters. There was barely a tree or structure left standing, and if there was it was almost entirely buried by dark brown silt. Chris climbed up onto the roof of his truck so he could get a view of the entire Bay watershed, and saw that everywhere looked the same as if a thick brown blanket had been laid down over the landscape.

Chris watched as military helicopters flew low over the ground, scanning for any survivors that were stuck in the mud or trapped in their houses or cars. He had a painful thought of his family trapped in the truck; trapped in complete darkness under metric tons of silt. He climbed down from the roof of the truck and turned on the radio. He tuned to the closest station and listened to the live reports of the rescues that were in progress, and the tragedies

that had unfolded overnight. They were not releasing any names of people lost and found, so Chris turned the knob to a different station, listening for anything that might lead to news about his family. After an hour he gave up and turned the radio off and sat in the truck, staring out at the foreign landscape before him. The road he had been racing down just 18 hours ago was now buried under 10 feet of soft muddy silt. A few minutes later Chris noticed one military helicopter flying low near the hill he was parked on. He watched the helicopter make a wide turn around the hill and then fly towards Chris. The landing lights began to flash, and Chris took it as a sign he was about to be rescued. He waved his arms at the helicopter, then reached in the rear seat and grabbed his backpack. Then he pulled the key out of the ignition and slid it under the floor mat. He climbed down and stood next to the truck, holding the door open and giving the interior of the truck one last reminiscing look. He noticed the dusty floorboards, the oily red rags in the door tray and the random tractor parts lying on the backseat. He remembered the first time he climbed into the driver's seat, the first time he learned to drive with his father. The emotions welling up inside became too much to bear and he slammed the door shut and turned to face the large helicopter that was closing in on Chris. The helicopter rotated so that one side was facing Chris and he saw a young woman in a National Guard uniform waving at him. He waited until the helicopter was just 10 feet above his head, and he stared up into the huge rotating blades that created a whirlwind around him. A rope ladder dropped down and Chris grabbed onto it. Then he felt the ladder lift him up to the helicopter as it began to ascend away from the hill. A pair of outstretched hands reached for him and pulled him safely aboard the aircraft.

"My name is Special Surgeon Casey Miller! We are glad to have you on board! What is your name?!" the young female yelled as the wind whipped through the open doors of the cabin. Chris got a closer look at her and noticed she was a pale redhead, with freckles on her cheeks and bright green eyes. Some of her ginger-colored hair stuck out from underneath her olive drab flight helmet. She smiled at him and Chris instinctively smiled back, feeling warm inside.

"My name is Chris Khan! I am missing my family!" he yelled back.

She nodded and bent towards an older man in a flight suit who was leaning against the back of the pilot chair, holding a laptop. He nodded at her, then began typing on his computer. She leaned back towards him.

"We will put in a query for missing persons! You can talk to someone when we land!" she said.

Chris nodded slowly and managed to say a "thank you" as his emotions began to well up inside again.

He looked down to distract himself and noticed they had already climbed to a high altitude and he could see almost the entire Chesapeake Bay. He looked down and caught his last glimpse of the island he had been rescued from, and his blue pickup truck shrinking in the distance - the last time he would see that truck and the last thing that was left of his family's farm.

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After a 15 minute flight, the helicopter began to descend towards a large airport. Chris could see from above that the whole tarmac was packed full of trucks and people, and only a few clear spaces remained for the helicopters landing and taking off. His helicopter made a circle around the airport before quickly dropping towards a part of the tarmac marked as a helipad. The black asphalt rose up to meet them, and the wheels of the helicopter gently touched the ground. Casey jumped out and beckoned for Chris to do the same. He climbed out of the helicopter and kept his head low as he walked, feeling like the rotor of the helicopter was inches above his head. Casey waited until they were a few feet from the helicopter, then pointed to a line of people.

"Go stand with them! We need all rescued people to register as found!" she said, then she hugged him and began walking back towards the helicopter.

"Hey!" Chris yelled, "Thank you!"

She turned around and grinned, then yelled: "Good luck finding your family!"

As soon as she climbed onto the helicopter it throttled up and shot up into the sky. Chris saw a hand waving out of the door as the helicopter sped back towards the Bay.

Chris turned around and walked across the tarmac to join the line of people.

"Hey," Chris said to the nearest person "what are we waiting on?"

"There's a bus that supposed to take us to reg" replied the gruff looking man. He had a stubble beard and wore overalls and rubber boots, and Chris guessed he was a waterman.

"Thanks" Chris replied, staring ahead at the end of the long line.

"Where'd they grab you?" the man asked.

Chris looked back at him "uh, off the hill on Route 32. It was an island after yesterday"

The man began to well up, and tears glistened in his eyes.

"I saw the picture of you on the news, you and your truck on that hill," he said.

"On the news?" Chris replied, surprised.

An older woman a few spots ahead of them in line looked back at Chris and the man.

"Hey! I saw that too! I bet you feel lucky to be alive!" she said.

Chris managed a weak smile, trying not to feel the pain of losing his family.

"Chris Khan!" yelled a voice.

Chris looked around, then saw a small utility vehicle with three men stop at the front of the line.

"Chris Khan!" yelled the voice again.

Chris held up his hand. "Here!" he called out. The man driving the vehicle saw Chris and drove towards the end of the line where he was standing. The man calling his name looked at him and beckoned to him with the bullhorn he was holding to walk over to join them. Chris walked slowly towards them, feeling unsure.

"Uh, that is my name," he said.

"Climb aboard son," said one of the men.

Chris obeyed to his commanding voice, and the driver sped them away, and Chris looked back and saw the waterman and old women waving goodbye as they drove away.

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The three men and Chris wheeled around the menagerie in silence, only interrupted as the driver blew the horn to get people to clear a path for them. A few minutes later the vehicle stopped outside a line of large hangars and a series of canopy tents.

"You've got someone waiting for you under that green tent," said the one man holding the bullhorn, then they drove off.

Chris put on his backpack and walked over to the green tent where soon he saw a man looking very much like his father.

"Chris!" called his Uncle Tony, jogging over and locking Chris in a tight hug.

"I'm relieved that they found you! I couldn't believe it when they told me where they picked you up from!" Tony said smiling, staring at Chris.

Chris nodded, and Tony knew the question he wanted to ask. His expression quickly went from delighted to mournful.

"Ah,... yes. There has not been any word on your family. I have called my brother's phone several times but haven't gotten through. Did he have his phone with him?" Tony asked Chris.

Chris shrugged "I think so."

Tony put his arm around Chris's shoulder and gently walked him towards the tent.

"Don't give up son, there is a massive rescue operation underway, and they are plucking people out of the mess every minute" his uncle said.

They walked to a table under the tent where several uniformed military men sat with clipboards in front of them.

"Sir, please just write your name and Social Security Number on the sheet, and sign it," said one man, handing Chris a clipboard that held a thick stack of paper sheets.

"They are keeping track of who they save" Tony explained as Chris filled out the form with his information.

Chris handed the clipboard back to the man, who gave Chris a meager smile, then Tony led Chris out of the tent and towards the hangars.

"What is this all about?" Chris asked suddenly as they walked.

"What do you mean Chris?" his uncle replied, looking confused.

"Why am I getting ahead of everyone else in line? With the ride on the golf cart."

Tony nodded his head, then replied: "I have some friends running the show here, I just wanted to make sure you were safe."

Chris remained silent until they reached the front of a hangar, where a black sedan was parked.

"Get in," Tony gestured as he opened the rear door.

Chris climbed onto the leather seats, and then his uncle climbed in on the same side, sitting next to Chris in the backseat.

"To the Engineering Building please," Tony said, and as they drove off Chris realized that the car was driving itself, and he watched in amazement as the steering wheel turned on its own and drove them toward their destination.

"These new electric sedans are pretty sweet" Tony smiled at Chris.

Chris gave a small nod and stared out the window at the huge mob of people that were waiting to be reunited with their loved ones. Helicopters departed and landed every half minute, adding to the buzz of activity. Chris felt a sudden pang of guilt - he should be in one of those lines, waiting to be reunited with his family. The car silently carried them off the tarmac and down a wide road until it stopped in front of a large white building that was at least four stories tall.

Tony opened the door and climbed out with Chris following his lead.

"Come inside," said Tony walking up to the building and swiping an access card at the door. The door swung open and Chris followed him inside into the large air-conditioned building.

Inside, he was amazed at the collection of aircraft and rockets, all in various stages of assembly.

"What is this place?" Chris asked, looking around.

"Welcome to the giant toy box," his uncle said, smirking.

"Uh-huh ... so why are we here?" Chris asked.

His uncle looked at him like he had just said something alarming.

"Well, ... like I said I just wanted to make sure you were safe.... I'll be back in a moment Chris I just need to do something real quick" Tony said. Then he turned and walked across the building and opened the door to an office. Chris waited patiently for his uncle, then he began to wander around the shop floor and examine some of the machines. He walked past an attack helicopter with most of its engine missing, and then a large fighter jet with the wings missing. He noticed a large shape in the background which was covered in a huge white sheet. He began to walk towards it until he heard his uncle's voice calling his name.

"Chris! Where you at?" Tony called.

Chris quickly walked over and met his uncle who was looking at him suspiciously.

"Sorry," Chris said.

"No worries bud, we've got bigger things to worry about," said his uncle "c'mon I just had to grab some things from the office, let's go out to my car."

Chris followed Tony out of the building and back into the warm spring weather. The clouds had disappeared and the sun was shining down from a brilliant blue sky. Chris was annoyed by the beautiful day. The weather shouldn't be this nice on such a terrible day. Tony walked over to a blue car parked on the empty parking lot. He unlocked it and opened the door, then lowered himself in. Chris walked around the front of the car and opened the passenger door feeling the hot air that was trapped in the car start to flow out past him as he climbed into the shotgun seat.

His uncle waited for Chris to close the car door before speaking.

"Look, uh Chris. I have friends in the rescue operations today. I just received word that they found the red truck, and.... well, this is hard. He was my brother, and I considered all of you my family. I'm sorry Chris."

Chris immediately felt his eyes and throat swell up and he choked as his throat tightened.

"Are you sure?" Chris croaked.

His uncle remained silent but Chris knew better. If he had said they were gone, then they were gone. He swallowed hard and slowly exhaled, determined to not ruin his uncle's upholstery by crying his eyes out.

"I know Chris, I know..." his uncle said quietly, staring at the floor of his car.

Tony put his car in gear and they glided out of the parking lot. They drove off the base and they remained in silence as Tony drove them both away from the flood zone. Chris stared out the window at unfamiliar scenery as his uncle drove them away from the life Chris had known. After a half-hour, they pulled up to a large brick arch with tall iron gates. Tony stopped the car and waited as the gates automatically swung open, and he continued driving along the winding driveway that was surrounded by a forest of evergreen trees. After a few minutes, the car pulled up to a mansion and Tony stopped the car. Chris gazed up at the huge house, then realized how very little he knew about his uncle. Tony remained in the car, then looked at Chris.

"I want you to stay here for the next few days. My people will take care of you, Chris. I don't know how else to express my condolences, because they were a part of me too."

Chris nodded and stared at the car dashboard.

"I can carry your bag inside..." Tony offered, but Chris shook his head.

"Nah, thanks" he whispered.

His uncle nodded to himself and then opened the door. He walked around the front of the car and then slowly up the stairs to the front doors of the house. Chris remained in the car, trying hard not to think about the red truck lying in the thick mud. He imagined his family sitting in the truck right before the raging water struck them. They never had a chance.

If he hadn't been distracted by that phone call, then maybe he could have saved them.

He closed his eyes and felt a few tears roll down his face, and he felt their salty taste on his lips.

*Don't blame yourself* said a voice in his head.

*If only I had been in the truck with them...* he countered.

*There is nothing you could have done. You are lucky to have your uncle, he is the only family you have now.*

Chris stared blankly out the windshield, noticing a few splotches of rain on the glass. He glanced up and saw that the sunny weather had been replaced by a large group of gray clouds. Chris opened the door and grabbed his bag, then walked up the stairs to the front doors. As he approached the dark wood doors they automatically opened and Chris saw a butler holding the door open.

"Master Chris, my name is Addison. I am here if you need anything at all. Please just give me a shout. The stairs to your right lead up to your room, your uncle has said you would like some time alone."

Chris nodded, completely foreign to the idea of having a butler or a large house. He stepped inside the entrance hall and was blown away by the eccentric design. A shiny marble floor spread out before him in a room about thirty yards wide. A massive chandelier hung from the ceiling, and underneath were long staircases that curved up to a second-floor from each side of the room. Chris slowly walked up the staircase on the right and once at the top, he faced a long hallway with doors on both sides every 10 yards. He walked down the hallway and saw a maid standing outside an open door.

"This way dear, I just finished cleaning," she said sweetly.

Chris managed a weak smile then entered the room. A massive bed sat against the far wall with a large banister and curtains. There were a few pieces of furniture, and Chris saw that on the dresser against the opposite wall sat a small toy tractor. Chris walked over and picked it up, looking at it. Images of his family's equipment buried under tons of mud and water flashed in his mind. He thought about the sprayer that he loved to drive, now lost forever. Along with everything that had been a part of his life, he could no longer return to the life he had loved. Chris put it down and stared out the tall open window, and he watched the gray clouds slide slowly through the sky, covering the ground in shade. He realized that behind the mansion was a huge area of manicured grass, along with a few large fountains and flower gardens. Beyond the landscaping, the large forest of dark green trees continued endlessly in all directions.

He stared out at the natural and artificial beauty, then closed the window panes shut as a few drops of rain began to blow inside the room. Chris suddenly felt exhaustion wash over him as he turned and face the bed, and he sat down on the bed and untied his boots and then took off his hat. Then he laid down in the middle of the wide bed and stared at the ceiling.

*This is all a dream...*, his last thoughts floated across his consciousness before he closed his eyes and his mind went blank.

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Chris woke up and heard the sound of heavy rain striking the window. He sat upright, imagining that he was back in bed from the day before, listening to the thunderstorm outside. He looked around the room and realized it was pitch black until a sudden flash illuminated the room for a split second, followed by a sharp crack of thunder. He realized that he was not in his room like he had hoped, and he slowly slid back down to lay flat on the bed. He pulled out his phone and turned on the screen, temporarily blinding himself with the bright screen. He turned the phone away and let his eyes readjust, then quickly glanced at the time on the screen. 0306.

He sighed and listened to the storm outside, twitching at each flash of lightning and clap of thunder. Just 24 hours ago he had been lying in his bed at home, listening to a thunderstorm....

He sat up and slid his legs out of bed and onto the floor. He was wide awake and needed to go for a walk to clear his mind. He carefully walked through the darkroom, using his phone screen as a light source. He found the door and then turned the knob. He pulled the heavy wooden door open and then crept silently into the hallway. A series of orange lamps mounted on the wall next to each door cast a glow on the floor. Chris compared it to a candlelit hallway in a haunted mansion and felt a shiver go across his back. He walked towards the end of the hallway that led to the entrance hall and then walked down the marble steps to the main floor. The large chandelier had been turned on and was mesmerizing with all of its crystals and gold arms illuminated. Another loud bang sounded outside the front doors, making Chris jump. He treaded past the chandelier and under the second-floor balcony and faced a wall that had a short hallway on either side, that each had many large paintings hanging on display. He followed the hallway on the right, which immediately cut to the left. Chris made the turn and after a few more steps he was standing at the top of stairs leading down into a massive library. A small path continued around the edge of the library and led to a series of large wooden doors on the right and left ends of the library. Chris gazed around at the library, amazed at the tall bookshelves and wooden desks scattered throughout the room. He turned and followed the path to the right that led him to the large double doors, noticing that the display of artwork continued around the entire

length of the library. He stopped in front of the doors and pushed one open. It made a creak that echoed through the library, but he continued pushing it open until he had moved past the door. Now he was facing a very long hallway with tall pillars on the left and two stories of balconies above him to the right. Between each pillar was a tall window showing the storm outside. On the wall to the right below the balconies were the same orange lamps, casting an eerie glow on the wall and floor.

*This place keeps getting bigger and bigger...*, Chris thought as he wandered in awe. Then he noticed ahead a light source shining out into the hallway, and he tried to see where it was coming from as he walked. As he approached it, he realized it was coming out of a doorway that was inset of the wall by a few meters. Chris walked to the light then stepped into the beam it cast, and almost jumped when he saw his uncle sitting at a desk inside a large office. Chris quietly walked into the room, looking around at the eccentric wall carvings and art decorations. His uncle looked up and smiled.

"I thought I heard someone down the hall. Nasty storm isn't it? How are you feeling Chris?" his uncle asked.

Chris shrugged and looked at his uncle, "okay."

His uncle sighed and put down the book he had been reading and looked over his reading glasses at his nephew.

"Me neither. Pull up a chair Chris" he said, gesturing to a high backed leather chair against the wall. Chris followed his uncle's request and sat down across from Tony, still looking around at the large office.

A loud boom of thunder rattled the windows in the hallway outside.

"Ah, this storm is the split-off of the hurricane," he said looking out the office door. "They reckon the rain will be on and off a few more days," he said. Chris remained silent, gazing at a large painting behind Tony's desk.

His uncle glanced back and looked at it.

"The owner of this house is particularly fond of foxhunting art, and Western paintings" he explained.

He looked back and noticed Khan's quizzical expression. "No, I am not the owner of this monster house. Your uncle does well, but not this well" Tony said, chuckling.

"Whose house is this then?" Chris said, starting to feel slightly uncomfortable.

His uncle sighed again, looking at Chris.

"It is belonging to an organization, and the owner of this house graciously lets some of the members of the board use this house, including myself. He also happens to be one of the leading financial contributors to the organization" Tony added.

"What organization is that?" Chris asked, now even more curious.

His uncle smiled "you'll learn that soon enough. Not to keep you in the dark but let's take one step at a time. We've both had a long day don't you think?"

"Sure," Chris said, knowing his uncle meant it was time to go back to bed.

Chris stood and began to walk out.

"Chris, you know your way around by now right?" his uncle asked, reopening his book.

Chris nodded then walked back into the hallway, retracing his steps until he was back in his room. The storm outside had subsided slightly, and now strong winds along with rain were beating against the window. Chris walked over to his bed and laid back down, and let his mind wander with questions.

*What is Uncle Tony not telling me? Whose house is this? And why is the organization such a secret?* Then an image of his family flashed through his mind, and Khan felt a pang of guilt for not thinking about them. He waited for the wave of exhaustion to wash over him again, but instead, his brain kept him wide awake. After a few hours of listening to the rain, Khan finally sat up again and looked around the room. He needed to do something to distract his mind and make him tired. He stood and began pacing the room, before reminding himself that there was a huge library downstairs and that reading a long boring book might help to lull him back to sleep. He opened his door again and then quietly stepped down the hall, trying not to disturb the people he imagined sleeping behind the closed doors. Chris made his way down the flight of stairs and through the hall leading to the library. Once again he entered the massive room and slowly walked down the library stairs and onto the green carpet floor. He wandered to a bookshelf and began scanning the spines of books facing him, some books

looking much more worn and dirty than others. Chris continued walking until one title caught his eye.

"Fantasies of Galactic Travel" it said, with no author name.

Khan removed the dusty book, intrigued. If he was going to read, then it might not hurt if the book was interesting. He could sleep later. Khan carried the book to one of the large wooden tables and sat next to the lamp on the table. He opened the cover and checked the print date: 1966. Khan smiled, something about being able to touch and handle from previous centuries fascinated him. The lifestyle, the things people wrote and read, the events that took place and literally wrote history in the process. He appreciated all of it and thought about how everything knew today would seem ancient to people. He also thought about how in a few decades there would be another young man interested in the time that Chris had lived, or so he hoped. The entire future of humanity was in question right now.

Khan flipped through the first few pages of the book to escape his thoughts, and started reading the first page:

*If you have ever gone for a walk at night when the winds are calm and the sky is clear, how often do you look up? How many times have you caught yourself gazing up at the dark canvas, sprinkled with the faint glow of a few stars? If you are a regular star gazer such as myself, then perhaps you start to think after a few minutes of staring at the sky. Maybe your mental cogs begin to spin and mesh as you think about the possibilities.... If they put a man on the moon on July 20, 1969, then maybe they can send a man to the stars as well. Distant galaxies and far away worlds. In ten or maybe twenty years, who knows? We might be well on our way to expanding the human domain and preserve human civilization with the construction of a few solar system colonies. But the real explorers, the true dreamers, they will be the first to climb solo into their rockets and be blasted into a direction that is borderline random, in the hopes of finding completely new worlds far outside the confines of our limited human knowledge. If you, reader, find yourself tantalized by this idea, and your imagination has already been sparked with endless possibilities, then find a comfortable chair to settle into, and join me as we set off into the unknown together. Be inspired to write your own adventures, and when not engrossed in this book, live your everyday life with a greater sense of curiosity and wonder. Those that don't will surely never realize that in life the journey is worth more than the destination.*

Chris looked up at the book, his head buzzing from excitement. This was the kind of book he wanted to read. He quickly scanned the outside cover again for an author's name but found none. He opened the book and then flipped to the next page. He sat in the library for hours, his mind alive and sparking in the quiet din of the library. The room began to gradually become brighter as the morning light began to slowly trickle in through the tall windows. Khan finally stopped reading to check his phone and realized he had been sitting there reading for over three hours. He glanced behind him and saw that the sky was gray and overcast. As he stood to stretch and return the book, the library doors opened and his uncle walked in, looking at Chris.

"There you are! I was started to worry you had wandered off, this house can be quite the maze" he said.

"Oh, sorry" mumbled Chris, his face turning slightly red.

"Don't be sorry Chris, your sense of adventure and curiosity is a remarkable thing" Tony said as he walked down the library stairs to Chris's table. He glanced at the book in Chris's hand, "I hope you found something worth reading in here?"

Chris nodded and yawned, "Yeah, it's something to keep me distracted."

Tony nodded back to show his understanding.

"Well if you want breakfast it will be served in a few minutes. If not then you can go back to bed or stay here... just let me or the staff know if you need anything."

"Thanks," Chris said, wishing he felt like saying more.

His uncle managed a soft but reassuring smile, and then turned and walked back up the stairs and out of the doors. Khan looked down at the table, seeing his phone sitting there. He picked it up, suddenly having the urge to call some of his friends. He opened the contact list and was about to select 'call' when he realized his phone showed no service. Chris frowned, then attempted walking around and holding his phone up, but he received no connection. He began to walk towards the doors, but on second thought turned around and walked back to the book on the table. It was still early in the morning, and he doubted if anyone would pick up right now. He would read a few more pages, then go off in search of signal or Wi-Fi. He opened the book and began reading where he had left off when his phone suddenly buzzed. He looked up and unlocked the screen, then stared at the notification. It was a reminder of

his father's birthday. Chris felt the wave of emotions suddenly roll over him, and this time he let them go. His eyes filled with tears as he thought about his family again, then he broke into full-on sobbing. His tears dripped down and onto the book pages, staining them. Chris pushed the book away and laid his head in his arms onto the table and let himself bawl his eyes out. After a while his cries turned to loud short breaths, followed by sniffing and then a deep sense of calm slowly filled him. He breathed slowly as he dried his puffy eyes with his t-shirt. After fully regaining himself, he looked around the library, glad that no one had witnessed his break down.

Chris stood up and walked towards the doors that had led him to his uncle's office. Maybe he would know how to find a cell signal. Chris opened the wooden door and walked down the walkway with tall pillars. He made a right turn into the inset of the office entrance, then stopped as he saw that the office doors were closed. Chris thought about knocking, but then he heard his uncle's voice inside the office. Chris turned to leave but just then a man came walking up behind Chris.

"Oi, what are you up to?" the man asked Chris, giving him an accusing look.

"I wanted to ask my uncle something," Chris said, feeling himself get defensive.

"Oh, your Tony's nephew then? I'm sorry about your family" the man said, not showing any emotion.

"Yeah," Chris said.

Then the office doors opened and Tony came walking out, talking on his smartphone.

"I know Andy, just send the bid and then we will wait and see. All right, good- yesh- ye- look I've got to go" he said, ending the call as he saw Chris and the man watching him.

"Hey Brian" Tony nodded to the man, then he looked at Chris.

"Chris! Were you looking for me?" he asked with his usual cheery tone.

"Yeah, I just, wanted to know if I could find cell service," he said, looking at his uncle's phone.

"Oh, well uh, the house is unfortunately pretty much a dead zone," then he noticed Chris looking crestfallen, so he pulled out a phone from his pocket and handed it to Chris.

"It's my work phone, it's got special service," he said quickly, "look, Chris, why don't you and I go for a drive this afternoon, then we can find you a new phone," his uncle said while motioning for Brian to enter the office.

"Mmmkhay," Chris said, against the idea of getting a new phone because his current one worked perfectly fine, otherwise then finding service.

"Oh and stop by the kitchen, they've got your breakfast ready," Tony said, "just keep walking down this hallway and make a right" as Chris turned and walked away. Tony watched Chris walk away, then followed Brian into the office, closing the doors behind him.

Chris followed his uncle's directions and soon found himself hopelessly lost in endless hallways and empty bedrooms. He finally stumbled across a maid dusting a trophy room and asked her for assistance.

"Hi, um, I'm Chris.... is the kitchen nearby?" he asked shyly.

"Yes dear, o'course" she said with a thick British accent. She finished dusting a tall cabinet then put down her duster and walked through the open door and past Chris.

"Right this way, dearie" she said, leading him down the hallway he had currently found himself in, then through a narrow doorway and into a small staircase. They descended down a flight of steps, then she opened the door and led him into a massive kitchen, with enough stovetops and ovens to cook a feast for hundreds of people. There were only a few people working in the kitchen, wearing traditional white chef outfits.

One of the cooks looked at Chris, realizing who he was.

"Ah, Master Chris!" he spoke in a French accent, "your breakfast iz ready," he said with a dramatic wave of his arms, leading Chris through the kitchen and into a small dining room. A mug of steaming black coffee and an empty plate was waiting for him.

"Please sit, it will be out in a moment," the chef said, disappearing back into the kitchen. Chris walked over to the chair and sat down, picking up the coffee mug. He felt the warmth of the liquid through the ceramic mug and gently blew on the top before taking a sip. He was instantly surprised at its sweetness and smoothness. He happily took another sip, appreciating a change from the bitter taste he had always associated with black coffee. The chef reappeared, holding a plate with a cover over it, and set it down next to the existing

plate on the table. He removed the cover and Chris was thrilled to see many of his breakfast favorites: jam on toast, scrambled eggs, oatmeal with blueberries, and a bowl of fruit.

"Thank you," Chris said, and the French gentlemen bowed his head with a smile before pushing through the kitchen doors. Chris looked down in anticipation of the delicious food in front of him, all of the smells wafting up into his nose, making his mouth water. His appetite quickly subsided however, when he thought about how his family should be enjoying this breakfast with him. He pulled a piece of toast from the plate and nibbled on it slowly while he reflected more on the previous day. It was hard for him to believe that it had all only been just yesterday that he had seen his family for the last time. And then his uncle whom he hadn't seen in months suddenly appeared to "rescue" Chris from the airbase.

He definitely wanted to ask his uncle some questions when they went out later. After finishing his piece of toast, Chris stood up and looked wistfully at the bounty he was leaving behind. He felt guilty about wasting it, but even more guilty if he enjoyed himself in the wake of losing his whole family.

Chris walked towards the kitchen door just as a door opened behind him, and Tony stepped in and saw Chris and the leftover food.

"Good Lord Chris, I thought you would've gobbled that up," he said surprised, looking at the plate.

"Yeah...just not hungry," Chris said as his stomach rumbled.

"I see," Tony said knowingly, "perhaps they can box it up for later. But I was going to come down and check on you and ask if you wanted to leave."

"Now?" Chris asked, glancing at his phone for the time.

"Yes, my day just became free. We can take the bike out if you want" he said.

"Bike?" Chris asked, perking up.

"Ha. I knew that would get you" Tony said with a smile.

"Follow me".

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They stepped out of the house and Chris saw that the sky was still overcast but yet the driveway was dry. He followed Tony over to a long brick garage that was separate from the main house. His uncle unlocked one of the wooden doors and pulled it open and stepped inside. Chris followed and was instantly amazed. There must have been a collection of twenty motorcycles in the garage, all freshly waxed and parked as if on display in a museum. Chris walked around, admiring them. His uncle pulled a cover off a black touring bike and motioned to Chris.

"Here, we're gonna take this one," he said as he did a quick visual check around the bike.

"Is this yours?" Chris asked.

"Yeah, I bought it from my friend who lives in Europe, these bikes are hard to find in the US of A."

Chris looked at the bike and to him, it appeared bulky and slow. His uncle watched him closely and saw his impression of the bike.

"Don't be so quick to judge her," he said "she's got the bigger engine for carrying more weight. Here" his uncle handed him a helmet and slid onto the bike. Chris climbed on behind his uncle and was surprised at how comfortable the seat felt. Tony hit the electronic start and the bike revved to life, making the seat hum with smooth vibrations. Tony slid his helmet visor down and Chris did the same. Then his uncle carefully walked the bike out of the garage, then punched the throttle and Chris hung on for dear life as the bike charged forward with instant acceleration. Tony rode the bike around the house then past the front and continued on to a long paved driveway that Chris hadn't been on yet. Tony kept increasing the throttle and Chris peeked over his shoulder and drew a shocked breath as he saw the speedometer needle creeping up to 90 mph. Trees whizzed by and the bike kept increasing speed, and Chris felt like he was sliding off the seat. They finally approached an iron gate and Tony slowed the bike down to a crawl and waited for the gate to open.

"Can you hear me?" his uncle's voice spoke into his helmet, crisply and clearly.

"Wow, yes" Chris replied breathlessly. "How can I hear you so well?"

He heard his uncle chuckle "The helmets are built-in with wireless, so you don't have to scream at the person on the bike with you. What do you think of the bike?"

"It's awesome!" Chris replied, his desire for adrenaline suddenly kicking in.

"Good," Tony said, then he accelerated the bike again and they shot between the iron gates that were swinging open automatically.

They rode for a few more minutes down the driveway and then were back on the main road, but a different part than where the entrance was located. Tony kept the bike at a lower speed to follow the speed limit signs, but still joyfully shot the bike around slow cars. They rode for 15 minutes down the two-lane highway until suddenly they were approaching a large town and Tony slowed the bike to 30 mph. Chris admired the antique style of the town and then saw the sign next to the road that read "Annapolis". They rode past large brick buildings and cute ma & pa shops until Tony parked the bike in a spot on the water's edge, overlooking a dozen sailboats that were bobbing in the water. There were a lot of yellow utility trucks parked throughout the town and they seemed to be repairing some of the floodwater damage around the buildings closest to the water.

Tony climbed off the bike and pulled off his helmet and beamed at Chris.

"I am surprised you never got a bike," he said.

Chris climbed off pulling off his helmet and looked at the ground "Mom wouldn't let me" he said.

Tony shook his head "I should have known..." then looked at Chris.

"Hey, do you like ice-cream?"

Chris nodded and they walked down the antique brick sidewalks, glancing into the large storefront windows of all the shops. A few groups of shoppers wandered about, already back to business as usual after the flooding that the town had experienced. Tony led Chris to a shop a few blocks away from the water, and stepped in and waved at the person behind the counter.

"Tony! Hey, long time no see!" said a bearded heavyset man that was serving ice-cream to a family.

"Hey Art, how are you?" Tony replied.

The large man named Art rung up the family in his cash register, then turned back to Tony  
"Good man, we were lucky we didn't get flooded too bad up here."

Tony nodded and looked around the shop "place still looks the same."

"Yeah, just repainted everything a few weeks ago. People come in here for the nostalgia of the original ice cream shop so I try to keep it original" he said.

"Hey, but have you been man? Let me get you and your friend - oh my God, Chris? Tony is that your nephew?" Art looked at Chris like he had just noticed him standing next to Tony.

Tony gave Chris a squeeze then looked at Art.

"Sure is, he's staying with me for a while."

"How about the rest-" Art began, but stopped as Tony held up a hand.

"Oh...gotcha. Let's sit down and talk! What do you guys want, pick anything, it's on the house!"

A few minutes later they were sitting at a table next to the window, looking out at the slow flow of cars and people moving about through the town.

Chris sat with a chocolate ice-cream cone and Tony had settled on a cup of sherbet. Art, however, had carried over half a tub and placed it in front of himself.

"It's Neapolitan, nobody has been ordering it so I didn't want it to go bad" he explained at Tony's sideways glance.

"Anyway, how is all your space stuff going?" Art asked, slowly becoming self-aware of the both of them watching him eat out of the tub.

Tony coughed loudly, shooting Art a look.

"The, uhm, *space stuff* is going well. We are busy with our latest project though, its deadline will be here in a few years."

Art lowered his voice and leaned down on the table "where is this one headed?"

"I would tell you my friend, but it has to be declassified first..." Tony said.

Art nodded understandingly "sometimes I wish I was still on the inside".

Chris looked back and forth between the two, feeling like they were speaking a different language in front of him. Art noticed Chris looking at him, then addressed Tony, "does *he* know anything yet?"

"No - but he will soon, he's staying at the mansion with me."

"You lucky dog..." Art shook his head, then piled a big spoonful of ice-cream in his mouth.

"It's just temporary, mine was relocated by the flood," Tony said, a grim expression crossing his face.

"Ah- sorry," Art said, "where do you live - or did you, rather?"

"Right by Thomas Point, but now it's just a big pile of mud."

"I reckon there are several places around the Bay that are now mud" Art grumbled, "nobody saw how much of a disaster that was going to be."

"Yes, many families were impacted," Tony said, glancing at Chris.

There was a pause of silence before Art and Tony struck up small talk and Chris sat back and stared at the activity outside the shop window. He listened to them cover sports then the weather, then finally past girlfriends. A half-hour later Tony stood and Art finished his last spoonful of ice-cream from the large tub.

"Alright Art, I gotta get a move on. Thanks for the ice-cream, it was good to talk to you."

"Same here" Art replied after licking the spoon clean.

Tony stood up and as he shook hands with Art, Chris saw the flash of a yellow envelope between them. Then it was gone, and Art leaned in and hugged Chris before they walked out of the store.

"Free ice-cream anytime for you Chris! Especially for your lady friend when you bring her!"

Chris smiled and waved, then followed Tony back towards the water. Tony stopped at a bench near the bike in the shade of a large oak tree overlooking the sailboats "I have something to go get, I will be back in a few minutes."

Chris sat down on the bench and realized that he hadn't checked his phone yet. He pulled it out and realized that there were 35 text messages and 18 missed calls awaiting his attention. Chris sat and read through each of the text messages, smiling at some. He was glad to hear that some of his friends had survived the flood. Still, there were texts from other friends that were asking Chris if he had heard the bad news.

"Hey Chris, I hope you and your family are ok. OMG, I hope you have heard but they had a funeral for Emily and Jake Taylor today."

"Did you know the Smith's? I just got a call from the family friend and she told me they all perished in the flood. So tragic, please send prayers."

"Hey Chris, please respond soon, I need to know you're ok. Also, Ashley Baker and her brother were lost in her car, they are still missing. Please keep them in your thoughts."

Chris swallowed back the tears and continued to read all of his messages which was a rollercoaster of emotions. After he finished he turned off his phone screen and looked out at the water in front of him with tears in his eyes and he started to think about how nature seemed to be more powerful each year, and as the number of natural disasters increased so did their destructive abilities. Tony came walking up behind Chris and sat down next on the bench to him, sighing. He glanced down and noticed Chris's phone in his hand.

"Did you get caught up with your friends?" he asked.

"Yeah, more like I read all the text messages I have been unable to read" Chris replied, still looking at the water.

Tony reached into his inner jacket pocket and pulled out a slim tablet and he handed it to Chris.

"Here, I want you to start using this. It is called a NetPad 3 and it will be very useful to you in the future."

"Did you just buy this?!" Chris asked, accepting the gift.

"Well, no I have been carrying it with me and I figured I might as well give it to you since you had such a sad look on your face" Tony replied, smiling.

"These are the hottest things on the market right now! How did you even find one?" Chris asked excitedly.

"I .... have my ways," Tony said sneakily.

Chris turned on the tablet and it instantly made an encrypted profile with his fingerprint and face scan. Chris played with the many functions of the tablet for several minutes before looking up at Tony.

"This thing is awesome!"

Tony laughed "I'm glad you like it."

They sat for a few more minutes before a couple of raindrops fell onto the pavement in front of them.

"Uh-oh," Tony said, "looks like we better race to the house."

He walked over to the bike and popped up the seat to pull out a jacket from a compartment under the seat.

"Here put this on, it will keep you dry," Tony said, handing the jacket to Chris.

Chris quickly put the jacket on and they climbed onto the bike. His uncle started it and slowly walked it out of the parking spot, then they raced off back towards the mansion.

Unfortunately, the rainstorm was in the same direction and soon the speck of rain on their helmet face shields turned into splatters and then streaks of rain. Soon they were racing through rain showers, the water stinging any exposed skin. Chris felt his shoes and pants getting soaked, but still loved the thrill of riding the motorcycle. After some time they finally reached the entrance gates, which opened to let them in. They zoomed up the driveway and Tony pulled the bike into the open door of the garage. He shut off the motor and they climbed off, the lower halves of their bodies sopping wet. Tony and Chris removed their helmets, looked at each other, then burst out laughing.

"I guess I should have checked the weather before we left" Tony laughed as he tried to squeeze his pant legs to wring out some water.

"I think there are ponds in my shoes," Chris said with a grin.

They closed the garage and ran to the house as the rain began to fall even heavier. Once inside, Tony yelled for the butler "Addison! Can we get some towels please?"

The butler appeared a few moments later with a stack of white towels and handed them to Tony. "Here you are sir, shall I fetch some dry clothes as well?"

"No thank you, Addy, we will take care of that" Tony said.

"Very well, as you wish," Addison said, walking out of the room.

"Why don't you dry off and change, then I can show you some neat features of the house," Tony said to Chris with a smile.

"Sure," Chris said, drying his pants as much as he could before walking out of the mudroom and up to his bedroom. He walked up the marble stairs then down the hallway, opening his door and then grabbing his backpack. He pulled out the only clothes he had managed to stuff in his bag, which was a pair of hiking pants, a light blue t-shirt, and some socks and boxers. He pulled off his damp jeans and other wet clothes, then dried himself off and pulled on the dry clothes from his bag. Chris relished the feeling of being dry again. He carried his wet clothes with him back downstairs and was intercepted by Addison at the foot of the staircase. "Please sir, I will take care of these" Addison said, asking for Chris's wet clothes.

"Thank you," Chris said, then he walked down the hallways to meet with his uncle. Tony came walking into the hallway with the tall pillars near his office.

"Feel better?" Tony asked.

"Yes," Chris replied.

"C'mon I'll show you the rest of the place," his uncle said, leading Chris to the doors at the other end of the hallway. They walked into a grand dining room with at least twenty round tables and massive chandeliers hanging from the ceiling.

"He likes to hold banquets in here, and sometimes rents the place out to some businesses" Tony explained as they passed through the large room, Chris staring openmouthed at the intricate architecture. They entered through doors on the side of the dining room and entered a large lounge with a few bookshelves and many large leather chairs. Then they went down a flight of steps, and into a hallway, then made a turn into a set of gold doors and entered a large dimly lit room.

"The movie theater" Tony gestured with his hand at the two rows of red reclining chairs and the large wall facing the chairs.

"Wow...." Chris stared around at the room "a private movie theater?"

"Sure is! And I-" he suddenly looked down at his buzzing phone and saw a reminder, "-I actually have a phone meeting in my office so I have to run, but the remote for everything is in one of the front seats. If you want you can get something playing until I get back, I shouldn't be too long."

"Awesome, thank you," Chris said, still in awe of the place.

His uncle left and Chris sat in the chair with the remote. He pressed the ON button and the wall suddenly showed a giant menu with almost every movie imaginable ready to be played.

He scrolled for a while until he found a movie from his childhood that brought back a flood of memories. He thought back to when he and his sister were both younger, when they had become fascinated by a movie series about a young wizard. He blinked back tears as he thought about the times his family had made the rare trips to the movie theater to watch the latest movie releases.

Chris selected a movie from the series and let it play. The lights in the theater automatically dimmed and soon Chris was imagining his whole family sitting with him in the theater.

About halfway through the movie, the butler named Addison walked in, surprising Chris.

"Sorry to disturb you sir, but I wanted to let you know that lunch will be served if you are feeling hungry."

"Oh-" Chris said, and he paused the movie to walk up to the dining room, but the next second the butler wheeled in a cart with several covered dishes on it. He set up an eating tray over the chair Chris was sitting in, then unloaded some plates of food on the tray.

"Today we have vegan tacos with our chef's special sauce, followed by steamed seasoned broccoli, and tomato soup. For dessert, we have coconut milk ice-cream and vegan cheesecake"

Chris looked at him, confused "I'm not vegan".

"Your uncle thought you would like to explore a different diet" Addison added, before placing silverware and then walking out. Chris looked at the food, unsure of what to think. Then his stomach growled and his instincts took over as he grabbed a soft taco and bit into it. His mouth was instantly rewarded with a mixture of flavors.

"Wow!" Chris said out loud, without meaning to.

He took another large bite of a taco, then chewed it slowly, savoring the tastes.

He picked up the remote with his free hand and resumed playing the movie.

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After finishing a few movies Chris decided to go for a walk and stretch his legs. He wandered around for a while and managed to find a pair of doors leading outside to the large balcony that jutted out over the huge lawns behind the house. He looked up at the night sky and was surprised to see even more stars than he had ever seen at home. It was very quiet and peaceful outside, and not a sound came from the forest. Chris leaned against the low wall that wrapped around the balcony and he stared up at the speckled canvas above him, losing himself in his imagination. The longer he stared, the more that he was able to see in the night sky and he began to see things he had never seen before. He noticed the small white dot of a satellite moving slowly across the night sky, then a few minutes later a shooting star streaked through the night. As he stood transfixed by what he saw, he didn't notice the figure approaching him from the balcony.

"Anything good up there?" said Tony's voice.

Chris jumped and then looked around until he saw his uncle walking towards him on the balcony.

"Whoa, hey - yeah the sky is really clear tonight," Chris said, trying to calm his heart which was hammering in his chest.

"Didn't mean to scare you" Tony laughed as he leaned against the railing near Chris.

They spent several minutes in silence while they both gazed upwards, then Tony finally spoke.

"Do you ever wonder what is out there?" he asked, not taking his eyes from the stars.

Chris paused before answering.

"Yeah, I actually do a lot," Chris said finally.

They stood in silence a few more minutes before his uncle spoke again.

"Listen, Chris, I work with an organization that looks for people that are curious about the universe..." Tony said slowly.

"What, as in building deep space satellites or something?" Chris asked.

"Well, no not exactly," Tony said, clearly unsure how to tell Chris what he wanted to.

"Look - I'm not sure how much you know about the changing world we are living in but to be completely frank with you, humanity may not be on this planet in a few hundred years."

This time a long silence existed between them as Chris processed this.

"So ... you are sending people into space... like a space colony? Are we going to Mars?"

"No, no, not Mars. Mars is a hopeless dream. I'm talking about faraway planets, the ones that take hundreds of years to travel to. Those Chris, are where the future of humanity might be"

"And people are being sent to those planets... or many people since its hundreds of years?" Chris asked.

"Ha, I wish I was better at explaining things sometimes. I want to ask you, Chris, how much would you be interested in traveling to a new galaxy or exploring a new uncharted planet?"

"Well...." Chris thought for a long time, "honestly I have dreamed about that for a long time. But my family...." he faltered and Tony put an arm around Chris and gave him a squeeze.

"Look it's such a big thing I don't want to even talk about it anymore tonight. But if you are interested I can arrange a meeting if you want to learn more."

They stared at the sky for a few more minutes, then Chris said goodnight to Tony and walked back to his bedroom. However, he didn't sleep but instead, he laid in bed and thought about everything his uncle said and everything that had happened in the past few days.

He had nothing left tying him to this planet... not really, since his family was no longer here. He had experienced so much loss that really, the only thing he *wanted* to do was get away

from this place. The idea of starting a new life on his own, on a once in a lifetime adventure certainly did sound appealing. No matter how many people he surrounded himself here on Earth, he would always be alone, without his family, or the place he loved. Being by himself in a spaceship didn't sound too much different. Of course, still, the thought of the human race going extinct was a thought that was pretty hard to grasp. And being jettisoned far into the deep unknown of space on a one-way trip was enough to scare anyone. But it was also the most exciting thing that Chris could think of, and he fell asleep dreaming of worlds that he could see.

He fell asleep fairly quickly, and before he knew it he had entered the fantasy that his mind had been creating ever since his uncle had started telling him about traveling through space. He was drifting around inside a white barrel, and he realized it must be the inside of a spacecraft. Computers were lining the walls with flashing lights, and through a small window next to him he could see little sparkling lights in the darkness outside. He pushed himself off of the wall and to the other side of the spaceship where a door was open, leading down a hallway towards the pilot chair. He gave himself a boost and zoomed down the hallway, using his arm to slow himself down on the chair. He was floating in front of a giant instrument panel and could see little outside of the cockpit windows. An alarm suddenly sounded, and he looked around frantically for the source of the alert. Then he saw a small message that had appeared on the screen: "Landing Countdown" and next to it was a box showing the countdown. The spaceship began to vibrate and shake as the countdown continued to get closer to zero. He quickly grabbed onto the pilot chair and began strapping himself in. He could feel the pull of the gravity on his body as they began to break through the atmosphere of the planet.

10...9...8...7...6...5...

The craft shook violently and he began to wonder if he was going to survive the landing. He closed his eyes and continued counting to himself to avoid watching the landing if something went wrong. He was clearly not in control.

Then after a few seconds, everything was silent. Chris slowly opened his eyes and saw that there was light coming in through the small windows. He cautiously stood up and walked over to the door in front of him. He tried to peer through the small window in the middle of the door but couldn't see anything outside. He reached down and gripped the large red handle to open the door. He gave it a pull and the door swung open, revealing a world he was not

prepared to see. He was looking at an enormous tunnel which was perfectly round just like a pipe. At the end of the tunnel was a source of bright light, which illuminated everything as far as he could see. He had landed in a snow-covered forest, and as he looked around he realized that the forest to his left continued up, all the way until it was directly over his head. And the forest continued all the way around to his right. Along the way, the forest changed color, and he realized it represented a change in seasons. The trees to his left were beginning to bud for spring, the trees hanging inverted overhead were in summer peak, and the trees on his right were turning all of the fall colors.

Chris woke up early the next morning thinking about his crazy dream. Everything had seemed so real, and yet here he was laying in the same bed, still in the mansion. The sunlight was streaming into the room through the windows as it had for many mornings. In many ways, it was just another morning. Except that now Chris knew that he had a choice to make since talking to his uncle last night. A huge choice that would change his life depending on what he decided.

He pulled himself out of bed and pulled on a pair of pants, and stopped at the window to admire the beautiful day outside.

He stared at the clear blue sky, the lush green trees, and the singing birds darting through the forest. He felt a warmth in his heart and knew that he loved all of this. Earth was so familiar, and it had so much beautiful and diverse nature. Chris was struck again at the thought that one day all of this would disappear. Whether through the consequences of human actions or the inevitable passage of time. But leaving all of this, really was like leaving his home. He couldn't explain it, but in a way, his very soul was linked to the Earth and its nature. Leaving forever would surely have devastating effects on him emotionally and psychologically. And yet... the pull of curiosity and adventure was too much for him when he would stare up at a clear starry night sky. He loved his home, but he also had suffered so much here that he simultaneously wanted to remove himself and forget about all of the problems in this world. Chris lost track of time as he stood at the window, staring out at the scene before him. After a while, he felt his skin getting hot and realized that he had been standing for so long his bare chest was beginning to burn in the bright morning sun. He continued getting dressed and watched the sunrise.

Soon there was a knock on the door which startled Chris, and he quickly turned and walked over to open it.

"Hello?" he said as he pulled the door open.

"Hey Chris, it's me" replied Tony. "I wanted to get you up so we could go somewhere, breakfast is ready in the dining room."

"Oh, sorry, alright," Chris said, glancing at his watch and realizing it was almost 0900.

"Don't be sorry," Tony said with a smile "I'm glad you got some rest. I'll come to get you when I'm ready, I just have some things to do in the office."

"Alright, I'll be down," Chris said with a nod. Tony winked and walked back down the hall towards the staircase as Chris closed the door.

*I wonder if it has to do with our conversation last night,* he thought as he felt a rush of excitement. He finished getting dressed then hurried down to the dining room with his stomach growling from hunger.

He found that this morning there were stacks of large pancakes with large goblets of rich dark maple syrup.

"Morning sir," Addison said while pouring orange juice into a glass.

"Wow Addison, this is a big breakfast," Chris said as he looked at all of the prepared food.

"Your uncle said you men would need a large meal for the morning," Addison said as he finished preparing the table for Chris. He pulled out the chair and motioned for Chris to take a seat.

"Your uncle said you will be leaving soon, so eat what you can" Addison added before disappearing behind the kitchen doors.

Chris stared at the pile of food in front of him then felt his hunger quickly take over and he reached for the closest plate of warm pancakes.

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Ten minutes later Chris sat back and observed the damage he had done. He had consumed a dozen pancakes, half a bottle of maple syrup, a bowl of fruit, 2 omelets, and half a waffle. He sighed, and suddenly wanted to get up and go back to bed. Right then, the dining-room door opened and Tony stepped in, wearing his motorcycle riding gear.

"You ready? Get enough to eat?" he said, looking at Chris then the empty plates.

Chris nodded slowly, feeling groggy.

"Good! Come on sport, grab your gear and let's go. We have 25 minutes to get to the office"

Chris pushed himself away from the table and stood up to join his uncle. He walked to the mudroom and pulled on the bulky riding gear, then grabbed his helmet. They walked out to the garage, which was still in the shade of the house.

This time the bike was sitting parked right outside the door. They climbed on and Tony started the engine. Chris closed his helmet mask and instantly blocked out all of the noise from the wind and the engine. They sped off down the long driveway that led to the main highway, and after a series of turns and intersections, they were flying down an overpass that provided a view of the city. Dark clouds were scattered around against a hazy sky, and the wind was beginning to make the trees sway.

After some time passed, they finally pulled into a short driveway from the main road and Chris saw a large square glass building surrounded by the forest tree line and empty parking lots. Tony rode the bike straight up to the front entrance and parked the bike in the handicap zone. Chris shook his head as his uncle climbed off the bike, and he could see his huge grin. A crack of thunder made them both glance up at the sky, but Tony shrugged.

"I don't think the rain will last too long. C'mon we have people waiting on us"

Tony swiped a plastic card at the front door and the door unlocked. They walked into a modern lobby that had the feeling it had just been recently built. There were lights and computers on but not a single person anywhere to be seen. Chris glanced at his uncle.

"Are we in the right place?" he asked.

"Most definitely," Tony said without smiling. They stood in the empty lobby for a minute before a door opened and a broad man in a military uniform with close-cropped hair walked over, his shiny boots clicking on the floor.

"Everyone is downstairs," he said to Tony, then he stared at Chris as if measuring him up.

"Alright let's go then," Tony said, leading Chris with an arm behind his back.

They walked through the same door the man had appeared from, and entered a long metal hallway that looked like it belonged deep underground. They walked to the end and then stepped inside a cage elevator and rode it down. Chris felt the chill of the underground air as they went further down. When they finally stopped and the doors opened Chris saw that they were in some kind of abandoned mine. The tunnel in front of them still had the rail tracks for mining equipment and antique filament bulbs illuminating the tunnel for a few hundred yards ahead before the darkness blocked out the dim bulbs. The military man led them both into the mine shaft and then he stopped in front of a huge metal door and knocked three times.

After a minute the door swung open, and they entered a modern-looking meeting room with concrete walls and various screens hanging around the room. *What is this place?* Chris wondered, finding the whole scene bizarre.

Three more men sat at the table, two in green military uniforms and one in a blue flight jumpsuit with some colorful mission patches sewn on it. Tony motioned at Chris to sit with him opposite of the three seated. The man that let them in remained standing by the door. There were a few seconds of silence before the man in the jumpsuit spoke.

"So, welcome all. I think we know why we are here" he said with a glance at Chris.

Tony butted in "let's be reminded that this is purely Q&A, not an interview"

A few of the military men shifted in their seats but said nothing.

"Chris, please sit," the guy in the jumpsuit said, gesturing to an empty chair across the table from him.

Chris sat and Tony stood to the side as they faced the room.

"Alright, fine. What did you want to know?" he asked, holding his hands up. "Oh, and I should introduce myself. My name is Captain Hanks."

Chris's blank face didn't give the effect on Chris that Hanks had thought it would.

"Maybe some information on the project" Tony suggested, and Hanks sighed.

"The Legacy Project, which you apparently are interested in applying to" he shot a questioning look at Tony, "... was founded about 40 years ago due to the increasing threats to

human existence on the Earth. I'm sure you are aware of some of the problems we are facing as a species" Hanks paused to check if Chris was following him.

"So, some people got together and initiated the project, and a few companies got invested. Now we have the largest deep space exploration organization in history"

This time Chris's eyes widened.

"We have built eight vessels to date, and have launched a dozen of the bravest men and women in the world into an unknown fate."

There was a pause of silence before Tony spoke.

"Chris, the people he is talking about are some of the best people I have ever known. The rarest of the rare. They were each assigned very specific missions and were always ready to risk everything."

"And they did, of course," Hanks added "so for anyone that is even considering this position you have to be absolutely willing to give up everything you know. Your friends. Your family-" Tony squeezed Chris's shoulder, "...the planet you were born on."

The room went silent again and everyone seemed to be waiting for a response from Chris.

"Son, if none of this is for you then tell us so we don't waste any more time" the man that had let them in spoke for the first time.

"I am," Chris said loudly and with aggression that surprised himself. He maintained eye contact with Hanks, who was looking back at him with mild interest.

"I am still interested" Chris finished.

Tony nodded and looked around the room at the impatient faces.

"Gentlemen, I have the feeling that none of you are impressed with my nephew here" the military men looked like they'd been slapped.

"No no, we aren't disrespecting you" apologized one of the men, and Chris was surprised to see the unease on his face.

Hanks sat up in his seat.

"I suggest we give him a chance. But does he know that he has to enroll in the Academy?"

Hanks asked Tony.

"I will explain everything to him," Tony said with a nod.

"Alright." Hanks started pushing himself out of his chair, then looked at Chris.

"Well Chris, we might be seeing you around."

\*\*

Tony and Chris stopped at a small cafe on the ride back home for lunch, and as they sat by the front window the rain began to fall. They were the only guests in the cafe and sat in silence as they watched the rain begin to splatter on the window. The waitress appeared a few minutes later with their sandwiches and coffees.

"Thank you dear," Tony said as he accepted the tray of food, and the girl smiled and glanced at Chris, who was still staring out the window.

"You really fall into your own world sometimes," Tony said as he started eating.

Chris turned his attention to his uncle and the food in front of him. He sipped the coffee then nodded.

"You missed out on that cute waitress, I think she wants your number" Tony teased, but Chris couldn't stop thinking about the meeting and everything that had been said. He had started thinking a lot about it as he rode on the back of the motorcycle. *How can I even compare myself to people like that?*

"C'mon Chris, that was supposed to inspire you more," Tony said, trying to stay cheerful but slightly frustrated at Chris's attitude.

"I just..." Chris said finally, stopping to think.

Tony remained quiet as he waited for Chris to say something.

Instead, Chris picked up his mug and sipped the steaming coffee. The hot beverage made his lips and tongue sting but he took the pain instead of responding to his uncle.

"Look," Tony said, "you have every right to ask as many questions as you want. And you are completely free to never think about this again. The way I see it, anyone would need some time to really think about this and learn as much as they could before signing away their lives" he ended his statement with a chuckle, but he knew how serious of a commitment the program truly was.

"Yeah..." Chris said, staring into his drink. *Why is it so hard to talk right now? All I did was go to a meeting with Tony...*

Tony shook his head and knew he had pushed enough for now. The two continued eating their meal in silence as the rain pattered on the window. After a few minutes when they had cleaned their plates, Tony took a sip of his coffee and looked across the table at Chris.

"You know..." he began, pausing for a second, "you just remind me a lot of your father"

"Your brother," Chris responded.

"Yes, my little brother. But still, he was courageous and smart, and sometimes he would worry a lot or over-think decisions that ultimately he would make the right choice."

Chris remained silent to let Tony continue.

"He took risks, and it almost always proved to be worth it, but not worth the time he spent worrying about everything..... I think, Chris, that life is too short to waste it worrying about something inevitable."

He let the words sink in before speaking again.

"I am by no means trying to tell you how to live your life. That is entirely up to you, and no one can convince you that you should or should not sign up. Your chances of being accepted as the single trainee for are slim to none- no offense" Tony finished and drank the rest of his coffee.

He pushed his chair back and stood up to stretch, then he looked outside the window at the steady drizzle of rain.

"Well, I think that the weatherman said that the rain is not letting up anytime soon."

"Alright, I am ready," Chris said, and he took the last bite of his sandwich. They put their gear on and walked out of the shop to get on the cycle. The overcast sky had become increasingly dark, almost like it was dusk. Puddles in the cobble street were reflecting the lights from the storefronts, making the street appear to be glowing. They walked to the bike which they had left parked under a wide oak tree. The tree had protected most of the bike but it still water had dripping down on it.

Tony took a rag from a front pocket on the bike and wiped most of the fat water beads that covered the seat. Chris knew that the ride would still be a wet one as tiny droplets continuously fell from the sky. Tony started the bike and they pulled on their helmets.

"Sorry, but the seat is still a little damp" Tony said into the helmet microphone.

"No problem," Chris said through his helmet, "I doubt we are going to stay dry"

He knew his uncle smiled even though he couldn't see his face. Tony kicked the bike off of the kickstand and they rode over the bumpy cobble back onto the main road. As they reached highway speed the water on Chris's visor began to form streaks across his face, like thin fingers trying to cover his eyes. The water splashed up from the wet road and began to soak into the unprotected parts of Chris's body. The ride lasted for thirty minutes, and Chris was relieved when they finally pulled through the gate and down the long windy driveway back to the mansion.

They stowed the bike in the garage and then waited for the rain to slow so they could run to the house. After ten minutes of watching the downpour, Chris turned to Tony.

"I don't think we are going to get any drier," he said.

They both ran out into the curtains of cold rain and were fully drenched after finally making it into the mudroom of the house.

"Maybe we should take the car from now on" his uncle laughed, and they waited for Addison to bring them both towels and dry clothes once again.

\*\*

The next few weeks went by fairly quickly to Chris. His uncle was out of the house more frequently for business, so Chris had plenty of free time alone to himself and his thoughts. He read and then reread all of the brochures his uncle had given him about the Legacy Project,

and then dreamed about if he was accepted, and the things he would see as he traveled the galaxy. The sense of adventure into the unknown was thrilling, but the reality of leaving the Earth forever was a hard obstacle to look past.

Then one night at dinner with Tony, a question suddenly struck Chris.

"How come there aren't more people in the program?" he asked, and his uncle almost choked on his mouthful of asparagus.

"Well – you mean, why are you the only one?" he said, composing himself. "The only way I can explain it, Chris, is that the unique design and purpose of this mission requires only one candidate to be the pilot and explorer."

Chris thought about his uncle's answer, then returned to eating his dinner. Once they had each finished their meals, they sat in silence as they waited for dessert.

"I'm curious Chris, what your latest thoughts are on the program," Tony said, approaching the subject carefully.

"I'm ready to sign up" Chris heard himself say.

Tony nodded to himself. "When did you decide?"

"After finishing my mashed potatoes," Chris said, ignoring the screaming voice in his mind to think about what he was saying to his uncle.

Tony nodded some more and appeared to be trying to contain his excitement.

"So.... the Academy begins next week, so your answer couldn't have come at a better time. But Chris, I want to make sure you are sure. If you want to talk about it..."

"I have thought about it for long enough Tony," Chris said, surprised at his own authority. "I want to do it for my family.... they would want me to do it" he finished.

Tony stood and walked over to put a hand on Chris's shoulder. "They would be more proud of you than I already am."

Addison suddenly walked in through the kitchen door, pushing a cart with two decorated slices of cheesecake.

"Sorry to disturb your meal sir, but there is an urgent call for you in the office," he said as he distributed the cake onto the table.

Chris heard his uncle softly curse, then watched as he walked towards the door.

"No problem Addy – Chris, sorry to leave. We will talk later..." then with a flash of a grin his uncle was gone, and Chris was sitting alone at the table.

"Everything alright sir?" Addison asked as he laid the dessert on the table.

"Yeah- it looks good" Chris replied halfheartedly as he looked at the plate of cheesecake.

Addison nodded respectfully and quietly left the room back to the kitchen. Chris felt his hunger vanish, and decided to leave the treat for one of the kitchen staff. He pushed away from the table and wandered back to his room, knowing that he might not see his uncle for the next few days. He sighed as he laid on the bed, and tried to reassure himself that he was making the right decision. There would be no turning back after submitting his name on the application forms. And if the Academy started in a few days, Chris knew he would be feeling the consequences of his choice just a short time from now. He thought about what his uncle had said to him at the café, and tried to find some comfort in his words *"you just remind me a lot of your father ... he was courageous and smart, and sometimes he would worry a lot or over-think decisions ... life is too short to waste it worrying about something inevitable ..."*

If there was anything that Chris wanted, it was to make his father proud, especially his whole family. He drifted off to sleep, picturing their smiling faces in front of their farmhouse.

\*\*

In what seemed like a blur, Chris found himself standing in front of the Admissions building to the Academy just a few days later. The rest of the week had been rainy and gray, and today the sky was covered with a thick layer of gray clouds. Tony and Chris waited in line for the next half hour as cadets ahead signed their lives away for the other programs. Chris knew from his uncle that since Chris had agreed to start, the applications for the Legacy Project were closed. He was only here now to go through basic training, which was a requirement of the Legacy Project.

They finally approached the table where an older woman sat at a table with a laptop computer, typing in people's information.

"Name?" she asked indifferently as Chris approached the table.

"Chris Khan"

"*Full name*"

"Chris Amadeus Khan"

The lady typed on her keyboard and kept her eyes on the screen.

"Signed waiver?"

Chris slid the paper across the desk and she typed more on her computer without looking down at it.

"Department," she asked.

Tony leaned forward and flashed his ID badge. "He's with me," he said.

She glanced at the badge then slowly looked up at him and Chris, seeing them for the first time. Right then a door opened behind the table and a young blonde woman walked over to them, holding a large yellow envelope. She handed it to Chris, who looked at it blankly.

"Everything you need is in there," she said, then she turned away and walked back through the door, closing it behind her.

After a moment's pause, the lady at the table sighed and resumed staring at her computer. She typed in a short note and then scrolled down until she was at the end of the application on her screen.

"Sign please," she said, motioning to a pen and flat pad on the table.

Chris slowly signed his name, and saw that instead of writing on the pad, his signature was appearing on her screen. After he finished signing, he stood and waited.

"Is that all?" he asked.

"Your preferred name – for the uniform," she said.

"Khan," he said "I go by Khan"



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