

THE GAME MIGHT
JUST KILL YOU



THE GAME OF LIVES

FROM THE BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE MAZE RUNNER*

JAMES DASHNER

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ABOUT THE BOOK

THE GAMES ARE OVER

Only weeks ago, sinking into the Sleep was fun. The VirtNet combined the most cutting-edge technology and the most sophisticated gaming for a full mind-body experience. But now the line which separates the virtual from the real is blurring. And every time Michael sinks, he risks his life.

The VirtNet has become a world of deadly consequences, and the Mortality Doctrine - Kaine's master plan - has nearly been realized. If Kaine succeeds, it will mean worldwide cyber domination. And it looks like Michael and his friends are the only ones who can put the monster back in the box - if Michael can figure out who his friends really are . . .

JAMES DASHNER

**THE
GAME
OF
LIVES**

RHCP DIGITAL

For Lynette

PROLOGUE

Michael welcomed sleep. The small bumps of the road and the hum of tires on asphalt relaxed him for the first time in days, and his eyes grew heavy. He was an expert at dealing with reality—or *unreality*—but after what he'd been through lately, if he could pass a little time unconscious, he would be eternally grateful. There had been a lot to digest. Any chance to escape the world and its many ills—he'd take it. Though, fat chance he'd be slipping inside a Coffin anytime soon.

Michael's head bobbed. He caught himself and sank back into the seat. He knew it was a dream because he was no longer sitting in Sarah's dad's car. He was at his kitchen counter before it all began, where his nanny, Helga, had served him breakfast hundreds of times. If not thousands. He thought about the man who'd visited him in prison, his strange speech about dreams within dreams, how the looping logic applied to the VirtNet as well. Things that could drive you crazy if you thought about them too much.

"These are some great waffles," Michael said. He was surprised at how real they tasted. Warm, buttery goodness. He swallowed a bite and smiled.

And then Helga was there! Sweet, stern Helga. She gave him a look as she put some dishes away. It was a look Michael had seen many times over the years. A look that said he'd better not be trying to pull a fast one on her. A look he normally got when he faked a cough to miss school or lied about his homework.

"Don't worry," he said. "This is a dream. I can have as much as I want!" He smiled and took another bite, chewed

and swallowed. “I guess Gabby’s still missing, haven’t heard anything from her. It sure is sweet to be back with Sarah and Bryson, though. The Terrible Trio, live and still kickin’. Even if we are crammed into a backseat. Anyway. Who would’ve thought my life could get so weird, huh? Crazy stuff.”

Helga nodded, smiled, bent over the dishwasher; the room filled with the clank of glass and porcelain.

Michael frowned, feeling as if Helga didn’t seem to care one whit. “Maybe you don’t know everything, my little German. Oh, let’s see. Somehow we got tricked into blowing up the VNS systems, pretty much shut the whole thing down. Sarah’s parents—who’d been kidnapped, mind you—show up out of the blue to rescue us from jail, talking about *you* and a bunch of former Tangents behind it all. *You*, Helga. Care to enlighten me on that?”

His nanny gave him a guilty shrug, barely pausing from her work. Clinks and clanks rang out, the thumps of cabinet doors closing. Michael knew it was too good to be true—that he could just sit there and enjoy his dream. There wasn’t a place in the universe he could run to escape his thoughts—his own mind less than anywhere else. He stabbed a last few bites of waffle into his mouth, relishing the crisp outside and the soft interior, sensing that the dream was about to end anyway. And Helga had yet to say a single word to him.

“I guess you can’t talk to me in my dreams, can you?” Michael said. “That’s just plain weird. Kaine told me he’d killed you, killed my parents.” Picturing his mom and dad sent a deep ache through his dreaming heart. “Maybe you escaped somehow? I don’t know. Either way, can’t you at least live on in my head? Maybe that’s too much like talking to my—”

Helga turned sharply, her face afire. “The Hallowed Ravine, boy. You know that’s where you’ve got to go. Back to the Hallowed Ravine. End it where it started!”

Michael started to reply, but wouldn't you know it, that was right when a pothole had the gall to disturb his slumber.

CHAPTER 1

A NICE PLACE IN THE COUNTRY

1

When Michael woke up, he had the not-so-pleasant sensation of bile rising in his throat. Not the happiest way to greet the conscious world.

He sucked in a slow breath. He wished he'd taken something for motion sickness. Sarah's dad seemed to think he was a NASCAR driver, and the road wasn't cooperating. Gerard the Gear Hound, the country's next great race-car superstar on the world's twistiest, most torn-up track.

As they wound their way around the tight curves of the north Georgia mountains, Michael leaned into each turn with his entire body, as if that would somehow keep the car on the road. Lush foliage and trees overgrown with kudzu formed a great tunnel through a cave of green, sparkles of sunlight winking between leaves as they drove.

"You're sure she said Helga?" Michael asked once again, his dream fresh in his mind. *Go to the Hallowed Ravine*. That's what she'd said. Which meant, logically, that his own mind was telling him the same thing. They had to go back to the place where it all started if they wanted to end it. Seemed reasonable enough.

Gerard, clutching the steering wheel as if he feared it might try to spin away from him, sighed at the question. His wife, Nancy, shifted in the passenger seat to face Michael.

“Yes,” she said with a kind smile, then turned to the front again. Her patience made it seem as if that were the first time Michael had asked the question, though, in fact, it was probably the fifth or sixth.

He sat in the middle of the backseat, Bryson to his left, Sarah to his right. No one had spoken much since their initial reunion. Between being chased down, imprisoned, and rescued, it had been a long several days, and everyone seemed as dazed as Michael. Michael himself didn't know what to think. Sarah's parents had been kidnapped, then rescued by a group of mystery people. Those same mystery people had then directed Gerard and Nancy to pick up their daughter and her friends and take them to an address in the Appalachian Mountains.

But there'd been something about Tangents. And a woman named Helga.

It couldn't possibly be his nanny, Michael thought for the hundredth time. Could it? His Helga was gone—wasn't she? As far as he knew, she was a Tangent that had been decommissioned by Kaine, just like his parents. At the very least he'd hastened their Decay. Real or not, their deaths had emptied his soul, and not much had filled it since.

Sarah nudged him with her elbow, then awkwardly fell into him, her whole body pressing against his as Gerard whipped around yet another curve. The tires squealed and a flock of birds exploded from the foliage at the side of the road, screeching as they flew away.

“You okay, there?” she asked, righting herself. “You don't seem very chipper for someone who just got broken out of jail.”

Michael shrugged. “I guess I'm still trying to put it all together.”

“Thanks for the message you sent me,” she whispered. While separated, both Michael and Sarah had hacked through the prison firewall systems to send notes to each other. “It helped a lot.”

Michael nodded, gave a half smile. A horrible image formed in his mind—Sarah dying beside the lava pits, her last struggle for breath before exiting Kaine’s Path in the deepest folds of the VirtNet. Michael had dragged her into all this. And her parents. And Bryson. It had broken his heart to see her in so much pain, and he couldn’t stop wondering—did worse fates await them than virtual molten rock?

Bryson leaned forward to look at them. “Hey, no one sent me a message. That’s not cool.”

“Sorry,” Michael said. “I know how much you love your naps—I didn’t want to interrupt.”

As if to rub it in, Sarah clicked her EarCuff, illuminating her NetScreen. Michael’s message, *We will win*, hovered before them. A thrill of happiness warmed his chest to see that she’d saved it there. He smiled, more than a little embarrassed.

“Real sweet.” Bryson leaned back, eyeing Michael. “I’m pretty sure I haven’t slept in, oh, about three weeks—which I blame you for, by the way.”

“Blame accepted.” Michael knew his friend was joking—mostly—but he still felt bad. Bryson might have never said something so simple and yet so perfectly true. The nausea from the roller-coaster driving suddenly shot up a few notches. “Oh, man,” he groaned. “Sir? Uh . . . Gerard? Could we pull over a second? I’m not feeling so well.”

“Turn toward Bryson,” Sarah said, inching away from Michael. She rolled down the window. “Does that help?”

But her dad had already slowed—the sudden braking sending Michael’s whirling stomach up another notch—and was pulling into a little patch of dirt on the side of the narrow road.

“There you go, son,” the man announced. He seemed familiar enough with the maneuver that Michael was sure it wasn’t the first time he’d driven someone to the brink of losing their lunch. “But hurry—we’re already late.”

Sarah's mom smacked her husband on the arm lightly. "Have a heart, honey. For heaven's sake. No one likes to throw up."

Michael was already climbing over Sarah. He opened the door and jumped out of the car before she could complain. His horrible prison breakfast was coming up, and there was no stopping it. He found the closest bush and gave it a very unpleasant surprise.

2

"Ah, man, I think there's something on your shirt," Bryson said a few minutes later. They were back on the road and Gerard had resumed practicing his racing skills.

Michael smiled—he didn't care. He felt so much better that the world had brightened and cleared.

"I'm glad that makes you so happy," Bryson muttered, then patted his friend on the shoulder. "Actually, thanks for not spewing all over me."

"You're very welcome," Michael replied.

"You feel better?" Sarah asked.

"Tons." Michael folded his arms and shifted his legs to get more comfortable. "I guess I'm feeling better about everything. I mean, I'm not sure what happened back in Atlanta—but it's something that we're all still alive, right? And now we're on our way to people who want to help."

And I have a plan, he thought. It was the first time in ages he'd had one, and it felt good. He would go to the Hallowed Ravine, back to where this had all started. He just had to find the right time to tell his friends about it.

"Dude," Bryson said, "you're a glass-half-full kind of guy. I like it."

Sarah smiled and covertly grabbed Michael's hand between them, slipping her fingers through his. The world brightened even more. *And we need to make sure Gabby's*

okay, he thought. The last time he saw her she'd been unconscious—hit in the head—and it was Michael's fault for dragging her into the whole mess. He didn't want to pull her in any deeper, but he needed to make sure she was all right.

"We're almost there," Gerard called back to them, slowing. "Uh . . . I think."

Butterflies filled Michael's stomach. Still holding Sarah's hand, he leaned forward, peering through the front windshield as they continued tunneling through the leafy forest. He had absolutely no idea what to expect—where they were going or why—but his excitement built in leaps and bounds as he watched the road ahead. It made him think of the Path, and with a jolt of anxiety he wondered if he was truly in the real world, in the Wake, or somewhere in a box, connected to wires and uploaded to the VirtNet. He'd been fooled so many times and in so many ways, he'd never be certain again.

He thought back to the man, the one who had visited him at the prison right before Agent Weber. It had come back to him in his dream also. Something about waking up over and over again, within layers upon layers of VirtNet levels. What was it? Like a dream within a dream. That really creeped him out.

The road pitched steeply downward, and Michael shook the thought out of his head. He'd get dizzy again if he kept it up. He focused on the world around him—real or virtual—as it was.

Outside, the trees had thinned to reveal a wide valley nestled between two heavily forested mountains. Clouds covered the sun, casting the day back into gloom, as if to make up for the shade they'd lost.

"Is that where we're going?" Bryson asked. Releasing his seat belt, he scooted as close to Gerard as he could, gripping the headrest in front of him. "That place looks a thousand years old."

“That’s gotta be it,” Nancy answered. “It doesn’t look like there’s anything else around.”

Michael stared. Down below them, scattered among the trees of the valley floor, were several long, low buildings that reminded him of battered shipping crates. They looked like military barracks, something you might see in one of those ancient war movies set in a jungle somewhere exotic. The roofs had holes torn in them—some were patched; most were gaping wide, though, and open to the elements. Kudzu and ivy crept everywhere, blanketing sections of the buildings so that certain parts resembled neglected topiaries in the garden of some forgotten giant.

“Man,” Bryson moaned. “I was kind of hoping for something more along the lines of a Marriott. At least the prison had working toilets.”

“Snakes,” Sarah whispered, as if in a trance. “I bet that place is full of snakes.”

Michael refused to let his newfound enthusiasm be dimmed. His curiosity more than made up for the dilapidated appearance of . . . whatever the place was. “So, you haven’t been here before, right?” he asked Gerard, then tried a new tack. “Where’d you meet Helga and the others? How’d you know where to find us, how to get here?”

Nancy turned to face him. “Not a lot to tell, I’m afraid. My guess is you three probably know more than we do. These . . . Tangents—that’s what they called themselves—barged into that horrible warehouse our kidnappers took us to, released us, gave us this car, gave us instructions. Everything happened in a whirlwind. We didn’t have much choice but to trust them. I mean, look, it meant getting to you kids and getting out of there.”

Michael could’ve responded in a lot of ways to that one. Trusting others was something he’d never find easy again. At the moment, it was just about staying alive, and he had to admit that this did seem to be their best option.

And there was Helga. He had to meet this Helga.

The road leveled out, cutting off their view, and suddenly they were pulling into the overgrown complex of barracks. What Michael had been unable to see earlier were the dozen or so cars parked under the shade of several big trees. The cars were beat up. They looked so old that, if it weren't for the complete lack of kudzu on their surface, one would think they'd been there as long as the buildings themselves.

Gerard had barely pulled to a stop when a tall woman appeared at a door of one of the buildings. She wore dusty jeans, boots, and a black sweatshirt, and her sandy blond hair was pulled back into a ponytail. She walked confidently toward them, her face twisted into a scowl.

"That's her," Gerard whispered as he rolled down the window.

Michael didn't recognize her, and his heart fell even though he'd have no reason to know what Helga looked like in the Wake.

She leaned in the driver's-side window, resting on her forearms, and peered inside at each of the occupants. She nodded back toward the building from which she'd come.

"Let's get you inside," she said, her accent far from the German that Michael realized he'd been expecting, "before the world falls apart."

Then she turned and headed back toward the barracks.

3

"Today, dude, today." It was a bad time for Bryson to take a year and a half to get out of the car. Michael had never been so impatient in his life. He had to find out the truth about this Helga and the people she was with. They could help him get back to the Hallowed Ravine.

“I’m coming, man, chill!” Bryson responded. But he still hadn’t moved. He gave Michael a hard look. “Are we sure about this?”

“Yes,” Michael and Sarah answered at the same time. Sarah’s parents were already out of the car, closing their doors.

“Would you go so far as to say . . . you’re sure as heckfire?” Bryson pressed. “My grandma used to say that. If you say you’re sure as heckfire, then I’m in.”

Michael willed himself to calm down. “Yes. I’m sure as heckfire.”

“Okay, then.” Bryson climbed out of the backseat, Michael half pushing his friend to get him out faster. Sarah got out on the other side, and the group followed her father up a trampled path of weeds to the door, which stood ajar. Gerard didn’t hesitate. He walked right in. Michael and his friends followed.

The tall woman who’d greeted them was waiting for them, but that wasn’t what got Michael’s attention.

When his eyes adjusted to the light, he was shocked by what he saw. It was as if he’d stepped into a completely different world. The beat-up, weathered building housed a technological wonderland. Low-glare LED lights lined the ceiling, illuminating the green haze of dozens of NetScreens. A row of blue Coffins lined one wall; a row of desks lined another, men and women working furiously at them. Fresh lumber had been used to reinforce the walls and ceiling, and Michael noticed that they’d used some sort of plastic to patch the various holes in the roof.

Their host’s voice cut through Michael’s daze, breaking the silence. “We had to find a location that was remote—”

“Mission accomplished,” Bryson muttered.

“—and yet had a power source and access to the satellite VirtNet feeds. This is an old training facility for army tech warriors, abandoned a decade ago due to budget cuts. Turns out it worked perfectly for our needs. Took a couple

of weeks to set up, but here we are. Already down to business.”

Michael had a million questions, but one stood out above all others.

He faced the tall woman and took a step closer to her, looking into her eyes carefully. “Gerard said you told him your name was Helga. And that you’re a Tangent. Does . . .” He had no idea how to phrase what he wanted to ask.

Michael was surprised to see tears glistening in her eyes, blurring the reflections of the lights in the room. “Yes,” she said. Then she wrapped her arms around him, pulling him into a crushing hug. “So you must be Michael, then. My boy.”

Michael’s eyes widened and it took him a moment to return the embrace. “You’re . . . Helga? Really? But how?” She’d quickly come to accept him in his new body, but he didn’t know if he could do the same.

She pulled back from him, her eyes fierce despite being wet. “There’s a lot to tell. A lot to catch up on. In brief, we’ve been on Kaine’s trail since even before you crossed paths with him. We stole the Mortality Doctrine program from him. Copied a version of it, anyway. We had to do it, Michael. We had to come here into the real world if we ever wanted to save the virtual one.”

The carsick feeling washed over Michael again. “Wait . . . you . . . stole people’s bodies?” He took a step backward. “You . . . How do I even know you’re really Helga? How can I trust any of you? At all?”

The woman who claimed to be his old nanny smiled kindly. “Good questions, all,” she said. “And I’ll answer each and every one. I think it will be easy enough to prove who I am. I’ll answer something only you know. . . .”

She paused, carefully looking over Michael’s group. It was obvious they were as concerned as he was. They’d committed themselves to stopping this sort of thing. And yet their rescuers were no better than Kaine, apparently.

“We haven’t . . . killed anyone,” the tall woman finally clarified. Her stance had grown formal again, her expression no longer tender. But Michael could see a deep sadness in those eyes. “Not the true death, anyway.”

“The true death?” Sarah repeated, shooting a wary look at Michael. He suddenly felt like the ground below him was shifting.

“Please,” the woman said, clearly frustrated by her audience’s turn. “Let’s just sit down and talk through it all, okay? Please.” She motioned toward a circle of chairs set up near the glowing Coffins.

Michael looked at Bryson and Sarah and shrugged, then started for the chairs, the words *true death* ringing in his ears.

4

“Let’s start at the beginning,” the tall woman said once they’d all taken a seat. “You need to know that I am who I say I am before you can trust me.” Helga gave the group a moment to get settled, then turned to Michael directly, looking into his eyes as she spoke. “I was your nanny, Helga. I *am* Helga. A part of me suspected that we might be Tangents, but you were real to me, Michael. Apart from everything Kaine has done, I think there were many of us who’d taken the leap to sentience—which slows down the Decay process significantly. I know you and I had taken that leap.” She’d begun to stare off into space, as if lost in a desert of old thoughts, then came back just as fast, waving it all away. “My point: you have been and always will be like a son to me. But let me prove it to you.”

Michael furrowed his brow, looking long and hard at her, as he thought through his options. The woman sat forward, leaning toward him, arms resting on her knees, hands clasped. She seemed genuine, her gaze intense and full of

pain. The rest of the room was quiet as he focused all his attention on this woman. Helga. His future hung in the balance.

“Okay,” he said, trying to think clearly. “What was my favorite breakfast?”

“Wait a minute,” Bryson said just as their host opened her mouth to speak. “This isn’t going to prove a thing.” He turned to face Michael. “If your nanny was a Tagent, then Kaine could easily know every single detail about your life. An instant download, boom. Or worse, he could’ve programmed her! This is pointless.”

“You’re not helping,” Michael replied. His friend was right, and it was as frustrating as ever.

“No, he’s right,” the woman replied, standing up. “Not about Kaine—but about it being impossible for me to convince you beyond a doubt that I’m Helga. I could talk all day about how you love to eat waffles for breakfast and how when you were barely five years old you begged me to let you read that Stephen King novel and I made you stick to Judy Blume. Or about your broken leg when you were seven, or how many times I caught you trying to sneak into your dad’s Coffin before you were legal. How many nights I brought you cheese and crackers while you studied the coding logs on your NetScreen in bed, or how we worked frantically to clean up after the infamous Sleepover Party Incident before your parents got home from that business trip.”

She paused, a warm smile spread across her face, and Michael could do nothing but stare at her, slack-jawed.

“I could go on and on and on,” she continued. “But you’d never fully be convinced. Neither would your friends. I’m a piece of code, Michael. Nothing more. No one understands the pain of that more than I do, trust me. I’m not sure I know how to completely gain your trust.”

“Sheesh, I didn’t mean to insult everybody,” Bryson said sheepishly, looking down at the floor.

Michael realized that he himself was trembling, emotion welling up in his chest. Bryson had made an excellent point, and they couldn't afford to ignore its implications. But at some point, Michael had to let himself trust again. Something. *Someone*. And if he had a truth radar, it was pinging like never before.

"It's you," he whispered.

No one responded. Maybe they hadn't heard him.

"It's you," he said louder.

And then he ran to her and hugged her before anyone could see the tears spill from his eyes.

CHAPTER 2

A CIRCLE OF HANDS

1

“It *is* me,” Helga whispered in his ear, patting him on the back. “I promise you. We’re going to get through the madness together.”

It had been a long time since Michael had felt anything like this—and it all crashed down on him at once. Happiness, sadness, nostalgia. He cried into his nanny’s shoulder as he remembered the parents he’d lost, the home he’d lost, the life he’d lost. He had his two best friends, but Helga was the only link to the world he’d known without them. And he’d been sure she was gone forever.

There were questions, yes. Concerns. But in that moment all he could feel was the sweet, burning warmth in his chest.

Finally, Helga gently took him by his shoulders and held him away from her. He was relieved to see that she had shed a tear or two as well.

“I might’ve convinced you,” she said through a weak smile, “but not them.” She nodded toward the others.

Totally embarrassed, Michael composed himself, wiped the tears from his cheeks. Then he turned to face his friends.

“It’s her,” he said with all the force he could muster after making such a scene. “I don’t know how to explain it, but I know it’s her.”

Surprisingly, it was Sarah who showed the most doubt. “Well, you’re going to have to figure out a way to explain it, Michael. We can’t just hand our lives over to this lady. What she did . . . stealing a body . . . it’s no better than what Kaine’s doing.”

The last word had barely come out of her mouth before the rest of the group erupted into chatter, talking on top of talking, until Michael shouted for them to shut up.

“Listen to me!” he said, looking straight at his friends and Sarah’s parents. “You don’t have a clue what it’s like to be a Tangent. We might be a bunch of code to you guys, but I can’t accept that. There’s more to us. I know it. I’m a person, I have a mind, I can think for myself, and I don’t care what anyone else says. I mean, I could just as easily be programmed as Helga. At some point you have to go with your heart! My parents were real, as far as I’m concerned, until Kaine wiped them out. And Helga . . . she’s like a grandma to me. This is Helga. I know it.”

“Grandma?” Helga asked. “Really?”

“Sorry. Best aunt ever.”

Sarah walked up to stand right in front of Michael, and she stared at him for several seconds. “You’re sure?”

He nodded firmly. “I’m positive.” He looked over at Bryson. “Sure as heckfire.”

Bryson shrugged. “I guess we just have to trust you,” he said reluctantly.

“You don’t need to worry about us being like Kaine,” Helga interjected. “There’s a difference. A huge difference.”

It was Gerard’s turn to speak. “Yeah?” he pressed. “So enlighten us. What’s this huge difference?”

Michael trusted Helga, but he was definitely interested.

“The difference,” Helga said, “is that we’re here to stop what Kaine’s doing. The difference is that we triggered the Mortality Doctrine only because it was a last resort. And the biggest difference . . .” She paused for a moment. “The

biggest difference is that we plan to give these bodies back. Hopefully very soon. I highly doubt Kaine plans to do the same.”

“Give them back?” Bryson asked. “How?”

Helga sat down in her chair. “It’s time I tell you about the Hive.”

2

The Hive. The words jarred Michael, and his group quieted. He looked at Sarah and Bryson and nodded to the chairs. “Can we listen to what she has to say, guys?” he asked. The group didn’t answer, but everyone sat down, ready to hear her out.

“The Hive,” she repeated, once everyone was settled. “Kaine created it—for what ultimate purpose we’re not completely sure—and he protects it and maintains it, and we’ve figured out how to get there. To break in, I should say. The Hive is the key to everything, the key to restoring things to the way they were, before”—Helga gestured to herself sadly—“all this.”

“But what *is* the Hive?” Sarah insisted. “We’ve never heard of it.”

“Ah, yes,” Helga said quietly, “of course. The Hive is where intelligence is stored. Intelligences, actually. Plural.”

“You mean, like the brain of the VirtNet?” Bryson asked.

Helga shook her head. “No, nothing like that. It’s a quantum storage facility. It has the capacity to store massive amounts of data, including backups of Tangent programs. We’ve discovered that it’s also where a consciousness is sent when a Tangent takes over a body. Where the *mind* is stored.” Helga turned to Michael. “What’s the name of the person you replaced? Jackson Park?”

“Porter,” Michael corrected her.

“Yes, Porter. Well, Kaine didn’t destroy him when he enacted the Mortality Doctrine on you. It doesn’t work that way. Again, for reasons we don’t know, the intelligence, the . . . memories, the personality, the knowledge of Jackson Porter, must be preserved. We have theories—for instance, it might be a necessary part of the process. For the human body left behind to survive, the consciousness might need to be kept alive as well. If such a connection was completely severed, who knows if the physical body could handle it. What I’m saying is that your body still has a link to Jackson Porter . . . to what makes him, him. We think it’s similar to the technology used for the Core you need to Sink in a NerveBox.”

Michael’s heartbeat picked up uncomfortably. “Wh-what are you saying?” He could barely get the question out.

“I’m saying that the intelligence of the person you replaced still exists, intact and whole. His consciousness is stored in a place called the Hive.”

“That’s . . .” Michael swallowed. “That’s . . . confusing?”

Helga stood up. “I think the best way to do this is to show you.”

Michael looked at Bryson and Sarah and her parents. Everyone appeared as stunned as he felt.

“Yes,” Helga said. “I think that’s what we’ll do. Let’s Sink.”

3

There were fifteen Coffins total lined up against the long wall of the old barracks building, glowing blue, like phosphorescent sea creatures. A few showed they were occupied, but most were empty, awaiting their next guest.

“I’m sure I haven’t fully gained your trust yet,” Helga said, standing next to the line of machines. “I’ll leave it up to you to decide whether you’d like to Sink with me.

Everyone can come, if they'd like, or just you, Michael. Whatever you feel most comfortable doing. I guarantee your safety." Helga gestured to the strangers busily working around the room. "Everyone you see here has sworn to protect you. To protect all of you. We're all on the same team."

"You three go," Sarah's dad said. "Nancy and I will stay behind and . . . keep an eye on things." The message was clear. Gerard didn't trust these people. Not yet. He'd stay and guard his daughter's physical body—probably well aware he'd be no match for the forces that could attack her mind in the Sleep.

Michael looked at his friends, and he could see reflected in their eyes what he himself was feeling: curiosity. Though Michael wasn't so sure how he'd feel about what they learned at this place. This . . . Hive.

Michael hadn't yet opened his mouth to accept Helga's offer and Bryson was already taking off his shirt.

"Sounds good to me," he said, unzipping his pants. "Let's go."

"Can we please stick to a full-underwear policy?" Sarah pleaded, shielding her eyes. "Some things in life you can never unsee."

"You say that now," Bryson teased, batting his lashes.

Helga cleared her throat, reminding them she was there. She began to remove her shirt, though Michael noticed right away that she wore one of those fancy Sink suits underneath. Full-body spandex to cover yourself in mixed company.

"Enough chitchat," Helga announced. "Let's get in. Walter," she called to a man at a nearby NetScreen, "can you help us?"

The man gave Helga a slight nod and clicked his EarCuff, turning off his screen. He was medium height, had dark hair, and wore a look of such intensity that Michael wondered if his face hurt.

“This is Walter Carlson,” Helga announced as he approached, “temporary replacement for one Keith Sproles, whose intelligence lies in wait within the Hive, from which one day he will be returned.” Her tone had a note of respect to it, as if she wanted them to know she didn’t take lightly these borrowed bodies and stored intelligences.

“Hey, Walter,” Bryson said.

Michael reached out and shook the man’s hand; Sarah did likewise.

“We try our best to remember who we are and what we’ve done to those we replaced,” Helga explained. “As for myself, I’m the temporary replacement of Brandi Hambrick, whose intelligence lies in wait within the Hive, from which one day she will be returned.”

Michael nodded, hoping the sudden and unexpected fear he felt wasn’t showing on his face. What did this all mean for him? Was Jackson Porter really out there somewhere, waiting to come back to his body? If he *was* stored, was he aware? Conscious? *Thinking*? Or was it more like cold storage? Meat in a freezer. He’d thought about Jackson a lot, but now the thought felt like a cold blade in his side. He was scared, plain and simple.

“Nice to meet you, ladies and gents,” Walter said, snapping Michael back to the present. “We’ve heard a lot about you. Helga has a hard time shutting up about you, actually. She’s right as rain, though, when she says we’re on the same team. I can promise you that. No one despises Kaine quite as spectacularly as I do, that’s for sure.”

Sarah flashed the man a smile. “That’s good to know,” she said, then looked back at Helga. “I think we’re ready now.”

Michael breathed a sigh of relief that Sarah seemed to have decided to trust Helga. It made him feel better about his own decision.

Walter started getting busy on the Coffins. He worked down the line, moving from one to the next, tapping

screens and pressing buttons. One by one the hinged doors swung open, and Michael felt that familiar rush of adrenaline. That excitement that came right before Sinking into the Sleep. It never got old. Even after everything he'd gone through.

Stripped to his boxers, he was the first to step inside a machine. Just as he sat down in his Box, Helga shot him a huge smile.

"Walter is going to work his magic with the settings," Helga said as she lowered herself into the Coffin right next to Michael. "He'll take us where we need to start, and then we'll have to do some serious code maneuvering once we're in."

Michael gave Helga a big smile back. He really liked the sound of that.

4

The Coffin door swung shut, clicked, and hissed as it sealed tight. Then came the NerveWires, snaking across Michael's body and nestling into the familiar places, pricking him as they broke his skin. The LiquiGels calibrated hot, then cold; then came the cool whoosh of the AirPuffs, and he let out a relaxing breath into the hum of machinery working around him. It seemed like an eternity since he'd done this.

He closed his eyes as the system initiated fully and plunged him into the VirtNet.

5

Michael stood next to Bryson, Sarah, and Helga on a huge expanse of hard white sand, stretching in all directions as far as the eye could see. The outline of a mountain range in the distance laid a hazy smudge against the horizon.

Shimmering heat danced along the sand as the sun beat down from a brilliant blue sky. And it was hot—a dry heat that made Michael’s throat feel layered in dust.

“Salt flats,” Helga announced. “Patterned after the famous site on the western side of Utah. A lot of land speed records were broken there. You can imagine the ridiculous stunts that take place here in the virtual version. It’s very popular with the VirtCar enthusiasts. Speeds over a thousand miles per hour, usually ending up in death and a heap of broken metal and glass. The things people do for kicks.”

“That’s cool and all,” Bryson said, “but what does this have to do with the Hive?”

“We’re admiring the landscape,” Helga answered. “Try to stop and smell the roses every now and then.”

Michael turned, taking in the hot, dusty scene. He reveled in this new perspective on the world and its virtual counterpart. He was still trying to understand the human body and its senses and what it meant to have a real body compared to a programmed one. On the surface, everything at the salt flats seemed real enough, but he could almost taste the fabrication, like that waxy texture of cheap cake.

“We’re not in the Deep, are we?” he asked, interrupting Bryson muttering about roses and salt.

“No, we’re not,” Helga answered. “The Hive is actually nowhere near the Deep or any of the programs that have achieved that status. Very purposefully. It’s separate in every way from most of the VirtNet—as quantum level as you get within the programming. We’re not in the Hive yet, though. To get where we want to go, it’s going to take some work, and it might not be what you’d call . . . pleasant.”

“Why do we keep hearing that?” Sarah asked. “People are always telling us, ‘What you’re about to do is not going to be very pleasant.’”

Michael couldn’t agree more. The Squeezing they’d gone through to get into *Lifblood Deep*—or what they’d been