

HERO INITIATIVE

~~EMPOWERED~~

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CH. 3 - AN UNAUTHORIZED TOUR

Five years later, in a completely different universe.

The midday sun glinted off the sleek, white buildings that made up the OmniGen compound. Nestled just outside San Francisco, the complex was far enough to be out of the way while not being too much of a hassle to commute to.

On this day, a row of school buses from Abraham Lincoln High School rumbled into the parking lot. Out of them came a horde of students, their anticipation palpable as teachers and chaperones herded them to the entrance.

Here, tour guides met and led them into the multilevel glass superstructure of the lobby.

The inside of the atrium was buzzing with activity. Scientists in white lab coats passed from one point to another; many were in groups of three or more, while others were carrying boxes or stacks of paper. The lobby acted as a midway point or hub for the entire complex; everyone and everything came through here throughout the day.

As the students were brought to the lobby's center, a holographic presentation flickered to life. The image of a woman in a crisp lab coat appeared before them, smiling as she addressed the group.

"Welcome, students, to OmniGen Labs, the forefront of scientific research and development. Here, our focus spans many different fields, everything from microbiology to space aerodynamics. Today, you will all catch a glimpse into the cutting-edge work being done here."

An excited murmur spread through the students. They watched in awe as the hologram shift into a circling display of images from different projects –

renewable energy sources, advanced medical research, and even a glimpse of a robotic arm assembling a complex circuit board.

The scientist reappeared after a moment.

“Now, let us begin the tours,” she announced, smiling as she spread her arms out in a welcoming gesture.

With the presentation concluded, the guides began to sort the students into groups as they prepared for the tour.

In one of these groups, a lanky fifteen-year-old with a mop of shaggy brown hair hung back a little with his friends. His name was Liam Whittaker, and he was already more than familiar with the hallways of these labs.

Both his mom and dad worked at OmniGen, and he’d spent countless hours exploring the maze-like corridors, soaking up the hum of innovation and discovery.

It wasn’t long before Liam’s group were standing before an observation window. They watched an assembly of engineers working on a line of tall, humanoid robots.

“The All Terrain Biologic Exploration Robot,” the tour guide explained, “or ATBER for short. These androids are constructed out of materials capable of withstanding harsh environments that a normal human wouldn’t survive in without special equipment. It is our hope that we will one day be able to send these out to explore planets in other solar systems.”

As the guide went on to explain the androids’ versatile range of motion and articulation, Liam and his friends – Marcus and Selina – watched the assembly line. Some of the engineers had just finished working on one of the ATBERs and activated it.

With a shutter, the android came to life and sat up, two small red lights came on as its vision sensors activated.

On Liam’s left side, Marcus – a broad-shouldered teen with spiky red hair – shuttered. “I dunno, man. Those things give me the creeps.”

Liam grinned at him. "Let me guess, you're thinking about all those robot uprising movies you've watched?"

"I'm tellin' you, man. That's how it always starts. Sure, they're meant for something peaceful, but it's only a matter of time until they're being used to replace humans in battle. From there, how long until they decide to turn on us? Or get overridden?"

In a quick movement Liam reached over, grabbed Marcus' hood and flipped it over his head, obscuring his eyes. "Yeah, yeah, and I'm a superhero from another world."

While the two boys bickered, Selina leaned forward, clearly fascinated with the work being done. "You do have to admit, the technology being developed here is fascinating. Just imagine what this will do for space exploration."

Liam paused to look over at her, taking in her warm brown skin, dark flowing hair, and striking hazel eyes.

It went without saying that he might have had a slight crush on her for what felt like forever. Not only was she on the school debate team, but she was also captain of the tennis club. Liam had spent many afternoons watching her during PE classes, always standing out from the others in her class.

The idea of impressing her suddenly became very appealing to him.

"You know," Liam said, "this is all just the surface-level stuff they keep out for tour groups and the press. The *really* interesting stuff happens down in the lower levels."

Pulling his hood back off, Marcus scoffed. "Yeah right, Liam. Like they'd just let us down to see what's going on."

"Oh?" With a smirk, Liam reached into his jacket and pulled out his own ID badge he used to go see his parents.

Marcus blinked in surprise. "Right, I keep forgetting your parents work here."

"Can you take us down to see them?" Selina asked, a hopeful gleam in her eyes.

Liam thought about it. "Well, I think it should be alright to go see my mother. She works in biological sciences, none of the work being done there is particularly secretive."

Marcus grinned, clapping Liam on the back. "Great! What are we waiting for? Let's go!"

After making sure their tour guide wasn't looking, Liam led Marcus and Selina away from the group. They ducked into a short side corridor with a secured door at the end, Liam bringing his ID back out.

He scanned the badge and the door slid open with a soft beep.

"Come on," Liam whispered, ushering them inside.

The door slid close behind them before anyone realized they were gone.

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Liam led his friends through a maze of corridors of the OmniGen complex. The walls shifted from stark white to a soft gray as they ventured deeper into the facility. The hum of activity was a constant background buzz as they navigated the hallways.

Finally, they emerged into a series of interconnected hallways shaped in hexagonal patterns. Liam paused at a door labeled *Biological Sciences Division* and swiped his badge.

The door slid open to reveal a large, circular room designed to resemble a forest glade. Trees stretched towards the ceiling, their leaves rustling softly under artificial sunlight.

Dotted around the clearing were a wide variety of animals, ones that wouldn't normally share a habitat – a peacock, a raccoon, a tortoise, a silverback gorilla, a Komodo dragon, and a shoebill stork were just a few of the species that could be found here.

"What going on in here?" Marcus asked, looking around at the animals which regarded the new arrivals with curious eyes.

"Mom's conducting a study on how an unpolluted environment can affect the behaviors of different animals," Liam replied.

In the center of the room was Liam's mother, Dr. Eva Whittaker. She was kneeling beside an elderly striped hyena; its graying fur starkly contrasted the vibrant stripes of its youth. Gently, she poked the needle of a syringe filled with a clear liquid into a spot between its shoulder blades.

Liam went over, kneeling down next to her, and gave the hyena a gentle pat on the head. "Hey, Mom. Hey, Scrapper."

"Hello, Liam," Dr. Whittaker said, not looking up from her work. "Care to explain why you've brought unauthorized visitors into my lab?"

Liam shifted uncomfortably. "They're my friends from school, Mom. They were interested in the research you're doing here."

With the syringe empty, Dr. Whittaker withdrew it before she stood. She brushed off her jeans before turning her attention to Liam and his friends.

Her eyes narrowed behind her glasses as she scrutinized them closely.

Liam glanced nervously between his friends and mother. This was the first time she had ever met his friends, and he seriously hoped this wouldn't end in pieces.

"Um... hello, Dr. Whittaker" Selina stepped forward, hand outstretched. "I'm Selina Rodriguez. I've read about your work and find it fascinating. Your research into natural processes of preventing biomatter from decomposing is inspiring to say the least."

Marcus leaned over to Liam asked, "Say what?"

"Ways of preserving fruits and vegetables for longer periods of time without using harmful chemicals," Liam translated.

"Oh..."

Eva stared at Selina for a moment, then reached out and accepted the handshake.

"I see," she said, a rare smile gracing her lips. "I'm glad to see that my son has made friends who share an enthusiasm for the pursuit of knowledge."

She looked at the three of them. "You can stay. Feel free to look around and ask whatever you like. All I ask is that you don't disturb the animals."

Liam sighed in relief.

"So... who's this guy?" Marcus asked, kneeling next to Liam and joining him in giving the striped hyena pets.

"That is Scrapper," Eva replied. "He's been with us for a while now and turned twenty this year. Despite his age, he's still quite the character, as you can see."

Scrapper had practically started melting at Marcus' touch and had rolled onto his back to expose his belly.

"If you don't mind me asking," Selina said, "what was in that syringe you were using on him when we came in?"

Eva's smile faded slightly. "Scrapper has a rare form of leukemia that's hard to treat. The serum I've been administering is a relatively new remedy that should help, but his advanced age makes his prognosis uncertain."

Selina knelt down next to Liam and Marcus, her hand tentatively reaching out to stroke the hyena's coarse fur.

"That's so sad," she murmured.

Liam looked over at her. "It is... but it's also an opportunity for everyone to learn and improve treatments."

"Indeed," Eva agreed with a nod, "it's what we do here at OmniGen—we endeavor to make the world a better place, one discovery at a time."

With that said, she turned back to Liam, her expression becoming businesslike again.

"Speaking of which, your father left his lunch here when he came to see me earlier." She held up a brown paper bag out to him. "Since you're giving your friends the grand tour, you don't mind taking it down to him, do you?"

Liam nodded, standing up before taking the paper bag from his mom. “Sure thing.”

“Where does your dad work?” Marcus asked, looking up at Liam.

“Theoretical Physics. He and his colleagues work out ways to... well, theoretical ways they could rewrite or break the laws of physics.”

Both Marcus and Selina gave him looks that told him they wanted to come.

Liam sighed before turning to his mom. “Do you think Dad will mind?”

A smile raised the corner of her mouth. “If he forgot his lunch, I don’t think he’ll mind having visitors – especially if they show as great an interest in his research as they did with mine.”

“I don’t think that will be a problem,” Liam replied, looking at his friends’ enthusiastic faces.

As they left the lab, Selina turned to Liam, her eyes shining. “Your mom is amazing. And this place... it’s all incredible!”

Liam smiled, a warm feeling spreading through him at hearing her words. “Yeah, it is.”

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The three teens journeyed deeper into the heart of OmniGen – the air becoming cooler and the hum of machinery more pronounced.

Liam led the way, occasionally pausing to greet passing scientists with a familiar wave.

After a while, they reached a massive lab filled with towering machinery and whiteboards scrawled with complex equations.

“Well, this is it,” Liam announced as they stepped in. “My dad’s workspace.”

Marcus and Selina looked around, their eyes wide and curious.

The lab was a stark contrast to the forest clearing of Eva's workspace, all cold metal and blinking lights. However, there was no sign of Liam's father or any of his colleagues.

"Um... where is everyone?" Selina asked, her voice echoing slightly in the vast space.

Liam set his dad's lunch on a nearby desk. "Not sure. Maybe they're in a meeting or something, Dad does work with a lot of important people."

Marcus had wandered over to a whiteboard, his eyes furrowed as he tried to decipher the equations. "So, any clue what exactly your dad does down here?"

Looking around at the lab, Liam shrugged. "Honestly? I'm not entirely sure. A lot of what he does is kept under wraps and he doesn't talk about it much, even at home."

Selina picked up a small, blinking gadget from a workbench, turning it over in her hands. "Seems kind of secretive."

"True, but that's just how it is around here," Liam replied. "Come on. Dad's not here, so we should probably get back to my mom."

They had just turned to leave when, with a clicking of claws on the floor, a familiar figure trotted into the lab.

"Is that... Scrapper?" Marcus asked, dumbfounded.

The striped hyena came over to them with a happy grin, his tail wagging slowly.

"How did he get here?" Selina asked, crouching down to pet the hyena.

Liam grinned and replied, "Oh, this isn't the first time he's managed to get out of Mom's lab, the little escape artist."

Scrapper panted happily, his tongue lolling out as he accepted pets from the three of them.

"Alright, we should really get going now," Liam said, glancing at a clock on the wall.

As they started to leave, Scrapper's demeanor suddenly changed. His nose twitched, and he began sniffing the air intently. Before Liam could react, the hyena darted towards an open bathroom door.

"Scrapper, no! We're not supposed to be here," Liam called out, chasing after him, Marcus and Selina following right behind.

Inside the bathroom, Scrapper sniffed around until he started pawing at a section of the wall, his tail wagging excitedly.

Liam sighed, reaching out to grab the hyena's collar. "Come on, Scrapper, we don't have time for– WHOA!"

He was cut off as he stepped on a patch of soap dripping from the dispenser. Both Marcus and Selina managed to catch him before he fell back – at the same time, Liam's hand shot out and latched onto the faucet of the nearby sink.

There was a *click* as the spout turned sharply to the side in his grasp.

Suddenly, the section of the wall Scrapper had been pawing at slide open with a soft hiss. Lights flickered on, revealing a set of stairs descending into unknown depths.

The three teens stared in shock at this. For a moment, the only sounds were the distant hum of machinery and Scrapper panting.

"What... is this?" Selina whispered, her eyes wide.

Liam, his heart still pounding from nearly falling over, shook his head. "I don't know... I've never seen this before."

After spending so many years here, he thought he'd explored every nook and cranny OmniGen had to offer.

This was something else.

Marcus took a few cautious steps closer to the opening. When he spoke, there was obvious excitement in his voice. "This is so cool! It's just like something out of a movie."

Selina turned to look at Liam, her expression worried. "Do you think your dad knows about this?"

He nodded slowly. "He must if it's in his lab... but why the secrecy? What's he doing that requires *this*?"

For a moment they stood in silence, taking in the weight of their discovery and what it could all mean.

Then Marcus turned to the others, his eyes practically bursting with determined curiosity. "Guys, we should check this out!"

That shook Liam out of his daze. He looked away from the dark staircase to glare at Marcus. "Are you serious? This could be dangerous! We should just leave and tell my mom, let her handle it."

Marcus scoffed, clapping Liam on the back. "Oh, come on, man! It isn't every day you stumble across an honest-to-goodness secret passageway. We have to see where it goes!"

Liam looked over at Selina, silently begging for support.

She seemed to think about this for a moment, mulling it over in her head before coming to a decision. "I do think you're right, Liam. This is something we *should* leave alone and tell your mom about..."

After a long sigh, she gave Liam an apologetic look. "But, I'm also curious about what your dad's doing."

Liam groaned, knowing he had lost. "Fine... but we need to be careful. And if it gets too weird, we turn right around and come back. Agreed?"

Both Marcus and Selina nodded in agreement.

With a final glance back at the lab, the trio stepped through the hidden doorway, Scraper close on their heels.