

Greg Wagner

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At The End  
Of  
Forever

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I would like to thank (in this order) My Wife Roberta, Wikipedia, Google Maps, and Amazon.com, because without any of the above this novel wouldn't have happened.



## Chapter 1

The City of Jerusalem (1AD)

It is the fifth day of Tammuz, in the Year of the World 3761;

*We are leaving the city under the cover of darkness. There is a general feeling of foreboding in the air. Mary is heavy with child and Joseph is receiving threats upon his life because he allowed "The Christ" to be buried in his family's tomb. The hierarchy is incensed. They wanted nothing to do with "the imposter" yet they care where he is buried? What sense does this make?*

*We will be travelling to Gaul where Joseph has already contacted associates who will provide us with sanctuary. A ship awaits us in Jaffa, I have arranged to take cuttings along and enough fruit to last me. The host has already been entrusted to the "Priory de L'arbre." Since they were the original guardians, I feel it is only proper to remand custody back to them.*

*I don't know if they will bring him with us or not. I have been thankfully kept out of their machinations so far. Mary, Martha, and I will stay in Gaul for the time being. Joseph and his associates plan on continuing to Britannia once we have settled in.*

*Jerusalem is in shambles. The House of David is torn asunder. Thankfully, the House of Benjamin is still on solid ground and my family continues to prosper. I have succeeded in liquidating the majority of my holdings here in the city over the last year, and I am ready for a clean break. Tonight is the night. Goodbye to my old life, I am leaving you behind.*

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Somewhere off the coast of Europe (1003 AD)

Sven Jorgenson wiped the ocean's spray from his beard again. The great Viking ship bucked and swayed through the

crashing waves, salt burning his cracked lips as he peered into the storm's gloom.

By order of Clan Leader Erick Erickson, Sven and his crew of sixty stalwarts had set forth on a mission of finding. Three long ships were to travel to the elusive "southlands" in search of fortune.

He glanced up at the ever-darkening sky and chuckled to himself as he watched his crew in action; *By Thor's hammer if this rain does not stop soon, there will be a mutiny, and who could disagree? Ha, and if it gets much worse, I will join them!*

The rain had fallen for twelve sunsets straight and supplies were dwindling quickly. Fresh water; always a valuable resource at sea, was also in short supply despite the raging storm all around them. The roar of the surf was so intense that it almost drowned out the cries of his navigator, who had walked up behind him on the undulating deck.

"Sven! Sven Jorgenson, we must turn back!" the mission's "Chief Navigator" Rolf Dagarak's voice barely cut through the noise of the storm as he stood wide-eyed, soaking wet, and shaking before Sven.

"The chart says the *Wyrn at the end of the world* lives here and that there isn't anything beyond, it just ends." Rolf stopped, and stared at him bewildered, with his drenched beard and hair giving him the appearance of a heretic madman, as he pointed at the half unrolled parchment in his hand.

A great bolt of lightning split the sky just then and was followed almost immediately by the crack, boom, and rumble sound of the subsequent thunder rolling across the water.

Sven waited until it had faded to echoes before he chuckled disarmingly.

"Of course Rolf my brother, for you see, we go beyond our ancestor's limited expectations." He laughed heartily, then slapped Rolf on the shoulder and boomed, "Do not fear, *we* will

make the charts from here on out and *we* will become the stuff of legend.”

Rolf looked at Sven doubtfully, but then nodded and rolled his map up. “I will do as you say Sven Jorgenson,” he replied simply and with that, he turned and made his way back to his post.

The trio of Viking ships sailed on for the rest of the morning and into the afternoon. Sixty-foot longboats plowing through enormous waves as the torrential rain and hurricane gusts continued to thrash them about.

Late in the afternoon, the storm let up.

As the sailors stood at their posts, a silence fell across them. It was as if everything in the world had stopped for just that instant and then, as one, the crew cheered. Their cries ringing out to Valhalla, loud enough to rival even the thunder itself.

It was as if the heavens had opened up, and where before, clouds and darkness had ruled; now light and warmth had taken over and spread across the seascape. The feeling was infectious, as even Sven allowed himself the luxury of joining in, yelling out a great victory battle call, and shaking his fists at the sky.

With the clearing weather came a calm that set upon the ships, leaving them dead in the water, bobbing aimlessly on the surface of an ocean that shined like a mirror for as far as the eye could see.

Normally calm water was the sailor’s bane, but Sven viewed it as a blessing, as it could be used to assess any damage that the storm had done, and make much needed repairs. He ordered all hands on deck and had the crew working for the rest of the day to set the ship to rights. Just before nightfall, a cry came from the lookout, sighting land on the far horizon.

When darkness fell and they had a clear nighttime sky to navigate by, Rolf Dagarak, and his men reported that they were still on course and were fast approaching the land of the Moors.

It wasn't until late in the evening, that they came within hailing distance of the continent's vast shoreline.

Earlier excursions had indicated a large settlement near the southernmost tip of the continent. It was at Sven's discretion whether to use diplomacy when making contact with the natives or to just go in and take what they needed. Since supplies were dangerously low and there wasn't much chance that the villagers would give them what they needed, he ordered raiding parties to make ready.

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Seattle, Washington (2016 AD)

The sun was a faint glimmer on the skyline, as Norton finished typing the remaining part of the computer code into the waiting laptop. He crossed his fingers, then hit the enter button for the last time in a sequence of keystrokes that would set the whole process into motion.

The network monitoring system that he used, supplied "real-time" information, displaying the most important aspects of the deployment, on a computer screen with a series of impressive if overdone digital graphics. What the program was actually showing him now was the progress of some specially crafted "worms," as they replicated and proceeded to gain access to the target website.

Norton Halbred was what some people would call a criminal.

If he had chosen to do the same thing, but for the forces of "good," he would be considered a *computer genius* or at worst a "hacker," which while still derogatory, was in some circles considered the ultimate in "cool" titles.



Norton didn't care too much about cool. *Yeah sure, back in the day "cool was the rule,"* he thought, running a hand through his long red hair, *but these days cash is the name of the game.*

He laughed nervously. For some reason Norton couldn't help feeling a little on edge despite the apparent ease of the task before him.

*No big deal right?*

He'd done it hundreds of times.

Go to a popular internet watering hole and look for a vulnerability in that website's code, then perform an SQL injection using some of the code that's already on the page. After that, you just sit back and wait for people to visit the site and get infected.

"Infected" usually meant that the computer in question downloaded a specially programmed .exe file that would remain dormant on that system until activated. Once a target has been acquired, then all the hacker has to do is wake up the infected little "sleeper" computers out there, and point them in the right direction.

Norton looked down at the worn wood floor of the apartment that he was renting. From where he sat, he couldn't help but notice the slight tilt that the old floor had to it, a tilt that followed the wall all the way around the room, and then ended in the middle, near the basement door.

*It's like there's a gravity well down there somewhere,* he thought with a smirk, *and the pull from it, is somehow warping the fabric of space and time, making the basement doorway sag.*

Most times Norton used the hacked computers for DoS or "denial of service" attacks. These were mainly what his friends considered "Rebel" actions that *stuck it to the man*. He made it a point not to let his personal feelings come into his

business dealings too much, *I suffer from enough inner turmoil as it is.*

Norton had literally grown up with computers. When he was in middle school, he used to help his father, who was a full time accountant and a “part time” video game enthusiast. Norton’s father first got him hooked on the old “DOS” based 3D computer games.

Norton’s favorite game was a first person shooter called “Shadow Warrior.”

It was similar to Duke Nukem, in that the game’s protagonist “Lo Wang” was always coming up with funny off the wall comments throughout the levels. Like when you fired the grenade launcher around the corner, to blow up the enemy without giving them the chance to shoot you back, he would say, “Oh, you little tiny dick” in his exaggerated Chinese/Japanese accent, or when you killed someone with a sword, he would laugh like a maniac and say, “heh, heh, heh, oh look, you coming apart.”

Using “build” engines that were included on the game’s installation discs; Norton and his father used to create game maps and extra levels that they could play and share with others. This led Norton to computer programming.

Programming offered many challenges in an era when Windows hadn’t even been heard of yet and the latest and greatest operating system of the time was MS DOS. So when Norton was offered a chance to attend a special new “technical” high school to learn more about programming, his mother and father were more than happy to help him enroll.

This move was what started Norton down the career path to college, on a full paid scholarship majoring in computer engineering.

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Gibraltar, Spain (1003 AD)

Sven Jorgenson had waited until the Goddess Sol left for the netherworlds before ordering his warriors to make landfall. From the ship, he could see the fires on the shoreline, blazing brightly across the water separating the warriors from their prey. The smell of cooking meat wafted in the air, teasing the recently “ship bound” men, who after weeks of reduced rations, were looking considerably skinnier than when they left the Motherland.

Shadows on the island grew tall and danced among the tree tops that lined the beach, making its inhabitants seem like giants out for a nighttime stroll. Sven ordered his team to make landfall downwind of the village. As they approached the settlement, a hush fell over the crew of the longboats.

They crept quietly up on the main clearing in the middle of the village. Sven signaled his men to hold off for a moment, then he looked up at the stars and made an appeal to “Odin the One-Eyed All Father” and “Thor the Storm Bringer,” asking for their guidance and blessings.

*Then they attacked.*

The Viking warriors with their fearsome helmets and armor were proportionately colossi, compared to the small black skinned men that stood helplessly around the fires, while the first wave of Sven’s men drove straight into the center of the village and right out the other side, mercilessly mowing down any opposition like stalks of wheat before the scythe.

The villagers fought bravely, but were no match for the Norsemen’s fierceness. No sooner had Sven and his men started fighting, and the battle was over.

As he wiped the sweat from his brow and looked around at the devastation, his first mate Janson Skorvald came running up.

“Sven Jorgenson you must come quick,” and as fast as Janson had appeared before him, he was gone.

Sven shook his head wearily, and then loped off into the darkness, following his crewman through the low-hanging, early morning mists floating up from the water.

Some of the huts were still ablaze, in most cases torched by the villagers themselves, in an attempt to deprive the raiders of what they could not take with them. The flames were quickly running out of fuel as Sven made his way past the main meeting area.

He abruptly came to another area that he hadn't seen before. There, looking completely out of place, and situated near the back of the clearing, was a small building made out of what looked like red clay bricks. When they reached the front of the building, Sven could see that the hinged door was hanging off its frame like it had been forced open.

When he entered the outer room, he was confused at first, until his eyes adjusted to the darkness and then he saw the skinny "white man" chained to the wall.

The man looked up wildly.

As Sven walked into the room, apprehension filled the smaller man's eyes, and he dropped down to his knees and started begging and pleading. "Please, please, let me live, I beg you, let me live and, and I can," the man stopped suddenly and looked down at hands, "I, I can give you everlasting life," he finished, nodding his head vigorously and blinking.

Janson growled, drew his sword, and started toward the prisoner, muttering gruffly to himself. The man looked frantically back and forth between Sven and his soon to be executioner.

"No, no, please, I know where the *Tree of life* is, I can lead you to it, I swear."

Sven held his hand up, and his first mate reluctantly stood down.

He stepped closer to the little man and bent down, looking hard at him for a long moment. The man squirmed under his gaze and smelled strongly of fear. Sven wrinkled his nose in distaste.

Judging by the stench coming from the little building and the scars on his back, it looked like the treatment that the little man had received while in captivity, had been less than hospitable. As Sven listened to the man babble, he kept thinking about the Viking legend of a “tree of life” called the Yggdrasil. Some consider the tree to be the center of everything and it is told, that it also bears fruits that when eaten, give one eternal youthfulness.

Sven scowled, *but what could this little man know of the legends?*

He considered the possibilities, then gestured for his men to bring the him along with them, back to the ship.

*If what he says is true, I could gain much fame back home, Sven thought and shrugged, thumbing the edge of his sword, and if he is lying, then I will send him off to the gods myself.*

## Chapter 2

Kingwood, Texas (2016 AD)

Edmund Lasser shuffled through the vials and bottles that he kept on the shelf of his workshop.

Edmund's "workshop" was located at the far side of the third floor of the old house that he shared with his mother. The ceiling of the attic is plastered with a century's worth of successive wallpaper layers and is slanted sharply on both sides following the contour of the roof. The door has a big metal padlock on it and he keeps the keys with him at all times.

Shelves line the far wall of the "man space" from floor to ceiling, jammed almost to overflowing with various sizes and shapes of colorful glass containers.

"It's got to be here somewhere," he muttered, shifting the iridescent tubes from one side of the shelf to the other searching intently.

"Ah there it is," he said seizing a small brown bottle that was sitting right in front of him.

Edmund held it up to the light and shook the remaining powder back and forth on the bottom, *looks like I need more of that.*

He placed it back on the shelf, then looked at it, then moved it, then arranged the other bottles on the shelf around it, then rearranged them, muttering to himself and obsessively counting and positioning each one as if he was moving pieces on a chessboard in a match with a world class grand master. When he was done, and every container was in its respective place, he crossed his arms in front of him, and nodded in satisfaction, clearly the victor of his imagined match.

Father had died of a "heart attack" when Edmund was just a teen, and while he always looked to the man for approval,

the two never were very close, due to his father's unending obsession with making a fortune.

And make a fortune he did, unfortunately, it killed him.

His mother on the other hand, had long ago replaced her beloved husband with a big screen color television set, and hardly missed him other than when the money started running out. Now she spends all day and every night, glued to the TV's endless prattle. Barely tearing herself away to even go to the bathroom sometimes. She never sleeps in her bedroom anymore, preferring instead to fall asleep reclined in her easy chair with the boob tube blaring.

Being an only child has certain advantages.

*One*; you are the only heir, no competition for anything, *and two*; in the end you get everything, without question, the law pretty much guarantees that.

Edmund's mother is in her early seventies, over weight and not in very good health. He had originally moved back in with her a few years ago, after another one of his many failed attempts at finding companionship with creatures of the opposite sex, *strange enough as they are*.

At first moving back was an act of desperation, but later when his mother's health began to decline, he used it as a convenient excuse to stay. If asked, he would always say that he was *selflessly* taking care of his poor, poor, old mother, and letting *her* live with him, because *she* didn't have any place else to go. *Which is sort of true, because when she dies I get it all anyways*.

At twenty-seven, Edmund's favorite pastime is playing "massively, multiplayer, online, role-playing, games," or MMORPG's.

Although existing as far back as the seventies, MMORPG's didn't really start gaining popularity until the late

nineties when things went 3D, with titles like “EverQuest” and “Asheron’s Call”.

Suddenly for a fee, you could log on to graphics rich fantasy worlds and develop characters, and earn credits through game play, that you could later use to purchase virtual items and “in-game” currency.

The ability to interact with other players in a “live chat” environment as well as the use of 3D animated avatars was highly appealing to the new subscribers.

Edmund’s favorite game, “World of Warcraft” hit the MMORP market around 2004 and was a huge success right from the start. More complex than its predecessors, it was the first game that allowed the players to; play by themselves against the game or play against other players, allowing subscribers to join up into “Guilds” either to complete missions and “quests” or to wage war against other teams.

By 2013, the game boasted over seven million subscribers and currently holds the Guinness Book World Record for the most “subscribed to” MMORP of all time.

Edmund especially likes the role-playing part of the game. He normally plays in RP-PvP mode which is a variant of player-versus-player mode that involves being “in-character” the whole time, while still having the ability to join in combat with other players.

Over the years, he has developed many characters, including the Mage, the Druid, and the Paladin, but found himself favoring his “Rogue” character the most.

He liked the mystery that it offered.

The official World of Warcraft website describes the “Rogue” character as:

*...the only code is the contract, and their honor is purchased in gold. Free from the constraints of a conscience, these mercenaries rely on brutal and efficient tactics. Lethal assassins*



*and masters of stealth, they will approach their marks from behind, piercing a vital organ and vanishing into the shadows before the victim even hits the ground.*

Edmund thought that described his nature best.

In the rogue character, he also had the ability to poison his opponents, either by coating his “main-hand” and using it as a weapon or by applying it to “range” weapons such as crossbow bolts, or throwing knives.

What Edmund liked most about the game is that, it’s the one, *and probably only place*, where a chubby, balding, unattractive little man with no social skills, can be a handsome, dashing, debonair, “man to be reckoned with,” raid villages and plunder dragon hordes and never leave the comfort of his home, *ok*, he rolled his eyes, *his mom’s, home.*

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Hagerstown, Maryland (2016 AD)

Elijah Brooks sat in a chair beside his sleeping wife’s hospital bed. The nurse had just given her another shot of morphine and she finally drifted off into a fitful, if not peaceful sleep. He sighed and watched her in slumber.

*She’s so beautiful.*

Looking at her laying there, he remembered back to when they had first met.

Elizabeth was a handful from the very beginning. The two of them met in college while he was studying for his master’s degree in Archaeology. He should have known when he found out that she majored in political science, what his life with her would be like, but even then, he knew that he didn’t have a choice, *how can you just not love your soul mate when they come along?*

They were married in late spring, following graduation.

Elijah had just accepted an assistant professor's position in the Archaeology wing at Maryland State University. Elizabeth on the other hand, had started getting involved in local politics when she was in college. She more or less made her debut during her senior year as the campaign director for independent candidate Bob Taylor's successful campaign for U.S. Senate.

While her "handlers" wanted her to run for office *yesterday*, she, and Elijah agreed that they wanted to start a family first.

Elizabeth was pregnant with their daughter Rebecca by autumn.

When Rebecca was born, Elizabeth became a stay at home mom. This suited her just fine. She always wanted to have the luxury of raising their daughter instead of the babysitter doing it and this also allowed Elijah to focus on his "doctorate" work.

When Rebecca was six, Elizabeth was coerced into being the coordinator for Bob Taylor's new campaign for Governor.

When election time came and as a direct result of Elizabeth's tireless work, Bob won by an easy twenty percent margin. In gratitude, the new governor offered her the position of "Chief of Staff" in his new administration. After discussing it with Elijah, she accepted the position and was back in politics again. Bob Taylor was a good man and was overwhelmingly reelected for a second term. By the end of his last term, there were many calls for Elizabeth to run for his position, so run she did.

Young Rebecca was "all grown up" by then (at least as far as she was concerned) and had just started driving that summer, which made both Elizabeth and Elijah nervous. He always said, that he wished he could "bubble wrap" the world to keep his daughter safe, and young Rebecca would always

wrinkle up her pretty little nose and furrow her brow and say, “I’m not a baby Dad.”

While in her eyes that may have been true, as far as Elijah was concerned, no matter how old Rebecca would get, she would *always be* “his” little baby girl.

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Seattle, Washington (2016 AD)

The city outside was coming to life for its morning routine on the block. The noises of the streets filtered in through the tattered curtains that hung lifelessly from the front windows of the rented apartment. Norton Halbred yawned and leaned back on the old lumpy sofa as he watched the server-monitoring program.

Things were going well with the hack.

The target website was now experiencing an unusually high number of “downed” servers. Soon the host of the website would have to either shut down or reset, due to all of the extra traffic, either that or the website would crawl along so slowly that people will just give up trying to view it, thereby also “denying them of service.”

Norton learned hacking with a good friend from back in his high school days. At the time it was more as a matter of self-defense, recently though, he found someone willing to pay him a lot of money to do it.

While Norton made what most people would consider a reasonable amount of money off of his *freelance* business doing “legitimate programming,” he also wasn’t entirely against getting paid *a lot of extra cash* on the side, to do something that he otherwise enjoyed.

The only snag about this hack is that it targets a government website, more specifically the nationwide launch of the “Affordable Health Care Act” enrollment website.

Norton usually drew the line when it came to messing with the Fed and he kind of felt guilty about this hack, because of the fact that *Obamacare has been getting a bad enough rap as it is lately.*

While Norton might struggle briefly with this morally, when it came to how much his clients were willing to pay, the money quickly overcame any internal qualms that he might have suffered from.

Norton was being paid \$20,000 up front, and then they promised another \$20,000 when he was done, and all he had to do was keep the DoS attack going for one week.

*That shouldn't be a problem,* he thought; he once did a DoS on the Sacramento Police Department's website for a whole month, *for free,* in protest of a few of the officers using "excessive" force against one of his classmates back in college, *one week should be a piece of quiche.*

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Hagerstown, Maryland (2016 AD)

Neither of the major parties fielded candidates with any name recognition in the governor's race that year, except for the local mayor who ran as a republican. At the televised debates, Elizabeth commanded the show with a clean "stick to the issues" campaign, with every word coming out of the Mayor's mouth looking like a dastardly attack on women, mothers, America, *and* apple pie.

When the election was over and the voters of Maryland had spoken, the Brooks' were off to the governor's mansion.

During her first term as Governor, Elizabeth made progress with key legislation helping out the middle class. With job training programs and the implementation of new apprenticeship-like placement incentives, unemployment numbers across the state dropped significantly.

In the meantime young Rebecca, who had no sooner graduated from college, when she met the “man of her dreams.” Over that summer, Rebecca fell head over heels in love with Tom and *much to Elijah’s chagrin*, was married and pregnant by wintertime.

Little April was born the following autumn.

When Elizabeth’s first term as Governor was up, she was easily voted back in for a second four-year term.

The following year tragedy struck in one of the most unexpected places.

Rebecca and Tom were on their way home from his parent’s house on a snowy Thanksgiving night. As they were pulling out from an intersection, a drunk driver ran the stop light and broadsided their car.

The impact ignited the gas tank and their car went up in flames before anyone could escape.

Rebecca and Tom died instantly.

Little April had been spending the night with Gramma and Grampa when the accident happened.

At the funeral, Elijah watched as they lowered his “baby girl” and her husband into the ground. It all felt so surreal; *how can life be so unfair?* he asked himself. As Elijah walked away from the grave, he wiped the dirt from his hands and seriously considered suicide.

*But life goes on...*

Three months later, Elizabeth and Elijah tearfully completed the final adoption proceedings for their granddaughter April. It was an emotionally trying time for the three of them.

When Elizabeth’s second term as governor ended, she ran for U.S. Senate. April had just graduated from high school and was looking forward to attending college in the spring.

In her campaign, Elizabeth ran as an Independent candidate, against a two-term incumbent Democrat and a no name republican newcomer. Tea party activism hadn't kicked fully into gear yet, but even so, it was a brutal race. When all the smoke had finally cleared, Elizabeth won, but only by 3% of the vote.

At first, as a freshman at the "big house" and an Independent, she was low on the totem pole of the important senate committees. Fortunately though, thanks to her years of service to the political machine, she was owed some favors from high up, and that landed her a ranking seat on the Senate Agriculture Committee. This suited her fine, as most of the causes that she believed in involved food and the safe and humane production of it anyway.

The next election witnessed the "Tea Party Revolution" and a purging of sorts across the board that left Elizabeth with the "chairman" seat on the agriculture committee. With her in the lead, the senate enacted sweeping legislation calling for new labeling and disclosure of food products.

That spring Elijah accepted a position at The Farwell University as "the" resident archaeologist. He was a little apprehensive at first about working for a Mega Church, but quickly changed his mind after meeting the Reverend Pat Farwell.

A physically unimposing man, Pat exuded confidence and a sense of well-being, not just on the surface, but also on a subconscious level. What struck Elijah as strange, was that the man actually seemed to care. He remembered thinking at the time, *either this guy's really good at faking it or he's the genuine article.*

With the new position, not only was Elijah closer to home, but he didn't have to teach anymore. Most of what he did now consisted of authoring research projects and participating in

any of the artifact digs that the university funded from time to time.

Meanwhile things were heating up for Elizabeth in the senate. The tea party was wreaking havoc for Republicans and Democrats alike now. Elections were more like slaughters, with character assassinations as the norm, rather than the exception. Millions spent on public opinion campaigns and propaganda, sometimes even many years before the elections.

Elizabeth, being an Independent, was able to dodge most of the blowback from the movement and had made herself a pretty secure little niche. Lacking party associations, her policy positions were mainly “old school” conservative, unless it came to individual rights, then she blurred the lines to *always* side with the little guy. This attracted more than a few of the disenfranchised voters from both parties and she managed to squeak by for another four years.

Meanwhile April had just graduated from college that spring with a Bachelors Degree in Linguistics. Two weeks after graduation, Pat Farwell called on her personally, to offer her a position at the University’s Antiquities lab.

The following autumn, *tragedy struck the Brooks family again*. Elizabeth had become violently ill suddenly, and then was diagnosed with a very aggressive type of cancer.

Doctors couldn’t really say specifically what kind of cancer it was; just that it was affecting her marrow and that it vaguely resembled acute lymphopenia, a condition characterized by an abnormally low number of lymphocytes in the blood.

Because of the nature and rapid onset of the cancer, the doctors only gave her six weeks to live.

Elijah was devastated.

He lived for Elizabeth, without her he was a “half of a person” trying to fill up a “whole” body. He immediately took an extended leave of absence from the university to take care of

Elizabeth; while April gave up her apartment and moved in with the two of them to help out.

Over the next week, the cancer metastasized and spread to her lymphatic system. Elizabeth was steadily getting worse with traditional methods, so she opted for a more controversial, but natural method of treatment.

In order to keep his mind off the sickness and his time away from Elizabeth, Elijah became obsessed with a “new” hobby.

Trees have always played a major role in legends going all the way back to the dawn of time. Throughout his many years as an archaeologist, Elijah occasionally found references to *eternal life*. Though most of the references were vague at best, some actually appeared to have a grain of truth attached to them. One in particular, stood out more than the others did.

Elijah found that according to many ancient sources, a “Tree of Life” per se’ had once existed on the earth and might still actually be out there somewhere. Hoping for anything to help Elizabeth, Elijah threw himself into the research, looking against all reason, for anything that might give him a clue to saving her from this unrivaled monster.



## Chapter 3

Seattle, Washington (2016 AD)

As far as computer security went, Norton Halbred employed an extremely complex series of browsers, firewalls, and proxy servers to hide his tracks online.

In his entire hacking career, he's never even come close to being detected. Most times, he would just get a warning when his *next to*, the next to the last, line of defense was in danger of being breached. At that point, he could either throw up another firewall, or in "dire" situations, he used a special "self destruct" code, that would immediately shut everything down and erase all traces of his identity from the hack.

Norton's default mode when it came to things like this was *paranoid*. Whenever he was doing a hack, there were precautions that he *religiously* took, that went beyond the pale.

*Just because I think that people are out to get me, doesn't mean they aren't.*

In keeping with that, Norton always used a "completely anonymous" laptop that he would buy "used" specifically for the attack. Then he would personally scan and clean the machine "three ways from Sunday" and back again, making sure that there wasn't anything on the laptop that could even be remotely connected to him.

Each time he did a hack, he would rent an apartment using fake ID. The kind of people that Norton rented from usually didn't care *who* you were, as long as you had cash. He was always careful to choose a location that was close to the downtown area, that way he could tap into the local "Wi-Fi" network, eliminating the possibility of his identity being detected from the connection end.

He allowed his eyes to slowly scan across the ceiling of the apartment, briefly focusing on the shabby wallpaper that covered most of the living room and part of the stairway going

up to the second floor. He distractedly thought that it was strange, that they had done the wall covering part of the way up the stairs and then nothing, like they got that far and then changed their minds or something.

He turned back to the laptop and checked the numbers on the glowing screen again. The monitor showed the program continuing to pick up more “sleeper” computers and adding them to the network.

*This is going to be a big one,* Norton smiled.

He needed to be careful; sometimes a network can get too big for the task. There have been a few times when Norton had to manually yank cables out, to shut traffic down before it attracted too much attention.

The sun slowly tracked its way across the front of the apartment building as the day progressed. At first shining in the side window, warming the back of Norton’s neck in the morning, then sneaking around and glaring in through the faded curtains of the front windows in the afternoon and then peering over the edge of the rooftops for its final appearance before nightfall.

Norton checked the hardwired connections on the computer for the hundredth time in the last hour. He tried to bring up the target website on his other computer. After he hit enter the browser just sat empty for quite a while, then a “message screen” appeared and stated simply: *We have a lot of visitors on the site right now. Please stay on this page. We’re working to make the experience better, and we don’t want you to lose your place in line. We’ll direct you to the login page as soon as we can. Thanks for your patience!*

Norton smiled in satisfaction, then sat back and settled in for the “long” wait.

He always brought no less than four laptops along. Two were usually all that he needed for the hack. The other two were there to keep him occupied during the sometimes endless hours of tedium involved in this profession. He had just downloaded a

few whole DVD's full of new "Simpsons" episodes last week; *they should help pass the time.* Most times (thanks to high levels of security redundancy) nothing exciting ever happens.

He hoped that this was one of "those kinds" of jobs.

The rolling credits and closing theme song, signaled the end of another Simpsons episode. Norton rubbed his eyes and popped the new disc into the drive, and then waited for it to refresh, so that he could start the funnies going again.

He looked out the window at the sun coming up, and then at the time on his computer.

He glanced back over at the monitoring computer again, and noticed that the screen had gone dark. *That's funny, I thought I disabled the "automatic sleep" function on that machine.*

He tapped a few keys on the laptop and wiggled the mouse, in an attempt to get the display to come back up.

His jaw dropped as he watched a strange white dot slowly start to grow in the middle of the computer screen.

*What the hell is that?* He thought.

The white dot now filled the entire screen; bold black text rolled "marquee style" across the display and then stopped.

*Oh shit!*

He jumped up and violently yanked the network plug out of the machine, effectively disconnecting it from the internet, and then focused on what the text said.

**WARNING!**

This computer has been used to commit a crime of the Federal Espionage Act.

If you cooperate with us now and turn yourself in, leniency will be considered.

United States Federal Bureau of Investigations Office 1-800-CALLFBI (225-5324)

*Shit shit shit!* Norton thought, as he scrambled around the living room grabbing his belongings and shoving them into garbage bags. He threw everything in together. *I can sort it all out later, hopefully.* He shoved the bags into his backpack and then stopped for a second, looking around the room one last time, before sprinting for the door.

Norton opened the front door a tiny crack and then tried to see the around the corner out into the street. Once he thought that the coast was clear, he quickly stuck his head out and looked both ways, then ducked back in and slammed the front door and locked it.

There wasn't anyone out front, but just to be on the safe side, Norton left by the back door and ran down the shadowy stairway. This led to a breezeway that opened up into a narrow alley that ran in between the houses on the block.

When he got to the end of the breezeway, he peeked around the gate at ground level. Then in spite of a strong urge to run, he stood up and slowly stepped out into the alley and started walking calmly down to the end of the block, trying not to look around too much or otherwise draw attention to himself.

Once he felt that he was far enough away from the apartment, he circled around via side streets, back to just across the street from the front of the building.

Everything was quiet as Norton stood watching from behind a low wall that was at the side of a Chinese grocery store. He crouched and waited to see if he had attracted any attention.

After a few minutes of waiting, it looked like all was quiet. Norton let out a breath that he hadn't realized he had been holding, and sat back against the wall, allowing his gaze to wander up to a first floor window behind him. *Probably part of the apartment where the store's owners live,* he thought.

Just then, a cute little Asian girl of five or six appeared in the window and smiled down at him, giggling and hiding her face, for all appearances amused by Norton's current predicament.

He waved back at her and smiled.

Just as he was about to get up to go to his car, a shiny black SUV came squealing around the corner across from him and slid to a stop at the intersection not twenty feet away, flashing lights spinning, it's occupants hidden behind heavily tinted glass windows.

Five seconds later, another SUV came screeching up at the other end of the block, effectively cordoning off the street in front of the apartment building.

A SWAT team truck and a few more unmarked cruisers pulled up, but when Norton saw the Special Forces Soldiers get out of a tactical van, packing shotguns and assault rifles, with their full battle armor and face shields glinting in the late afternoon sun, he figured it was probably a good time to get out of there.

He rummaged around in his pocket and located his car keys, then pushed the start button on the custom retrofitted key fob that served as the custom "remote control" for the ignition of his 1962 Volvo station wagon.

A little ways down the block, he heard the car's antique starter grind over a few times, before the engine came to life. By the time Norton reached the door, the little four-cylinder was purring away quietly.

When he left, he took the roundabout way back home, in case anyone was following him, obeying the speed limit all the way up to his driveway.

He got out of his car and walked calmly to the door of his modest split-level home. As soon as the door was shut, he

leaned back against it, closed his eyes, and resisted the urge to scream.

He went to his backpack and pulled the infected computer out, plugged it in, and then quickly went to work formatting/erasing its hard drive.

Once he was sure that it was reformatted, Norton powered the computer back up, only to have the same message flash across the screen again.

“This computer has been used to commit a crime of the Federal Espionage Act...”

He shut the computer down again, then turned it back on and went in the “back way” to clean it. After he was sure that the machine had been successfully “wiped” completely clean of everything, including the operating system, he turned it back on.

“This computer has been used to commit a crime of the Federal Espionage Act...”

*What the hell? Oh come on, that isn't even possible,* he thought, *I know it's not supposed to work that way.*

He frantically pushed the power button again and then yanked the power cord out as he ran for the door.

He hopped in his car and drove down the state road to the 5<sup>th</sup> street Bridge, where it crosses the river at the edge of town.

As he was driving out over the water, he opened the window and threw the laptop out “Frisbee” style as hard as he could, watching as it arced away, hitting and skipping across the surface of the water a few times, before sinking quickly into the darkness.

*That takes care of that,* he thought, *I hope. Meanwhile I'm gonna need to lay low for a while, just in case, until I'm sure that this has blown over.*

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Hagerstown, Maryland (2016 AD)

April Brooks looked in on her grandfather as he sat bent over the old wooden desk. She was concerned with him working too much lately.

“Grampa are you ok?”

Elijah rubbed his face, turned away from the computer screen, and looked up at her bleary eyed.

“Yes, yes dear, I’m fine.”

She smiled softly, handed him the day’s mail and then went to get him a cup of tea. He shuffled through the mail pile. “Bill, bill, junk, junk, oh... what have we here?” She turned back momentarily as he tore excitedly into a big envelope that had just arrived.

Once she put the teapot on, April walked back out and stood in the doorway, watching her grandfather’s face brighten, as he held the faded photocopies up to the light so he could see them better. “Now I can do something with this,” he muttered and smiled absently, already lost in the glory of the hunt. April lingered a little while longer, as he pored excitedly over the new maps.

Reverend Farwell had graciously allowed April to forgo her translating duties at the university, in order to help her grandfather with his newest obsession. She was glad to see that her Grandfather was snapping out of it a little. It’s never easy dealing with a loved one’s illness, especially someone as special as her grandmother. April worried about her too, and she missed her.

Grandma Elizabeth had always been like a mother to her, more so than even her real mother, who died when April was a child and that she *at best*, only had vague memories of to begin with.

She sighed and walked back out to the kitchen.

On the way there she stopped, catching a glimpse of herself in the mirror that was attached to the attic door. She did a quick catwalk turn and was pleased with what she saw.

Fast approaching thirty, April still retained much of her youthful figure and perkiness. Her long brown hair, still shined in the sunlight like it did when she was a teenager. She leaned closer to the mirror and cringed, as she noted the beginnings of crow's feet around her sky blue eyes, and how her once cute dimples, now looked to be quickly turning into permanent laugh creases.

The teapot's shrill whistling made her jump, and she hurried over to the stove to turn it off. Plopping down at the kitchen table, she gazed longingly out the window at the yard.

Sometimes she wondered if maybe she was missing something. With all of her past experiences with people *or lack of*, she often worried if maybe something might be wrong with her, like she might not be able to *feel* enough in order to function normally in society.

*I'm twenty-eight years old and I still haven't had one successful relationship. What does that say about me?*

Oh sure, there had been a few guys along the way, but duty to family and her career always seemed to be more important. *There was one though*, one that she even thought that she loved.

*I wonder what he's up to now*, April thought wistfully.

When they split up, it was by mutual agreement, as they both had lofty dreams that didn't quite align. They still stayed in touch and even got together occasionally. Each time they connected again, it was as if no time at all had passed, and yet when that time was over, they still went their separate ways.

April smiled and stared off into the distance; *maybe I should call him*.



