

Project Dreamer Chapter 1
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“What’s going to happen to me, papa?” Gina asked.

I took the handkerchief from my back pocket and wiped my brow. It must have been 90 degrees in this hospital room. The AC had been out all day. I told the nurses twice today but the maintenance crew was taking a while.

“I don’t know, but it’s gonna be alright. I’m here,” I said.

Gina looked up at me from her bed and smiled. I smiled back and patted her hand. She was my granddaughter. After my late wife, Julia, passed away Gina was all I had left. Poor girl had followed the same fate as my late wife did. Even though she was 24 years her junior.

I raised Gina from the time she was about three. Her mother, my daughter, passed away when she was little in a car accident. A patch of black ice got her on the way back from work late one night. Her father was never really in the picture. After that me and my Julia took her in.

I hated to think about it. The fact that there I was. Sitting at the bedside of my little girl. Trying to tell her that it would all be alright, even though she was at stage 4. We tried to catch it earlier, but no luck. The doctor’s thought her headaches were simply migraines. That was until we found Dr. Murphy who told us it was an inoperable brain tumor that had spread to her spine.

My brother Tommy, a real go getter his whole life, died two years ago from a combination of liver failure and stomach cancer. I never had to the heart to tell Gina he died. I told her instead that he had gone on one of his cross-country trips and wouldn't be back for a while. I'd say she realized he wasn't coming back pretty quickly. Truth is, I couldn't convince her he was gone because I couldn't admit it to myself.

"Will I see Uncle Tommy or mom again?" Gina asked.

"Sure, you will. I'll be there too soon. You don't have to worry. Grandpa will always be by your side. Lord Cyrus told me that himself," I said.

"Good... I need to get some sleep. Will you be here when I wake up?"

I smiled at her and ran my hand along her long beautiful brown hair.

"Sure thing. I'll be here. I always am. Get some sleep."

She smiled as her eyes closed slowly. She was fast asleep before long. I held my hands on my knees, sighed, and stood up from the chair. The room was full of flowers. People from the church back in Demora sent their regards. Mori, the head priest, stopped by often to check on her whenever he could.

I walked outside of the room to get some fresh air away from the strong rose fragrance inside her room. Doctors and nurses walked along the long white corridors pushing medicine carts, while other patients spoke to various staff. I walked up to the service desk. The nurse sat at her desk furiously typing on her outdated Macbook and seemed to be in a haze.

“Hey... sorry to bother you. Is there any updates on when the AC units are going to be fixed?” I asked.

“I’m sorry sir, there’s no way for us to tell. I’ll put in an expedited request if you want.”

“That’ll be great, I just want her to be comfortable is all. I don’t know how long she has left... What time she does have left I want her to be comfortable at least.”

The nurse frowned and sighed.

“In this line of work you never get used to it. Especially when a child is involved. We do the best we can to make them comfortable, and in as little pain as possible. It’s a heartbreaking job, but it’s the path we chose,” she said.

“I just wish I could do something to keep her from leaving me. I’ve lost my wife, my daughter, and my brother. She’s all I have left,” I said tearing up.

She frowned nearly tearing up herself. If not for the sense of professionalism years of dealing with this kind of work slowly making her numb to these tragic circumstances.

Julia was a nurse at the hospital in Drova. She didn’t deal with the terminally ill, she was the opposite. She was a pediatric nurse, mainly dealing with newborn infants. Some of them came out sick, some even died. She would come home every day from work in one of two moods. Happiness, or utter despair.

I sat there for hours comforting Julia. Anytime a child passed away due to an abusive mother—or just a streak of bad luck—she would come home crying. I knew the cycle of life and death too well. I beat cancer three times already. Two bouts of skin cancer, and liver

cancer which was now in remission. I knew all too well the horrors chemo brought. I'd never wish it on anyone.

"I'll put that request in for you sir, and i'm so sorry this is happening to you. Good people are often dealt such bad hands."

I nodded and walked away towards the waiting room. It was smaller than the others since this was for the terminally ill. Most families stayed in the patient rooms or just left the hospital. I sat down. The news was playing on one of TVs mounted in the corner.

"...and in our top breaking story, last night, an unknown thief broke into the Luma National Museum stealing the priceless Scythe of the nation's most fabled hero from the middle ages, The Red Reaper. Authorities are at a loss as to how the thief got passed security guards and systems in place without triggering any alarms or being noticed. In other news, The President has said that peace negotiations with Ramoth leaders are a bit rocky but still ongoing. The matter has been somewhat inflamed by paramilitary units of The Fallen, under their War Chief Merrick—who by all accounts of critics across the country—has been playing both sides of this decades long feud between Oryx and Ramoth. Now for the weather..."

Great more peace talks. It's not like the last dozen fell through or anything. I served during the original Ramoth-USSA incident and it was hell. I only got deployed in as far as the Markin island cluster near

Horizon, but there were guys who got sent as far out as the Fallen naval fleet near Ramoth's coastline.

Officially they were on our side, but they had nearly five bases there and an armada of ships outside their border. Always begged the question; were they protecting us or Ramoth. That was over 20 years ago.

A maintenance man passed by in the hall and walked down toward Gina's room. I watched him go inside wearing a utility jumpsuit, with the name DARPAN logo on it. I had heard of them before. They dabbled in experimental technology of all kinds. Genetics, pharmaceuticals, plant splicing, cars. They had a stake in everything it seemed. Their eccentric CEO, Lucien Leblanc, was well known in the area but highly controversial.

He would come out once in a while on Channel 5 announcing some new breakthrough and then go silent for months. Some things would disappear into the void others would come out 10 years later. You never knew what was going to happen with them. Their last breakthrough was a new fertilizer that made crops grow three times faster.

It helped a lot of people when the people in Mediva when during a catastrophic food shortage. I didn't trust that kind of technology. They were a new field that lacked regulation and people like Lucien seemed like the type to toss shit at the wall and see what stuck. Even with his "breakthroughs" there were grave consequences.

Julia used to complain anytime Leblanc came on TV. She talked about how that new chemical and how it did increase the output of said crops but there were

major drawbacks. Over time consumption of such things could've lead to birth defects, food poisoning, or even worse. She had seen infants born to those who came to the hospital after Mediva was used as their testing ground. Around 3 out of every 5 infants had some type of defect. The most common was low birth weight. Not necessarily deadly, but it was a defect linked to the fertilizer nonetheless.

Some infants came out with other abnormalities like early onset epilepsy. Around three died the first week. The surgeon general himself came out stating a warning for those who were pregnant, or planning on becoming pregnant, to abstain from eating those crops treated with such a chemical.

The problem with companies like DARPAN was they ran headstrong into new innovations without taking into account that such things require time. They rushed into things recklessly. There were many rumors on the news saying they didn't even take time to do extensive testing. If any testing at all.

The right wing establishment hated them but the liberal outlets always stayed silent on the matter. It was unclear if he had them in his pocket or if they simply liked the technological advances, no matter how foolish they could be. At best, DARPAN shoved out the beta product and hoped for the best.

After the babies had passed they were called in front of congress for a long bout of hearings. They ran Lucien and his group of scientists through the wringer for hours. No one could miss it. It was everywhere. He sat at the table smiling, and sipping his water, while he lied right through his teeth. Congressional hearings

rarely bared fruit. It always ended up in a big mess that never accomplished anything.

Everyone knew his name but very few knew much more about beyond what the tabloids printed after each scandal. The biggest issue was not even one sourced from DARPAN themselves. It was merely a side effect of how technology works. DARPAN's projects moved with such rapid disregard that there were few regulations in place.

It was like playing political whack-a-mole. DARPAN would come out with something and before congress could pass new regulations they were onto another project. It was a never ending battle. DARPAN created something, congress argued, and by the time the government came to any type of consensus their regulation had become obsolete. The project was over, and it was on to the next issue.

Mr. Leblanc had a wife, who never came on TV, but I do remember a quote from her referenced on the news some years ago. She was asked about the ethical nature of her husband's work. She said that he was 'a very driven man with one singular goal on his mind and that such consequences of their experiments were acceptable losses.' It was very telling. For the man's own wife to publicly call him and the whole company out on the controversial stuff they had been doing.

Apparently he thought so, because as far as I'm aware, she never made any public comments about him or DARPAN again. The timing of her comments being just after the hearings didn't help matters either. Bad PR is a thing contrary to common belief, and DARPAN was no stranger to bad PR.

They also had had their fair share of legal battles with other companies over tech and copyright, most notably with Viarise Corporation. They were one of the largest telecommunications companies here, even having some locations and services in Luma and Horizon.

When Viarise found out about the testing and how it had caused deaths and birth defects, they immediately pulled funding and cut off all service lines to DARPAN citing unethical behavior as a violation of the contract between the two companies.

DARPAN claimed Viarise was well aware of the nature of the testing going on and that it was well within the law, further arguing that the unfortunate side effects caused by some defective products were accidents caused by misuse. They would never take the blame for their failures. It was always better to pass the buck to someone else.

Needless to say, the two companies never worked together again and DARPAN despite the controversy and government investigations received a hefty grant which saved it from going bankrupt. They slowly built up their own telecom network and put in their own lines.

Viarise wasn't an angel either. They had been caught stealing and selling customer information so many times, the government actually redefined what constituted as 'information theft'. Customers really had no choice but to go with Viarise as they were the only high speed network provider around.

NetX still provided dial-up and DSL to more rural and suburban areas or just low income families in

general but they were on their way out. Less than two million customers nationwide, the only real market they had left was in Luma and Horizon due to how much of a pain it was to setup good high-speed lines on the islands.

It was either go with Viarise and give them your info or suffer the slow speeds of 1990s internet. Most were happy make the sacrifice completely disregarding the severe ramifications of giving these corporations more power over their lives.

The biggest issue in Oryx by far though was the fact the country had become fully socialist. Everything was run by the state. That meant that the hospitals were too. Underfunding caused many to die due to low wages with the doctors. Those who did stay were poorly trained at best, and absolute quacks at worst.