

Citadel

Freedom is Just a Forgotten Dream.
Because Some Doors Should Never Open Again.

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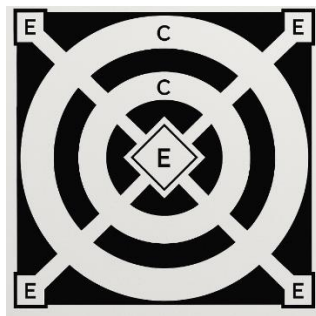
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Citadel top-down overview map

E = Elevator

C = Corridor



Chapter 1

Anchorage, Alaska

9 pm

The Road to Hell

Dorian stood in the living room doorway, watching his son, Liam, curled up on the medical bed, nestled in a tangle of blankets, his oxygen tank and bedside monitoring system showing optimal settings. The bed was positioned perfectly to see both the TV and the kitchen where his wife Claire moved around, the smells of tonight's dinner still wafting through the air. Liam's thin frame and pale skin stood out, but his eyes lit up faintly as he caught Dorian's gaze.

'Hey, champ,' Dorian said softly, smiling and wandering over to say hi, stroking his curly blonde hair. 'Be good for your mum and Grandma, okay? I'll be back in two weeks. Movie night, just us.'

Liam gave a faint smile and a thumbs-up.

Claire, wiping her hands on a tea towel, stepped over to Dorian, her face drawn but determined, 'You've got this, love. We'll be fine. Your mum will be helping as usual.'

Dorian nodded, though the lump in his throat made it hard to speak. His two younger kids ran through the room, chasing each other with shrieks of laughter and water pistols, oblivious to the weight of it all and making a mess as usual.

He kissed Claire on the forehead and gave Liam's shoulder a gentle squeeze, 'See you soon.'

Then he turned, grabbed his duffel bag, and headed to the driveway.

He pulled his collar up against the Alaskan wind and stared one last time at his family framed by the porch light. The light cast its usual dull glow over the driveway, illuminating his wife, kids and their labrador retriever standing by the door. Claire gave him a tired smile, arms crossed against the cold. His other two sons clung to her sides, their small faces barely visible in the shadows but wrapped up in their pyjamas and dressing gowns against the icy wind and falling snow.

'The usual two weeks, then I'm home again,' he said, placing his duffel bag on the rear seat.

Claire nodded, 'Just stay safe, okay?'

He did not answer but gave a quick nod and a wink. She knew better than to expect reassurances.

She's still as pretty as the day I met her, he thought.

It was the same routine every time. The Citadel was not the kind of place where you *could* make promises. A private jail, a black site for the worst of the worst. Terrorists, paedophiles, gang bosses and their henchmen, serial killers, sex traffickers, mass murderers, and even criminal masterminds.

The kids mumbled half-hearted goodbyes, and then it was done. He climbed into his SUV, slammed the door, and started the engine. He did not look back. It was always harder when he did. But he had secretly left an envelope with a love note to Claire and the kids with a bundle of cash for treats and entertainment. He had done this for fifteen years, every time he was away for his two-week shift. Each time a different location in the house. This time he had hidden it in their sock drawer. She knew the routine and the kids loved the hunt.

The road was slick with black ice at this time of year, so he took his time even though his snow tyres could handle the appalling weather. He knew the snow would probably be three feet thick by tomorrow but that was not his concern. After picking up his new colleague, the rookie, Greg Yoshida, they would head north for half an hour to the town known as Eagle River. Once there they would take the long road through open fields and park in sub-level B4 of the Citadel. After numerous security checkpoints, they would head up to his offices on floor three to sit behind their desks watching their monitors with a coffee and a sandwich while the guards harassed the inmates. He always liked to ease rookies in on their first month. No bullshit, no nasty tests, just observation. That way he could judge their character.

Dorian knew that most of Greg's training, up to now had been theory and classroom stuff with a month of physical training, all off-site. He loved rookies because they were fun to mess with. Their shift started at 10 pm but he always liked to have a calm half hour before the storm of confining the shit bags they had to detain. Occasionally they provided security for the criminal psychologists and psychiatrists who interviewed and interrogated the inmates. But never lawyers or visitors. The inmates would never see either. Ever.

Greg's home was a fifteen-minute detour through the quiet, snow-dusted streets of their suburb. At this hour, most houses were dark, save for the odd porch light or flickering television in a living room window. The world fell asleep as he was waking up.

When he pulled up at Greg's apartment block the young man was already outside, a duffel bag slung over his shoulder, steaming travel mug in hand. He was only twenty-five and still had that fresh-out-of-training energy about him, but Dorian knew the first two weeks at Citadel would start to wear it down. A job like this did not just *take* time; it *took* pieces of you. But he was confident the rookie was his right choice of new employee. He asked the right questions and some intriguing ones. He also knew he was not ex-military or a cop or, perhaps worse, an undercover journalist. He knew, in the back of his mind, that Greg was just a guy who felt secure in his personality. Of all the candidates he had interviewed, he liked Greg the best. A good fit for the team and he liked his sense of humour. In Citadel you needed one.

Greg slid into the passenger seat, 'Good morning, boss. Permission to come aboard?'

'Mm,' Dorian shifted the truck into gear. 'Yes, it is a wonderful evening, isn't it? How's Lara?' he asked, referring to Greg's girlfriend.

'She's fine. Still planning our holiday.'

The road stretched dark and empty ahead of them, the trees on either side looming like silent sentinels. The only sound was the hum of the tyres against the ice-covered asphalt. The military at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson always kept the roads free of snow and ice in this area just in case.

After a few minutes, Greg broke the silence, 'So, uh, anything big happening this shift?'

Dorian tapped the screen on the dashboard, bringing up the Citadel's internal AI system called Echo. The monotone, yet friendly, female voice filled the cab. The image did not display an icon or avatar of her, just an audio waveform.

'Good evening, Officers Reed and Yoshida. Shift schedule uploaded. Two prisoner arrivals tonight between 9 and 10 pm. First: Kyle Benjamin, inmate number 395, was convicted of multiple homicides and sexual assault. Maximum-security placement. Second: Steven Adams, inmate number 317, known alias "Steve-o The Drongo." Serial killer. Special handling protocols are in effect. Temporary placement on Level thirty-one pending further assessment. Security risk level: extreme. Warden William Sinclair will handle both arrivals.'

Greg let out a low whistle, 'Steve-o. *The* Steve-o? That guy's killed, what, fifty people?'

'Fifty-two,' Dorian corrected, 'that we know of. Personally, I think of him more as a contract killer, but, you know how the media spins things.'

Greg took a sip of his coffee, 'Jesus. And our site is the one in charge?'

Dorian glanced at him, 'Warden Sinclair and his guards will be in charge. Not you and me or my team. He's getting put away forever like every other inmate in Citadel. Soon, you and I will have a few more high value... customers. We've got terrorists and gang leaders to look after but the super high-profile nutters are Sinclair's problem.'

Greg shifted in his seat, 'Still. I don't know, man. Guys like Steve-o... I don't think they're human.'

Dorian kept his eyes on the road, 'Doesn't matter what you think. They *are* human. That's what makes them dangerous.'

His colleague Warden Sinclair controlled floors twenty-five up to the helipad on the roof above floor fifty-five, while he was warden of floors three to twenty-four and was not due a high-profile inmate for at least a week, but he knew Greg was going to be in for a treat tonight. He knew what was on the agenda since his clearance was way higher than the rookies but not as high as Sinclair's. That man was a legend in the private security business.

Greg exhaled, rubbing a hand down his face, 'Two weeks of *this*. Christ. Why do we do this to ourselves?'

Dorian smirked, 'Because some doors should never open again. Some of the people we house are deemed too dangerous to ever be released. Like I told you on your induction day, they're off the books, off the map, off any government's conscience.'

Greg huffed a laugh, 'You sound like the goddamn company slogan.'

Dorian shrugged, 'Maybe. But tell me I'm wrong.'

Greg did not reply. He just took another sip of his coffee and stared out at the endless road ahead.

In the distance, past the trees and the frozen expanse of wilderness, the Citadel loomed, its pristine silhouette rising against the faint glow of the coming dawn and street lights.

'Two weeks inside. Two weeks of hell,' Greg added. 'Lara is slowly getting used to it though. Oh, and I brought my swimming trunks. I'd like to see the Olympic-sized pool on the fifty-fourth floor.'

'Yep, use your two days off per week wisely,' Dorian grumbled as he took out his pass card motioning for Greg to do the same. 'I like the gym on fifty-five. Plus, I'm a shit swimmer.'

They turned off the main road onto yet another leafy lane. Two minutes later they arrived at a snow-covered guard hut in front of a solid metal gate attached to the perimeter walls. It was unmanned as usual, but CCTV cameras and motion sensors were evident. Dorian held up both their ID cards and waited for Echo and a human guard to acknowledge them. Then the gate slid to the left on rails allowing them across the fields ahead and then to the mile-long underground tunnel that would bring them to the underground car park of the Citadel in B4.

As they bounced over the familiar contours of the road Dorian commented, 'I know every inch of this facility from the seven basement levels up to the twenty-fifth floor. Beyond that, I don't have access, even after fifteen years of loyal service. Sure, you and I can access fifty-three to fifty-five but the floors in between have always been off limits. My next meeting, or for want of a better word, interview, with Sinclair, Camilla and Echo is coming up next month. Perhaps I'll find out what goes on up there one day.'

'Sir,' Greg said with a nod and raising his coffee cup in a mock salute, 'You'll nail it.'

'But if I do it means I can't tell you about it. And I can't take you with me. No more mentoring. You'll be assigned another warden.'

'Do you think, on the upper floors, it's something nefarious... underhand?'

'C'mon son, this is a black site for the worst of the worst. Everything is both of what you just said. I know, and you know, Argentum Capital Reserve on the ground floor is just a front company on the ground floor for the public image. I thought you'd have figured that out by now.'

‘The first week I started training. I tried to open an account, but they politely refused. Saying stuff about credit scores and that you have to open an account with a million dollars. But, hey, I don’t really care. As long as the paydays keep happening and I go home in one piece, Lara doesn’t mind and neither do I.’

‘Today, I’ll show you a little bit more of what I know.’

They continued along the leafy road toward sub-level B4 and then up to what would be their home for the next two weeks. But only if they got through the next three safety and ID checks, and even more inside.

* * *

Claire heard the knock just as she was checking Liam’s oxygen levels. His breathing was steady, his frail body dwarfed by the white blankets cocooning him. She glanced at the clock, it had been barely thirty minutes since Dorian left. The boys were in the living room, sprawled on the floor by the fireplace with their colouring books and toy cars, too distracted to notice her unease.

Peering through the spyhole she saw three men, one wearing a courier uniform, clipboard in hand, and two dressed in maintenance coveralls. She was not expecting anyone at this hour but opened the door. She didn’t even have time to scream before the clipboard man stepped forward, pressing a hand over her mouth and a gun to her ribs.

‘Quiet,’ he hissed, ‘You scream, your boys die.’

Inside, the other two moved fast. One scooped up the two younger boys, their toys scattering to the floor. They squirmed and shouted, but the kidnapper tightened his grip on both, ‘Hush now. No one needs to get hurt.’ He placed duct tape over their mouths and sprayed a chemical up their noses causing them to faint.

Claire screamed before duct tape was forced over her mouth as well.

Then she saw one man, tall, clean-shaven, approach Liam’s bed with the easy efficiency of someone who had done this before. He checked the oxygen monitor, scanned the equipment with a glance, and nodded to his colleagues. ‘Get the portable ready,’ he said calmly.

From the courier’s bag, they produced a portable oxygen setup, almost identical to Liam’s home gear. The medic disconnected the tubing from the wall unit and attached it to the portable with practised ease. Liam stirred, blinking up at the stranger with sleepy confusion.

‘Hey there, champ,’ the medic said, his voice low and almost gentle. ‘Just moving you to a new bed. Your mum’s coming too. You’ll be just fine.’

Claire's knees buckled, but one of the kidnappers caught her, forcing her upright. 'Cooperate, and he lives. We've got everything he needs. You make this hard, none of you make it to sunrise.'

They carried Liam, wrapped in his blanket, to the waiting vehicle parked outside.

She saw it was not a van as she had expected but a large, mobile home, painted dull beige to blend perfectly with the neighbourhood but sporting flags of the Anchorage Wolverines, the local ice hockey team.

The side door slid open silently. Inside, it was clean and clinical. The back compartment looked exactly like Liam's corner of the living room, complete with an oxygen unit, monitor, and even a small fold-out bed with side rails.

They laid him down, reconnected the tubing, checked his vitals, and secured the door.

'Your ride's ready, ma'am,' the medic said, mockingly polite, as the two younger boys were carried inside ahead of her and placed gently onto the circular seating area.

Claire was forced in last. The door sealed shut, the locks clicking into place. One of the kidnappers slid into the front passenger seat next to the driver, the engine murmuring to life. As the mobile home pulled away from the curb, she caught a final glimpse of the house its porch light still glowing, and Rico their dog whining behind the front window. Her heart twisted into a knot.

Inside the moving prison, the medic checked Liam's vitals again and gave her a thin smile, 'He's stable. For now. Do what you're told, and you'll all stay that way.'

Claire sat between her two younger boys, pulling their recumbent bodies close, her body trembling as the mobile home melted into the winter night. Tears streaming down her cheeks as she stared at the barrel of a gun.

* * *

Dorian and Greg parked up in a layby just before the tunnel entrance as the snow thickened, swirling like ghostly confetti. Fifty feet ahead, a sign displayed a crossed-out mobile phone and walkie-talkie, marking the start of Citadel's signal-jamming perimeter. One mile of silence wrapped around the facility.

This was their last chance for a cigarette, or three, and a final call to loved ones.

Before they could step out for one last breath of fresh Alaskan air, Dorian's phone buzzed. Withheld number. He tapped to answer, switching it to the car speakers. Greg flicked ash from his cigarette out the window, raising an eyebrow.

A voice, slick with venom, oozed into the quiet. 'Dorian Reed. You do not know me, but I know you. I know your wife. Your kids. Lovely family you've got.'

Dorian's cigarette froze midway to his mouth. His voice sharpened. 'Who is this? What do you want?'

'There's a man inside Citadel. His name is Constantine Rael. We need to know exactly where he's being held. Floor. Cellblock. You get us that information, and your family goes home safe. You fail, and... well, you'll find out soon enough.'

Dorian flicked a glance at Greg, panic barely suppressed. 'I don't have access to the upper floors. Why me? Why not the other warden?'

A dark laugh rippled through the line. 'Because he doesn't have any other living relatives. Not even a dog we could ransom.'

Before Dorian could respond, his phone pinged. A new message appeared on the screen. A video. The car's audio switched automatically.

The screen filled with shaky footage: Claire and the boys huddled in the back of a moving mobile home. Claire's mouth was taped shut, her eyes wild with terror, tears streaming. One of the boys cried softly. The camera shifted, revealing Liam lying pale and frail in a hospital cot, hooked up to oxygen. The video cut off abruptly.

The voice returned. 'In case you think calling the cops will work. You've got two hours. Play hero, and you'll never see them alive again. We'll send the bodies to your doorstep. Perhaps that'll feed your little doggy on these cold winter evenings. The clock's ticking, Dorian. Get me that location.'

The line went dead.

Greg's face paled. 'What the hell was that?'

Dorian swallowed hard, his voice low and tight. 'Trouble. Let's get inside.'

The phone rang again. Dorian answered.

'Warden, sorry...' This voice was different. Posh. Educated. British. 'Just to clarify. I'm terribly sorry, my now-terminated associate completely misread my perfect copperplate handwriting. You have two weeks, not two hours. But the stakes remain the same.'

'Wait,' Dorian shouted. 'Citadel has no comms in or out for staff. Cell jammers, radio jammers. No internet. How do I let you know?'

'Oh, you poor little bear of little brains,' the man sighed. 'In this day of modern technology, people overlook the simplest of old-school tech. Get to floor fifty-five. The staff recreation area with the open-air sides.'

'And?'

'Oh, for the love of God, man. Morse code with your torch. They can't block that. Just face east, and we'll be watching. Remember the name: Constantine Rael. Good day.'

The line disconnected.

Dorian stared at Greg, his cigarette still hanging from his lips. 'I... I think we need to get inside.'

'Guess I better brush up on my dot-dot-dash-dash skills,' Greg muttered, lighting another cigarette.

Dorian's mind churned, *A prison within a prison. A family for the trusted employees. A hell for the forgotten. That was the price of working at Citadel. The guards watch the guards as much as they watch their prisoners.* His jaw clenched, *How the fuck am I going to pull this off? The only thing I can think of is pulling my promotion interview forward, but that just screams of desperation. God help me.*

Chapter 2

Argentum Capital Reserve

Lobby Area, Ground floor of Citadel

9:10 pm

Citadel's façade

Jaxon I. Belmont stepped out of his black Range Rover and into the crisp night air, his polished shoes becoming moist in the snow-dappled car park of his favourite wealth management company. The towering neoclassical façade loomed above him, its gold-inlaid doors reflecting the soft glow of the distant streetlamps. He was accompanied by Zephyr, his PA, and two bodyguards. Four more guards remained outside, waiting in a second Range Rover. His previous visits had always been amicable but a man of his wealth and power never took chances.

A doorman, dressed immaculately in a three-piece suit, stepped forward and gave a subtle nod. No words were exchanged, none were needed. At Argentum, silence was the preferred language of the elite.

Jaxon adjusted the cuffs of his coat, smoothed a hand over his silver hair, and strode inside. The bank's foyer was a masterpiece of excess, black marble floors, towering white columns, and a chandelier that glittered like a captured constellation. Though it was just after nine, the bank hummed with quiet activity. A handful of clients moved with deliberate purpose, escorted by private bankers dressed in tailored charcoal-grey suits. It was a wealth management company like no other in America open twenty-four hours a day.

A woman in a fitted navy trouser suit, perfectly tailored, hugging her frame, approached him, tablet in hand, 'Mr. Belmont,' she greeted smoothly. 'We've prepared everything per your instructions. The vault is ready for your next deposit.'

Jaxon merely nodded. He had no patience for the ceremony.

As they moved past the main hall, the murmur of wealth at work faded behind them. They passed through a corridor lined with security checkpoints, biometric scanners, pressure-sensitive flooring, and cameras that studied every movement with machine precision.

'Your holdings are secured in Sublevel B6,' the banker continued. 'As per standard protocol, no electronic devices are permitted beyond this point. Would you like to review the records before proceeding?'

'No need,' he replied. 'I know what I own. And I know your procedures. You must be a new employee.'

'Three weeks, sir. I'm Lara. Assistant manager.'

He nodded in reply, 'You'll get to know me and my routines soon enough.'

The elevator doors whispered open, revealing a brushed steel interior. He stepped inside, and the banker swiped her ID card before inputting a code. The descent began, smooth and soundless toward B6.

A private vault. A simple transaction. The room was laid out as he had always remembered it. He placed his briefcase on the table before him. The case was handcuffed to his wrist. He uncuffed himself and took out eight solid gold bars and a plain white A4 envelope with the word '*insurance*' written upon it. After handing them to the woman she gave him a receipt with a nod and a smile.

'Our business is concluded, for now, Mr Belmont. Please allow us forty minutes to confirm the gold authenticity, take photographs and provide you with a further receipt. I will have coffee or tea brought to you in the lobby.'

He smiled inwardly and followed the guards and Zephyr back to the lift.

Everything was exactly as it should be. The weight of gold always brought a quiet satisfaction, proof of power, of dominance. Some men measured wealth on paper, in ledgers, in fleeting numbers on a screen. *Fools*, he thought. *Real wealth has weight. It gleams under my gaze. It can be held, hoarded, hidden. And in my case, moved.*

He cast Zephyr a glance, a near-imperceptible exchange passing between them. They both knew this deposit was more than it seemed. It was their future.

And as always, Jaxon I. Belmont felt he was one more step ahead.

Chapter 3

9:25 pm

Arrival of Steve-o

Steve-o 'The Drongo' Adams sat in the back of an armoured transport van, his hands shackled, and his legs bound further by thick leather restraints and chains. His hands were cuffed to a leather waistband and a further leather collar around his neck. The journey had been long, silent, and disorienting, but the worst was yet to come. He knew it. A cloth blindfold had been tied over his eyes the moment before he was removed from the prison transport aircraft, an extra layer of security to ensure he could not form any bearings about where he was being taken. They had put ear defenders in his ears and then a further cloth sack over his head. The lack of sight and sound worked to the company's advantage, to confuse and unnerve him, to remind him that he had no rights left in this world. But he knew all this was coming one day. He had done what he did for a higher purpose. For his employer.

His fingers twitched, feeling the cold metal of his cuffs, the sharpness of the leather digging into his skin. He could hear the van's engine growling beneath him, the tyres rumbling against rough roads that jarred his body. The only other sound was the soft rustling of the guards sitting on either side of him, their breathing steady, but distant.

This was not a transfer like the ones he had envisaged. This was not like the ones he had researched, the so-called "safe houses," or the prison cells that housed a world of familiar torment. No. This was different. This was the Citadel. He was sure of it. There were hundreds of supermax prisons around the world, but there were more black sites only known to a few. The only way he knew he was in Alaska was because of the scent in the air. That was the one sense they had not denied him. And he had been to Alaska numerous times. The Citadel was Alaska's first private jail. He had heard rumours about it and now felt this was possibly a new assignment from his employer.

The van screeched to a halt, the sudden stop throwing him against the restraints. The door swung open with a hiss, and cold air rushed in, sharp and biting. One of the guards barked an order and he was yanked out of his seat.

'Move.'

His world was still dark behind the blindfold, but he felt the cold concrete beneath his bare feet. His legs wobbled slightly, disoriented by the abrupt stop. He was pulled roughly by his arm, guided, but only barely, through the maze of what felt like endless halls. Endless corridors and then into an escalator. Ascending.

The voice of the guard was sharp and no-nonsense, more a statement than a threat.

'You don't get to speak here. You don't get to ask questions. You only speak when spoken to. You can't even talk aloud to yourself in your cell. You don't have any rights or privileges. You're in Citadel now.'

Boom. I was right, he thought.

They shoved him forward, the footsteps of the guards echoing in the hood he wore. Each step was like a countdown... toward what, he was not sure. It did not matter. All he could do now was endure. The cold concrete floor was again beneath him as they hauled him upwards.

Another sharp yank, and then he was shoved into a small, sterile room. The air felt different here, thick with cold, with metal, the scent of pine bleach. He could hear the distant sound of buzzing, perhaps cameras or monitoring systems, but there was no warmth, no comfort.

The light was harsh, and clinical, stinging his sensitive eyes even through the blindfold and sack.

'Take the blindfold off,' another voice ordered, this one colder, deeper.

The sack and blindfold were removed roughly, and his vision was flooded with the harsh fluorescent lights of the room. His eyes adjusted slowly, but even then, he could not make sense of his surroundings. Metal walls, a sterile floor, and the overwhelming sense of claustrophobia. No windows. One table and three chairs. He plucked the foam ear defenders and placed them on the brushed steel table, shaking his head and inhaling deeply.

In front of him stood a tall man in a dark uniform and a warden's hat, his face was jowly, and he had rosy cheeks. There was a distinct chill to the man's posture as if he were nothing more than a machine operating at maximum efficiency. The guards on either side of him wore black masks covering everything below their eyes.

'I'm Warden William "Bill" Sinclair. The man. The myth. The psychological warlord,' he shouted while two armed guards flanked him. 'I'm your jailer. You will comply with every order given.'

Steve-o didn't move, 'Now, now, Willy. No need to be rude. You could at least say please.'

'Steve-o,' Sinclair said, his voice firm, lacking any trace of sympathy but perfectly American, 'Or should I call you Mr Adams? It doesn't matter. You are now inmate number three one seven. You've been brought here because of your unique... abilities and the information we need from you. You are on level twenty-five of this facility. You will soon be moved to your cell on level thirty-one. Your existence is now in the hands of Citadel. There's no going back to a life beyond these walls. You, sir, are here because you've failed to comply with the system that tried to control you, but now you belong to something much bigger, much more... permanent. And, because you murdered fifty-two people. That we know of, so far.'

Steve-o took a moment to absorb the words, but the reality of them crashed into him like a wave. He was trapped. This was no ordinary prison. There was no way out, no escape routes, no promises of parole or anything resembling freedom. But again, he had always expected to end up in a place like this. He knew he had no possible way of escape but in many ways, it was a comfort. He had completed the mission for his employer and now he had what everyone wished for: a roof over your head, three meals a day and time to think and dream. Peace. Even the warden had called him 'sir.' *Perhaps they will allow me to work in the gardens or the library or make number plates or...* his train of thought was quickly derailed.

Warden Sinclair stepped closer, his eyes cold. 'Let me make this clear: Here, you have no rights. You're not a person. You are a thing. A tool to be used, to be studied, to be... kept alive.' He leaned in, further, inches away, voice low and chilling. 'And believe me, we'll do everything in our power to keep you alive for as long as necessary. We need the secrets in your head, and we'll extract them, no matter the cost. You don't even get a new lawyer. The one you saw at your trial was your last one.'

Steve-o's lips twitched, a smirk threatening to form, but he swallowed it. He had heard worse threats before. He had outlasted the best, the most skilled torturers. But something about the finality in the warden's tone, something about the cold efficiency of this place, made his insides twist. This was not like the others. Not what he expected.

The warden did not wait for a response. He motioned to the guards, who stepped forward to strip him of his clothes, even his underwear, and any last remnants of freedom. A soft, mechanical click echoed in the room as he heard a buzzing sound.

'Your new life begins now,' Warden Sinclair said. 'Welcome to the Citadel. Now shave the fuckers head.'

Half an hour later he was fitted with a fresh set of clothes and a microchip had been implanted in the rear of his left calf.

He had expected nothing less of a supermax prison. He cared for none of it. His mission was over. He just wanted mind-numbing boredom for the rest of his days. A chance to reflect on his life, what he had achieved and even if they put him in solitary confinement he would be alone with his thoughts.

He was shoved forward out of the initiation room and marched up a gently sloping concrete corridor. On the right-hand side, a cell door was open. It was made of thick unpainted steel, and a two-inch-thick glass window was at eye height. Glancing inside he saw a single bed, a toilet and a wash basin. But no window. The light came from a strip of LED lights above and there were two cameras in the ceiling.

'Cheers bro,' Steve-o said in his plucky Australian accent. Despite not getting the kind of cell he had envisaged.

The warden slammed him hard in the back causing him to hit the floor hard.

'You're gonna love it here you bastard. The lights change colour every half hour. We knock on your door every twenty minutes to make sure you're still in there and alive. Your meals are not in a communal area, they are unceremoniously shoved through the slit at the bottom of the door. You only have one roll of toilet paper per week, and it feels like sandpaper. Plus, you will have nothing to read or write on. No access to lawyers, family or friends because guess what, this place doesn't exist. You are not going to see another human being other than the guards and they will definitely not be your friends. They all look identical, don't have routines you can learn and don't have a sense of humour. Good night, fuck head. Your only purpose here is to rot and give us what we need.'

The door closed with a hydraulic hiss followed by the metallic clunk of half a dozen metal bolts sliding home.

Steve-o clutched his bedding briefly. This was not what he thought Citadel was going to be like. He had been lied to by his employer, his mentor and muse. He felt like saying, 'I'll kill him when I get out of here,' but now he knew he was beyond any help. But he felt the warden had forgotten one important thing. He could still have access to medical staff if he complained enough or feigned illness.

Then the sound of a baton slamming his cell door shook his reverie.

'Oh, I almost forgot,' Warden Sinclair shouted, 'If you get sick no doctor will be appointed to you and if you try and commit suicide... I say go for it. Why? Because they pay me too much to care about a piece of shit like you. Lights out in twenty. Oh, and then back on in twenty... then off, then on and so on...'

Steve-o heard the warden's voice trail off as he left him while still rattling off a list of things that would become a daily occurrence and also banging on other cell doors.

He shivered.