

ZEN 12

by Kerri Hawkins

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CHAPTER 1

GARRETT REMEMBERED THE FIRST TIME she saw it and truly understood what was coming. She was sitting in a restaurant, back when they still had restaurants, when there were still waitresses and waiters, a human being who came and asked you what you wanted.

She was sitting in a fully packed diner and it was eerily quiet. A clank of silverware and the rattling of dishes would drift out from the kitchen, but beyond that, it was almost silent. Fifty people sat in that room, many across from each other, their heads bent reverently as if in prayer. They did not speak to one another and they ate mindlessly. There was only the tapping of keyboards, the subtle sound of the pads of fingers on touchscreens.

Garrett looked around the room. At the time, the “zombie apocalypse” was fashionable in popular culture, endlessly harvested in the media of that era. But the apocalypse had already occurred; people just didn’t realize it. The zombies had already been victorious in a bloodless coup. No violence had been necessary, and no one seemed to miss their brains.

Garrett’s own phone, that anachronistic world-altering object, was sitting on the table next to her elbow. She felt anxious at what she was about to do, untethering herself, cutting the cord wrapped about her neck so she could breathe freely for a few months. Well, six months at the most, according to her doctor.

The screen was warm, soothing. Garrett’s fingers caressed the smooth outlines of the artistically designed casing. It was a marvel of engineering, a model of artisan craftsmanship. The screen was beautiful, packed with col-

ors. She toyed with the recessed button, then slowly, infinitesimally began to apply pressure. The screen blinked at her uncertainly, surprised, even shocked. Was she certain? Had she pressed the wrong button? Perhaps she meant to watch a video instead?

She was certain. She continued to apply pressure until the screen faded, as if she were slowly choking the life from it, and then it went to black.

No alarms were sounded. No one looked up. No one seemed to have even noticed, which for some reason surprised Garrett. She paid the bill with US money, another anachronism. She passed a homeless bum who stood outside the diner, thrusting out his filthy hand for whatever someone might throw in his direction. It struck Garrett that he was the only one she had seen who was truly “there,” which is why she had mixed emotions about her next act. She handed him the phone, uncertain if she was bestowing on him a gift or a curse. Perhaps he would sell it, but Garrett doubted that as he was already turning it on as she walked away.

That act would change everything in her life. Not the act of giving the phone away, but rather the simple act of turning it off. Garrett did not die six months later, or six years later, or even sixty years later. She volunteered for a bizarre and ill-fated research experiment involving telomerase that would end in catastrophe. The initial trials with small animals and primates had been so promising. But 499 out of 500 research subjects died horribly in phase one of the experiment.

Except Garrett. She lived on, the cancer that had been eating her from the inside out suddenly and mysteriously gone. For ten years she allowed them to study her, to poke and prod and try to figure out why she was different, why she had survived when no one else had. The fact that she was not aging became apparent as the years went by, exciting even more speculation and calls for research.

But Garrett was finished and walked away from all of it, just like she walked away from her phone.

CHAPTER 2

“WE HAVE A DISTURBANCE IN Sector 46-G-52-1.”

The voice entered directly into Garrett’s head. She concentrated briefly and the information screen appeared about a meter in front of her face. She bumped the opacity down so she could still see the room behind it, noting that Zen 64 and Zen 82 were both receiving the same message.

“Let me guess,” Garrett said, recognizing the designated sector, “more Amish on Raider violence?”

Zen 64, a jovial giant of a man also known as Mike, chuckled. “I don’t know who designed the grid in that location, but that was some poor decision-making.” His pearly white teeth contrasted sharply with his pitch black skin. Although racial designations were still used when Garrett was young, the explosion of diversity and intermarriage made them more and more confusing. It was not unusual for someone to have such mixed heritage it made no sense to call them anything. When you’re Caucasian-Asian-African-Indian-Latino, well, really, you’re not anything at all. Technology, of course, then made the designations completely irrelevant as people saw what they wanted to inside the grid.

Mike, however, at least to Garrett’s eye, was someone who truly could be called black, not as a racial category, but as a descriptor in the same way she could be called a very diluted, pale beige and Zen 82, also known as Charlene, could be called a deep caramel.

“And will the illustrious Zen 12 be accompanying us on this jaunt?” Mike teased.

Garrett sighed at the joke. She accompanied them on every field call, just as she always had. And Mike teased her, just as he always did because “Zen 12” was the oldest identification still on active duty. No one knew anything about Zen 1 through Zen 11. Zen 13 through, well, almost up to Mike’s designation were assigned to administrative positions, were inactive, or were dead.

But Garrett still worked the field. And even though Mike, Charlene and Garrett had been partners for years, neither of them had any idea how old she really was. In reality, at this point in time, so many from her past had died that to her knowledge, only the Intermediary knew her actual age. The Intermediary was rather timeless and ageless herself, and Garrett had no idea of her true age. Although ultimately responsible for the management and governance of the grid, the Intermediary did not have a Zen designation. In Garrett’s mind, she often thought of her as Zen 0.

Char punched Mike in the arm. “Of course the boss is going. The few times you and I go out alone, it always ends in disaster.”

Mike sighed. “Sad but true.” He winked at Garrett. “Ain’t no one calmer, no one cooler under pressure.”

“It’s my years of experience,” Garrett said with another sigh. “Did the disturbance begin in 52-1 or 52-2?” she asked, tilting her head to the side and addressing a point slightly above everyone’s head in the room, deliberately looking at nothing. It was a standard gesture, considered polite and good etiquette so that no one else in the room mistakenly thought she was speaking to them. People who did not engage in such etiquette were referred to disparagingly as “bleeders,” i.e. those who let their internal and external dialogues bleed together, causing confusion.

Zen 64 and 82 knew Garrett was addressing Central Communications, and the response was piped into the common channel.

“52-1,” came the soothing female voice. It was only vaguely robotic, retaining just enough of that flavor for an appropriate level of professionalism.

“So it’s on the Amish side,” Char said, “damn I hate those outfits.”

She stood. All three were dressed identically in gray and black form-fitting jumpsuits. From a distance, the material looked like cloth. Closer inspection, however, revealed hundreds of thousands of flexible nano-fibers woven together so that it was essentially a giant circuit board. The uniforms

were similar in appearance to the gray and blue dress of every other member of the population. Theirs, however, were thickly armored and more functionally extreme than the civilian suit. The nano-fibers collected light, bending it, shaping it, creating any form of illusion desired.

“Do we have to go native on this one?” Mike asked, knowing the answer. “I look like a dick in that beard.”

“Yes,” Garrett said, “52-1 is an isolation sector. You know it’s SOP to go in native and only go Guardian when we have to.”

“Fuck,” Char said, tilting her head and looking to the ceiling. “Access library, appropriate attire, Sector 46-G-52-1.”

Her clothing blurred, shifted, then transformed. She was no longer wearing the gray and black jumpsuit, but rather a long black dress, white apron, and white hat. Mike laughed out loud.

“As many times I’ve seen you in that dress, it’s still so damn funny.”

“Fuck off, preacher boy, and get your beard on.”

Mike, too, shifted his suit and he was now wearing the traditional Amish garb and beard. He was gigantic for an Amish and refused to change the color of his skin, which was not required by policy, so he cut quite an interesting figure.

It was now Garrett’s turn. “I’m going to have to SC for this, you know the males won’t recognize my authority while native.”

“SC” was slang for sex-change. Gender in many ways had become as meaningless as race. However, in areas that requested and qualified for pure illusion, Garrett tried to adhere as closely as possible to local custom. She wasn’t required to; Zen Guardians could go anywhere and do anything they wished within policy. But sometimes it was easier to accomplish goals by taking the path of least resistance.

The algorithms could somewhat change one’s appearance, but they always held the seed of the original face. Garrett preferred to keep hers as close to her natural looks as possible, albeit male instead of female. “Activate SC, Amish attire, elder council member.”

A flash of blue light bathed her body, then changed her outward appearance. She glanced down, then looked to Char to confirm the complete transition.

“You know, you make a pretty hot looking guy, boss. But that beard has got to go.”

“Yeah,” Garrett said, “the sooner we get this done, the sooner it’s gone. Let’s go.”

The three hopped the light rail system. Private transportation no longer existed, other than for public safety and government officials. And when travel was for non-emergency purposes, they generally took public transportation. It gave them an opportunity to patrol different sectors while in camouflage.

The train was always an experience, as were all shared spaces of the grid. Over ninety-nine percent of the human population was now under the influence of augmented reality twenty-four hours a day. Ninety-nine percent of the one billion people left on earth lived in a world that did not actually exist, a world created by a computer that was overlaid on actual reality so that they could see and experience life any way they chose. It wasn’t real, but no one cared anymore. After World War V, roughly half of the earth’s land masses were no longer livable. What remained of the decimated populations congregated to the cities as a whole, desperate for any type of communal living.

Augmented reality was not new; it was already entrenched before the wars and disasters. But what it morphed into never could have been expected. It was initially a social experiment, a way of overlaying information onto places and things. But the information began to become the place, began to become the thing, and soon the places and things themselves became less interesting and eventually ceased to exist in any meaningful way.

The “grid” and “AR” were interchangeable terms, although in a technical sense, the grid was the physical hardware that ran the AR system. AR could be experienced in three ways. It could be experienced in isolation, in which a single person overlaid the theme they wished on whatever they were seeing. It could be experienced in groups in which the group as a whole shared and interacted within a theme. Or it could be turned off entirely, in which a person saw what was really in front of their eyes.

No one ever used option number three anymore. Well, no one except Guardians, and most of them did so only because it was part of their job. And Guardians alone had a most interesting option number four. Because

it was their duty to maintain and protect the integrity of so many competing illusory worlds, they could also see what any given individual was seeing at any given time. Which is what made shared spaces so very interesting.

For a moment, as she often did, Garrett switched her visual plane off-grid. The interior of the car was very sterile, very plain, no adornment or decoration whatsoever. All of the occupants were dressed in identical blue and gray jumpsuits. Most were exceedingly plain and drab individuals, so little individuality amongst them they could have been automatons. Mike and Char were dressed in their Guardian uniforms, as was Garrett. No one on the train was aware that they were Guardians, although were any of them to go off grid for even a moment, that fact would immediately become known by their distinctive garb. But no one ever chose option number three anymore, not even for a second.

Garrett switched back to the shared channel, and Mike and Char were again dressed as Amish, as was everyone else on the train. They had not so much altered their appearance as aligned themselves with Sector 52-1's grid so that they would perceive and share the reality they lived in.

Garrett examined the other occupants of the train, always curious to see where or when they had chosen to live. A very pleasant looking, elderly lady sat in front of her. In the Amish reality, she was quietly humming while knitting a sweater. Garrett gave the mental command to shift to her reality, and was unsurprised to see she had turned back time to before the wars, to what she probably assumed was a happier era. This was very common in people who had grown up in ubiquitous AR, to choose the reminiscences of someone else. They had no choice, because now no one had a life to remember, they had only memories of fabrications.

She moved to the man behind her, who had chosen a less mundane world in which to live. It looked to be around 19th century, mid-western United States. Everyone was dressed as a cowboy, and he himself bristled with six guns and a bandolier. He wore a marshal's badge on his chest and twirled the tips of his waxed mustache while he fingered his pocket watch.

Char and Mike were clearly engaged in the same activity as Garrett was.

"Uh oh," Mike said, "pervert on aisle 6."

Char and Garrett both switched to the indicated channel and burst out laughing. This was probably the most common reality they saw. It had

many sordid nicknames, but its official title wasn't much better. It was known as Nudist Colony.

Everyone on the train was completely naked, including the man who sat with his legs spread wide as he gaped about at the imaginary nudity around him.

"Oh please," Char said, examining herself, "my breasts do not look like that."

"And why is my package so small?" Mike said, glancing down in dismay.

"You know the algorithms are always conservative with a small degree of randomness thrown in." Garrett glanced at the size of Zen 64's package. "That does look a little small for you."

"Thank you," Mike said indignantly, "I'm going to request the engineers re-seed the noise factor for the random generator on Nudist Colony. It's clearly generating unnatural results."

Garrett had to smile at the phrase. "Unnatural." None of this was natural. It could only be natural within its frame of reference, only be consistent within its theme.

As omnipresent as the grid was, it had its limitations. People could not just make up anything. The programming and processing power required to sustain and overlay even a single reality was enormous. The engineers solved that problem by providing broad themes for people to choose from. One could always make a request, within reason, and if there was sufficient demand for that theme, the overlay would be created. And the more information that was available, the more likely the project would be completed. If a time or place had a great deal of historical and cultural information available, a robust world could be manufactured and sustained. Garrett was always amazed at the number of people who chose to live in Ancient Greece, wandering about statuary wearing togas. They weren't actually ever in Greece; that island nation had ceased to exist and the entire Mediterranean was irradiated and would be uninhabitable for the next 245,000 years. But wherever these people were, well, it was Ancient Greece.

And the world that the theme was based on did not necessarily have to be "real," a term Garret admitted had become somewhat slippery. One of their most frequent calls involved disputes between the occupants of Starfleet Academy and those from the Jedi Training Center, not to mention

the internecine disputes between the “Kirks” and the “Picards.” That sector was one giant fiasco.

Garrett examined the various occupants of the train car. Some of the limitations of the grid were coded in on purpose because much of the early AR revolved around game programming and theory. Allowing individuals to change their appearance continually and without restriction would have broken the system. Changing the aggregate was easy in comparison. So an individual could somewhat change their appearance based on certain algorithms. They could make themselves slightly more or slightly less attractive, which, broken down into code, generally meant their features were more or less symmetrical, more or less proportional, and more or less interracial. Years of study had been distilled down into the rules universal attractiveness, which seemed to be consistent across almost all cultures. Humans liked symmetry, they liked proportion, they liked an “international” look, and they liked anything that represented fertility. Youth, of course, played into that latter category, and age was also something that could be altered. But again, the illusion could only be carried so far because the AR was merely laying on top of what was really there. It was generally recommended that one not alter one’s age by more than plus or minus ten years because it began to strain the illusion. But, like the bad comb-over from years gone by, there were always those who pushed the envelope, wearing an illusion that looked like a 20 year-old while the body walked and talked like it was 50.

Garrett glanced around the train. She was always curious why the engineers included the “less attractive” option. Statistics showed that 96 percent of the people chose to make themselves more attractive, 3 percent chose to appear as they really were, and only 1 percent of the population chose to make themselves less attractive. Even those choosing to inhabit so-called post-apocalyptic realities wanted to look good in their hellish worlds. A robust 99.6 percent of all males had chosen the penile enlargement option, and eventually a delimiter had to be coded into the system because there was too great of a disconnect between illusion and reality. It may have looked like 10 inches, but it didn’t feel like 10 inches.

“I’m going back to 52-1,” Garrett said, and Mike and Char transitioned back to their Amish garb while Garrett changed sexes once more. Interestingly, physical sex changes were less regulated than virtual ones.

The transgender trait in individuals was identified very young with an extraordinary degree of accuracy, and the appropriate surgical adjustments were made. A male who had transitioned to a female was forever identified with that biological sex, and vice versa.

Virtual sex changes, however, were not allowed in a casual sense. In the early stages of AR this prohibition had not been in place and it caused enormous conflict. The engineers had reasoned that many video game players explored virtual worlds as the opposite sex and therefore might want that option in “real” life. The problem was that there was no actual physical contact in the virtual world whereas most AR did in fact end in bed. It was one thing to have your pixelated avatar bopping a she-male, another thing entirely to physically experience this for yourself. After numerous encounters ended in violence, the engineers attempted to code in a number of safeguards. Although anyone could change their appearance, there was one spot on the body that could not be altered. It was affectionately referred to as the “Adam’s apple” and it was conveniently located in the same vicinity on the jumpsuits, red for males, blue for females. So although anyone could appear as male or female, they could not hide their actual sex. Everyone had the option of ignoring the indicator on others if they chose, or even disabling the notification, but there were no unwelcome surprises.

The exceptions to this rule were Guardians in the line of duty. The indicator on Garrett’s armor would change to red when she went SC, then to blue when she returned to normal.

Although people could flit about from theme to theme, they generally settled on one reality as their reality, even though it was never actually *the* reality. True, AR was now mature and well-established, but it suffered some early growing pains before standard rules were adopted. The first generation born into AR, when the law passed and the corneal implants became mandatory at birth, bore the brunt of those early mistakes. Some parents allowed their children freedom to experiment, and that had horrible results. Because of that, many parents chose not to tell their children about the grid at all until they were teenagers, which had even worse results. Twenty-three percent of those teenagers committed suicide upon learning that what they thought was real did not exist. It scarred a generation, and standard rules of education were put in place. Parents still had the ultimate say over what theme their children would live in, but the State required a

step-by-step orientation to the grid at certain age-specific intervals.

“Come back, boss.”

Mike drew Garrett from her reverie because the train was entering the station. Both Char and Mike were used to Garrett’s endless bouts of reflection. The three exited onto a platform that was likely very plain, but to their eyes looked like something from the 1850s. Everything was finely crafted of wood, what metal was visible was simple and shaped by hand. There was little adornment, but the furniture had a hardy sturdiness to it and the building a clean architecture. The one thing that could not be hidden, however, was the “sponginess” of the ground, which seemed to give way with every step. There were plates beneath nearly every well-traveled surface, plates that absorbed and collected the kinetic energy of pedestrians as they walked across and compressed the surface. This station had the appearance of being devoid of technology, but that was an illusion on top of an illusion, because the technology to power the grid was woven into its very fabric, as it was everywhere.

Sector 52-G was within walking distance, which was good because Mike was none too fond of horses. A wagon with a happy Amish couple drove by, offering them a ride, but Garrett declined. The three Guardians appeared Amish to them, but that was because the Guardians had purposely altered their appearance and were sharing their grid. But everything else also looked Amish to the happy couple because that was how they chose to see the world. Even the Raiders that lived in the adjacent sector to them would look Amish. And conversely, the Amish would look like Raiders to the occupants of that sector, because that was the reality they chose to overlay on everything.

That was one of the tacit agreements to living within the grid: you could control how you saw everyone else and how you saw yourself, but you couldn’t control how they saw you. True, your default appearance, i.e. the one that you decided upon, was largely retained regardless of what theme was overlaid upon you. This seemed strange to those who had not lived through the history of AR implementation, because why shouldn’t you be able to see others any way you wanted when you could so change the world around you? But Garrett had been there through the chaos of this particular experimental phase. There were fads where everyone looked like a certain model or celebrity, and it was boring. If the changes to ap-

pearance were too bizarre it became wearying, unpredictable and jarring. Eventually, there was a complete loss of self, total disorientation when it no longer mattered how you saw yourself because it was in no way connected to how everyone else saw you. Additionally, too much energy was required to keep pace with the variability of this model. So the engineers maintained a default state of “self,” even if that self was artificial and created. And each theme would statistically vary the template, but seeds of the original self would remain.

AR was most effective on a global scale and themes were much simpler to regulate, little more than a series of conditional statements and resultant function calls. If the Amish wanted Garrett to look Amish, she would look Amish. If the Raiders wanted her to look like a Raider, she would look like a Raider. If she went to the Aquarium Sector and they wanted her to look like a fish, she would look like a fish. But she would look like a Garrett fish, which in her case was exactly as she looked under normal circumstances since Garrett was one of the 3% who had chosen not to alter her appearance. Guardians had the ability to override the overlay if it was necessary to maintain order, but most of the time it was simpler just to stay in character.

Certain groups chose to live within a shared reality, as the Amish did. Then everyone pretty much saw the same thing. And when such a group could demonstrate long-term cohesiveness, they could apply for an isolation permit. Isolation permits were rarely granted, and religious affiliation was the number one reason they were requested and approved. Requested, because each religion felt they needed to separate themselves from the unclean unbelievers surrounding them, and granted because the secularists in charge of the grid found that religious zealots were a pain in the ass and generally couldn't get along with anyone else.

The grid itself was not geographically confined. It could exist anywhere the infrastructure was in place, and it was in place in almost everywhere that was still inhabitable. Only Eastern China and the upper portion of North America, primarily the US and Canada, had emerged relatively unscathed from the world wars and then were able to survive the subsequent natural disaster that nearly destroyed the planet. Some of this was the luck of location, some of it was due to severe isolationist policies that both countries had adopted, and some was due to the back-dealing between the two nations that essentially sold everyone else out. But geog-

raphy did not limit the grid.

Except in the case of an isolation permit. An isolation permit designated a discrete area in which only one manifestation of the grid was allowed. In Sector 52-G, everyone was Amish, everyone looked Amish, everyone saw Amish, and everyone acted Amish, whether they wanted to or not. For that reason, most people avoided going into isolation areas, other than for tourist-type excursions. No one was required to stay within an isolation area, but while inside of one, they were required to adhere to all local customs and mores.

The Guardians were approaching a small village and a group of men were engaged in a barn-raising. They all wore black pants and white shirts, their long sleeves rolled up in their exertion. A group of older men, probably the village elders, were standing off to the side, watching and giving direction. A group of women, all dressed in identical, ankle-length dresses and bonnets, sat off to the side engaged in various womanly projects. The younger women bowed their heads modestly when the young men tried to catch their eye.

“God I hate this world,” Char murmured.

Garrett cleared her throat. It would not be professional to intrude upon their reality. She approached the group of elders, and a man with graying temples and a weathered face turned to greet her.

“Hail, strangers, are ye here for a visit to our fine town? Perhaps wishing to join our community?”

“No sir,” Garrett said politely, “we are here on a different matter.”

Just then, the village leader caught sight of Mike, who, although dressed in traditional Amish garb, looked nothing of the sort. His black skin was a stark contrast to the universally white population in front of him. He was also much larger than anyone present, and his muscles seemed to bulge from the black coat and pants, even though his clothing should have been as form-fitting as his suit.

“I see,” the village elder said uneasily, his eyes returning to Garrett. “And how can we be of assistance to you?”

“We are here on a complaint, something regarding the neighbors.”

The unidentified “we” in her statement increased the uneasiness of the entire group, and many of the men working on the barn stopped so they could overhear the conversation.

“We have not made any complaints about the neighbors,” the elder said. “Although we consider them a strange lot, they generally keep to themselves.”

“No,” Garrett said patiently, “you don’t understand. They have complained about you.”

A large man with a reddish beard stepped forward and Garrett could feel Mike tense behind her.

“It’s that little harlot, isn’t it?” he demanded, “that little Jezebel!”

“Now Jeb,” the elder said, trying to calm the red-haired man. “Keep your words peaceful.”

“And what harlot would that be?” Garrett asked Jeb, her voice still neutral.

“My daughter, that’s who!” Jeb spat out. “She disappeared last week, went over the border. I went to get her, to bring her home, and she refused.”

Garrett could almost hear Char’s eyes rolling in her head, but again she maintained complete neutrality.

“How old is your daughter?”

Jeb clenched his jaw, and Garrett knew the answer.

“She turned eighteen last week.”

“I see,” Garrett said, nodding her understanding. “Then you know that she’s an adult.”

The statement was far more than commiseration with an angry father, it was a statement of legally binding fact. Parents had control over their children’s augmented reality up until their eighteenth birthday. They could require a son or daughter to share their theme throughout their childhood and teenage years. But once the child reached the legal age of adulthood, they were emancipated to choose any reality they wished. And clearly Jeb’s daughter, the “harlot,” no longer wished to be Amish.

The elder to whom Garrett had first spoken was growing more uneasy in direct contrast to, and possibly because of, her continued equanimity.

“Are you Keepers?” he asked, for the first time stepping out of character.

“No,” Garrett said simply, knowing that her one-word response would only increase his unease by telling him exactly what he didn’t want to know.

Keepers were a quasi-law enforcement agency that numbered in the hundreds of thousands. They could not see or control the augmented re-

ality of others and had no more control over, or access to, the grid than anyone else. They were simply peacekeepers operating within the different themes, generally assigned to a particular theme much like a police officer would be assigned a particular beat. They dealt with the lower-level difficulties and crimes that had nothing to do with the grid itself. By admitting to the man that they were not Keepers, that left only one possibility for their identities.

The elder grew very pale. “We don’t want any trouble,” he said, his voice trembling slightly.

Jeb stepped forward, still belligerent. “Simon, I’m not going to stand by—”

Simon turned to him almost violently. “You will do as the council instructs you to do. You will do as I instruct you to do. And you will be censured for this most grievous violation of our ways.”

It appeared that Simon’s agitation finally communicated to Jeb exactly who stood in front of him. His eyes darted to Garrett, then went to the ground.

“I’m sorry, Simon. You’re right.”

Garrett examined Jeb at length, determining that his contrition, or at least his fear, was legitimate and that he would not cause further difficulty.

“Good,” she said, “then we will be on our way.”

The men all removed their hats, and the women, who had risen to their feet, curtsied as the three walked by. Garrett could hear their murmuring as they passed through the gated fence to an adjacent field, which drifted away as they put distance between them.

“I have never known anyone who could say so much with so few words,” Mike said with approval.

“I’m not going to use words in situations where they won’t do any good,” Garrett replied, glancing at the small display that appeared in the palm of her hand, hovering just above the surface of her skin. “The border is about half a mile this way. Let’s make certain ‘Jezebel’ left on her own accord.”

Char stepped over the gnarled root of a tree. “This seems like something the Keepers could have handled, pretty mundane.”

“Yes,” Garrett agreed. She had already received a private communique explaining the reasoning. “They sent us out because they’re re-evaluating

the isolation permit, and technically this was a violation of the terms of the Amish agreement.”

“Are you going to revoke their permit?” Mike asked.

“No,” Garrett replied. “This is pretty minor stuff. Had we received any resistance, I might have considered it, but I think ‘Simon’ has ‘Jeb’ under control.”

“That still doesn’t explain why they sent YOU out,” Char said, and Garrett smiled.

“I’ve given up trying to decipher the reasoning of the Council. Sometimes I think they do it just to keep me from getting rusty.”

They were approaching the border, which was not visible in any way beyond the marking on the display. They crossed the grid-line, which was completely uneventful. Everything looked and felt exactly the same.

“Okay, switching AR to Sector 52-2.”

And then everything changed. Before, they had been standing in a pastoral scene of rolling hills and babbling brooks. Now they were standing in a post-apocalyptic wasteland. The world was a junkyard of twisted metal and jumbled concrete. The gently flowing stream was now a toxic morass.

“Now this is more like it,” Char said, examining herself. She was dressed in leather and chains, her full breasts pushed upward in a corset adorned with spikes. Garrett glanced down at herself. She was female once more, and dressed slightly more conservatively in leather pants, a vest, and some type of duster. She, too, bristled with spikes and chains, and apparently now she wore an eye-patch. Sometimes the engineers had quite a sense of humor.

“Now that’s what I’m talking about,” Mike said, glancing down. He was shirtless, his huge chest muscles bulging, tattoos on every inch of his dark skin. He was gazing down appreciatively at what looked like a metal athletic cup worn on the outside of his leather pants.

“I don’t know,” Garrett said dubiously, “that might be all cod piece.”

“I assure you that’s my package,” he said with satisfaction.

Char snorted. “We might want to re-seed this noise generator as well.”

They continued on and it wasn’t long before they came across the first group of raiders. They were dressed as outlandishly as the Guardians, and Garrett felt like they were all fugitives from some bad movie from her childhood. This group outdid them in terms of piercings, however, which

ranged in appearance from the mildly uncomfortable to the unbearably painful. One woman had chains running from her pierced lip down to the piercing of each nipple, which then disappeared down into the top of her low-cut pants, where presumably it was connected to something else that was pierced. She followed Garrett's gaze.

"Want to see where that chain goes, darling?"

"No thank you," Garrett said politely. "We're looking for a girl that came over the border last week, should be a new addition to your tribe."

The pierced woman shoved away from the pock-marked wall. "You ain't some of those Amish fucks, are you?"

Mike chuckled. "I assure you we are not."

She appraised him through slit eyes. "Ray! Get out here! We got some more of those Amish bastards out here!"

Ray and a whole group of his buddies came out, all of them as stupid as the pierced woman. They tried to appear menacing, dismissing Mike and leering at Char. They surrounded the three threateningly, obviously forgetting that they were merely living inside a theme. It was not uncommon, especially for groups who chose to live in extreme versions of reality for long, uninterrupted periods of time. This group clearly thought they were some type of hardened gang of criminals, an illusion Garrett was not about to allow to continue.

"That's enough," she said sharply, and snapped her fingers.

The effect was immediate and staggering. A blue flash of light flickered across the landscape, rippling outward, appearing almost to be an imperfection in the scenery, an EMF wave that bent and distorted everything it touched as it propagated.

Mike chuckled a low chuckle. He looked over to Char. "I never get tired of that."

The response of the raiders was more pronounced.

"Jesus fucking Christ, they're Guardians."

Ray suddenly remembered that when he was not leader of Satan's Riders, he was a mediocre accountant at a mid-sized law firm.

"Look, look! We were only kidding! What do you want? You can have anything!" He shoved the pierced woman towards them in panicked confusion. "Anything!"

Garrett felt as if she were dealing with a child. "Where is the girl who

came across the grid-line last week?”

A young woman wearing leather pants, leather boots, a red head scarf, and a sheer, sleeveless cropped T-shirt stepped forward. “I’m Eliza, I mean Liz.”

Garret looked upon her impassively. “Are you here of your own volition?”

“Yes,” the young woman said firmly, then a little less confidently. “I think so.”

Garrett tilted her head to one side. “Eliza?” she said, using the Amish version of her name. “Is anyone coercing you to stay?”

“No,” Eliza said, shaking her head, then firm once more. “No, not at all. I’ve just had doubts. And I miss my family.”

“We’re your family now, babe,” Ray said less than convincingly.

Garrett stepped forward and held out her hand, palm up. Eliza placed her hand on the palm, face down. A flash of light appeared between the two palms, and the data transfer was complete.

“That is my holograph contact, and I can be reached at all hours. You have the legal right to return to Sector 46-G-52-1 at any time, although upon your return, you will be bound by the customs of that isolation sector. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Eliza responded.

“Good,” Garrett said, “And the rest of you?”

The response was muttered, anxious, and unanimously affirmative.

“Yeah, yeah, we got it.”

“Good, I don’t want to be out here again anytime soon.”

The ride back to the station was uneventful and Garrett was left to contemplate once more why she had been sent on such a seemingly low-level mission. She wondered which council the order had come from. There were an endless number of councils, The Council for Education and Development, The Council for Order, Law, and Regulation, The Council for Wellness and Adjustment, all of which had darker functions that would have made Orwell proud of those names. But there were really only two that mattered, two that stood above all others, and only two that Garrett

answered to.

The first was SCAR. SCAR had twenty members, five Master techno-psychiatrists, five Master Guardians, and ten engineers. The whole field of techno-social psychology had blossomed out of early experiments with social networking, then flourished when augmented reality took hold. Techno-psychiatrists researched and attempted to predict the mental and emotional effects of technology implementation. What the psychiatrists could predict, the engineers could create, and the Guardians could control. The Master Guardians were on SCAR to maintain the integrity and consistency of the illusion of AR. The rest of the council was staffed by the Master Engineers, five from the software side and five from the hardware side, each specializing in some facet of the creation and manifestation of the grid. Granted, there were millions of positions below them all fulfilling some role, from the intern, real-time texture mapper to the senior software automation engineer, but these twenty people stood above all with tremendous responsibility and power. The world no longer had presidents or kings or queens, but, SCAR, also known as The Supreme Council of Augmented Reality, ruled everything by pursuing the simple goal of maintaining a perfect, personal illusion for each person on the planet.

But there was one council above SCAR, one far more shadowy and exclusive, one known only as Echelon. It had only three members, two men and one woman who not even most members of SCAR had met face-to-face. And for some reason she could not pinpoint, Garrett was almost certain the order had come from these three.

CHAPTER 3

THE KEEPER GLANCED TO THE figure coming down the road, then did a double-take. He elbowed his partner in the ribs none-too-gently to rouse him from his inattentive state. His partner grumbled and stood upright, also turning his gaze to the woman coming toward them.

“Yeah, yeah, I see her. I don’t know why you think she’s so special.”

The first Keeper tried not to stare at the approaching woman, thereby emphasizing his interest by his exaggerated disinterest.

“You’ve seen her locker, where she keeps her jumpsuit.”

“So what, a couple of these weirdos have private changing rooms.”

“No, I’m not talking about her room, I’m talking about the locker.”

The partner eyed his friend. “You’re not supposed to be in those rooms.”

“I wasn’t in there. I mean, not really. I caught her in the hallway as she was coming out, tried to get her talking so I could get a peek. Fucking creeped me out, though. She has this way of looking at you, like she sees right through you.”

The partner snorted. “Everyone has that look.”

“No,” the Keeper said, shaking his head. “It was different. I don’t know how to explain it. But it was different.”

“You think she’s a senior Keeper?”

The Keeper stared at the woman darkly. “I think she’s a Guardian.”

The partner exploded in harsh laughter. “Why the fuck would a Guardian live in an off-grid hell-hole like Refuge? Yeah, that’s where I

would live if I had almost infinite power, someplace where I couldn't use it."

That made too much sense to the Keeper, deflating him somewhat. "I'm just saying, there's something about her."

Garrett was near enough the two that they quieted. Of course her armor augmented her hearing so she had heard every word they said. And it was humorous to her for several reasons, but mostly because she was making no attempt to hide her distinctive black-and-gray uniform and had either Keeper chosen to go off the grid for even a moment it would have instantly confirmed her identity as a Guardian. But neither did so, perhaps because they did not wish to, or more likely, because it did not occur to them. The Keeper sentry would rather engage in amateurish subterfuge, attempting to peek over her shoulder at her locker rather than look at what was right before him.

"Hi guys," Garrett said mildly, then pushed into the gatehouse.

The interior of the gatehouse was simple. The primary space was a public changing room. Almost all public spaces, even those once segregated by sex such as restrooms, were co-ed. Since no one was actually seeing what you really looked like and crime was almost non-existent, the need for privacy had diminished. Anyone could imagine you naked at any time, so what use was it? The gatehouse was slightly different, however, because the public lockers were framed with small cubicles that could be shielded with a curtain pulled across the front. The reason for this small nod to modesty was that the gatehouse was one of the few places on earth that people removed their AR jumpsuits, which was a requirement to enter into Refuge.

There were a few residents of Refuge that Garrett recognized, and she nodded to them. They nodded back, watching curiously as she disappeared through the back door as she always did. She moved down the dimly lit hallway, stopped in front of an imposing looking metal door, then pressed her palm to the biometric scanner. The door slid smoothly open and Garrett stepped inside a small, clean, metallic room. The door slid closed behind her.

The protection on the door was minimal because it did not really matter if someone broke into the room. It was the locker in front of her, the one in which she would store her armor, that was protected beyond measure. It required eight unique biometric signatures from her, produced

in an exact order that was randomly changed each day. The order was communicated to her by a series of flashing colored lights associated with each signature. The lights flashed, green, red, blue, yellow, orange, white, purple, then black, and then in order, she underwent a fingerprint scan, iris scan, voice analysis, face recognition, retinal scan, breath analysis, skin analysis for both DNA and scent, and finally a brain scan.

“Welcome home, Zen 12.”

“Thank you,” Garrett said as her locker opened, the sound of compressed gas escaping. True, she was speaking to an artificial intelligence, but that didn’t mean she couldn’t be polite.

Garrett began undressing. According to the engineers who designed her locker, seven of the eight biometric signals were unnecessary. The techno-psychiatrist who scanned her brain, who was also a neurologist, determined that her brain signature was so unique in the general population it was not only unlikely to be duplicated, it was unlikely it could even be reproduced by other than pure chance.

She pulled on jeans, a black T-shirt, some black sneakers, and a dark green jacket. Unlike most people walking into the gatehouse, she walked out looking exactly the same except for a change of clothes.

The few people in front of her walked through the scanners without incident while the Keepers looked on. Refuge was a designated “AR free” zone, and although not completely off the grid, the invasiveness of AR, as most residents termed it, was not ever-present. The scanners would identify any bit of technology that would overlay AR on Refuge or its residents.

Refuge had a small stable population and a smaller sub-population that fluctuated in a predictable pattern. There were always new residents who thought they were through with the grid, that they wanted “reality” in all its harsh beauty, but they generally lasted about a week. That hearty frontier spirit wilted under the banality of day-to-day life without the grid, and it was far easier to scratch that itch by joining the Oklahoma Trail sector where there was more excitement and the risk was purely theoretical. It reminded Garrett of the beginning of the 21st century, when military video games were ubiquitous, but military enlistment was at an all-time low.

Garrett passed through the scanners, as always, without incident. She nodded to the Keepers at the gate then stepped into Refuge. Most newcomers were disappointed because nothing looked that different from the world they had just stepped from. To their eyes, Refuge looked like any other run-down town, signs of dirt, disrepair, and disorganization evident everywhere. The city sign even had the “g” scratched out and replaced so that people were greeted with “Welcome to Refuse.”

To Garrett’s eyes, nothing looked the same. In the early days of robotics, there was a great deal of research testing human’s acceptance of artificial life forms. Researchers found that people felt more affinity towards robots the more human-like they became. But there was this space where the robot was almost human, but not quite, where suddenly the humans were revolted, repulsed by the close-but-yet-so-far likeness. This space was called the Uncanny Valley and its study exploded when the field of AR began to grow.

But the Uncanny Valley had swallowed the world, and humans were so deep inside that valley they could no longer see over the cliff walls in any direction, and the valley had become so wide that for all practical purposes, it had ceased to exist.

But not for Garrett. Her eyes could discern between the dust that collected in the corners and cracks of Refuge, and the dust patterns the grid generated from a fractal or turbulence model with random noise levels. She could tell the difference between the rough, scarred wood of the “Refuse” sign and a carefully designed texture map with vector displacement applied. She could tell the difference between skin that was truly kissed by the sun and that which merely had a very good sub-surface scatter shader applied.

Refuge, although not completely removed from the grid, was largely what it appeared to be, as much as anything was before AR draped its veil over the world. All of the logistical functions, electricity, water, trash reuse/ destruction, sewage conversion, were still part of the public system. The residents, like everyone on the planet, had the corneal implants. They carried the nano-particulates that nestled in the meninges of the brain, silently communicating with the grid and carrying massive amounts of data back to the Department of Statistical Analysis.

Although almost everyone was familiar with the corneal implants, few

knew of the nano-particulates, tiny dust motes of an individual's cloned brain cells, 3D-printed into sensors that acted as transducers between the brain and the world around it, installed at the same time as the corneal implants. The sensors converted physical sensation to electrical signal, and vice versa, contributing monumentally to the illusion of the grid. Initially, the AR overlay had been merely visual, but the disconnect with the other senses shattered the illusion. But once smell, taste, and hearing were added into the mix, the illusion was almost flawless. Only touch remained out of the grasp of the engineers, the somatosensory system having too many inputs, not merely skin, but bones, organs, and muscles. It was Garrett's understanding they were closing in on this holy grail of artifice, however, by creating nano-particulates out of spinal material that would float in spinal fluid, intercepting whatever signals were transmitted from the various inputs and translating them into something "appropriate." Garrett had observed one experiment in which a blind-folded test subject placed her hand into a box and was asked to describe what she was holding. She was quite certain it was a soft blanket, perhaps lambskin or something similar, and the engineers all nodded to one another quite pleased. They did not reveal to the woman she was fondling a cactus.

Garrett reached out and ran her hand along the worn sign, enjoying its rough surface and the gentle squeak of the hinges as it swung on its rusty chains.

"Hey Garrett!"

She turned at the greeting and waved to her neighbor, Bill. Bill was a thin, lanky man, his arms and legs a little too long, his nose a little too large, his thinning hair ruffled, and his smile bright enough to light up a room.

"You coming to the Duck tonight?"

"Yeah," Garrett said, "probably."

"You know Rachel will ask me first thing," Bill said.

"Tell her I'll be there around 2000," Garrett said, reaching her doorstep. She unlocked her front door with an ancient device referred to as a key. When she had first moved to Refuge and purchased her small house, she had replaced the electronic door lock with the archaic mechanical device. Her neighbors had never seen such a thing. She allowed free examination of the magical equipment, and they marveled at its simplicity, the ease

with which it worked. And finally one man, Daniel, stated the obvious.

“That thing is off the grid.”

“Well,” Garrett said, “as much as anything can be. But yes. It doesn’t use any electricity. It doesn’t talk to me, or open when I wave my hand, or set the thermostat in my house. But, I turn the key, and it unlocks, pretty much every time.”

Within days, Daniel, a big bear of a man who liked to build things with his hands, had begun fashioning locks for everyone in Refuge. It became such a tourist attraction that they placed a mock door just outside the gates so that the curious could examine the item without having to actually leave the grid themselves, and without disturbing the inhabitants of Refuge.

The door opened with another mild squeal of hinges and Garrett stepped into her house. It was clean, but a bit disorganized, not cluttered, just comfortably unkempt. It had a holographic entertainment center in the front room where one could play games, watch movies, read, or any combination of the above in three dimensions. Although movies had gone through an experimental phase of audience interactivity, that had morphed into something very different. Originally, producers thought the audience wished to determine the twists and turns of the plot, the outcome of the story, but that was too much work and required too much thought and not what the audience wanted at all. Instead, movies had become much more like video games, in which the viewer could wander around and explore the room in which the actors were playing out their scenes. Or they could join in the action, fighting the enemy at parts until the more sedate parts resumed. Or at any time, they could touch anything in the scene and be linked to some bit of information that would satisfy their curiosity. It had changed the entertainment industry drastically because artistic camera angles no longer mattered. Rather it was the detail of the scenes and the degree of interaction that were preminent.

Garrett rarely used the holographic system at all, mainly because it seemed very much like living within the grid and not that entertaining. It reminded her of people who used to play simulation games in which they held jobs, bought houses, got married, raised children, fed pets, in short, everything they did in real life. It all seemed very odd to her, something of a duplication of effort.

The house had a very simple layout: the front room, a bedroom, a small kitchen, and a small bathroom. It was a little over 500 square units, which in her childhood would have been considered tiny but now was considered spacious. Few people, even in Refuge, lived alone.

The green jacket was hung from a hook on the wall and Garrett settled into the adaptive memory foam couch. It shifted itself to her desired firmness and she relaxed, allowing her eyes to close. She did not sit in some painful lotus position, but merely kept her back straight and both feet on the floor, her hands comfortably resting on her thighs. She shifted her attention to her breathing, her focus on the gentle in-and-out of breath, the slow rise-and-fall of her diaphragm. The black nothingness that was not nothing but rather “no thing,” full of emptiness, floated before her eyes, then expanded outward, encompassing everything. Fragments of thought drifted in, but she did not push them away nor did she grab onto them. Rather she let them fade away without giving them attention. After a while, the thoughts ceased and there was only the dark light of her mind, utterly still and utterly peaceful.

The senior director of the Department of Statistical Analysis stood before a wall of holographic displays that shifted continuously providing information from a system that processed 300 yottabytes per second through quantum relays. Most of the sub-systems were monitored by artificial intelligence, and the AI sifted through the binary signals that existed in the either/or state, or sometimes both, representing emotions, thoughts, sensations, sight, sound, taste, really anything that the human brain processed. The flashes of light signified everything from hunger to satiety, sadness to despair, mild pleasure to violent death, although the last was now extremely rare.

Very few of the systems were monitored by humans, and only one by the senior director of the DSA. This particular system monitored the feedback and status of the Zen Guardians, possibly the most important individuals on the planet. Zen Guardians were not born; they were created, groomed almost from birth. Chosen from the highest DNA stock, they were strong, healthy, intelligent, but more importantly, possessed balance,

reason, and critical thinking. They also possessed an undefinable quality, a tolerance for ambiguity and a nonchalance that was almost psychopathic had it any other focus than the preservation of the grid. A Zen Guardian had to be capable of making the right decision at the right time in the right context, knowing that an hour later, that same decision in a different context could be completely wrong and even immoral.

The selection and identification of Zen Guardians was still something of a crap shoot. Although early attempts at genetic engineering had proved promising, humans learned the hard lesson that accelerating evolution was not a good idea. Bending natural selection to the whims of society had fairly horrific consequences as nature rarely gave something without taking something else away. When nature's take-away occurred over a hundred thousand years, it was not so noticeable. But when it occurred in a single life-span, or even in a single year, the consequences were far more evident. When one gene was modified, it was not a simple cause-and-effect relationship. That one gene might suppress another, which accelerated the growth of a third, which then mutated a fourth, which worked in tandem with a fifth, and so on. And even that complex scenario ignored the epigenetic ramifications. It was almost impossible to predict the outcome, and humans were reminded that the reason why evolution was so effective is that what did not adapt, died.

So Zen Guardians could not be created in that sense, but they were chosen almost from birth. And from those chosen, only a minute fraction would actually become Guardians.

The senior director looked up. A red light was flashing frantically, and the alarm, although muted, communicated the severity of incident. The director looked to the engineer monitoring the sensor display in question, but neither appeared anxious or even surprised.

"It's Zen 12."

"Very well," the director said calmly, "silence the alarm."

The director watched the red light blink silently. This was an almost daily occurrence, and sometimes more than once a day. The brain waves of Zen 12 settled into such an abnormal state that it triggered the alarm on a routine basis. The pattern was deeper than sleep yet stronger than major excitation, then fell into something resembling death. He had never met Zen 12, but he was told that the first time this had occurred, a major

response team had been dispatched only to discover her sitting quietly, unharmed and awake. The scientists had wanted to take her away for research purposes, but the Intermediary had intervened and shut that down immediately. That did not stop Echelon from issuing a quiet edict that all of Zen 12's activity was to be recorded and forwarded to R&D for research. The director did not know if Zen 12 was aware of this edict.