



SHOCK WORLD SAMPLER

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Shock World

In a near future, Virtual Reality programs are more than just a game.

Sampler pages

Prologue

“This is your reality. You can never escape.”

The words echoed in his head, the sound of a deep hollow voice with no measure of feeling.

The silhouette before him was recognizable; a tall, dark figure of a man in a suit, standing upright, imposing.

He knew who this figure was at once, but could not believe it.

It can't be, he thought. I shot you! I saw you die!

He could not pronounce the words, gripped in fear, sitting in a corner of a dark looking room.

His surroundings were not clear to him, and it seemed as if everything was hidden in a cloak of darkness. He could barely perceive that he was in a small, vacant room without a window.

Panic took over as he realized that he was in an isolation room, presumably locked away in an asylum.

The dark silhouette vanished before his eyes, but a deep, mocking laughter filled the room.

You can never escape, never escape...

His mind began to drift away, and so his sanity.

Part One

Chapter One

He is standing on top of a tall building, looking down but not able to see the ground.

Above him, the sky has turned orange, the sun setting behind an array of mountains far to the west, announcing the arrival of dusk.

Below, a dark mist lingered below; a formation of smoke and fog due to contamination.

But his background was ignored, eyes focused on the door that opened to the roof.

There was loud gunfire by automatic weapons.

He is dressed in black, as if there was a special purpose for this, but it isn't clear to him.

A small battle is taking place inside the unknown building, but ends abruptly.

There was silence for only a few seconds, and then the door opened.

Human figures began to approach, weapons aimed to one target, leading him to the edge.

He knows one thing for sure: They are after him and want to take him alive. He has something very important and they want it.

He has nowhere to run.

The alarm goes off and Nick stretches over to hit the buzzer.

Saved by the bell.

He tossed the sheets and sits up to rub his eyes gently, hoping to wipe away another nightmare as well.

The alarm clock reads 6:00 a.m. Not the usual time to get up, but today was different.

As he walks over to his closet he scratches his head, wondering if he should tell Jordan about this dream as well.

Of all of the times the dreams felt as if they meant something important, this one was the most vivid.

He could still feel a wave of emotions running deep inside.

The room itself was quite little, with the basic furniture of a small bed, night table, a small wooden drawer for clothes, and the standard closet, but the room itself was overcompensated with posters of sports cars and modern jets spread out from wall to wall. His mirror was uncovered, and he glanced at it for second, revealing the face of a young man barely in his twenties, with clear blue eyes and light brown hair.

Moments later Nick stepped out of his room wearing a blue t-shirt, jeans and white tennis shoes. He reaches the kitchen to find Jordan pouring himself a glass of milk, his bowl of cereal set on a round wooden table with three chairs.

Nick smiles as Jordan starts to devour his cereal and pops open his laptop as if he were late for work, even though the t-shirt and sweat pants he wore would say otherwise.

“This is it, dude, our first training day!”

Nick pulls out two loaves of bread and peanut butter from the cabinet while Jordan types quickly on the keyboard, anxious to check his email.

“I got it!”

Nick’s eyes widen. The captain wasn’t kidding.

“He says 6:15 and that means 6:15,” Jordan says as he reads the new message received.

“Cap says hi. Welcome to day one, blah, blah, and here’s your keycode! You have five minutes before it becomes useless. Good luck!”

Jordan dashes out of the kitchen leaving Nick as he sits down to his usual breakfast.

Moments later Jordan runs back in.

“Okay! It worked. We’re in the program. Congratulations, we are officially Junior spies!”

Nick stands up to shake his friend’s hand, but Jordan is past formalities, giving him a hug that lifts him off his feet.

“Bro! We are spies, this is a big thing, man! This calls for a celebration.”

Nick just smiles sheepishly at Jordan and realizes how his personality fits his physical attributes: blond hair, brown eyes and well built, he could not be any closer in description to the “party animal.”

Jordan steps back as Nick looks at him with a confused expression.

“I know, I know, you’d probably settle for a cappuccino, but this merits at least a shot.”

Nick offers a smile: “Alright, one shot, maybe two, but that’s my limit.”

Satisfied with the answer, Jordan raced off again, Nick walking after him leaving half a sandwich on the table.

The room is barely big enough to be called an office, but that’s what Nick and Jordan call it.

Two the left a set of weights are on the floor next to an exercise bike. Another object farther to the right is slightly covered with a dark plastic sheet. The door opens and Jordan crosses to the other end in a single bound, pulling of the plastic sheet to reveal a

chair with arms with a number of gadgets on each. A headpiece with a visor is hanging by the side, as well as a pair of gloves.

Nick smiles as Jordan proceeds to “gear up.”

“I’m first. See you in about 20 minutes.”

With his friend occupied with the program, Nick goes back to the kitchen to finish breakfast, wondering why he had gotten up so early if he was not going to be able to use the VR program until Jordan was done.

Oh well, he thought.

He was in no hurry. The Cap knew that Nick and Jordan would use the same VR equipment and would not limit their training program, but after the orientation they would have different time periods for the training, therefore it was safe to guess that the programs would be different for each so as not to cheat and give the other clues on how to pass the program.

He looked out the window to see a modern city with tall buildings everywhere.

Modern city, he thought musingly.

After so many natural disasters the world as he knew it was left to waste. He had seen movies about post apocalyptic landscapes from years past, and was frightened to see how dead-on the creators of these scenarios were before this event became a reality.

It was a reality for him, although he recognized he was one of the fortunate ones.

Years after the world crumbling down, technology reaching its end, a group of special people conformed of scientists, engineers, architects, etc, etc, got together to start rebuilding civilization.

Now there are certain places where the infrastructure is brand new. Where most of the landscape is covered with torn down buildings and cracked streets, some places look like the age of technology had continued its course unaffected.

Most of this new advancement was due to the right men with a vision to rebuild civilization.

One such man was Simon Richter. With very little of his past has become public knowledge, his recent years, however, have made him the man of the year, possibly the man of the century, being one of the world’s largest contributor in rebuilding Los Angeles and spending money as if it grew on trees.

A Multimillionaire, a visionary, a saint; these were few words to describe this man who aspires to become this next Governor of California.

“Ok Nick, your turn. Let me know what you think.”

Nick jumped up from the sofa in the living room, caught by surprise as Jordan appeared.

“Man, to wake up early just to start a 20 minute training program,” Jordan began to say, his voice sounding a bit disappointed.

Expecting something more on his first day of training, Nick thought.

He smiled and went to the office, ready to start his training as well.

It had been a month since both had passed the selection process, but they were told to be patient, to wait for 30 days.

The day arrived, following strict orders to get up early and enter a specific keycode to activate the program.

Such procedures could only mean that this was serious stuff.

And Nick knew this was serious, very serious.

The present scenario was not an average apartment anymore.
Nick opened his eyes to find himself in a dark room of 100 square feet. It was completely empty, except for the chair Nick found himself sitting in.

The wall before him suddenly lit up and went bright.
Images began to appear, and Nick realized that he was seeing a flash presentation as if in a movie theater.

“Welcome Junior Spy.”

The voice was the Captain’s, the man who had recruited them.

“For the next 20 minutes you will be informed on the history of our friends and foes, what you are called to do, and the steps to follow.”

Nick couldn’t help chuckling at the thought of seeing Jordan sitting down through a lesson based on history and facts, which, on the other hand, was something he was going to enjoy greatly.

“So, what do ya think?”

Nick looks up from his glass of whiskey, which hasn’t been touched yet.
His friend has wide eyes and a crooked smile, looking anxious to have a detailed answer.

“It’s cool.”

Jordan frowned. He had three small glasses set in front of him, and two are empty.

“Cool? We have secret information that many don’t share and you say ‘cool’?”

Nick looked around a bit shyly.

The bar had roughly 14 people, besides the bartender.

“They won’t hear us, bro.”

“Ok Jordi, this is what I think.”

Nick took a quick gulp of his shot and squints as the burning sensation runs down his throat.

He begins to speak, chokes a bit, coughs, and clears his throat.

Jordan bursted out laughing.

“Take it easy, man. One is good enough for you.”

Nick leaned forward as if to whisper his answer.

“I think that the Captain being ex-marine is awesome. David doesn’t sound at all like a big shot, but being the creators of these programs mean that they know a whole bunch more than what they tell us. And Simon...”

Nick lowered his voice almost to a whisper, and Jordan leans in to hear him.

“Simon, being candidate for governor will definitely make it very hard to prove he has something up his sleeve. Everyone thinks he’s a hero.”

Jordan managed one more shot and stops.

“Dude, I’m wasted. One more and you will have to carry me out.”

Nick bursted out laughing and stops himself short. He pulls out a plastic card and inserts it into a square box with a credit card opening to the side.

Once the transaction was done a ticket comes out and Nick took both credit card and receipt.

“We’re done, and I’m not gonna carry you.”

Jordan nodded in agreement.

“I had another dream.”

There was a moment of awkward silence, but Jordan stared at Nick with interest.

“C’mon. It must’ve been good if you mentioned it to me!”

Nick took a quick breath and goes on.

“I was on some kind of mission, wearing a black gear, like those S.W.A.T. guys. Don’t know where I am except on a rooftop of some big building, and there’s gunfire everywhere. The thing is I’m trapped and about to be tossed over the roof, and the bad guys are closing in on me.”

Jordan smiled.

“You know you should write a book about all these wacky dreams, they sound action-packed.”

Nick frowned.

He stands up as if to leave but Jordan asks him to wait.

“Let me clear my head a bit, I have something else I need to tell you before you take off to work.”

Nick sat down, looking at his wristwatch.

“Come on, you won’t be late, besides you won’t have customers ‘till 9 o’clock.”

Nick looked serious and started fidgeting his keys.

“I’ll be quick. Here’s the deal. Becky’s back in the city.”

The keys fell on the table with a soft clink and Jordan doesn’t pause.

“She’s gonna call you. I think you guys can hit it off this time.”

“Who gave her my number?”

“I did.”

Jordan stands up this time and starts heading out.

“C’mon, Nick, she’s your main squeeze. I’d give it a try if I were you.”

“Jordi, I wouldn’t know how to start something after what happened.”

Both are already heading out of the bar and Jordan heads to group of motorcycles parked to the side.

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you. When she calls, get together and see if there’s anything going on still. Good luck!”

Nick stood there as Jordan starts the ignition and revs the gas of the black Kawasaki ninja.

“Later!”

The cycle roars off and Nick shakes his head in disapproval.

He reached his helmet and slips on the gloves, ready to ride off on his red and blue Honda NSR.

Today was a special day after all, he begins to muse, secretly starting a covert mission and discovering that his secret love is back in town.

Just before riding away at a slow speed he looks at the time.

8:45 and late for work, blast it!

-Alfa Unit is in place.-

Nick stood at the entrance of a half torn down building, one of very constructions somewhere in a remote area. He was dressed in the classic Desert Storm uniform, armed with an M-16 and grenade launcher.

Ken and Anne Marie stood next to him.

They were waiting for orders to move in.

-Bravo Unit is set.-

Eventually Charlie, Delta, Echo and Foxtrot Units reported their positions, and Nick gave the order to move in.

Different teams entered separate buildings.

Their target was in an unknown location, and each team would have to make do with the little information acquired, the enemy resembled a force of Iraqi soldiers, armed with AK-47s and other similar fire power as the Units present.

-Bravo Unit taking fire.-

Bullets sprayed the smaller building as the Unit took cover from the enemy.

Other reports confirmed hostile presence.

In a moment all Units were engaged in hostile activity.

-Ken, you and I will hold position and give Anne Marie cover.-

The young Japanese understood.

Both men took separate positions and drew the enemy away from Anne Marie, who silently moved back and found another way to reach the expected room.

-Target spotted in Building C. Request back-up.-

Anne Marie's message was answered as key members of different Units arrived at Building C and engaged in combat.

Nick and Ken fell back and went to assist their teammate.

-Taking serious gunfire. Sustaining injuries, 5 casualties.-

Reports were given to monitor progress, and soon one Unit reported loss of all team members.

Nick and Ken moved quickly and stood across a hallway before reaching the key room.

Anne Marie held her ground.

-I'm movin' in to draw fire.-

Ken was the most skilled of the three. He stayed against the wall and fell to the ground just as he reached the entrance.

Maintaining a steady gunfire, the others followed.

In a moment the three were inside the room, taking out the present enemy, and locating the target.

A giant rectangular box was placed in the middle.

It had the appearance of storing a missile launcher.

-Alfa Unit, Target acquired. Need backup.-

Nick and Ken each took an end of the box and started to move out.

Grenade blasts slowed Alfa Unit as they reached the exit.

There was an armored vehicle blocking their path.

-Delta Unit, Clear the way.-

Grenades launched from different angles took out the enemy vehicle, giving the Alfa Unit a chance to move out.

-Charlie Unit, all members down.-

The chance to complete the mission grew dimmer by the minute, but the team would not back down.

Suddenly Ken fell to the ground. A Sniper had taken him out from an unknown position.
Nick dropped to the ground and tried to use the missile launcher casing as a shield.
-Sniper present, unknown position.-
The answer came immediately.
-Sniper sited, taking him out.-
Grenade launchers took out the imminent threat, and Nick continued with Anne Marie to reach the safe point.
A hummer was waiting for the Alfa Unit, and two soldiers stepped out to assist them.
As they reached the vehicle the screen turned blue, and a white flash announced that the mission had been successful.
Reports came in to give an instant follow up.
-Alfa Unit, 1 casualty. Bravo Unit, 6 casualties. Charlie Unit, 6 casualties. Delta Unit, 4 casualties, Echo Unit, 3 casualties, Foxtrot Unit, OK. Target is secured.-
Nick got out of the chair, wondering if the success of the mission outweighed the number of losses.
In the end, the mission had been completed, but the number of downs meant that most of the soldiers had died in battle.
It was not a pleasant thought to realize that in real life the results would have been devastating.
They would have to do better, and Nick hoped that next time they would be able to prove themselves and have a better report for such a mission.
He couldn't help smiling at the thought that Ken was going to be angry at getting shot and would probably have to say something to say about it at tonight's meeting.

It was already dark when Mr. Appleton arrived at the Holiday Inn.
He had made a reservation for one night in suite 404.
Everything was as scheduled, and the middle aged man took his e-card, carry-on, and personal computer up to his room.
With time to spare he ordered room service to bring up his dinner, by now he was out of his work clothes wearing a t-shirt and sweat pants.
Moments later he was sitting in the living room, watching TV and devouring a chicken parmesan with mashed potatoes and corn on the cob.
He opened his laptop and started checking information, fixing his glasses to accommodate his face as he proceeded to work.
A knock on his door caught him by surprise, and he closed the computer before standing up to approach the door.
Two young ladies stood outside, one carried a bottle of red wine, the other three wine glasses.
He opened the door, not hiding his surprised expression.
-Complimentary wine, and some fun for a special guest.-
The brunette with tanned skin spoke as the blonde one just giggled.
Both were wearing silk robes and opened them to reveal their nightgowns.
-Call me Sugar,- said the blonde girl, wearing a white baby doll.
-And i'm Spice,- the brunette said as she revealed a red corset.
Mr. Appleton smiled.

-Well, I didn't expect the hotel to give such personal service...-

Both girls walked in uninvited. They made their way to the living room to open the wine bottle and pour all three glasses.

This time Sugar spoke up.

-Don't be shy, Mr. Appleton, it's just some fun, and nothing else.-

Both girls sat down on the couch and invited Mr. Appleton to sit in the middle.

As he did they handed him his wine glass, which he drank in one swift motion.

Sugar and Spice, as they called themselves, teased him until he began to grow dizzy and look like he was going to pass out.

That was odd, he thought to himself. All he had was one glass, but he was feeling light-headed and rather pleasant.

Suddenly having two young models for company was a great idea, no need to worry about business.

-I bet you have lots of money, don't you?- said Sugar as she eased herself to sit on Mr. Appleton's lap.

-Sure, lots of it, in a secret account.-

He felt suddenly relieved that he could tell someone of no interest about one of his secrets.

-And... could I see how much you have hidden there?-

The model with blonde hair was kissing him gently as the other proceeded to open the computer.

Mr. Appleton proceeded to give his password to start the program, the bank account, the password for the bank account, and a special phrase to confirm the password.

In a matter of seconds, Spice was looking at the secret account and preparing to make a transfer to another account.

-Wow! 5 million, that's a lot,- said Sugar as she continued to flirt with the businessman, oblivious of what he was doing.

Spice turned to look at her partner and nodded.

-Now, close your eyes for just one moment,- said Sugar as she gently removed Mr. Appleton's glasses.

He did so and did not feel the spray over his face, but was sound asleep in a matter of seconds.

The two girls stood and picked up any evidence of being there, removing the bottle and glasses, and closing the computer as well.

They fastened their robes and walked out silently, satisfied with doing their job.

In another room, one larger than the one bedroom suite, a middle aged man with silver hair was sitting on the corner of his king size bed, looking at his electronic agenda, illuminated only by a tall lamp made of ivory.

He was dressed in silk pajamas, shirt and pants, but his face showed no expression of comfort.

Next to him, a young red haired lady was lying down, under the silk sheets, resting comfortably.

The palm suddenly buzzed, and the man hastened to pick it up immediately.

The message he read was the following:

The job is done. 5 million wired to the project account. Black Widow.

-What is it, Simon?-

The red haired lady was sitting up now; awake in spite of the silent buzzer of the sophisticated gadget.

Simon smiled and answered: -Nothing, darling. I have just received a generous amount of money from an anonymous benefactor to fund Dr. Curry's project. He will be so pleased.-

-Why, that is great news, my love,- answered the lady as she lied down on her pillow. -And how much did he donate?-

Simon Richter smiled and answered: -5 million credits.-

It was late in the day when Randy Striker announced that they had reached the place where the Captain was being held.

Barely a couple of hours outside of city limits, and the whole landscape had changed drastically.

The road was cracked and barely visible since sand and dirt blowing over it by strong winds.

Buildings of all shapes and sizes were wrecked or torn down, and all forms of transportation disassembled to take advantage of parts that could come in handy for something else.

Not far off a tattered building, quite narrow yet 10 stories high seemed to be in one piece; a construction oddly out of place among all the devastation.

-It's used as a prison facility, but I have never seen more than a few prisoners step out and when they do the guys are heavily guarded,- said the bounty hunter. -They are usually sent out with knives as their only weapons to face crazies as they do some weird tasks, bringing stuff back to put away like a loading area. It's almost dark and they will be coming back any minute. We can get to them before they're popped back inside. It's our best chance. They're maybe 4 guards for each prisoner.-

Ken began giving orders to the Unit leaders at once. Each Unit moved out setting a watch around the building in hope of finding the prisoners and their watch guards approaching.

He was stunned to receive word immediately.

-Alfa 1, Delta 1. I have 8 guards returning with 2 prisoners on the west side. One appears to be the Captain.-

-All Units, converge with Delta Unit.-

Ken gave the order and started to move in, but stopped Mark and Jordan.

-I need cover for our escape, and you guys are it.-

Both nodded and held a secure position.

The bounty hunter, Ken and Nick moved closer, trying to avoid detection from the building itself.

A loud explosion followed by gunfire announced that the rescue mission had begun.

All Units except Alfa Unit were taking fire and moving in as quickly as possible to rescue the Captain.

The guards were in minor transports, jeeps armed with heavy machine guns on tripods as the biggest threat.

Bullets shattered through pieces of rubble and blocks lying on the ground, but the Resistance kept cover and alternated Units to reposition and open fire.

In a matter of minutes the guards were taken out, and two prisoners stepped out of the last vehicle as Delta leader confirmed their identities.

-Alfa 1, Delta 1. The Captain is not here, I repeat, the Captain is not here!-

-Blast it!-

Ken couldn't believe his misfortune. They would be forced to enter the building and attack at will.

The bounty hunter took out his shotgun and lead the way wordlessly, understanding their predicament.

Ken gave the order and each Unit moved forward to enter the building as more gunfire filled the air.

A few shotgun blasts told everyone that the entrance had been breached, leaving a gap for others to follow.

The bounty hunter was moving in with little regard for his life.

Nick shuddered and froze for a second as he realized that a similar scenario had taken place in one of the VR training programs.

He was convinced that he and Ken had to reach the Captain before their guide.

The building itself was a death trap, and Nick realized that it was similar to a watchtower in configuration, where reaching the top would be close to impossible.

The rescue team did not have time to figure out the details, racing towards the staircase and opening fire to whatever opposed their path.

Inside, each Unit sent members to check each level to make sure they were not missing anything.

What were once work offices with small stations had become surveillance with monitoring equipment, but it didn't seem correct that the lower levels were for the guards and the higher ones for keeping prisoners.

Reports came back through a two-way Ken had strapped to his thigh.

-Charlie Unit, level three, taking serious fire!-

-Echo Unit, level four, 2 men down!-

Nick's head began to spin as the damage reports got worse.

A few men with the Alfa Unit had managed to reach the final floor through the stairway, and Nick couldn't help feeling sick as he suspected that they were walking into a trap.

No guards were on the last floor. It was a giant square room, maybe a conference room once before, with knocked over plastic chairs and a podium to the far end.

Another sound suddenly caught their attention; a sound which was easy to decipher.

-The roof, it must have a heliport!-

Nick and Ken were the first to race up the last flight of stairs to come out of a door leading to the roof.

The helicopter's rotators were now at full throttle, and the MD 500 started to lift away, but as Nick raced towards it he noticed that the chopper had only person, the pilot.

There was no way that the chopper could transport another passenger.

Nick looked back and did not see Ken.

The door was closed shut behind him.

Something was oddly familiar about the scenario, and then it hit him like a thunderclap.

It was his dream, or nightmare, just before starting the VR training programs.
He is standing on top of a tall building, looking down but not able to see the ground.
Above him, the sky has turned orange, the sun setting behind an array of mountains far to the west, announcing the arrival of dusk.
Below, a dark mist lingered below; a cloud of smoke and fog due to contamination.
But his background was ignored, eyes focused on the door that opened to the roof.
There was loud gunfire by automatic weapons.
He is dressed in black, as if there was a special purpose for this, but it isn't clear to him.
A small battle is taking place inside the unknown building, but ends abruptly.
There was silence for only a few seconds, and then the door opened.
Human figures began to approach, weapons aimed to one target, leading him to the edge.
He knows one thing for sure: They are after him and want to take him alive. He has something very important and they want it.
He has nowhere to run.

The roar of the siren was heard a block away as the ambulance raced down the highway towards L.A. General.
Cars pulled over and made room for the vehicle with first priority until it reached its destination.
The patient was lead by personnel on a stretcher and rushed in from the back.
The hospital was busy that day as sick people began to pile up and occupy any rooms available.
-Dr. Peters, I'm afraid we have more patients with the same symptoms.-
The nurse looked frightened, as if she was about to panic.
The doctor just gave out instructions, keeping his worries to himself.
-Do whatever you can,- he said as he walked off, -at least we know it's not contagious.-
The nurse didn't look relieved at the final remark.
Whatever was happening was not a pretty picture, especially after reading so many studies on terminal sickness and epidemic virus.
People kept coming in showing symptoms similar to a terminal virus.
This had begun the day before but not in such a large number, and the cause was still unknown.
Dr. Peters knew that this was slipping out of his hands.
It was time to announce a red alert.

Watching the news had become a hobby for Mark to follow up on anything related to the Governor of California.
At the time being there was nothing outstanding or worth looking into other than trivial activities.

Simon Richter was keeping a low profile with his exercise of authority. It was a tedious job that Mark didn't enjoy much, but it was the only thing that kept him focused on the idea of keeping an eye on Simon Richter. After two months he was starting to lose interest. Things changed considerably when some breaking news report called everyone's attention. Mark shuddered. The report was local. He was about to call Nick but for some reason his boss was standing next to him. -Got a mail to watch the news,- he said quietly so that only Mark could hear. He realized then that it was pointless to be discreet when the report came out. -As of 9 a.m. this morning more than 500 people have been brought to L.A. General with symptoms similar to a virus. There is no news on what has caused this, or if it is terminal. There is speculation, however, that this virus has reached other cities in California due to similar reports....- -This is whacked!- Mark couldn't help himself and walked away looking disgusted. Nick kept watching the news until he had heard enough. When he stepped back he realized that he had 3 missed calls on his cellular. The news report concluded with the promise of more updates and Nick walked away as customers present began to talk among themselves. -A deadly virus?- Nick said it to himself but Mark had heard. -Who would wanna do such a thing? After the Big Crash the whole world suffered no one was interested in wiping us out. Each country had to deal with its own problems. So, what the hell?- Nick checked his phone and realized that all of the missed calls came from Jordan. His friend must really be worried. -Whatever it is, it's not airborne,- said Nick to calm Mark down. -There are no reports of anyone dying yet, and it doesn't look like it kills any time soon.- -Great, you suffer for a long time,- said Mark with a sarcastic look. Nick patted him on the shoulder. -I think it's time I contact the Captain. Maybe he has a better idea of what's going on.- He sat down and looked at Mark, and then to the door. Mark shrugged and walked out the office, muttering something under his breath.

As day became night the people of the state of California were close to reaching total chaos as news reports of the possible virus attacking more people kept pouring in. All workplaces were temporarily closed as everyone was forced to return home to lock themselves in even though preliminary reports confirmed that the virus wasn't airborne. But general panic had more influence and soon a state of emergency was put in effect.

Angry at the fact that he could not meet with the Captain, Nick settled on sitting down on the couch with Jordan as they watched the 11 o'clock news, hoping that something good would be said after so many hours of negative results.

Both young men sat forward as the face of Simon Richter appeared when another breaking news report interrupted regular programming.

-The governor of California had something to say,- said Jordan in a sarcastic tone.

Nick offered a quick smile but was looking at the TV screen as Simon began to speak.

-I am pleased to report that our best scientists are working on a cure to this unnamed virus. They have been working since the first patients were taken to the hospital, the first sign of this virus being reported since yesterday. We have our first test with positive results, but tests are still being conducted to confirm its effectiveness. By morning we will have the final results. There has not been any indication that this virus is mortal since no one has died from it, and we expect to cure everyone before such an event should take place.-

Jordan leaned back as the reporter appeared again for final details of the present situation before the report ended.

-The unnamed virus has now reached other cities around the United States, people manifesting the same symptoms...-

Nick clicked the mute button and faced Jordan.

-This has Simon Richter written all over it. He's behind the virus, and coming up with the cure is part of his plan to be the big hero since his first plan against terrorists didn't work out.-

-And how did he manage to spread a virus?- asked Jordan.

Nick leaned back quietly.

His face lit up as things became clear to him.

He picked up the phone and made a call.

The Captain answered, and Jordan leaned forward as the phone was set on speaker.

-Did you see the news?- asked Nick anxiously.

-Of course, and I bet you have an idea of what's going on.-

Nick clenched his fists as if he had the answer on the tip of his tongue but could not say it.

-I know that the A-life products have something to do with it, but I can't figure it all out.-

-You have part of the answer, and the key element,- answered the Captain. -But how in the world could he manage to trigger a disease in such a specific moment with such accurate results?-

-I know, and why wasn't this detected before?- said Jordan, chipping in.

-There has to be something else that triggered the nasty side effects, and something that happened between yesterday and today,- answered Jonathan. - Simon is very resourceful, and he knows how to cover his tracks. I'm afraid we're still in the dark with barely any clues.-

Nick frowned at the remark.

-If there's anything we can do...-

-I know,- answered the Captain, -Do what you can on your side. Get Sandy and Sue to investigate the cure Simon is going to offer tomorrow.-

Nick shuddered at the mention of the cure.

He had overlooked its importance.

The governor of California had more in mind than becoming a hero.

-Captain, Simon is going to dose everyone infected and they'll take it, like water in the desert.-

-Very insightful,- answered Jonathan. -Simon is about to manage whatever he was planning from the start. Millions of people around America are about to take a cure without asking questions.-

Jordan was sitting forward again next to Nick as both looked at the phone.

-We need to find out what the cure really is,- said Jonathan to conclude the matter.

-Call the girls. Do whatever you can. Godspeed.-