

Chapter Null

AVOID A MIRROR

When you come to, you are strapped into a chair. Something weighty is on your head. Stiff spots on your forehead where electrodes are attached. Kai is in the chair next to you, his face pale and groggy. His eyes are opening like they are heavy as lead curtains. He has the device gripping his head as well. It looked like a thin purple helmet with five arms on each side to grip or attach electrodes to his forehead by wires.

Tasaka circles around to stare at you. He must have been surprised that you awoke.

“Ez, I see you are back with us. You spoke the safe words correctly, but we needed to hook you back up to our brain-machine interface to study how your brain activity has changed after experiencing the Slaughtercade. Please, let me ask you some questions about your experience.”

“I’ll be your quality assurance,” you say and clear your throat. It’s time to play along.

“How does the electrical device you’re reading on feel in front of you? Your eyes and brain are so focused. We are sending you signals as you decode these markings, these *words*. Think of a large orange pumpkin. Can’t you see it before you, uncarved? The words you are reading conjure pictures in your head across space and time. I know you’re sitting there, reading these words, thinking you’re safe because you know they are just words. But words are powerful as a knife. You can’t keep reading them, can you? You think you are *compelled* to. But you know we are suggesting that you carry on. Since you are still reading these letters, hold your hand open. Visualize a large chef’s knife in your hand. Grip it tight. Feel the handle and weight of the chrome blade. Its sharpness will cut nicely. Now let’s carve the pumpkin, shall we? The next time you look in any mirror, your face will look as if you are aged ten years. Ragged from stress and misery. It will start to take on an orange color. The pumpkin you *need* to carve is now sitting right on your shoulders. Be quick, and start with the eyes.”

The device on your head feels strange. It tingles as it ebbs and flows with energy. Thoughts are leaving you, and also impressions are being fed into you. Tasaka alternates between looking at you and a monitor with waveforms changing over time as the graph scrolls to the left. Now and then, he glances into the depths of the

massive warehouse space as if waiting for something.

“The Slippery Ghost is going to haunt you,” you say. Kai turns to lock eyes with you. You can see him nod.

“We didn’t get a Slippery Ghost fear memory from you,” Tasaka said.

“Good. Then you can release the buckles now,” you say.

Tasaka turns from the monitor to look at the side of your chair quizzically. You can *feel* the Thought Impression Emitter working on you—and also through Tasaka. You are visualizing the release button for your arm clamp restraints.

Tasaka stands up from his table. No expression on his face as he walks to your chair and presses the release button on the side of your chair. A distance away, the sound of an automatic roll-up gate churns and whines. Tasaka walks to the railing to watch. Your hands are free. Groggily, you unbuckle the belt around your chest and lean to the side to find the button to release the clamps above your ankles. You push yourself up, flip your legs over the side, and step onto the floor. Staggering over to Kai’s chair, you press the release buttons.

A vehicle engine revves violently. Looking past Tasaka, you see one of the vans that brought you to Slaughtercade burning toward the platform lab.

Pushing off Kai’s chair, you run to the directional audio device, switch it to immobilize, then crank the dial to the highest setting. Kai is behind you, out of the path of the blast. Tasaka has spotted you, his face stern and enraged.

You twist the sonic weapon at the incoming van as if aiming coin-operated binoculars. The vehicle jerks and swerves erratically as it picks up speed. The driver must have jammed on the gas pedal. It crashes headlong into the section under Tasaka.

An explosion of crunching metal, breaking wood, and heavy equipment toppling over as the platform collapses. Tasaka is running in the air, clawed hands grasping at you as he drops like a rock. Equipment and tables slide to the edge as if on a capsizing ship. Kai was anticipating the collapse and hooked his elbow around a pipe shelf post secured to the wall near the collapsed HOLES wall. You leap as the floor disappears. Grasping Kai's arm mid-air, you swing until you hit the wall. You find footing on a protruding outlet box before grabbing your own piece of the pipe shelf to support yourself. Below you, a tangle of broken shelves, equipment, and machinery is still smashing together until it reaches a standstill of dust and debris. The chairs have been uprooted from the platform to add to the heap.

With your footing, you're able to stand above the shelf you grasp onto. A Directional Audio Device sits on the shelf on a swivel stand. It was pointed at the wall, aimed into the HOLES room. It must have been a backup. The one that hit us was destroyed when the wall collapsed.

“Tasaka—“ Kai strains.

A story below, at the edge of the heap of what once was the equipment platform, the monk stood still with his gaze

planted firmly on your head as if it were a target sight. In his hands is a thin rifle with a long barrel. A tranquilizer gun. He raises the barrel up. *Thwack*. A dart sticks in the wall next to Kai's side.

Another dart thumps into the wall to your right. Propping yourself up on a defunct fire alarm pull gave you the leverage you needed to reach the DAD. You tilt it down at Tasaka, who is leveling the rifle at your chest. He cranes his neck to look down the scope, taking his time not to miss this shot. At that exact moment, you flip the manual switch on the machine then turn it on. It emits a destructive high-pitched tone.

Tasaka's hand jerked off the trigger. His other hand whipped up, sending the tranquilizer rifle spinning through the air until it clacked into the debris pile below you. He doubles over in a fit of convulsions.

"I—can't," Kai managed to say, his face contorted with pain. The pressure of holding on against the burns on his body were excruciating.

He released his arms lock on the pipe and dropped. He slid down the steep incline of the collapsed deck and landed against the side of a shelf. The van's front half was under the collapsed balcony, partially crushed, with the back half sticking out. Wendell and Damien were pushing the boards away and climbing through the cracks. They must have been in the cab. The back door of the van swung open. Cadell hopped out of it. His arm stuck out of his robe and was pressed to his blond head.

Steadying your precarious stance on the fire pull, you maneuver the DAD to face Wendell. He screams, whipping his long hair around like he's headbanging as he falls to the ground. Rotating the weapon slightly, you incapacitate Damien in the same fashion.

Cadell's maroon robe flaps behind him as he climbs over fallen cabinets and broken equipment toward Kai. You begin to swivel the DAD, but the thought of accidentally catching Kai in the blast confuses you, and your footing slips. Your fingers brush the DAD, tilting it up to the ceiling before you drop away from it. Sliding down the incline of the tilted floor, you begin rolling. Too fast—you're going to sustain an injury.

Firm hands break your fall. Your momentum is slowed before you collide with Kai's body. Sharing the force of your velocity, you both hit the railing and come to a stop. You gasp to replenish the air that has been knocked out of you.

"Where is—" you begin, but Cadell has grabbed hold of you from behind and spun you around. The blond monk's fist comes down hard to connect with your jaw. A blast of pain stuns you as you fall back. You're wedged between a cabinet and the deck. The angry face of Cadell bears down on you. He lifts his boot high above your face and brings it down savagely.

The monk's body jerks back. His foot impacts the deck to your side as he collapses with a *bang* against the side of a medical chair.

Rubbing your jaw, you pull yourself up and turn around. Kai is standing there, two hands on the tranquilizer rifle.

“I got the bugger,” Kai said.

“Thank you. You alright?”

“Not at all. But I’m alive enough to drive that van out of here.”

Behind Kai, Tasaka appeared. Seeing my eyes widen, he began turning as Tasaka lunged out with a kick. The blow knocked Kai back against the tilt of the floor. The rifle fell at your feet. Picking it up, you step back from the fray. Kai was swinging his hands at Tasaka.

Looking the weapon over, you see a modification. A magazine below has the words ‘Darts Only’ on it. You’ve never fired a tranquilizer dart gun, but you imagined you would have to load a dart before firing it. But there was no bolt on this gun. Pulling the trigger, a dart hissed out at the floor with a tuft of mist. *Is this thing semi-automatic?*

Tasaka was delivering a combo of punches to Kai. Kai fell to the ground, defeated. You aim the barrel at the monk and pull the trigger. The dart strikes him in the chest. Searching his body, Tasaka pulls the dart out and tosses it aside. Looking at you, advances. He falls to one knee, closes his eyes, and sinks to the side. Out cold.

A large piece of equipment breezes by your head and crashes behind you. Wendell is picking up another shard of debris for his next attack. He holds up a metal box with wires sticking out of it. *Zip*. A dart strikes him in the shoulder, and he lets the box drop. Gritting his teeth, you

see his golden incisors flash one last time before he falls backward.

Crouching out of view behind a fallen shelf, you can see Damien through a crack. You poke the barrel through, look down at the rifle's sight, and squeeze the trigger. Damien twitches as the dart sinks its needle all the way into his neck. He drops out of sight.

The only movement now is Kai dragging himself to you.

"I'm good," He said. "Still alive enough."

"Okay then," you say. "Let's escape."

Together you step over the twisted heaps of equipment to the van. The back of the van is empty. Kai shuts it and crawls through the broken floorboards to reach the cab's open door. He slides into the driver's seat and slams the door. A moment later, it lurches backward. The wooden floor pieces above it bang down to the cement factory floor, adding to the rubble. You jump into the passenger seat and unroll the window to stick the thin barrel of the tranquilizer rifle out.

"Riding shotgun," you say with a smile.

Kai floors it in reverse and pulls the steering wheel to the side. The van squeals through a quick turnaround. The van guns out towards the roll-up gate and into the night.

The road leading away from the Slaughtercade is half dirt and weeds. You don't know what time it is, but it's still dark. The night wind is cold, and you feel every bit of it through the gaping hole that once held a windshield. The collapse of the equipment balcony compacted the cab's roof, but you and Kai can sit normally.

It looked like you were about to drive onto a maintained paved road. But there's a metal barricade blocking the way.

"Shit," Kai muttered.

You see a dark figure stagger out of the woods in your headlights with his hands up. You grip the rifle in your hands tightly, getting ready for anything. The figure is wearing a black cape with a red interior, his face slathered with corpse paint. The golden shears necklace swings back and forth like a pendulum as he walks over uneven terrain to the van.

Sir Belchmore. Easing a bit, you wonder what this amateur is doing way out here.

"Please," he says as he approaches the driver's side window. He's still in character, elongating his vowels. "My car broke down. I need to get back to the Dungeon of Doom, please."

Kai turns to you and opens his mouth to say something. He leans back, and you can see a gun in Belchmores hand. He fires it into Kai's shoulder. It made a fizzing sound. *Silencer?* You juggle the rifle in your hands,

attempting to point the barrel out the driver's window at your assailant, but it's too late. Belchmore squeezes off another shot, and you see a tranquilizer dart sticking out of your collarbone. Your world feels cold, and darkness quickly overtakes you as you shake your head. The last thing you hear before passing out is Belchmore's voice.

“Slaughtercade pays well. What can I say?”

Go back to the book and read chapter 11.

