



Making Dylan Maxwell Moxie Mezcál

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Making Dylan Maxwell
by Moxie Mezcal
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MoxieMezcal.com

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Chapter 1

(Side A) Labyrinthine

It was somewhere around 2:00 am, and I was on top of the roof, watching about three dozen of the city's best and brightest stand around and freeze their asses off. And, truth be told, I was enjoying the spectacle, even though it meant I was freezing my own off right along with them.

The anemic, refugee-thin heiresses shivering in their barely-there party dresses. The effete dot-com executives in thousand-dollar “distressed” jeans trying to look unaffected by the cold that's cracking their lips and shriveling their dicks. It warmed my spiteful, jealous little heart.

Columbine was busy circulating through the crowd, handing out sheets of paper, one a head. When she finished, she came over to sit with me on the parapet.

“What's this all about?” I asked as I grabbed one of the leftover sheets off the stack on her lap.

“This is tonight's game,” she explained. “Scavenger hunt.”

I looked down at the paper in my hands, which contained a list of items neatly printed in three evenly-spaced columns. The items were pretty far out there, things like an albino, a monkey's paw, a transgender prostitute, an original Matisse, a three-legged dog, a pickled punk, an ounce of heroin, and a human spleen.

“Scavenger hunt?” I repeated skeptically.

“Yeah. You have to try to find as many of the things on this list as you can and bring them back.”

I rolled my eyes. “Yes, I understand the concept of a scavenger hunt. I'm just wondering why a group of grown adults – the city's richest and most powerful bright young things, no less – would spend their Saturday night on one.”

I heard footsteps behind me on the parapet, and then a new voice joined our conversation. “Imagine you were filthy rich, richer than any human being has any right to be. You can literally do and have anything you want. You've traveled the world, had the dirtiest sex imaginable,

imbibed the filthiest narcotics. What would you do for kicks when you tired of the same old thrills?"

I craned my head to the right and saw Dylan Maxwell standing atop the parapet, hovering over my head. He grinned like a deranged Japanese oni, the cold night air turning his breath visible as it streamed out of his nostrils.

"All right, kids, listen up!" he called out to everyone on the rooftop. "We're going to get started. I trust you've all had a chance to look over the list for tonight's game. I see a few new faces, so let me bring you all up to speed.

"The object is simple – whoever brings back the most items from your list by sunrise is the winner, and whoever brings back the least is the loser. Aside from that, there are no rules. Steal, lie, cheat, break and enter, wander around the bad parts of town, work your connections, get your assistants out of bed, cash in all your favors."

"So, what exactly do you get for winning?" I interjected.

Max glanced down at me with a twinkle of obvious amusement in his pale blue eyes.

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I had arrived at the address on Columbine's invitation about three hours earlier. The place was a warehouse in the middle of the industrial zone on the north end of town. Being Saturday night, every other building for miles was empty and shuttered. However, this particular building's parking lot was packed with expensive cars – tiny bug-like sports cars, hybrids, giant suburban tanks, and other shiny metal toys. Muted lights and the din of yuppie chatter spilled out of the open front door, casting a foreboding aura over the entrance.

I glanced down at the glossy rave card Columbine had given me, which read:

LABYRINTHINE

art • technology • performance • intersections

Opening Night – Gala Reception

The address printed on the bottom confirmed that this was in fact the right place, much to my dismay. This wasn't the type of thing I would normally be caught dead at. However, I had been trying to get an interview with Dylan Maxwell for years, and Columbine assured me he would be here. And there was no real reason to doubt her – after all, I met her in the men's room at my sister's wedding. If that doesn't scream *credibility*, then I don't know what does.

I took a deep breath and then made my way for the entrance.

As I approached, the first thing I noticed was the beefy refrigerator in a rented tux blocking the doorway. The second thing was the surveillance camera perched on the wall above his head.

"No, absolutely not," the doorman said, pressing a meaty palm into my chest to stop me from entering.

"Ah, it's okay, good sir," I explained cheerfully, taking a step back while flashing my invitation in front of his face. "As you can see, I am a properly-credentialed member of the Fourth Estate."

I took another step forward but again met with resistance.

I was fairly certain that something like this was going to happen – it always seemed to, despite my best efforts. This time, I had even stopped at home and changed before coming to make sure I looked appropriately pretentious – charcoal gray pinstripe jacket over a *TV on the Radio* t-shirt, black jeans, black Docs, a black fedora, and a decent two-day scruff on my cheeks. I certainly didn't look any worse than the other idiots I saw filing in and out of the door.

I wondered if he somehow knew who I was and had been warned beforehand not to admit any press. Then I noticed the ear piece he was wearing and my eyes darted back to the surveillance camera.

"Motherfucker," I spat and raised both arms to flip off the camera.

Meanwhile, Dylan Maxwell sat in front of a wall of monitors, watching as my middle fingers danced around on one of the screens. He was laughing his ass off.

Luckily, part of an investigative journalist's job is getting into places where other people don't want you to be.

I circled around the corner of the building, looking for some kind of alternate entrance. To my chagrin, all the windows lined the top of the building over thirty feet above my head. I found a series of roll-up doors on the loading dock and one normal door that for didn't appear to have any handle or knob. It clearly opened only from the inside.

I continued to the far end of the back wall. As I rounded the next corner, I saw a group of people standing about thirty yards away. I crouched behind a dumpster to watch them, hoping to wait until they re-entered the building and sneak in after them.

There were three of them clustered in a group, two men and one woman. One of the men was yelling excitedly while the woman stood a couple paces behind him, sobbing. The other man just stood silently, his arms folded across his chest. He was a giant shit-kicking type, easily 6'8" and built like a bulldozer. He had a shaved head and a dark olive complexion of indeterminate ethnicity.

The shit-kicker endured about twenty seconds more of the other man's shrill yammering before he got fed up and clocked him. His fist met the other man's jaw with a loud crack that sounded like snapping bone. The smaller man fell to his knees, but the big guy didn't let up. Grabbing him by the shirt collar he landed three more powerful blows square in the small guy's face, sending blood splattering everywhere.

Finally, the big guy let go and the other man collapsed into a heap on the ground. The woman dropped to his side, screaming hysterically, while the shit-kicker calmly walked back to the building and tapped on the side door. A second later, the door opened to let him in. I decided that it probably wasn't the best way into the building after all and doubled back to the loading dock.

This time, however, the back door next to the roll-ups was propped open, and there was a woman standing beside it. As I walked up the stairs to the dock, she was silhouetted against the light coming from the open doorway. She looked statuesque and regal in a full-length black trench coat with the belt cinched tight around her waist, showing off the curve of her hips. Her features were angular and severe, and she had large brown eyes and a stark white complexion. I guessed her to be around my age and of Eastern European descent. Her thick, long hair was dyed a vibrant purple.

When I reached the top of the stairs, I came to an abrupt stop in front of her and just stood there staring like a slack-jawed idiot. She smiled warmly at me while she dug a pack of cloves out of her coat pocket. Just as she wedged the filtered tip between her full, dark purple lips, I sparked my Bic lighter. She leaned in to touch the tip of her cigarette to the flame, her eyes rolling up to look at me. Then she uprighted herself and blew a steady stream of smoke into the night air.

"Thanks," she said. "Did you lock yourself out?"

I pulled out my own cigarettes and lit one for myself.

"Nah," I explained, "the gestapo at the door wouldn't let me in, so I was looking for a way to sneak in."

"Well, then I have a dilemma. I could let you in, but then I'd feel personally responsible for whatever you end up doing in there. How can I know you won't cause any trouble?"

I shrugged. "You can't, honestly. I guess you'd just have to take a chance on me."

She took a few more drags off her cigarette, silently looking me over with a skeptical eye. "You wouldn't by any chance happen to be D., would you?"

I nodded.

Her lips curled into a satisfied smirk. "I thought you might be. I'm Violet. I'm a friend of Col's."

I was a little taken aback and wondered whether it was just a coincidence that she had been back here to run into me.

"Have you seen here in there, yet?" I asked.

"No, but I'm sure if you look around a little, she'll pop up," she said and dropped her cigarette butt on the ground, then stamped it out with her bare foot.

She took me by the arm to lead me inside the door and down a narrow hallway. I could hear the sounds of the party grow louder as we approached. We emerged through a set of black curtains onto a small makeshift stage. In front of us was a stool and a simple wire framework that looked like a crude skeleton of a person. The frame was partially covered by thin gold strands draped delicately from anchor points on the wire.

Violet removed her trench coat, revealing a thin, gauzy silver gown underneath that was more or less completely see-through and clung maddeningly to the curves of her figure. Through the thin material, I could make out what looked like huge burn scars running along the left side of her body.

She sat on the stool and resumed her sculpture. She took a few small thin rods of glass and wrapped a long gold strand around them, then delicately hung the whole piece with the others on the wire frame. She seemed to be using the glass rods to give the work its shape. The whole process looked impossibly intricate and extremely unstable. A stiff breeze could have probably collapsed the entire structure.

I stepped off the stage and joined the small group of people who gathered to watch her work. She weaved the strands together with gentle and precise movements, her eyes locked on her work with a singular intensity.

I noticed that while she worked, her legs parted enough for the crowd to be able to see more-or-less clearly between them. This realization made my cheeks turn red, and I wondered whether she realized it or not. Then I saw the placard mounted at the base of the stage, giving the title of the installation: *Sheela na Gig*.

"Well," I stammered, "I probably should go find Columbine."

She turned to look at me, and I read in her face that she had all but completely forgotten about me. "Oh yeah, right. Hey, make sure you come back later and see it when it's finished."

I walked away, filled simultaneously with the urges to break into a dance, rip out my own hair, and dump a bucket of ice down the front of my pants.

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The warehouse had been converted into some kind of futuristic art gallery teeming with pretentious cognoscenti, faux-bo street punks, yuppies playing like they still had souls, hyper-affected eccentrics, and vapid beautiful people dying to be seen.

Large black curtains had been hung to create a labyrinthine system of walls. The entire layout seemed designed to intentionally frustrate a guest's sense of direction. The floor was packed with art installations that incorporated elements of video, audio, live performance, and technological props.

One was a giant wall of LED-lights projecting random words and phrases. As I walked closer to it, I realized that the messages it displayed were actually snippets of conversations going on around it. The place must be wired with hidden microphones, I guessed, that fed into a computer with a speech-to-text converter. I looked around saw several mics scattered about the space. I also found an alarming number of surveillance cameras like the one at the front door.

Another installation allowed people to stand in front of video cameras on tripods and see themselves displayed on monitors. Each monitor was labeled with a different disease: *Jaundice*, *Shingles*, *Psoriasis*, *Proteus Syndrome*, *Harlequin Ichthyosis*. The images on the monitors were digitally manipulated to show what the subjects would look like with their respective afflictions.

At another, a jazz-fusion quintet performed, consisting of piano, tenor sax, trumpet, drums, and a DJ. They changed the mood, tempo, and style of their playing based on the people who walked by. If a couple passed while holding hands, the sax would blow a romantic theme. If a group of teenagers ran by, the drummer would cut loose into a short, frantic solo.

Behind them, three graffiti artists were on a scaffolding, spray painting a mural influenced by the mood of the music. They sprayed slow, relaxed lines in blues and greens during mellow grooves. When the improvisation sped up or took on irregular syncopation, they switched to orange, red, and yellow hues, waving their arms frantically and haphazardly as they painted in large, bold strokes

One installation was just a line of six stationary bicycles being ridden by guests wearing metal helmets, earphones, and some kind of big clunky video goggles. Seriously.

I stopped in front of an installation where two people stood on a platform in front of a row of touch screens, each displaying a thumbnail of various video clips. The two operators mixed the images together into a montage, which was projected onto a large screen hanging over them. A nearby speaker stack was blasting Of Montreal's "Id Engager" to provide them inspiration. I whistled at the operator on the left. She looked up at me and smiled. It was Columbine, wearing a canary yellow *Care Bears* tank top with a ruffled pink skirt, rainbow-striped tights, and red zebra-print boots.

She hopped down from the platform and gave me a hug. "Hey, I was worried you weren't gonna show."

"Yeah, well, fashionably late and all that. Is Dylan Maxwell here?" I asked.

"Gah, so impatient," she said in mock-frustration as she punched my arm playfully. "I haven't seen him yet, but don't worry, he'll be here. Work can wait. In the meantime, I have some people to introduce you to."

She hooked her arm around mine and dragged me away.

Columbine had a game she liked to play where she would fabricate ludicrous back stories for me when introducing me to new people. The first of her friends we ran into that night was an aging goth couple named Aldous and Ilona. Col told them that we met when I approached her in a bar, thinking she was a prostitute. This led into a prolonged discussion of my habits as they related to picking up prostitutes, which I apparently did with alarming regularity.

After that, I spent the rest of the night posing alternately as an award-winning playwright, a drug smuggler, a pre-op transsexual, Col's brother/lover (don't ask), a CIA "operative" (which I'm pretty sure was implied to mean assassin), and a descendant of deposed Russian aristocracy – depending on what the conversation happened to turn to.

"Everyone lies as these things to make themselves seem more interesting," Columbine said by way of rationalization. "I at least make the effort to come up with good lies."

I have to admit I did enjoy it, in a weird way. I had become impervious to surprise, deftly connecting with whatever curve ball she lobbed my way. Which is why I was all the more taken aback when I heard her introduce me as:

"This is my friend, D. Quetzal, the reporter."

My turned to see who she was talking to and instantly recognized him. Dylan Maxwell stood casually with his feet apart and hands buried in his

pockets, teeth bared in that huge Cheshire Cat grin of his. A few errant strands of his chin-length jet black hair hung down in front of his blue eyes, giving him a rakish charm. Tall and lithe, he cut a striking figure in his black silk vest and matching tie over a blood red shirt with black slacks and a pair of red Chuck Taylor All-Stars. The Chucks, while clashing with the rest of his outfit, were a kind of signature for him; he was never without them – or at least that's what it said in all his press materials.

“Pleased to meet you, Mr. Quetzal. My name's Max,” he said, extending his hand.

“I know who you are, Mr. Maxwell,” I replied as we shook. He had a surprisingly strong grip for someone of his lean build. I'm not one to get all star-struck and panty-moist around celebrities, but Max projected an undeniable electricity. The entire room seemed to shift and warp around his presence, like when you touch your fingertip to an LCD screen.

“Please, I really do insist you call me Max.”

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Dylan Maxwell (Max to his friends) was the president/CEO/founder/whatever of Abrasax, one of the most successful dot-com's in the world and therefore one of this city's largest employers and bona fide tax revenue cash-cow. This in turn made him one of the most powerful and influential people in the city. An active political fundraiser, patron of the arts, and investor – if you wanted to get anything done in this town, at some point you'd find yourself on hands and knees kissing those old red Chucks.

But all that was really just incidental – the thing that truly defined Max was his rock star mystique. Young, good-looking, charismatic, unconventional, and not afraid to say exactly what's on his mind, he had built up a strange cult of personality around himself that was as much about style as it is the substance of Abrasax's business.

Anyone who ever wrote about the company said the same thing – Max ruled Abrasax with an iron fist. He personally oversaw everything from user interface and QA to the design aesthetic and the marketing campaigns. Employees evoked his name in debates like a parish priest citing chapter and verse. The question wasn't *good-or-bad, right-or-wrong*. It was *what will Max think?*

As we got to know each other, he explained the situation to me like this: “It's not that dissent isn't tolerated. It just simply doesn't exist.”

He gave me an example. “Say I pull some new concept out of my ass at the weekly executive meeting, some gem like 'user behavioral metrics'

or 'achieving psychosocial harmonization' or whatever nonsense springs to mind. By the end of the day, you'll hear that same phrase echoing the halls throughout the entire campus. Everyone will be parroting it from the lowest mail room intern to the CFO's mistress."

But Max's professional life was only one part of the intricate personal mythology that had built up around him. The tales of excess and debauchery in his personal life were legendary. Max fucked the most beautiful people, ate at the most expensive restaurant, thoroughly trashed the most exclusive hotel rooms, and puked up the most exquisite liquors – all within conspicuous range of the camera's lens. He was like Kieth Moon reincarnated with Bill Gates' bankroll in the age of TMZ. Tabloids and local bloggers ate his shtick up, further propagating and embellishing the myth.

Even his back story morphed and evolved to service the myth. The canonical version went like this:

Dylan Maxwell was a native of the city born into a solidly upper middle class family. His mother was an orthodontist, his father an accomplished composer who experimented with electronic music and had scored a few moderately successful films. He showed an interest in computers from an early age, encouraged by his father who was himself quite the technophile and always had the latest equipment for his son to tinker with. By the time Max entered high school he already had a lucrative part-time business designing web sites and software applications for local companies. He quickly expanded this gig to include security consulting by hacking into the sites of several major banks and government agencies, then telling them about it and offering to help them fix the vulnerabilities.

At the age of 16, Max passed the equivalency exam and dropped out of high school. This allowed him to devote himself to his computer work full time. He tried taking a few college courses, but lost interest in them quickly. By the time he turned 18, he had turned down multiple offers for jobs and scholarships and instead decided to travel abroad. This was where the official record got hazy.

There were a number of outlandish stories of his two years overseas; talk to a dozen different people who profess to *know*, truly *know* Dylan Maxwell, and you'll get a dozen different accounts, each more preposterous than the last. From what I could deduce reading between the lines, he first spent half a year backpacking through Europe, then spent the rest of the time in southeast Asia where he studied for some indeterminate period in a Tibetan monastery.

Aside from that, the story was a *Choose Your Own Adventure*. Turn to page 23, Max loses his virginity to a window hooker in Amsterdam while tripping on LSD and mushrooms, and the experience is terrifying to both parties involved. Turn to page 32, Max falls in love with a teenage ladyboy in Bangkok. Turn to page 42, Max gets in a bar fight in the eastern side of Berlin with a group of skinheads and ends up slicing open one's throat with a broken whiskey bottle; the skinhead dies on the way to the hospital. Turn to page 66, Max joins up with an underground sect of Kali worshipers and participates in at least one ritual killing. At a certain point, I began to suspect that Max was deliberately leaking misinformation, but he vehemently denied this, instead preferring to compare the retelling of his life story to a game of Japanese Whispers.

In the end, all that really mattered was that the Max who returned to his home town two years later was no longer the shy, introverted kid who would rather stay inside poring over lines of code than go outside and play baseball or talk to girls. The new Max wasted no time in making the rounds to potential investors to pitch his new startup, Abrasax.

Initially just a search engine, the company quickly expanded its reach to include e-mail, social networking, online storage and hosting, software development, and finally the web-based operating system Envisage that moved the user's entire computing experience onto Abrasax's servers. Max promoted it as giving users the freedom to access their documents and run their applications anywhere, any time, and on any computer. Critics complained that Abrasax would share user's data with advertisers to help target their marketing and in the process drive up Abrasax's own fees. However, the company's overwhelming surge in users and ad revenue ensured that critics were swiftly marginalized.

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Back at the party, Max brought us downstairs into a large dimly-lit room adorned lavishly in reds and blacks. One side was a lounge area with a wet bar where about twenty people were hanging out – all young, beautiful, and immaculately dressed, drinking and talking too loudly in the way that only people who are desperate to be noticed can, like they are daring you not to eavesdrop.

Max exchanged brief greetings with a few of them before being approached by a short man with prematurely thinning hair in an ostentatiously expensive suit.

"It's getting late. When are we getting started?" he asked testily as he tapped his watch.

Max reached out to pinch his cheek and cooed condescendingly, "Patience, Peterman. I have to be a gracious host and show my guest around."

"We've been waiting here for two hours," the other man persisted.

"Then I'm sure you can wait a little bit longer. In the meantime, why not try enjoying yourself a little. Everyone else seems to be," Max replied.

Max took me by the arm and led me over to the far side of the room, which was dominated by a wall of video monitors mounted above a desk that housed mixing boards and other A/V equipment. The monitors displayed feeds from the surveillance cameras in the main art galleries. Six people sat in a row in front of the monitor bank, each wearing a pair of headphones that were plugged into the mixing consoles.

I stepped toward the control desk and picked up a free headset. Through it, I heard random strains of conversation presumably picked up by the mics upstairs. The most dominant, easily distinguishable voice was a woman's; she sounded raw and sullen, as if she had been crying. There was something familiar about it. She said, "I don't know what I'm going to do. Maybe there's nothing I can do. I wonder if I ever even had a chance of being happy. Like if I had made different choices, if I hadn't fucked things up so bad. I wonder if there's some other world out there where I ended up happy."

I stepped away from the console. "So you're all spying on people?"

Max smiled indulgently. "I prefer to think of it as research. Spying implies a violation of trust, an assumption of privacy that is betrayed. We made no secret about the surveillance methods upstairs; all of our equipment is in plain sight, and many of the art installations themselves used the surveillance as an integral part."

"In other words, you're saying it's okay to invade someone's privacy as long as you tell them about it."

"I'm saying that privacy as you understand it has become an archaic concept."

I smirked. "Of course you would say this. You've made spying on your customers into a business model."

Max scoffed, then responded in a raised voice, taking on an almost professorial tone. "I make no secret of my company's business practices. People willingly give us access to their information, and we use it to give them the best possible customer experience. I'm sure anyone who complains about the price of gas in an e-mail and then suddenly sees an ad for the latest hybrid knows exactly what I'm doing."

"Spare me the corporate PR spiel," I groaned. "What about the people that don't want you tracking what they buy and what sites they look at and what they talk about in their e-mail?" I argued.

"Then they can patronize our competitors," he said dismissively. "Or realistically, they should stay off the internet altogether."

"Are you serious? Can I quote you on that?"

"Of course," he replied, and I realized he was no longer talking to just me – the rest of the room was listening as well. "The web has truly become the great democratizer of information, in the most literal sense of the word – rule of the people. Information is now controlled by the people, plural; it is no longer the sole property of any one singular person. You ask *why shouldn't you have the right to keep things to yourself?* I ask *why shouldn't your business partners, your employers, your friends and family have the right to know who you really are?*"

"I call bullshit," I said. "Even if you accept that argument, it's only valid based on the assumption of a social good. But what's the social good in all this?" I pointed at the monitors.

"The same social good that exists in any real art – purification of the human soul. Hold a mirror up and make us confront who we really are."

"Now I really call bullshit."

Max laughed. "Let me put it to you this way – I put forth to you that the age of surveillance is only a symptom of the new hyper-narcissism that has infected our society. We invite the surveillance cameras into our homes because they are proof that someone is paying attention to us.

"Let me give you an example. You criticized my company for collecting users' personal data, but people are voluntarily and intentionally sharing the most intimate minutiae of their lives everyday, and they love doing it. Even as we speak my phone is being bombarded by e-mails, blog posts, tweets, and status updates from personal and professional acquaintances. Privacy is passé; it simply no longer exists as a social value. No one wants to toil in obscurity. Fame has become the new social currency of the 21st century. In the 19th century the struggle was between the working class and the ruling class over the means of production. By the end of the 20th century, the paradigm had been made obsolete by the emergence of new classes – the leisure class, the creative class, the consumer class. Now there's a whole new emerging class bringing another sea change, the celebrity class. Suddenly we have an entire stratus of people who are famous just for being famous. It doesn't matter if you aren't the most talented, or the most virtuous, or even the most beautiful,

as long as people know who you are. We've built a brave new world where every man and woman can be a star."

His eyes locked in on mine as he presumably waited for me to respond to the depth and profundity of his argument.

"Jesus, are you still talking?"

Max broke into a chuckle and threw an arm over my shoulder.

"*Brave New World*, huh? That is the second Huxley synchronicity I've had tonight."

"*Every one belongs to every one else*," he quoted.

Suddenly, I felt a presence behind me. "We're all set, boss," said a loud, deep voice.

I turned to see the shit-kicker from outside towering over me. He was wearing a black t-shirt with a distorted image of a bull that I recognized as a detail from *Guernica*.

"Ah, Saint Anthony. Always impeccable timing," Max said.

The two men clasped hands, then the shit-kicker hooked his thumb in my direction. "What's that?"

"Oh, don't worry about him. He's a *journalist*," Max said, putting a derisive emphasis on the last word. "Mr. D. Quetzal, I'd like you to meet Saint Anthony, my special advisor."

"Special advisor? What's that mean?"

"Whatever it needs to," Anthony answered, taking a step towards me.

Max clapped his hands together to get the attention of the entire room. "Everybody upstairs. Curtain time in ten minutes."

"We're going back to the art show?" I asked.

"No," Max replied. "I meant all the way upstairs."

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"So, what exactly do you get for winning?" I interjected.

Max glanced down at me with a twinkle of obvious amusement in his pale blue eyes.

He dug a small red metal box from his pants pocket. It was rectangular in shape, no more than five inches long and two high. "The winner gets what's inside this box,"

"And what's that?" I pressed.

"I swear to you, we didn't script this," Max said as an aside to his audience. A few light chuckles rippled through the crowd. "To find that out, D., I guess you'll just have to win."

"I guess so," I replied. "And what if I lose?"

Max turned to smile at me once more, but this time he didn't offer any further explanation.

“Weatherman says the sun rises just after seven. You have five hours give-or-take, children. I suggest you get moving.”

As everyone else cleared off the roof, Max put a hand on my shoulder, indicating that he wanted me to stick around.

He beamed with pride, obviously enjoying the look of confusion in my face. “So, what do you think?”

“I don't get it,” I said. “Not that I ever professed to understand why rich people do the things they do, mind you. I just don't see why a bunch of grown adults want to run around town in the wee hours of the morning jumping through your silly hoops.”

Max paused, as if trying to work out the best way to explain some impossibly complex mathematical theorem to a child.

“Look at this thing,” he declared finally, stamping his foot on the parapet. “Ridiculous. What purpose does it serve? Think about it. Would it really be so dangerous to have just a plain flat edge? Is this little bit of wall going to actually save lives?”

I shrugged.

Max continued, “And if someone is genuinely dumb enough to fall off the side of a building, are we as a species really better off with that person alive and procreating? So much of our energy is expended styrofoam-padding and sterilizing our existences to protect us from ourselves, from our own frail humanity.

“We realize just how hopeless and fatalistic our human condition is, how we are at the mercy of forces beyond our control. So we try to trick ourselves into a false sense of security by dreaming up phantom perils, harmless straw men that we can build a wall around or bury under concrete and feel like we have control over our destinies.

“We pass more laws, we arm more cops, we build more prisons, and we lock up more of our neighbors in the name of our own 'freedom.' Our fear of death drives us to poison ourselves with 'medicines' that at best only postpone the inevitable. And to what end? We still die of cancer, we still get sick – sometimes as side effects of very drugs we take to keep us well. We still crash cars. We still make war. So where has all this gotten us as a species?”

“It's gotten me freezing my nuts off on a roof like a dumbass, wondering what the hell you're talking about,” I offered.

Max laughed. “I am talking about changing the rules of the game. We have as a society have made it too easy on ourselves, and it has made us fat and dumb and unimaginative. We sit in our offices and watch our TV's and plan for retirement and take out insurance policies and go on

sad little stage-managed vacations, just not anywhere too dangerous or dirty, and we make sure we are all wearing our government-approved safety helmets and carrying our health plan cards in case something goes wrong. All that mad, innovative passion that elevated us above the other apes has been allowed to atrophy. We have stopped natural selection from purifying the species because deep in our heart of hearts, we are all terrified that we wouldn't make the cut.

“Changing the rules of the game is the only way to survive, to prevent being overtaken by a hungrier, more inventive competitor. We need to rediscover the exhilaration of painting ourselves into a corner that we don't know we'll get out of, of having our mettle tested with everything on the line. We need to remind ourselves of the joy of the truly uncertain outcome. We need to gaze into the abyss.”

We found Columbine and Anthony waiting for us downstairs.

“Miss Columbine,” Max said. “Are you waiting for me or tall, dark, and snarky?”

“Him,” she said as she hooked her arm around mine.

“Of course,” Max said with a nod. “And why not? See how he rocks that hipster-Philip-Marlowe look with his rumpled coat and slightly askew hat.” He reached out to fuss with my hat a little. “I hope you don't mind if we walk you two out.”

“Not at all,” I said, knocking his hand back from my head.

Max led us through the art show towards the the back of the building. The party was winding down, most of the guests had left and a few of the installations were already coming down.

We came upon Violet and her sculpture, which was almost finished. It was a woman sitting on a rock, lounging casually and looking at herself in a hand mirror, posed in almost exactly the same position Violet had been in, with her legs also spread open to the audience. There of course weren't fine details, given the media used, but the figure was very fluid in its lines and structure. It was beautiful.

“Hang on, I want to just see this before we go,” I said as I moved to join the group of people still watching Violet work and admiring the finished product.

The crowd had grown much larger since I left, and we had to force our way in to get closer. Anthony wedged himself between a young, well-dressed couple, stepping on the man's foot in the process.

The man and Anthony exchanged some words. The other man got in Anthony's face, apparently remembering some terrible advice from his

childhood about standing up to bullies. Anthony pushed him back like a you would swat away a fly. The man came back and tried to shove Anthony, who promptly lifted him off the ground and tossed him away like a rag doll. Unfortunately, the man landed right on Violet.

It all seemed to happen in slow motion, although I was frozen in place and unable to react. The man flew into her with a tremendous force, knocking her off her stool and face-first into her sculpture. She ended up crumpled in a heap on the floor on top a pool of shattered glass and torn gold threads.

I leaped on stage to help her to her feet. Shards of glass had torn through her gown and implanted themselves in her skin. Small gashes of red dotted her body.

Suddenly there was applause. I turned to see Max clapping. Others in the crowd looked at him questioningly at first, but then soon joined in.

Violet, standing at my side, took a bow. Anthony did the same from within the crowd.

"To create is sublime, as is to destroy. If we are not willing to destroy the beauty we have created, we become slaves to it," Max expounded.

"Fuck this," I rejoined.

Chapter 2

(Side B) Underground

Two days later, I met Columbine for breakfast. When I arrived, she had the morning's paper spread open and waiting for me.

"What's all this about?" I asked.

"Read it."

The headline said: *Peterman Indicted – Inspiratech VP Charged with Fraud, Embezzlement.*

I recognized the man in the accompanying photo as the impatient man Max had words with at the party. The article said that information had surfaced early this morning that revealed Peterman had been running an elaborate kickback scheme.

"You wanted to know what happens to the people who lose one of Max's games," Columbine said, pointing at the paper. "Guess who lost last night."

"You're saying Max framed him?"

"No, I'm saying that everyone has dirty little secrets, and Max has a way of finding them out."

"Wait, so that means he has dirt on everyone who was out there on the roof the other night?"

She nodded. "He has to; that's how he keeps the game interesting."

"He takes this all a bit too far," I said, shaking my head. "You know, as we were coming down from the roof, he offered me a job. I'm supposed to go see him this afternoon to talk about it."

"What kind of job?"

"I'm not really sure. I wasn't even sure if he was serious. I only just met him, after all. Do you think he is?"

"Probably, he's pretty impetuous when it comes to these things," Columbine replied. "But be careful around him. I mean, he's my friend, but he's involved in a lot of things I'm sure you don't want to get mixed up in. You don't get as successful or powerful as Max without accumulating a few skeletons in the closet."

I shrugged. "I suppose not. And I guess he doesn't keep muscle like that guy Anthony around just to pick up the dry cleaning. But I'm a reporter; it's not like he's going to ask me to turn into his personal hitman. How dangerous can he really be?"

Columbine leaned forward and said, "He's rich, brilliant, and completely sociopathic. They don't get much more dangerous than that."

I had never been up to the twenty-third floor of the Abrasax building before, despite my best efforts. The obsequious little intern who met me in the lobby had to swipe a special keycard in the elevator just to get up there.

Once the elevator doors opened, I walked out into a vast reception area with a large rectangular reflecting pool, sky lights, and marble desk where Max's assistant sat. She was a young freckle-faced woman with short-cropped red hair and a very slim, boyish figure wearing grey slacks and suspenders over a white blouse. Towering over her on the wall behind the desk was a giant LCD screen running a continuous loop of Abrasax commercials with no sound. The contrast of the bright, garish ad images against the serenity of the room gave it an unsettlingly hypnotic *Clockwork Orange*-esque feel.

Max's assistant smiled when she saw me and intoned in a chipper voice, "Mr. Maxwell will be with you in just a minute. Please go in and wait inside."

Entering Max's office felt like stepping inside a giant iPod. The entire room was painted white – the walls, the ceiling, and even the floor was white. It was sparsely furnished with only a few pieces of furniture – a white plastic desk and chair, a long white wet bar with a row of matching stools, a couple white pleather couches, and a glass coffee table. All the furniture had a shiny, plastic look with rounded edges and chrome accents. The walls were completely empty and the entire room was devoid of any personal flourishes like art work, baubles, or photographs.

I plopped myself down on one of the couches. The sound system was piping in Throbbing Gristle's *20 Jazz Funk Greats* at a low, barely audible volume, which I took to be some esoteric form of psychological warfare on Max's part.

After fifteen minutes, Max finally came in. "Sorry to keep you waiting," he said as he made a b-line for the wet bar. "How about some drinks?"

Max as he poured us two glasses of scotch. "So have you had a chance to think about my proposition?" he asked while carrying over the two glasses in one hand and the rest of the bottle in the other.

I took one of the glasses from him and drained its contents in a single gulp. "I already have a job."

"You really should sip a whiskey this expensive," Max chided while refilling my glass. I snapped my head back and drained the second glass just as quickly. Max grinned.

"I'd hardly call your reporter thing real work. How much do you actually get paid by that subversive little rag?"

I told him. He laughed. "I can more than triple that. And you won't even have to give up your day job."

"What do you want me to do, exactly?" I asked.

"Information, D., I want information. By hook or by crook. I fiend for it, like a junkie, and my hunger is insatiable. Therefore, I am willing to pay top dollar to anyone who can get it for me. Some of my operatives use technological means, like surveillance. Others, like dear Saint Anthony, use more traditional low-tech approaches.

"What I want you to do is give me the human element, show me what's in the blind spots that a video camera can't see. Talk to people, ask questions, piece the puzzle together. Just like you do for your paper, but now you'll be reporting to me, and in the process you'll enjoy all the access and resources that you need."

"How do you know I won't turn around and publish what I find out for you?" I asked.

"Go ahead," Max shrugged, filling our glasses again. "Like anyone cares what you and your socialist friends print."

I took a deep breath. "What the hell, I'm dumb enough to agree to almost anything. What's my first assignment?"

He smiled triumphantly and raised his glass to clink it against mine. "This weekend I'm running another game. I'll have the details sent to you. Just show up, talk to people, try to blend in, and try not to be too much of an asshole."

"That's it?" I asked.

"And keep your eyes open, of course."

I was sitting around in a basement full of crates and metal storage containers, waiting for Max's game to start.

There were about fifteen of us all told, but everyone had broken up into smaller groups to make small talk until Max arrived. My particular

clique included a strawberry-blonde woman who looked about my age and another man in his mid-thirties.

They both looked like athletic types and were dressed like they were going hiking or rock climbing or something. The woman was wearing a tank top and cargo pants, while the man had on a flak jacket over a t-shirt and camouflage pants. Both were carrying backpacks loaded up with serious outdoors survival gear. I had nothing, like an idiot, because apparently Max didn't deem it necessary to warn me I would need it.

The woman had engaged me in conversation because she thought I was someone she knew from high school. Even though we quickly figured out that she was mistaken, she still invited me to stay and talk with them.

I decided to accept the offer, honestly, because she was the best looking of the women there. She wasn't exactly my type, but attractive nonetheless – a peppy, girl-next-door type with big green eyes, a china doll face, and a pair of tits just a touch too large for her slight frame.

My appreciation of that last feature was not lost on her companion, who would periodically catch me looking and respond by moving in closer to her, as if marking his territory. When he did this, she would wait just long enough not to be rude, and then take a couple steps away from him, reestablishing the distance between them. I took it less as a signal to me of her availability, and more as a signal to him of their boundaries.

“Are you nervous?” the man asked me.

I shook my head. “Should I be?”

He smiled and shrugged. “I guess we'll see.”

“Stop trying to scare him. I've heard the stories about your first time, how nervous you were,” the woman teased.

The man chuckled and explained to me, “A colleague from work – really he was more like my mentor – convinced me to join as a networking opportunity. The next thing I know it's two in the morning and Max is teaching me how to break into a bank.”

“It's really not that hard once you get the hang of it,” the woman chimed in.

“Why does Dylan Maxwell need to know how to break into a bank?” I asked. “He can't need the money.”

“It was part of the game,” the man replied, drawing out and over-annunciating every word to indicate the answer should have been obvious to me. “The object was to see who could find the most interesting thing in a safety deposit box. The guy who won found an actual human heart;

it had been treated or whatever to preserve it, but Max had it checked out and verified it was legit.”

A few minutes later, a hatch door in the ground opened, and Max emerged. “We're good to go,” he announced. “Come on down.”

One by one, we descended through the hatch and down a ladder, which brought us into a decaying room that looked like it might have once been a bank vault. Max led us out of the vault into another room, which indeed could have once been the lobby of a bank, but looked as if it had been built in the 19th century and left to rot ever since.

Which, as Max explained, was in fact the case.

“When this town was founded, it was at first just a stopover on the trail to the gold mines up north, a place for men looking to make their fortunes to stock up and refresh themselves. The town fathers realized there was more money to be made off the miners themselves than off the gold. Mining supply stores, banks, and hotels did pretty good business; the bars and whore houses did better.”

We walked through the bank lobby and out what was once the front door, which opened into a large tunnel about a story high, buttressed by concrete. The length of the tunnel was lined on either by the remnants of the facades of old buildings.

“This used to be Main Street,” Max continued. “You see, the 1906 quake buried the old town in a landslide. However, by that time the city's most powerful businessmen had realized the true value of this valley – that practically anything would grow in its soil – so they simply rebuilt the city on top of the old one.

“Back in the fifties, during the cold war, the city started looking into building underground fallout shelters in case of nuclear attack. They discovered the remnants of the old town and decided to preserve them as a historical site. It now exists as a labyrinthine series of subterranean tunnels connecting the old buildings. The idea was to make them safe for tourists to walk through, but the funding dried up and the project was never completed. These tunnels snake around, under, above, and through the old buildings in an intricate maze with a total length of over thirty miles if laid end-to-end. The buildings themselves have multiple rooms, some have multiple stories, some have basements, and all are in a dangerous state of ill-repair. So watch yourselves out there,” he added with a mischievous grin.

He then reached into his pocket and produced another small red metal box. “Somewhere in the ruins of old town I have hidden a box that looks

exactly like this. This one is empty, but the other contains something very valuable. Find it, and it's yours to keep.

"But don't dawdle. In exactly two hours, I am sealing the hatch we all came through. If you can't find your way back in time, you lose."

The strawberry-blonde, who I learned was named Elizabeth, finished tying off another length of wide, silver ribbon around an overhead water pipe. She had been placing these periodically along our path at intervals to make sure we didn't lose our way back.

The man, who was named David, took the point, shining his high-power flashlight ahead as we traversed another cramped subterranean tunnel. I was in the middle, while Elizabeth brought up the rear.

I decided to tag along with my two new friends, who had explained that they usually teamed up on games where safety was a particular concern. As David had put it, "You don't want to be left alone if you fall and break your leg down here."

"Is this stupid tunnel ever going to end?" Elizabeth groaned as she caught up with us.

"It has to eventually. Do you want to double back?" David asked.

"No, that will just waste more time," Elizabeth complained. "I thought you said this was the way to go."

"Looking at the map, it seemed like the most promising option," he replied defensively, tapping on the hand-drawn map he had been sketching as we explored.

"Your map is shit," Elizabeth said bitterly.

It was clear that the strain of confinement in such tight, dark quarters was getting to my companions. Of course, the physical exertion was also taking its toll, as was the growing realization that Max's assignment was essentially impossible – like finding a needle in a haystack, except you don't even know which haystack to look in.

"Hang on, I think I see something," David said – not so much with enthusiasm as with desperate hope. As we advanced further, the flashlight's beam revealed that our tunnel came to a dead end at a large concrete wall with a small metal ladder affixed to it. The ladder led up a tall, narrow shaft, but we couldn't see where it opened up.

"Do you think we should climb it?" he asked.

"It beats walking back the way we came," Elizabeth said.

The bottom rung of the ladder was about seven feet off the ground, so David gave her a leg up. As she started to climb, he turned back to me and offered me a boost.

"Why not? The view's better from the second position anyway," I said, pointing up at Elizabeth's ass swaying back and forth as she worked her way up.

David glared at me as he cupped my heel in his hands and helped me up. Once I had cleared the first few rungs, he took a running start and leaped up the wall to start his own climb.

When all three of us had made it to the top, I slapped David on the back and said, "Nice hopping, frogger."

"That's what weekly Saturday afternoon pickup games will do for you," he boasted.

"Now if only your navigational skills were as keen," Elizabeth chimed in. "Look where you brought us."

We walked out into the middle of a large clearing with four different tunnels forking out from it. Two of the tunnels had Elizabeth's silver ribbons already tagging their entrances.

"You see that? You led us around in a giant circle," she shrieked. "That's the tunnel that we came here through the first time, and the other's the stupid tunnel you made us go down that brought us right back here."

She was right; I recognized the clearing. I took a seat on the grimy concrete ground and leaned back against a wall.

"What are you doing?" she asked me.

"It's been a while since we had a break, and I think that climb took a lot out of us. Let's catch our breath and cool off a little while we figure out what's next."

"Fine," she replied, sitting down beside me and taking a drink from her canteen. "Which tunnel do you want to take next, then?"

David, meanwhile, was fretting over his watch. "We actually should start heading back. There's only thirty minutes left, and it'll take us most of that to get there."

"It'll take twenty max, fifteen if we hustle," Elizabeth objected. "You're too cautious, Dave. That's why we never win."

He bristled under that comment, and I could just about hear him biting his tongue. "Okay, we'll check one of the tunnels, but if we don't find anything in ten minutes, we should call it quits."

Elizabeth nodded in agreement. Satisfied, David sat down, forcing his way between us. Once he had finished jostling me aside, he put a hand on my shoulder and asked, "So are you having fun on your rookie outing?"

"Oh yeah, this is a blast," I grumbled sarcastically.

He laughed.

"Don't complain," Elizabeth jumped in. "There are worse ways to pop your cherry, believe me. You should hear some of the stories – people have been arrested their first time, broken bones, been mugged, and worse."

"I can see why you all think this is so much fun," I said sarcastically. "So what about you?"

"What about me?" Elizabeth repeated.

"What was your first time like? David told his story, but you never told yours."

"Well, let's see," she began. "I joined when I was sixteen. My father was already a member, and he thought it would be good for me. On the first night I went out with Max, there were only a handful of us, like six or seven, all women. Max helped us get into these horrible disguises, like big wigs and trashy make-up, leopard print and hot pants and bustiers and leather skirts. Then he drove us down to the San Hermes Park late at night with nothing but the clothes on our backs and turned us loose with all the drug dealers, the vagrants, the junkies, the hookers. And he told us the one who had made the most money by daybreak was the winner."

"Jesus," I said. "And you were only sixteen?"

She nodded her head and trailed off before abruptly jumping to her feet. "Enough sitting around. Time to shake dirt."

David and I followed her to our feet. "So, two tunnels left to pick from. Which'll it be?"

David pointed to the one on the far left.

"Left it is," she said. "Not the way I would've gone, but what the hell – you're due for a good call."

We started down the tunnel and within a couple minutes came upon the entrance to what looked like an old Victorian home that had been tilted off its foundation by the quake and slumped to the right.

David was the first one up the front steps and had to work at the door to force it open, since the crooked jamb had wedged it shut tight.

"I don't think we should go in. This doesn't seem safe at all," he said.

"Then don't go in," Elizabeth replied as she forced her way past him.

She was about three steps inside before she jumped in fright and dropped her flashlight. "Holy shit!" she exclaimed.

"What is it?" David asked as he ran in. He swept his flashlight's beam around the interior until he found what had scared Elizabeth.

Sitting in the middle of the living room, which was just off to the left from the front entrance, was a skeleton sitting propped up in a rocking chair. Its body was human, but the skull looked like a bull's.

"What the fuck?" David uttered in disbelief.

"Someone set it up like that," I said. "There's no way the bones would stay together upright like that on their own."

"That's sick," Elizabeth said. "Why would someone do that? Is it supposed to be a joke?"

"Maybe," I said and gave a noncommittal shrug.

I walked over to a book case along the far wall and shined my flashlight on it. It was packed tightly with old leather-bound volumes. Elizabeth came up to join me.

"They're all books about the occult – witchcraft, demons, things like that," she said. "Weird."

"Hey, look at this," David called to us from the other side of the room.

He pointed at a typewriter sitting on top of a small wooden writing desk.

"So what? It's a typewriter," Elizabeth said, unimpressed.

"It's not just a typewriter, it's a Royal DeLuxe. Hemingway used to do ads for these. This is an earlier model, of course."

Elizabeth rolled her eyes. "Fascinating. We are all humbled by your prowess as a treasure trove of useless information."

David continued, undeterred. "The thing is, the earliest model of these didn't surface until the twenties. Meaning that this typewriter was put here after the earthquake."

Elizabeth snatched the machine away and started tinkering with it. She eventually managed to work the top of the casing off, revealing Max's red box nested beneath the typebars.

We started to make our way back, following Elizabeth's trail of silver ribbons. David was once again taking the lead, while I was hanging back to walk alongside Elizabeth. She was busy turning the box over in her hands, inspecting it.

"I can't figure out how to open it," she said. "There don't seem to be any seams or hinges or releases or anything."

"Max can probably show you once we get back," I said. "Do you know what's in it?"

She shook her head. "No clue."

"Well whatever it is, I hope there's two of them," I said. Elizabeth didn't respond. "But seriously," I pressed, "how does this work, do you two share the prize or what?"

"You'd think so," David called back from up ahead. "We both worked together, made decisions together, shared equipment. We found it together, we should both enjoy the benefits."

"You know Max won't allow it," Elizabeth replied. "One winner – that's the rule."

I studied her face, seeing the hardening of her features, the tightness of her jaw. "So how are you going to decide which of you gets it?"

"Well, I'm the one holding the box," she said firmly. "So I'm obviously the one who found it."

David stopped in his tracks and turned around. "On the other hand, I was the one who noticed the typewriter. I was the one who realized it didn't belong. So one could make the argument that I actually found it. I could have just as easily opened the casing myself."

"But you didn't. I did."

David took a few steps closer to her, then continued, "I was also the one who picked the tunnel. You said yourself, if it had been up to you, we'd have gone the other way."

"Actually, if it had been up to you, we wouldn't have gone either way. You were ready to give up and head home early, remember?"

David took two more steps, getting right up in Elizabeth's face. "I could just take it you know." He reached out and grabbed Elizabeth's wrist, gripping it tightly. "I could take a lot of things from you, if I wasn't always such a gentleman."

Elizabeth's cheeks turned deep red with anger. "Why don't you then?"

I put a hand on his shoulder and spun him around. "Enough."

He backed off. Then it was Elizabeth's turn to step up to him. She thrust the box into his chest.

"Take it," she said through gritted teeth. "If it means that much to you, you can have it."

David snatched the box out of her hand, then turned around to continue in the direction he had been walking. Meanwhile, Elizabeth knelt down to pick up a chunk of broken concrete off the ground. She crept up silently behind him and brought it down on the back of his head. He dropped to the ground quickly, blood trickling out from the loose flap of skin dangling off his scalp.

Elizabeth dropped the bloody concrete hunk onto the ground and plucked the box out of David's hand. Then she looked at me to see if I was going to make a move. I didn't.

She started walking again. "Are you just going to leave him behind?" I asked.

"We're barely going to make it back in time as it is. Dragging him along will only slow us down. You're more than welcome to try, if you really want, just don't expect me to wait up for you."

She kept walking. I followed after her, leaving David where he lay.

We spent the first half of the walk back in silence. Elizabeth was the one who finally said something.

"I was the one who lost on my first night," she said. "I didn't make a single cent. I wanted to play the game, I thought I could, and I even found a man. I got into his car, and he drove down the street and pulled into the empty parking lot of a middle school. He parked the car and didn't say anything, just unfastened his seat belt, reclined his seat, and unzipped himself. Then he looked at me with the most disgusting face I've ever seen – I still can see it to this day – and I realized that this wasn't about sex to him, it wasn't about getting off. He hated himself for being ugly, for being old, for being fat, for being too much of an asshole for any woman to voluntarily put up with. And he hated me for being young and beautiful, he hated me for making him desire me. And this was his way of getting revenge, by subordinating me to him. Somehow, looking at him in the care with his disgusting little prick peeking up out of his open pants, I knew all this to be true, and it made me sick. I opened the car door and ran out as fast as I could, I ran for something like a dozen blocks before I finally collapsed. I tried to throw up to see if it would help, but I could only dry heave. So I just went back to the park and sat alone on top of a picnic table, waiting for daybreak to come."

"What happened to you for losing?" I asked.

"A week later my father lost his job. Max leaked to the paper that he had been keeping a mistress who was drawing a salary of \$500,000 a year from his company as a 'consultant' even though she never set foot in the building and hardly spoke a word of English. He had also been using his expense account to fly them overseas for vacations under the guise of market research. Two days after this all came out, he killed himself. My mom and I lost everything and ended up on the streets. Instead of going away to an ivy league university, I had to stay with her and work two jobs to put myself through community college. It was rough, but I ended

up graduating from State and getting a scholarship to Stanford to get my Master's. Later, Max came to see me and told to me that he never harms the people who lose his games. He just tests them, shows them who they really are. I told him that I already knew this. And then he offered me a job."

By the time she finished her story, we had reached the bank. We quickly made our way back into the vault and up the ladder. Max was waiting for us when we emerged from the hatch.

"Cutting it a bit close, aren't you?" he said.

"Yeah, but it was worth it," Elizabeth said as she showed him the box. "I couldn't get it open, though."

"Congratulations," he said. "Go on back upstairs, and I'll be along in a second to show you how. It's actually surprisingly simple, once you know the trick."

She left the two of us alone, staring at the open hatch.

"David's still down there," I said.

Max looked at his watch. "He'd better hustle. He's only got ninety-three seconds."

"He's not going to hustle anything. She knocked him over the head with a hunk of concrete."

"Is he dead?"

I shrugged. "He was still breathing when we left him, just out cold."

Max sucked on his teeth, his eyes still fixed on his watch. "Well that's it, time's up."

I watched as he moved to seal up the hatch. "We could go back and find him. It wouldn't be hard. We were leaving a trail to help us find our way back; that same trail would take us to David."

"What's the point?" Max asked as he lowered the hatch into place.

"The point is that you don't have to lock him in there. The point is we could go in there, carry him back, and get him the medical attention he needs. The point is we could save his life."

"You misunderstand me," he replied. "I meant what is the point of the game, if we do that? What is the point of life, for that matter? If you don't raise the stakes, if you're not playing for keeps, then it's all just masturbatory self-indulgence. Victory is hollow without the possibility of defeat, of losing everything. There have to be consequences for failure. And we all have to learn to live with them."

"Don't you mean die from them?" I asked. "I don't think David's going to be living with much of anything for very long."

"He might last longer than you expect," Max replied. "Although it's true sooner or later he'll succumb to either blood loss or dehydration or exhaustion – or any combination thereof. The point is, I'm sure he'll have plenty of time to ponder where his life went so terribly wrong. But then, you're misunderstanding me again. Because I wasn't really talking about David."

"You mean Elizabeth?" I asked.

"Her, too."

"What do you mean? Is she the reason why you had me come out here tonight? Did you know what was going to happen, somehow?"

Max grinned. "Do you remember what I said the night we met? No one wants to toil in obscurity. Well, that includes me.

"So much of what I do necessitates secrecy and misinformation. But now you've seen this thing that happened with your own eyes, and you know it to be an incontrovertible fact. What's more, you know that on some level, I'm ultimately responsible for it.

"The question now is what you do with that information – publish it, or remain silent. On the one hand, it would make quite a story for your paper. On the other, it might raise some uncomfortable questions about your own actions – or inaction – tonight. After all, you probably could have stopped Elizabeth, just like you could have stopped me from shutting the hatch, or even made more of an effort to help David.

"But that's all your own concern now, not mine. For me, one person knows what happened, and that is enough."

—

Elizabeth sat up in her bed while the TV droned on the background. She wasn't really paying attention to what was on – some cable reality dating show, *Skanks of Love*, *Desperate for Love*, *In Love with Myself*, something like that. She just liked the ambient noise.

She looked over the small red box, which was now open, and smirked. Max had been right; it was absurdly simple once you knew the trick.

She fished the USB thumb drive out of the red box, then picked up her netbook from the nightstand and plugged the drive in.

There was only one file on the drive, an e-mail with several attachments. The e-mail was dated ten years ago and read:

Max,

Here are the files I mentioned re: accounting irregularities. You may also be interested in vendor payments to Ms. Yolanda Perez for unspecified consulting services, despite no record of her associated with any project documentation. Let me know if you'd like to discuss further.

David

—

I couldn't sleep that night, I just sat up thinking about David – alone in the dark, his life slowly slipping out through the hole in his head, dragging himself up the ladder, clawing desperately at the hatch until his fingers bled, screaming and banging his pulpy fist against the metal door, knowing that in the end he had no one to blame but himself.

About

PLAYLIST

Morrissey – Last of the Famous International Playboys

TV on the Radio – Dancing Choose

Of Montreal – Id Engager

Primal Scream – Kill All Hippies

Yeah Yeah Yeahs – Art Star

PJ Harvey – Sheela na-Gig

Throbbing Gristle – Still Walking

The Kinks – Powerman

a **CONCRETE UNDERGROUND** remix single

MAKING DYLAN MAXWELL is a remix of the forthcoming novel **CONCRETE UNDERGROUND** – it can be read as a stand-alone story or as a companion piece to the novel.

about the author

Moxie Mezcal lives under an assumed name in San Jose, California.

For more (free) guerrilla fiction, visit:

MOXIEMEZCAL.COM

Contact Moxie:

MoxieMezcal@gmail.com

twitter.com/MoxieMezcal

facebook.com/MoxieMezcal

myspace.com/MoxieMezcal

From the same author on Feedbacks

Sweet Dream, Silver Screen (2009)

A young woman searches for her missing twin sister in a foreign country called America. On the road, she encounters a series of strangers who help her navigate its topography, including a cowboy in a pink Cadillac, a sadistic law enforcement agent, a pulp fiction novelist, the regulars at a nuclear bomb-themed dive bar, and a man who befriends mannequins.

1999 (2009)

It's New Year's Eve, and four teenage friends are waiting for the world to end.

Home Movie (2009)

When a customer returns his own home movie inside a rented DVD case, an obsessive porn store clerk soon finds herself plunged into an old-fashioned whodunnit.

Fake (2009)

A desperate journalist tries to make his girlfriend understand why he is guilty of orchestrating an elaborate hoax... and how, when he met a mysterious musician with an amazing gift, it seemed that his lies might be coming true.

Concrete Underground (2010)

An idealistic journalist sets out to expose corruption among the city's elite and soon finds himself immersed in a conspiracy of murder, blackmail, espionage, and human trafficking. Pitted against the enigmatic CEO of one of the world's largest tech companies, he must play a deadly game threatens to unearth its players' darkest secrets.

CONCRETE UNDERGROUND is postmodern pulp fiction - a gritty, labyrinthine murder mystery about identity and alienation in the digital age.

Gagapocalypse (2011)

Three audacious and darkly satirical short stories about fame, media obsession, and men behaving badly.

:: Viral :: A YouTube star reflects bitterly on his fifteen minutes of

fame.

:: No. 1 :: A honeymooning couple accidentally film the suicide of a famous pop star.

:: Gagapocalypse :: A music critic imagines that Lady Gaga is brainwashing listeners into Manchurian Candidate sleeper assassins.



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