

A Day Like Every Other
By Lucas Engelhardt

Chapter 1

It was a day like every other. Arthur awoke when his alarm went off at 5:25 AM. Another Tuesday morning.

Arthur always hated Tuesdays. Now, Mondays, though absolutely dreadful, were at least eventful. When he went to work on Mondays, he had to do all the work that he hadn't finished on Friday. So, his day sped happily along, or, at the very least, it sped busily along. And that was enough. Wednesday was always delightful, because it was the middle of the week. He was halfway to the next weekend. Thursday has the anticipation of Friday spread all through it. Of course, then there was Friday itself. A beautiful day of distraction that promised to leave much work undone, to make Monday more bearable. Saturday and Sunday were, of course, spectacular as work could be forgotten for two whole days.

Then there were Tuesdays. Work was slow, but ever present. Boring. And this was the day it was.

The snooze alarm was sounding. It was now 5:34 AM. Arthur decided it was time to get out of bed on this day, a day like every other Tuesday. A horrible day. A boring day.

Arthur got out of bed, pushing back the white sheets and gray blanket. It was November 1st, and the weather had started getting quite chilly in the morning. Outside the window of his third story apartment, he could hear the silence of the city. A cat in a nearby alley screeched and hissed, probably the result of insanity rather than any kind of danger, as no other sound was heard coming from that direction. Arthur raised the blinds and looked out the window. The city was dark, as it always was at 5:36 AM. A few lights were on here and there, an occasional taxi or bus would drive by. Arthur idly wondered if they ever had any passengers this early. He never actually saw people walking around at this time. The criminals of the city had gone to bed about 2 hours prior, and the productive members of the city were just getting out of bed. Much like Arthur, many of them were standing at their windows, examining the world outside, just to be sure that the status quo was still quo, though with a lingering hope that something, anything, would break the monotony of this day. This Tuesday. This terrible, awful day. Not a day where bad things happened. A day where nothing happened.

Arthur closed the blinds. He heard the shower in the apartment above his start. Without looking, he knew that it was 5:39 AM. The shower in the apartment above always came on at 5:39 AM. Arthur presumed that the tenant had their alarm set for 5:30, hit snooze, dragged themselves out of bed at 5:37, and then went straight into the shower. He didn't know the tenant upstairs. He didn't know any of his neighbors. And that suited him just

fine. After all, odds were good that their lives were as boring as his, and what Arthur did not want was to be bored by stories about someone else's life.

It was 5:40 AM, and Arthur went into the bathroom, and took his shower. The water, as always, started out warm and eventually turned cool. He had no idea why this happened. He had his own water heater in his utility closet, and it looked to be big enough to have a sufficient supply for a whole shower. But, apparently it did not. Arthur shrugged as he did every morning when thinking about his water heater. It was truly a day like every other.

At 5:50 AM, Arthur stepped out of what was, by that time, a cold shower. He dried off, and got dressed. White button-up, long-sleeved shirt, black pants, gray tie. That was something that he liked to spice up every now and then. He had several gray ties, of different patterns and hues. He would occasionally wear a different gray tie. Of course, no one noticed or cared, except for Arthur. But, Arthur wouldn't have wanted them to. He was not interested in gaining the attention of someone who would simply bore him with gossip about their kids' soccer teams or academic bowls. He wanted to be able to enjoy this Tuesday as much as possible, which admittedly, meant that he hoped to "break even", or at least cut his losses as much as he could. It was, after all, a Tuesday. A terrible, horrible day. And worse yet, a boring day.

At 5:57 AM, Arthur poured himself a bowl of cereal. It was a no-name brand cereal, but the same cereal that Arthur always ate. He liked it. Especially when he had 2% milk on it. The milk was also poured on the cereal. Orange juice completed the breakfast. The same breakfast he ate the previous day, and the same breakfast he planned to eat tomorrow morning. At 6:00 AM, Arthur turned on the television. One of the city's local stations decided that it would offer the city a great service by having the news on at 6 AM. Arthur watched the news. And, indeed, the stories sounded exactly the same as before. In criminal news, there was a theft at a convenience store. In culture, there was a symphony orchestra concert this Friday at the Palace Theater. In sports, the World Series was over, and the sports anchor was still blathering on about it. In weather, it was going to prove to be another cloudy, chilly, November day. In Arthur's life, he was going to work, coming home, relaxing and going to bed. It was going to be a day like every other.

At 7:00 AM, the news was over. This meant Arthur had exactly 7 minutes to grab his briefcase and walk downstairs and outside to the bus stop outside his apartment building. He arrived at the bus stop at 7:06 AM, waited one minute, and got on the bus to go downtown to his office building.

As Arthur rode the bus, he participated in the ritual he always participated in. He desperately avoided looking at anyone. This was not unusual, of course. Everyone did this. All the people, in attire appropriate to their status, whether fast food worker or business executive, refused to make eye contact with anyone else. Some read the paper that had been scattered on the floor, others read paperback novels that they had brought along, others looked expressionlessly outside the tinted bus window. Arthur, having already acquainted himself with the news for the day, and having no interest in novels,

was one of the latter. He stared at the closed storefronts as the bus passed them, occasionally stopping to pick up more passengers. Arthur didn't notice the passengers as they got on or off the bus. The best way to avoid being noticed was to avoid noticing people, Arthur had decided. And, sure enough, if anyone noticed him, they sure didn't make any fuss about it.

At 7:14 AM, the bus arrived in front of Arthur's office building. Arthur, and a few other nameless, faceless passengers got off. Arthur was the only one to enter his building.

Arthur's building was like so many others in the city. It was 15 stories high, almost entirely made of a reflective plastic made to resemble glass, and it had large, "glass" entrance doors with the building number in large black digits above the door. Arthur entered past the doorman/security guard who mumbled the same welcome he gave to every employee, and which almost no employee answered with anything more than a polite, eye-contact avoiding, nod.

At 7:20 AM, Arthur was ready to begin the day. He rode the elevator to the third floor, drank coffee, answered e-mails, shuffled through papers, made phone calls, went to meetings, broke for lunch at the deli he went to every day (yet the people there did not know his name, as he never shared it. He also did not know their names, despite the fact that their name tags were always on, and had large type.), returned to his office, and finished his work by 4:30PM, so that he could return home. He rushed down the stairs (to avoid waiting for a crowded elevator), and boarded the 4:34 PM bus back to his apartment. Work was, indeed, a day like every Tuesday. Dull, long, and meaningless.

At 4:52 PM, the bus arrived at Arthur's apartment building. As usual, there were far more stops on the way home from work than on the way to work. Arthur often wondered why it was that it seemed more people came home at the same time he did while fewer went to work at the same time he did. Today he wondered the same thing. Usually, Tuesdays were days that he asked this question, though that realization had never struck Arthur's mind. Arthur just knew that he hated Tuesdays. Tuesdays were awful, terrible, horrible, boring days. Arthur hated Tuesdays. Fortunately, Tuesday was almost over.

At 4:59 PM, Arthur walked through his apartment door, closed it, and locked it behind him. He flipped on the lights to discover that the apartment was just as he had left it. Empty, sparsely decorated, but certainly the home of someone who didn't tolerate messes overmuch. Arthur removed a microwavable dinner from his freezer, and put it in the microwave for four minutes and thirty seconds, as the directions suggested. Arthur ate his meal. As usual, it tasted bland. But, it was Tuesday, what was to be expected? Arthur oversalted his dinner, and choked it down with a glass of filtered, purified water.

It was now 5:30 PM, and the local station that had early evening news was beginning to recount the events of the day. As they repeated half the material from the morning news, and continued to events that had occurred on that particular day, Arthur thought to himself... "You know," (he said to himself) "they could just sum this up very quickly by saying 'it was a day like every other'." Truth be told, if they had done that, Arthur would

not have known what to do with this period of time in his life. He very well may have simply gone to bed early to avoid the boredom of doing nothing. But, the news did decide to report the events, or non-events, as the case may be, of the day. And here was Arthur, faithfully watching the news, just to make sure that this Tuesday was like every other. Horrible. Terrible. Boring. Arthur was not disappointed with the newscast.

At 6:00 PM, Arthur watched reruns of a sitcom which was still making new shows, but had sold the rights to broadcast old episodes. Often during this hour of his day, Arthur would wonder what happened to the episodes other than the 10 that always seemed to be shown as reruns. He presumed that those 10 episodes were considered to be “classics” by someone at the studio or the station, and so they were shown over and over again. Arthur watched and listened as the same jokes were repeated again, followed by the same laugh track, produced by the same “live studio audience”.

At 7:00 PM, Arthur watched his game shows for an hour. Arthur always had a difficult time remembering which contestant was which, as they each seemed to be exactly the same as the others. Arthur himself did not perform poorly as he played from home. His knowledge of trivia and ability to solve word puzzles seemed to be better than most. Though, admittedly, he had never been under the same pressure that those contestants were under. Being on a game show? Yuck. What a terrible way to spend a terrible Tuesday.

At 8:00 PM, Arthur changed the channel to the one that carried his favorite crime drama. Sure enough, this week, there was another murder. Arthur wondered if population growth was sufficient for there to be a murder in the city every week and still not have the city eventually totally die out. He assumed that it was, seeing how many children are in the hospital nursery at any given time. Not that he knew from experience, but he always imagined that the hospital nursery was full of screaming newborns, just waiting for their chance to be let loose on the world.

At 8:55 PM, the murderer was discovered. On this show, the murderer was never shown to be convicted, that was left to the imagination of the audience. And, of course, every audience member happily imagined that the murderer was found guilty. Arthur joined them in this presumption. At 9:00, Arthur turned off the television and went to bed.

As far as Tuesdays go, this one had been like every other. Horrible, terrible, boring. Arthur wasn't even sure if he had broken even.

Chapter 2

The day started like every other. It was 5:30AM, and Angela was waking from her night's slumber. Today was the day, she could feel it. Today was the day that the plan could start being put into action. Today, November 1st. A Tuesday. A wonderful day that the world would change. A day that the salvation of the world would begin.

Angela led a normal life, she thought as she pulled the Halloween issue of the city's newspaper off her. The news, of course, didn't matter to Angela except in as far as more news meant warmer nights. Yesterday was a big news day, mostly announcing the Halloween festivities that occurred every year. This meant that Angela had a warm night of good sleep. So, she was energized for her day, all the more so because it was a wonderful day. The day they had been waiting for. Angela just knew it.

In a leap that came partly from practice and partly from excitement, Angela jumped over the side of the dumpster where she had spent the night. Sure enough, as was true every day, her friend was there waiting, so that the work of the day could begin.

"This is the day, Frisk. I just know it," Angela said to the gray tabby that sat waiting. "Today we can tell him. Then we can really start changing the way things have been going."

Frisk looked at Angela doubtfully.

"No, I'm serious, Frisk. I can feel it. Today is the day, the day that everything starts changing. We have to tell him so that we can get started."

"NOOOOOO!" screeched Frisk. "It's too early, still," he hissed. "You know as well as I do that he's not ready. You've been watching him as long as the rest of us have, and he's not ready. He likes his life too much for us to disturb him."

"Oh, come on, Frisk. You know the trouble we're in. If we don't start soon, it'll be too late. We have to change the tide. And he has to be part of that. After all, it is All Saint's Day. That should be lucky, shouldn't it?"

"Very well, Angela. Very well. I won't fight you on this. But, first, we have to ask some of the others. You certainly can't just go and do this without going through the proper channels. But, I want to let you know that I have a bad feeling about this. It's just too early."

"Well, of course it's too early. It's only 5:39AM. There'd be no point in telling him now. He has a busy day ahead of him, too, I'm sure. No reason to prevent a perfectly good, normal Tuesday from happening."

Their conversation was interrupted by a taxi that turned into the alleyway. The headlights nearly blinded Frisk.

"Watch it, Ali," said Frisk, mostly to himself, as the taxi stopped a matter of inches from Angela. Angela, bag in one hand, opened the back door of the taxi, and Frisk hopped in. Angela sat down, closed the door, and buckled herself in.

"Good morning, Ali," lilted Angela. "Just a beautiful morning, isn't it? Well, I've decided that today is the day, as I'm sure you'll agree."

Without a word, Ali communicated that he was unconvinced simply by raising his eyebrow.

“I know, Ali, but she won’t be talked out of it, even by you,” said Frisk.

“Hush, cat, you said that I just had to get approval from the proper channels, and that is exactly what we are doing now. So, Ali, speed along. We have to make it to the station before the broadcast. Plus, I don’t want to miss the 7:07 bus. He’d never forgive me if I missed that bus.”

Ali drove quickly along, having removed his eyebrow objection. Traffic at 5:42AM was very good in the city, so they pulled into the alley beside the station at 5:48AM.

“Thanks, Ali,” said Angela as she closed the door behind her. “And, I’ll see you at the bus stop, right, Frisk?”

The cat nodded from the back seat of the taxi, and Ali sped off down the alley. After an excited wave goodbye to her friends, Angela opened the alley door to the station.

The city’s television studio was busy as they were preparing for a broadcast that would begin in 11 minutes. Angela looked frantically around for him, but couldn’t see Jim anywhere. A tall, dark-headed young man, with coffee in hand, noticed Angela’s dirty, torn, faded pink coat. More importantly, he noticed that she was looking for someone.

“Who are you looking for?” asked the young man.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I must just look silly. What was your name?” asked Angela, a bit flustered and embarrassed at her inability to find who she was looking for by herself.

“I’m Eric, and I’m an intern here. Now, who were you looking for?” asked Eric, pleasantly.

“I’m looking for Jim. I’m not sure if you’d know him, though...” said Angela.

“Oh, of course I do, he’s already in place. You better hurry, if you want to catch him before the broadcast. Right down that hall, to the right. Tell them that Eric said it was okay,” said the young man, with a smile.

“Thanks,” said Angela, as she shuffled down the hall, turned right, and saw Jim. She walked up to him. “Jim.”

“Make it quick, Angela,” said Jim, as he turned away from the TV Camera he was operating. “I’m kind of busy right now, and will be very busy in about 3 minutes.”

“Okayokayokay. In that case, Ireallyhaveafeelingthattoday’stheday,butFriskdisagrees,but

will let me tell him if I get permission from the others so I was asking if you would give me the go ahead.”

Jim chuckled, “Of course. You’re far closer to this one than I am, so I’ll trust your judgment.”

“Thanks, Jim. I can’t wait to rub that in Frisk’s smug little cat face.”

“Angela, that’s not nice, and the broadcast is starting,” said Jim, as he turned back to the camera.

“Right. Thanks again, Jim.”

Angela walked down the hall, waved thanks to Eric, and ran back out to the alley. The church bells chimed six as the door slammed behind her. Angela stopped running, realizing that she was going to have to wait for Ali to return. So, she stood there in the alley, bouncing on her heels, knowing that she would be able to get the approval the Frisk demanded. After all, who would debate that the tide needed to be changed? Well, Frisk might. He’d probably say that it needed to be “turned”. Such a finicky cat, Angela thought to herself, as she picked up a cigarette butt that she had seen on the ground. The cigarette butt was damp with the dew that had fallen the previous night.

“Messy, messy, messy. How can people be such slobs?” Angela said, as she tossed the cigarette butt into a nearby dumpster.

Today was the day. Everything was going perfectly. The tide was going to change or turn or whatever it needed to do for the world to be saved. In just a few hours, the battle would begin, and he’d be there leading the way. Angela’s excitement was interrupted at 6:07 when Ali pulled into the alley.

“Back to my alley, Ali,” said Angela. “Haha. That’s funny, I hadn’t noticed that before. Ali, alley. They’re pretty similar aren’t they,” chuckled Angela.

Ali was not chuckling. Angela had, in fact, noticed this fact about his name several times. And, every time, it was just as funny to Angela. It was progressively becoming less funny to Ali. But, still, Angela was a nice, well-meaning girl. And, most importantly, she was on the right side in the struggle they all faced. And that outweighed all her faults, as far as Ali was concerned.

Ali pulled into Angela’s alley at 6:37. The early morning traffic was beginning to pick up, and Ali had hit the stoplights terribly. But, there was still plenty of time before the 7:07 bus for Angela to get herself all arranged and ready for the bus trip.

Angela exited the taxi, waved Ali goodbye as Ali sped off to his next destination. Angela did what she could to calm her wild, dirty blonde, curls. In the end, this amounted to “not much”. But, the attempt did give Angela something to do while she waited.

Unfortunately, it was not enough, so Angela was forced to awkwardly, repeatedly straighten her torn, dirty, pink coat. If any normal person had been walking down the alley, they probably would have assumed that Angela was a crazy homeless person with some kind of obsessive-compulsive disorder. But, normal people generally avoid walking down alleys, and Angela's alley was particularly avoidable.

Frisk walked down the alleyway toward a woman that was nervously straightening her coat. The woman finished straightening, and began again before Frisk came into the woman's sight.

"Well?" prompted Frisk.

"Jim says he's with me. It's my case or something like that. Anyway, that's a check next to one proper channel."

"Yes, I suppose it is," said Frisk reluctantly. "But you know that there are more people involved than just Jim and Ali."

"Of course that's why we're going to be getting on the bus in... 7 minutes."

"Right."

"Speaking of that, shouldn't you get in your position for the bus ride?"

"You know that I hate that."

"And you know that I feel like today is the day, but you're still making me run around telling everyone aren't you?" At that, Angela opened her bag, and lowered it for the cat to get in. With a look that only a peeved cat can give, Frisk entered the bag where he would have to spend the bus ride. Angela closed the bag, being sure to leave sufficient room for Frisk to breathe.

At 7:06, Arthur arrived at the bus stop, and Angela stood next to him, looking at him intently. Arthur did not seem to notice. He had never noticed, as far as Angela knew. But, that was okay. Pretty soon, he'd have no choice but to notice. And then things would change. On this wonderful day. The day the salvation of the world would begin. And Angela just knew it.

At 7:07, the bus arrived, and Arthur, Angela, and a few others boarded it. Angela sat down, and looked at the other people on the bus. There were fast food workers in their polo shirt uniforms and brightly colored visors. There were businessmen in their bland suits. Angela amused herself by imagining the fast food workers in the business attire and, even more so, by imagining the business executives in the fast food worker uniforms. Angela noticed a slightly muddied paper on the floor of the bus, and bent down to pick it up. The front page of the section she got had an interesting story on it. Much of the story was unreadable, but the headline was clear. "Convenient Store

Robbed: None Injured”. Angela was glad to hear that that one turned out as well as can be expected from a convenience store robbery. Angela also wondered why robbing banks had gone so out of vogue. On the next page, Angela could just make out a picture advertising this week’s symphony orchestra concert. Angela shivered, folded the dirty paper neatly, and opened her bag to put the paper in. When she looked in her bag, she realized that Frisk was in there looking up at her, and she thought better of putting the paper in a bag with an irritated gray tabby. She carried the paper with her instead.

The bus pulled up outside Bill’s building at 7:14AM. Angela and a few business people got off the bus. Arthur walked into his office building, nodding at Bill as he entered through the large glass doors under the black numerals indicating the street number. Angela stepped off to the side to wait for the crowd getting off the bus to go their separate ways to their separate jobs. When the crowd had sufficiently dispersed, Angela walked up to Bill, who, rather than opening the door, as he generally did when approached, smiled at Angela.

“Good morning, Angela. I see that you are faithfully carrying out your duties as always.”

“Even more than that, Bill. Today’s the day I get to tell him.”

“Oh, really?” inquired the doorman. “I imagine our feline friend has something to say about that.”

There was movement, and the sound of a muffled meow from Angela’s bag, which reminded her of the cat that she had almost placed a muddy newspaper on. Angela politely opened the bag.

“Thank you, Angela,” mumbled Frisk, as he straightened up somewhat. “And, as a matter of fact, Bill, you are absolutely right. I told her that I have a very bad feeling about this. But, really, it’s not worth fighting her once she has her mind made up.”

Angela took this as a compliment.

“That is certainly true, Frisk,” spoke Bill gravely. “But, I’m not certain that Angela understands exactly how important this is. If she tries too soon, it could ruin everything.”

“And that’s why I’m still waiting, Bill. I’m not a fool,” answered Angela. “He will be told when the time is right. And that’s not until later today. But, today is the day. Of that I’m absolutely certain.”

“Well then, it seems that Frisk is right. There is no talking you out of this. And, to be honest, I’m glad of it. It is time that the tide should begin turning. And, even if it doesn’t, getting him involved will make things more interesting. It’s terribly dull standing here just watching a door every day to make sure that he’s still on schedule.”

“Exactly my thoughts!” said Angela excitedly. “Well, except the watching a door part...”

Bill chuckled, as Angela, with cat in bag, walked off down the street. One more stop, and a lot of waiting, and Angela would be ready to get started.

Angela walked into the deli, and up to the counter. The deli was only inhabited by a couple employees, of which only one looked attentive, and a man in a suit eating a bagel. The time was 8:03AM.

“I’ll take a turkey sandwich on white and rye, Sarah.”

“Ah, white and rye, today?” queried the young woman behind the counter, whose name, indicated on her name tag, was in fact “Sarah”.

“Well, it’s a special day,” said Angela as Sarah began making the sandwich. Sarah nodded indicating that Angela should continue her story. Not noticing the nod, Angela proceeded, “You see, today is the day that I think we should tell him.”

“What are we going to do? Have a meeting in his apartment? Sir, I’m sorry to bother you, but we need your help. The world depends on it,” mimicked Sarah.

“Oh, no no no. I’ll go by myself. Well, I guess Frisk might come... though that might be a bit much for him right now...”

“I think it will be a bit much for him right now anyway. Just look what he does. He goes past the same people every day, and doesn’t have a clue what their names are. He’s not ready. All he wants is his morning and evening newscasts and his crime dramas.”

Angela shuddered at the thought, recovered herself, and countered, “But, that’s why we need him now, we have to get him out of those miserable habits.”

“Oh, so that’s what this is about, is it? Saving him? Funny, I thought we were after something a bit more important than that,” said Sarah as she handed Angela her sandwich. “Besides, he seems happy with his life. He won’t think that he’s being saved from anything at all when you drag him into all of this. But, it has to be done. So, go ahead, give it a shot. It certainly can’t get much worse.”

At this, Angela gleefully took her sandwich, her cat in a bag, and her muddies newspaper, flashed a smile at Sarah, and walked out of the deli. Not much longer and things would begin turning around. Angela ate her sandwich with great hope as she walked the long walk back to her alley, got into her dumpster (now far more empty than this morning), and went to sleep. After some time passed, her bag began shaking and meowing angrily until it gave up and decided to take a nap as well. Despite the sounds of the city that gently roared down the alley from the main street, both slept peacefully until evening came.

It was 8:58PM when Angela awoke and noticed the closed bag beside her. Hurriedly, she opened the bag to find Frisk lying inside, not moving at all.

“Oh, no! I’ve done it... I’ve killed him... I was so excited that I killed him... Oh no... What are we going to do now?”

Frisk’s eyes snapped open. “You what?!”

Angela looked relieved, “I said I killed him, but I meant you... But, I thought you were dead. I’m sorry, I forgot all about you.”

“Well, that’s not a surprise. Fortunately, your bag is far from airtight, and it actually provides a nice place to nap, if I do say so myself. Even though I know you’re going to make a horrible mess of things here soon.”

“Oh, yes, that’s right. What time is it?”

Frisk looked around. “Oh, I don’t know... 9PM, maybe?”

“Oh, perfect,” declared Angela as she climbed out of the dumpster, with Frisk close behind. “Oh, yes... Umm... I do think you should probably stay here. I mean, I imagine him finding a woman in his apartment will be enough of a shock. We don’t need a stray cat in there, too.”

“Very well,” said Frisk, rolling his eyes.

Angela walked into the apartment building, checked the time on the clock in the hallway (9:13PM), walked up the stairs to the third floor, opened the door the apartment, and closed and locked it quietly behind her.

The apartment was very quiet. Only the sound of passing traffic could be heard, mixed with the sound of snores from the bedroom. Angela’s eyes adjusted to the dark, and she made her way toward the bedroom. She sneaked silently up to the bed, looked closely at Arthur’s peacefully sleeping face, flung the covers off of him, and declared,

“Let’s get to work, Arthur! Today’s the day the world changes!”

Chapter 3

Things had been going well for some time. Recently, his life had gotten busier, but Eric knew that that was what happened when you tried to work multiple jobs. Ultimately, though, Eric was doing what he knew needed to be done. And the only way to make ends meet was to work both at the convenience store (even when it got robbed), and at the station with a rather low paying internship. So, here he was at the station at 5:30, getting the coffee ready for the busy morning. By all rights, Eric should have been in bed asleep

for at least a couple hours by now. But, that was impossible, seeing everything that needed to be done. So, here Eric was, benefiting from the splendor of a caffeine induced state of waking.

The station was all abuzz with activity. Anchors were getting last minute touches to makeup and hair. Reporters were putting finishing touches on stories. The tech crew was checking lights, cameras, and sound. And Eric was serving coffee to each of them. Eric liked his job, and knew that it was more significant than most realized. But that was the way it was supposed to be. People enjoy blissful ignorance to truth, and Eric liked for people to be happy.

But, there were rumblings that a disturbance was on its way. Thus, Eric had to work extra hard to keep the veil in place, make sure that all the cogs were well greased, and keep the machine running without a hitch. If there was one thing the world would not tolerate, then Eric would be on the front lines preventing that one thing. Seeing as there were many things the world would not tolerate, and they were becoming more likely, Eric was a busy man.

For now, though, Eric had one, simple responsibility. He was getting coffee to make sure that the news broadcast was exactly as it was every other day. But, then, something unusual happened.

Eric was walking around the station carrying his coffee with him when he noticed someone that seemed out of place. There was a woman with dirty, tangled, curly blonde hair, and wearing a dirty, torn, faded pink coat standing in the hall. Generally, crazy street people were to be thrown out. But, this woman had such a sense of purpose that Eric knew that he should not get in the way. Rather, he should help her and watch her closely.

“Who are you looking for?” Eric asked the woman.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I must just look silly,” the woman said, a bit flustered. Eric silently agreed. “What was your name?”

“I’m Eric, and I’m an intern here. Now, who were you looking for?” asked Eric, pleasantly.

“I’m looking for Jim. I’m not sure if you’d know him, though...” said the woman.

She was looking for Jim, so Eric’s suspicions were confirmed. He definitely needed to help her. “Oh, of course I do, he’s already in place. You better hurry, if you want to catch him before the broadcast. Right down that hall, to the right. Tell them that Eric said it was okay,” said Eric with a smile.

“Thanks,” said the woman, as she shuffled down the hall, turned right, and, from the look on her face, saw Jim.

Eric followed nonchalantly, and leaned up against the wall where he could easily overhear what was being said.

“...very busy in about 3 minutes.”

“Okayokayokay. In that case, Ireallyhaveafeelingthattoday’stheday,butFriskdisagrees,but willletmetellhimifIgetpermissionfromtheotherssoIwasaskingifyouwouldgivemethego ahead.”

So, apparently, they were getting ready to make a move, but there was disagreement in their ranks. Eric was pleased, as this should slow the woman down from causing any unwanted changes. The world didn’t like changes unless they were stamped, approved, marketed, and nicely packaged. Thus, Eric fought ones that weren’t. After all, Eric liked people to be happy. He heard Jim’s answer:

“You’re far closer to this one than I am, so I’ll trust your judgment.”

“Thanks, Jim. I can’t wait to rub that in Frisk’s smug little cat face.”

“Angela, that’s not nice, and the broadcast is starting.”

Eric moved a little bit further down the hall, content with the information that had been gathered thus far. There was a disturbance coming, and they would have to be ready for it. Disturbances had come before, and they had dampened them, keeping ripples to a minimum, and people gleefully ignored the small data that would have shaken them out of their neat, well-balanced, predictable routines. The world was capable of absorbing small changes with minimum impact, and this time would be like all the others. The disturbance would be dampened, and no one would be the wiser.

Eric pulled out his cell phone and made a fast call.

“Yes, it’s Eric. I have confirmation. Things are moving. The cat’s trying to fight it as best he can, but seems to have only slowed things slightly. That should buy us time. We need an operative at the deli to see how things transpire there. One is already placed? Good.”

Thus ended the conversation, and Eric went about the station while the broadcast was going on. Picking papers up, dropping them off, keeping everything running smoothly. Exactly the way things were supposed to run.

The broadcast ended without incident, and the news kept flowing in. Summaries were written, bias was added and veiled, snappy headlines and onscreen graphics were developed. Shortly after 8:00AM, Eric’s cell phone rang.

“Eric. Yes. Okay. Any idea who this ‘he’ is? Shoot. They must have him well hidden. We’ll just have to keep a good watch on her then today. Good.”

Thus ended Eric’s second phone conversation that day.

At 9:00AM, Eric clocked out and headed back toward his apartment. It had been a long shift between getting robbed at the convenience store and all the excitement that had gone on at the station. Today would be a significant day. The day the world changed. But, not if Eric had anything to say about it. He needed a good day’s sleep to get ready for the excitement that would await him in the evening, and he fell asleep that Tuesday listening to the late morning traffic outside his window. Things were running smoothly, and, if all went well, it would stay that way.

Chapter 4

Arthur woke with a start. There, standing over him, was a very proud looking woman, who seemed to be completely oblivious to the state of her hair and clothing, which should have made her something less than proud. What had she just said? Today’s the day the world changes? Arthur turned back over, trying to ignore this woman as best he could as he pretended to fall back to sleep.

The woman cleared her throat. “Excuse me, Arthur! I said, ‘Today’s the day the world changes!’ Now, get up so we can get started!”

Seeing that this woman, even if she was a figment of his imagination, was at least a persistent one, Arthur gave up his pretense of sleep and decided to try a more direct approach. He sat up, and turned to her.

“Listen, lady...”

“Angela.”

“Right. Listen, Angela. I don’t care if the world changes. It changes every day. The weather was different today than yesterday, the news was different, everything was different. So, there’s no reason why the world changing should make me lose sleep. Now, if you’ll kindly let yourself back out, I have work in the morning, and want to be rested for it.”

“Umm... wow... Sarah may have been right about you... But... Let’s get to work, Arthur! Today’s the day the world changes!”

Arthur rolled his eyes. “So I’ve been told.”

A noise came from Arthur’s utility closet.

“What was that?” asked Angela, startled.

“Oh, it was just the stupid water heater kicking on. It makes a lot of noise for how poorly it works.”

“Wow, you really have no clue, do you, Arthur?” Angela declared, as she walked out of the bedroom to the utility closet.

Arthur heard a small scuffle, and Angela reappeared through the bedroom door, carrying a large rodent. This time it was Arthur’s turn to be startled.

“What is that?”

“A heat rat. It’s been sucking the heat out of your water, I imagine. You didn’t notice it?”

“Actually, I did... in a way... So, what are you going to do with it?”

“Eh, probably feed it to Frisk.”

“Right... Frisk...”

“My cat,” said Angela. This statement was true enough that Angela figured people would understand the degree to which it wasn’t true. Whether Frisk would understand was another matter which Angela preferred not to think about at the moment. “Listen, Arthur, just trust me, the world is changing today in a way it doesn’t usually change, and we need your help to make it happen.”

“Wait... Is the world changing or not? It’s changing, but you need my help to make it happen?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

There was a loud knock at the door, and Angela ran out of the bedroom, stuffing the rat into her bag. Arthur could hear her frantically locking the door and setting the deadbolt.

“We don’t have time for this,” she said as she came back into the bedroom. “You need to come with me or you’ll have bigger problems than the world not changing.”

The loud, now angry knocks, at the door convinced Arthur better than any more conversation could. Here, he was in danger, and, though he may be in danger with Angela, at least he wouldn’t be alone.

This was the first time Arthur could remember having this thought. “At least he wouldn’t be alone...” For some reason, he didn’t want to be alone right now. He had always sought to be alone. Not to notice anyone and not to be noticed by anyone. But, here he was, following the street woman Angela onto the fire escape, for little more reason than

the fact that someone was knocking loudly at the apartment door. In a matter of moments he had gone from reasonable conversation to impulsive action, from independence to helplessness, from safety to danger. Arthur was scared as he realized that he wasn't sure if he'd ever return to his apartment. He was even more scared as he realized that he didn't know this woman that he was following. He was following on no more than blind faith. He didn't even have a good feeling about her.

Their feet hit the ground, and Angela and Arthur ran over to Angela's dumpster.

"Get in," Angela ordered.

"What?" Arthur questioned, a bit offended.

Angela answered with a look she had learned from Ali. It was far more effective on Arthur than it had been on Angela. He got into the dumpster, and Angela followed.

"Listen, Arthur, they won't follow us here. I'm sorry that it worked out like this. It wasn't supposed to go this way." Angela was nearly in tears.

"You're telling me. I'm being chased now by people I've not even seen. Actually, for all I know, it wasn't even anyone chasing me. It could have been my neighbors complaining about the noise coming from my bedroom. Now, here I am, sitting in a dumpster with someone I've never met."

"Oh, Arthur, I'm so sorry..." said Angela as she struggled to keep herself from crying. "This is all my fault. I shouldn't have brought you into this all. It's too much for you. I can't blame you for being angry. It was supposed to go much more smoothly than this. I was supposed to tell you we were getting started, and you were supposed to be excited about it, and we were supposed to hop out your window and start turning things around. I'm sorry."

Arthur looked at Angela's face. She was clearly distressed and stricken with sorrow because of how much trouble she had caused him. She really did seem sorry that she had gotten him involved. Arthur's heart softened toward her. She may have been dirty, foolish, and inconsiderate, but she was sincere. But, these traits seemed to be inversely related.

"So, what are we supposed to do, then?" asked Arthur. Angela's face immediately seemed to light up.

"So, you'll help us?" she asked.

"I don't know if I really have a choice," answered Arthur.

Angela suddenly looked serious. "Arthur, you always have a choice. Only they will tell you otherwise. You'll never hear one of us say that."

“That’s a question. Who is this ‘us’ you keep talking about? How many of you are there?”

“Oh! You don’t know about any of it... I just keep forgetting. Well, there are lots of us, but not enough. Right now, all we can really do is keep an eye on what’s happening. We’ve just been trying to survive while we’ve been waiting for the right one. For you, Arthur. And now, here you are,” Angela said contentedly.

“But, what are we trying to do?”

Angela looked at him blankly, as if the question had never really struck her before. Arthur was not comforted by this reaction. Suddenly, a voice came from outside the dumpster where the conference was being held.

“We are trying to keep things from getting worse,” said an older man as he climbed into the dumpster.

Bill was still in his doorman’s uniform.

“Good evening, Arthur,” said Bill as he took a seat next to the other two. “Angela here is one of our best operatives. Unfortunately, she is not well informed about the broader mission. To be honest, I don’t know how many of us can really be said to be informed. Rather, we are bound together by a common feeling. Things aren’t going the way they should. There is a strong tide pushing things away from the way the world should be. Occasionally, there are disruptions to the smooth flow of this tide. Sometimes, these disruptions push the tide forward, sometimes they push the tide back. Angela and I are two of the people that are trying to push the tide back. Judging from the look on your face, Arthur, you’re still not getting it. Okay, here we go. Our job is to cause disruptions that will change the direction of things in the world, and to prevent disruptions that will continue the direction of things in the world.”

“I still don’t get it,” admitted Arthur.

“Listen, Arthur, I don’t really either. But, what I do know is that I feel like the world is on a wave going somewhere I don’t want it to. I don’t know where that is, and I don’t know where else we can go. But, I simply follow my heart and do what I think will help. That’s all we’re asking you to do. We will provide some direction for you, since there is so much that you don’t know about. Though, really, there is much that we don’t know about either.”

“Okay.”

“Listen, I know this is a lot for you to take in. By now, it should be safe for you to return to your apartment. Sleep on it, even go through a normal day tomorrow. As long as you do what you normally do, they won’t bother you. If you have any questions, call me,”

Bill said as he handed Arthur a business card, and then crawled out of the dumpster. Angela smiled pleasantly at Arthur, and followed Bill.

Arthur sat in the dumpster, not really sure where to go next.

Chapter 5

Arthur decided to follow a bit of advice that he'd heard before... Or maybe he had just made it up on the spot, but it sounded like the kind of thing someone would dole out as advice. Either way, Arthur decided to do the most obvious thing. Go home and go to bed. Hopefully, it would all be better in the morning.

Arthur pulled himself out of the dumpster, walked to the front of his building, and up the stairs to his apartment door. He reached out to find the door locked. And, being like most people, Arthur did not carry his apartment key in his pajama pants pocket. So, he walked back outside, climbed up the fire escape, and into his bedroom window. Inside, things looked undisturbed, so Arthur crawled into bed and went to sleep.

That night Arthur did something unusual... almost as unusual as having a summit about changing the world in a dumpster in the alley by his apartment building. Arthur dreamed.

Arthur was standing on the seashore, watching the tide come in. The shore was not like the many sandy beaches Arthur had seen on cruise line commercials. It was rocky, and each wave, large or small sent a proportionate spray into the air. Arthur looked down the shoreline, and his eyes came to rest on a man. The man was faceless and was wearing a business suit. He was systematically leaning down, grabbing the nearest stone, whatever its size, and throwing it up further onto shore.

"Excuse me, what are you doing?" asked Arthur. But, the man did not react. He simply continued on, entirely unabated by Arthur's question. One rock after another was picked up and thrown, from the smallest pebble to boulders half the size of the man throwing them. They flew through the air, one by one, in a continuous unbroken rhythm.

"He won't talk to you," said a small, young voice behind him.

"What?" asked Arthur as he turned to see a young girl with tight blonde curls in a frilly pink dress.

"I said he won't talk to you."

"Why not?"

"He doesn't have a mouth."

Arthur was surprised by the simplicity and utter accuracy of the answer. "Yes, but he didn't seem to hear me either."

“Oh, he heard. He just wasn’t listening.”

“Why not?”

“Because he doesn’t care what you said.”

“So, what are you doing?”

“Talking to you.”

“But, what are you here for?”

“To talk to you. Well, and to work against him.”

“Why?”

“Because he needs to be stopped.”

“Who is he?”

“He’s the one working against us.”

“Who are you?”

“We’re the ones working against him.”

“How are you working against him?”

The girl bent down, picked up a small stone, and threw it out into ocean. There was a splash as the stone disappeared beneath the surface. Arthur laughed.

“You can’t be serious,” Arthur managed to say through his chuckling. “That didn’t do anything.”

“Watch closer,” said the girl. She threw another rock. Arthur watched as the rock hit the surface of the water and ripples traveled across the surface of the water.

“Yes, yes, I get it. One small stone sends out ripples across the whole ocean.”

This time, the girl laughed. “No, no. You’re looking at the surface. You have to look deeper.”

Arthur woke with a start. It was 5:25AM, and Arthur’s alarm was going off. It had been an eventful night, and Arthur didn’t feel rested in the least. As always, he hit the snooze

button. It was now Wednesday morning. Wednesday, November 2nd. Arthur fell back to sleep.

The girl was standing there looking at him, and there was nothing else to be seen all around.

“Arthur, you have to commit if you want to be one of us. We need you, Arthur. But, it is your choice. It will not be easy. You won’t know what you’re doing. But, you will know that you’re doing what is best, or, that you’re at least doing something.”

It was 5:34AM and the snooze alarm was sounding. Arthur decided it was time to get out of bed on this day. This extremely disconcerting day. Compared to how much of the day he had already lived. The mere 10 minutes of it, all the rest of his life seemed like a vague dream.

Arthur pushed back the white sheets and gray blanket. The weather this morning was chilly again. Outside the window of his third story apartment, Arthur could hear the silence of the city. Arthur raised the blinds and looked out the window. As always, the city was dark at 5:36AM. Other citizens were also looking out their windows to make sure that nothing exciting was happening. As always, they were not disappointed.

But, as Arthur looked out over the city he was stricken with a terrible feeling. The feeling could not be described or defined, but it was very real. There was something amiss in the world. He felt like he was suffocating, struggling for breath, like he was drowning. He backed away from the window, and closed the blinds. The shower in the apartment above his started. It was 5:39AM. Arthur moved toward the bathroom. What had the older man said? “Go through a normal day, and they won’t bother you.” But, Arthur didn’t need “them” to bother him. He already felt bothered. There was something not right with the world. He couldn’t describe it to himself, however much he tried, and he certainly wouldn’t be able to describe it to his boss. So, Arthur went into the bathroom, and took his shower.

The water was warm, and stayed that way this morning. Arthur felt like there was a warm blanket wrapped around him, comforting him in this new, cold existence. Arthur had been pulled in by a group of ragamuffins, it seemed. And, though they couldn’t give him the least good reason, he felt that they were right in what they were doing, though Arthur wasn’t even clear on that yet.

At 5:50AM, Arthur stepped out of his warm shower. He dried off, and got dressed. White button-up, long-sleeved shirt, black pants, gray tie. Arthur looked at himself in the mirror and nearly shuddered. He reminded himself far too much of the man he had seen in his dream. The faceless man that totally ignored everyone around him and kept going on his work, whatever good that may have been.

At 5:57AM, Arthur poured himself a bowl of cereal. It was a no-name brand cereal, and the same cereal that Arthur always ate. He poured 2% milk on it, as he always did, and

also poured himself a glass of orange juice. Arthur bit into the cereal. It was terrible. Not stale or soggy. Simply terrible. Like someone had soaked it in something that had an intentionally bad taste, had dried it, and packaged it. Arthur threw the rest of the bowl of cereal away. At 6:00AM, Arthur moved to turn on the television. Then, he changed his mind. He wasn't going to watch the news today. What was there of value on it anyway? Rather than watching television, Arthur went to his bookshelf and picked up a dusty old novel. He wasn't even sure what one he had gotten. But, he started reading it to pass the time, nonetheless.

At 7:00AM, the news was over, though Arthur hadn't watched it. Instead, Arthur took his book, marked his place with a small scrap of paper, and set the book on his end table to be picked up later. Arthur grabbed his briefcase and walked downstairs, outside to the bus stop, and got on the bus at exactly 7:07AM. Right on schedule. Standing next to him at the bus stop was Angela. They looked at each other briefly, without sharing a word with one another. They sat separately on the bus, and both did their best not to acknowledge that they knew each other. Though it may have seemed impersonal, they both knew it was for the best. The other side may very well know that Arthur was connected with Angela (and whoever else Angela was connected with), but that was no reason for the two of them to flaunt it. So, they discretely avoided each other as much as possible. Of course, everyone else was too busy not noticing anything to notice the two of them not noticing each other. So, their plan went well.

At 7:14AM, Arthur and Angela got off the bus. Arthur walked up to Bill, nodded politely to Bill's greeting, and went inside.

It was certainly a Wednesday, the middle of the week. There was a decent amount of work to be done, yet it didn't seem overwhelming. Arthur did the work that needed to be done. But, it felt stale. It was the same work as before, and it was just as important as it had always been. But, how could Arthur sit around in an office shuffling papers and making phone calls when the world needed to be changed? This was the question that repeated itself over and over again each time that Arthur's mind wandered that Wednesday. There was work to be done. Arthur didn't know what it was, but whatever it was was more significant than this. Arthur would definitely call the doorman tonight when he was done with his more mundane schedule.

Arthur's more mundane schedule ended at 4:30PM. Arthur left the building, got on the bus, and went back to his apartment and ate an early dinner. He was done by 6:30PM. At that point, he nervously picked up the phone, took out the card the man had given him, and dialed the number. Arthur had no idea what he was going to say, but he knew... no, felt... that this was the right thing to do. Or, at the very least, this was something to do. And Arthur was ready to do it.

The phone on the other end rang three times, and just as Arthur was getting ready to hang up, a voice on the other end said:

"Hello?"

“Hi, it’s Arthur.”

“Oh, good. I’m glad that you decided to use the number. What do you need?”

“I’ve decided to commit, whatever that means. You all are right. I can feel that things aren’t... like they’re supposed to be, as you would say. So, what can I do?”

“Actually, Arthur, your timing couldn’t be better. We have news that there is going to be a disturbance tonight. One of the bad ones. Angela will be by and will take you to where we need you to be. She’ll have the information the two of you will need.”

“Thanks...”

“...Bill.”

“Ah. Thanks, Bill.”

“No, thank you, Arthur. Truth be told, we need you. And now, here you are. Have a good night.”

“Of course,” said Arthur as he heard a distinct “click” on the other end of the line.

So, tonight was the night. The world was changing, and Arthur had decided to be a part of it.

Chapter 6

There was a knock at Arthur’s apartment door. Arthur walked to the door, opened it, and found Angela standing in the hall, beaming.

“I’m glad you’ve decided to come along,” Angela, very unnecessarily, stated.

“I can tell.”

“Well, come on, then.”

Arthur closed the door behind him, and the two of them walked down the hall to the stairwell. They entered the stairwell, and started down the stairs, but there was a man in the way. A man with dark hair and sunglasses wearing a black business suit.

“Stop where you are. We can’t allow this to continue,” said the man forcefully.

Arthur hesitated, but Angela kept right on going toward the man. The man drew out a gun, and pointed it at Angela.

“I said ‘Stop’, ma’am.”

“You better stop, Angela,” added Arthur.

All Angela did was slow down to turn around to face Arthur.

“Oh, Arthur, you still don’t get it, do you?”

“Get what?”

“He won’t shoot either of us like this.”

“I’m sorry.”

“They always do thing either way out in the open for everyone to see or way out in the middle of nowhere for no one to see. They always do things by extremes like that. So, come on, let’s go.”

“He has a gun, Angela. A gun pointing at you.”

“It doesn’t matter. Come on.”

Despite all reason and concern for his own skin, Arthur followed Angela. The two of them walked right past the man in the business suit, who, though he appeared to be very angry, did refrain from shooting, or even moving to harm, either of them. The two of them walked safely out of the building to the street. Finally, Arthur just couldn’t take it any more.

“But, why in the world didn’t he shoot us?”

“Does that matter?” asked Angela, smiling.

Arthur didn’t have an answer. He thought that it should matter, but why it should matter escaped him. So, without a word, he continued to follow Angela.

Angela walked around the corner of the building into her alley, and then stopped, standing next to the building. Arthur stood beside her. A matter of seconds later, a taxi darted off of the street into the alleyway.

“Good evening, Ali,” said Angela, as she opened the back door of the taxi. “Get on in, Arthur. Ali will be taking us to where we need to be.”

“And where is that?” asked Arthur.

Angela answered with a stern look, mixed with a mischievous smile. Arthur relented and got in the back of the taxi. Angela followed, and slammed the door behind her. Ali sped off down the alley, and onto a street. He headed toward downtown.

The two passengers didn't talk during the ride. Arthur's head was filled with questions that he knew Angela would dismiss as meaningless. No, worse. Angela would question their importance, and Arthur has no reason why they were important. He just felt like they were. And, of course, that was not an acceptable reason to demand an answer or explanation for anything.

The taxi pulled up in an alley next to the television studio, which seemed to have emptied out some as only those involved with the 11:00 news remained behind. A man stood in the alleyway smoking a cigarette. The taxi stopped, and Angela and Arthur exited the vehicle.

"Hi, Jim," said Angela, as Ali sped away in the taxi. "This is Arthur, who I told you about. He's decided to help us out."

"Hi, Arthur," said Jim, as he reached out his hand to shake Arthur's. Arthur responded appropriately. "I suppose that Angela has given you the update."

"No, she hasn't, actually," said Arthur with something of a glare at Angela.

"Oh. Well, then I suppose that's up to me," said Jim, as he looked each way down the alley. "This probably isn't the best time or place. But, no time like the present and no place like here, right? Anyway, what do you know?"

"Not much. Just something about tides."

"Wow, you didn't tell him anything, did you Angela?" said Jim.

"Like what?" asked Angela.

"Well, first thing you need to know, Arthur," continued Jim, "is that you won't understand what's going on. None of us really do. But, we all know that we have to do something to get things on the right track. Also, we have to keep other people from doing some things that will get us further down the wrong track. Does that make sense?"

Arthur nodded hesitantly. This was good enough for Jim.

"Anyway, we have news that the other side is planning something for the station here tonight. We're not sure what, though. But, we're quite sure that whatever it is, it will be happening here."

"So, we're just supposed to keep our eyes open for suspicious people lurking in alleyways?" said Arthur, sarcastically.

Jim chuckled. “You do have a point, Arthur. But, you’re way off, none the less. No. The other side very rarely does things in alleyways, though, admittedly, they use those tactics when necessary. But, no, we have reason to believe that this is actually an inside job of some kind. They’ve implanted someone at the station that is going to get the ball rolling.”

“How do we know that isn’t you?” Arthur questioned. Angela elbowed him in the side, hard. “Hey!” Arthur responded, with a glare at Angela.

Jim chuckled again. “Angela, that wasn’t nice, it’s a perfectly good question. Now, Arthur, do I seem like the kind of person that would sabotage my station in someway?”

“I have no way of knowing that, we’ve just met.”

“Point again, Arthur. But, you must learn to be a little less skeptical. If all you do is let questioning things give you a reason not to act, you’ll never get anywhere in life. Let me give you a hint. The other side will never explain what they’re doing to you.”

“You aren’t either, really.”

“Wow, you’re full of them, aren’t you? There, though, you’re wrong again. We can’t offer you an explanation. We don’t have one. The other side does have one, but won’t give it to you.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because that’s the way they work. They have some goal in mind. Our goal is basically to obstruct them from reaching theirs. That’s why they’re usually on the offensive and we’re on the defensive. They are actually going somewhere in particular. We’re just trying to make them go back. Does that make sense?”

“Not really. It just sounds like none of you really know what you’re trying to do, or even what the other side is trying to do. You’re just attacking each other willy-nilly.”

“Wrong again, Arthur. I’ve told you. They have some goal in mind. We just don’t know what it is. The simple fact that they are acting without any provocation on our end...”

Jim didn’t finish his sentence. Inside the building, an alarm was going off. To Arthur, it sounded like a fire alarm. Some of the people that were left in the building came streaming out into the alley.

“Oh, great,” said Jim. “Come on.”

Jim walked into the alley door between people that were coming the other way. Angela, and then Arthur, went behind him. Going into a burning building, thought Arthur, what a

stupid thing to be doing with people he barely knew. But, here he was, doing it nonetheless. Those last two sentences seemed to be able to sum up what had been going on in his life during the last... 24 hours. Amazing how time flies, especially when you're running into a burning building with people you barely know.

Angela, Jim, and Arthur were in a hallway in the building. Jim and Angela were frantically looking around. Arthur was trying to get his bearings. The building seemed normal enough, as far as television studios went, but there was a distinct lack of smoke for the fire alarm to be going off. A young, dark-haired man was coming quickly down the hallway toward them.

"Eric!" shouted Angela over the ringing of the fire alarm. "Where's the fire?"

"I'm not sure," said Eric. "But, I think it's upstairs somewhere. You all should get out of the building. Who knows how bad it is up there? Wouldn't want the building to collapse on you."

Eric walked off down the hallway, opened the door to the alley, and exited the building. The other three, Jim in front, and Arthur in back, headed toward the nearest stairwell and went up to the second floor. By now, Jim, Angela, and Arthur were all looking around for smoke. Jim and Angela wanted to find out what was going on, and stop it. Arthur just wanted the other two to be willing to leave a building that could fall apart at any moment, as far as he knew.

They walked down a hallway, turned a corner, and Jim shouted.

"Over there!"

They all saw it, from under, over, and around the sides of a metal door, there was noxious black smoke coming out of a room. The three of them ran over to the door. Jim reached in his pocket for his keys, and began fumbling through them looking for the one that he knew would open the door.

"Oh, forget it!" shouted Angela into Jim's ear. She turned the doorknob, and opened the door.

Smoke filled the hallway, and the three people in it were overcome with coughing. The smoke smelled of burnt plastic, and burned their nasal passages as it entered. Regaining their senses, the three dropped to the ground. Jim spoke.

"This is the vault where we keep our copies of episodes of an old sitcom that we still run as reruns. We should try to save as many as possible. Run in, grab some that aren't burning or melting already and then we'll run out."

The three of them followed the plan precisely. They ran in, holding their breaths, each grabbed a handful of tapes, and they ran back out. Behind them, the fire was picking up speed.

“Okay, we should leave the building now before the fire trucks show up.”

The three of them ran out of the building, tapes of sitcom episodes in their arms, and continued out of the building into the alley.

The three walked down the alley and across the street as fire trucks, sirens blaring and lights blazing, pulled up to the building. Across the street, Angela, Arthur, and Jim examined the few tapes that they had saved. Jim declared that there were probably about ten or twelve episodes total on all the tapes that had escaped the fire, and that the station would be glad to see that they could continue airing the program.

“What?” said Arthur, mildly offended at that. “You mean that with only a dozen episodes, the station will keep showing the series? They’d have to repeat the episodes every other week!”

“That’s true,” said Jim. “But, these episodes seem destined to become some of the best loved, best remembered episodes in that particular series’ history. After all, they’re the ones people will end up seeing.”

“But, shouldn’t the station just give up on this show and try another.”

“Why? People like this show. So, the station will provide as much of it as they can. Sure, maybe it would be better if they could provide more. But, they can’t. Their options have just been limited.”

“Okay, okay. Maybe the station doesn’t really have a choice.”

“There’s always a choice,” chimed in Angela, correcting him.

“Anyway, what I want to know is why the other side decided to do this. Burning a vault of tapes of episodes from an old sitcom? Seems like a waste of time to me.”

“You’re just looking at the surface. You have to look deeper,” answered Angela.

Arthur simply looked confused and frustrated, so Jim decided to do what little he could.

“Listen, Arthur. I know you want answers. We all do. But, we don’t have them, and the other side is not particularly open with us about what they are doing or why. What we do know is that, for some reason, they wanted to keep this show from airing again. Now, we just have to figure out why. Maybe these episodes provide clues as to what is really going on with them. Maybe they’re afraid that these clues will get implanted in people’s minds and they’ll lose power. I don’t know. But, we saved these ones, and I can make

sure that the station airs them. The station will want to, anyway. So, I basically just have to let them know that we managed to save them. What we have to do now is make sure we watch them closely and see if there are any clues that we can latch onto. Maybe it will tell us about their next move, or their overall plan, or something. But, right now, all we can do is be thankful that we saved this much.”

Arthur didn't feel particularly thankful. In fact, Arthur felt used and confused. These people had pulled him into this world of tides and one side against the other. But, really, he had no evidence that there was another side. He didn't know who had been knocking on his door that night. Maybe the pizza delivery boy had the wrong apartment number. He didn't know who that man in the stairwell was, either. For all he knew, it may have been some frat boy getting initiated. Arthur was beginning to suspect that he had been duped by some kind of collective delusion. People wanted to believe that there was a good side and a bad side and that, of course, they were fighting on the good side. Maybe this was all just a fantasy that these people had created for themselves. Nothing more than a game. That's what it was.

And yet, Arthur knew that it was a game that he had to play. And these were his fellow players, it seemed. A vagrant, a cameraman, a doorman, and a taxicab driver. Arthur had a vague suspicion that this was not the formula for a winning team.

Chapter 7

Arthur was walking up the stairs to his apartment. Despite how little he had actually done, he was exhausted. He supposed that running from a fire carrying an armful of tapes might result in that. It was now 9:00PM, and Arthur was planning to go straight to bed. Fortunately, nothing interfered with those plans. Arthur was uncertain how he would have reacted if anyone had tried to interfere. But, then again, Arthur felt uncertain of things in general. So, Arthur decided to go to bed. If only for a few hours, sleep would dissipate the uneasiness that came from fighting an unknown enemy with an uncertain plan alongside a motley crew. Arthur didn't even bother to change into his pajamas.

Arthur woke to a sharp knock at his door. The clock next to him read 11:32PM. Arthur got out of bed, and opened the door to his apartment.

And there stood the pizza delivery boy.

“I have your large pepperoni pizza here, sir.”

“I didn't order a pizza.”

“Are you sure?” asked the delivery boy.

The pizza delivery boy and Arthur checked, and sure enough, the address was correct. Someone had decided to order pizza for Arthur. Unfortunately, that person had not

decided also to pay for the pizza, so Arthur sent the delivery boy on his way, and went back in his apartment to go to bed.

Arthur fell into bed, for the second time that night, and drifted once again into dreaming sleep.

Arthur was sitting at a table, and across from him sat a faceless man in a black business suit. Setting on the table was a chess board, but the pieces were different. Arthur's pieces were white, and he had only five, each of them clearly distinguishable as people he knew. There were figures of Angela, Ali, Jim, Bill, and himself. The faceless man's pieces were black. But, that was all that could be said for them. Arthur could not tell what the pieces signified. At times, it almost seemed as if the pieces were nothing more than a single, unified black fog or blob sitting on the board. Arthur watched helplessly as the fog moved toward his pieces, surrounded them and enveloped them.

"What are you doing? Why is this happening? Why?" shouted Arthur desperately at the faceless man. But, the man did not respond. Arthur could distinguish screams coming from his pieces as the fog hid them from sight. In act of desperation and frustration, Arthur picked up the chessboard and threw it to the ground. But, as he did so, the fog moved off of the board, and began to take on a form. The fog grew and took the form of a man who stared at Arthur as he approached him. Arthur tried to back away, but before he could run, the ghostly man of black mist was on top of him, and enveloped him. Arthur's mind was swirling as his sight failed him. Arthur felt as if he were gasping for breath, yet could breath normally. Then, it was all over.

Arthur was standing in a room of pure white, and there was a young girl with blonde curls and a pink dress standing there, looking at him scoldingly.

"Well, now you've done it," she said.

"Done what?" asked Arthur, angry at the fact that he had just been through that terrible vision and was now being scolded for his, apparently, poor performance.

"You've ruined it."

"Did you see what happened? They were screaming. I had to do something."

"Did they ask you to? Did you know what they were doing? How dare you interfere, like that."

"Interfere? What are you talking about? They were pieces on a chess board! How was I supposed to know that they had some kind of plan that involved getting absorbed by that... that... thing."

"You know what your problem is, Arthur? You never listen."

“To what? All you people give me are occasional orders and vague statements about tides and waves and disturbances and us and them. It doesn’t make sense.”

“What does?” said the girl as Arthur’s alarm woke him.

It was 5:25AM, and the alarm was waking Arthur. It was now Thursday, November 3rd. And Arthur didn’t know what he was supposed to do. Especially now that doing something was apparently a wrong answer.

Chapter 8

Arthur called in sick from work that day. With all that had been happening, and the terrible night’s sleep he had, Arthur knew that he needed a day off from the office. Around 7:15AM, his apartment phone rang.

“Where are you?”

It was Angela.

“I’m in my apartment.”

“Oh. Why?”

“That’s the question, isn’t it?” said Arthur, and hung up the phone. Arthur wanted nothing more than to just sit in his apartment today and not do anything. After all, that was what the dream meant, wasn’t it? He shouldn’t interfere. Sure, Arthur had no clue what he was interfering with or how, but he definitely shouldn’t interfere. Fortunately, Arthur was pretty good at doing nothing when that was what he decided to do. So, he turned on the television. It was a local news break.

“Last night, there was an unusual fire in this station’s video vault. Fortunately, little real damage was done, and we are still able to broadcast from the studio. Thanks to a station employee and some kind passersby, no one was hurt and several of the videos from the vault were saved. Investigations are continuing, but the fire is believed to be the result of faulty wiring, and no foul play is suspected at this time.

“In other news, investigations are continuing on the recent upsurge in convenience store robberies. Last night, several stores were robbed. Police believe that there is some connection, but have yet been unable to discover it. If you have any information on this crime spree, please call our Crime Watchers hotline. The number is at the bottom of your screen.

“Tomorrow, the city’s symphony orchestra is playing one of Beethoven’s best known symphonies. Tickets are open to the public now for a discounted cost. Come to this night of classy entertainment. Now, let’s turn it over to a look at weather with our very own meteorologist.

“Thank you. Today should prove to continue with seasonal temperatures prevailing for the next few days. No precipitation is expected, so they should be nice cool autumn evenings.”

Arthur got up and turned off the television.

There was a knock at the door. Arthur ignored it. There was a louder knock. Arthur ignored it again. The third knock was one that Arthur feared ignoring, so he answered the door.

There outside his apartment stood Ali, holding an envelope and a video cassette. Ali silently handed the envelope and the cassette to Arthur, turned around, and walked down the hallway toward the stairwell.

Arthur, a bit confused by this mysterious exchange, opened the envelope. Inside was a note, scrawled in masculine hand.

Arthur,

Here's a copy of the episodes we saved. If you get time, watch them, and look for clues. I'll be by later to check if you found anything out. We have a big night tomorrow, so it would be good if you could do this today or tomorrow. Thanks. –Jim

Arthur took the video cassette and set it on his end table next to the book he had picked up yesterday. Arthur picked up the book and began to read. Not too much later, Arthur put the book back down. He just couldn't concentrate, he was so frustrated and confused. So, he turned the TV back on, and put in the tape that Jim had sent.

Arthur watched several hours of the sitcom. The show itself was like most of its genre. There was a family with a slightly unusual family situation, and every episode was about one or more of the many children getting in trouble for some reason or other. Arthur watched as closely as possible, given his scattered state of mind. Yet, no real connection to anything jumped out at him. By the time he had watched 5 of the episodes, they were extremely predictable. Once the conflict of the episode was presented, Arthur could pretty well guess what was going to happen from there on out. There were lines that reappeared time and again, there were static characters that never seemed to learn their lessons. Each lesson seemed to start from exactly the same starting point, and move over paths that were similar except for details, to destinations that were the same also except for details. Hardly anything unexpected, as far as Arthur was concerned. Arthur had finished watching by lunchtime. He made himself a sandwich and sat down to an afternoon of watching soap operas. Arthur never watched soap operas and found them very difficult to get into. There were too many characters with too complicated of lives to learn and then keep track of. On the other hand, Arthur could rest knowing that even if he didn't understand soap operas, the world wouldn't be worse off because of it. Now, Arthur not being able to understand the world, that could have bad impacts. He might end up interfering where he wasn't supposed to. And, that would be bad. Or so Arthur

had been led to believe. Arthur managed to sit in his apartment undisturbed through a full afternoon of confusing, but ultimately meaningless and unimportant, soap operas.

Around 5PM, there was another knock at Arthur's apartment door. Arthur opened the door, and Jim stood there.

"So have you found anything?" asked Jim, getting down to business immediately.

"No, nothing. According to the news, the fire was because of faulty wiring, anyway. I don't think there's anything in it."

"What? You think the news is going to say 'The forces of evil started the fire'? They'd sound crazy."

"It is crazy."

"But it's true."

"How do I know that? You're all nuts. Just playing a little game with an imagined enemy. Have you ever seen the enemy?"

Jim's face lost all expression at this question. Arthur decided that it may be best to back off of that tactic.

"Listen, I know that you all think that this is very important, and that I have some huge part to play or whatever. But, I have no reason to believe that anything you've said is true. World on a wave going the wrong direction? What does that even mean?" Arthur said as he plopped himself down on the couch. Arthur realized how childish this action must have seemed. But, at the moment, he didn't really care.

Jim sat down next to him. "I know it's hard. We're asking you to take a lot on faith..."

"...everything on faith, you mean..." corrected Arthur.

"It probably does feel like that. We're asking you to treat our words as good enough for you. Truth be told, we really don't know what is actually going on. We want to be able to give you a better, more convincing answer. But, we simply can't. We don't have one. You know, I was like you once. I remember when Angela pulled me into the fray. I wanted answers, explanations. But, she couldn't give me any. Bill helped a little bit, but even he doesn't know much of what's going on. But, I was convinced in time. I gave them a chance, and Angela's belief in what was going on was so strong that I couldn't help but be convinced that she saw something I didn't. I still have my doubts sometimes. But, there are enough times that the information we get is good that I can ease those doubts. I've learned not to worry about them, really."

"Your information has been good often enough you say. Like when?"

“Okay, let’s go with the most recent one. Last night. We knew that something would happen at the station. Didn’t know what, but we did know that something was going to happen last night. And, sure enough, there was a fire which, despite what the station itself is saying, was obviously the result of arson. Sure, we don’t know who the other side is exactly. We don’t know what their goal is, but we do know what they’re doing sometimes. Really, we’d have to have gotten really lucky for that fire to just have randomly happened that night, wouldn’t we?”

“Fine, let’s say that it wasn’t random. But, that doesn’t mean there’s some other side out there. Bill wasn’t with us last night. Maybe he set the fire. Maybe it’s just a game that he and Angela play. They set up bad things happening, feed each other and the rest of us information about it, and then see if the other one, along with the rest of us, can get it right and prevent it. It’s a scam and a game. Nothing more.”

“You’ve spent some time with Bill and Angela. Not much, I know. But, some. Do you really think they’d go around burning down TV stations for the sake of a game?”

“Fine. Maybe it’s not them. Maybe there are people over them that are organizing it, and we’re all on the same team. All being duped by the same people who are just using us for entertainment.”

“Okay, maybe you’re right. Maybe we are just pawns in some game. But, if we don’t play, then there will be even more destruction. Whoever it is that’s giving us and the other side orders clearly doesn’t care if they end up destroying things or hurting people or whatever. So, even if our enemy is also our boss, we still have to play to keep them from hurting people, don’t we?”

“Fine, fine. You’re right. We don’t have any choice but to play these stupid games because of whatever criminal mastermind happens to be in charge of the whole thing.”

“Now wait a minute. I’m not saying you are right. I’m just saying that even if you are, we still have to fight. If we refuse to play, not only do we lose, but everyone else loses.”

“Yeah, loses all of the episodes of a sitcom that’s only airing in reruns. Big deal. It’s not like they’ve hurt anybody.”

Jim’s face fell. “You don’t know that,” he said quietly.

“They have?” asked Arthur, suddenly interested.

“They are continuously hurting people, Arthur. But, it’s still too early to tell you about that. One step at a time, Bill says.”

Arthur’s frustration quickly returned. “Of course. Can’t tell Arthur too much. Heaven forbid he actually be informed about what’s going on.”

“Listen, one step at a time is the only way to do it. When you’re all the way in, you’ll see how overwhelming it could be if we pulled you in all at once. I know that with me it was hard even doing it a little bit at a time. The nightmares were terrible.”

“Nightmares?” asked Arthur, once again interested.

“Oh, yeah. Being pulled in wreaks havoc on your psyche. Strange, strange dreams. Fortunately, they’ve stopped by now. I’ve gotten used to the way things are.”

“Oh, that’s good, then.”

“Well, I think I’ve overstayed my welcome, so I’ll head out. Oh! I almost forgot, something else I was supposed to tell you. We’re going to the symphony tomorrow night, and we’d like you to come along, if you could.”

“Sure. But, why the symphony?”

“Because it’s our turn to go on the offensive. But, we’ll tell you more about that tomorrow night. Have a good one. We’ll be by around six to get you tomorrow. And, be sure to dress up.”

“Right,” said Arthur. Jim got up, and exited the apartment.

And, once again, Arthur was left alone.

Chapter 8

Arthur got up off the couch and made himself a microwavable dinner. He sat down on the couch, and decided to watch the tape that Jim had given him again. After all, maybe there was something in it that Arthur missed the first time around. Yet, after watching the first six episodes for a second time, Arthur still found nothing unusual that could be construed as a “clue” without really forcing it to seem like a clue. At 9:30PM, Arthur decided to give up and go to bed. Once again, Arthur was plagued with one of the dreams he had been having since he had met Angela and her people.

This time, Arthur was on the rocky shore again. Once again the faceless man in the business suit was picking up pebbles and boulders and throwing them up onto shore. Arthur watched silently. Then, it struck Arthur. The suit the man was wearing didn’t look wet. No matter how many times the man bent over to pick up a stone or pebble or anything, and no matter how many waves crashed beside him, the suit wasn’t getting wet at all.

Just as this thought was passing through Arthur’s mind, a stone hit him in the back of the head.

“Hey!” he shouted, as he turned around to see the girl that was becoming all too familiar to the sleeping Arthur.

“Sorry,” said the girl sincerely. “Did I hurt you?”

“Not really. It wasn’t a very big rock,” Arthur said.

“Oh, good. I’m glad you’re not hurt. That would be bad.”

“No kidding.”

“So, will you help me?”

Not knowing what else to do, Arthur nodded, and joined the little girl in throwing small stones into the ocean.

“So, what am I supposed to do?” asked Arthur, in an attempt to get information from any source, including little girls in dreams.

“Exactly what you’re doing, silly,” was the reply.

“And what is that exactly?”

“Throwing rocks into the ocean.”

Arthur stopped throwing just long enough to turn to the girl with a confused, questioning look on his face. As she turned to face him, she looked over his head, screamed, and fell to the ground unconscious as a large rock flew through the air and hit her on the head. Arthur spun around to see the faceless man continuing his work as if nothing had happened. Arthur stormed toward the man.

“You hurt her! Can’t you see that? Don’t you care?”

As always, the man did not respond. He simply leaned down, picked up another stone and threw it.

“You’re going to answer me! I don’t care if you don’t have eyes or a mouth or any of that! You’re going to find some way to fix it.”

The man leaned down, picked up a rock, and threw it toward shore.

“Forget the stupid rocks!” shouted Arthur as a wave crashed around his feet. “They don’t mean anything! None of this means anything! Anything at all!”

This last outburst seemed to grab the man’s attention. The man stepped toward Arthur and reached out to grab him. Arthur punched the man in the stomach with all his might.

All that happened was that a jolt of pain went through Arthur's hand. The man took hold of a struggling Arthur. The man's hands were cold, and his grip was like a steel, robotic claw. The man effortlessly lifted Arthur over his head and threw him out toward the ocean. Arthur flew through the air and breathed in a deep breath just before he splashed into the ocean again. The water swirled around Arthur as he struggled to swim to the surface. Arthur broke through the surface of the water and gasped for air. He looked around him, and saw that he was nowhere near shore. The man, the girl, and the rocky coastline were nowhere to be seen. Rather, there was just Arthur, treading water here in the open sea. Arthur called for help, but the only sound was that of the sea which surrounded him. Arthur did the only thing he could, he chose a direction and began swimming. He had not gone far when he felt his hand scrape the bottom. He stood up where he was, and looked around. All around him was still sea. Much of it looked to be quite deep. But, he had found somewhere where the water only came up just past his knees. He looked down at his feet, and found that the shallow area he stood on looked to be a submerged pile of stones, none any bigger than his hand.

Arthur woke in a sweat. His clock read 6:35AM. In his frustration, he had forgotten to set his alarm.

Chapter 9

Arthur got out of bed, and took his shower and got dressed. He rushed through his breakfast and ran down to the bus stop, just in time to catch the 7:07AM bus. Angela was on the bus with him, carrying her bag as she always did in the morning. As they had two days before, they didn't talk to each other. But, Arthur could tell that Angela was upset with him. He also knew that she had reason to be. He did not like the situation he was in. He hated be dragged around and through situations that he didn't have the slightest understanding of. But, he had definitely been rude to her on the phone the previous morning. He would apologize tonight when they all went to the symphony.

At 7:14AM, Arthur got off the bus, nodded to Bill as he entered the building. Arthur had a busy day ahead of him. First, he had to catch up on all the work that was left undone because he had decided not to come in the day before. Then, he had to make sure that he got the most urgent work from today done. Then, he had to get home and get ready for the symphony.

Arthur wondered what the nature of the offensive was. Arthur had a hard time imagining Angela and her crew really doing anything big. What were they going to do? Cough? But, Arthur had to be ready for whatever needed to be done. After all, whatever it was, it was apparently important. So, Arthur was going to go and participate however they needed him to. After all, he had a choice, and that was the choice he was going to make. He was going to help them.

Work went as well as on a usual Friday when Arthur had missed the previous Thursday. Arthur was very busy getting caught up as best he could. By the time Arthur finished work at 4:30PM, he was exhausted from the rush of trying to do two whole days of work

in a single day. Arthur rushed down the stairs to catch the 4:34PM bus back to his apartment.

At 4:52PM, the bus arrived at Arthur's apartment, as usual. Arthur went inside and heated up a microwavable dinner, then went to the bathroom for a quick shower. Arthur got into his best suit. Black coat, black pants, white shirt, and a black tie. He combed his hair to make sure that everything would look perfect for them to go on the offensive, whatever that meant.

Chapter 10

At 6:02PM, there was a knock at the door. Arthur opened the door to find Jim, in a brown suit, blue shirt, and yellow tie, Bill, in all gray, and Angela, in a hideously pink dress, standing there. Arthur invited them in, and they informed him that Ali was waiting for them, so they should get going right away. Arthur stepped out into the hall, closed and locked his door, and the group of them went downstairs, out of the building, and into the alley where Ali was waiting in his taxi. Bill opened the front door for Angela, and then the three male passengers got into the back of the taxi. Ali sped through the streets toward downtown. Arthur felt a certain sense of Déjà vu as they rode downtown past the glittering lights of the city in the taxi. The taxi pulled up in front of the City Music Hall, and the taxi unloaded. Once Bill closed the door behind them, Ali sped away, leaving the group to whatever plans were in the works. Arthur realized that he was still unaware as to exactly what they were up to.

“So, what is the plan?” he asked Bill.

“Oh, it will be obvious enough. Just follow our lead. Nothing too outrageous, so don't worry.”

The fact that Bill was downplaying it so much was a cause for Arthur to worry. But, there was little point in that, so Arthur chose to enjoy his surroundings. It was a cool night, though Arthur's breath was not yet visible. He looked around at the downtown lights on this Friday night. The store and restaurant fronts were all lit up with neon colored lights while white street lights lit the side walks. There were people walking around in different styles of dress, from the exquisite minks of the women coming out of the nearby French restaurant to the jeans and sweatshirts of the high school students enjoying a night out on the town. There was a light breeze blowing the scents of various foods to Arthur's nose. Around him, a number of well-dressed middle-aged and older people were gathering in front of the City Music Hall to be sure that their seats would not be sold if they showed up too late. Angela, Bill, and Jim also seemed to be soaking in the world around them. A night at the symphony. It had been a long time since Arthur had been to see the symphony orchestra. In fact, he didn't even recall the last time he had come to a concert. After all, he really didn't have anyone to come with. But, now, here he did. Despite how off their collective rocker this group may be, they definitely included Arthur very very quickly. It was almost cult-like, Arthur reflected. But, either

way, here he was with them, standing outside the Music Hall waiting to be let in to take their seats, so that they could carry out their plan... whatever that plan happened to be.

At 7:00PM, the doors were opened, and well-dressed men and women began entering into the theater lobby, and walking straight through to place purses and suit jackets on seats to ensure that everyone know that those seats were definitely "taken". Bill led their group through the doors and to their seats on the floor. They were actually very good seats. Third row on the floor, near the center. Though seating at a symphony mattered less than at a rock concert, play, or musical, those were definitely highly coveted seats. Apparently, Bill's years as a doorman had gotten him connections so that he could get good seats at the symphony. At least the years weren't totally wasted.

The four of them sat down in their seats, and watched as others walked in, dropped off their seatholders, often their husbands, and headed off for one last bathroom break before the show started. Arthur was sitting between Angela and Jim. He leaned over to Angela.

"Hey, I'm sorry about yesterday morning."

"What?"

"Yesterday morning, when I hung up on you."

"Oh, that was what happened. I assumed the phone line had been cut."

"Oh," replied a very confused Arthur. Arthur decided to return to silence momentarily, and then turned to Jim.

"So, what are we actually doing tonight?"

"Enjoying the show."

"That's the offensive."

Jim smiled. "No. We're not just going to enjoy the show. We're going to break the rules."

"Which rules, exactly?"

"You'll find out soon enough. Just follow our lead."

"Okay," said Arthur, a bit frustrated that the others seemed to still believe that he wasn't good enough to let in on their secret. Maybe he should tell them about his dreams. Maybe that would impress them enough that he'd be let in. But, then again, why would he want to impress them anyway? Did their opinions really matter to anyone except each other? Of course not. They were just a vagrant, a cameraman, and a doorman. They didn't matter to anyone. Except to him... This last thought startled Arthur as the lights

dimmed and brightened to indicate that it was 15 minutes before the concert would begin. Arthur excused himself to take a look around the concert hall. He got up and walked to the back of the audience area. He looked around, and didn't recognize anyone. Outside, in the foyer, there were security guards making sure that ruffians of various sorts wouldn't come in. Upstairs were music students from the university who decided to feel cultured, or perhaps who had to come for a music appreciation class or something of the sort. Things looked exactly as they should look in a downtown concert hall before a concert started. Arthur was curious as to who, exactly, they were going to be on the offensive against. Of course, he had been curious about who the enemy was for some time. And that certainly had not been good enough reason for the others to share with him anything worthwhile. Having concluded that everything was, in fact, quite normal in this concert hall, Arthur walked back to his seat.

Arthur said to the others, "Everything looks clear." None of them appeared to be impressed with or appreciative of Arthur's reconnaissance report. But, he had given it anyway. After all, how was he supposed to know if anyone else in the Hall mattered at all to their plan?

The lights dimmed, and the curtains opened to reveal the city's symphony orchestra sitting. The concert master (a young violinist with abnormally stiff hair) rose and cued each section to tune. Each section tuned in turn, and the audience applauded at how well the concert master did his job of making sure that everyone was tuned to the same key. The concert master sat down at the First Violin position, and the spotlight moved to the side of the stage. The conductor, a woman with long dark hair pulled back in a pony tail, walked out onto stage amidst great applause. She took hold of the microphone that was next to her conductor's platform, and introduced the piece that was going to make up the concert for the evening. Apparently, it was one of Beethoven's lesser known early works, had a heavy influence from Mozart, and some other information that Arthur didn't really register because he found it to be quite boring. The woman set the microphone back in its place, and raised her conductor's wand. The members of the orchestra sat at attention, awaiting the first beat. The anticipation of most of the audience was nearly tangible. After several dramatic moments, the baton fell, and the concert began.

The first movement was a rousing Allegro, fast-paced with a strong driving beat. The strings sang. The brass blared. The woodwinds whistled. The percussion pounded. Each part worked together to create an effective whole communicating the anguish, anger, and hope, in short, the passion, of the young Beethoven. Arthur remembered hearing somewhere that Beethoven would often write and rewrite every measure of a piece of music until he was satisfied with it. Arthur was curious how many times Beethoven had to write and rewrite that particular piece of music before he was satisfied with it. It was a good piece of classical music, and it was well-performed by the orchestra. The conductor's baton bounced through the air at varying rhythms as the timing of different sections of the song changed. The conductor cued the various sections when they had important parts to play. Arthur wondered how much the orchestra actually watched the conductor during a performance. After all, the orchestra must have practiced this piece so many times that they could play it without the conductor there at

all. Arthur imagined that if the conductor suddenly collapsed, the audience would have to call it to the orchestra's attention for them to even realize what had happened. Fortunately, the conductor looked to be in good health, so the odds of her collapsing any time soon was slight. She seemed to be totally enveloped in the music that she was conducting. It was as if the music wrapped itself around her and drove her through every movement rather than the other way around. The show was perfectly unified, as far as Arthur was concerned. The different pieces fit together perfectly, just as a good orchestra concert should. And it was still only the first movement. Finally, the movement came to a majestic finish. The conductor closed with a flourish of a cut off. And the audience sat silent in anticipation of the next taste of Beethoven's little known masterpiece.

Except for Arthur's companions. It started with a simple clapping from Bill. Then, Jim and Angela had joined in. All three of them were clapping. Jim stood up, continuing clapping, and Bill and Angela joined him. Angela looked down at Arthur and silently lipped a single word. "Now". Arthur caught the hint and began clapping as well. He also joined them in standing. The four of them were there standing amidst a silent audience. Angela called out "Encore! Encore!" Jim yelled out something indiscernible that was reminiscent of things that drunk fans yelled at professional football games. Up until then the conductor had been simply trying to wait the disturbance out, but at Jim's yell, it was clear she had had enough. She turned around, and nodded toward the back of the room. Several security guards came forward, and took hold of each of the four by the arm in turn, and led them out as their screaming for "Encore!"s continued and got louder. The security guards got them out into the foyer, and one of them turned to the others.

"We'll have to separate them."

The others nodded in response, and Arthur saw the security guards take Jim, Angela, and Bill, individually to different rooms. The guard assigned to Arthur, however, pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and placed it over Arthur's face. Arthur got out a "What are you..." before the world went black around him.

Chapter 11

Arthur woke to find himself lying on a bed, with a young man with dark hair watching him closely. Arthur blinked a few times, and looked at the man. He looked vaguely familiar.

"Ah, good, you're awake," he said, pleasantly. "We were wondering when you'd come to."

Arthur, still quite groggy, managed a nod.

"I'm sure you're very disoriented. Here, take some coffee."

Arthur took the coffee. He didn't particularly like coffee, but it was tolerable, and, more important, it was what was being offered. Arthur took a sip of the hot beverage and

found that it did help his head clear some. He nodded thankfully at the young man sitting on a chair next to his bed.

“You’re very welcome,” he said.

Arthur looked around the room. It was a large bedroom with a high ceiling and a warm fire crackling in the fireplace. The curtains were drawn, but Arthur guessed that it must be dark outside as not the least light was shining through or around them.

“Where am I?” asked Arthur.

“You’re safe now, that’s what matters,” answered the man. “We weren’t sure if we could save you, but I think that we got to you in time.”

“In time for what?”

“That will come later, friend. Simmons will explain everything when he meets with you. But, you still don’t seem to be quite with it yet. So, just rest here. There should be some food on its way.”

Arthur leaned against the oak headboard of the bed. A few moments later, a woman walked into the room carrying a bowl of chicken noodle soup. She handed it to the young man and walked back out of the room, closing the door behind her. The man, in turn, handed the soup to Arthur.

“Be careful, the bowl is hot.”

Arthur gingerly set the bowl down on his lap and began eating the soup. It was quite warm, but not hot enough to burn his mouth. It was just the way chicken noodle soup should be when you’re not quite feeling well. As the young man watched, Arthur finished the soup, one spoonful at a time.

“Very good,” Arthur declared.

“Feeling better, then?” said the young man, smiling as he took the bowl back from Arthur.

“Much, thank you.”

“Good. So, do you feel up for a little meeting with the man who organized your rescue?”

Arthur was split on this. He had just been unconscious, for how long he didn’t know. He also had no idea who these people were. On the other hand, they did seem to be treating him well, and, if nothing else it was a chance to gather something he was lacking: information. This final point was the one that drove it home. He was ready to go talk to Simmons, whoever Simmons may be.

“Yes, I think I’m up to it,” Arthur told the young man.

“Good, good. Then, if you’ll follow me, please.”

Arthur got up out of bed and realized that he was still wearing the clothes that he had on at the concert. This made sense to Arthur, as he had no idea what else these people would have done. He followed the young man out of the bedroom and into the hallway. The hallway had a very high vaulted ceiling and there were tapestries hanging on the wall. The hall was lit with electric candles attached to the walls. Arthur walked down the hall after the young man and followed him as he turned right down a similar hallway, leading to large wooden double doors. The young man knocked on the door, and from inside came a single word.

“Enter!”

The man opened one of the doors, and stood aside to allow Arthur to go into the room. Arthur walked through the door, which closed behind him.

The room that Arthur found himself in was far from pleasant. Standing on either side of the door he just entered were two men who, judging from their stature, were bodyguards. Arthur reflected that if professional football players were causing problems in a bar, these men would be the bouncers that the bar manager would hire. But, as Arthur looked around he realized exactly what it was that made the room so unpleasant. The room, and everything in it seemed out of proportion. The room was quite narrow, more like a wide hallway than a room. The length of the room was also out of proportion, furthering the feeling of it simply being a wide hallway. The walls were lined with bookshelves filled with books bearing spines similar to one another. The room was dimly lit, but at the end of it, Arthur could see a desk with a chair on either side of it. The one near him was a small office chair, the one on the other side had an unusually high back which was facing him. Arthur stepped forward.

“Come in, come in, Arthur,” said a voice from the high backed chair.

“Thank you,” said Arthur as he sat down in the chair, facing the back of the high backed chair across the desk from him. “Simmons, I presume.”

“You have heard correctly,” answered Simmons. “For a while we weren’t sure if we could save you. But, I think we have moved quickly enough.”

“I’m sorry, but…”

“You have no idea what I’m talking about?”

“Right.”

“I rather suspected not. The other side generally is not particularly open with information, and rightfully so. After all, if they told you what they were really all about, odds would be very slim that you would join them. No one in their right mind would join them unless they were duped into doing so.”

“So, you saved me from Angela and her friends?”

“If that is the way you think of them, then yes. That is what we did. I’m terribly sorry that we were forced to resort to the tactics we used. But, as I’m sure you’re aware, it was very difficult to get past them to you.”

“Of course,” affirmed Arthur, unconvinced.

“They have been keeping very close to you for the last few days,” continued the voice. “We were only hoping that you hadn’t caught their madness before we had the chance to let you know what we are really all about.”

“They don’t seem to know what you’re all about. They claim that they haven’t been able to find out.”

“Of course they claim that. If they told the truth of what we’re about, you would never even think of joining anyone working against us.”

“That sounds forboding,” said Arthur, a bit more honestly than intended.

The voice on the other side of the chair laughed. “Of course, when you don’t have all the information, things sound far worse than they actually are. Appearances, I’m afraid, are not my strong suit.”

“That much is obvious.”

“I suppose it is. So, let’s start getting to the real business. After all, just looking at appearances will help neither of us,” Simmons said as he turned around in his chair.

Simmons was not an old man. He looked to be in his mid-thirties, and quite thin. His skin was pale in the dim lighting, and his cheekbones stood out. His hair was dark, almost black, and combed neatly in place. His smile, though, was bright and sincere. He was dressed in a black suit, and a gray tabby cat sat on his lap. Simmons slowly pet the cat with his long spidery fingers.

“Arthur, it’s so nice to finally see you face to face. But, here you are. Wonderful,” said Simmons with a smile.

“So what are you actually up to?” asked Arthur, getting right to the point.

“Of course. I imagine you have been sorely disappointed in your requests for information from the other side. See, they lack vision. All they want to do is cause disruptions to the way things are going. They have no plan on which to let you in. So, really, don’t be angry with them. They are doing their best. But, all they know is that they are fighting against something. Some vague concept that is personified in my agents. Unfortunately, they have never even bothered to ask what we are trying to do.”

“So, what are you trying to do?” asked Arthur, tired of the fact that Simmons, too, seemed to be gifted with the ability to beat around the bush.

“Oh, yes, of course, of course. Our goal is simple, Arthur. We simply want to make people happy. Don’t you want people to be happy?”

“You have to be kidding me!” yelled Arthur, as he stood up out of his chair in indignation. “That’s ridiculous! You’re telling me that you burned the video vault in order to make people happy?”

“Yes. I am saying that.”

“And I thought that Angela was mad.”

“Sit down, please, Arthur,” requested Simmons. Arthur complied. “Arthur, what have you studied of human happiness? What do you understand of it?”

“Not much, really.”

“Exactly! Arthur, human happiness is our business. True, most of the necessary steps, people take on of their own accord. This only leaves a very limited scope in which we must work. It is our job, Arthur to take those steps that lead to happiness that people are not willing to take by themselves. We do these things for them to keep them from having to make the very hard choices to improve their happiness.”

“I’m sorry, I’m really not seeing what this has to do with burning down a television station.”

“Here, we did take a risk. Our goal was never to destroy the series. We were hoping that you and your friends would discover the fire in time to save some of the tapes.”

Arthur looked at Simmons with a questioning expression.

“People do like to see their old favorites on television. But, they don’t want to have to watch a year or two of reruns to see their favorite episodes. So, we eliminated most of the episodes for them. Now, if their favorite happens to have been one that was saved, then they will see it sooner. If it is not, they will quickly decide to do something else with their time rather than wait for a single episode of a rerun television series to air on their local station. We have simplified the process for them, Arthur.”

“But at what cost?”

“The cost was small, as you know. No one was hurt. Property damage was small. A price had to be paid, and the station’s insurance company will be paying it. In the end, though, it is insignificant. Ultimately, we have made many people happier at the cost to a few. You have no reason to worry, Arthur. We have everyone’s best interests at heart, even when they don’t.”

“But what about choice? Everyone deserves the right to have a choice.”

Simmons’ eyes narrowed. “It seems that they have already gotten to you, Arthur. Yes, people should have the choice, in as far as they can be trusted to make right choices. But, people aren’t always willing to make themselves happy. Sometimes they simply don’t know how. Other times, they’re not willing to pay the cost. Therefore, it is our job to pay the cost for them. It is our job to make them happy when they don’t know how to make themselves happy. That is what we do, Arthur. That is our goal. And that is the goal that your little friends have decided to stand in the way of.”

Once again, Arthur was conflicted. On the one hand, the things that Simmons said did make some degree of sense. People didn’t always make the right decisions with regard to their own happiness. There were too many very unhappy people for that to be true. But, on the other hand, it was clear that Simmons saw little room for people to make their own choices. Arthur felt that this should be a point against him. Something came to Arthur’s mind. Something that Jim had mentioned. Perhaps this would provide some benefit or insight.

“What about all the people you’ve hurt? How are you making them happy? Or what about Angela and her people?” asked Arthur, not entirely sure what he was talking about.

“Listen, Arthur, we have a difficult job. It is not easy making as many people happy as possible. Sometimes sacrifices must be made. It is unfortunate when that happens, I agree. But, the simple reality of the world is that, sometimes, for many people to be happy, one person must be made unhappy. That is another part of our job. Discovering these cases, and being sure that, once again, the necessary price is paid.”

Arthur had finally heard enough. He began to rise from his chair in order to leave.

But, in rapid succession, several things happened.

Simmons nodded to his bodyguards in the back of the room who began advancing toward Arthur.

The gray tabby that had been peacefully purring on Simmons lap howled, hissed, yelled “OUT THE WINDOW!” at Arthur, and bit the hand that had been petting him for most of this time.

Simmons let out a cry of pain as he tried to remove his hand from the cat's mouth, or the cat's mouth from his hand.

The bodyguards began moving toward Arthur faster.

Arthur climbed clumsily over the desk, and made his way to the window that was behind a very distracted Simmons. Arthur opened the window and looked out. He was on the second floor, and the drop to the ground was significant. But, at the moment, not quite as significant as the bodyguards that would soon have hold of him. Arthur jumped out the window. But, then he realized he had absolutely no idea where he was. So, he guessed and ran away from the house. Behind him, Arthur heard a voice say "Follow me!" As he turned around, he saw the gray tabby running up behind him. The tabby ran past him, and turned his head around, looking for Arthur to follow. Arthur did.

The cat led Arthur, now at a slightly slower pace, around the old house that they had both just escaped. They ran out to the road in front of the house. When they got there, Arthur saw that they were still in the city, in one of the older, but well-kept sections of town. The cat turned left and began walking up the street, under the light of the street lamps. His pace had slowed significantly, and Arthur could follow at a normal walking pace.

"Should we be moving faster?" asked Arthur, anxious that they might be easily overtaken at this pace.

"If you want to lead, go ahead," answered the cat.

Arthur decided that this pace was good enough.

The cat turned to Arthur as they continued walking. "Arthur, if they were chasing us we would hear people running behind us. Or they would be driving after us in a car, in which case walking a little bit faster wouldn't matter. So, there's no reason for you to get yourself out of breath now when you might need that breath later if they do decide to come after us."

Arthur was a bit offended that he had just been put in his place by a gray tabby. Yet, the cat was definitely correct in his analysis. For now they could walk.

"So, what's your name?" asked Arthur, striking up what he was pretty sure was his first two-way conversation with a cat.

"Frisk," answered the tabby.

"I see... So, what were you doing in Simmons' house?"

"I was doing what I usually do there. Gathering information. But, I guess my days of that are over. I doubt that they'd let me back in now, after I helped you escape."

“That’s true. So, are you who I should ask about what’s happening, then? No one else seems to know.”

“That’s right. No one else knows more than necessary. And you won’t either.”

“Well, isn’t that a bit dangerous? I mean, what if you were to die?”

“I’m a cat. We have nine lives. I’m not even through with number four. At this rate, I have quite a while to use the rest.”

“Oh. So you won’t tell me anything?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Oh, then please do. Seeing as it’s obvious that you’re not all crazy now, tell me the truth about what’s going on.”

“No.”

“What?”

“I said ‘no’. It indicates that I will not tell you what’s going on. Weren’t you listening? Simmons already told you more than most of us know. More than you need to know. And that makes you more of a threat. A threat with only one life to lose. And who said you aren’t crazy? You’re talking to a gray tabby.”

“Lots of people talk to cats.”

“Not many people hear them talk back intelligibly.”

“True, but…” Arthur didn’t know how to finish the sentence. Despite the terrible situation he had just been rescued from, Arthur finally felt free. He felt as if he had spent his entire life chained to a post but now that chain had been broken. He could do anything. Including having a full conversation with a cat, which was exactly what he was doing.

“Oh, it’s happening to this one, too,” said Frisk, apparently somewhat perturbed at the fact that Arthur, rather than pestering him with questions, had suddenly stopped walking, become silent and got a far-off look in his eyes. Frisk bit Arthur through his pants leg.

“Ouch! Hey! That hurt!” said Arthur as he reached down to rub the place where he had just been bitten.

“Oh, it’s not bleeding, so don’t worry,” said Frisk. “I just had to get to back with me. You were far more pleasant when you were asking all the dangerous questions that I refused to answer.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Of course it does. I’m a cat. I like playing with mice.”

Arthur was somewhat confused at this comment, and chose to let it go. Frisk stopped next to a bench.

“Arthur, have a seat. We need to talk.”

“We were talking.”

“We need to talk seriously,” said the cat, with the serious look that the most serious cats give. Arthur sat down. Frisk jumped up next to him on the bench. “Listen, Arthur, it’s only Friday. On Tuesday, you were living a perfectly normal life. Then Angela woke you and got you started on a path that, she claimed, would change the world. Now, what did you think of her and her claim?”

“I thought she was annoying and crazy.”

“Why?”

“Because she was in my apartment in the middle of the night. And, later on, she couldn’t explain anything that she was saying.”

“Can she explain it now?”

“No.”

“Has anyone explained it, fully, to you?”

“Well, I guess you could say that Simmons did.”

“So, the words of Angela’s enemy convinced you that she is sane?”

“Yeah. What’s so strange about that?”

“Nothing, it’s just interesting.”

“Well, seeing the enemy, I now know what our goal actually is. We’re trying to keep Simmons and his people from...”

“...making people happy?”

Arthur stopped to think about this. He finally answered, "But, they're not making people happy. They're destroying things. Maybe they're even killing people. I don't know."

"Well, Arthur, you're three-fourths right."

"What?"

"They're destroying things. They're even killing people sometime. And, yes, you don't know."

Arthur tried to remember exactly what he had said. "So, you mean they ARE making people happy?"

"Of course they are. Simmons told you. Human happiness is their business. Surely a man as smart as Simmons is wouldn't be totally wrong with how he runs his business. I'm sure that, by some measure, he and his people are making people happy."

"But..."

"Arthur, I've had enough of this. You're causing me a lot of trouble. Listen, Angela is convinced that she has to do what she has to do because things are going wrong in this world and she's fighting that. She is right. Bill is convinced that he has to do what he has to do for exactly the same reason. Jim was convinced because Angela was right about something that she couldn't have known about beforehand unless she was right about a lot of other things. You, on the other hand, are fighting tooth and nail against joining the cause until we give you some sort of solid plan."

"But, I'm convinced now! I told you! I'm convinced that Angela is right."

"No! You're wrong. You are convinced that Simmons is out there doing bad things and that he needs to be stopped. You're fighting a very different fight than the one that Angela is fighting. She is fighting the tide. You are fighting a single man. And, Arthur, that's just not good enough."

"What? Why not? Simmons told me the way he works, and the way he works is not good. So, we have to stop him."

"If it was as simple as that, Arthur, we'd just get rid of Simmons. He may be a smart man, but he's blind as a bat with regard to some things. That's how I managed to be laying on his lap during so many important meetings. But, those days are over."

"Are you saying that you could get rid of him?"

"Yes."

“Then, why don’t you?”

“There are many reasons, Arthur. Many reasons. But, the most important one is that Simmons is just riding the tide. Occasionally pushing it and clearing its path. But, we want to turn the tide. And taking Simmons out of the picture won’t do that. In fact, it would probably only push things along faster.”

“I don’t understand.”

“That’s fine. Arthur, that’s another problem of yours. You always insist on understanding things. You’re paralyzed until you understand, understand, understand. Forget about understanding for now, Arthur. What is really going on is too big for any of us to understand. And, if we sat around waiting for it to happen, we’d drown as the tide washed right over us.”

“But...”

“No more buts, Arthur! You’ve said you’re convinced now. I still think you’re convinced of the wrong thing. But, deep down, I think you feel the right thing. And, that’s going to have to be good enough. Angela dragged you in now, so we’re just going to have to hope that things work out with that. But, now that you’re convinced, Arthur, we’re going to need something more important from you.”

“What’s that?” The feeling of freedom that Arthur had been reveling in just before Frisk made him sit down was gone. Arthur had been pulled back down into the chilly November night by Frisk’s harsh words. Yet, at this point, Arthur could no longer deny their truth.

“What we need from you right now is obedience.”

Chapter 12

Arthur was crawling into bed. It was very late on Friday night when Ali dropped him off after the talk with Frisk. His clock read 3:35AM when Arthur finally crawled into bed. Fortunately, Arthur could sleep in. The next day was Saturday. Saturday, a day for rest and relaxation. These were the words passing through Arthur’s mind as he fell softly into sleep.

At 5:30AM, Arthur was rudely awakened when someone threw the covers off of him. Again.

“Arthur, you’re okay! I’m so glad you’re okay! We thought we’d lost you for good!” cried Angela as Arthur with a sleep-deprived headache looked up at her.

“Unnnngg...” groaned Arthur as he turned over to go back to sleep.

“Arthur! Come on! It’s important!”

Arthur opened his aching eyes and looked at Angela. She was there, smiling at him, waiting impatiently for him to get out of bed. She even began straightening her coat as she bounced on her heels.

“Do you know how late I got back?” asked Arthur.

“Ali said it was 3:30. That’s pretty late.”

“Yes. I’ve only slept for two hours.”

“Wow. That’s too bad,” said Angela, looking very concerned.

“Yes, it is.” Arthur closed his eyes again.

“So, are you ready to go?” asked Angela. “We have to hurry. There’s going to be a robbery soon.”

“What?” asked Arthur, his sore eyes snapping back open.

“A robbery. Another convenience store is going to be robbed, and we’re going to stop it.”

“Okay,” said Arthur reluctantly as he sat up. He was still in the clothes that he had worn to the symphony the night before. So, he removed his tie and set it on his night stand. He then stood up to join Angela.

“Alright, let’s go.” said Arthur.

“Okay!” she said and headed toward the door of his apartment. Arthur followed behind her as they left his apartment and went down to the street. Angela led him away from downtown, in a direction that Arthur very rarely traveled, to a small convenience store. Angela and Arthur walked in and were greeted by a young man with dark hair at the counter.

“Eric?” asked Angela.

“Yes?” replied Eric.

“You need to get out of here,” she said. “It’s not safe.”

“But, it’s my job.”

Arthur looked at the young man, and recognized the man that had handed him coffee and chicken noodle soup the night before.

“Shouldn’t we get what we’re here for?” asked Arthur, attempting to distract her from revealing too much to one of the enemy’s men.

“Yes, I suppose we should,” she answered.

The two of them began aimlessly examining the wares of the store just waiting for the inevitable to happen. Angela had declared that it was going to be, and Arthur knew that she was going to be right. Or, rather, Arthur felt that she was going to be right. And that was good enough.

About five minutes after they had entered, a man in a ski mask entered, demanded that everyone get down on the ground (Arthur and Angela complied), and ordered that Eric give him all the money in the cash register. Eric began emptying the drawer into the bag that the robber provided. But, as Eric was emptying the drawer, Angela and Arthur snuck up behind the criminal. Angela grabbed his ankles in order to trip him and Arthur pushed the man from the side. The man lost his balance and fell as the gun slipped out of his hand and slid across the floor. Angela and Arthur pinned the man to the ground.

“Call the police!” Arthur told Eric.

Eric did.

When the police arrived, they were surprised to see a man in a wrinkled dress shirt and a woman in a torn, dirty pink coat pinning down the man who had tried to rob the store. Shortly after the police arrived and while they were still taking statements from Eric, Angela, and Arthur, a news truck from the television station pulled up outside the convenience store. Apparently, the capture of this culprit made “late breaking news”, and Angela and Arthur found themselves being broadcast throughout the city on the early Saturday morning news.

After the initial rush of activity from the arrival of the police and news crew, things began to calm down some in the convenience store. The police took the culprit with them to incarcerate him as they waited for a court date. The news crew left to look for even more interesting happenings in the city to report during local news segments. This left Eric, Arthur, and Angela standing in a now empty convenience store.

“Well, that’s over,” said Angela, as she took Arthur’s hand and led him out of the store.

“That man was there last night. He was where they took me.”

“What?”

“He was with them. He’s one of them!”

“What’s your point?”

“We just helped him. We just helped them! Why did we do that?”

“We did it because it was the thing that had to be done. Isn’t that good enough?”

Arthur fell silent. After all, Angela was right. Stopping a robbery was a good thing to do. Did it really matter that the victim was one of them? One of the side that kidnapped him, supposedly for his own good. To save him from the “insanity” of Angela. An insanity which seemed all the more sane after he saw who they were. And yet he still doubted that they had actually done the right thing. After all, hadn’t they just helped the enemy? Surely that was unwise. Surely it was not a good strategic move at the very least. But, what was it Frisk had said? Something about fighting the tide being their goal... But, how could they fight the tide while they were helping the people that were pushing the tide along?

“So, where are we going now?” asked Arthur, realizing that he had no idea about the answer to this question.

“We’re going to show you something.”

“Oh, okay,” answered Arthur as he and Angela crawled into the back of Ali’s cab, which, Arthur had just then noticed had stopped to pick the two of them up. With both passengers safely in the back, Ali sped off toward downtown.

Chapter 13

The taxi pulled up in front of the city’s major hospital. Angela and Arthur stepped out of the taxi, and Angela led Arthur into the hospital and to the elevator. Arthur hated hospitals, but figured that Angela must have a reason, good or bad, for bringing him there. So, here they were standing in the sterilized hospital lobby, complete with institutional white fluorescent lighting, waiting for an elevator to take them to floor number five.

The doors of the elevator opened with an electronic ding, and Angela and Arthur stepped inside. The doors shut behind them, and, to Arthur’s surprise, they were alone in the elevator. Generally, he imagined hospital elevators as being quite crowded, but here he was with just Angela in the elevator.

The doors slid open when the elevator arrived at the fifth floor of the building. Arthur and Angela stepped out of the doors and they closed behind them. Angela led Arthur down a hall way and around a corner and then stopped in front of a large window.

“Look,” she said, with the most serious look on her face that Arthur had yet seen.

So, he looked. Through the glass, Arthur could see several cribs lined up in rows. He guessed that there must have been at least 20 cribs, possibly more. But, only two was occupied. He looked back toward Angela. The serious look had been replaced by a look

of satisfaction and triumph, as if she had just proven the most important point she had to make.

“What’s your point?” asked Arthur.

Angela’s look changed again. From satisfaction to confusion.

“What do you mean what’s my point? Isn’t it obvious?”

Arthur looked at the cribs, and looked back at Angela.

“No.”

Angela sighed. “The point is there aren’t enough kids here.”

Arthur laughed. “You have to be kidding me. Are you saying we’re dying out?”

“Slowly, yes.”

“And what are we supposed to do about it?” asked Arthur, not feeling ready to start a family at all, let alone one with a street woman who always wore the same dirty, torn pink coat.

“We’re going to have to keep some people from dying.”

Arthur laughed again. “What?”

“That’s right. We’re going to keep some people from dying.”

“I hate to say it again. But, you have to be kidding me.”

“I’m not kidding you at all.”

Arthur looked at Angela’s face. And, sure enough, she was not kidding him. He was actually beginning to learn that, despite how laughable she might be, she rarely said anything she didn’t wholeheartedly mean. She definitely intended for the two of them to keep people from dying. This seemed like as good a plan as any to Arthur, despite how vague it was.

“Okay, then. Let’s get started,” declared Arthur as he hesitantly looked around at the hospital hallway. After all, what better place to start keeping people from dying than here in the hospital, where it happened so often.

“Good. Then, follow me,” said Angela.

Angela led Arthur all the way back out of the hospital.

“But, aren’t we going to keep people from dying in the hospital?” Angela looked confused at Arthur’s question.

“Of course not. They have people there working 24 hours a day on that already. If anyone out there is going to die that we can stop, it probably won’t be in that hospital.”

“Okay, then where are we going?”

“Nowhere in particular right now.”

“What? Why not?”

“Because we don’t know of any deaths we could stop right now.”

“Then, what was that all about?”

“Well, we had to let you know what one of the big problems was, and what our big plan to fight the tide was.”

“So, your plan to turn the tide means we have to keep video vaults from burning, keep convenience stores from getting robbed, keep people from dying, and occasionally make scenes at classical music performances?”

Angela thought about this last question for a moment.

“Yes. That’s a lot of it.”

Arthur was somewhat annoyed at how ridiculous this sounded. But, he was coming to accept that things would sound ridiculous. And, in fact, things that sounded ridiculous were often more likely to be right than things that sounded reasonable. Simmons and his people sounded perfectly reasonable. But, that reasonableness also sounded ruthless. Arthur decided that he’s rather deal with Angela and her ridiculousness than be associated with Simmons and his people. So, keeping people from dying. That was the next step in the great plot to turn the tide and save the world. Though Arthur didn’t quite buy it, he accepted that fact and decided to get on with his new life.

Angela led Arthur to the bus stop outside the hospital. They waited for several minutes, and Arthur was feeling quite cold by the time the bus came. This November 5th was definitely on the colder side of normal, and a dress shirt was insufficient protection to keep out the ever growing cold.

Arthur and Angela boarded the bus and sat together talking about things that didn’t matter to either of them. The weather was the major topic of conversation. To Arthur, it felt very strange to be having a conversation about something that was so normal and unimportant. For a little while, he didn’t have to think about the great tides pushing

society one way of another and how Simmons and his men seemed so well organized and subtle in what they were doing, yet Angela and her people were on the right side. The side that had to win. Not because it was the right side, but simply because it had to. Arthur didn't know what he was going to do to make sure that it happened. But, he was going to do what he could. Which, if Frisk was right, mostly meant just doing what he was told. A difficult task for Arthur, as he figured it was for most people. But, it was a necessary task, and a task that Arthur was willing to pursue, even if it killed him, he told himself, uncertain whether he was telling the truth or simply lying to himself. This seed of doubt had just implanted itself when Angela told Arthur that they had arrived at their stop, and it was time to get off the bus. Thus, Arthur was forced to follow.

When Arthur stepped off of the bus he saw that they were in a shopping plaza. There were many kinds of stores there, from clothing to books, and Angela walked into a nearby bookstore.

“So, what are we doing here?” asked Arthur.

“We're having some fun, looking at books,” declared Angela.

Arthur accepted that this was as good a reason as any, and picked up a nearby book and began to read. Much of that afternoon was spent reading in that bookstore. Arthur was curious why they had decided to spend the afternoon in such a relaxing atmosphere when so much needed to be done. But, Arthur rested in the fact that this was only the eye of the storm. The worst was yet to come.

Chapter 14

Arthur got to bed much earlier that night than the previous one. By 9:30PM, he was lying in bed falling off to sleep. After an extremely busy Friday, and an extremely early morning this Saturday, it was nice to at last be able to get a full night of sleep again. Arthur felt warm under his sheets and blanket as he drifted soundly off to sleep.

Arthur woke at 10:13AM. The sunlight was shining into his room, filtered through his blinds and curtains. He got up out of bed feeling, for the first time in several days, like he had gotten a good night of sleep. He knew that his work with Angela had really only just begun, but he felt up to it.

They were going to keep people from dying.

The nobility of the cause was as impressive as its difficulty. Yes, Simmons may be out there wreaking havoc and pushing the tide, whatever that was, further and further. But, that was not he and Angela's concern. They had bigger fish to fry. They had lives to save.

With the energy that came from working for a noble cause, Arthur got into the warm shower. With each drop that hit him, he felt further invigorated in his new crusade. He

hadn't understood what Angela had met when she first invaded his life. "Today's the day the world changes." But, surely the world was going to change now. After all, he and Angela were going to save lives. And if that didn't change the world, what would?

Arthur finished his shower and made himself some scrambled eggs for a Sunday brunch. As he nearly expected, there was a knock on his door, interrupting his meal. He answered the door to find Frisk and Jim there. Frisk appeared to have been sitting, patiently waiting for the door to be opened while Jim could barely be seen behind a stack of seemingly very heavy boxes that he was carrying.

"Umm, what do you have there?" asked Arthur.

"Records," replied Frisk.

"Of what?" asked Arthur.

"Murders," replied Jim shortly between breaths as he dropped the boxes on Arthur's living room floor.

"Murders?"

"Yes, murders," resumed Frisk. "If you're going to stop people from being killed, then you're going to have to find out how people get killed."

"So, I'm supposed to read all this?"

"Oh, clearly not. Just enough of it to get the main ideas."

"Umm, okay."

Arthur reached over and opened one of the boxes that Jim had brought in. The inside was filled with several manila folders, each of which was packed with papers. Arthur chose one at random and opened the file. But, as he flipped through the file that he had chosen, he realized something.

"I know this case."

Jim, who had pulled out another file and was flipping through it, and Frisk both looked over at Arthur. Jim asked the obvious question.

"How?"

"It was on an episode of the crime drama I watch. It was on just the other week."

Jim shook his head. "No, you can't be serious."

“No, I am,” replied Arthur, with increasing tension. “The only thing that is different is the people’s names. And even those are pretty close. I mean, even the victim’s address here is exactly the same as the one on the crime drama. That’s more than a coincidence.”

Frisk looked at Arthur and then at Jim. “I think that Arthur is right, actually. The question, of course, is which inspired which.”

“I can’t tell,” said Arthur. “The dates on this case are just about the same time that I think that episode first aired.”

“Well, that wasn’t very long ago was it?” asked Jim. “The trial must still be going on.”

Arthur continued flipping through the file, as Jim and Frisk watched him. “No... It’s not. There wasn’t a trial at all. The file says they determined they wouldn’t be able to find the culprit.”

“What?” asked Jim incredulously. “They gave up on finding the person already?”

“Yeah,” answered Arthur, as he looked unbelievably back and forth between Frisk and Jim’s faces. “No wonder we’re losing too many people... If the police give up on finding a murderer that quickly...”

“Somehow, I doubt that that’s their policy...” suggested Frisk. Both Jim and Arthur looked at Frisk with looks that suggested Frisk elaborate on his last statement. “I think that this murder was special. Guessing from what Arthur said, I’m guessing a lot of these, but not all of them, are special. Special in a way that makes the police decide to give up on them quickly. Jim, you should understand that.”

Jim’s face fell, and Arthur saw that, for some reason, Jim did understand that. But, Arthur was distracted by the issue at hand.

“Yes, but how can we stop people from getting killed then?”

“The police need help. Or, at the very least, encouragement,” began Frisk.

“That’s it? Encourage the police? That’s your great plan to save the world?” asked Arthur, once again quite upset at his new found friends.

But, at that moment, the door opened. All three of them turned to look. Angela stood in the doorway.

“No, it’s not,” answered Angela, as she entered the room and closed the door behind her. “Frisk is still trying to protect you, Arthur. But, I know that tonight is the night.”

“You always say that,” said Frisk under his breath.

“Frisk!” yelled Angela at the tabby, startling even herself. “We can’t avoid it any more, and you know it. It’s a dangerous job, but Arthur and I have to do it. Tonight. If we don’t, another person will die. And, if we stand idly by and let that happen when we could stop it, then... well, what are we standing for anyway?”

Frisk’s eyes narrowed. “Angela... You know as well as I do that we don’t have enough information to do any...”

“You’re wrong, Frisk! Sarah told me just before I came over here. She found out where and when it’s all supposed to happen. All we need now is to get in the way. And Arthur and I are going to do it. I’m not even asking you to risk one of your furry little lives on it.”

Arthur stood up. “This is what I signed up for, Frisk. I didn’t know it, specifically, at the time. But, it feels right. We have to go. Angela and I have to do this.”

Frisk replied simply. “Fine. It’s no use trying to change your minds. You’ve decided to do it, so do it. Jim, let’s go. They don’t need us here right now.” Jim rose obediently, and followed Frisk to the door, opened it, and the two of them left.

Angela turned to Arthur and smiled. “Thanks, Arthur. Tonight’s the night. We’re taking a big step. I’ll be back later. You might want to take a nap. We’re going to have a busy night.” Without waiting for a response, Angela walked to the entrance of Arthur’s apartment, opened the door, and walked through, closing the door on her way. Arthur was left standing next to a box of files and staring at the back of a door. He wasn’t quite sure what he had gotten himself into. But, that was a feeling he had gotten used to.

Chapter 15

Arthur’s eyes slowly opened. He was sure he had heard a voice.

“Arthur, it’s time to get up. Tonight we’re going to change the world.”

Arthur turned around to see Angela standing by his bed in her familiar pink coat with her dirty blonde curls. She was waking him differently than before. Far more gently. For this, Arthur was quite grateful. He got up out of his bed, feeling rested from the nap that he had taken. But, as he looked at the clock he realized he had taken more than a nap. It was now 10:14PM. He had been asleep for over seven hours.

“Oh, wow... I didn’t realize I’d slept that long.”

“It’s okay, Arthur, it doesn’t matter. We’ll still be in time. We don’t have far to go.”

“Where are we going?”

“Just upstairs. We’ll go up the fire escape. We’ll be less likely to be noticed.”

The two of them walked over to the window that opened onto Arthur's fire escape. They climbed through the window, Arthur following Angela, and then started up the stairs.

"I thought so," they heard as a dark-haired young man came into sight on the fire escape above them.

"Eric?" said Angela, surprised.

Eric smiled.

"What are you doing here?"

"I'm stopping you."

"But, why?"

"Because you're just trying to interfere with the greater good. So, I have to stop you. So, stay out of my way, and this will all turn out fine."

Eric put his hand into his jacket and pulled out a handgun. He slowly turned toward the window, and began aiming.

"NO!!" shouted Angela, and lunged toward Eric. Eric turned, and a shot rang out.

Arthur turned to look at Angela, and Angela looked back and then down. There was a small red stain spreading across the front of Angela's coat. And then, she fell to the stairs.

"You! You killed her!" Arthur screamed. But, Eric simply turned back toward the window. "Don't you care?" And Arthur ran up to Eric.

The two struggled, as Arthur tried to get the gun and Eric tried to fight Arthur off so that he could complete his mission. Then, suddenly, several sensations hit Arthur at once. He heard another gunshot, and felt himself falling. Then, all was dark.

When Arthur came to, he heard voices coming from the street.

"Down this way. I heard someone fall."

Arthur looked toward where the voice was coming from. A couple of people were coming toward him.

"Hey, aren't you that guy that stopped that robbery?" asked the person standing above him.

“Yeah, I am,” Arthur grunted painfully. He was just coming to realize exactly where he was and what had happened. And the first thing he realized was that he was lying on top of Eric. The second was that Eric was not moving.

Two people were standing over Arthur as he was getting up.

“What happened?” one of them asked Arthur.

“We were struggling... the gun went off... we fell... Angela!”

“What?” asked the other.

“My friend, Angela... She’s up there, on the fire escape. He shot her, too...”

“Listen, you stay with him. I’ll call for the police and an ambulance.”

The person that was standing nearest him placed his arm around Arthur’s shoulders.

“Come over here with me. It’ll be okay,” said the voice, now intentionally soothing, as the person led Arthur away from Eric’s still body. A few minutes later, Arthur was aware of the sound of sirens and being placed in the back of a car.

Chapter 16

“Well, everything looks to be in order, Arthur. No charges will be pressed. It was very clearly self-defense. So, you have nothing to worry about.”

Arthur was glad to get this news. Now, he was free to go. He stepped out of the police station, and was met by a gray tabby who nodded toward a nearby alley. Arthur followed, as the cat had indicated.

“Arthur, after what has happened, we’ve decided that you can’t be part of us any more.”

“What?”

“I said you can’t be part of us. You’re going back to your normal life.”

“But, I was supposed to change the world... Angela said so... How is Angela? I never got news...”

“She’ll be fine. Fortunately, the shot managed to only cause reparable damage, and help came quickly, so she’ll be all right.”

“But, she and I... we were going to change the world together... keep people from dying...”

“Yes, you were going to. That was the plan. But, you didn’t. You killed someone, though that may have not been entirely your intent. So, we’re letting you return to your normal life.”

“But, Angela, what is she going to do?”

“When she’s well enough, we’ll assign her to a different person or case. Arthur, we have enough work for people to do. It’s not like we don’t have a use for her.”

“Then you must have a use for me.”

“No, we don’t. And that is that.” With these final words, Frisk turned around and walked out of the alley. Arthur was tempted to follow in protest, yet felt that he shouldn’t, though he didn’t know why. So, he did the only sensible thing that could be done for the night before he returned to a normal life. He went home and slept.

And in his dream that night, the tide was ebbing away from shore, and all Arthur did was watch.