



**WE, THE  
WATCHED**

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ADAM BENDER



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*For my parents, who let me play with the typewriter  
and encouraged me to write.*



## CHAPTER 1

## AWAKE

The light is blinding. I cough up pine syrup, shake off the sweat and dew in a shiver. A million needles stab; a woodpecker hammers and pounds. I roll away from the light and scurry into the cool shadow of a towering oak.

Stop. It's just a nightmare. I'm still in bed; just need to open my eyes. Just get them open and this will all be over.

Something itches my neck—a tick, maybe. I picture the insect's dark head sink into my skin, its abdomen ballooning red. I sit up fast, scratching all the way.

Oh my God—I'm not dreaming.

I thrash about, a futile attempt to improve the reception. Nothing makes sense; all I get is static and a strengthened headache. The woodpecker hacks away.

I close my eyes and let a slow, warm breeze brush through my hair.

“Think, damn it,” I breathe at last. “How did you get here?”

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My clothes are damp and feature spots of mud, but nothing is torn. Stranger still, my body aches, but my skin shows no signs of cuts or even bruising. It's like I just up and decided to spend a night in the woods—but forgot the tent and sleeping bag. Was I drunk? I can't remember anything about last night.

Frantically, I search my pockets. No wallet, no keys, no cellphone... only thing in there is a crumpled-up brochure.

"You have to be kidding me," I groan, tossing it on the grass.

Unless...

I snap up the ball of paper, carefully unfurl it. Emblazoned across the top are miracle words: *National Park Visitor's Map*. Better, someone's drawn two circles in Sharpie—one around the end marker of a trail and the other around a station labeled *MONORAIL*. I must have used the map to get here. But why?

Sitting isn't doing me any good, and the headache's starting to subside, anyway. I'm sure things will come together as soon as I get home—if I can find it.

Shut up, you couldn't have honestly forgotten—

No, I didn't forget. I couldn't have. I'm just disoriented still. This is what happens when you sleep outside on the grass all night. I don't know what hallucinogen I did last night before coming here, but I'm never doing it again.

Ok, so where's the trail?

I stare into the wilderness. Could I actually have taken a trail to get here? I was too wasted to remember anything, but sober enough to stick to a path?

Wait. Is that—?

The tree on the other end of the clearing—something's

scratched into its trunk. I stagger to my feet and limp the rest of the way. My socks squish.

Graffiti—some idiot decided to take a pocketknife and carve the numeral 7. The whole thing is senseless and illogical, but it confirms civilization is nearby. I squint into the vegetation and pan slowly, left to right. My eyes land on a path—overgrown with weeds, but a path nonetheless.

The density of green is overwhelming. And the birds—the damn birds are everywhere, all singing for mates. Too bad I’m not here on a hiking trip.

What the hell is wrong with me? I’m lost in the woods, don’t have the slightest idea why, and what do I do? Make jokes! Make stupid jokes! If I’d just concentrate I might be out of this mess already.

Or—I don’t know—at least maybe I would have built a hatchet to protect me from the forces of nature.

A new sound: trickling water. I dash for the source and almost run right through a stream. Splashing and guzzling ensues.

The ripples fade. I don’t recognize the youthful eyes staring back at me, but a touch confirms the gaping mouth and patchy beard are my own.

The bushes on the other side of the stream rustle and snap, and two large deer tiptoe out into the open. They stare at me, bodies frozen stiff. I take one more hit of the cool liquid and rise to my feet. “Enjoy,” I say with a wave toward the water. The doe, apparently alarmed by my suggestion, turns around

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and bolts back into the shrubbery. The buck continues to stare.

I force a grin. He runs after her.

Oh God—now I'm talking to animals. If I don't find humans soon I'm probably going to end up completely insane. But all I can see is the green and all I can hear are the birds. Who's to say I actually woke up in the place circled on the map? I could be anywhere. Is this really even a trail?

Shut up. Keep going. Follow the trail.

Winged insects hiss in my ear and bite my arms and face, apparently attracted to my sweat and extreme body odor. The further into the vegetation I push, the more the bugs seem to attack, the more they foil my pitiable attempts to distract myself from the present.

This is insane. I don't know where I am, I don't how I got here, and I don't recognize my face. I can't afford to rest—I have to keep going until I find somewhere I can get help and sort things out. I'll be ok if I just keep moving.

Maybe I shouldn't have got going so fast—should've looked around where I woke a few minutes more. I might have found some answers right there. God, why didn't I think of that? Maybe I should turn back.

No, right now, all that's important is survival. I should probably call it a miracle I woke up at all. I might have been on the brink of death. And if that's true, I'm not going to waste a second chance at life scrounging around for hints to my past. That's like—I don't know—selfish or something. Screw that.

It's too much like a dream—the disorientation, the pres-

sure to reach a conclusion that never comes. But as hard as I strain, I just can't get my eyes open any wider, can't find that safe, cozy bed. Like it or not, this is reality, and I'm getting the feeling it won't get cut short by an alarm clock.

My eyes lift to the horizon and swerve nearly 90 degrees with the path. It turns away from a strange blue patch of light—a surreal end of the forest. Curious, I drift off the beaten trail and through the thin layer of trees.

The cliff drops more feet than I have time to estimate, but below and far beyond is a shore-side metropolis. The skyscrapers and white-speckled ocean are as familiar as *déjà vu*, but I can't attach a name to the picture. My eyes ride an ivory-toned structure from the city edge back to a large, tin-roofed building about a mile below.

The monorail station. The map was right.

I return to the trail, trot along it with renewed energy. The path slopes down the mountainside. I glance up at the sun to get an idea of the time, but dark clouds have invaded the sky.

My mind replays the awakening, the futile scan for meaning. I scream wildly. A bird returns the cry.

Calm down, damn it. Take things one step at a time. Just make it to the city and the haze will clear. You're hungry and aching—of course you can't think straight. Of course you can't—

My surroundings snap me back into the present like a well-timed slap to the face. The path has opened up into a field—no, a cemetery. Cold fog seethes around the graves and

down my spine. The stones all have the same stark contour, but they've chipped individually with age. A granite soldier watches over them, a menacing hawk perched on one outstretched arm. Below his boots are words: *These soldiers gave their lives for Unity. They will be remembered for Heroism in a time of Great Civil Strife.*

I glance upwards, freeze under the hawk's icy stare.

The train station can't be far. This is a graveyard; there's got to be at least a parking lot nearby. If I can find that, I can find the train.

I pick a random direction and move on. Every advance through the white curtain reveals another hundred tombstones, and the taste of stale death comes with every inhale. It's irritatingly quiet—even the birds have shut up. I need to get out of here.

I'm running. My ankle screams, the world blurs, and I'm face-first in the dirt, caught in death's shadow. Something cold licks my neck—my eyes bolt skyward and watch several hundred liquid daggers scream into my face. I scramble to my feet and sprint through another marble row.

The storm grows torrential, and the rain's static drone amplifies my lungs' wheezing. My legs give out just as I reach a crumbling flight of stairs and a war-torn chapel—shelter. I keel over and spit thick yellow mucus into the grass.

The chapel's rotten doors are two times my height and at least ten times my age. I push hard and tumble through. The fall sets fire to my arms and legs, pierces them with jagged shards of red and yellow. The windows blew out long ago—all the color's dropped to the rock floor. I clench my teeth and

tug at the glass.

The old church smells of mildew and I can see why: without glass, the rain comes through the windows in buckets. I lumber down an aisle that zigzags between twenty-or-so off-kilter pews, and find a seat somewhere the middle that's as far from the water as I can get.

God—what happened to this place?

I pull out the map and trace my path to the cemetery with a spare finger. The monorail isn't far. As I figured, there's a parking lot nearby, and the train station looks like a quick jaunt from there.

The glossy paper reflects a blinding lightning flash into my eyes. Stupid storm. Why did this have to happen now? Dramatic effect?

Suddenly, my right sock is wet and sticky.

Oh, my ankle's bleeding. Great. Must have cut it when I fell down. Probably aren't any tissues in here.

I bend over, use my hand to press my pant leg against the wound. Hope this helps.

It doesn't make sense. None of this makes sense.

I tug at the map and scan it for any additional information about my whereabouts. But there's nothing – just a big forest called National Park.

My stomach rumbles. When was the last time I ate? The pain seems to intensify the more I focus on it, and the more I ache, the more attention I seem to allow. I can feel acid in the back of my throat, demanding.

“You know what?” I say aloud for whatever reason. The train station is probably sheltered too. There's no point wasting more time here. Anyway, I'm already wet and gross. I'll get myself cleaned up when I make it to the city.

A peculiar quiet takes hold of the church the second I stand up. I glance up at the window. The storm is over—or at least slowing down for the time being.

“Please, don’t start up again,” I pray as I reach the stairs back into the graveyard. There’s still a sprinkle, but it’s a vast improvement from five minutes ago.

My ankle burns with every step, but I grit my teeth and limp through the graves like a fresh zombie. Several hundred tombstones later, I find more cracked marble steps. They descend into a parking lot.

I scratch at a red mosquito bite. Too bad I didn’t wake up next to can of repellent.

The lot is empty, but a large yellow sign with the word *MONORAIL* and an arrow gives me direction. One marker leads to another. This one’s vandalized with the word *SUCKS*, sprayed in red over a crossed-out *RAIL*. Once I get over the cleverness of it all, I continue on through a giant, grass-covered metal pipe. I plod into the dark and dank passageway; it twists a few times before finally opening into light.

The monorail station stabs through the pastoral beauty of the land. Only the unkempt ivy twisting over its dark metal surface keep the structure rooted in the forest. Jet black stairs climb from the earth into the blue sky just beyond, but their entrance is gated and watched by a tall, clean-shaven man standing erect in navy blue uniform.

“Good afternoon,” he greets. “Put your arms in the air.”

I follow his advice and he starts patting down my shirt.

“You don’t look well. Why are your clothes torn?”

“I tripped, fell through some bushes.”

“You’re early. The train won’t be here for another two hours.”

“I didn’t have a choice.”

He stares me cold in the eyes, calculating. Then with a quick turn he pulls open the gate.

The steps clank under my feet and the wind whistles loud in my ears. A whirring camera attached to the overhang meets me at the top and then swivels away. The station is as empty as the parking lot. The only sign of life comes from some stenciled graffiti on the wall, an eerily realistic jet black silhouette of a man with fiery red eyes.

I slump against the wall and gaze vacantly at a tight entanglement of trees just beyond the tracks. I’m awake.

## CHAPTER 2

# MONORAIL

“If you see someone leave a bag,” an automated voice is saying, “kindly ask them, ‘Is that your bag?’ If it’s not theirs, please alert the station security center immediately. We value your help in keeping Monorail safe.”

A clean-cut and pot-bellied old man steps onto the platform—the first person to arrive in the near two hours I’ve been waiting. He walks by, takes a seat a few benches away and begins eying his wristwatch.

A soft hum grows into an angry, mechanical roar. For an instant the silver bullet seems to move in slow motion. The wind rushes through my hair, and I take a step back as the train hurtles into the station.

The steel doors slide apart. “Welcome,” it says.

The monorail is obsessively clean; oversized modular windows provide the only color. Thankfully, the car is half-

filled with people. The man who'd waited an astounding 30 seconds for the train to come takes a seat adjacent to mine. The doors snap shut, and a bored-looking fellow in a conductor's hat shifts through the car.

Shit! The whole concept of paying for public transportation somehow slipped my mind. I frantically search my pockets for money but come up empty.

The pudgy old man next to me is staring. "Are you broke, son?" he asks.

"I...uh, I could have sworn I had—"

"Don't worry about it," he says with a wave of the hand. "I'll cover you."

"Thank you—I'm really sorry to make you—"

"No worries, happened to me the other day," he laughs. "What's your name?"

My name... Oh my God, I can't even remember my name. I cycle through all that's left of my memory, search for anything that sounds even remotely usable. What was that graffiti I saw? On that tree—it was a number. What was it?

"Seven," I say. The announcement takes me by surprise. "Um, yeah, call me Seven." Great, I just named myself after tree graffiti. Well done, man, well done.

"I'm George." He drops a handful of loose change into the conductor's hands. "This is for my friend here," he explains with a nerve-wracking grin.

"Thanks again," I say weakly.

"You're lucky I was sitting here. Most people these days are too paranoid to loan money to a perfect stranger...let alone one as ragged-lookin' as yourself."

"Heh...thanks." My eyes lower to the floor. How many times am I gonna have to thank this guy?

I gaze up at one of the many advertisements lining the space above the windows. This one isn't so much a promotion. It reads in big block letters: *PATRIOTS ARE THE TRUE. HERETICS ARE THE DAMNED.*

“Visiting the cemetery, eh?” George asks me, still beaming like a saint.

“Yeah, it's quite...”

“*Magnificent*, isn't it?” George interrupts. “I have some old friends buried out there—gave their lives in that Great War. If it weren't for them, we'd still be overrun with heretics.”

An elaboration on that would be helpful, of course, but I don't want to sound like an utter moron and ask about a war everyone seems to think is so goddamned *great*. I nod instead, but he still takes it as a cue to continue.

“My unit actually fought near that cemetery. Of course, it was just a big field at the time. I think there were more trees too. Anywho, the government had just discovered the rebels' center of operations was deep in those woods. We were one of the troops that got sent in to take it down. Victory was in our reach! Oh, what a feeling! Have you ever thought about joining the Guard?”

“It's crossed my mind,” I say.

“I loved every minute of it—retired last year. I was eventually promoted to lieutenant!” George's eyes light up. “But where was I?”

“Victory was in your reach.”

“Ah yes, victory in our very grasp! What a rush of adrenaline! Made us a bit cocky, I s'pose—we were so *noisy* in

those woods. The rebels suddenly appeared and opened fire before we even got to their base! I dived behind a large boulder for cover—threw a grenade into the blaze! It was bloody—like nothing you’ve ever seen—but for such a noble cause!”

“Right.”

““If you’re going to keep your house tidy, you have to eliminate the termites”—that’s what my mother would always say. I’ll never forget that!”

George’s mood shifts to gloomy. “Jimmy didn’t make it—shot between the eyes—nothing we could do. He wouldn’t see the nation reunited. I dedicated every kill at the rebel base to that brave soul!” He swallows. “But what an adventure! What an absolutely exceptional—”

“So how long does it take the train to get to the city?”

“You’re not from around here, eh?”

“I’m on vacation.”

“Oh, how interesting!” he says. “Where do you hail from?”

Eventually, I decide I hail from “a small town up north.”

“Oh, I have some buddies up in Loganville,” George gushes. “Bob and Johnny! They fought beside me you know! They have some incredible war tales of their own, let me tell you! Why, Johnny, he took out an entire camp all on his lonesome. He was an explosives expert, see.”

“Ah,” I smile weakly.

“I’m sorry, I haven’t even answered your question yet, have I, my boy? We should be there within the hour.”

I frown.

“Didn’t you bring a book?”

I woke up in the middle of a fucking *forest*! “Uh no, I left

it behind by mistake.” I wish I didn’t have to be so dishonest with a guy his age. I just really don’t want this conversation to get anymore complex than it needs to.

“Shame, that. I’ve got a magazine if you’d like.”

“Oh, that would be great, thanks.” Dammit, that’s the fourth time I’ve thanked him. Good thing he’s handing me a reason to disengage.

The magazine is labeled *National News Weekly*. Emblazoned on its cover is a photograph of a fit, middle-aged man in soldier garb saluting and smiling intriguingly at something just above my head. A large caption below his neck reads *President Drake, Poised For Greatness!*

Perplexed, I glance at George, who’s smiling a bit stupidly at the landscape outside the train window. My eyes shift back to the magazine while my fingers flip to the cover story, *Leading Our Powerful Nation*. The article is a Q&A, composed more of big glossy pictures than text.

There’s not much in the way of an introduction, and I cringe at the first question: *How are things going overall?* I get the feeling this isn’t going to be that hard-hitting of a story, and I’m right. Question after question demands information on the health and happiness of Drake’s family. Apparently, they’re all *just dandy*, as the president describes it. Drake likes to call his wife Betty his *extra leg*. His daughter Sarah is about to graduate high school and plans to attend the president’s alma mater, National University. His son Tom just made the honor roll for the fourth straight semester at National.

I wonder if Drake’s offspring are actually smart. Wouldn’t

there be some incentive to pass the president's kids with flying colors? Not to be cynical or anything—it's not like I'm from around here.

*Q. How are you feeling as president?*

What kind of ridiculous, open-ended question is that? Maybe the reason Drake's son is doing so well is just that college professors in this country suck.

*Drake: Nothing could be better! The nation is the strongest it's been in years. And it was already the most powerful in the world, so I think we're doing pretty well. I'll be the first to admit that being elected president is somewhat intimidating at first, but I've attacked that beast and now the role and its responsibilities are really just a natural extension of my life.*

Despite the bold “Q” preceding it, the next question isn't actually a question.

*Q. The economy is booming.*

*Drake: The economy is stronger than it's ever been! The great thing about this fine nation is that with a little work, anyone can accomplish their life dreams. A colleague of mine commented to me yesterday that our nation is at its peak, the best it's ever been. I disagree. We will never be at our peak. Let us all keep working to be all that we can be.*

The subject turns to war—one's going on, I guess. Drake tells the reporter that *progress is being made* and that *the stage we're at right now is exactly where we should be*.

*Q. How is the heretic situation at home?*

*Drake: It's not a situation.*

George clears his throat. "Good news, eh?" he articulates so matter-of-factly it sounds more like a declaration than a question.

I pause long. "Yeah."

"This is *the finest* nation in the world!" the old man gushes.

I smile politely, lean back in my seat, and gaze again at *PATRIOTS ARE THE TRUE. HERETICS ARE THE DAMNED*. Three indigo trucks slide by my window. Golden hawk emblems are plastered to their sides.

George, still eying the magazine over my shoulder, enthusiastically declares "Damn them heretics!" He clenches his teeth and shakes his fist.

I nod silently and flip to another article.

Learning about the president's apparently superb taste for fine wine gets old fast, so I put the periodical down. I slouch a bit more in my chair and lay my head back against the scratched plastic window. Too bad I got so much sleep last night.

Across the way, a little girl holding a pink, heart-shaped pillow leans against her mother's side. Both wear headphones, their eyes fixed upon a tiny screen on the mother's lap. The

girl's eyes are wide, the mother's half-closed.

I swivel to the window again and watch fields of corn fly by. What will I do when I get into the city? Finding answers is easier said than done. Without memory I have nowhere to go, no one I can contact.

“Will you look at that,” George says admiringly. My eyes englaze and follow his finger out the window. A barn in the distance is enveloped in flames. Dark clouds of smoke billow out the top. A pair of men in midnight blue uniforms stand with rifles relaxed at their sides, smirking at the burning structure.

“What the hell? Why are they just standing there?” I scan the area for a fire engine, an ambulance, something...

“Must be one of them damn rebel groups hiding out in there,” he says, grinning.

“The *soldiers* set it on fire?” I sputter back.

The question appears to irritate George. “The Guard keeps us united,” he says. “If we can't stand together, the heretics have already won.”

A figure dressed in black rushes out of the barn. His arms stretch into the air.

One soldier lifts a rifle to his shoulder.

Not totally believing, I glance at George. The old man nods his head in approval.

## CHAPTER 3

# THE CITY

A bland urban blur of concrete and steel invades my window.

“No, no, yeah,” a pasty teen a few seats over stammers to his portly chum. “I mean, I don’t doubt for a second that life began on this planet. It’s just that, well, it seems to me that like, I mean, wouldn’t it be irrational to assume there isn’t life anywhere else?”

“You’re an idiot,” says his squeaky-voiced compatriot.

“If you’ll just hear me out...”

“Hear you out? I’ve been listening to your sci-fi bullshit for the last twenty minutes!”

“It’s not bullshit! I’ve read stuff about this on the Internet!”

“I’ve read stuff about your mom on the Internet.”

“You have not!”

“Yeah man, she’s *all over* the Web.”

“Yeah? Well your mom is all over my—”

“My mom is dead.”

Silence. "I meant—I meant your step-mom is..."

I close my eyes in a vain attempt to shut out the chatter. But it only makes the execution replay in my head. "Keeping us united," I mumble.

The engine fades. The buildings focus and slow.

"Do you have a place to stay?" George asks with sudden alarm.

I pretend not to hear him and instead focus on the doors. They don't budge.

"Seven?"

Dammit. "Sorry?"

"Do you have a place to stay?" he says again.

I pause. "Not exactly."

George rips a page of the magazine and pulls a pen out of his pocket. "My sister Claire runs a small youth hostel in the city. I'll write down the address for you. She'll give you a bed if you mention my name."

A youth hostel? Well, that would better than another night in the woods. "Thanks," I reply, shoving the scrap into my pocket.

"You're going to need some cab fare in the meantime," he continues.

Who does this guy think he is? "I don't want to—"

"I'm far from penniless, young man," George says, pulling out a couple paper bills. Both are splashed with the number 20. "Take this."

I hesitate.

"It's OK. They tell me I'm supposed to get rid of money so my family doesn't get taxed when I... well... later on," George says, pushing the money into my hands. "I swear to you, my boy. You'll be doing me a favor."

My fingers close around the green. “Heh,” I manage. “Thanks.”

The doors slide open. Finally. “Have a good one,” I tell George.

I let another hurried passenger clear a path through the crowd and onto an escalator. George is far behind by the time I descend into a fluorescent-lit corridor. The stores inside sell magazines and cigarettes.

The sparkling sound of a flute fills the air and calms my nerves. My eyes find the source: an old beggar, slouched against the wall. Wish I had some coins—can’t afford to give away a twenty. I walk by.

Just ahead is the exit. Orange sunlight streams through scuffed glass.

A deep groan and ringing clatter spins me around. The music’s done. The beggar’s old instrument case lies upside down against the wall and coins are scattered everywhere. He whimpers, fading in the shadow of a man with “GUARD” sewn onto his blue jacket. The soldier is rabid.

“You heretic piece of shit!” he squeals. “You can’t play that song!”

The drifter holds the flute tight against his heart. “Please,” he cries. The soldier tears the instrument away and lifts it high over his head. It whistles on the way down. Then it cracks in half over the howling musician’s neck. “You’ll learn, traitor!” the enforcer barks, pushing the two splintered ends into the beggar’s face.

Suddenly, the lizard’s eyes slide back in my direction. “What in God’s name are you looking at?!”

My head spins like a top; I’m the only one who actually stopped to watch the maniacal violence transpire. I turn, walk

fast to the station exit and tear at the door.

The warm air comes in hurried gulps. I get a good taste of grilling hot dogs and car exhaust in the process. The avenue is thick with sluggish automobiles and snaking motorcycles. Every few seconds a car horn breaks through the din.

“God damn! What is your problem?!” sneers a man in a leisure suit, walking in my direction.

“Huh?” I make out.

“Susan, for fuck’s sake stop worrying about the *fucking dog!* He’ll be fine!” There’s black plastic in his ear—the guy’s just on a cell phone. “Look, I just got off work. I’ll be home in an hour.”

A yellow cab on my side of the street futilely tries to pick up speed by switching to the lane closer to the sidewalk. I wave with one hand, reach into my pocket and crinkle the magazine scrap with the other.

I read him the address. He says something in incoherent, broken English. I smile, nod, and ease myself into the back-seat.

“Paper!” He beckons me, so I hand the piece over. He gives it a good, contemplative stare—like it was some kind of word search—and then throws it back at me. The taxi lurches back into the slow traffic.

“Move sopping wet car, shitty fuck for brains!” he yells out his half-rolled window. Then he half-turns to me and laughs “These fools make me wish I had my dog and my gun.”

I choke out a laugh. Weird.

The city is surprising clean. There must be at least three

trash cans per block, and the streets and sidewalks look like they've been recently scrubbed. The building designs are equally unexciting. On the surface, nothing appears to have much historical value, and many of the buildings seem to follow the same design.

The radio snaps on and a tweedy, nasal male voice enters the cab. "—lo Arthur, welcome."

"Thank you for having me, Ian."

"And welcome also to Jimmy."

"Good to be back, Mr. Gambit."

"Good to have you again," declares the host. "Now I want to tackle a different side of the heretic situation. Is the Guard focusing too much of its energy on the war? Should we perhaps be more worried about heretics within our own borders? Arthur, let's start with you."

"Well, Ian, to be honest, I don't think we're worrying nearly enough about the Enemy. We've been at war for two years now and—"

"Jimmy?" Ian Gambit interrupts.

"I disagree," he says. "Our nation is just too darn powerful to need to worry about those dang skeeter bugs as much as we worry about 'em. If there's any problem, it's internal."

"So you're saying the larger problem is inside our country."

"Yes, Ian, it's them we need to work on! We need to spend more time hunting the traitors down and bringing them fools to justice!"

"Can I interject?" asks Arthur.

"Go," allows Ian.

"I agree that dissension is a growing problem, but I just think we're already spending too much of our resources on

something not nearly as dangerous as—”

“That’s a load of crap!” bursts Jimmy. “The Guard is far too strong! We can never be defeated! The only thing that can bring us down is our very own selves. Yes sir, it will be another Great War that destroys this powerful nat—”

“That’s exactly the attitude that will lead to our annihilation! We think we’re invincible, when in reality—”

“Arthur, if I may ask you,” says Ian. “Exactly what are you basing your argument on?”

“Well for one thing, the Enemy still has nuclear weapons somewhere!”

“Oh please,” laughs Jimmy. “Even if that’s true, they wouldn’t have the slightest idea what to do with them.”

“And what are you basing that argument off of?!” Arthur steams.

“Now, calm down, Arthur. Take a deep breath,” says Ian.

“I am calm! I—”

“We’ll be right back.”

“You’re listening to ‘Backtalk with Ian Gambit,’” oozes a sexed-up female.

“So!” the cabbie suddenly exclaims. “What do you think the President Drake will have to say tonight?”

“Uh, that things are fine?” I reply vaguely.

“He’ll have more to say than this, I am certain!” he shouts. “I believe the President Drake has heresy solution! Are your hands wet, my friend?”

“What?”

“I was driving today at 6 a.m. on 611 with a man and his soggy daughter! My dog likes women so I carry a gun!”

“Ok?”

We pass by a large glass display of mannequins dressed in

flowery skirts and bikini tops. Sweaty shoppers rush around the sidewalks and cling to large plastic sacks. One woman drops her bag during a frantic rush for her cell phone and starts squawking. A disapproving mother clamps her hands over her son's ears and squawks back.

The road curves slightly and a towering chrome building rises into view. I let out an audible gasp. "Cap-toll-der," the driver comments.

"Excuse me?"

"Capitol Tower! This is first visit, yes?"

"Yes."

"President Drake...he works in that building over there, that one right there. Whole government, very good, very wet!"

"Oh, very good." Nice one, that wasn't an awkward reply at all. Talking to this guy is hurting my vocabulary.

"Monument Park is down this street," the driver waves vaguely out his window.

"Ok."

Sagging back into soft leather, I start worrying about my financial situation. I can't depend on people donating me money. "Hey," I get the driver's attention, "How's the economy lately?"

"Very good!" he raves. "Praise to President Drake! He keeps things very wet!"

I think I feel the onset of a headache. "So how hard do you think it would be to find a job?"

"Very good! Land of opportunity they say!" he yells back at me. "But you'll have to take off your pants."

"My pants?!" I nearly bang my head into the padded ceiling.

“Your pants and shirt—not wet! No one will hire unless you carry a gun!” He laughs.

“What?!”

“Not wet! Your shirt! Your pants! Ripped up!”

I slouch back into my original position and exhale.

He’s not the first guy to comment on my attire, and he’s got a point, even if he *is* a loon. I’ve got torn, dirty, probably blood-stained clothing on—not exactly a fashionable style in most places.

Shit. That means I’m going to have to buy something new to wear. There’s more money down the drain—do I even have enough for that? Fuck, this guy better not charge me too much for the ride. Hell, I don’t even know how much this hostel is going to put me back—hopefully George’s name will get me some kind of major discount. Damn it.

The driver turns down a small, residential street, cruises a few blocks and takes another right. Finally, he comes to a stop in front of an old two-floor brick house. A sign on the front reads *Youth Home*.

“Thanks,” I say.

He yawns.

“How much?” I ask finally.

“Nineteen-fifty, sir.”

You have to be fucking kidding me! This isn’t very *wet* at all! I give him one of my twenties and tell him to keep the change. Not much of a tip, but I’m so fucking broke. He mutters something in a tongue I can’t place.

I trudge along the short brick pathway to the hostel entrance shaking my head. I straighten my oily hair, compose myself, and ring the doorbell. Instead of a traditional “ding-dong,” it plays a familiar yet ultimately unidentifiable elec-

tronic tune. The door opens and a woman that looks about George's age takes me in with an awkward gasp. Her grey hair is tied tightly in a bun, and her large eyes stare at me uncertainly. She takes a sniff of the air and frowns slightly.

"Hi," I say. "Are you Claire?"

She nods, but the confusion on her face remains. "Uh," I continue, "I just came in on the Monorail a little while ago and I was talking to your brother, George. I don't have a place to stay and he recommended—"

"Are you Seven?"

"Yeah, I, uh, how did you—?"

"George called me a little while ago; told me to expect a new resident—though I didn't expect you to be so filthy,"

"I'm sorry, I just—"

"Well, aren't you a gentleman!" she smiles. "No need for explanation, come on in."

"Have a seat, Seven," says Claire, waving me toward the dining room. "I've got to get a pen and some paper."

The place is nothing fancy but it's got a homey atmosphere. Eight old wooden chairs surround a mahogany table. I slide my hand lightly over its smooth surface before easing into the chair closest to me. This is a hell of a lot better than I expected.

A fat, orange tabby moseys into the room. It pauses to give me a look. I drop my hand low to the carpet and the cat strides over for a sniff.

"All right, Seven," Claire says softly as she enters the room. She's got a blue ballpoint and a yellow pad. "How long will you be staying?"

"I'm, uh...I'm not really sure, actually."

"Well I already have one permanent resident," she says, sitting. "I can't take on another."

I rush a guess. "It shouldn't be any more than a few weeks, I would think."

"Oh I'm just joking, darling! You can stay as long as you need to. I was referring to my grandson, Adrian. He's about your age. Lived here in one of my rooms since..." Claire trails off as her eyes lower to the table. "Well, I guess it's not that important," she mutters. Her eyes flash back to me and she whispers, "Now, George told me you didn't have a lot of money."

"Well...no, not really."

"It's usually twenty a night, but because you're a friend of George I'll bring it down to fifteen. You can also pay me later, when you get some money together."

"Thank you...that would really help." Shit, I need a job. "Uh, do you know where I might find a job around here?"

She breathes out sharply, and scrutinizes the carpet for a few seconds. "Well, my grandson works at a bookstore, maybe he can help get you some work there. He's out practicing with his band right now, but maybe you can talk to him tomorrow morning. Oh! That reminds me! Breakfast is complimentary every morning at nine."

"Great." Food. Damn, I haven't eaten in a while...wonder if there's anything cheap around—

"Oh and how could I forget?" she continues. "Church is tomorrow at 10:30! It's only a short walk from here so we can all go together."

"Er...ok." I can't remember if I was religious before I woke up in that field, but given the amount the word "heretic"

is thrown around here, I probably should be.

“Your room is upstairs,” she says, handing me a key. “I’ll show you where it is.”

Claire’s bobbed hair bounces slightly as she buzzes up the steps. She’s got a surprising amount of energy. Soon we’re in a long wallpapered hallway filled with small paintings of cats, flowers and landscapes. Claire pushes open the first door on the right.

It’s small, but better than nothing. A twin bed is pushed against the opposite wall below a couple of windows. There’s a small closet, a desk and a chair. The room smells like window cleaner.

“Now the bathroom is just at the end of this hallway, ok, hon?” She stares at me for a second. “There’s a shower in there.”

I smile. That was subtle of her.

“Have a good evening, now.” Claire stops at the door and turns back. “Have you eaten?”

My heart leaps. “No, I—”

“Would you like something? A sandwich, maybe?”

“Actually, I mean, if it’s not too much trouble, then that would be great. I haven’t eaten anything since—”

“Ok, I’ll be right back, Seven.” Just like her brother, Claire is so friendly it’s isolating.

“Actually, I might take that shower first.”

Claire looks somehow relieved. “Not a problem! I’ll just leave the sandwich in your room for you. Hope you like ham.” She turns to leave, but once again pauses and swivels back. “Oh, by the by,” she says, “I noticed you didn’t have

any baggage with you...and your clothes are in awful shape..."

"Oh, yeah, I...uh—"

"You don't have to tell me what happened—I've made the mistake of asking *that* once before." She grimaces and shakes her head. "In any case, there's a place nearby that has cheap donated clothing for sale—money goes to the blind. Just make a left from the front entrance and walk a couple of blocks—you can't miss it."

"Cool—"

"I'll get some of Adrian's clothes for you to wear in the meantime."

"Oh, I don't want to have to take his—"

"He won't mind. Adrian's a good boy."

I haven't met Adrian, but I feel embarrassed for him all the same. Oh well. There's no use fighting Claire; she's just being generous. "Well, all right then," I say. "Thanks again."

"You're welcome!" Claire moves for the door again, and this time she makes it all the way through.

I got a few twinges of memory on the way here. Small things. Something about the city air felt familiar, and that great missile of a Capitol building—it... it just stirred something up inside of me. Maybe I did live here before I woke up in that forest. I might have an apartment, a job, a bank account waiting for me somewhere in this city. But if I can't even remember my name, how am I supposed to find out anything about myself? The only thing I can do is wait it out here. If my memory doesn't come back on its own, maybe I'll run into someone who knows me and can set me straight.

The soap and hot water stings my scratches but washes away most of the stress. I am so fucking lucky. Only a day ago I was unconscious, surrounded by wildlife in some fucking forest. Now I'm refreshing myself in a shower with the amazingly beautiful knowledge that I have a warm bed and ham sandwich waiting for me.

Hopefully, I can get a job at that bookstore Claire mentioned. Who is this Adrian kid, anyway, and why does he live with his grandma? I mean, what kind of rock band is he in?

There's clothes on my bed—some old jeans, boxers, socks and a white T-shirt—but no food. My stomach rumbles as I dress. Then there's a knock at the door. "Come in," I say.

"Here it is!" Claire's got a sandwich and some chips. She holds out the paper plate like it just earned her first place at a state fair. "There's a glass on your bedside table; the tap water isn't too bad here."

I glance at the table and notice an old radio alarm clock — it reads "7:08 PM" in digital red numerals. "This is amazing," I say, barely able to contain the drool. "I really appreciate it."

"Well aren't you a little gentleman!" she beams. "You're once again welcome, but I am sorry I took so long. I got distracted by that handsome president of ours. He just announced new plans to keep the heretics down."

"Excuse me?"

"Yes, sounds like we'll soon be cleaner than a teacup!" she laughs. "Have a nice evening, dear!"

"Come in the water," the blond girl says, splashing some

of the chemically treated liquid in my direction.

Laughter. I throw myself into it.

The leaves are everywhere, brown, yellow and red. I see her soft black jacket disappear behind the tree. I run for it and trap her against the oak.

“You were supposed to count,” she whispers.

Her hair is soft in my hand—softer than it looked. “I love you,” I say.

Her fingernail runs down my chest and I shiver.

Gentle strumming of an acoustic guitar—my eyes open. I roll over and squint at the clock—it bleeds *1:03 AM*. The ceiling fan spins in time with the music. “That’s nice,” I hear myself mumble.

## CHAPTER 4

# THE CHURCH

“Good morning, Seven,” Claire smiles as I enter the dining room. She motions to a pair of teenagers. “Seven—Walt and Emily. Walt and Emily—Seven.”

“Hi,” I say.

Walt, a spiky-haired mouse boy, cranes his neck 90 degrees and stares vacantly. Emily, a blonde with powder-white skin and small, black-rimmed glasses shoots me a quick wave. She doesn’t look up from her fried egg.

The two kids probably aren’t friends. Emily and Walt are so far away from each other, they’re practically sitting at different tables.

A still-folded newspaper rests peacefully between the pair. The headline reads: “President Reveals New Anti-Heresy Measures.”

I grab a seat near the paper and reach for it, but my hands are intercepted by a steaming plate of eggs and toast.

“Enjoy!” chimes Claire.

My left hand snaps up the toast; the right snags the newspaper. Emily gives me a weird look. I shrug it off.

*CAPITOL TOWER -- Navy blue and gold billowed behind President William T. Drake in a televised speech yesterday. "Heresy is at its end," he proclaimed.*

*The president said the government is ramping up internal security to prevent what he called a "frightening spread of heresy."*

*The first item underway involves updating laws and surveillance technologies, he said. "We cannot fight heresy with outdated provisions."*

*Drake also announced the creation of the Department of Purity, a government branch dedicated to national unity and safety.*

*"We will not wait around for another civil war," Our Leader said. "The Department of Purity will ensure heretics are dealt with efficiently. We will cut the problem out of society."*

*President Drake gave no further details of the plan, citing a likely danger to national security. However, he assured TV viewers that heretics will feel the new measure's effects.*

*"Remember, oh great nation," said the President, "Our unity will conquer all evil."*

*The Church applauded the initiative.*

*"It's time we teach the heretics a lesson," said Reverend Archibald Fuller in a statement.*

*“There are some who don’t realize the consequences of deviance. The President’s plan will make them clear.”*

*Citizens are also supporting the plan.*

*“Every time I turn on the tube there’s something else those ... heretics [have] done to try and frighten good citizens,” said Bill White, a capital resident for 20 years. “Let’s get them for good.”*

*President Drake said the plan is already “going swimmingly.” More traitors are being arrested than ever before, he said.*

*“Purity is no longer just a dream,” Drake said. “It is becoming our reality.”*

*The president—*

“Good morning, Adrian,” Claire interrupts. Emily’s head snaps toward the entrance.

Adrian is an obvious punk rocker, somehow managing to look confident and tortured at the same time. Long, wavy-black hair falls over dark, inset eyes. His blue jeans are worn with age and his black t-shirt looks at least a couple sizes too small.

Claire points over at me. “This is Seven, our new guest.”

“Hey, how’s it going?” Adrian smiles.

“All right...could be worse.”

Claire hesitates. “Where did you say you were from, again, Seven?”

“From a small town up north.”

“Oh, George has some friends up in Loganville! Nice place, Loganville.”

“You get here last night?” Adrian asks, sitting across from me. Claire slides a steaming plate under his chin.

“Yeah, I found out about this place on the train in. Caught a taxi over.”

“You should have taken the Metro. How much did that set you back?”

“Twenty, but it was entertaining at least,” I pause. “The driver asked me if my hands were wet.”

Adrian swallows his food hard and breaks out laughing. “—He what?”

“I don’t know. Before I could ask he starts telling me about driving at 6 a.m. with some guy and his soggy daughter.” I start laughing too.

Emily stares wide-eyed at us. “You shouldn’t make fun of foreigners!”

Awkward.

“You in the room first door on the right?” Adrian asks me a bit tensely.

“Yeah, why?”

“I’m next door. Hope I didn’t keep you up last night with my guitar. Sometimes I just have to relax, and um, that’s the best way I know how.”

“Oh, yeah, no, don’t worry—that’s totally cool. Didn’t bother me at all.”

“Good,” he nods, “Just knock on the wall if I’m a problem.”

“I love your music,” Emily interjects with a smile that visibly unnerves Adrian. Who is this girl, the queen of awkward silence?

Adrian gives me a look as if to say “This girl has issues.” He turns to Emily and says “Thanks.”

“So you play in a band?” I ask.

Adrian looks relieved. “Yeah, there’s three of us—call ourselves Beacon...kind of a punk, indie thing. I sing and play guitar, and then we have a bassist and drummer.”

Emily is still staring at him.

“You write the songs?” I continue.

“Yeah, well mostly. Ron and Jake know better about what they can do with their instruments, so they pretty much write their own parts into the guitar stuff I come up with.” Adrian sticks a forkful of eggs into his mouth, chews and gulps. “And then Ron actually has a few really tight songs of his own where he does lead vocals.”

“I like your songs better,” Emily says. “Your lyrics are much more thoughtful than Ron’s and—”

“Thanks,” Adrian cuts her off without making eye contact. “But yeah, it’s pretty cool. We actually have a concert coming up in a couple nights over at the Red Lion. If you wanna come out, I can get you in free.”

My hazy recollection of Adrian’s guitar playing late last night is favorable, so I say “Yeah, that would be fun.” At the very least it will pass the time. Maybe they’ll let me trade in my hearing for a little memory.

“Cool.” Adrian goes back to his eating. I shovel down the rest of my eggs.

“Oh,” I begin, remembering, “Claire was saying you might be able to help me get a job around here. I’m...uh, I’m really broke.”

“I know the feeling,” he says, considering. “Yeah, there might be an opening at the bookstore I work at. Come with me tomorrow morning and I’ll see what I can do.”

“That would be awesome—”

“Don’t mention it.”

Claire appears. “I hope y’all are almost ready to head to church. I...I don’t want to be late.”

It’s weird. She sounds almost afraid.

“Where’s Walt?” she says in a tense whisper.

Holy shit, the kid’s gone. Didn’t even see him get up to leave. Emily unlocks her gaze on Claire’s grandson and answers, “Walt’s kind of weird.”

Adrian looks down at the table like he’s trying to stop himself from laughing. “That’s ironic.”

“What?” says Emily vacantly.

“Well I don’t want to be late,” Claire repeats. “Did you see where he went?”

Emily shrugs. “I think he went outside.”

Claire shuffles toward the entrance and pulls open the front door. “Walt? You out here? Walt?” The orange tabby shoots through her legs. “No, Puss! Darn cat!”

“Is he out there?” Adrian asks.

“No, maybe he headed over without us,” Claire bites her lip. “I hope, anyway. I don’t want any trouble.”

Trouble?

“We better just go right now,” she says. “Hopefully Puss won’t try to follow us.”

Emily excuses herself to use the bathroom. Adrian and I abandon our dishes and follow Claire out the door.

“Are we late?” I ask Adrian.

“Nah, we still have ten minutes and the church is right around the corner,” he says. “But it’s good to get there a little early.”

Claire paces back and forth outside the house, alternately calling for Walt, the cat, Walt, the cat. Finally Emily joins us.

“I guess they’re not coming,” Claire sighs. She locks the house up and power-walks into the lead.

The church really is right around the corner—I’m surprised I hadn’t noticed it in the taxi. The thing is massive, all steel and red tinted glass with pointed edges and triangular steeple. The church takes up almost an entire city block, and that doesn’t even include the huge lawn of marble sculptures in front.

Claire still looks uneasy. There’s a line—everyone has to go through some kind of security check. Adrian looks down at his feet and kicks the grass. Emily is completely spaced out—more than before. What exactly was she was doing in the bathroom?

“Last name?” commands the Guard.

“Oh, uh—” I’m squirming like a fish on a hook.

“He’s visiting,” Claire explains simply. The guard looks me over, contemplates the clouds for a few seconds, and then lets me pass.

I get a whiff of strong incense as we stride through the building’s massive steel doors. “Unbelievable,” I exhale almost instantly. Turns out the ground level is actually the fifth floor. There’s stairs and an elevator that go down to four more, all the same size. The floor I’m on alone looks like it could seat maybe two thousand—and the place is packed! It’s like a damn sports arena; sure there’s a lot more candles and it’s a lot quieter, but I mean, damn, there’s even a giant Jumbotron hanging from the ceiling to ensure everyone has a view! How could—

Adrian chuckles. “Seven, are you all right?”

I close my gaping jaw. “Oh...yeah...I’m just—”

“Overwhelmed, right? Understandable, this is your first time in the capital. This is one of the largest cities in the world. The Church is built to support that.”

We find seats on the third level. They’re not all exactly next to each other, but close enough. It’s like we’re the last to arrive at a fucking movie premiere.

“That couple down there makes me feel kind of under-dressed,” I whisper to Adrian with a laugh. I point at a silk-suited man and an astonishingly made-up woman in the front row.

“Well, they have a bit more money than you do,” Adrian replies. “Wait, you do know who that is, right?”

I shake my head no, and then try to explain, “Um, I mean...it’s hard to tell from here.”

“That’s Daniel Alexander Young,” he pauses. “You know, owner of every other building in the city?”

I squint in an effort to pretend like I’m analyzing the man closer. “Oh yeah, so it is.”

The lights cut out and a baby starts wailing. There’s a slight hum from above and a cylindrical shaft of sunlight courses through the building. It immediately reveals a black-robed, balding man, who for all I know could have been standing by himself in the darkness down below the whole time. Talk about drama.

“Greetings,” the priest’s voice booms in digital surround. His sharp green eyes flash giant on the Jumbotron. It’s hard to look away. Even the babies shut up.

“Rise!” he shouts. There’s an abrupt shuffling amongst the faithful.

“Let us pray as one,” he suggests. Everyone starts hum-

ming a vaguely familiar song. I pretend like I'm humming too, but no sound comes out of my mouth. Hopefully no one notices.

The screen remains focused on the priest's face. As he hums, his eyes twitch back and forth, watching, analyzing. Adrian's eyes are closed, like he's in some kind of trance. Everyone is. I'm looking at my feet, but I can still feel the heat of the priest's eyes.

The humming sinks to a pitch lower than death. I shouldn't have come here. Why did I come here?

Adrian opens an eye and gives me a funny look. I'm breathing rather heavily. I try closing my eyes, send my mind on vacation to some tropical island.

"Sit!" the priest orders. Everyone collapses back into their seats.

He smiles maniacally, like he knows something I don't. Things are getting way too cult-like for my tastes. All I want to do is leave. "Praise God for work," he says. "Praise God for love. Praise God for family. Praise God for life. Amen."

"Amen!" chants everyone.

"You know, He appreciates all of you who managed to turn up this week," the priest says, his voice like thick maple syrup. "It's come to His attention that attendance this week is nearly three less than last week. And that last week's attendance was four less than the week before. My children, we would best like to avoid another civil war."

But the place is packed! The percentage drop on that has got to be less than one!

"Why must we come to church and pray every week? Because when we were born, we each signed a contract with God: a solemn promise to serve and appease our Lord Master.

Why did we sign this promise? Because we love Him, our Lord, our Master, our God. And because we are *sinner*s, sinners who must earn our place in His Kingdom. We have been sinners since our *sinner* parents committed their most sinful deed nine months before we were sinfully born. We must make our sins up to God. We must prove to Him that we are worthy of being alive in His Kingdom. We must serve Him for He is our Master!”

He pauses for an eternity. I hold my breath.

“According to the word of God, there are two gates. One leads to life, but it is narrow. The other leads to destruction, and it is wide.

“Do you know what religion literally means? Binding together! The Church is the glue that holds our nation together.

“But the Church is also what separates us from the Enemy. We are the Chosen flock of this most wretched of worlds. We are the only sinners on this forsaken planet to whom God even offers a chance to escape the flames of Hell. Only a fool would shirk off this rare opportunity for redemption! Surely no one here wants to burn for all eternity on an iron stake!”

The priest smiles as if he’d just told a clever knock-knock joke. Some people in the crowd laugh nervously. The priest glares until silence returns.

“Children, I am afraid,” he rumbles. “I am afraid that if we cannot unite under the glory of God, some Awful Judgment will come upon this land, and that the Wrath of God will arise, and there will be no Remedy.

“This cannot be allowed. If you have friends currently holding a one-way ticket to this most horrible of fates, please talk to them. Tell them that you love them. Tell them that the

Church loves them. Tell them that God loves them,” the priest’s eyes are full of passion. “Tell them that they must love Him back or be sent to the cavernous depths of Hell! Tell them that they must serve God for He is our Lord and Master!”

I’m staring at my shoes now. I just want this to be over. I just want to get out of here.

“Yesterday, the President declared war on the heretics. The damned can no longer be pitied. By giving up or rebelling against the force that binds us all as a people, they become traitors to their very nation. By breaking from the pack, they threaten the existence of all. They weaken our proud state and they anger God above! We are his chosen few, but I ask you for how long? If we do not love God back, he will become vengeful and we will all pay for a few sinners’ crimes!”

Silence.

“In the audience today I heard murmurs, murmurs asking ‘What can I do to help the effort? I am not in the Guard; what can I do?’

“The answer is simple: fight them from home, teach the heretics the way. And if they cannot be taught, then they will be sent straight to Hell! We are God’s chosen! He made us in his image. Any deviation is an insult to God, our Father, our Lord, our Master. To take another path is to fall into damnation! And to let another man sink into Hell is to be pulled down with him.”

I glance around. It might as well be an audience of corpses.

“I sense there is someone here with doubt, someone who doesn’t feel he belongs,” the priest declares, his eyes glaring at me through the monitor. “Someone here is heading down

the forbidden road.” The priest’s mouth clamps shut. His eyes slide back and forth

I may have been fidgeting a little, but he can’t really have seen me, right? Unless there are cameras—are we being watched? But how would he—?

The priest picks up a goblet of wine, tilts his head back and dumps the liquid down his throat. The gigantic face on the screens grins widely with stained teeth. “Let us pray for that lost soul.” The priest clasps his hands together and looks up into the light.

**Thanks for reading this sample of WE, THE WATCHED by Adam Bender.**

For the rest of the story, please buy the full eBook. For info on where to get it, visit [www.WeTheWatched.com](http://www.WeTheWatched.com).