

The Monsters Within

Chapter One

At the Office

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Infinite Worlds

At the Office

2163.05.17 | 10:04

Brett sat back in his chair, giving his eyes and hands a brief rest. He had already been there for a couple of hours comparing the data he was assigned to what was in the database. He made corrections as needed, added information, and noted discrepancies. The simplicity of the job balanced the monotony. He liked that. All he had to do was what was assigned to him. Very little responsibility weighed his shoulders. For six hours a day, six days a week, this was his life. It wasn't a prestigious job, but it was what he knew...what he was trained to do.

A glance at the wall of the office building revealed that the time was now 10:04 in the morning. Normally, he would have four hours remaining in his work shift; however, today was a special day. The office was closing at noon. Today was the Centennial Celebration, marking one hundred years since the United Global Coalition, commonly referred to as the UGC, saved the world from the Great Plague of the twenty-first century. At 14:00, they planned a grand celebration at the Old National Mall in the Capital District. The Regional President of North America was set to give a speech, and there would be special rations handed out to the attendees.

Brett took a breath and rubbed his face to shake loose the strain from staring at the monitor. Then he ran his hand through his dark brown hair before leaning forward, regaining his focus. He just had to get through a couple more hours. Meticulously, he continued working on today's assignment to input and verify data from the Bureau of Citizens into the UGC master database. The information from the Bureau provided updates to the details of every citizen in the city. It was important to have trained eyes on this data to ensure that the database was accurate and up to date. That information included

everything from the basic details of a citizen, such as their birth date and physical description, their occupation, and their current status. Most of the updates were minute illnesses or incapacities, marriages, births, or deaths. Also included were the citizens' daily activities as recorded by city surveillance, check-ins, and incident reports.

Tempting as it was for Brett to look up his own details, he knew that such an act would be a violation. Access to records was tracked, and the punishment was extreme. The system was set up so that nobody would be assigned data that correlated to themselves or any of their relatives or close friends. This was for protection and to stop anybody from altering their own information. In fact, another office handled any information or updates for anybody in the Annapolis District office. Should any such data slip through, it was to be reported immediately to the supervisor.

Brett went over the data on his tablet and pulled up the records. His fingers glided over the screen. He stopped immediately as he stared at the data before him. His eyes went back and forth from the data to the record as he tried to sort it out. Something was troubling him.

Brett leaned in. The record was for a citizen named John Lewis. There were many holes in his record, and it listed his status as "Deceased" with a date of death as "2161-0812." However, the form entry that Brett pulled up was dated "2163-0425" and listed John Lewis's status as "Contained." This was the third such discrepancy that Brett had come across this morning. The first was a man named Joseph Lawrence, who was listed deceased as of five years ago but had a form entry that listed him as "Unknown" just last month. Another listed a woman named "Alice Jacobson," whose record showed her as "Retired" this year, but the form listed a death date of "2156-1113."

Brett noted the discrepancies and tapped his tablet to the monitor to transfer the notations and logs. He had sent the first two over for supervisor review. He knew it would be examined, eventually. However, "once is happenstance, twice a coincidence, and three times a conspiracy," as his father had once told him. Brett knew he had to bring this to his supervisor's immediate attention.

He locked his workstation and picked up the tablet. As he stood, he peered around the room. His eyes scanned over the security bot that seemed alerted to his sudden movement as he navigated the maze of cubicles. Its single eye was glowing red as a warning that all employees needed to remain in the office. He reached the door to his supervisor's office and knocked.

“Enter!” came the woman’s voice. The name on the office door read *Stacy Houston*.

Brett entered the room and stood before the desk. “Mrs. Houston, I have something that I thought I should bring to your immediate attention.”

His supervisor looked up from her terminal and regarded him. She was about ten years older than him; he knew. She kept her hair in a bun, as was customary, especially in a business environment. It was lighter than his, but her skin was slightly darker.

He handed her the tablet and continued. “There are several records that I came across in the last hour that have some discrepancies. Some list the respective citizen as deceased, in some cases for several years. However, the new records give other information. I already flagged the first two I came across for further review, but with the growing number of records that I encountered, I thought I should bring them to you immediately.”

Mrs. Houston looked over the information. As he explained the discrepancies, she nodded in confirmation. Brett stood there patiently waiting for her to respond.

Finally, she looked up and smiled. “Thank you, Mr. Hardin, for bringing this to me. This does seem strange. I will have the administrators investigate this immediately.” She looked at the clock and back to Brett. “Even though today is a short day due to the Centennial, I think you have earned yourself a break. Go ahead and take it. You have twenty minutes.”

Brett thanked her and left the office. Not wanting to waste any of his time, he went immediately to the break room. Walking in, he noticed that one of his coworkers, Eric Larson, was sitting at the table watching the newscast. It was odd for Brett to find him there. But Brett’s own time was limited, and he didn’t want to waste it worrying about the likes of Eric.

A glance at the screen confirmed what Brett had already suspected—the news talk would be about nothing other than the coming celebration. Brett walked over to the refreshment station and pulled out a cup, placed it in the fountain dispenser, and let it fill with water.

Once the cup was filled, Brett took it, walked over to the table, sat down, and lost himself in the newscast. Presently, they were going over the history of the last 112 years since the Plague gripped the world. It started in rural areas. At first, it affected crops, spoiling the food at rapid rates. This soon led to a

famine in parts of the world, while richer countries started seeing an exodus from rural areas to the metropolitan regions.

Then, the Plague mutated.

It began to affect people. They would become feverishly sick, turning pale, almost a grayish color. Once it took hold, those that survived were left a husk of their former selves. Most victims, however, succumbed to death. It was at this point that the nations of the world came together and formed a coalition that would handle the global disaster, the UGC.

The response was immediate. The great metros set up large camps on the outskirts where the refugees from the country would be kept in quarantine. Vast projects were started to handle the populations. Walls were built to surround major metros so that no one could bypass the checkpoints and make their way into the cities. Each of the metros constructed massive biodomes where they would grow food, unaffected by the Plague, which could feed the populace. Work also began on infrastructure, raising most of the cities off ground level with a massive network of magnetic monorails intertwining and connecting the major metro areas. The once open spaces, such as parks or forests, were filled with apartments to handle the growing population.

The broadcast continued its history lesson, speaking of the first metros to be completed. These were the major cities across the world. London, Rome, Paris, and Berlin were among the first in Europe. Tokyo, Beijing, and Hong Kong in Asia. Sadly, some of the lesser developed nations disappeared completely. In America, cities like New York and Los Angeles were among the first to be completed, along with this city where Brett lived and worked.

Now known as Capital Metro, it was a large area. Originally, the metros of Washington, Baltimore, and Annapolis were separate. But within decades, the area in between was filled with residential blocks that merged the three metros into one. The broadcast went on to show a map of Capital Metro and the districts. Stretching from the Potomac River to the Chesapeake Bay and north past Baltimore District, Capital Metro was the largest metro in the world. It became the center of the North American Region of the UGC.

“It’s amazing how something so small, so microscopic, can wreak such havoc and cause drastic change as to reform society in the blink of an eye.”

Brett pulled his mind back to the present and blinked at the statement. He looked at the speaker, his coworker. He’d gotten so lost in the telecast that he forgot Eric was there. “Excuse me?”

Eric just laughed. “It doesn’t matter. We don’t really matter. We are all just the cogs of this society, turning the wheels that spin the Earth.”

Brett was confused. As he tried to sort out the strange comment, he took a deeper look at his coworker. His sandy blond hair looked as if somebody had mussed it, and stubble dotted his face. His work shirt wasn’t fastened straight and appeared a bit wrinkly. It was a wonder the man was even there. Brett wondered why Eric was sitting in the break room and not at his terminal or on disciplinary hold. Brett spoke to break the awkwardness. “Did something happen to you?”

Eric turned to him; his face serious. “Yes. You could say that. It doesn’t matter anyway. Hey...you have a daughter, right? Isn’t she about to turn five?”

The sudden change in topic jarred Brett. “Yes, she is.” He had never been that close to Eric. Of course, fraternizing of any sort was frowned upon. Though some did, to an extent, they often kept it quiet. Brett refrained from doing so. He had his own life to worry about. “Her birthday is next week. She is scheduled for her evaluation.”

Eric continued to stare at Brett, his eyes intense. “Do yourself a favor. Don’t take her.”

Brett was confused. “That’s impossible. You know it is mandatory.”

“Listen to me! If you want what is best, you will take her away. Far away! Don’t let the UGC get their claws in her. Take your family and just leave.”

The suggestion horrified Brett. “What? That... I couldn’t! Where would I even take her?”

“To the Wildlands,” Eric replied without hesitation. “It’s safer there. Much safer.”

Brett shook his head. “That would be madness. You are mad. What happened to you? To even suggest such a thing is—”

Eric’s laughter interrupted Brett. “Madness! That’s right; you are a faithful loyalist. You do whatever you are told by the UGC. Mark my words—it will rip you apart. They will eat you alive.” Eric stared at Brett intently, his face distorting to disgust. “You don’t even realize how lucky you are.”

Brett stared back at the man. He was clearly unhinged. Footsteps as three people entered the room. Stacy Houston, flanked by two others in PPU uniforms, regarded the pair. Stacy turned toward Brett. “Mr. Hardin! Your break is almost over. It is time for you to return to your station.”

Brett jumped from his seat and looked at the time. He nodded and quickly headed out of the room. As he left, he heard Eric chuckling. He reached his station and sat down, barely in time. As he logged on and resumed his work, a commotion rang out through the office—a thud followed by a succession of zaps. Brett reflexively popped up from his cubicle and noticed that his coworkers were doing the same.

A moment later, the two UGC officials came out with Eric in restraints. He looked dazed. Brett realized that the two officials were members of the Protection and Preservation Unit, or PPU. Some jokingly referred to them as “Cleaners.” The PPU acted as the police force of the UGC. As they reached the entrance with their prisoner, the eye on the security robot turned green to allow them to pass, then turned red again once they were through. Stacy came out of the break room and looked around. She called for everybody’s attention.

“There is no need for alarm,” she began. “The PPU has removed a threat from our midst. It was discovered that your coworker, Eric Larson, was an agent of the Grey Roses terrorist organization. I know that it may be concerning having such a creature among us. However, let me assure you that his vile deeds have been minimized, and any damage that he has done is being corrected as we speak. He is being taken for interrogation, and he will *not* resist. As you know, the PPU are experts at extracting information. These deplorable criminals will not succeed in their nefarious plots against the free peoples of the UGC.”

She scanned the room, looking at each person individually, it seemed. Finally, she continued. “With that said, I understand that this is a lot to deal with, having one of your coworkers suddenly escorted out. Knowing that you have worked beside him, maybe had conversations with him, you may feel filthy. I have received authorization to end the workday. Go now and focus on today’s magnificent celebration. Put Eric Larson out of your minds and focus on the United Global Coalition and your place within it.”

Upon completing her speech, she returned to her office. Brett looked down and saw that his workstation had a green icon indicating that he was authorized to log out and leave. He did just that and made his way to the door. The bot’s eye was now green, and people began to file out. He paused as he approached Stacy Houston’s office. He turned and knocked, and she welcomed him in.

Before he could say anything, she smiled and said, “You need not worry, Mr. Hardin. You are cleared. Monitors in the break room revealed the conversation, and we do not suspect you as an accomplice. We all know that you will not

listen to a word that lunatic said and will do your duty to your family and, most importantly, the UGC.”

“Th...thank you!” Brett stammered. She had known exactly what he wanted to talk about. He supposed that made sense, given the circumstances.

Mrs. Houston continued. “Are you heading to the Mall for the ceremony?”

“Yes, I’m meeting my family there.” The words were slow to come out at first as he was still shaken by the events that had just unfolded.

“Well now, go! Enjoy the festivities.”

Brett nodded and exited the room. He walked past the security bot and pulled out his comm phone. He called Lindsey, his wife, and explained that he was leaving now and that he would meet her and the kids outside the museum. With that, he made his way to the railbus platform and awaited the next railbus heading toward the inner capital.

About Author



S. J. Serio was born in Baltimore, MD where he currently lives with his family. He has served in the U.S. Navy and worked in many jobs of different fields including information technology, transportation services, and hospital services. He decided to pursue his love of writing and creativity and is the founder of Infinite Worlds, LLC.