

## **CAIBIDIL A SÉ:** Tabula Rasa

Focus was elusive: the more you grasped for it, the more untouchable it became. Joe's world had crumbled before his eyes. 24 hours ago, he had made a correct choice, but now it had become an error of epic proportions. His decision's repercussions started to make themselves known with a dizzying force, consuming Joe in a vortex of distress and sorrow.

Joe and Bryson sat in a prison of stillness and sterility. White walls smothered any hint of colour or life from the lifeless furniture. Joe wore a ribbed, skintight bodysuit with those red-black wrist cuffs concealed, and Archie curled up in his lap like a lifeline.

*"Good morning, Joe. I trust you slept well and are feeling refreshed?"* Bryson lounged in an armchair, upholstered in pale Corinthian leather. With a leg crossed over the other, he cradled an automated recording device - a NoteTaker, its slim metal surface gleaming under the dim light of the room. He wore that stylish suit from the day before, but now it hung off his body like a shroud of deceit.

The air in the room became a weight pressing down on Bryson and Joe, a palpable tension that electrified the atmosphere. Bryson's gaze cut through Joe like daggers as his breathing became shallow with fear. Joe tensed, willing himself not to cower from Bryson's piercing stare. He decided to be honest with the doctor and voice his feelings.

*"I'm not good, Doctor."* The beat of Archie's heart thrumming against his thighs was the only thing grounding him in reality, preventing him from succumbing to the maddening chaos swirling in him. He took a deep breath, steeling himself for what came next.

*"This must be a challenging time for you, Joe. We all have our struggles in life, and I can understand how this situation unsettles you. Despite the discomfort, I believe this ultimately serves a larger purpose."* Joe recognised Bryson's veiled statement of *"the greater good"* with a heavy heart. It was short of an open declaration. People often used this phrase to legitimise despicable deeds throughout history.

Words he never expected to hear from a psychologist.

*"It's not what I'm meant to do with my life."* He seethed with rage at getting reduced to a government puppet. His life was worth nothing, and thoughts of dying on a forgotten battlefield filled him with despair. How could they expect him to sacrifice while politicians stayed safe in comfort?

*"I, too, felt lost and uncertain when I was your age. I had no clear vision of a path forward."* Joe looked up at Bryson, incredulous. The man appeared calm and collected as if he had never experienced a moment of doubt or fear.

*"Yeah, you had your own set of fucking problems, and I've got mine. At least you managed to land a job you enjoy. You and your pal roped me into this by threatening to hurt my dog."* Joe couldn't resist the urge to scoop up the Cocker Spaniel puppy, cradling him close to his chest

where his hearts beat. He hugged the furry bundle of joy with an almost primal ferocity as if embracing this little creature had awakened something deep inside him.

*"I'm sorry, Joe," Bryson said, low and sincere. "I understand if you can't forgive me for what we did, but I want you to know it wasn't personal. We were trying to do what we were ordered to."*

Joe looked at Bryson for a long moment, weighing his words. He could see the genuine remorse in the older man's eyes and knew that Bryson was telling the truth. He wasn't trying to save face or make excuses.

The psychologist leaned back in his chair and removed his glasses. His eyes, calm and collected, betrayed a hint of sadness. *"Please know that I had no part in any threats towards Archie. That was a decision made by someone else. And as for your concerns about your life and future, I understand this is a difficult time for you. But sometimes, it takes us going through hard times to find our true calling."*

*"This is what haunts me in this life, the uncertainty of tomorrow. I'm constantly afraid of what's ahead that I can't see. I can't tell if I'm an hour or a lifetime away from death."* Fear squeezed Joe's life out. A storm of suspense hung over him, ready to plunge him and Archie into the abyss at any second.

Bryson nodded. *"The fear of the unknown is a common one. But have you ever considered that it's that very uncertainty that makes life worth living? Life would become mundane and uninteresting if we knew what would happen daily."*

*"As the seconds tick by, I feel time slipping. My age climbs higher, and each passing moment pushes me closer to death's door. We are so small and insignificant in this huge and uncaring world; it won't take long before everything we achieve fades forever – every peak conquered, every kingdom erected, and even our memories of one another. Nothing can prevent it."*

The clock continued its relentless march, pushing Joe ever closer to death. As he aged, so did the world around him, a constant reminder of insignificance. Every moment and milestone achieved was an illusion erased in time. Even his memories would one day fade away - no matter how hard Joe tried to resist it, death's icy grip advanced with each winding second.

Bryson listened, his eyes never leaving Joe's face. *"It's true," he said, "that we'll all be gone one day. But that doesn't mean that our lives are meaningless. Whether we realise it or not, we all leave a mark on this world. It could be a smile, a kind word, or even a small act of kindness that changes someone's life."*

Joe's eyes widened in surprise as his mind whirled with the possibilities. He never fathomed that life could have a greater meaning than living day-to-day. His mouth went dry, and he croaked, *"But how do I find my purpose?"* A sense of desperate hope vibrated through his voice.

The psychologist smiled. *"It depends on you. You need to think about what drives your passions and makes you happy. Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, and others proposed that to combat nihilism; one should specialise in something they care deeply about to give their life purpose."*

*"Well, there is something I enjoy doing ... drawing, although it's not the greatest. I mean, far from it. Every time I try to draw something, it just looks terrible."* While not the greatest works of art, he still poured his hearts and soul into the sketches in his sketchbooks. Yet, no matter how much effort he put into them, an overwhelming disappointment crushed him as soon as he put down the pencil.

*"Terrible? I think your sketches are simply remarkable. Your eye for detail and artistic skill is truly impressive. I believe you have what it takes to be an extraordinary artist."* Bryson's inspirational words pierced Joe's anxiety like a hot dagger, burning away his worries and calming his racing hearts with a newfound relief.

The loneliness had made his art his only companion before meeting Archie, yet it was never good enough for the outside world. But now that someone had laid their eyes on his creations, admiration spread through them like wildfire. He craved this attention--for it treated him with a sense of value that he'd never felt before. Despite its fleeting nature, it meant the world to him.

*"I keep drawing the same things; dogs, birds and naked women. But it's not art I'd be proud to show or anything special. If I did, women would think I'm some creep."* And there was no denying why: those "models" of the women he drew came from Old Millennialian porn magazines, fueling the deep sexual obsession keeping him shackled. An urge that should have never existed but lingered like immortal cancer, ready to swallow him whole.

Bryson leaned forward, his eyes gleaming with excitement. *"But that's precisely what makes your drawings unique. The beauty of art lies in the eye of the beholder. You shouldn't be worried about what others think. You should create what makes you happy and proud."*

Joe's eyes lit up with a newfound flame of ambition, his chest swelling with pride. Every word became a burst of energy, pumping through his veins and giving him wings to fly higher. *"Maybe you're right. Maybe I should start drawing again and see where it takes me."*

Bryson nodded, *"Yes, Joe. Let your passion drive you. And who knows? Maybe one day, your art will inspire others and leave a lasting impression on the world."*

The empowering words ricocheted around Joe's mind like a volley of lightning strikes, stunning him into shocked silence. The relentless cadence of the inspiring speech drilled deep down into the softest core of his brain, reverberating until the murky clouds of doubt burned away by its fierce blaze.

*"It appears you have a lot of pent-up angst. It's not beneficial for someone your age to hold on to all that negativity."*

Joe couldn't disagree with Bryson's assessment. Despite his newfound motivation to pursue his passion, he still felt the lingering weight of his internal struggles. *"Yeah, I know,"* he muttered, averting his gaze from Bryson's piercing stare.

Bryson leaned back in his chair, folding his arms across his chest. *"You know what I do when I need to release tension?"*

Joe shook his head.

*"I meditate. It can be an extremely effective way to process and handle difficult emotions. It has been a beneficial practice for me, so I thought it might be something you'd want to explore."*

Joe raised an eyebrow in scepticism. *"I don't know. I've never tried meditation before."*

*"You don't have to like it. Just use it as an outlet for your emotions. Give it a try."*

Joe hesitated at the suggestion of meditation, considering the possibilities. On the one hand, it would help him relax, but he was unsure if it would be worth the time and effort. He bit his lip, torn between two courses of action. He nodded in agreement, though he wasn't sure if he had made the right decision.

*"Alright, I'll try it."*

Bryson grinned. *"Excellent. I have just the thing for you."* He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small, carved wooden cube with detailed grooves carved into it. Joe stared in awe at its intricate details, marvelling at the depth of the grooves cut into it. *"This is a meditation box. It's filled with many things that can help you relax and focus your mind."*

Joe's eyes bulged with an insatiable craving as his doctor flung the item into his palms. He caressed the ornate carvings on the box's surface, tracing each line and curve with a trembling finger. The perfect symmetry of its design left him quivering in awe while the light glinting off its slick sheen set his hearts racing. Beads of sweat formed rivulets down his forehead as he imagined all the hidden secrets.

*"Go ahead, open it,"* Bryson urged.

Joe trembled as he fiddled with the small square, his heart racing in anticipation. As the lids lifted and the light flooded in, Joe couldn't contain himself as his eyes beheld an assortment of precious treasures; shimmering crystals, vibrant feathers, and mysterious trinkets glinted up at him. He plucked out a round stone that glowed with a sea-like hue, feeling its cool weight in his palm and sensing its powerful energy.

*"What do I do with this?"* he asked, a bit overwhelmed.

*"Whatever makes you feel most at ease,"* Bryson replied. *"Hold it, focus on how it feels in your hand, and let your mind wander. Don't try to control your thoughts. Just let them come and go."*

Joe's head swivelled. A fire of curiosity and trepidation ignited in his heart. His fingers clutched the delicate feather, its softness radiating through him like a beacon of hope. He closed his eyes and tried to picture himself standing atop a precipice, the wind howling around him, but all he could see was an endless abyss below.

The worry and fear that had weighed him down for so long were hard to ignore. Despite the newfound strength coursing through his veins, a nagging lingered. He hoped that this small token would be enough to pull him out of the darkness. For the first time in forever, contentedness spurred in Joe - if only for a fleeting moment before the weight of his thoughts came crashing back down on him.

As Joe opened his eyes, he found Bryson watching him.

*"How do you feel?"* he asked.

*"Amazing. I never knew that something so simple could make such a difference."* Joe's chest heaved with laboured breaths as if a boulder had gotten lifted off his body. The sensation was almost too intense to bear like the world around him collapsing into a pure ecstasy black hole.

Bryson smiled. "Meditation is a powerful tool. It takes time and practice to master, but once you do, it can do wonders for your mental and emotional well-being."

"Thank you, Bryson. I think this might be just what I needed." Joe clenched his fists in joy, feeling grateful for Bryson's support. He placed the items back in their box with reverence as if it was a sacred vessel. Every action was like a giant leap towards success, and he revelled in the accomplishment.

Bryson's eyes sparkled with pride. "Anytime, Joe. Remember, you can always come to me if you need someone to talk to."

The room hummed with power as the BuzzDisc quivered next to Bryson. Joe had to leave, so he scooped up Archie and set him in Bryson's lap. Archie licked his face, and Bryson smiled at the unexpected moment of happiness. Joe felt anguish watching them, remembering when Bryson had threatened to end Archie's life if he didn't become a government super soldier. Though these threats seemed like distant memories, fear still hung over them like a fog. Bryson looked up and met Joe's gaze.

"What's on your mind, Joe?"

Joe's stomach twisted as he tried to find the courage to speak up. He felt exposed, his innermost thoughts and fears displayed for Bryson. But something about the man's deep, understanding gaze made Joe feel a strange kind of safety, enough for him to take a deep breath before speaking out and revealing his heart.

"I just...I can't believe I almost went through with it. I almost gave up, Archie."

Bryson placed a hand on Joe's shoulder.

"You faced a tremendous amount of pressure, Joe. Fear and confusion are natural responses to such high-stress situations. However, you made the correct decision in the end. Soon, you and Archie will have the opportunity to start fresh and enjoy life unburdened.

Take solace in knowing you did what was best for yourself and your loved one. Keep looking ahead with hope and positivity.

Remember, I'm here for you whenever you need support."

Joe's face shifted in a grimace of a smile, and he flinched at Bryson's touch. His chest was tight with fear, but he found solace in having someone stand by him. The air between Archie and Bryson crackled with electricity as they exchanged tender touches, a silent language of love that gave Joe the courage to take on whatever lay ahead.

With a deep breath, he looked up at Bryson. "Thank you, Bryson. For everything."

Bryson nodded, his eyes filled with kindness. "Of course, Joe. You're not alone in this. We'll get through it together."

The giant steel door leading out of the room loomed, its bulky metal frame making it seem impenetrable. With a deep breath, Joe walked towards the door, and a chill of anticipation rushed through him as the two halves of the door clanged apart. He stepped into the unknown, where all that remained was a stark expanse of metal as far as his eyes could see.

Kahurangi towered over Joe, a behemoth looming large in the hallway. His skintight suit had skeletal bars on his limbs, and his face concealed behind tribal tattoos. A dread surrounded Kahurangi as if powers beyond our comprehension were within him.

Kahurangi's fingers dug into Joe's arm, and he stuffed a meditation box in his pocket for protection. They stopped at a door, their feet echoing off the walls. Kahurangi's eyes locked on the door like a predator. Joe felt fear choke him as if every inch of the door was alive with malevolent energy warning against its threshold. But Kahurangi entered the code anyway, beckoning whatever horrors lay beyond.

An inscription circled the door, emitting a sinister power: *Deus est in suo caelo, omnia sunt bene in mundo*. Though Joe had limited linguistic skills, he recognised the language as Latin. In his mind's eye, a crude translation of the phrase flashed across his consciousness - "God in the sky, everything good with the world". The words were beautiful, yet somehow filled him with dread setting his nerves on edge.

Kahurangi shot Joe a deadly glare, fingers punching at the keypad with an urgent rhythm. With a sharp click, the door opened, unleashing what lay beyond. The room was cloaked in darkness,



illuminated only by the red blinking of a screen in the corner. On its surface, Joe saw the silhouette of a man bent behind a HoloDisplay.

Kahurangi pushed Joe into the abyssal chamber, trapping them with an unknown figure. Fear drummed in Joe's chest as he had no clue why he was here. The man at the computer didn't move, and Kahurangi observed them, his voice soft. Fear coursed through Joe as he realised the gravity of his situation.

"Greetings, Joe. How did you find your initial session with Doctor Bryson?"

Joe quailed under Doctor Kōki's pleasant but ominous words, sinking deeper into despair as he couldn't escape his piercing gaze. The walls seemed to close in on Joe as he searched for an escape. The doctor's words were a siren song of false security, the oppressive silence stealing Joe's energy until he croaked out his fear-filled response.

"Well... it wasn't perfect. The guy seemed alright, I suppose. But I'm still not so sure about him."

The darkness hid Doctor Kōki's face from Joe, but he could still sense the doctor's eyes drilling into him. He wanted to look away, not wanting to subject himself to such a heavy gaze, yet at the same time, the intensity of it drew him in. Joe was desperate to leave the room but couldn't move.

It was like Kōki was one of those "doctors" from the Integration Academy.

It was then that Kōki spoke again. "I understand your concerns, Joe. Please rest assured that Doctor Bryson is a highly qualified professional with decades of experience helping patients like yourself manage their fears and worries. I have complete faith that he can be a reliable guide for you in this difficult time."

The walls closed in on him, an invisible force bearing down with crippling weight. He suffocated in fear and unease as he tried to push away the fearful thoughts cascading through his mind. Sweat rolled down his face as he struggled against the terror that held him captive, knowing he must flee but unable to find a way out.

"Please don't tell me I'm here because you want to run more tests on me."

Doctor Kōki's features were hard as stone, unreadable like a mask of indifference. Joe's words hung between them, oppressive and heavy like a dense fog. The room was filled with an awkward tension that seemed almost to crush Joe, leaving him gasping for breath, knowing deep down he may have sealed his fate.

"I apologise for the inconvenience. However, more tests will be necessary to properly understand your unique anatomy. Today's examination will focus on understanding your abilities better."

Joe's heart raced as he heard Kōki's words. Something about the way the doctor spoke made his skin crawl, and he couldn't shake off the feeling that he was in grave danger. He tried to talk, but his throat was dry, and he had to clear it several times before he could form a coherent question.

"What kind of abilities are you talking about?"

Kōki leaned forward on his desk, his eyes narrowing. "You know what I am talking about, Joe. Your unique abilities are what brought you here in the first place. We need to understand them better if we are going to harness their power."

"Are you going to cut me open while I'm still conscious?!" Every fibre of his being writhed in revulsion and dread as a parade of sinister instruments crossed his mind—razor-sharp scalpels, gripping forceps, cruel pincers, and brutal pliers. Blades slicing into his skin like the claws of a beast.

"I will undertake this with the utmost care. I understand that my methods may be uncomfortable. However, I assure you that I will do all my power to keep any distress to a minimum."

Joe trembled with fear in the locked room, captive to Kōki's cruel experiments. He pinched himself, feeling the sharp pain of reality and knew there was only one option: escape. As Kōki rose from his desk, Joe froze in terror, but instead of attacking, he opened a secret door in the wall.

"I am taking you next door to the Examination lab. I will be performing a few more tests on you before I begin the actual procedures," Kōki gave Joe an intense, lingering gaze as he beckoned for him to follow. Kahurangi lagged, mystified by the awkward atmosphere permeating the space, and Joe's feet became lead blocks. But Kōki's reassurance allowed him to release his worries.

The Examination lab was a large, white and featureless expanse. Lab technicians ran around like ants amidst machines attached to the walls, all dressed in white. None of them acknowledged Joe, except for his presence, the only discordant note being the submachine guns everyone seemed to carry, coarse metal providing a stark contrast against their work apparel. Kōki motioned towards a solitary white chair in the hallway and told Joe to sit.

He settled on it without comment, watching several more technicians hurry up to help fasten the white Kevlar bindings around his forearms, hands, and ankles. Sterile white, with metallic surfaces, gleamed in the bright light. The air was thick with antiseptic stench, making Joe's stomach churn.

He lay down and closed his eyes, hoping to block out the horror around him. But he couldn't. Joe heard Kōki's footsteps as he moved about the room. Joe's mind raced with the possibilities of what Kōki could do to him. He could cut into him, remove his organs, and dissect him like a laboratory specimen. A shiver ran down Joe's spine at the thought of it.



Kōki leaned over him, staring into his eyes with his piercing gaze. “I need you to take a deep breath and relax. I will give you something to ease the pain.”

Ease the pain!?!

Fear paralysed Joe as Kōki spoke. He didn’t have time to react before the doctor removed a needlegun from his pocket and pointed it towards Joe’s face. The sharp tip slid into the flesh of his right cheek, sending a chill down his spine. With a click, the trigger released, and something cool and numbing surged through his veins, paralysing his face.

His skin crawled with a creeping chill that seemed to sink deeper and deeper into his flesh until it had reached his bones, and he got paralysed with cold. His breath came in short and shallow pants as he tried to will away the numbing sensation.

“Kōki... you... tuilí.”

Kōki sprang into action, grabbing a robotic spider-like device. Joe got taken aback by the sight of the metal arms glaring at him before he could understand what was happening. His extremities immobilised as each arm began its job, prying open his mouth and eyes, expanding them beyond recognition until his face was unrecognisable.

With his gaping mouth, he couldn’t articulate himself, but Kōki could tell what he wanted. In a composed voice, like he had done this many times before, he said, “Let us start with a full physical examination.” He spoke like a dentist - it won’t hurt too much. Just take it easy, and you’ll be done in no time.

The needles jabbed into his eye sockets like molten lava ran through his veins, and lightning coursed between both eyes. He stayed quiet, fists clenched to muffle any noises of pain or anguish; he was stuck and had no choice but to tough it out.

Two robotic arms shot out towards Joe, blades spinning and whining. The metal tips cut into the skin on both wrists, creating two pools of blood beneath them. Two other technicians rushed up with microsonic scanners to inspect the wounds while more needles punctured Joe’s body to extract blood into a glass reservoir exposed to bright light beams.

As soon as the needles pulled away from Joe’s eyes and gums, metal arms emerged, burning away the cuts until only faint red lines remained. Joe closed his eyes to moisten them, relieved as he could breathe and swallow again. He gritted his teeth and suppressed the rage threatening to rise inside him.

Kōki’s examinations were far more invasive and agonising today than the day before. Yesterday he got subjected to a full-body CT scan, biopsy and a Maximal Anaerobic Running Test that left him feeling like his soul was getting ripped from his body. The pain and suffering seemed to last an eternity, but he endured it all and was released.

*"I do apologise for any discomfort I have caused with these examinations. My superior gave me orders to make them more intensive."* Regret etched itself across Kōki's face like a permanent scar. His mouth twisted into a grimace of guilt, his eyes heavy with shame. He shifted from foot to foot, wishing he could undo the wrong he had done to Joe. There was no mistaking it - Kōki's remorse was real.

*"Why didn't you warn me this would be so fucking painful!?"* The fury boiled in Joe's chest as he sat in the examination chair, a silent scream ringing through his head. His body trembled, and sweat beaded on his forehead from the intense testing he had gotten subjected to. The technicians released each restraint that bound him to the chair, yet the feeling of restraint lingered in the air.

*"I am sorry,"* Kōki repeated, his eyes downcast. *"I did not want to alarm you. I thought it was better not to say anything."*

Joe stared in disbelief, an intense rage swelling inside him as he had never experienced. The agony and hurt he'd gone through unleashed a fury conflicting with his everyday nervous demeanour. He was angry yet scared, overwhelmed with emotions he couldn't control.

*"Better not to say anything? Are you fucking kidding me?"* He took a step forward, his eyes blazing with fury. *"You put me through hell and didn't even have the decency to warn me what to expect!"*

Kōki flinched at Joe's outburst. He knew he had made a mistake but didn't know how to make it right. He couldn't take back what he had done or erase the pain he had caused.

Joe towered over Kōki, his chest heaving as he glared at the man. *"You think an apology is enough? You think that makes everything okay?!"*

Kōki remained silent, his gaze still downcast.

*"You're a fucking monster!"* Joe spat, his words dripping with venom. *"You don't care about me. You don't care about my pain. You just want to experiment on me like I'm nothing more than a lab rat!"*

Kōki looked up, his eyes wide with shock. *"That is not true,"* he protested. *"I care about you. I want to help you."*

*"Help me? By torturing me?"* Joe shook his head. *"You don't have the right to do that to people, no matter your intentions."*

Kōki hung his head. His shoulders slumped in defeat. *"I know I have made mistakes,"* he said. *"But I am trying to make things right."*

Kahurangi towered above Kōki, holding a pen-like cylinder with a large red button at the end in her hand. Joe's pulse raced as he imagined the deadly Funnel Web solution he could inject into him with a single press of the button - enough venom to cause excruciating pain and madness.

Joe was running out of time, and his hand shook as he reached for the meditation cube. He opened it to reveal a blue stone radiating calmness, which he grasped. His eyes closed as he remembered Bryson's words on escaping mental bondage and doing away with darkness. After one deep breath, tranquillity filled him from the stone in his hand.

He opened his eyes to find Kōki staring at him, his expression a mixture of confusion and curiosity. Joe wondered if the man had ever seen such a thing before.

*"What is that?"* Kōki asked, pointing to the blue stone in Joe's hand.

Joe looked down at the stone, its presence calming him even as he spoke. *"It's a meditation stone. It helps me calm my mind and erase negative thoughts. Bryson gave it to me."*

Kōki's eyes widened. *"I have never seen anything like it. May I?"*

Joe hesitated for a moment before handing the stone over to Kōki. The man grasped it in his hand, and Joe could see his body relax as the stone's energy took hold.

*"It is amazing,"* Kōki murmured. *"I wish I had something like this when I'm overwhelmed."*

Joe nodded, feeling a connection between them that he hadn't expected. He had come into this room feeling nothing but fear and anger, but now he saw that Kōki was just a man who had made a mistake. He was still learning, still growing, like Joe.

*"Maybe we can both learn to use it,"* Joe's lips quivered before stretching into a wide grin, the first genuine smile he had made in years. His face glowed with happiness, a feeling he thought he had long forgotten. *"To calm ourselves down and make better choices."*

Kōki smiled back, relief flickering in his eyes. *"Yes, I would like that."*

The stale air in the room electrified, rivulets of charged energy running beneath the surface. An untapped power welled up inside. He had found an unexpected comrade in this dark, unforgiving world and was ready to take on whatever challenges lay ahead. With a renewed sense of strength, he tightened his grasp around the calm blue stone in his pocket - a reminder of the infinite power within him.

*"We shall proceed to the following examination. You should be delighted to learn that it will be significantly less obtrusive and agonising than what you have gone through."* Kōki's iron grip on Joe's shoulder filled him with a strange sense of security, and his gut tugged with the idea that maybe Kōki could get trust.

Despite his fear of medical check-ups, Joe found courage in the cool texture of a blue stone in his pocket, urged forward by Kōki. In a cavernous room, Kahanguri followed them to two unfamiliar men standing near a glowing console with HoloDisplay screens. One was an old Indonesian man wearing a pristine white uniform, while the other was a muscular Arab in pinstripes.

The Indonesian man's gaze was like a hawk hunting its prey as he glared at Joe, his body rigid with hostility and mistrust, almost as if expecting him to lash out like a venomous snake. The Arab's eyes were like daggers, burning into Joe in an expression of utter loathing. It was a look that seemed to represent all the wrongs ever done by Joe's kind, a seething rage that ran deep through the centuries.

He did not doubt that if the Arab reached back behind him, a gun would get pointed at his head - this man wanted nothing more than to see Joe dead. Joe's stomach churned as he approached two men, Kōki's fingers pressing into his shoulder. The tension was palpable, and Joe knew it could turn bad. He forced himself to press on, relying on Kōki's support.

*"Let me introduce my colleagues. This is Admiral Eka and Yasir Baraq, Chair of the Board at Baraq Battlegear."* Joe nodded a polite greeting, his eyes darting between the two men. Hostility still simmered beneath the surface, their eyes locked onto him like a predator stalking its prey. He sought comfort in his blue stone; Kōki's grip on his shoulder tightened, reassuring him.

*"Well, if it isn't Prototype-000,"* Eka grumbled.

*"The desperate white knight who'll help us extinguish the Degeleryte menace. I hope you're worth the expenditure."* Baraq spat.

The blue stone in his pocket became heavier as he tried to steady his breathing and thoughts. He looked at Kōki, hoping to find a glimmer of hope in his eyes, but saw only resignation. Joe knew that Kōki had reasons for being here, but he had also seen something in him that he had never expected - a sense of kindness and understanding.

*"Well then, Mate Kōki, what plans do you have for our little guinea pig?"* Baraq asked, breaking the tense silence that had settled over the room.

*"We commence the assessment of Iolar's remarkable potential. Let us observe his aptitude for replication first."* Kōki announced.

The HoloDisplays flickered with static as they filled with footage of a room, a vast space reminiscent of an empty cavern. The place was washed in the glow of brilliant white light suffusing every corner of it, and there was not a single shadow to get seen. The ceiling overhead rose into a great dome, which only added to the sense of grandeur that this room exuded.

*"You'd be doing us all a favour if you just dissected the little leech instead. We all know his kind are nothing but scum."* Baraq clenched his teeth around the fat cigar, a sneer of satisfaction creasing his face as he flicked his thumb over the lighter, coaxing a flame from its depths. The pungent aroma of smoke swirled around him as he inhaled, savouring the potent taste.

Joe's skin crawled as Baraq's words slithered inside his brain. Hate saturated the air, and darkness smothered him like a shroud. He couldn't understand why he got trapped in the same room as that slimy anti-Celtic reptile.

*“I’m sure Mate Yaroslava will be ecstatic when she finds out you want to gut our prize specimen. She’d probably throw a party in your honour if she caught wind of this.”* Eka’s voice boomed out of his chest like thunder, cutting through Baraq’s words like a knife. He sent a searing glare in the other man’s direction before turning back to the HoloDisplays, his gaze burning with fierce intensity.

*“What experiments are you planning to conduct on me, Doctor?”* Joe’s palms slicked with sweat as he thought of the possibilities ahead. Fear and excitement waged war within him, pushing and pulling him in different directions. One moment he was filled with dread at what awaited him, while the next, he was awestruck by the tantalising unknown.

Kōki turned to face Joe, his eyes softening with concern. *“I just want to observe and assess your abilities, Joe. I will present some objects in the other room and would like you to replicate them.”*

*“That sounds simple enough.”* Joe’s throat tightened, the lump in his chest rising and blocking his airway. He attempted to gulp it down, but it seemed too big to swallow.

*“I assure you, Joe, I have no intention of harming you. My experiments are designed to unlock the full extent of your abilities and potential.”* Joe relaxed, yet still sceptical. He had heard those words before from people who subjected him to tests and experiments-- painful memories that left him wary of anyone wanting to study him.

Joe’s chest heaved as he entered the beam of intense light. He moved forward, drawn to the pedestal in the centre of the room. On it stood a small porcelain plate that shimmered, beckoning him closer. Joe filled with trepidation and dread as he stepped forward—his moment of truth—a chance to make something extraordinary or suffer the consequences of failure.

*“Your task is simple, Joe,”* Kōki spoke through the speakers concealed in the chamber. *“Try to make a physical copy of the plate before you without touching it.”*

Joe’s eyes darted to the plate, taking in its intricate design and delicate curves. He knew he had a gift, something that set him apart from the rest, but this task seemed impossible. He closed his eyes for a moment, trying to clear his mind, and when he opened them again, he saw the plate in a different way.

He had expected to replicate an object, but not without touching it. He turned to face Kōki, his eyes brimming with confusion. *“How am I supposed to do that?”* he asked, quivering with anxiety.

Kōki smiled. *“You will find a way, Joe. I believe in you,”* he said before cutting off the intercom.

Joe hung his head in concentration, eyes closed. Every muscle ached with the effort of pushing and pulling at the plate. He took long, even breaths to centre his thoughts and emotions. Heat radiated from him, and tingling sensations coursed through his body as energy surged. His power flowed through his open hands, growing until it burst through his nervous system.

His arm glowed crimson as he visualised the plate in vivid detail with his quasi-clairvoyant scope. He shaped the matter with each beat of his hearts until its new form was complete in his mind's eye. But when he looked, no dish was in his grasp.

Confused, Joe glanced around the chamber, wondering what had gone wrong. Kōki spoke through the speakers again. *"Physical contact with the plate is necessary to replicate it."*

Sharp pain stabbed in his chest at the news. The hope he felt mere moments ago was replaced by despair. He had believed it was possible to replicate the plate without touching it, but now he felt foolish for even considering such a notion. The weight of failure pressed down on him, making breathing hard.

Kōki's voice spoke again, but this time it was different. It was no longer as a scientist but as a friend. *"Joe, I understand this is disappointing, but failure is part of the process. You learn from it and come back stronger. That is what progress is all about."*

In frustration, Joe slammed his hands onto the pedestal, electricity coursing through him. With shut eyes, he traced his fingertips over the china plate until it shattered between his hands. He focused on its qualities, and unbridled energy threatened to tear his soul free.

Joe forced himself to stay focused, the energy radiating from his fingertips burning his skin. Each mote of light contorted into his exact vision of the plate. With intense concentration, perfect curves and minuscule flaws appeared, merging until indistinguishable. Cold porcelain formed between his fingertips, and Joe opened his eyes to behold his work of art. Kōki admired it over the intercom, filling Joe with pride at the thought that this would last him an eternity.

"Not bad..." Kōki murmured.

*"Beginner's luck."* Baraq sneered.

*"Unbelievable..."* Eka's words trailed off into silence.

*"Shall we progress to the next test? It would be illuminating to witness if you can affect organic substances."*

Joe held the sunflower in his hands, feeling its energy and scent. He closed his eyes and imagined it bursting with life and colour shifting. But no matter how hard he tried to make it decompose, the stem stayed resolute. Joe felt frustration and desperation rise, followed by anger and tears. No matter his effort, he was powerless. All that came out was a low whimper.

*"That is most regrettable. I trust that the apple will yield better results."* Kōki commented.

Joe wiped away his tears and steeled himself against further frustration. He held the apple, visualising its properties: *sweet, juicy and round*. Its shape morphed before him like an hourglass, and the colour changed to a crimson hue until it burst with a satisfying pop. Joe saw



that the transformation was complete; he had made a trade-off, destroying something perfect to create something uncertain.

Here goes nothing.

Joe imagined a round object, the same hue as the transformed apple. He focused on its texture and weight until he could almost feel it in his hand. When he opened his eyes, a glossy round fruit appeared. Joe marvelled at its perfection but wondered what use his new power served.

*“That is an intriguing prospect. While the recreation of living organisms appears to be difficult, non-living tissue seems to be more within your capabilities. I wonder if you can replicate more complex items.”*

Joe was mesmerised by the towering HoloClock. Its holographic display illuminated 09:30 AM, 03.03.467 NM on its face. A surge coursed through him when he touched it, and a solid hum shook him with intensity. He closed his eyes as every circuit in the clock melded with his brain.

But why wasn't it crumbling away?

A flurry of details pounded in his mind like an avalanche of sharp rocks. The ice-cold circuits, wires, and transistors pummelled him with relentless force. His body numbed from the electrical current until he could no longer scream in agony. Too much for him to bear in one rush. Joe's hands flew to his head, and he staggered backward as if to contain the force of some uncontrollable power within him. His body trembled, and he collapsed, hot blood streaming from his eyes.

The world spun around him in a stream of blurred lights and sounds. It was like he was the centre of the universe, planets and stars rotating around him. The darkness crept in, and the only thing Joe could make out was Kōki's desperate face and screams of his name - begging for help. Then, his vision vanished.