

authorities want to say a quick hello.”

Groans and curses filled the bus. “Fascism never sleeps!” someone called out.

A moment later, two uniformed police stepped onto the vehicle. Blue’s eyes narrowed. “They’re Homeland Security, not LAPD,” he whispered.

“Just making sure everyone’s on the level, folks,” said one of the officers. He slowly began making his way down the center of the bus, holding up what looked to be a digital camera and snapping a photo of each passenger in turn, then studying the camera’s display screen.

“It’s a facial recognition scan,” Blue said in a low voice. “They’re collecting biometric data. I know it.”

Blake felt a bolt of fear flash through the pit of his stomach. *We’re fucked*, he thought helplessly.

When the officer was a few rows away, Blue quietly stretched his arm across Blake and tested the latch just underneath the window. For the first time, Blake noticed they were sitting in one of the bus’s emergency exit rows.

“If I open this door, I want you to jump out immediately and run straight across the street as fast as you can,” Blue whispered. “I’ll be right behind you.”

Blake nodded, trying to maintain a bland look as the officer began photographing the passengers in the row just before Serena’s. He was mentally rehearsing their next steps—yank up the door, leap to the street, then run to...where, exactly?—when the cop’s partner suddenly put a finger to his earpiece.

“We just got a positive at the Whisky,” he called. “Probable MI. They’re requesting all available personnel.”

“Okay everyone, we’re done here,” The first officer said. As he turned and headed for the front of the bus, a woman’s voice piped up from one of the back rows.

*“Set the music free...”*

A few seats away, a man took up the verse:

*“Liberate all melody...”*

Seconds later the entire bus joined in, singing in unison:

*“Let the music be, All together, one, two, three!”*

Following the last note, the bus fell silent.

The two officers stood glaring. The one with the earpiece held up his nightstick in both hands like a baseball bat. “You’ve got ten seconds to get your filthy heads in your laps,” he growled.

The passengers in the first few rows swiftly lowered their faces to their knees and covered their heads as the officer strode forward, swinging the nightstick in a vicious arc. With a swift sequence of blows he shattered the first six windows on the left side of the bus, sending pellet-sized glass fragments showering over the passengers.

“Who’s singing now?” he shouted, red-faced.

Wheeling around, he walked back up the aisle, smashing six more windows on the opposite side. Back at the front of the bus, he spun to face the passengers one last time.

“Some fresh air for the ride. Enjoy your trip to stinking San Francisco!”



Blake felt light-headed with relief as the bus rolled out of L.A. and began the climb toward Tejon Pass. At the same time, he noticed that Blue and Serena seemed distant and preoccupied. Blake had seen a look pass between them when the officer made the comment about the Whisky. Now, they were grimly quiet.

He nodded off for a while then woke again, wishing wistfully for a blanket. The shattered bus windows had been patched with sheets of cardboard but the chill night air still whistled through the cracks, overwhelming the old bus’s heating system. He lay his head against his own unbroken window, watching the farmland of the San Joaquin Valley pass in the darkness. The more he thought things over, the more he regretted everything that had happened, starting with the secrecy of his

quantum project. If he'd only been more transparent about it—recruited others into the effort, made it a group endeavor—then he wouldn't have been singled out like this.

He'd also concluded that escaping into the desert was a mistake. He had to turn himself in and face the consequences of his actions; it was the only way out. Bucking the U.S. government was simply too hard. He was exhausted, physically and mentally. Blue and Serena might be cut out for this sort of thing—life in the UZ was probably a lark compared to swimming across oceans or parachuting into terrorist strongholds—but Blake was no warrior, despite what Branford had said. Plus, he was losing confidence in the ability of the Municipal Alliance to protect him. Sooner or later, the authorities were bound to catch up with them.

His mind was made up: Once they reached San Francisco, he would make his way to Berkeley, find Mel, and arrange to contact the authorities with his help. *I'm done with running*, he thought. He wondered briefly how Caroline had reacted when he failed to show up at the hotel, but the idea was too complicated to hold onto, and he found himself drifting back to sleep.

The sky was lightening in the east when Blake was wakened by a nudge from Blue's elbow. The bus had pulled into one of I-5's state-run rest stops, and most of the passengers were getting off to use the restrooms and grab a snack. Blue motioned for Blake to follow him. In front of them, Serena tottered down the steps of the bus on her high heels and entered the building.

Inside was a cafeteria and adjoining lounge where an all-news channel blared at top volume from a wall-mounted TV. Trailing Blue into the cafeteria, Blake selected a bag of potato chips and a bottle of juice. Ahead of him, between coughing spells, Blue ordered a coffee from a tired-looking woman behind the counter. *He's staying in character, that's for sure*, thought Blake with a touch of amusement.

An instant later, his attention was caught by Serena. She was standing at the edge of the lounge, signalling to them with an almost imperceptible wave of her head. Grabbing his chips and beverage, he