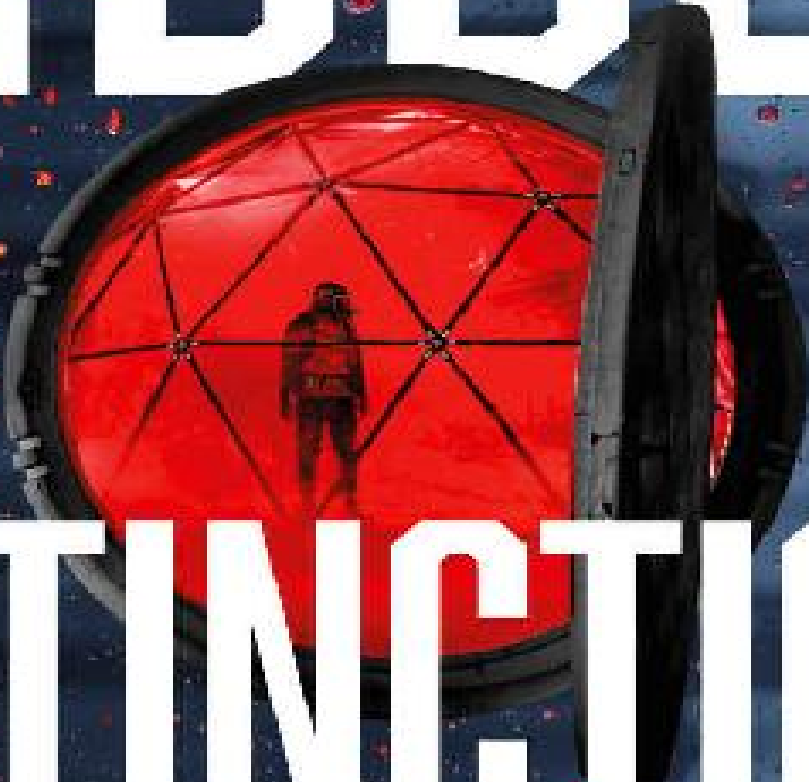


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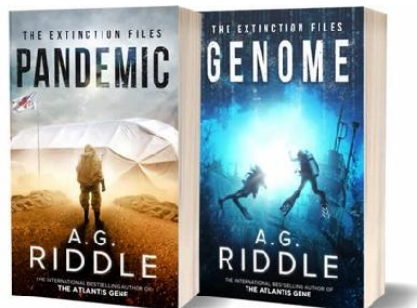
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THE
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LEGION

ABOUT THE EXTINCTION TRIALS

THE END... IS ONLY THE BEGINNING.

After a mysterious global event known only as “The Change,” six strangers wake up in an underground research facility where they learn that they’re part of The Extinction Trials—a scientific experiment to restart the human race.

But The Extinction Trials harbors a very big secret.

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AN EXTENDED LOOK AT THE EXTINCTION TRIALS

Dr. Maya Young is successful, single, and completely unfulfilled. But she’s working on it. Until one morning when everything changes.

After a strenuous spin class, Maya begins coughing until blood comes up. At the hospital, she discovers that her symptoms are far more complicated than she realized. Her illness may be connected to a far-reaching global conspiracy. And she may hold the key to stopping it.

Owen Watts is a firefighter who is slowly losing his job. Not because he's not good at it. And not because he doesn't show up and work hard. On the contrary, he's very good at his job—and hard working. His problem is that robots are increasingly doing the work he's trained his whole life to do.

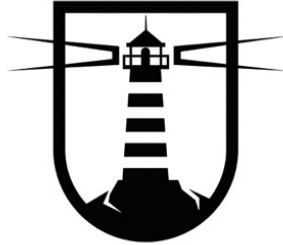
The robots aren't Owen's only problem. He has a limitation, a condition that has always held him back in life. Because of that, he's not exactly sure what he'll do next—when the robots take his job completely.

But one morning a call comes in that will change his life forever. With his team, Owen responds to a fire alarm at an apartment building. At first, it seems to be a false alarm. But it's not. It's the start of a global event known as “The Change”—a new era of human existence that will alter the future forever.

As The Change sweeps the world, Owen and Maya both end up in the hospital. With their injuries, it looks like the last stop for them. But the next time they wake up, they're in an underground research facility along with four other strangers. The group is told very little, only that they're part of The Extinction Trials, a scientific experiment aimed at finding a way for humanity to survive in the world after The Change.

What they don't know is that The Extinction Trials hides one very big secret—and a few small ones. And so do several of the other participants.

With time running out to save the last human survivors, Owen, Maya, and the other participants venture out into the changed world. What they find there is beyond anything they imagined. And the key to their future—and humanity's survival—is something no one expected.



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To the brave souls who keep going—even when it feels like the world is ending.

THE
**EXTINCTION
TRIALS**

PROLOGUE

THE DINNER HOST tapped his champagne glass with a fork.

The *ding-ding-ding* echoed through the vast dining room, drawing the attention of the sixty guests.

“Tonight, I’d like to pose a simple question: what is the *destiny* of the human race?”

He let the words hang in the air for a moment.

“We all know the answer. At some point, our species will go extinct.”

He paced the room, all eyes following him.

“How? What will be our end? Artificial intelligence? Will our undoing come at the hands of an AI project one of your companies is working on? Or maybe another one of your pet projects? Will genetic engineering splinter our species, making some of us obsolete, setting off an unimaginable war between the next humans and the ones left behind?”

The host turned and paced again, stopping in front of a pair of doors that opened onto a wide stone veranda. Beyond, waves from the ocean crashed upon the rocks, a soft symphony punctuating the speech.

“Let’s assume, for a moment, that our extinction won’t come at the hands of one of our inventions. After all, we’re not here tonight to point fingers. Tonight, we’re here to find a solution—to whatever awaits us.”

Murmurs erupted around the room.

The host pressed on. “Consider how vulnerable we are. A solar flare could destroy our planet in the blink of an eye. A supervolcano could blot out the sun, and starve us and freeze us into extinction. Would we stand a chance against an alien invasion? Perhaps our end will come from an old

enemy: a pandemic—maybe a more deadly version of a pathogen we’ve already lived through.”

A sea breeze swept in through the doors, tugging at the man’s white hair.

“And there’s another great question that should haunt us all: why do we seem to be alone in the universe? Is that a clue to our true destiny? Tonight, I’d like to propose a simple solution to those twin enigmas that have always haunted us.”

He held his hands out to the crowd, palms up.

“We know the truth: we can’t stop what’s coming. We can’t prevent the next extinction event. What we can do... is control what happens after. *That* is the key to the future.”

He let his hands drop to his sides.

“What I’m proposing is a new kind of experiment. A project with one purpose: to restart the human race after the Fall. A project that will witness the rebirth of our species and unravel the deepest secrets of our existence. I’m calling it The Extinction Trials, and I want you to be part of it.”

PART I

THE FALL

CHAPTER ONE

EVERY MORNING, before work, Owen Watts visited the nursing home.

The halls were mostly empty. Only a few doors stood open. Residents sat outside their rooms, knitting or reading, glancing up as he passed, most staring at his uniform.

At his mother's door, he paused and peered in.

Owen had a dangerous job, but that moment every morning was easily the most frightening he faced every day. One morning, he knew he would find the room empty. The narrow bed made. His mother's pictures and belongings gone.

But not today.

She sat in a chair by the window, a book in her lap.

He breathed out as he crossed the threshold, his heavy footfalls drawing his mother's attention, and instantly, a smile.

Life had taught Owen the value of time. How precious it was. How quickly things changed.

His work had left scars on his body. Life had left a few on his soul. They were what made him cling to the time he had left with his mother.

"Reading anything good?" he asked as he took the seat across from her.

"Well, I just started. But it looks promising. An original premise. And a likable main character."

She studied him a moment. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing."

She cocked her head.

"Work," he said simply, hoping she would drop it, knowing she wouldn't.

“What about work?”

“Work... is getting weird.”

“Weird how?”

“Weird as in I’m slowly being replaced by robots.”

“It’s safer that way.”

“True.”

“You’re worried about what you’ll do next—when the robots have completely replaced your job.”

Owen smiled. “You can read me like one of those books.”

“That’s what mothers are for.” She paused. “I know what’s really bothering you.”

He raised an eyebrow.

“Your limitation.”

Growing up, Owen’s mother and father never used the word handicap. *Limitation*—that’s the word they used. Because everyone has limitations.

“Can I bore you with a piece of advice?” she asked.

He exhaled and nodded.

“Life isn’t about your limitations. They matter far less than you think. You make a living doing what you’re good at. That’s what’s important—your strengths, not your limitations.”

“I’m going to put that on a t-shirt. That’ll be my new job. T-shirt salesman.”

She smiled. “Always a tough one. But I know you listen too. And I know you’ll land on your feet. You just need a little faith. In yourself, most of all.”

She reached over to the bookcase and took out a small paperback and handed it to him.

He read the title: *The Birthright*. He opened it and flipped to the first page and read it:

Every human is born with a birthright. That birthright is happiness. Our greatest challenge to achieving happiness is not the obstacles we encounter in our life. The true barrier to happiness lies inside of us—and it’s the one thing we can’t ever escape: our own mind.

From birth, we are educated on countless aspects of life, from personal hygiene to personal finance, but there is no widely accepted curriculum for understanding and managing our minds.

Indeed, almost every human remains the victim of their own mind throughout their entire life, never learning to master it, or manage it, or even understand it. The Birthright was written to change that. This book is an owner's manual for a human mind. If you read it and do the maintenance it recommends, your mind will run smoothly. It will break down less often, and in the end, it will take you to your birthright. Indeed, a well-tuned mind is the only road to true and lasting happiness.

Owen closed the book. "It's not exactly... my type of thing."

"Your type of thing?"

"Self-help books."

"It's not a self-help book—not that there's anything wrong with them. *The Birthright* is a book about science and psychology, and most of all, understanding yourself and the world around you."

"Wonderful," he muttered. "By the time I read it, the world will probably be changed again."

"The world is always changing. Always will be. The key to success is accepting that the world will keep changing. The ideas in that book transcend worlds and time."

Owen's armband buzzed. The three fast pulses signaled an emergency alert. He activated the band and read the message.

"Sorry, Mom, my disappearing job needs me."

"An alarm?"

"Probably just a false alarm. See you tomorrow morning."

He hugged her and turned to leave, but she called to him, "Owen, don't forget the book."

FIFTEEN MINUTES LATER, Owen was in the front seat of the fire truck, barreling through the city, sirens blaring. The truck wirelessly shut down the traffic lights and crosswalks ahead. Driverless cars pulled to the side and waited as the hulking vehicle rumbled past.

Owen studied a tablet and called to his two teammates behind him.

“It’s a kitchen fire. Oasis Park Building. Eleventh floor, unit 1107. Auto fire suppression has already extinguished it.”

He was about to continue when the pleasant computer voice of the central AI came over the truck’s speakers.

“The apartment building has fifteen floors and seven hundred and twenty-three registered residents. Scout drones confirm sixty-five infrared signatures currently inside. There is one adult female and one juvenile female in unit 1107. Vital signs normal.”

Owen set his tablet down, annoyed. The AI didn’t even trust him to give the briefing. What bothered Owen the most was that he had to admit the AI was more efficient at the briefing than him. And, in a raging fire, he was glad to have the robots there. They never panicked. They were built to withstand extreme temperatures. Most of all, they were replaceable. Humans were not.

He didn’t miss the danger of fighting fires. But some days—a lot of days lately—he missed going home after his shift and feeling like he had made a difference in someone’s life.

This assignment would probably be like the last ten: he’d investigate the source of the fire (likely human error), explain what happened to the resident, and provide safety tips on how to avoid future fires.

The two firefighters in the backseat had each been on the job less than a year. They were staring out the window with the same sense of excitement Owen had felt fifteen years ago when he had joined the department. He wondered what they would be doing in fifteen years. If they would even be needed.

Another alert popped up on the screen. A resident in unit 403 in the same building had just reported a gas leak. The unit’s safety detector hadn’t gone off. That was strange. Maybe the resident was confused.

“Selena, take 403. Confirm the gas levels and do a welfare check on the resident. Call an ambulance if they seem disoriented.”

“Copy, Lieutenant.” She smiled, seeming happy to have her first solo assignment.

“Cole, we’ll take 1107. Pay attention. You’re taking the lead on the next one.”

He nodded. “Yes, sir.”

On the tablet, three more alerts appeared in buildings across the city—all gas leaks. That was *very* odd. Was it a malfunction in the detectors? Or

maybe a prank: kids hacking the sensors and making false reports.

As the truck rolled to a stop, the rescue drones took flight. They would circle the building, waiting, arms at the ready to take anyone who needed to be evacuated from the building.

Firebots detached from the truck and marched toward the building, clanking on four legs, long arms outstretched, fire suppression tanks on their backs like jetpacks.

Owen stepped out and led his team into the building, the sixty pounds of suit and kit barely slowing him. He climbed the stairs as protocol required, feet pounding on the concrete. At the seventh-floor landing, he was barely winded, but Cole leaned over, panting, hands on his knees. Sweat covered his face behind the clear mask.

“Gotta log more gym time,” Owen called over the radio. “Training is half the job. Always—”

“Be prepared,” Cole said between gasps. “Copy that, sir.” A few seconds later, he said, “I’m ready.”

At apartment 1107, Owen pressed the doorbell with his gloved hand and waited. Cole was still breathing heavily behind his mask. When no response came, Owen pressed the doorbell again.

“Central, confirm occupants and vitals in 1107.”

“One adult female. One juvenile female. Both vitals normal.”

Owen banged on the door. Maybe the ringer was malfunctioning.

“Selena, what’s your status?”

He stabbed the doorbell and pounded the door again while he waited.

No response.

“Selena, do you copy?”

Silence over the radio.

“Central, confirm Selena’s location and status.”

“Selena is in unit 403. Vitals normal. Communication systems check failure.”

Cole stepped closer. “Want me to check on her?”

“No. Let’s get a status here first.” Owen eyed the door. “Central, open unit 1107.”

The lock clicked and Owen strode in and stopped cold.

A woman about his mother’s age lay on the floor. He rushed to her, jerked the thick outer glove off his right hand, and exhaled when he felt a faint pulse.

“Central, send an ambulance. Adult female unconscious. Probably asphyxiation.”

Owen glanced at his arm panel. Oxygen level normal. The panel had to be malfunctioning too. And so was central: it had confirmed normal vitals. The occupant was out cold.

Something was wrong here.

He replaced his glove and the suit re-pressurized.

“Central, I’m ordering a mandatory building evac. Possible gas leak and fire risk. Broadcast it and have the bots execute.”

“Confirmed, Lieutenant.”

“Selena,” Owen said, standing up. “If you read me, get out of the building.”

It didn’t add up. This many malfunctions? It was impossible.

The apartment was likely filled with gas. The unconscious woman indicated that. Unless she had been affected by something else? An intruder. Or a medical condition. Better safe than sorry.

“Central, vent unit 1107.”

Owen stared at the floor-to-ceiling windows in the living room, waiting for one to open slightly.

Nothing happened.

“Central, I repeat, vent unit 1107.”

No response.

“Vent it, Cole.”

“Sir?”

“Get your ax out and make a big hole in that window. Right now.”

The young man had only used his ax in training a few times—and probably never expected to use it in the field, except perhaps in the oldest homes, and only after the firebots were destroyed, and he was the last line of defense. But Owen was proud to see his younger teammate unsheathe the shiny ax and charge toward the window.

Owen dashed down the hall, throwing doors open as he went. The second door on the left opened to a child’s bedroom. Posters of teen idols covered the walls. A jewelry box sat on a table, cheap imitation necklaces and bracelets spilling out as if it was a treasure chest waiting in an undiscovered cave. On the narrow bed lay a young girl, eyes closed, unmoving.

Owen moved like a man possessed, quickly, automatically. He scooped her up, kicked in the door to the bathroom, and laid her gently in the tub. He was about to check her pulse when fire exploded through the apartment.

CHAPTER TWO

IF THE PAIN didn't stop soon, Maya Young was certain she would die.

Her muscles burned.

Her heart hammered in her chest.

Her pulse throbbed in her neck.

Her body was drenched in sweat.

She wasn't alone in her misery. The cycling class was filled to capacity, thirty women pedaling their stationary bikes to the music, huffing, glancing up periodically at the instructor, who was barely winded. The woman was a mix of a suburban mom and a military drill instructor. Her friendly, housewife exterior hid a merciless personality that seemed to delight in inflicting pain on those in her spinning class.

"Come on, ladies, one final push!" the instructor yelled. "Crank it up and let's do this. No pain, no gain!"

Maya reached down and turned the bike's resistance dial—just one click. She heard others cranking even higher, the sound like a hundred camera snaps going off at once, the clicks a disembodied guilt trip saying, "Why aren't you turning yours higher like everyone else?"

She pumped the pedals, breathing hard. It felt like her bike had bottomed out in quicksand. She better get a ton of gain for this pain. Speaking of, if she ever met the person who first said, "No pain, no gain," she would punch that person in the face. Hard.

After what seemed like an eternity, the instructor stopped pedaling and began clapping.

"Okay, that's it! Nice job, everyone. See you again tomorrow. Reminder to check the schedule online tonight. Enrollment for the next eight classes

opens at six.”

Maya stepped off the bike and staggered on wobbling legs to the lockers. When she had first toured the gym, she had fallen in love with the cycling studio, with its exposed rafters, antique brick walls, and shining wood floor. Now she barely noticed. It was just a really well-decorated torture chamber.

Outside, sirens blared. A moment later, a firetruck rumbled past the plate glass windows, red and blue lights flashing. Maya paused at her locker to watch.

When the truck was gone and the siren had faded, Maya’s friend Zoe closed her locker and said, “Guilty confession: hoping the class is full by the time I log in tonight.”

“Same,” Candice said, pulling her messenger bag on. “I’ve got two, maybe three weeks max left in me. Remind me again why we’re doing this?”

Maya, Zoe, and Candice had made the current exercise pact late one night while slightly intoxicated. At the time, it had seemed like an unquestionably good idea.

“I think,” Maya said, “it had something to do with becoming more attractive, finding a mate, and advancing life stages.”

Zoe glanced up theatrically as if contemplating. “If this is the cost of mating and advancing life stages, I’m opting out. I’m okay with being slightly overweight for the rest of my life. And single.”

A crackling laugh erupted from Maya, almost involuntarily. Her lungs hurt, she assumed from the exertion. The laugh turned to a cough, and she brought a hand up to cover her mouth. She froze when she saw the red specks. She stared for a moment in disbelief.

Candice moved closer, squinting at the red droplets on Maya’s hand.

“Hey, are you okay?”

A wave of dizziness washed over Maya. Her legs went numb. She reached out for the locker but couldn’t grip it. The floor rushed up as her vision spotted. She felt arms around her, someone saying, “Maya?”

Then muffled voices. Someone prying her eyes open. And finally:

“Call an ambulance!”