

HELL SCRAPER



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CHAPTER 1
OFFICE COLLAPSE



“**B**rian, are you sleeping at work again?” The loud, naturally intimidating voice thundering above him belonged to Jim Ross, his manager.

Brian straightened in the chair and pressed keys at random, only to discover the computer had locked him out. That revelation did not help the mild panic attack rampaging through his mind.

“No, sir, I was thinking about the performance report,” Brian said, nervously mistyping his password over and over. “With my eyes closed. It’s easier to think this way.”

“This isn’t Japan.” Jim spilled the words as if he was holding back either rage or a joke. “We don’t appreciate people sleeping at their desks. One more time and your next paycheck won’t be any different from the janitor’s. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Mr. Ross,” whispered Brian, struggling to hide a yawn.

“I need this report to be ready at six in the morning. Make it happen, or else.”

“It will. I promise, Mr. Ross, you will have the email first thing in the morning.”

Jim Ross was already walking away through the rows of cubi-

cles. His gaze swept the office, checking each display to make sure no one was slacking.

Brian popped out both middle fingers and pointed his arms in the direction of Jim's back until he disappeared around the corner. The stack of papers that had served as a pillow was just a drop in the ocean compared to the tower of boxes beside his desk. Brian stood and picked up an empty mug stained with leftover coffee. This was cup number five, and probably not the last.

"Yo, man! Wanna go downstairs?" said Ray, leaning on the side of the cubicle, just above a picture of gallows with the classic motivational quote: *Hang in there*.

Ray was quite a character. On his first day of work, he had shown up wearing a rainbow beanie and his favorite brown hoodie with a giant marijuana leaf in the center. He and Brian had become friends instantly, with a shared love for games, anime, and being single. Most of all, they shared a mutual hatred of Jim.

"I can't. This bloody report needs to be done by morning," Brian replied, slowly sliding down in his office chair.

"Him again?" Ray pressed forward.

Brian nodded while organizing his papers into a few smaller piles.

"Do you want coffee?" Brian asked, trying to find a compromise that would help him finish the tedious task and still hang with Ray.

"Why not both?" This was Ray's standard answer to most dilemmas. "You'll have your coffee, and I'll get my fix."

These small interactions were the glue keeping them together as best friends. Without arguing, Brian stepped out of the cubicle and followed Ray to the elevator hall.

"What about Lucas?" Brian asked while they made their way down the stairs.

"Haven't seen him, so it's just you and me."

They walked out of the building and turned into the alley between the skyscrapers. Ray pulled out a joint and handed a

cigarette to Brian. Without waiting, he turned his back to the sidewalk, making sure nobody was watching them.

Their office was on 4th Street in Manhattan, and even though they were far from the most crowded sidewalks, one or two lost souls would periodically wander into the alley, pointing a fancy camera upward to try and capture an artsy shot of the blue sky trapped between two glass towers.

A loud cry of, "Hola!" bounced from the walls, startling them both.

Ray turned first. He hid the joint inside his fist and looked tense. He was always ready to fling the bud in case the police decided to show up. Usually cops wouldn't bother checking on people in the alley, but you never know.

"What the hell? Stop sneaking up on people." Brian was angry. Hot coffee had spilled on his hand when he jumped, and a splash stained his last fresh white shirt, which he had hoped to wear until the end of the week.

"Come on, guys," said Lucas. "What else do you want me to do? Would you prefer if I snuck up behind your backs and then screamed?"

"I thought you were out today?" said Ray.

"Not really. I was at the dentist and decided to drop by on the way home."

"Today is the wrong day for pranks." Coffee always made Brian cranky. He wanted to go back and finish the report before midnight. His cigarette was half-done, and the last thing he wanted was to stand around in the alley. Before the internal rage monologue could finish, the sun slid between the skyscrapers and a beam of warmth hit his face. Instinctively, he closed his eyes and tilted his head toward it. It felt too good.

"Are you okay?" Ray's voice sounded dull, like he was talking through the wall.

"Give me a second." Brian slowly opened his eyes and looked around.

Millions of fireflies filled his vision. Even after his sight adapted from the sunlight, the world looked wrong. Colors were fading out. Out of nowhere, anxiety hit like a wave, and his body started to tremble. A skyscraper in front of him slid straight down into the ground as if there was nothing under the street.

It was so surreal that Brian's brain froze.

There was a sudden scream coming from the main street. "Run!" echoed like a shot through the tall corridors between buildings. In the next moment, Brian was sprinting through crowds of tourists frozen in the middle of the street. He shoved through them in panic as buildings continued to slide into the earth all around him. The ground shook so hard, he lost his balance when a wide crack split open in front of him. With all the strength he could gather, Brian pushed off the edge with both feet. Then darkness swallowed him whole.

There was no transition between dream and reality as Brian jolted back into his chair, feet braced against the desk. With no time to react, he tipped backward, cracked the chair, and rolled onto the floor. Bright fluorescent lights burned his retinas.

"Report!" he screamed in panic. The memory of the dream faded away, replaced by the real panic of a missed deadline. There was only one thing in the world that mattered. Brian jumped up, ignored the pain in his back, and leaned forward, towering over the computer screen.

His eyes felt dry, and the skin on his cheek carried an imprint of the keyboard. Judging by the clock, his nap was a full night's sleep. It was that weird transition state where it felt worse than if he hadn't slept at all. He scanned the office above the cubicles. There was nobody around, and the empty office was sparsely lit up by fewer lights than usual. The only exception was the reception desk and elevator hall, which were brightly illuminated with a fluorescent bluish hue.

"What the heck? Two thousand pages?" Brian yelled to the empty office after checking his workstation.

The worst thing right now would be discovering that, by accident, the super urgent report he was working on had been destroyed by some weird glitch. The cursor jumped nervously from page to page as a fan in the computer started up with the whining pitch of a dying beast that was loaded with way more than it could chew. Classic issue with old hardware that Jim was so adamantly refusing to upgrade, claiming it could probably survive another decade.

On the screen, endless pages showed one long word made of a single letter: z.

“Phew,” he muttered. “The tables are still there. Now all I need is to select all this text and hit delete.”

What sounded like a trivial operation would probably have been easy on newer hardware. After selecting a few hundred pages, the image froze. Brian punched a few keys in frustration and then smacked the mouse. He stared at the frozen document for a couple seconds, then shoved a stack of papers off the edge of the desk.

“I can’t believe I have to do this again,” he said. As if staring at the frozen screen wasn’t bad enough, now he had to pick up scattered pages while a headache hammered inside his skull.

Brian took a few steps and started gathering papers just to watch pages nearby slipping through the gap down into the abyss. What used to be the bare cement floor of the office revealed a hole hungrily consuming all his important papers.

Brian’s mind was still trying to comprehend the situation. The entire floor was covered in a web of deep cracks that split Brian’s corner of the office away from the rest of the cubicles. The crack running through the floor widened, swallowing the rest of the pile that disappeared in the darkness silently. He instinctively jumped away, lost his balance, and slammed into the nearby wall. A thunder of noise filled the air as dust and cement rained over his desk. His heart raced as adrenaline surged through his bloodstream.

“What the...?” Brian scrambled up and stepped back as the corner of the office slid down and disappeared into darkness, leaving nothing but hazy air saturated with drywall debris. There should have been buildings and streets and people walking there. Instead, dark nothingness stared back.

Brian paced around the reception desk with a slice of cold pizza in one hand. At this point, monotonous chewing was mostly a meditation rather than sustenance. Rhythmic movement involving food allowed his animal brain to take over while his human side was working overtime, squaring the chaos of the new reality. The best-case scenario was to hide in delusion. Call it a nightmare that, for unknown reasons, persisted outside of his will to wake up. Yet every time his sight slid by the missing corner of the building, his heart rate would jump so high that he could hear it through the loud chewing of stale pizza.

The hour hand of the clock on the wall clunked to 5, and judging by the darkness, it was five in the morning. The office looked deserted, with empty rows of cubicles and the reception desk facing a short corridor with elevator doors on the right and restrooms on the left. Usually around that time, the first rays of the rising sun would be blasting through the dirty windows and lighting up the office space in vertical strips. But not today.

A sudden noise startled Brian out of repetitive cycles of thought and circling inside the reception space. He looked in the direction of the sound, then back to the leftover pizza in his hand, and wondered what to do next. On one hand, the change required inspection, at least partial curiosity. On the other hand, he had a nice thing going. Another rumbling echoed down the corridor. There were a few possible escape routes: elevator shaft, fire escape, restrooms. This made no difference whatsoever, and the last thing he wanted was to get stuck in a restroom and develop claustrophobia.

Worried about being discovered with his pants down by a rescue team, Brian walked through the corridor toward the noise.

Like a frightened deer, he stepped slowly, producing as little sound as possible.

This part of the office was under construction. A few weeks ago, when someone forgot to close the faucet in a kitchen above, it flooded the floor and leaked through the ceiling, leaving round yellow spots of residue. Management caved only after numerous complaints from workers, and the working crew set up scaffolding, slowly replacing pieces of damaged drywall. The sides of the corridor had duct tape all around the perimeter. During the work, they used plastic drapes on both sides that were now hanging freely, waiting to be reattached. Right after the scaffolding, at the end of the corridor, were the only restrooms for the entire floor, which made the work of sealing and resealing the area annoying for everyone.

Just as he reached the restroom and slowly started to turn the handle, something growled on the other side.

“Where! Are! Reports?!” a loud gasping voice that partially resembled Jim’s babbled from just behind the door.

“Mr. Jim?” Brian already knew the answer, but was too afraid to admit it. “I think the building has collapsed and we’re trapped here. Can you open the door? I can help!”

There was no answer. The silence lasted forever. The only thing he could hear was the drumming of his heartbeat. Again, without warning, a sudden inhuman scream broke the silence, scaring the living hell out of Brian. He pushed himself away from the door a split second before it exploded and flew across the hall. Jim walked through the doorframe, still dressed in the same suit as earlier. His clothes were in tatters, and the big, black, furry head of a wolf was protruding from a rip in the shoulder. While the dog-like eyes looked directly at Brian, Jim’s head was slightly tilted to the side, blindly looking upward.

Should I run now? was the only thought rapidly looping around in Brian’s head.

Almost as if the monster could read his mind, it turned its

human head toward Brian. Its eyes were completely black, and its face was a silent mask of pain, frozen like a sculpture. Then it started to twitch, morphing into a wide smile, showing teeth covered in blood.

"You are going to die!" Jim screamed, and then his entire body twitched; every muscle sprang as if an electric shock was going through it. It looked like an epileptic seizure, but without the shaking. The monster's body formed an arc with its hands pulled back.

This was Brian's cue to get the hell out. He leapt with force, finding himself behind Jim in an instant. The rush of adrenaline flooded his blood, converting hyper-reality into one of those dreams where running felt like swimming. Every move happened in slow motion as he saw an outstretched arm reaching for him. The monster jerked, twisting itself to follow Brian's movement, while the other shoulder ballooned and ripped apart like a large pimple.

Without looking back, Brian ran around the scaffold and hit his face on a crowbar that was levitating in the middle of the corridor. It was just hanging in the air, held by nothing less than magic. Not that this surprised him any more than a beast chasing him, but it definitely was somewhere in the realm of an *any moment and I will wake up* kind of deal. He reached for it and used it as a lever to pull himself up. Surprisingly, the metal felt warm to the touch and natural in his grip, as if some medieval smith carved it specially for him.

Meanwhile, the monstrosity of a creature ran straight into the scaffold head-first, wailing and screaming in the agony of metamorphosis that was occurring in the middle of the chase. The rupture on the other shoulder revealed a similar dog's head that had fur all covered in gore and pieces of ripped white shirt obscuring the view. Unfortunate timing for the beast. The support beams holding the newly patched ceiling in place broke under impact, and the entirety of the construction equipment, together

with large pieces of the ceiling, avalanched on the thing, burying it completely.

Brian came to his senses moments later. He was standing above Jim's corpse, with both hands continuously stabbing the monster in random spots with a newly acquired crowbar. He had no memory of what happened just a moment ago, or at least his brain was working overtime to block the details of the traumatic incident from his memory. He wasn't even sure if Jim died from the collapse or what happened after. Brian's shoulders were shaking as blood dripped off the crowbar onto the carpet, crumbling the dust into small spheres.

"I killed him," Brian whispered as he breathed heavily.

The office was cold as gusting winds blew through a hole in the corner. There were a few lights flickering, but somehow it still felt dark. Brian stumbled to the reception area and sat at the table with a bottle of whiskey he had somehow acquired. He sat in the office chair, looking blankly at the wall. The shock of the entire situation was slowly dissipating, leaving a weird conflict of emotions bubbling inside. The old accumulated rage that he felt toward his manager finally found an unexpected outlet, and the entire interaction made him question everything.

Did he hate or enjoy killing Jim?

AFTERWORD

Thank you for reading. I hope you enjoyed Hellscraper.

I wrote this book while living through a corporate hellscape. While it left a lasting effect, I used the rage bubbling inside to write the most terrifying and disgusting scenes; they are fueled by real emotions. What was even more damaging was that, after the deaths of certain characters, I spent substantial time walking around downtown San Francisco trying to process the loss. Nevertheless, this was a great adventure, and I thank you for joining me on it.

I would love to hear your thoughts, so please consider leaving a review on Amazon. I read every review and comment across all platforms. Your feedback not only helps me refine my writing but also helps other readers discover the series.

- Elie Ra

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Elie is a Ukrainian-born author who has been weaving stories since the age of twelve. With a Master's in Mathematics and over two decades of professional experience as a software engineer, Elie brings a deep, grounded authenticity to the technological landscapes and artificial intelligence explored in *The Singularity Sequence*. After emigrating to the United States, he settled in San Francisco, where he lives with his large Ukrainian family and his children. When he isn't exploring the post-singularity world or tinkering with custom mechanical keyboards, he is usually typing away on his next manuscript—often pinned down by his two cats, including Phoebe, who insist on sleeping on him while he works.

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