

CHAPTER EXCERPTS FROM AN AWARD-WINNING NOVEL

by Lauren Holmes (2018)

21 THE SHATTERED CELEBRATION

The Breakthru Mission creatives and their supporters and benefactors trailed from the white and bright ballroom to the dark oak-paneled Library to continue their celebrations with food and drink and camaraderie. The room was clothed for opulence – a fitting context for deferentially honoring those who had contributed so significantly to saving the planet.

Walls of dark-bound tomes suggesting age and wisdom punctuated the wood panels. The deeply honeycombed indentations of the vaulted ceiling in the same dark oak completed the cocoon-like coziness of the large room. The Library was obviously appointed to provide a sense of history to a planet that was still in its infancy.

Beneath the elaborate and expansive crown molding framing the ceiling, a row of windows bordered the room high above the paneling and shelves of books. If it had been daylight, they would have flooded the room with a very different light. For now, they merely reinforced the darkness of the cocoon.

The old-world elegance of the Library was epitomized by the blazing fire in the floor-to-ceiling black granite fireplace which anchored the room. Its inviting glow danced off the multi-faceted polish and sheen of the room's accoutrements. A colony of crystal chandeliers bejeweled the ceiling to add a glittering luminescence to the firelight.

The Library was dominated by a massive built-in bar structured from carved dark oak panels and topped with a heavy black granite slab to match the fireplace. Brilliant tiny spotlights embedded within the ceiling created the breadth of light that magnetized everyone to congregate there for conversation.

Seating vignettes grouped for peace and privacy had been pushed to the wall around the large Library room to permit the long table of a lavish buffet in the center of the room. Luxuriously deep and tufted leather couches were paired with proud wingback chairs and coffee and side tables of every description.

Lamps darkened by ornate shades highlighted each seating arrangement. The sectionings were also accompanied by a population of other chairs – Bergère, Lawson, tub, and club – offering a potential fit for any bottom and back. Hassocks strewn throughout added to the welcoming warmth of the relaxed elegance.

The buffet table teemed with the most succulent dishes. Each was spotlighted by their own silver-encased lights which shielded the glare from the side and above to minimize distraction from the ambience created by the chandeliers, fireplace, and bar.

As the bulk of the creatives and Council Ministers burst into the room, Connor turned to look at his students with affection and satisfaction. They had each excelled in their challenge to transcend their history to crush the crises facing their world.

More than this, he loved the community they had formed. They were family. Everyone was now congregated in elation chatting about the success of their various undertakings. Camaraderie was everywhere. Connor so enjoyed watching their joviality and pride of achievement. This post-transformation success was his jam.

Axl stepped onto the dais next to the bar where it could share in its ceiling lights. He identified and thanked the many VIPs in attendance for their contributions and support. To close, he thanked Connor from his heart.

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. Someone screamed. It was Freya. Axl was writhing on the floor. “Help my husband,” Freya shouted hysterically. “Help. Help. Please save him. You must save him.” Many rushed to surround Minister Dahl.

“Could it be a heart attack?” asked someone in the group.

“It looks more like an epileptic fit,” suggested another.

“No, No,” said Freya. “He doesn’t have epilepsy.”

“Could this be strychnine poisoning?” asked Dania. “Could someone have poisoned the Supreme Commander?” she asked as she called him by his old title in error in her panic. As with the masses, Dania still felt emotionally that Minister Dahl was the true Supreme Commander of Annutia.

Supreme Commander Riis was not popular and growing less so daily. At worst, he was viewed as malevolent, dishonest, and the worst of what politicians can be. At best, he was viewed as an incompetent lame duck, or worse, a puppet for big money.

“What do you know about poisoning, Dania?” asked Kane of the astrobiologist as he knelt over Axl to hold his shoulders to prevent injury from his rapid convulsions.

“The first sign of exposure is the body's muscles spasming like this. They start with the head and neck. The spasms then spread to every muscle in the body with nearly continuous convulsions. The convulsions progress, increasing in intensity and frequency until the backbone arches continually. Death comes from asphyxiation caused by paralysis of the neural pathways that control breathing, or from exhaustion due to the convulsions. Death occurs within two to three hours after exposure.”

“Where was Axl three hours ago?” demanded Connor gently of Freya.

“He was at the Council meeting. All the ministers and their wives were there.”

Both Connor and Lenore had listened intently to Dania's information.

Connor!" Lenore commanded. "Bring me a large container from the bar half filled with water. Bring me something with which to stir." Lenore rushed to the fireplace, grabbed the shovel next to the poker from the fireplace implements, and began to smash the charcoal to ash and cinder.

Meanwhile, Connor sped to the bar and filled the largest container with water – a crystal martini pitcher with a long glass stirrer. He rushed to Lenore's side on the hearth to help her scoop the crushed charcoal into the pitcher.

While there, Lenore took the opportunity to speak to Connor confidentially. In a lowered voice, she said, "I didn't want to say this in front of Freya but, given the previous attempts on Axl's life, I'm going to treat this as a poisoning."

"I figured as much," said Connor quietly. "I think we're both thinking of that movie we watched recently for my murder mystery obsession whereby a victim had to be saved from poisoning. Connor began stirring vigorously. In a flash they were both back to Axl convulsing on the floor. Lenore immediately took charge. She knew exactly what to do.

"Connor, raise his head," requested Lenore.

"I brought this as well," Connor said as he handed Lenore a crystal funnel from the bar. She grabbed Axl's chin and began pouring the charcoal mixture down his throat using the funnel. It took five minutes, but the Minister's body gradually began to sag into the floor in exhaustion. The convulsions were over. The charcoal had been effective.

While she worked, Lenore tried to comfort Freya. "We're giving Axl charcoal to keep any swallowed poisons from being absorbed from his stomach into his bloodstream," explained Lenore to Freya. The solution to most poisonings is the infusion of an activated charcoal slurry.

While he worked, Connor took the time to contemplate the larger context of this situation to assess the danger to the three Earthlings. Axl was their protector. He was the only one they could trust to return them to Earth. Many of his enemies and detractors disliked Connor's program. There was real danger for them if he died. This was the fourth attempt on the Minister's life in as many days.

But more than this, Axl was his friend. He loved and admired this most impressive man. He was the heart of Annutia. He would always be their Supreme Commander. Connor was extremely distressed by this situation.

Medics had been called but had not yet arrived. No sooner was Axl resting peacefully than another cacophony arose from one of the many vignettes of couches. It was the towering Defense Minister, Karsten Kolbeck, who had been felled next to a large leather couch. His convulsions took the same form as what they had witnessed with Axl.

"Connor! Water!" said Lenore as she headed back to the fireplace again.

"I have it already," said Daniel as he followed her to the fireplace. No sooner had they attended to Minister Kolbeck than Commander-in-Chief Trygg succumbed as well.

Connor immediately got on the phone to alert Birgitte to the exposure at the Council meeting. "I'll contact the Poison Commission to enlist their help," said Axl's executive assistant.

Luminary Ozias went down next. Then Annalise was down. Daniel was immediately by her side with a cocktail shaker of water in preparation for a charcoal slurry. He looked around the room and saw that Lenore was still busy.

"Connor," Daniel called. "Charcoal. It's Annalise."

As Connor dashed to the fireplace, the Azurite Chief of State, Einar Nyhus, bolted to Annalise's side at speeds unexpected for the diplomatic stature he normally presented. He immediately held her shoulders to minimize the effects of the spasms wracking her body.

"Hold on, Annalise. Help is coming. It'll be alright," he soothed. The Minister called to his assistant standing immobilized by shock.

"Call my driver to the front entrance." The assistant pressed a speed dial on his phone and ordered the driver.

Daniel assumed that Nyhus was simply caring for a fellow Azurite. They were both black with electric blue eyes. There was no denying their shared heritage. But there was an unexpected intimacy or familiarity in his demeanor.

Connor was back at the fireplace for charcoal. He quickly rushed back to Daniel with a shovel full of charcoal. Daniel covered the cocktail shaker and shook it to mix the charcoal slurry.

"Hold her head up," Connor instructed the Azurite leader as Daniel began pouring the mixture into the funnel in her mouth to counteract the poison in her stomach. As she relaxed, Nyhus swept her up in his arms.

"Freya," he called as he passed by her next to the recovering Axl on the floor. "We're going to the hospital. Do you want Axl to come or are you waiting for the paramedics?"

"Oh, Yes. We'll come," said Freya gratefully as she stood up. Daniel and Connor immediately slung Axl's arms around their necks to help him up and to walk him to the car.

Freya spotted Lenore nearby giving a charcoal slurry to KahlDahr Chief of State Lennart Lorenson. "Thank you for saving my husband, Lenore," she called.

"Of course," said Lenore.

"Thank you," stammered Axl in gratitude for their having saved his life. His eyes were closed and his head hung forward because he was still too exhausted to hold it upright. Connor understood what his friend was trying to say. They had reciprocated their kidnapping with kindness to their kidnapper and exploiter. Axl recognized that a special bond had formed beyond Stockholm syndrome between the abductees and their abductor.

At the elevator Daniel said to Einar, "I can come with her instead."

"No need," said the Chief of State. Annalise is my wife. Something in his expression suggested he knew of young Daniel's obvious infatuation with his wife. With his usual

diplomacy, he allowed Daniel to save face by continuing, “Your security team would not be pleased with me for extracting you from this building, Daniel.”

Two of Einar’s security team took over, shouldering Axl into the elevator. As Einar stepped into the elevator still carrying Annalise, he shouted for someone to take her. He fell to the elevator floor in convulsions. Daniel and Connor stood by helplessly in horror as the elevator door closed. Seconds later, two sets of elevator doors burst open taking the two by surprise. Four paramedics emerged with two gurneys.

“Azurite Chief of State just exited the elevator in the lobby. He needs a charcoal slurry,” ordered Connor anxiously.

Two paramedics are with Nyhus and his wife now in an ambulance going to the hospital. Activated charcoal will be administered to the Minister en route.

“Excellent. Please come this way,” directed Connor as he led them to Lenore. Lenore had now funneled charcoal into nine of the twelve Ministers. She immediately began to update the lead paramedic as to the symptoms and what she’d done. The other three began attending to the Ministers lying powerlessly in exhaustion on the various couches or rich Bokhara carpets on the floor.

The lead paramedic responded to Lenore’s summary. “These symptoms are similar to what people all over the planet have been experiencing due to algae neurotoxin poisoning. In high enough concentrations, the water treatment filtration systems became unable to remove the toxins completely. After a year, we routinely carry kits of activated charcoal to do exactly what you’ve done. Your quick action saved our planetary government today, Lenore. Thank you!”

He used a walkie talkie to let his fellow paramedics know what he suspected. He continued speaking to Lenore and Connor, “If the Ministers ate shellfish or any of those species of fish, animals and birds which are higher up the food chain, the accumulation of toxins may have reached extremely concentrated levels. Scientists are estimating that at the worst point more than 70% of our food chain was tainted and 100% of our water.” The paramedic moved away to attend to the Ministers.

“What a scary thought,” shuddered Lenore.

Instantly, Connor was on his phone again to Birgitte at Axl’s office to update her. “Birgitte, what food was served to the Ministers today? Nothing potentially toxic about that. Could you please check the date on the water provided for today’s Council meeting?” He flicked the phone onto speaker mode so Lenore could hear.

“I’ll be back to you in a minute, Commander Kane.”

“Sir, the water is dated this month.”

“Are you sure it’s properly treated with the new filtration system that Henerik Halderson had developed to protect people from the algae?”

Within seconds Birgitte cried, “Oh no, Commander. It’s from this month last year.” Neither could speak for a moment with this chilling news. So many died from toxic water a year ago.

“I’ll leave this in your capable hands to resolve, Birgitte. Axl, Annalise, and Einar have been taken to the hospital by ambulance. Perhaps you could locate them and let their doctors know.”

“Yes sir. Thank you,” she said relieved that he made no judgement of her mistake or accidental complicity in the contamination.

“How is Minister Dahl? How are the other Ministers?”

“It’s really touch-and-go at the moment, Birgitte. The first 24 hours are critical. We’ll have to see if they make it through the night. We can only hope that the charcoal was in time to absorb the toxins in their stomachs.”

When he hung up, Connor began to consider some rather suspicious elements about this poisoning that suggested that it was deliberate. Why would the two ‘unpoisoned’ Ministers have wanted to get rid of the others?

“Annalise is married!” interrupted Daniel shaking his head in disbelief.

“When I think about it, it makes sense,” said Connor. There’s something similar in their manner beyond race. Heroic, fearless, kind, compassionate, world-centric, altruistic. They’re both strong and talented diplomats dedicated to helping humanity.”

“I never suspected,” said Daniel shaking his head. “I saw no evidence. Not even a ring. She never said.”

“They probably had to keep it a secret for Annalise to be taken seriously in her work. I had to do the same for Lenore. She is her own person with her own significant expertise and talent. She doesn’t deserve to be downplayed or typecast as simply my wife. People made the wrong assumptions any time she was standing next to me.

Connor continued with his suspicions about the poisonings. “Daniel, why would the two ‘unpoisoned’ Ministers have wanted to get rid of the others?