

## Redacted 10

Benny lifted his arm, casting a shadow over his eyes. The sunlight filtering through the force field above The School for American Presidents was bright today. He wondered what a droplet of rain would feel like on his forehead or how a gust of wind would feel when it ruffled through his long brown hair. Or how a real horsehair paint brush would feel on real canvas. Or how life would be different if he didn't have this predetermined destiny.

The bubbling international tensions of the 22<sup>nd</sup> century and the grave global mistakes of former presidents had marked the start of a new election system. The ancient bipartisan Electoral College was finally scrapped in exchange for a more logical approach: genetically engineering presidents. Every four years, citizens now voted for the future president's genetic characteristics on a ratings ballot. Each president-elect was raised at The School for American Presidents, trained to be a patriotic leader and hidden from the world until his or her 20<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Benny pulled off his embroidered "Presidents School" long-sleeve and dropped it on the concrete, revealing the plaid uniform underneath. The other four students were already in the field, assuming their normal Approved Recreational Activities. Xavier, too, was in his usual spot, the ant hills on the playground. His scraggly blonde hair bobbed up and down as he ran around searching for ant colonies. The ants were most active now, a few hours before sunset, so he could burn multiple at one time with his magnifying glass. Or maybe he would skip the ants and catch some lizards today, like he did last Thursday. Benny chuckled at his folly. He was the cutest of the bunch, but definitely the weirdest.

Benny grabbed the least frayed canvas and paint brush from one of the caretakers. "What are you going to paint today, Twenty-Four?" she asked.

"The future."

She raised a quizzical eyebrow. “Well now, make it appropriate, Twenty-Four. We don’t want a repeat of last week, do we? No made-up, silly, nonsense future. Stick to facts not fiction, Mr. Creativity 2.”

He smiled only with his mouth, his eyes remaining devoid of emotion. “Mhm anything for you, Ms. Peters.”

“Ah, well there’s the Understanding 9 I was looking for! Go have fun, Twenty-Four. But not TOO much fun. Twenty-Three is waiting for you at the table.” He nodded. She lifted her chin in pomposity and turned to the patio area. The other caretakers were mindlessly setting up the podium for current President Seventeen’s visit in two days while their eyes stayed glued to the daily 5 PM news hologram broadcast. Today’s breaking news: “New Missile Base Located in Russian-Occupied Mexico.”

The tall grass tickled Benny’s calves as he carried the supplies into the field. He gently set the canvas down on the picnic table. Elizabeth’s dark skin glowed in the light. She was already halfway done with a knitted scarf. “It’s a little bit hot to be making a scarf, don’t you think?” he pried.

“It’s not for me, silly. It’s for my future kids.”

*Why’s she always talking about kids? Isn’t it a little early?* Not even her prominent cat eye makeup was enough to remind him that she was four years older, his direct predecessor. He never felt the age difference when they were younger. Afterall, she was the closest to him in age, aside from Xavier, Twenty-Five.

“Are you sure they didn’t elect you to have Baby Fever 10 or something?” he teased.

“Hah hah, very funny.” She looked up from her stitch for a moment, eyed the caretakers on the patio, and went back to her stitch. “Now don’t joke around too much, Benny.”

“Damn, all of you are always so serious.” He laid the first bumpy stroke on the canvas. His new piece: a futuristic self-portrait of a muralist busking on the streets of Paris. He recalled one image in his History textbook about the city of love, before it was occupied and resurrected as the industrial epicenter of Russian metal fabrication. He felt the bumpy grains of the canvas parchment below the wobbly brush as he outlined the Parisian cobblestones and addressed Elizabeth once again. “Are you happy?”

“Of course, I’m happy.” She reached the corner stitch of the scarf.

“Don’t you feel trapped? Don’t you feel like your destiny has been set without your say? Is this really the life you want? Because it sure isn’t the one I want.”

“SHUSH, Benny,” she shouted, eyeing one of the brawnier male caretakers who had turned from the hologram news and was now intently staring at their table. “You better be quiet before you get yourself into a load of trouble.”

He ignored her. “But how can I be Creativity 2? How is that even possible? Art is my dream. It’s my passion. I’m MEANT to be an artist, Elizabeth.”

She threaded a new strand of yarn onto her knitting needles. “You know what the caretakers say. It’s just a phase. Everyone who graduates from the Presidents School program WANTS to be president. At one point, I thought I wanted to go into fashion, but now I’ve never wanted anything more than to be president. Don’t you want to fix what the old presidents started and lead our country to victory against Russia?”

*No.* “I just don’t see how 14 years can be a phase. Elizabeth, I’m telling you, I’m different. They made a mistake with me or something. I’m not meant to be president. I think I need to see my election files.”

“Everyone here is meant for leadership. You’re not different, Benny. Look, even Xavier over there is meant to be president,” she said, extending her yarn needle towards the ant hills.

Xavier was sitting cross-legged, intensely focusing on his magnifying glass. Benny giggled.

*Weird kid.*

He refocused. “I just don’t think this role is for me. I’m meant to be an…” Suddenly, the canvas disappeared from under his brush, leaving a dark black line of paint through the center of the Parisian donut shop he had just finished painting. Benny looked up to his left to confront the thief, the caretaker who had previously taken interest in their conversation.

“Twenty-Four, what did you paint?”

“Oh, it’s just me busking in Paris.”

“You know Paris doesn’t exist anymore. Are you trying to spread misinformation? You know that the founding principle of our society is accurate information dissemination.”

“No, I was just painting a surrealistic scene.”

“Why did you paint yourself as an artist? You are not going to be an artist.”

Benny clicked his tongue and crossed his arms. “I was imagining a life in which I could do what I actually wanted.”

Elizabeth clutched her needles and gasped. The caretaker’s scrunched bushy eyebrows popped up, revealing wide, disbelieving, black eyes underneath. With a new vengeance, he placed both hands at the corners of the canvas and pierced through Benny’s gaze, eyebrow wrinkles deeper set than before. He pulled in opposite directions. Benny breathlessly watched the threads of the canvas tear until it ripped directly in half.

“You are going to be the president. Not an artist.”

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During Approved Recreational Time the following day, none of the caretakers were offering Benny his usual art supplies. Instead, they crowded around the 5 PM news hologram broadcast, elbow to elbow, with bated breaths. Outside of the force field, dark smoke trails scattered the skyline. Benny grabbed his paint brush and a fresh canvas from the craft table, listening to the distant broadcast as he made his way into the field, “Yes, and Brian, you can see behind me the flames coming from the nuclear reactor site, and the fire has engulfed adjacent towns of Hillsvie, Stratford, and Redfield. Rescuers have confirmed at least 200 deaths so far, and the search for bodies continues. We urge our viewers, if you are anywhere within a 500-mile radius of ground zero, please evacuate immediately. We do not know how many more missiles the Russian government has fired at us.” Benny stopped in his muddy tracks and abruptly turned to the hologram screen. The headline read, “Breaking News: Russian Missile Attack on Nuclear Plant in South Dakota, Hundreds Dead.”

Benny’s mouth gaped. *The perfect distraction.* He ran to Elizabeth, sitting at the picnic table, and dropped his supplies. She was looking down at her knitted scarf and listening to her portable hologram broadcast, now projecting aerial footage of the nuclear plant on the table. “Elizabeth, I need to find out what’s up with my election records. I’m going to leave campus and get the files from the library outside.”

“Benny, are you crazy? We haven’t left the campus since birth. You’re going to get caught.”

“No, I’m not. All of the caretakers are distracted right now.”

“How do you even know there’s a library outside? I thought there were only like a few libraries left in the country, since we can get everything on our holograms.”

“Remember those records we had to read in English class? I found out they were from some library on the outside. Some things like election records aren’t in the hologram database.”

“Benny, this is a terrible idea. How are you even going to get out of the force field?”

“The caretakers always come in through the control center building right outside the gate. I’m just going to go through there. Can you cover for me? If they ask, tell them I’m just with one of the tutors getting extra help on my Public Speaking assignment.”

She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply through her nose. The reporter’s frantic voice emanating from the picnic table filled her silence. “Okay. But make it quick. Get back before the end of Recreation.”

He rolled up his sleeve and set a timer on his watch. “I’ll be back in 45 minutes.”

He walked over to the fence at the edge of the field and with two quick glances right and left, no caretakers or other students in sight, launched himself over the fence. He bent his knees and embraced the impact as he landed squarely on the other side. *Maybe weekly PE is actually paying off.* The control tower, white-bricked and looming, was only twenty feet away. He scurried to the door that read “Authorized Personnel Only. No Students Allowed.” and opened it just enough to see the security room window inside. Both guards behind the glass were turned away, facing the hologram in the back corner projecting the same newscast. He inched his way through the door, ducked beneath the window, and crawled under the turnstile at the other end of the room, out of view from the guards.

Emerging into a bright hallway, he walked towards the gaping metal doorframe at the end, which reflected the faint yellow glow of the force field glued to its edges. The glow was accompanied by a low-pitched static hum. *I’ve never been this close to the edge.* On the other side of the doorframe, the sky was lined with gray clouds and floating debris. *Must be from the*

*missile attack*. Through the smoky haze, he could see a small brown building on the other side of the street. A hologram projection etched the words “Library” into its side. Benny clenched his fists and held his breath. He took one long stride across the doorframe. The smoke smelled like freedom.


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“Fourth bookshelf, middle row,” the library clerk said. Benny tipped his hat and walked over, fingers trailing over every dusty book in reach. The smell reminded him of canvas paper, but here it felt older, muskier.

He scanned the middle row full of yellow manila envelopes. Most were government documents of nuclear energy expenses, national debts, transcripts of American correspondence with Russian army generals. One folder, however, was orange. He pulled it out, careful not to displace the others, and read the front cover to himself. *Election records. Jackpot.*

The first page in the folder read “President One” at the top, and each of the election criteria were listed below with their corresponding numbers. He fingered quickly through the pages, skipping to his own. *AHA! Creativity set to level 10! I knew it all along! Why would the caretakers lie to me? Or maybe they don't know? Wait a second....*

PRESIDENT TWENTY-FOUR

CHARISMA	10
KINDNESS	8
UNDERSTANDING	9
VENGEFULNESS	2
AGGRESSIVENESS	1
FEARLESNESS	3
CREATIVITY	10
MODESTY	10
	10

NOTE: 



*A redacted ninth criteria set at level 10? AND a redacted note at the bottom?* Benny flipped through the rest of the files. None of the others had a ninth criteria or a note at the bottom, let alone any redacted information.

He walked up to the clerk, lifted the orange folder over her desk, and pointed to the redaction. “Do you know why this is redacted? And where I can find an unredacted version?”

She looked up from her reading at Benny, unimpressed. “The only unredacted file would be in the president’s cabin...in the White House.”

He sighed. “Do you know what the redaction might actually say underneath?”

She lifted her eyebrow and eyed him up and down. “Why do you want to know, kid?”

“Just curious.”

“Hmmm, sure, let me take a look at my records.” She rolled over to the desk strewn with papers behind her. Benny looked to the side and tapped his foot. The ticks of the hologram wall clock echoed through the bookcases. *9 minutes left.* A bead of forehead sweat landed between his shoes. He tapped faster.

“Excuse me ma’am, did you find anything?”

“Sorry kid, still looking.”

He nervously flipped through the files again. *Twenty-three, twenty-four, twenty-five.* Xavier’s file. He traced each criterion. *Charisma 5, Kindness 3, Understanding 3, Vengefulness 6, Aggressiveness...* His mouth fell open. *10.*

His thoughts immediately raced. *Aggressiveness 10? Why such a high number? Why would people elect to have a president with Aggressiveness 10?* A sour taste began festering in his mouth, and his stomach turned inside out. *What is happening? Why are both of our files*

*messed up? Did the scientists mess up? Was there Russian interference? Oh God...* His lunch food began working its way up his esophagus.

*Fresh air. Need air.* He looked at the library doors, dark cedarwood with intricate decorative carvings. No, the door was too far. He wouldn't make it. But more importantly, *Why is the door glowing blue...?*

Within seconds, sirens emanated from beyond the library entrance. Men in blue, accompanied by small drones overhead, slammed the doors open, smokey debris covering the library books nearby. The School for American Presidents' Head Administrator Bronson trailed closely behind.

"Twenty-Four. What do you think you're doing outside of campus?"

Benny clutched his stomach and stammered, "I...I was just trying to figure out if I was Creativity 2 or not."

"Twenty-Four, why would you question the caretakers? They know what they're doing. Our country's system is perfect, and the Presidents School is an extension of that. There are no flaws."

"But the caretakers lied, and Xavier is Aggressiveness 10, and my file has something..." He couldn't hold it back anymore. He unleashed his entire digested beef stew onto Bronson's shoes.

"Enough! We're bringing you back to campus immediately."

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Hours later, Benny stared at the white brick ceiling illuminated by moonlight above his bed. Xavier snored gently on the lower bunk. *This just isn't right. Something's going on here.* His endless questions grew deafening. What were the redactions? Why would the citizens vote

for qualities like Xavier's, and why did the caretakers lie about Benny's creativity? Was Benny truly destined to be a president, or was there some sort of mistake? Was he different from the rest?

His screaming thoughts were interrupted by a light knock at the door. He sat up. Elizabeth opened the door slightly, letting the hallway light penetrate the moonlit darkness. "Benny!" she whispered.

He whispered back, "Elizabeth, what are you doing? You're not supposed to be here."

"I had to see if you were alright before our big assembly with Seventeen tomorrow. I saw the police escorting you back here in handcuffs," she said, approaching the tail end of the bed.

"Apparently the library clerk ratted me out."

"See, I knew libraries were shady." Benny cracked a smile.

"Listen, Elizabeth, something's up." He jumped down from the top bunk and landed on the carpet in front of her. "My file said that I'm Creativity 10. And get this. I have a ninth quality set at 10, but the quality was redacted in the files"

"No way."

"Yeah, and there's more. I looked in his files too," he said, nodding to the snoring outline of Xavier on the lower bunk. "He's Aggressiveness 10."

She gasped, covering her mouth with both hands. "What? Are you sure?"

"Positive. And I've been thinking about it all day. You know how he burns ants on the field every day?"

"Yeah, but he's just a little rascal. He's always been like that. He's only ten years old."

“But last Thursday, I saw him catching those tiny lizards in the field and skinning them alive. And right before he fell asleep today, he told me he wished there was a giant magnifying glass so he could kill humans just like his ants.”

Her pupils dilated. “I see what you mean. But why would people vote for something like that— Aggressiveness 10? It doesn’t seem beneficial in any way.”

“I don’t know. I’m thinking maybe the scientists made a mistake with me and Xavier. Or maybe there was Russian interference or something. I just know that I’m not meant to be this way. I’m different. And I think Xavier is too.”

“Russian interference. Now THAT would make for some breaking news.”

Benny paused and suddenly jumped up. “Wait, Elizabeth! That’s just it! This would make for breaking news!”

“What do you mean...”

“THIS is my ticket out of presidency. This is my chance to follow my own dreams. I just have to expose the election flaws to the media! They’d eat this up!”

“You could be right, but how would you expose them?”

“The assembly with Seventeen tomorrow! There’s definitely going to be press coverage when she delivers her speech. I’ll get on stage and tell the world what’s going on.”

“Benny, you’re going to get in massive trouble. Bronson is going to eat you alive.”

“He won’t be able to once I expose these flaws. This is my ticket out.”

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The next morning, Benny nervously tapped his foot as all five students, even Twenty-Seven, with the help of a caretaker, stood in front of their chairs in a straight line. Camera crews stood behind, quiet enough to hear a pin drop, and suit-clad men in dark sunglasses lined the

perimeter of the field. An all-black SUV with heavily tinted windows stopped just before the podium, and out emerged President Seventeen, tall, beautiful, and stately as ever. Instantly, camera flashes engulfed her long figure as she climbed the stage to the podium. Benny's foot tapping accelerated.

Seventeen delivered her speech, ending with a statement that "despite the unjust loss of life this past weekend at the hands of the Russians, the United States will not stand down, and each future president before me today will never forget the actions of the Russians and will always retaliate with full force." She yielded the rest of her speech time for questions.

Benny raised his hand and waited his turn. *Come on, come on. Pick me.* The President finally pointed to him on the second round of questions.

"Madame President, are you aware of the flaws in our election system?"

She stared blankly at him. "Excuse me? Twenty-Four? That has nothing to do with the presidency and is an inappropriate question. Please only ask questions about my experience as President."

*Keep going. It's your ticket out.* "With all due respect, Madame President, I would like to inform you that there have been some severe mistakes within our election system. There has potentially been Russian interference in the election, and our entire political system is at risk."

"This assembly is an opportunity for you to learn about how the presidency works and to ask me about my plans for retaliation against the Russian missile attack in South Dakota, not about the election procedure. I will not be taking any more questions on this matter."

*Artist. You're meant to be an artist.* "Madame President! I'm trying to warn you that the safety of our country is at stake. The Russians may be sabotaging us," he began shouting over the reporters' mumbles. The brawny men in black approached from all corners of the field.

“Next question,” she leaned into the podium microphone and pointed at Xavier instead.

*Imagine how a horsehair paintbrush feels on real canvas. This is your chance to break out of the system. YELL LOUDER.* “Madame President! Please believe me! Something is wrong with the election system,” Benny shouted, drowned out by the worried whispers amongst reporters and caretakers. Two of the secret service men grabbed his shoulders as the other two reached to restrain his legs. He threw his head into the left man’s eye and squirmed out of the other’s grasp, falling forward and crawling through the legs of the man in front. He sprinted to the stage and pulled himself onto the red carpet, using the podium for leverage. The president stepped to the side as he grabbed the podium microphone and stared directly into the camera lights.

Out of breath, he doubled over the podium and shouted into the microphone between gasps. “The election system is flawed! I am President Twenty-Four, and I am telling you something is not right!” Each reporter stood mouth ajar. “The election records show that I have some sort of extra election criterion that has been redacted. And that President Twenty-Five, my successor, is Aggressiveness 10 and has violent tendencies.” He turned to Seventeen, “Madame President, you must have seen the election records! You have the unredacted files. You know exactly what I’m talking about!”

She suddenly grinned. “Indeed.” The secret service agents began approaching the stage, handcuffs at the ready, but she held up a halting hand. “Let’s give the boy a chance.” She winked to the agent on her right.

Benny turned to her. “Thank you.” *That was kind of easy...Maybe she’s just nice.* He turned back to the reporters holding outstretched microphones to catch his every word. “I am not sure if it was the Russians, a corrupt government official of our own, a scientist with a personal

agenda, or simply a mistake by the American voters, but I am not meant to play this presidential role, and neither is my successor. The election system is highly flawed and must be changed.”

Seventeen slowly approached the podium once more and extended her hand to meet Benny’s. “Thank you for your diligence and patriotism, Twenty-Four. School has taught you well.” Sweat dripped from his forehead and adrenaline pounded through his ears. He gently bowed his head. *She actually believes me?*

She overtook the microphone and placed both hands on the podium. “Citizens of America,” she began, staring directly into the cameras, “Twenty-Four has come to us with a valid concern. We must treat his warning about the election system as diligently as any other domestic or foreign threat. I formally invite Twenty-Four to work with me and Congress in order to draft a new election procedure. We will speak more on this topic later.” Benny gawked. *It actually worked.* She covered the microphone and whispered to him, “We’ll talk later. Why don’t you go with my secret service agents, and they will escort you to a private room where we can speak more?” She winked once again to the men in black.

Benny thanked her and climbed off the podium stage. The men walked alongside him as they exited the field. *Why was that so much easier than I thought it would be? Does she really believe me? Does she know my secret...*

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One year and countless Congressional hearings later, Benny sat in the oval office alone, waiting for President Seventeen to return from her meeting with the Department of Foreign Affairs. He leaned back in the suede chair and rested his dress shoe-clad feet on the president’s table. With Benny’s help, President Seventeen and Congress passed a new election law based entirely on free will. No Electoral College, no bipartisan groups, no genetic engineering, no

predetermined destiny. Whoever wanted to run for president would simply be enrolled in a condensed leadership training program to gain election eligibility. Benny and the other students would finally be able to pursue any careers they wanted, and importantly, Xavier wouldn't become president. America would be safe, and elections would be fair at last.

Benny reclined with a grin, proud of his early contribution to the nation's political system. He considered repainting his torn self-portrait, but this time with an Oval Office setting, rather than a Parisian cobblestone one. He looked at President Seventeen's papers and manila folders strewn across the desk. *Folders, folders...* He rocked forward in his chair, his feet planting firmly on the carpet. *FOLDERS.*

He immediately called on the intercom for President Seventeen's assistant to bring him the election records. She entered minutes later holding it, the same shade of orange as the library copy. He eagerly flipped through, landing on Xavier's file.

A red stamp at the top of the page read, "DECOY: GOVERNMENT-MANUFACTURED" in bold capital letters. He furrowed his brow and flipped to the next page. Once again, the stamp read, "DECOY: GOVERNMENT-MANUFACTURED." All subsequent files bared the stamp, but none before Xavier's did. *Decoys? As in, these weren't from actual elections?*

He quickly flipped to his own. Unredacted.



## PRESIDENT TWENTY-FOUR

CHARISMA	10
KINDNESS	8
UNDERSTANDING	9
VENGEFULNESS	2
AGGRESSIVENESS	1
FEARLESNESS	3
CREATIVITY	10
MODESTY	10
REBELLIOUSNESS	10

NOTE: THE UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT HAS ADDED THE LAST CRITERIA, "REBELLIOUSNESS," BY DEFAULT WITHOUT AN ELECTION PROCESS. "CREATIVITY" WAS ALSO SET TO 10, CONTRARY TO THE VOTERS' DECISION. THESE CHANGES WERE AIDED BY GENETICISTS AND POLITICAL SCIENTISTS WHO HAVE PREDICTED THAT, AT THIS TIME, THE COUNTRY WILL REQUIRE A RADICAL CHANGE IN GOVERNMENT. TWENTY-FOUR WILL REBEL AND END THE ERA OF ENGINEERED PRESIDENTS, BEGINNING A NEW POLITICAL ERA. THIS WILL BE THE EASIEST WAY TO COVERTLY REFORM THE ELECTION SYSTEM WITHOUT CITIZENS BELIEVING THERE HAS BEEN EXCESSIVE GOVERNMENTAL INVOLVEMENT. ALL CITIZENS MUST CONTINUE TO BELIEVE THAT THEY HAVE FREE WILL AND A VOICE IN OUR "DEMOCRACY."

He dropped the folder, its edge piercing the soft red-carpet floor of the oval office.

*Rebelliousness 10.* He had only been a government pawn, and destiny was manifest.