

## **EXTRACT 1 – Symbolion**

Brett arrived at the *Journal* early in the morning and headed towards his office. He sat at his desk, pushing away a pile of papers. The unfinished report about the wastewater treatment plant was lying on top. He smiled inwardly. That had to wait for now. Today was a day with a capital D and Brett hoped that he would not be disturbed by anything unimportant. He had kind of stacked away the report about the plant for himself. The whole process of wastewater cleaning fascinated him. It was forbidden to work overtime. He had what he wrote. What he did not manage within working hours, had to be passed over to the editor who came to work after him. The editorial office functioned in a non-stop three-shift operation. The whole skyscraper shone like a lighthouse at night and never stopped living. As if it pulsed in its own rhythm. Brett liked the buzz. The media world enchanted him. He had already been curious about it as a boy. He was always reading or discussing something, he had educated himself. There was so much information, so many things he wanted to know. Something was happening all the time, and he wanted to be at the center of events. He loved his work. And now he had been Appointed. He was leading precisely the type of life that he had always wished for. He sighed. How could anyone want to voluntarily disconnect? Kala was no longer suffering from a sleep disorder, and they could not diagnose anything else in the Health Center. Still he noticed that she was gradually giving up. In his mind, he saw Kala's smile and her almost childish face. He loved her. He had always found the way. He believed that something helpful would also occur this time. Kala simply could not give up till that time. He walked over to the window and looked out. It was still snowing lightly outdoors. Christmas was approaching and he did not have any presents yet. He knew that it was the same for Kala. It would be best for them if they could go somewhere during the festive season. But there was nowhere to go.

Brett turned on the computer and dived deeper into the upholstered leather armchair. The theme of his writing was set for the day. He could write about practically anything. There was no censorship, no problems from the side of the authorities. There was only one taboo. Symbolion. Some claimed that it had already surfaced at the time Before the Hatch. However, only in the time After the Hatch, when their bodies had changed, did Symbolion become really dangerous. Anyway, Brett doubted that anyone could have played it before, considering the physiognomy back then. In any case, it was just a virtual game; and the only one to be forbidden. Symbolion fascinated him. Since the time he had heard about it for the first time, he had begun to gather all the available proven as well as unfounded information. All sources reported that there were nine game cards which enabled entrance to the game. Every man was a potential Key. This is what those connected to Symbolion were called. They became the Keys only at the moment they passed through the gate, a portal enabling entry to Symbolion. Not everyone who managed to get a card, was able to go through the gate and become a Key. It was reputed that a person remained connected even at the moment when he completed the game and passed the card on. Nobody knew how many Keys were circulating in the City. Only those who completed the game knew a list of people who were connected. It was generally known that the Secret Police were eminently interested in this list. There were even rumors that secret agents had got hold of one of the cards, but had not yet managed to obtain

the list.

Symbolion was like a living organism. It assessed the gaming potential, and if the Key did not meet those parameters, the gate remained locked. However, if somebody managed to pass through all the levels of the game, he was healed of degenerative diseases and the aging process was halted. It was said that such a person could even tap into the information system of the City and thus gain unimaginable powers of knowledge. However, Brett did not believe this fable. On the other hand, the threat to the whole of society was real. The game had a virus in itself, which attacked the central nervous system and resulted in a complete draining of energy. Death followed. A few people had already died in this way. They dissolved. Another rumor claimed that a person who passed through all levels of the game was able to gain access to the source of energy. This attracted many people. The game was too risky. Despite the threat, there were increasingly many people willing to pay unimaginable sums for a card. Brett knew many traffickers and yet had never heard whether the cards were traded on the black market. It was a mystery. Did the game actually exist? He did not understand that the City, with all the information and technology, was unable to track down the game and stop it. He wearily got up from the desk and stretched. Although he had already been awake for several hours, the City was just sailing into a new day. And this day obviously would be very long.