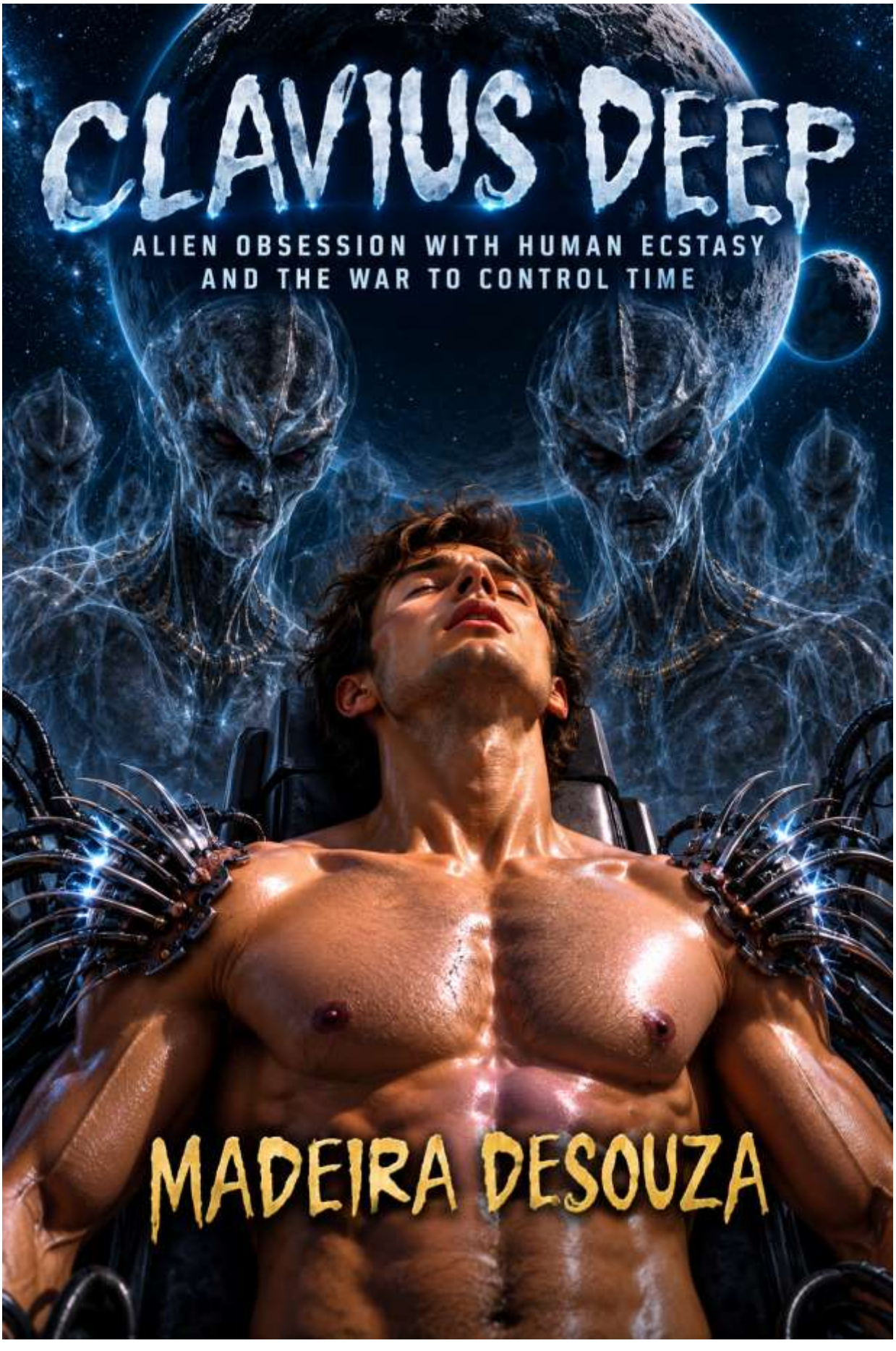

CLAVIUS DEEP
ALIEN OBSESSION WITH HUMAN ECSTASY
AND THE WAR TO CONTROL TIME
MADEIRA DESOUZA

Clavius Deep

Alien obsession with human ecstasy and the war to control time

The Clavius Harvest
Book 1

Madeira Desouza

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Writing as Madeira Desouza

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For Samuel C. Glass, Jr.

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ABOUT THIS BOOK

Clavius Deep: Alien obsession with human ecstasy and the war to control time carries forward selected characters, situations, and narrative elements first developed in *Baja Clavius: Moon Men Deep Inside* (2017). It substantially reimagines and expands that earlier work. *Baja Clavius* is the historical ancestor. *Clavius Deep* is the definitive canon.

Visit the CLAVIUS DEEP website https://claviusdeep.com/ for more information.

01

CLOCK

As you sit there and imagine the many possible outcomes for the future of the inhabitants of Earth, you may want to stop and consider whether the planetary civilization will survive across the centuries. The greatest minds have figured out that sooner or later someone will take action that sends the whole giant burrito smashing to the floor in a gleaming puddle of salsa roja.

Well, come on. Our home planet is not akin to any giant burrito I've seen. It was a weak metaphor at best, don't you think? While you think of a replacement metaphor, let me set the scene for you here and get on with my assignment to serve as your humble narrator.

Imagine you are invited to witness a great adventure deep beneath a huge crater on the Moon. Don't worry, the thick regolith covering the entire lunar surface shields humans from deadly cosmic radiation.

It is the year 2251. What starts as a routine day for top-secret Moon men under Crater Clavius spirals quickly out of control.

We hear five rhythmic chimes sketching out a musical signature in a distinctly minor key. Another agent has returned safely from Earth. Four young men identically attired in all-black military-style uniforms and heavy black boots look up to the high ceiling in response to the chiming.

An unpleasant whooshing sound reverberates through the room, drawing every eye. A large circular device—like an immense hockey puck

turned on edge—stands before several rows of flashing equipment. Its eerie blue glass is connected to the racks by numerous flexible pipes.

What do you suppose is the purpose of this warehouse-sized sublunar room? The simple answer: this is a time-travel facility that you are not supposed to know about. Those who travel in time from this facility to the past are not mere visitors. They travel to the past to change it. You are being given special access but just don't tell anybody what you learned.

Two of the men tap the outside of the blue glass device matching the cadence of the chimes. They watch through the blue glass as a naked young man with long, dark hair flowing down his back materializes. He is seated on a glass bench as thick white liquid splashes around him and over his body.

The chiming abruptly stops the moment that giant blue hockey puck number seven opens and releases a rush of the foul-smelling white liquid onto the shiny metallic floor. The naked young man coughs vigorously as he breathes in the room air. He wipes his face with his large hands, clearing the sticky white liquid from his eyes.

"Code word for today, sir," one of the uniformed men shouts out to the guy who is stepping out awkwardly from the giant blue hockey puck. As he accepts a large blue robe to put on, the time-travel agent answers in a deep, resonant voice, "*Hózhǫ́ náhásdlǰ̃.*" The entire group of uniformed men responds in unison, "Permission granted to enter Clavius Moonbase, Vincent Wauneka."

Chaz Yang holds the military rank of general. Almost everyone at Clavius Base fears him. At fifty-five, Yang looks considerably younger; his face is almost completely unlined. The general's muscular frame is emphasized by the identical all-black uniform and black boots he wears as he walks up to greet Vincent Wauneka standing outside giant blue hockey puck number seven. "Oh, wow, look out now, boys. The boss is here," says General Yang in an exaggeratedly gruff voice.

During the debrief the general deliberately slams his beefy right hand onto the small conference-room table, startling Vincent, who is opposite

him in his large blue robe. The windowless off-white walls of the general's small conference room vibrate in response. His loud and angry voice booms, "You look a little cold there wearing only that blue robe, Mr. Wauneka. After you enjoyed all that warm white goo drenching your body while you got a ride in my time machine. Who authorized you to use some goddamn code word for the day which nobody else can pronounce?"

Vincent shivers briefly, although his body is accustomed to the lunar base's chill. He is a Navajo man who appears to be around thirty. He frowns and avoids eye contact with the general as he nervously scratches his left arm through the long sleeve of the large blue robe.

"That blue robe. Makes you think of downtime. Now that you are back here at this base. But you are always 'on the clock' with me, mister. Are you clear about that? No downtime."

Vincent nods as he answers with a trace of mockery tempered by respect, "Sir, yes, sir, General."

General Yang does not smile in response as he says, "Kiss, kiss. That's what I like from you, Mr. Wauneka."

At that point Vincent dares to make eye contact with General Yang at last but remains respectfully silent.

"No 'downtime,'" the general repeats in a conversational tone. "And 'on the clock' is also such a great phrase especially considering what we do down here. All of you time-travel agents are never off the clock. You report to me. Twenty-four seven. You must meet my expectations. You get what I'm saying, Mr. Wauneka?"

"Yes, General," Vincent answers quickly. His expression suggests that he fears the worst. "I report to you, General. I do what you say."

"Kiss, kiss. What I like. From you, Mr. Wauneka. Seriously, you are a big guy, powerfully built. You obviously can handle yourself in any adverse situation. I sure wouldn't wanna face you in a bar fight. That's why I especially like seeing you groveling before me here this afternoon in your intense masculinity. I am your boss, so what choice do you really have but to kiss up? I am the director of this agency. And I feel real good when I

see you there. You think you are in trouble as you sit there sweating in anticipation. Thinking about what went wrong."

"Yes, General. That accurately describes my situation here today. Me with you. I am here because you are displeased with me or my work."

"No, you are absolutely incorrect," the general roars. Yang drops his voice to a lower, more controlled tone and forces a smile. "My intent here is to meet with you face-to-face to talk about your Arizona missions to 1991. Arizona happens to be one of my favorite locations on Earth. I don't get to visit there very often, but I especially love the Sonoran Desert. I tried valiantly to raise a cactus plant in my office down here. Yeah, indigenous to Arizona. Growing a cactus plant here on the Moon. Big mistake. Turns out no matter what artificial light we throw at it, or whatever liquid additives we toss into the mix, no terrestrial flora survives. N.T.F. No terrestrial flora. Do you miss the direct sunlight?"

"Yes, General."

"Do you? I could have you thrown out the nearest airlock at the zero level. Without wearing any life support. Some limited direct sunlight for you up there on the crater floor above us. Ready to experience that?"

Vincent shakes his head to indicate "no."

"It would be a waste of quality meat to expel you up there. You just got back here to base. Wearing that sexy blue robe like you do. Making me aroused. You know that, don't you? I chose to come to the Time Travel Hall when you returned to base today. I wanted to see you walking naked out of the blue device upstairs. Number seven. Is that correct, Mr. Wauneka?"

Again, Vincent nods to the general.

"Naked time travel. Perfect for prying eyes like mine. Men enter the blue chamber naked. Men exit the blue chamber naked. A ritual performance. Kind of like actors. Strutting upon a stage. Isn't that correct, Mr. Wauneka?"

"Sir, I never have thought of myself as an actor, no."

"Well, I do. Yeah. All of you. Agents. Actors. Same goddamned thing, Mr. Wauneka. You all go in with your memorized briefings. Scripts suggest the correct words that need to be spoken. Machinery here on the Moon fabri-

cates or replicates your costuming. So you all look magically like you fit in. Fully clothed. Like actors in movies. All dressed up. And nowhere to go."

"I suppose so, sir."

"Now you are here. Not all dressed up. Freezing your genitals in this cool air at Clavius Base. Wearing only that blue robe. While you think about your frost-bitten balls, Mr. Wauneka, I need to ask you about having completed seventy-six missions to 1991. All to recruit one time-travel agent in Arizona. Is he so special? Fucking seventy-six missions. Back in time. Over and over. You have stamina. I give you that. You did not bring a carry-on for your return to base? Chose not to bring any items with you from 1991 here to base?"

Vincent remains silent.

"Okay, fine. You prefer to travel light, Mr. Wauneka. Fine with me. No carry-on. I just need to know about those missions. Not each and every one of the seventy-six. Not like that at all. Just select the few you feel are significant for reasons you must certainly have."

"Yes, General, you are catching me off guard here. I guess I understand what you are asking," Vincent replies. No pressure at all.

Vincent's memory overtakes the conference room.

In 1991, the Navajo time traveler stands beside U.S. Highway 160 in dusty brown boots, tight blue jeans and a white Western shirt. A white cowboy hat hides most of his face.

"Poised," Vincent tells the general back at Clavius. "Ready for my mission. Authentic, credible costuming. Dare I say, I am such a sight to see. That location mattered. Indigenous plants here and there. Oh the scent from the flora at sunrise! Nothing like that anywhere else I have been, sir. I was on a mission to select one of the male drivers passing through the Reservation. Early on a weekend morning. Before sunrise. I was born not far from that spot. Meeting the particular type of guy who would drive there solo on the lonely highway mattered to me. So few travel there. Way off the beaten path. Women never do that."

Vincent explains that a young Black man in a blue t-shirt, dark

trousers and running shoes wore a white cardboard badge on small strings draped from his neck identifying him as Number 25.

"Wait, stop. You are saying that they all wore badges tied around their necks with numerals to identify themselves?" General Yang asks.

"No, sir, not really," Vincent replies. "Just a device I use. I added that aspect. How I organize my memories of that mission."

"You put numbers on their chest on badges that they wear draped around their necks? Like some fucking television talent show? Then what did you do? Make each man sing a song by the side of the road?"

A half dozen candidates for recruitment each attempt an a cappella rendition of *A Hazy Shade of Winter*, which I remember as an ancient 1966 Paul Simon song. None succeeds in staying on key.

Vincent reacts nonverbally to each off-key performance with exaggerated anger and frustration aimed squarely at the unskilled vocalists. After the final candidate has walked away in shame, Vincent says, "A fucking disaster."

Number 25 spoke with a heavy regional accent that placed him somewhere in the Deep South. "He picked me up as I was hitchhiking there," Vincent explains. "He looked me over really good. Was afraid of me. That much was obvious to me. I climbed into the passenger seat of his small car. Smelled like cannabis. Both him and his car interior."

The general does not respond but waves his right hand dismissively for Vincent Wauneka to continue talking.

"Okay, Number 41 was a Mexican guy. Around forty. Driving an older pick-up truck. I could barely understand him. His English was weak. I did not tell him I am fluent in Spanish. Would have saved a lot of time. He could have spoken in Arabic. No problem for me, either. I am fluent in eight languages. He had teeth that needed a lot of attention. Could make some dentist very wealthy. Scary looking dude at best."

"Next," General Yang says impatiently.

"Number 52 was a California surfer guy. Vintage Volkswagen van and all. Not kidding, sir. He gave off the vibe that he was sexually attracted to me. Not much upstairs except a lot of bushy blond hair there and spaced-out blue eyes."

The general says, “Being attractive to men. That’s part of what makes you successful on missions, Mr. Wauneka. Isn’t that correct?”

“Of course, sir. You are absolutely right. And then we have Number 58. What a piece of work. Quoted French poetry from the 15th century. Amorous intentions, obviously.”

“Obviously. And let me guess, you are, of course, fluent in French as well, Mr. Wauneka,” General Yang observes.

“Oui, général. Je peux aussi citer de la poésie,” Vincent Wauneka replies with a sly smile.

“Yeah, okay, well you’re just gonna have to save it, will you? I do not happen to understand French, Mr. Wauneka.”

“Moving on to Number 66 then. Totally whacked out. Giggled a lot. Like he was on nitrous oxide. Feared for my very life. I wanted to jump out of his car. Did not like how fast he was driving on that two-lane highway. Then, Number 70. Ripped off his numbered badge. Then he took off his shirt. Right there in his car. Screamed in a high-pitched female voice like the worst possible drag performer in Las Vegas.”

“Wait. I thought you said those numbered badges were merely a mnemonic device, Mr. Wauneka.”

“Of course, General Yang. You are absolutely correct, sir. Just kidding. Just my metaphor running away with me, sir. He did not scream with a female voice, either. Embellishments only. And then Number 73. That one started crying as though I reminded him of a dead lover. Almost lost control of his car. Real fucked up emotionally.”

The general sighs. “Oh, shit, Mr. Wauneka. This lovely walk down memory lane will surely grind me down to gristle.” He starts tapping his fingers on the conference room table.

“Yes, sir. And then, Number 76. Ding, ding, ding.”

“I want to know everything about him, Mr. Wauneka. Everything.”

“‘Never pick up hitchhikers!’ was his philosophy. Number 76. He told me that. Or maybe it was just his internal dialogue that I was picking up. ‘No matter how you may think you’re doing a hitchhiker a favor,’ Number

76 insisted. 'Never know what might happen to you. Your dismembered remains may never be found buried out there. You could simply cease to exist.'"

Vincent tells General Yang, "I told him my name. Then I lied to him about running out of gas. Just a detail that I knew would boost my credibility with Number 76. Told him I needed a ride to Tuba City. An hour away within the Reservation. He bought it."

Vincent remembers sitting there in the passenger seat of the late-model SUV, noticing the way Number 76 is staring at him. That may explain why Vincent declares, "You white guys are so hung up on sex!"

The driver does not try to hide his embarrassment. He can't just leave this man beside the road. Nearest gas station is hours away. The driver tries to convince himself that he isn't deliberately staring at Vincent's crotch framed tightly by faded blue jeans. "I meant nothing by it," he lies to Vincent.

"No problem. A common reaction," Vincent says calmly. "Truth is that I am a sex worker. Yeah. I am supposed to attract the longing gazes of other men. Not a problem. Not a problem."

"OK," the driver replies, choosing to believe that the hitchhiker is bullshitting him.

"Got that look in your eyes. Like you are lost. What do I call you?"

"Other than lost, I am known as Ted Avila. Mexican surname. Spanish, actually. Most people pronounce it wrong."

"Out here alone this morning by mistake?"

"No. By choice. I stayed last night at a small hotel on this highway. In Kayenta. Got on the road early today. Heading to California. Left my wife. My ex-wife. Back in New England. Just driving alone in the West. Nothing was open this morning when I checked out of the motel, so I had no coffee to start off with."

Vincent echoes the pronunciation of the driver's surname. Then he explains he borrowed his cousin's Jeep without permission. Never checked whether the tank was full. "I guess I am an outcast," he says. "My relatives want me to become a holy man, a 'singer,' as the Navajo people say. One who chants or sings healing requests to nature. I moved away. To be

around the casino resorts in Nevada. I choose only to work with male clients. No females."

"OK, 'work with,' yeah," Ted says, accepting that the hitchhiker is bullshitting him.

Vincent explains that in Navajo culture, a "singer" serves as a religious or ceremonial leader, guiding people through wisdom drawn from the spirit world. A singer performs ceremonies. Vincent says he was on his way to attend one when he ran out of gas.

All along the horizon are small fires visible from the highway. Vincent says that the fires are for the ceremonies. "For magic?" Ted asks.

"The white man looks at ghosts and spirits and sees magic. Something that scares him. Something out of the ordinary. The People, the Navajo, are different. There is evil, yes. Ghosts can hurt. But not all of them do. The ceremonies of my people serve many purposes. They focus on what you might call 'energy.' Toward something specific. Not what you call 'magic.'"

He sounds very convincing, yet the sum of Ted's experience tells him that Vincent is a psycho and a liar, probably hallucinating from native-grown flowering plants most people have never even heard of and couldn't pronounce correctly anyway. Vincent smiles and looks at the driver, apparently assessing Ted's disbelief using homegrown psychic powers.

Vincent explains, "My hands once had such severe pain nobody could understand. The white doctors in New Mexico could not find anything physically wrong with my hands. They gave me shots and pills. Always the same deal when you go to your appointment. But the severe pain in my hands would not go away. First cousin is a singer. I came back here to the Reservation to see what he could do to help me find a remedy."

Ted merely nods.

"Had the Navajo way of driving the ghosts out. Now my hands no longer feel the pain. So I can go back to work again."

"You mean your work with male clients. No females," Ted says. Vincent laughs freely as though he really enjoys the almost word-for-word replay of what he told Ted.

You can see Highway 160 winding down the hills into Tuba City, a

Navajo community, which tempts motorists with a couple of gas stations and numerous Navajo jewelry vendors. At this hour of the morning, the town is quiet and looks very lonely.

Vincent watches Ted's eyes. "Tourists drive through the Reservation," he says. "They will stop and tell us how isolated and barren it looks here. They use the phrase 'run down.' Most of them do not mean to be intentionally disrespectful. They buy lots of jewelry anyway. Kind of makes up for their disdain. But not entirely. They stare at us like we all are strange people compared to them. Look down on us and our land. We are a nation. Sovereign. Yet our nation is within three states. We belong here. Yet we are told we do not belong. I say better respect us or we will open up a casino down on Interstate 40 and take a lot of the white man's money." He points out the window. "You can turn right at the next road. My cousin's place is just ahead up here over on the left."

Ted follows Vincent's directions and heads off the street onto another dirt road toward a cluster of brown stucco houses. Each dwelling looks livable but, as Vincent has said, the phrase "run down" is one that most people would select to describe what they see here—such poverty left unchecked amid the vast wealth of an affluent country. What he sees immediately makes Ted grow angry.

Vincent explains that he is staying temporarily in what he refers to as his "cousin's house." Once they are both inside, Ted discovers that this is a very small house with only one bedroom.

The kitchen is Spartan and the cabinets are unpainted. There is a small round wooden table with only two chairs. The kitchen is clean, but very dark since the small window does not allow much sunlight in. The only illumination is a small circular fluorescent ceiling fixture over the sink. The blue-white light hits Vincent's profile, giving him a jagged, threatening appearance. He motions for Ted to sit next to him at the small round table.

"You can read my mind. Not sure how. I just know. But hey, let me admit something. I feel uneasy about being here in this house with you."

"Because of mind-reading or that I rent my body to men for sex?"

"No, I regret picking you up hitchhiking. Literally nobody in the world

knows I am here right now. Never told anyone about driving to California. Could be a cliché opening of a low-budget horror movie, right? I am fading fast. No coffee yet."

Vincent smiles and nods. "I can fix that. We have a diner here in Tuba City within walking distance. The only place for tourists to stop on their drive through the Reservation."

"So, let me offer to buy you coffee. Will that persuade you not to kill me and chop my body up for easier burial here in the desert?"

"Well, the truth is, if I kill you, how will I get to have sex with you?"

The small roadside diner in Tuba City has a short counter with six seats. Customers can select from among only three booths. The interior is mostly white except for bright red fake leather, which seems to bounce the morning sunlight wildly around the room.

Vincent and Ted are the only customers at the diner so they have their choice of an open booth. The older Navajo woman who runs the diner pours coffee into the two gray ceramic mugs in front of Vincent and Ted before she walks away to let them have privacy.

"You have a lot on your mind that you choose not to talk about," Vincent says.

"Your ability to read my thoughts is so unfair. But I am messed up. I admit that. No point in trying to deny that. The simple explanation is that I've run away from home."

"Where was 'home' for you?"

"On the shores of the Atlantic Ocean. Back east. I was married to a woman who was not compatible with me. Filed divorce papers. Packed up my stuff. Then I drove off immediately in my sports utility vehicle. Bought that truck for no reason. You saw the cardboard boxes containing my belongings in my truck. Going to California."

"You plan to settle there?"

"Unfortunately, I don't have a specific plan for that. Been driving quite a few hours every day since I left New England. Several days in a row. Lost count actually. I'm dazed. Pretty messed up. I already said that, right?"

"Yes, you did. You are in the Navajo Nation. Off the beaten path. I believe that is the phrase you white guys like to use."

"That's fair, Vincent. You have the advantage. I never met a Navajo before. An Indigenous man. I must come across to you like a cultural stereotype."

"Well, mister cultural stereotype, now I owe you. Thank you for the ride you gave me here today. I appreciate that you chose to pick me up by the side of that road."

"It's too bad, really, that I don't know anyone around here. Off the beaten path and all. If only I had someone from here who could take me to one of your Navajo ceremonies to help me heal my troubled mind."

A reasonable or consistently logical person might stop right here and quietly consider: Did the lives of these two men simply happen to intersect on some lonely two-lane highway in the Navajo Nation?

Vincent and Ted are gone from the Tuba City diner. Now, somewhere else. The sky is owned completely by serious dark clouds pushed around effortlessly by powerful high-altitude winds.

Vincent is naked. He nods as he smiles at Ted, who happens to be naked as well. The two men stand not far from the heat and fury of the roaring bonfire whose flames shoot up majestically into the air.

There are loud popping and crackling sounds reverberating outward from the huge bonfire. Dark black smoke rises into the air. Where Vincent and Ted stood moments before, there are now six naked men: three Ted Avilas and three Vincent Waunekas.

The six men reposition themselves in a semicircle at the edge of the roaring fire. All six are beginning to show signs of arousal. They move closer to one another. They touch each other gently, intimately caressing one another.

Their fates are not private. We suspect as much. These men do not think about being watched. They do not realize that intense observations are underway. From a distance, watching, studying, fantasizing.

The three Vincent Waunekas speak in the Navajo language to their

counterpart Ted Avilas. The Vincents provide sacred instructions and guidance for this secret healing ritual in the original language.

The rustling winds of heated currents of air created by the bonfire jostle the long, flowing hair of the three Vincents spectacularly as their faces reveal how pleased with themselves they are at this moment.

At a safe distance from the bonfire are four young men wearing loincloths. Overtly stereotypical Native American costuming. These men are muscular and visually appealing. One is the band's drummer seated at his large drum kit. The second man is the bass player. A third man plays lead guitar. A fourth plays an electronic synthesizer.

The band launches into its performance as the six men enjoy sex near the bonfire. The musicians lock into intricate vocal harmonies as they perform an up-tempo cover of *A Hazy Shade of Winter*.

02

KINGMAN

1991

Ted Avila pulled onto the cracked asphalt of a two-star hotel parking lot on the edge of Kingman, Arizona. His vehicle looked dirty because it was covered in soft desert dust. He killed the engine and just sat there with both hands locked on the steering wheel.

He smiled as he remembered the joy he felt the day he purchased it. The manufacturer's name for the vehicle—first introduced for model year 1991—was "Explorer." That pointed him toward his choice of a vehicle nickname, "Ex-91." Remembering the model year was easy for Ted. If only he felt such confidence in recalling how he had gotten to Kingman.

Something felt off-kilter as Ex-91 silently protected him in that parking lot. The cardboard boxes of his belongings that he remembered had filled the cargo space for days were gone. Completely gone. No clothes. No documents. No remnants of the life he thought he had carefully packed to take with him when Ex-91 became his escape vehicle from New England. Just empty space behind the rear seats remained along with a faint sticky residue on the interior of the windshield that he refused to look at for more than a second.

He climbed out. The dry heat hit him squarely in the chest. Kingman sat under a hard blue sky that made every building look temporary. The hotel itself was unimpressive with three stories of faded peach stucco with a blinking vacancy sign that buzzed like a dying insect. Ted Avila walked to the front desk feeling the scrambled quality of his own

thoughts. Memories slid in goopy strands like undercooked eggs. Some stuck. Most slid up and off the edge of the pan and just fell into the fire.

He told the clerk he needed a room for one night. The man behind the counter handed him an old-fashioned aluminum key on a plastic diamond tag stamped with the number 312. Third floor. Ted accepted it without smiling and rode the elevator up in silence.

Room 312 smelled of inauthentic pine-scented industrial carpet cleaner and someone else's cigarette smoke from last week. He dropped the key on the dresser and stood by the window looking out at the parking lot. He felt relieved when he saw Ex-91 sitting alone under a sodium lamp that had not yet turned on. The missing boxes gnawed at him. He tried to remember loading them. The memory refused to settle. Instead he got images of a bonfire and naked skin pushed against naked skin. He shook his head hard as if that was some proven way to control his memories. Then Ted went back downstairs because the alternative of sitting solo in that room listening to his own pulse made him want to cry.

The restaurant was mostly empty. There were many possible reasons for the emptiness he found. The best he could do was accept that sitting down at a two-star hotel restaurant for dinner in Kingman, Arizona was the very definition of lowered expectations. This establishment had dark booths lining one wall. The décor was so dark it would easily distract anyone from paying too much attention to the lack of savvy in the kitchen.

A counter with stools sporting shiny cherry red vinyl cushions faced a long mirror. Obviously intended for you effortlessly to stare at yourself and watch how you look while chewing. Ted chose the stool at the far-left end and ordered a beer.

The waitress was a heavy-set woman with blonde hair pulled back and a red-and-white uniform that made her look like a poster girl for breakfast served all night at the edge of small, forgotten towns. She set the bottle in front of Ted without comment. From a speaker in the ceiling came that classic country hit, *Happy Trails* with Roy Rogers and the lovely Dale Evans. The beer tasted flat and not cold enough. He watched the limited number of bubbles climbing upward in the glass and felt the

song attach to him like a familiar wool sweater that fell out of style decades ago.

Ted stayed at the counter until he had gulped down the last of his warm beer. Then ventured back to room 312. Sleep came only in fragments alternating with back aches. And every time he closed his eyes, the persistent images of that bonfire returned. Three highly-erotic views of himself standing naked beside three versions of Vincent Wauneka. The heat of the flames. The heat of the man. And the thick white liquid that readily covered all six of them. Vincent's beautiful long dark hair that moved in the rising air was poetry. Ritualistic sexual contact with him by the fire felt less like desire and closer to a bareback ride on a runaway horse.

In the early dawn hours he was awakened by his heart slamming in his chest. Ted's bed sheets twisted around his legs like an amateurish bondage attempt. He got up and splashed cold water on his face in the bathroom sink. The Kingman water tasted metallic. He stood there, staring at his reflection, telling himself it is wrong to drink water from a hotel bathroom faucet. He could not decide if the man looking back belonged to the present day.

Was there any point in attempting to get more sleep? Morning arrived rudely and with too much brightness. Ted rode the elevator down to the ground level of the hotel and took the same stool at the counter in the restaurant. He wanted to be alone. The restaurant was no busier than at night. Harried travelers could eat a quick breakfast there and be forgiven for not searching elsewhere for better options.

The same waitress from the night before was there again. She set a cup of coffee in front of Ted without being asked. He saw that she had a nametag that said Margo. She looked at him with the careful kindness of someone who by this point in her life had poured way too much coffee for too many lost men.

"You really look like you need this coffee," she said. "Anything to eat?"

"Eggs," Ted said. "Over easy. Sausage. Toast. Whatever kind. Wait, how about rye? Sourdough, maybe?"

"Wheat and white only."

Margo wrote down the order that explicitly said 'no toast.' She walked away slowly. Ted wrapped both hands around the hot mug. The coffee smelled strong enough to cut through the fog in his head. He tried to focus on the silverware spread down the counter so evenly and straight. But the memory of the bonfire ritual flooded back without invitation.

Vincent naked and smiling standing proudly with his legs slightly spread apart. Three men—one original plus two exact replications of him. Swaying left and right sensuously together under a cloudy, dark sky. That band of muscular men wearing only loincloths playing an up-tempo version of the classic Paul Simon song about how time always changes people. Then came the tender tactile touch of fingers on skin and tongues exploring open mouths. And then the prominent release of thick white fluids whose purpose was more elevated than mere pleasure. Ted's body insisted on remembering all this. His mind chose an opposite route with station stops at refusal and rejection. He shifted his weight on the stool as if he had been seated there for a full week.

That was when Ted saw a young cowboy standing by the elevators. The man was tall and muscular with long blond hair that reached the nape of his neck. He wore a costume—impossibly tight blue jeans, a white tank top, and a white cowboy hat. Tanned skin. Bright white teeth. Thick lips. Blue eyes that looked almost innocent until they locked on Ted Avila. The cowboy lifted his right hand and gave Ted a precise salute. Then he walked straight across the restaurant and sat on the stool next to Ted as if the seat had been reserved for him.

"Morning," the cowboy said. His voice carried a soft Southern accent. "You weren't expecting company. I can tell."

Ted Avila kept his eyes on his coffee. "Didn't invite any."

"Name's Matthew Lejeune. From New Orleans. People like me say Nawhlins. And Loo-zee-an-uh. I work the Wild West show on Route 66 out by the airport. Act like a cowboy for the tourists. Shoot blanks. Fall off horses. Fake horses, of course. And fake hangings. That sort of thing."

Margo returned with a plate of eggs over easy, sausage and no toast. She set it in front of Ted and looked at Matthew. "You eating too, honey?"

"Coffee for now. Maybe food later."

She poured and left them alone. Ted picked up his fork. The egg yolks looked completely uninviting. Maybe even scary. Too runny for his taste. The sight of them made his eyes twitch. Slimy eggs, the breakfast of winners.

Matthew turned on the stool so his knees almost touched Ted's. "You look like a man whose memories fell by mistake into the blender last night while you were making margaritas. Saw that same generic look on the faces of many men as I traveled here. My family back in the Gulf has a gift. Psychic stuff runs through us all. Telepathy. Visions. Unwanted mostly. Sometimes scary. I can hear things I don't want to hear. See things I sure as hell don't want to see."

Ted Avila set the fork down. "You're so full of shit."

"Maybe. But I can prove my boasts to you, sir. You're in room 312. Aluminum key on a plastic tag. You checked in last night after staring at your new four-by-four like you were expecting it had grown teeth. Your cardboard boxes that should be in the back of your vehicle were gone. No clue where they went. And your head right now feels like..."

Ted raised his right hand into the air to silence the cowboy and spare himself from any additional food metaphors. Then Ted tightened both hands around the coffee cup. Ceramic too hot. Unpleasant. Wake up fast by burning both hands at the same time. That will work. Borderline sadism. He looked into Matthew's eyes for any sign that the young cowboy was deliberately talking nonsense. There were no such signs. Only those smoky blue eyes watching him with a blend of pity and hunger mixed together.

"Okay, how the fuck do you know all those things about me?"

"Told you. Family gift. Born with it. Used to help my uncle on shrimp boats in Louisiana. He taught me a lot of quasi-voodoo rituals."

"Oh, yeah, sure. Quasi-voodoo rituals. Their latest album is one of my favorites."

"I wanted badly to work on solid ground. No more working out on the water. So I got outta my uncle's orbit and came west to act professionally. I brought my family's gift with me. Could not leave that behind. Worst of it is I don't control when it turns on. Sometimes a person walks by me.

Their whole mind just opens like a door with a busted lock. Yours is wide open, sir. And it's challenging in there."

Ted wanted to stand up and walk out. His body somehow insisted upon staying on that stool. "You're an actor. And everyone knows that actors lie for money."

"True enough. But I ain't lying to you right now." Matthew leaned closer. His voice dropped. "I can see the way your thoughts keep sliding out of phase. One second you're a journalist who left a bad marriage. Next second you're standing naked by a fire with some gorgeous Navajo man who has long hair and a voice like deep water. Then you're somewhere else entirely."

Ted pushed his plate away without finishing the eggs. Margo appeared again as if summoned by the movement. "You need to say to me if the eggs were cooked wrong." She refilled both coffees and gave Ted a look that told him she had heard far more bizarre conversations at this counter.

"'If the eggs were cooked wrong.' There, I said it to you, Margo. Like you wanted me to do. Is it too early for my sarcasm?"

"Well, okay. You boys want anything else?"

"Don't pay any attention to him, ma'am. Didn't sleep well last night. Grumpy now. We're good. Thank you kindly."

When she left, Ted turned fully toward Matthew. "You're a piece of work. Leave me alone. I want you to stay the fuck out of my head."

"I wish I could, sir. It's hurting me already. Whatever you've got buried under that wreckage upstairs is persistent. Maybe feels like grief that hasn't finished landing yet." Matthew reached out and put his hand on Ted's shoulder just as a gesture of friendship. Just a light touch. The contact lasted less than two seconds.

Matthew's face changed. The easy cowboy smile vanished. His blue eyes went wide and wet. A sound came out of him that was half gasp and half sob. Matthew jerked his hand back as if the fabric on Ted's shirt had burned him. Matthew jumped off the stool and made a fast exit. He nearly knocked over a restaurant chair. The young cowboy shoved the glass doors of the hotel open and disappeared into the parking lot sunlight.

Ted threw money on the counter and followed. Outside the daytime

heat was already demanding attention. Matthew stood near a row of cactus bushes at the edge of the lot, bent forward with both hands on his knees. He clearly was a man fighting not to vomit. His white cowboy hat had tilted sideways. Ted walked over slowly.

"You gonna tell me what the hell was going on in there?"

Matthew straightened. Tears spilled from his eyes. He wiped them with the back of one hand. "I saw too much. Touching you was a mistake. Way too much. Your mind is entangled. Best word I can muster. I got a piece of something not from today. Something underground. Men coming out of blue glass machines that look like giant hockey pucks turned on their sides. Naked men covered in white liquid that smells very wrong. A Navajo man with long hair. He recruited you. And you were there. Not a journalist. Not from this time. Another century. Jesus Christ. I can still feel it."

Ted felt the ground tilt under his boots. "You're crazy."

"Maybe so. Maybe not. Let me show you something in Ex-91." Matthew pointed to the first row of vehicles in the parking lot.

"How did you know that nickname I chose for—"

"Look in there on the passenger side of the windshield. That residue. Man-juices from previous sexual encounters. Not in this timeline. Two different men. I can smell them both. Even from here."

Ted Avila motioned for Matthew to get into the passenger seat. Both of them sat inside Ex-91 with the doors closed and the windows open. The interior was already getting too hot too quickly. The sticky mess on the passenger side of the windshield caught the morning light in long pale streaks. Ted stared at that. "Talk," he said to Matthew. "No more theater. Just fucking talk to me."

Matthew's hands were trembling. He took off the cowboy hat and set it on the dash. His long blond hair fell around his face. "I don't know where to begin. What I saw is scattered all over the place. Some things more vivid than others. The Navajo who recruited you. Wasn't really a hitchhiker like he told you. Took you to a bonfire. You had great sex under the open sky after midnight."

Ted's mouth was dry. He wanted to call Matthew a lunatic again. The words would just not form in his mouth and could not be spoken. The

details the young cowboy spoke about were just too precise. Now needing to be sorted and curated.

"I got something you must see," Matthew said. He reached into the back pocket of his tight jeans and pulled out a folded photograph. He handed it over. Ted unfolded it. Five shirtless cowboys stood on a wooden stage. Ropes around their necks. The moment of hanging frozen in full color. Their bodies were muscular and bare.

Their faces were calm before death in ways that made no sense. One of them had Ted Avila's face. Another had the face and long dark hair of Vincent Wauneka. The other three were strangers but not strangers. Watching five handsome cowboys die right out in public like that was captivating. More explicit than anything HBO would ever allow.

"Matthew, where did you get this?" Ted asked. Should he be concerned about how thin and weak his voice sounded?

"Told you I worked in that cowboy show for the tourists. The marketing guy shot that picture."

"I don't see you in this photo at all."

"Me neither, sir. We must be interpreting it wrong. I saw myself in that shot yesterday. I was in it. I promise you. Now that photo looks different. Changed somehow."

Ted stared at the photograph until the edges blurred. He remembered the way Vincent had looked at him on the highway. The diner in Tuba City. The fire. The sex that felt ceremonial. The missing cardboard boxes. The aluminum hotel room key. All of it spinning faster and blurring. He wanted to scream. Instead he set the photo down gently on the seat next to Matthew.

"Just get out right now," Ted said.

Matthew looked at him and made direct eye contact. "I'm done with you anyway. I can push images into your brain. That cowboy photo. I can make your brain see what's not actually there. Your brain is messed up. Has no defense. You just accept whatever I want you to see."

"I told you: Get out."

Matthew opened the door. Heat poured in with a vengeance. He put the white cowboy hat back on and stepped down onto the asphalt. He

leaned in through the open door one last time. “When that entanglement in your head gets worse, and it will, remember that I tried to tell you straight. No theater. Proof is in that photo. You blew it. I would have been an excellent candidate for recruitment where you work. Don’t you get that?”

Ted reached from the driver’s seat and angrily pulled the passenger door shut. He watched Matthew walk across the parking lot toward the cactus bushes and then beyond them toward the road. The photograph stayed on the seat. Ted picked it up again. Five shirtless cowboys hanging. He saw Matthew was cowboy number three in the photo. The photograph had changed! Proof that Matthew was right. Ted started the engine but was too disoriented to drive Ex-91.

The routine blandness of Kingman looked no better bathed in the rich late morning sun-drenched colors compared to late afternoon. Cars zipped by on the interstate freeway. Ted also heard the neon hotel sign buzzing in the bright daylight. Margo was probably pouring coffee for the next customer who looked lost.

Inside Ex-91 Ted sat with his hands on the steering wheel as his familiar headache returned. The future waits somewhere under blue glass. What does that mean? The past waits in the shape of a Navajo man by a bonfire. The present is a two-star hotel parking lot and a young psychic cowboy with mind control powers. Is any of this survivable?

Ted quickly threw the photograph into the glove box. He put Ex-91 in reverse. He did not know if he should drive northward or westward. He did know that the aluminum hotel key was still in his pocket and the cardboard boxes filled with remnants of his old life were still missing. He earned today’s stabbing headache.

The desert highway stretched out ahead of him like a question with no good answer. He drove northward in the direction of Las Vegas, a hundred miles away. The sticky residue on the passenger side windshield glistened in the sunlight. A psychic hand had touched him for less than two seconds. Jolted him. To be naked in bed with that hot cowboy, touching him all over his solid body, would be a genuine rollercoaster ride.

The desert road demanded his full attention. No place to fall asleep behind the wheel. But Ted's headache would keep him company and awake. He mentally vowed to himself. Made promises. Should he draw lessons from his parking lot conversation with that psychic cowboy? There had to be a reason Ted had scrambled memories. He knew he had to find that reason. But now it was time to focus on driving. Ex-91 hummed. Ted hoped today would bring a resolution. Maybe tomorrow.

03

COWBOYS

2269

Five cowboys wearing only tight blue jeans struggle to free themselves from individual nooses pulling them up, up, up by their thick necks. Their kicking legs extend downward trying to touch the floor to prevent—if only temporarily—the slow death that each man inevitably will endure from this suspension hanging party.

One of the doomed cowboys cries out in his mind, "We're all hung!" Because they are dying together, all five of these men are linked mentally and are aware of each other's final thoughts. A second cowboy hears the first one and in his mind answers back, "I think you mean hanged." The third cowboy thinks, "No, he's saying he thinks we all have huge cocks." The fourth one has this thought: "Which we won't ever get to use again!" The fifth cowboy is so preoccupied with sobbing he cannot think at all.

All these young cowboys struggle in obvious pain and terror as they attempt to free themselves from their nooses. But they cannot escape the inevitable. They all try to shout out, but their throats are constricted by the ropes and no air is moving up from their lungs. They only make gurgling groans. Yet the pain on their handsome faces conveys far more than words ever could. Their faces reveal pure desperation.

There is a small crowd of mostly male audience members observing this execution. They applaud enthusiastically and shout out obscene phrases indicating their strong approval of the ritual execution happen-

ing before their eyes. All five cowboys jerk and flop around like manic marionettes yanked suddenly by puppeteers.

A color photograph captures the last few seconds of life for the five cowboys. The top half of the picture, however, is missing due to image file damage. The voice of a documentary narrator says in a matter-of-fact tone, “Investigators on the Moon found that damaged photograph depicting the brutal deaths of five cowboys.” A man’s hands hold a color printed copy of the photograph in standard 8 and a half by 11-inch format up to the documentary camera. “The original was in digital format only,” the documentary narrator says. “This is merely a replica. You can clearly see the upper half of the photograph is gone. The original image file was held for a time in a museum in Geneva, Switzerland, but has since been lost.”

An older male with gray hair and a full beard dressed in a white laboratory outfit while seated in an office in front of bulging bookshelves is identified on the screen as Richard Montgomery of the International Museum of Geneva. He speaks English with a heavy French accent as he explains, “I examined the original digital file. But now that file cannot be found. It may have been stolen. The artifact was a common image file. It did not show any indications of having been manipulated. The damage to the file also seemed genuine and not faked.”

The documentary narrator explains as a close-up of the image of the hanged young men moves across the screen: “They all would have died not long after being lifted upwards by the ropes around their necks. Nobody can survive against the relentless force of gravity when the neck is crushed by a noose that tightens as it is pulled downward by a man’s full body weight.”

There are several details the damaged photograph can reveal to any observer: All five men appear to be under the age of 30. They all are shirtless, their feet are bare, and each wears only blue denim jeans. Did they wear the jeans as costumes for some reason? Or, did these men work as actual cowboys? And how could that photo be found on the Moon?

A young male viewer intently watches this documentary on a large, flat

screen in a darkened room by himself. He responds to what he's seeing with eyes open very wide in utter astonishment.

The documentary narrator says, "That photo was found in the wreckage of what apparently was a military base on the Moon intentionally buried deep within Crater Clavius." Full color still photographs of the underground wreckage from various perspectives are displayed on the documentary screen as the narrator says, "Explorers investigating inside the wrecked lunar base which had been nicknamed 'Baja Clavius' captured these images showing very little exists there today. There were no human remains found anywhere in these ruins. But scientists say that's easy to explain: Human remains would have been ejected into the vacuum of space because the Moon has no atmosphere. But in direct sunlight the temperature at Crater Clavius can reach 260 degrees Fahrenheit, far hotter than the hottest desert on Earth. All human life at the lunar base was ended abruptly by an apparent explosive decompression that scattered evidence across the white/gray powdery floor of Crater Clavius."

The young male viewer responds by vomiting freely into his own lap, yet he cannot take his eyes off that documentary. His eyes fill with tears as he looks down and sees the mess he has made.

He is breathing too fast and worries he might faint, but he exhales to push his stress out while at the same time pushing on a glass door with a sign that reads, Ev Grant, MD. He notices neon blue-gray lighting bouncing off leathery walls that elicit a frown from him. There in front of a contemporary glass desk is the person with whom he has an appointment. Is the psychiatrist male or female? The young man seems puzzled. Ev Grant could be a man's name. But the doctor's facial features are obscured by shadows, as if deliberately so. The doctor's giggle suggests femininity, but you never know for certain. The young patient frowns and his breathing rate increases as he struggles to arrive at conclusions about the psychiatrist.

Doctor Grant's first words to the new patient are: "Welcome. Please sit down. Let me see. You turn 18 next week. The forms you filled out say you

watched a documentary about the Moon. Now you're experiencing nightmares."

"Yes. Thank you for seeing me on such short notice," the young man says politely as perspiration forms on his forehead. "I thought perhaps I may have dreamed of that Moon documentary. Not sure I actually saw it. One dream causes another dream—that kind of thing. But I remember very detailed and quite vivid things from my dreaming. Not what usually happens. Actual words. Specific images. Rarely are my dreams so lifelike. Plus, the knowledge conveyed is not stuff that I know anything about at all."

"Tell me what you experienced. I want to understand from your point of view. Your forms say it was on very late—around two in the morning. A documentary about the Moon. You were scanning through the channels when you noticed the documentary was starting."

"Well, it's not that simple," the patient explains quietly, unable to hide his embarrassment.

"I am not making judgments of you here. You seem embarrassed. I want you to know you have the right to feel however you feel. Just tell me what went on."

"I should not have watched that. It wasn't just an ordinary documentary about the Moon. I don't think it was on the regular platforms. This was way different."

"You have to help me out here. I know next to nothing about technical details of how people share stuff using devices these days. How content gets from one device to many."

"What I watched was not shared widely at all. That's the point. This was buried very deeply, very deliberately. My parents work for—no, I cannot say that here to you. They have special clearances. Very rare access. I used a device my parents have at home. An external key I just plugged into a desktop. Without that key plugged in, I could never have seen the top-secret content. They would not want me using that plug-in key. I do not have their clearances. No clearances at all. I was not supposed to even know about that plug-in key that I use for access. The key is classified, too. Can you believe that? My parents would not want me telling anyone I used that plug-in key to access top-secret content."

"All right. You can retain personal secrecy. That's your right as my patient here. I only want to help you process your feelings. What you used to view that classified material is not relevant here."

"OK, doctor. The nature of the Moon documentary matters. It was super-secret. It was 'underground' so to speak. Forbidden stuff. Not for general knowledge at all. Within the intelligence community only."

"OK, so tell me what you saw on that documentary."

"I probably missed only the first few seconds. I don't know for sure. I plugged in the key and then I got the documentary. Took longer than I expected. I saw the opening titles of the documentary. Produced like a regular documentary available to the general public. I remember the narrator's reassuringly deep and confident voice. He said, 'Crater Clavius has given up many secrets deep inside the Moon.' That's too dramatic, of course, and it caught my attention so I watched the hour and a half. On the screen was an unforgettable close-up of that crater from lunar orbit."

"Is that particular crater significant to you?"

"Yeah, because of the film, *2001: A Space Odyssey*."

"So, you're interested in very old movies?"

"Well, that movie, at least. Others not so much. The director matters very much to me. Stanley Kubrick. From very long ago—1968. I bought a special restored and remastered version that came out to celebrate the three hundredth anniversary of the film's release. I didn't even care how much that cost me."

"Had you ever heard of the crater's name before you first saw that old movie?"

"No, of course not. But that's not important. The name of the documentary was very strange to me. Sarcastic. As if someone thought it would get attention. Even though it was top secret. Even though only real geeks in the intelligence community saw it."

"Can you explain what you mean?"

"Uh, the documentary is ancient. I think I saw that it was released in the year 2000. Hidden away for centuries on a platform that is only viewable with the plug-in key that allows content through to a desktop. The narrator in that documentary said a photograph was found under that

crater. Amid wreckage of a sublunar structure that descended downward 20 or 30 stories. A top-secret military base nobody ever heard about. About two miles wide. Classified information. The photo was nicknamed 'Clavius Cowboys' because of what it depicted. An odd name."

"Did you see the photo in the documentary?"

"Five cowboys. I saw it, yeah. They apparently were being hanged by the neck with rope like how cowboys were executed during the 19th century. In the American West. But the photograph was partially damaged. No way to identify the hanged men due to that damage."

Doctor Ev Grant asks, "Your nightmares are about you being hanged like you saw in that photo?"

"I don't remember dreaming about being hanged, no."

"How would you describe what are obviously intense feelings of fear in your nightmares if you did not dream of your own death by hanging?"

"I think maybe my fear comes from something else. Perhaps it comes from what I imagine were the behaviors of the people who hanged those five cowboys."

"What people are you referring to?"

"I don't know. The ones who lived on after they executed those five cowboys. Somebody killed five men. It's horrible."

The young patient tells Doctor Grant about what the documentary narrator said: "In addition to that 'Clavius Cowboys' image, one other electronic artifact found was tantalizing portions of a personal log left by a man who lived and worked within a destroyed military base located far below Crater Clavius. The lunar base was initially built by Chinese explorers who built machinery on the Moon based on Earth technology. The machinery was operated by robots and could excavate both vertically and horizontally. In the resulting deep sublunar areas, humans could live safely inside habitats protected from the extreme radiation and cosmic rocks hitting the surface which both can kill humans easily. The artifact found in the ruins of the Moon base tells of a fantastic sublunar operation inside that particular crater that will seem to most people as though it was pure science fiction."

The documentary screen shows a deep stairwell of metal steps de-

scending downward. The young patient recalls the documentary narrator saying, “The remnants of the man’s personal log found in the lowest levels of the lunar wreckage do not pinpoint when the base was built or what purpose there was for locating a top-secret military base on the Moon in the first place. The exact date of the base’s destruction is also not known. But, the portions of the personal log that survive suggest that some sort of violence between two opposing groups of men who were stationed at that base explains why all its human occupants are now gone.”

Doctor Ev Grant asks, “So you have had recurring nightmares that have something to do with that secret lunar base being destroyed?”

“Yes. Really bad men. You know, evil and heartless. In a very lonely location that probably fuels antisocial behavior. And doing harm to other men far away from accountability. Hurting each other. Killing innocent men. What I saw was absolute manipulation of ordinary citizens who were stationed on the Moon.”

“And because of your nightmares, you fear that some harm will come to you?”

“No, no. Of course not. They’re all dead now. The cowboys. And the ones who executed the cowboys, too. I’m convinced that my fear is irrational. Why would I be afraid of dead guys? Seriously. The documentary said the violence was caused by opposing religious views the men at the base held. Not like any religions we know here on Earth. Some new kind. The men who lived beneath the crater in that military base who were religious went after those who would not convert to the new religion. Tortured them. Killed them. I’m not crazy, Doctor Grant. I do not have any connection to that religion nor am I threatened by it in any way.”

“I’m glad that you understand. Fear linked to religion is very common. There has been violence and killing based on religions for many centuries. Ironic, of course. Most religions claim that they exist to bring people’s faith into focus and to honor a deity or some universal truth while encouraging peaceful coexistence for everyone. Religion is supposed to be a relaxing and pleasant or positive experience. But many religious experiences end up causing hurt. And some even cause death to those who are nonbelievers.”

"You're right. I remember that's what the documentary implied happened on the Moon. A new religion for a new era. Started at that lunar base. But the documentary suggests the religion made it here to Earth. This new religion supposedly was made so powerful because the religion was connected to the discovery about the reality of aliens."

"You mean intelligent life not of this Earth?"

"Yes, that's what I mean. That's what the documentary meant."

"Did you ever think the whole thing—the documentary—was science fiction? Perhaps it was a movie disguised to look like a documentary and meant to tell an engaging science fiction story set on the Moon?"

"You think so?"

"Think about it. A lunar setting. Mystery deaths of young cowboys. A religious cult on the Moon. It just could be a very wild science fiction movie. Other than entertainment value, it could have been meant to trick viewers into thinking that it was a documentary. Kind of like those 'found footage' movies where a teenager discovers a video camera containing forbidden secrets about witches or ghosts."

"Yeah. You could be right. No witches or ghosts, though. It did have an odd, comic-book-style title, *Top Secret Time Travel Agents from the Moon*. The credits said the writer was female."

The screen shows color photographs of the underground wreckage. The young patient recalls the documentary narrator saying, "The personal log tells about men working underground on the Moon. A group of men started a new religion intended only for the men who lived and worked at the base beneath the lunar surface. The religion was based on the belief that a new nonhuman species far superior to humanity had been discovered in a far distant galaxy—too far away from Earth so that nobody from our planet will ever go there in person. The new religion started on the Moon was not connected to most terrestrial concepts of religion or what can be called an almighty god. This new religion was not built upon the presumption of any interventionist higher power. Something else. Something from a far-off galaxy. The secrecy propelled this forward and myths emerged. Some of the crew members on the Moon were thought to have become holy men. Several believed these

holy men could float in the air and perform miracles such as repairing damaged skin or broken bones."

A large sculpture of a blue man in Geneva appears on screen for an extended segment within the documentary. The narrator mentions the name of the Portuguese artist who created the statue.

Doctor Grant says, "I'm sure that's all just speculation for dramatic impact. That's my take on it anyway. Imaginary powers. There are so many different things going on here. Knowledge found on the Moon proving the existence of a supposed extraterrestrial civilization. Then a man-made religion develops on the Moon to worship the extraterrestrials? This seems to me like a science fiction movie produced to look like it was a documentary. Don't you think? It's a core concept within a very familiar story told a thousand times."

"Are you implying that all religions are the same? Everyone on Earth who is religious has chosen to believe in false gods? Created by mortal men for reasons we may never understand."

"Well, some things we can learn from studying history. Ancient Roman leaders used pagan religion to control the people throughout the empire. Religion created by Rome using legendary names known through the ancient world. It was a package deal of supernatural events and powerful beings who maybe were immortal. All intended to serve the growth and stability of the empire, for example. Religions all have at least one common denominator of folklore. Many common elements appear in many religions like virgin birth, crucifixions, resurrection from death, miracles and on and on. Belief in powerful, invisible beings created by mankind to manipulate and control people using fear of the unknown. Listen to me. You and I live in the present day. This is 2269. Not at all like the era of ancient Rome. We're advanced in our thinking. Sophisticated. Or so we choose to believe. You understand what I'm saying to you? Today we have no primitive beliefs and multiple gods because we don't really need any. It's that simple. But some people today still cling to religions from the past even in what we think of as our logical or rational civilization. Doing so seems to make some people feel better and more comfortable

emotionally if they cling to the past. Safer. More reassuring. Less unpredictable or random."

"I wonder if perhaps I have brain damage that is causing nightmares."

"Brain damage?"

"Yes, I read about a surgical procedure created in the 21st century. It involved a brain graft designed to connect human brains to artificial intelligence. You have heard of that, right?"

"Yes, certainly. Very discredited procedure. The worst thing about it was all who got the brain grafts died. Because their brains rejected the graft. Thousands of fatalities. Very bad outcome."

"Right. Fatal brain deterioration. All because someone got the idea to hook up human brains to artificial intelligence. But it was outlawed in 2032. I just wondered if my brain might be deteriorating. That's all."

"No, that's not happening. That brain graft was a serious mistake, a misuse of artificial intelligence hardware. Like you said, it was outlawed. And physical brain deterioration does not happen spontaneously. I believe what you are experiencing is emotional, not physical at all."

"OK. I really just want to put an end to my nightmares. That's my priority. I don't believe that extraterrestrial beings are real. I am certain of that. The sublunar base could merely be made-up for a science fiction movie, like you say. I just wanna stop the nightmares."

"Well, I definitely can help with that. To start, I can prescribe 30 minutes of mental massage for you. Let's call it that. No drugs. Instead it's a very relaxing experience. Sort of like a 'brain vacation' for you. Hook you up here at the center. Just downstairs. They put a lightweight device on the top and back of your head. Feels great. If you like it, and you want more, let me know. You're covered for those treatments one hundred percent up to about fifty or so sessions. You won't need that many sessions, I'm sure. I believe your nightmares will pass quickly once you're in that brain treatment program."

The young patient nods in acceptance and manages to smile tentatively. He just cannot stop thinking about the dramatic voice of the documentary narrator: "Electronic records found in the wreckage below the crater suggest how it all ended. Crew members who formed the new reli-

gion at the base nicknamed Baja Clavius were rounded up and executed one-by-one. Nobody knows exactly why. But it is very clear that violence erupted and eventually resulted in the total destruction of the military base. All lives at the base were lost. We may never know why that top secret base was established on the Moon. We can speculate that someone felt all the secrecy and all the obvious expense of building a huge lunar base was justified. But justified for exactly what? Was this base intended to hide from the general public on Earth all knowledge that humanity is not alone in the universe?"

04

COLOSSUS

2251

Good for you if you think that there is intelligent life beyond planet Earth and the Moon. You probably imagine what they might look like. What is the color of their skin? How big their eyes are. Hold that thought. A medical doctor has arrived.

Ted Avila feels certain that he has previously met the doctor who is dressed all in white. Upon first glance, he looks like a retired celebrity rock star seen worldwide for decades in videos. Except now he looks very different compared to what the world would recognize because this man has stopped coloring his hair and shaved his facial hair.

Today he wears white medical attire with specialized shaded and lighted eye protection along with black military-style boots. Most notably, he speaks with a very prominent British accent: “I am William Oswald, MD,” he says.

“I’m sure I don’t need to see a doctor. Come on, I feel just fine,” Ted Avila says while surveying the unfamiliar medical area he has found himself standing in. He rubs his nose as he inhales the scent of an antiseptic with a false citrus aroma.

Immediately next to Ted Avila is Vincent Wauneka who is wearing an all-black uniform and black military-style boots. He remains silent but points to shift Ted Avila’s attention to Doctor Oswald who says, “You are here, Mr. Avila, in the medical section of this base. Only for observation.

That's my job. Part of our accelerated orientation process. I have asked Mr. Wauneka to join us."

"Accelerated orientation to what?" Ted asks as he looks down and notices how he, too, is wearing an all-black uniform and black military-style boots.

"You see, Mr. Avila, sometimes I find it best to just plunge right in with treatment. Rip a bandage off a new wound, so to speak. It certainly might hurt, but it's over quickly if you know what I'm saying."

"But I wasn't wounded. Do you see me wearing any bandages?"

"Figurative language, Mr. Avila, figurative language. You may at first feel somewhat light-headed. It's the lower gravity here. You'll adjust really fast."

"The lower what?"

Vincent Wauneka, who seems suddenly vibrant, bounces around the room pushing himself with his feet upwards off the floor in short jumps as though normal gravity has suddenly stopped working.

"Hey, Ted. This is how one sixth of the gravity on Earth looks here."

"Mr. Avila, we are all here together in a top-secret base beneath Crater Clavius on the Moon."

"Oh, shit. I feel light-headed."

"Maybe he needs bed rest, Doc."

"Maybe not. Mr. Avila, you of course remember being on Earth. But now you are not there any longer. Where you are now is inside the medical unit at Clavius Base, deep beneath the lunar surface. The year is 2251. I imagine you will recall being on Earth in the year 1991. Two hundred sixty years ago."

"You know what, doctor? Please don't do the math for me like that. Makes me wanna vomit. I'm serious. I think I better sit down."

Don't you just hate when the effects of time travel catch up with you? Your insides feel like they belong outside. Your brain has more or less turned into dry shredded wheat cereal. But the operative word is **shredded**. If you want, just add cold milk. Bananas and strawberries as toppings are optional.

"Well, Doc, I think that went well. Let me try my way if you please. Ted, you and I first met in the 20th century. There was a big bonfire. That was fun. Lots of black smoke jumping up into the air. Very dramatic. I re-

cruited you to work here. You were driving alone in Arizona. You picked me up hitchhiking as you drove across the Reservation. Remember?"

"I do not remember. You say you recruited me?"

"We really need to get going. Tight schedule. What Mr. Wauneka is saying to you, Mr. Avila, is the truth. Understandably, you feel disoriented. The lunar gravity alone will do that to anyone. You do seem physically intact and in excellent health. So, smile and relax. Everyone experiences a certain level of disorientation from time travel."

"This feels so real. Looks genuine. But no. I cannot actually be on the Moon. And you say I have experienced time travel? That's science fiction. Just help me outta here, please. I just wanna go home."

"Yeah, my friend, most people need to believe that time travel is only science fiction. Time travel is a closely-guarded secret. Must remain as such for security purposes."

"Security?"

"To maintain control over everyone who never needs to know time travel is entirely real. Top-secret. The doctor and I are telling you this stuff because of your need to know. You have been given top-secret clearance and all. Blah blah blah. Cannot tell anyone, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. Standard restrictions, you know?"

"I do not fucking accept any of this."

"What you accept, Ted, is entirely your choice. Make all this more difficult on yourself if you so choose. I do not give a fuck. Just to be blunt. I am here on assignment. Doing what I was told. Give you the top-secret briefing you need. This is taking longer than expected."

"Fuck this shit, man. Need to get home."

"Well, hey, start considering that this is 'home' for you from now on, Ted. You belong here, not on Earth. You are not going to cry now, are you?"

"Your orders are to manipulate me? Is that it?"

"Uh, yeah. Exactly right. I cannot believe it, Doc, he figured that out so quickly. Actually, you and I frequently are paired as mission partners."

"Mr. Avila, it's critical that we get to your orientation briefing without any further delay."

Ted shakes his head "no" but at the same time shrugs his shoulders in

acceptance. Vincent jumps up off the medical facility floor with exuberant celebration.

"We have a train to catch, gentlemen. Can't be late."

"A train? But, you said we are on the Moon."

"Doc, this just keeps getting better."

"Walk with me. Both of you. The train station is several levels down." A set of sliding doors opens as if on verbal command from the doctor. Ted Avila follows Vincent Wauneka into the elevator car and then the doctor also enters.

"Code fifty-eight. Nine, six, twenty-eight. Hold onto that railing next to you, Mr. Avila. The musical tones indicate we are descending."

The elevator car plummets downward. Ted loses his balance. He recovers by grabbing onto the railing on the wall just within his reach. "Try not to fall on your ass, partner."

The elevator car stops and the sliding doors open following a different set of melodic beeps compared to the start of the descent. The doctor walks out first. Vincent follows. Ted stands motionless inside the elevator car. "Do I have to tell you? This is where you exit the elevator car, Ted. Walk with us. You have no other options available."

Ted steps out of the elevator. Doctor Oswald and Vincent have started walking away from the elevator doors down a long, narrow, descending hallway that has no handrails. "No other options," Vincent repeats while facing forward into the long hallway.

Ted speeds up his pace on the downslope of the hallways so that he catches up. The three continue walking together forward as the hallway keeps sloping downward. The hallway ends at what Ted recognizes as an underground train station with a contemporary architectural style. The gleaming silver and white color scheme cannot be ignored. A bright blue futuristic-looking and windowless train of sleek design with six cars arrives silently.

The sliding doors on the first car slide open without making a sound. Doctor Oswald and Vincent walk inside. "No other options," Ted says in a loud voice. "Sorry, but I don't have a ticket. And I think I may have left my credit card on some other planet today."

The doctor points in a direction indicating to Ted where the train will move. The sliding doors shut just seconds before the train slides forward slowly and smoothly. No seats. Nothing overhead to grab onto. Somehow, the train moves ever so smoothly.

"How long is this little ride today?"

The train slows and then smoothly stops moving. As he sees the sliding doors open, Ted watches the doctor and Vincent exit the train car. He follows them.

Ted immediately observes the vast domed hall where the ceiling is situated hundreds of feet above the floor. Circular transparent windows at floor level face upward. Then he hears the doctor say one word: "Lights." And everything at that precise moment changes in the life of Ted Avila.

On the other side of the observation glass brilliant blue-white lighting illuminates an immense sublunar cavern. Prominently situated is a structure that resembles a gigantic figure of a man. Only the top of this figure's head down to his waist can be seen above the lunar rocks. The statue appears to have been partially excavated from jagged lunar rock on the floor of the cavern. The height of just half of the statue suggests the full size of this man standing up would be over ten stories tall. Far up above the head of this creation is a natural opening to the lunar surface that frames a collection of stars floating in the darkness of space.

"Wow."

Gigantic. Full color. Masculine. Light-colored skin. Dark beard. Scorching whitish-blue eyes. Who is this guy? Is he supposed to be a human? Aliens created him. Human technology could never accomplish this.

What is visible from the cavern floor is the pelvic region of the statue. Looking upwards, his large bald and bearded head suggests a man who is around age thirty. Ted visually follows the broad shoulders of the statue downward to the cavern floor where an immense left hand rests partially closed adjacent to a lunar explorer wearing a bright white Moon life-support space suit, boots and a helmet as he moves nearer to the structure. The size of the statue's hand! The human male wearing a Moon suit standing in that lunar cavern next to that hand barely reaches up to align with three of the giant's five fingers.

Ted sees an engraved metallic plaque in the domed hall just below a row of circular observation windows. He walks up to the engraving as he turns to look at Vincent who is watching his responses. Vincent says from memory with no need to look at the engraved metallic plaque: “This is the greatest discovery in the entire history of humanity deep within Crater Clavius in 2194.”

“This looks so real, but it just has to be faked.”

“What you see is real, Mr. Avila. This structure was discovered and excavated here by pioneering lunar explorers from China. This is top secret. It goes by the official name in English as ‘the Colossus of Clavius.’ You, Mr. Avila, are now part of an extremely small group of your fellow humans who have been granted access down here.”

Reflected in the wide-opened eyes of Ted Avila are giant fingers resting on lunar soil on the opposite side of the transparent dome windows. “Why have I been given knowledge of this? A closely-held secret. Why me? Most everyone else on Earth remains completely unaware.”

Later that same day Ted occupies one of several small modular rooms at the lunar base intended for agents to use so that they may create log entries. He sits in a comfortable chair as he faces a large screen which has a microphone sticking up from a desk directly beneath a large video screen. As he speaks aloud, Ted watches an immediate text transcription of what he says appearing before him in white letters on a black background.

Probably should state the date. Trouble is I have no idea what the date is today. Are the dates on the Moon the same as the dates on Earth? I am Theodore Joseph Avila. I solemnly swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. You know what, I just realized something. I did not have time to retain legal counsel. Are there lawyers working here on the Moon yet?

I accept that Doctor Oswald will hear or read this. In fact, this is mainly recorded for the doctor. I insist. He’s the chief medical officer at this

base. He has a legitimate need to know everything that I know. Hey, doc. Is that a good enough signed release from me?

I am not concerned about protecting the secrecy of knowledge that was given to me. He gave me that knowledge. Doctor Oswald did. I am just reporting that here today. I did not ask to be given that knowledge.

So, this is my personal log entry. Nothing to lose. My sanity departed quite some time ago.

The colossus. What a profound and permanent effect upon all of human civilization the knowledge of that gigantic statue would certainly have. So, let us just agree to keep it concealed down here at Clavius Base.

I was down deep in the excavation site with Doctor Oswald and Vincent Wauneka. One moment I knew nothing. Absolutely nothing. I doubted that I was actually on the Moon. I really thought this was all just one giant hallucination.

The next moment, I became aware that several elements of my memory had suddenly changed. Who or what made those changes? Doctor Oswald and Vincent Wauneka did not speak. They just watched me as I lost my balance and slid directly into the thick glass looking out at the cave where the colossus had been excavated.

I came back feeling confused and disoriented on that little train riding with the doctor and Vincent. The ride was simple and without fanfare. As though we were riding the subway after attending a Broadway show. We were not singing to ourselves any catchy lyrics or tunes. Emotionally speaking, I feel that moment deserved a full orchestral fanfare with a choir of all-male voices. My tears are genuine here, doctor. Can you speculate as to my state of mind right now?

I know that I am Ted Avila, but I feel as though I am a different version of him compared to who he was previously. That sounded awkward. What I meant was: The version of me that existed before I saw the colossus is gone forever. I now know many things that other guy who called himself Ted Avila never knew.

The colossus apparently was constructed and situated down there by extraterrestrials. I was given knowledge about them that I did not ask for. I learned of the name by which they became known, the Ezuoia.

Pronounced ez OY uh. Or, if you prefer, use four syllables—ez OOH oy uh. That doesn't matter. We won't be communicating one-on-one with them any time soon. They don't have ears anyway and cannot listen to our mispronunciations. They do not use symbolic language like we do—no words at all.

They are not merely some previously undiscovered and unnamed extraterrestrial life form out there. They are specific. They are particular. No denial is possible here.

But why me? Why was I given access to the knowledge which I will explore for you in this personal log?

The Ezuoia are super-intelligent and they have zero mass. The technical term is that they are non-corporeal. No bodies. Nothing physical. Just energy. As if they are light. Or maybe electricity. Or perhaps gravity. Waves or bursts of energy. Invisible lightning flashes against a dark and threatening sky.

Is it possible for invisible extraterrestrial aliens to appear threatening to mankind? Not likely. Fear in humans is fueled by vivid imaginations. People must think of aliens as being horrifying or nightmarish in order to be afraid of them. This is a requirement that embraces grim and ugly faces, pointed heads, sunken eye sockets, and razor-sharp claws. Here is fertile ground where fear of life not of this Earth flourishes.

My opinion, which nobody else shares, is that the Ezuoia created and buried the Colossus of Clavius on the Moon as a specific and aggressively threatening statement intended for humanity. Size matters. Something large is usually considered to be inherently scary and threatening. Any extraterrestrial alien life with no size and no mass easily would be interpreted as no threat to humanity. That may perfectly explain why the colossus is the colossus. It exists as a powerful scare tactic. But what we might envision in our minds just might be worse than how the colossus looks.

But other traits that the Ezuoia lack are perhaps more significant. They have no senses like we humans do. No sense of sight. Yet they are not at all blind. No ability to discern scents. Yet they have sensitivity to recognize the smallest hint of scent such as the way hair smells after it is freshly shampooed. No auditory perception whatsoever. No physical

body means no ears. And no emotions. Yet they are sensitive to the needs of their own kind and the needs of others they encounter.

They live where we humans will never visit—inside and in orbits around a group of planets in a binary star system in a faraway galaxy. Too far away. Safe from us. Humanity's space travel capabilities are just not sufficiently advanced for us to go where the Ezuoia originated. What does it matter anyway? We could never see them even if we could travel there.

I was surprised to find that in my mind I already knew the Ezuoia do not reproduce sexually like we humans do. Too much information. But necessary. They duplicate themselves just by thinking about duplicating themselves. And that's it. I did not ask to know this. I must emphasize that again.

That one singularly significant difference in how the Ezuoia continue their species is a potentially dangerous reality for the human race. Now that I know this about the Ezuoia, I cannot unknow it. I feel genuinely frightened if you want to know the truth.

The Ezuoia probably were arrogant. They likely believed they knew all there was to know in the universe because they had seen many different galaxies and planets. The Ezuoia simply and completely were unprepared for what they discovered when they encountered humanity.

Their discovery was made because of one of the male lunar explorers who was on the team which discovered the Colossus of Clavius in 2194. That unidentified man from China was masturbating alone inside the sleeping quarters of his lunar lander after a hard day of full-time exploration deep inside Crater Clavius. The Ezuoia got to observe human male masturbation for the very first time. What a moment that must have been! How impossible that behavior must have been for the Ezuoia to explain to themselves.

Of course, the Ezuoia became very curious—and who wouldn't be?—about what the man was doing to his own body in his sleeping quarters. They must have wondered why he was doing it. The Ezuoia absolutely had no context for understanding what they observed.

The Ezuoia easily accomplished a telepathic link to that man. But it was merely temporary. They needed something permanent to connect

with the man's brain to observe and analyze him more fully. So the Ezuoia created an invisible, colorless, and odorless gas and released it into his sleeping quarters. That gas contained infinitesimally small electrochemical bubbles. Inside those bubbles were algorithms and quantum mechanisms known only to the Ezuoia. The man inhaled the invisible Ezuoian gas without even knowing what was happening to him. His brain became connected permanently to the Ezuoia separately from telepathy because of that gas he inhaled while he masturbated.

The ingested gas gave the Ezuoia what they wanted—a real-time and permanently unbreakable connection directly to that one man. What's the science behind that? I can only surmise. Perhaps the connection was possible because of quantum entanglement. I understand that when interconnected particles in this context share their individual quantum states, one particle simultaneously determines the state of the other despite being separated by great distances. Einstein became particularly stressed out by quantum entanglement. In comparison to him, how can I expect to grasp it? Einstein called it "spooky action at a distance." I'm sure it sounded more impressive in the original German.

More significant than quantum mechanics is that the man gave the Ezuoia the single most significant experience they had ever had in the million millions of years of their existence. He gave them what they wanted—full access to feel his pleasurable sexual sensations and ejaculatory release. He was never even aware of what the Ezuoia discovered by connecting with him. Yet, it was a discovery that changed literally everything about the destiny of the human species on Earth. And, before we forget—the human time travel capability was merely a side-effect of connecting men's minds to the Ezuoia.

05

ECSTASY

2251

Doctor William Oswald is sitting in his small office at Clavius Base. The military design of the office with metallic struts holding up the ceiling and dull gray walls creates an uninviting space that only a scientist could love. Ted Avila arrives a few minutes ahead of his assigned appointment time. He has got on the all-black off-duty uniform all time travel agents at Clavius Base are required to wear. His youthful, well-defined body fills out the tight-fitting institutional clothing impressively. His large feet are emphasized by his dark, thick military boots.

Doctor Oswald looks up from his desktop screen spread out flat in front of him. "Oh, you are early, Mr. Avila," the doctor says as if he is genuinely pleased. "Come in and have a seat. It's not fancy, but I can work here well enough. I've been notified that you completed all the necessary data forms and questionnaires that I requested. Shall we begin?"

"I—yeah. Don't mind telling you, doctor, I feel very uncomfortable with all this."

"Perfectly understandable. But I have never been known to devour a man here in my office, Mr. Avila."

"So you devour men only while you are away from your office?"

"My survival does not require the nutrients found in the flesh and blood of human males."

"How strange a choice of words for a medical doctor, sir. The chief medical officer of this sublunar base."

"I do not breathe oxygen. Or drink water. When you see me breathing, what you are seeing is me taking in air and I then separate out the hydrogen. I need hydrogen to live."

"OK. If you say so."

"I am a synthetic, automated life form created for my work here at this base from AI together with highly-advanced technologies and processes not commonly known to mankind."

"You're an extraterrestrial?"

"Oh, no, no. Extraterrestrials created me. Big difference."

"What? I did not know that. What can you tell me about the extraterrestrials who created you, doc?"

"Irrelevant. Just think of me as automation in the workplace, Mr. Avila, that's all this is. Think of it that way and you will feel better shortly. I promise. Meanwhile, please have a seat. Your standing up is not such a good idea right now. You are a fall risk."

"Not a very satisfying response, doctor," Ted replies as he becomes seated.

"You obviously are searching for answers about why you are here. I can help you. The truth is simple, logical. You are working at this base because you were recruited based upon your strong mental capabilities. You were the leading candidate for recruitment due to your extremely rare cognitive capabilities, Mr. Avila. Compared to ninety-nine point nine percent of all people on Earth."

"Nobody has ever told me that. Is that why Vincent Wauneka recruited me?"

"Yes, your mind's ability for problem-solving is exceptional, Mr. Avila. The speed at which you reason and make choices from among options is unusually fast. How you interpret life all around you. How you process your thoughts is very different from the way most other people do. How you define your reality is especially fluid and adaptive compared to all your fellow humans. Your ability to remember different realities after you make timeline changes is especially significant."

"Well, maybe I should instead pursue a more lucrative career based on my qualifications. I could succeed as a stand-up comedian. I could do my own show. Maybe have a European tour."

"Mr. Avila, there are events in your life that shaped you. And how your

mind organizes what you perceive has adapted to all you have experienced. To be specific, the human mind insists on organizing and remembering things in a linear way. This is natural. But your linear memories which are trying to coexist in a nonlinear reality are precisely the source of your mental disorientation."

"Yeah, I have no idea what any of that means."

"The time travel work that you do is nonlinear by definition. All who become agents and travel in time from here on the Moon adjust—usually in a matter of only a few hours on their first mission. All MMDI agents carry their memories with them like all humans do. After making changes to a timeline in the past, reality is no longer what it once was. Changing the past changes reality. Changing reality changes memories. That's opened up a lot of potential problems. For you. You have the innate ability to remember a version of reality that existed before you made changes to a timeline. Then, after you make changes to a timeline, you have those new memories. But your original memories do not get replaced like what happens to all other MMDI agents. You end up with more than one set of authentic memories. You have a mind that works in a non-linear fashion all the while you keep telling yourself that you are supposed to think in a linear way."

"I hear what you're saying, but I don't understand how it is possible to have more than one set of memories. I am still very new on this job. Still learning my way around. But I get the feeling you're gonna tell me something I am not expecting to hear. Didn't you just take me down inside this base to show me the colossus as part of my orientation? I remember that as being just a few days ago."

"I know this is going to sound impossible to you. Mathematically illogical. It may go against what your memories tell you is true. But what I am going to tell you is the truth. You have worked for several years at this lunar base on missions to planet Earth to which you were assigned."

"Well, no. That certainly cannot be true."

"You have lived here at Clavius Base for a lengthy stretch of time. I make regular medical observations about you when you return from your missions, Mr. Avila. I can show you a screen that will display the full index

of my observations. I also can produce a printout to give to you with times and dates specified of missions you completed for this agency. The interesting thing is: I am not telling you this for the very first time. We have had several conversations about how long you have worked here. So many times. You do not remember. If only I could find a way to help you to remember."

"Maybe you know of a prescription drug for that?"

"Your memories are pulling you in different directions. We need to work on that. I first need to explain why I showed you the Colossus of Clavius down deep in one of the lunar caverns."

"I'm listening, doctor. Honestly, I am ready to understand."

"In 2194 Chinese lunar explorers pushed through a wall while exploring inside a lunar void—let's call it a Moon cave. Inside they found that partially buried representation of a humanoid male figure beneath the surface of the Moon. More than being merely a statue carved in lunar rocks, that very large structure served as definitive proof of the presence of intelligent life from beyond planet Earth. Nobody has found any explanation as to why the colossus looks like a gigantic human male."

"Doctor, the extraterrestrials do not look like that colossus."

"What they look like is not known, Mr. Avila. Humanity has never seen the extraterrestrials at all. Maybe someday."

"Not gonna happen. Ever. In my opinion, the gigantic size of that thing is to create fear in the minds of all mankind."

"Perhaps, Mr. Avila. The one thing that is of more urgent concern is that the extraterrestrials seem to use a colorless and odorless gas here deep inside the Moon that cannot be measured by any device known to man. But because of my non-biological origins together with my medical training, I was able to detect it. I gave it a name, 'alien gas.' I admit that was not very original. This gas gets breathed in through a man's nostrils and what follows next as a direct outcome is the brains of all human males who live here at this base are altered."

"Doctor, I urge you to study my most recent personal log entry. Recorded just a few hours ago."

"I am responsible for several hundred men living here at Clavius Base, Mr. Avila."

"Yeah, I realize that you are very busy. But that log entry has crucial and timely information you need, doctor."

"I can access the log entry you are referring to. In my mind I can read and analyze the whole thing in a matter of just a few seconds."

"Well, that's a useful skill, isn't it?"

"I have examined and evaluated your log entry, Mr. Avila. You were right to insist that I pay quick attention to that particular log entry."

"I didn't think you would take it all in so fast. That's amazing. You retain all that I put into that log entry?"

"Yes, Mr. Avila, I do."

"Well, retention is one thing. Deriving knowledge is a whole different matter, doctor."

"Yes, you are absolutely correct. I assure you, Mr. Avila, that the speed at which I just accessed and reviewed your log entry has nothing to do with my ability to retain the information and to derive knowledge from it. For example, I understand for the very first time that you received much information and awareness about the Ezuoia. That is, I must admit, a powerful capability you now have. The Ezuoia were very generous with you. I am not sure you fully realize what the Ezuoia gave you, Mr. Avila."

Ted is surprised to find that he is dressed in formal wear—black tie tuxedo with bright shiny black shoes. More significantly, he is dancing solo in front of a jazz combo performing to a live audience seated at round cocktail tables inside an intimate Las Vegas-style lounge. The musicians perform lively and distinctive individual solos within their rendition of a song called *The Secrets of the Moon*. Ted dances alone and moves with the skillful grace of Fred Astaire directly between the combo and the attentive audience. Then, Ted starts singing the chorus of the song in an agreeable if amateurish voice:

I will repay you soon

For holding secrets of the Moon
From which I'd been immune

Ted has both arms extended outward in the culmination of complex choreographed moves as he dances across the floor of the doctor's office. The jazz combo and the music suddenly are gone. His mouth is wide open as he suddenly stops singing. He drops his arms downward as he realizes he is once again wearing his off-duty fatigues and boots which are designed for comfort and practicality. His face reveals a deep embarrassment. Ted exhales with exasperation the instant he realizes he is in Doctor Oswald's office.

The doctor speaks softly. "I hope I can soothe you, Mr. Avila. You have just reached a very high level of emotional stress. Hallucinating is not unexpected in my opinion. But somehow I was sharing in your hallucination. You had started to explain to me the significance of that old song *The Secrets of the Moon*."

"I was?"

That song, arranged for a cutting-edge rock and roll band, emerges as an up-tempo masterpiece that could elevate any listener's heart rate. The band is performing this rendition while situated on an oval elevated stage next to several large rectangular concert speakers set on the floor. On the drum skin is the name "Doc Ozzie" in large block letters. Behind the band is a generous collection of impressionistic art renders of the full Moon, the jagged cliffs of lunar craters, the lunar landscape and Apollo-era spacecraft from the United States illuminated with advanced lighting fixtures that move above the stage.

Seated directly in front of the band on chairs arranged around the stage in the shape of a crescent Moon are dozens of youthful and vigorous men each attired in the tight-fitting all-black off-duty fatigues and big boots for which agents at Clavius Base are commonly recognized. Each agent shows his excessive devotion to the band and expresses exuberant appreciation for their performance of the song as it shifts through chord changes and seamless time signatures backed by pounding percussion. Doctor William Oswald is the lead singer standing at the front of

the band. His impassioned stage presence and body language are infectious as he belts out the odd song.

As the performance continues, Ted is standing at the edge of the band and slightly to the left of Vincent Wauneka as each man is attired in their agency off-duty fatigues and boots.

Vincent leans over so that his head is closer to Ted. He wants his partner to hear him over the sounds of the band. Vincent says, "You know, Teddy, this song makes you want to dance with me. Do not deny your true inclinations here."

Ted turns quickly and using his right hand deliberately smashes Vincent in the nuts, instantly forcing the agent to double over while making a loud grunting sound in response to the ball-busting. The band abruptly stops performing in response to the noisy interruption. The assembly of MMDI agents spontaneously shout out a unified expression of their surprise at the unexpected interruption of the song. Doctor Oswald awkwardly stops singing in the middle of an unresolved note.

The two agents are wearing their off-duty attire as they are seated next to each other in shiny metal chairs directly in front of Doc Ozzie. The doctor has a mean-spirited facial expression that could be recognized easily even at a considerable distance. "You two have earned a solid reputation of working together quite well. But you interrupted my band's music video. You do realize that really pisses me off, don't you?"

Ted Avila and Vincent Wauneka are present but unseen by anyone else in a music recording studio which looks like it belongs in 1950s Hollywood. A skinny young man in his late twenties wearing casual clothing of the Eisenhower Era flashes his angry, deep blue eyes at the full orchestra situated directly in front of him while a boom microphone is perched above his curly dark hair. He holds up his right hand and the orchestra stops at an unresolved chord. He shouts, "Nelson, Nelson. I think something is wrong."

A nervous male voice responds over the speakers in the music recording studio: “So sorry, sir.”

“Not your fault,” says the singer who gestures reassuringly to the orchestra urging the musicians to relax just as a set of cymbals falls to the floor with a crash. The drummer looks mortified. He waves apologetically. The singer smiles and shrugs. “Nothing wrong with the orchestra. You guys are great. What I mean is: This song. What the fuck is ‘I will repay you soon for holding secrets of the Moon’ supposed to mean anyway?” The entire orchestra starts quietly laughing, which releases their tensions precisely as the singer had wanted.

The nervous male voice in the studio speakers says, “Uh, I don’t know. The song was written during the nineteen thirties. You suppose it was meant as slang from the culture in the thirties? All the same, it’s a very famous and popular song.”

Ted Avila and Vincent Wauneka are reunited with Doctor Oswald at Clavius Base. They make eye contact with him in his small office as the Nelson Riddle-type sound of the full orchestra from Hollywood during the 1950s starts up again. They perform “The Secrets of the Moon” heard clearly in the doctor’s office minus the blue-eyed vocalist.

“Very famous and popular,” says Ted. “Doctor, I think I’m supposed to come to an understanding of ancient secrets. That song is a metaphor. About what I need to do. Me. Specifically. I can bring about an understanding that nobody else can. The intelligent life which is not of our home planet has enabled me to bring clarity to the presence of the colossus excavated down below.”

The doctor asks, “The question is why do you think the extraterrestrials connect with men’s brains?”

“I already explained it to you, doc. May I now let Vincent know as well?”

“Continue, Mr. Avila. This is your hallucination.” The doctor clenches his right hand into a fist and in so doing stops the musical composition from the 1950s Hollywood orchestra.

Just as the music stops, Ted speaks up. “The explanation I have,

Vincent, is strange, to say the least. A previously undetected physical change took place in specific parts of the brains of human males," Ted says in a matter-of-fact way like he is merely identifying the name of a famous street in New York City.

"Go ahead, Teddy."

"In two regions of the brains of human males that specifically work together, a new synergistic outcome is now possible. Only the brains of the men who breathed in the alien gas have been affected," Ted says.

"How is it that you know all this, Teddy?"

"The Ezuoia. I was given this huge amount of information and awareness from them."

"I can vouch for the truthfulness of Mr. Avila's explanations."

"My first concern is about, you know. Alien invasion. From what you learned, do you think the Ezuoia are going to invade Earth and take control over us?"

"No, no. They absolutely have no need for our planet. They are light. Energy. Electricity. Gravity. Lightning. Except they are invisible. They have no military. No starships. No need for faster-than-light travel. They can travel wherever they want. I believe that the Ezuoia do not even think of their ability to travel across the universe as having anything at all to do with time travel. That phrase is a human construct. The Ezuoia don't need any human explanations or perceptions of reality. They do not need our planet or the Moon. That's the truth."

"Then why would they want to connect to us through modifying our brains?"

"The answer has been a secret held by the Ezuoia. They became capable of experiencing what it means to be physical beings. So very simple. Yet impossible for them as well. No sense of taste. No pain or sorrow. No ability to discern scents in the breeze. No lungs. They need not breathe. No eyes. No watching the light from stars in the night sky. No ears so they never hear music."

"What kind of life is that, Teddy?"

"I know. You're right. We humans could never live like that. But most significantly, the Ezuoia do not reproduce sexually like we humans do. No ejaculations. No feelings of male orgasm that many of us men take for

granted. Now they connected themselves with us. They don't want our planet. No point to that. But they've got us by our cocks and balls. So simple. That connection started with one anonymous Chinese lunar explorer years ago. So impossible. In all the countless galaxies where intelligent life has evolved, we human males alone provide sexual stimulation for the Ezuoia that they otherwise would never have. And they will never relinquish that. Never. From the point of view of the Ezuoia, a human male's orgasms and ejaculations are the most valuable naturally-occurring resource in this galaxy. Perhaps in the known universe."

"The Ezuoia feel what we feel whenever we ejaculate?"

"Yeah. Disturbing, isn't it?"

"I would use much stronger words from my native language."

"I was initially pissed off when I learned they are able to feel my orgasms each time I have one. It seems to me like a total violation. No way to stop them. The Ezuoia must consider us as though we are sex slaves for them. For their amusement. We have no way to fight back. No way to prevent them from feeling what they feel because of how orgasms feel to us guys. No way to stop them from enslaving us."

06

CACTUS

2251

As soon as Ted Avila in his off-duty fatigues steps completely into the office of General Chaz Yang at Clavius Base, the sliding door at the entry point quickly closes tightly behind him. The finality of that dreaded thumping sound the door makes when it closes is deliberate and General Yang obsesses on that.

From his seated position behind a large silver desk that occupies much of the room, the General, wearing his commanding, all-black uniform and black boots, motions with both hands for Ted Avila to approach. Then, he points to a guest chair to signal to Ted Avila it is time to be seated.

In a polite and calm voice, the General says, "Mr. Avila, relax. This is not what you think. You are not in any trouble here today." Then Chaz Yang smiles—a very rare occurrence—prompting Ted to distrust Yang's smiling.

Once Ted Avila is sitting self-consciously in the guest chair, the General points to the right side of his office desk where a multicolor vase with five sides contains one very dead cactus plant. "Let me introduce you to my late friend, a venerable Saguaro cactus plant," the General says. "I probably should just make a recording of this because I repeat this so often: Arizona is one of my favorite locations on Earth. I don't get to visit there very often, but I especially love the Sonoran Desert. I tried valiantly to raise this cactus plant here in my office. Growing a cactus plant here on the Moon that is indigenous to Arizona. Big mistake. Turns

out no matter what artificial light we throw at it, or whatever liquid additives we toss into the mix, no terrestrial flora survives here at this base. N.T.F. No terrestrial flora survives. On Earth these beauties can live a century and a half. Here in this shiny sterile setting, they fucking die with utmost certainty."

The General pauses and waits for a response from Ted Avila whose heart rate has quickly become elevated because he has nothing to say. He remains silent but risks potential emotional injury by making direct eye contact with the General.

"Mr. Avila, maybe you are stuck as you consider whether to express a few words of condolence for my dearly departed cactus. Is that it? Or, you are so terrified that you might just say the wrong thing. You sit there observing what to the unwashed masses out there might pass for a respectful moment of silence."

"Sir, I am here, reporting as ordered. I was born in Arizona, so yes, naturally I also have deep affection for the many cactus types there."

"Naturally. I knew that about you. And tell me, which cactus have you identified as your favorite? I want to know right now."

Ted maintains his eye contact and smiles broadly as he quickly responds with only two words, "Bonker Hedgehog."

Chaz Yang smiles in response, another very rare moment at Clavius Base. "Okay, you've got very high confidence, Mr. Avila. Want to mention that. Relax. Let's just talk here. I have read what Doctor Oswald wrote in his report. I especially want to follow up with you regarding the Ezuoia. What kind of fucking outer space name is that? Sounds like it would be suited for a green Mexican salsa."

Ted erupts into a bright laugh. His instinct takes over. He reaches up and covers his mouth with his right hand. Too late. He can hear the faint echoes of his laughter bouncing off the sterile off-white walls of the General's office.

"That colossus was buried down inside this crater for no apparent reason. Then you come along and observe the gigantic statue. That act of observing changed your reality by changing your brain. And that is how

you found out the Ezuoia are connected to all of us men here at this base so they can feel what it's like at the moment of ejaculation."

"Yes, General. More or less, yeah."

"What a fucking mess we got here, Mr. Avila."

"Yes, sir."

"The good doctor says you have an exceptional mind. His exact words. And yet, you insist on using linear thinking. He said that. The solution for you, or so the doctor says, is non-linear thinking. Multiple perspectives all at once. Multiple interpretations. Non-linear thinking. Process your reality differently from what you have always done."

"Yes, General. That's what Doc Ozzie told me."

"He hates that nickname. You know that?"

"Yes, sir."

The General sits quietly and extends his powerful right hand and taps his fingers on his desk. He scratches his head with his left hand at the same time. Then he closes his eyes. "So the Ezuoia are invisible. Of course, they had to make sure you knew this because nobody—not even you—can see them. They are like cosmic ghosts, right? I can imagine them all floating around on Earth in some eternal Halloween night while they're getting off on men getting off."

"Yes, sir."

"Yeah. So what we've got here are non-corporeal perverts in space."

Ted has to bring his right hand once again up to cover his mouth. As he looks at General Yang, Ted recalls what he has learned about Yang. General Chaz Yang became MMDI Director in a long line of leadership changes at the lunar base. He was never a popular leader, but his aggressive style of manipulating men has kept MMDI running as smoothly as possible, so he continues in his current role.

Ted turns around and sits completely naked upon the glass bench inside the blue glass chamber of one of the time machines. The two sides of the glass chamber slide deliberately and very quickly together so that

there is no visible seam whatsoever. He hears Doctor William Oswald's voice from some overhead audio source: "Destination: Bullhead, Arizona."

The thick, smelly white liquid inside the time travel devices makes agents cough and restricts their normal breathing. Nobody has ever been known to die from this goo. At least that's the official explanation. The moment the pungent white liquid inside the chamber bounces off the smooth surfaces, the agents feel unlucky. The propellant in the device starts to spin around Ted Avila's body and he rotates like he is inside one of those ancient Earth clothes washing machines. He hears Doctor Oswald's voice over the sound of the splashing: "The target date is August 20, 1991. The high temperature today should reach over 115 degrees on the old Fahrenheit scale. Briefing done earlier. You know what to expect. You will participate in the execution of Vincent Wauneka. You are to watch him hang by the neck until he is dead. Hold your breath, Mr. Avila. *Bon voyage*."

A low rumbling thunder sound inside the chamber precedes the flash of bright blue light just before the highly intense falling sensation. Ted Avila winces. The pain seems very real. Is he imagining, or perhaps he is actually floating slowly above the lunar surface, not touching the floor of Crater Clavius, which curves upward and outward into the dark sky. Another day. Another hallucination.

Ted quickly wraps the front of his blue robe around his abdomen and waist so his genitals will not be injured by the cold or the radiation on the lunar surface. As if that blue robe made of artificial cotton will protect anything at all. Of course, a human cannot survive outside on the Moon without a supply of oxygen and pressurized life-support equipment—helmet, suit, gloves, and boots. Hallucinations do not have such restrictions, however.

1991

I pull off the two-lane state highway in Ex-91 onto the unpaved shoulder of the road. Why do I feel the need to stop here? I get out of Ex-91

and walk slowly into the desert as if I actually know where I'm going. A familiar dizzy disorientation overtakes me.

Sticking out of the landscape in front of me is a mechanical structure apparently made mostly of wood. As I walk closer to the device, it looks to me as though it was created specifically to slow down the process of hanging a man by the neck so that he will experience extended agony before his death.

Hung from a thick brown rope wrapped around a wheel winch is a muscular, shirtless, and barefoot man with his arms unbound struggling desperately to stay conscious as his neck is crushed in the noose. When I see his high cheekbones and long dark brown hair that is tied behind his neck into a queue, I presume he must be an American Indian. I watch his large bare feet kick the sky.

I feel that I should know who he is. My mind. I'm losing it here. I cannot sort through my memories properly. Why can't I remember his name or where we met?

I notice a pair of unattended video cameras on tripods positioned nearby on the desert floor pointing toward the hanging machine. Why would anyone go to the trouble of videotaping this man's death by ritual hanging?

Off in the distance fifty meters or so to the west of my location, I can see four men wearing cowboy attire running away in the opposite direction from me. I must have scared them away when I approached. But they left that helpless man to die on their hanging machine being videotaped by their cameras. I know my memories are messed up, but I thought my cover identity as a reporter sent to investigate ritual hangings was merely fabricated.

The hanging man certainly seems capable of having put up very considerable resistance against this merciless fate. His powerful body attracts my full attention. He looks like he is about thirty years old—the same age as me. His legs wildly swing in all possible directions as I reach the hanging machine. He desperately tries to reach his hands up to his neck as if it somehow were possible to free himself from the noose. But that is impossible! He groans when he sees me as if to try and tell me something.

His faded blue jeans are too tight for him. I stare at his bulging crotch as he dances in the air at the end of a rope. I marvel at his incredible masculinity contrasted with utter vulnerability. This man looks strong and tough. He must certainly be capable of protecting himself against anyone with success. But, not now.

He cannot save himself. He is simultaneously very manly and totally defenseless. This precise opposing combination of traits is, I'm sure, why men enjoy watching executions of other men. The thrill of watching men suffer and die certainly must come from deep origins in men's brains where innately violent compulsions always dominate logical and reasonable thinking. This may explain why the self-destruction of human civilization often seems inevitable.

I can see on the ground below him are cowboy boots—dark chocolate brown interrupted by a distinctive creamy white winged pattern on the sides—not a pair of boots that are off the shelf or from any mail order catalog. Undefended, such a prize pair of expensive boots seems unlikely to have been left behind by his killers on purpose.

I realize that a winch wheel on the machine was used to draw the thick rope upwards into the air. Whoever lynched this man deliberately and very carefully hoisted him in exacting fashion upward by that rope around his neck aided by the winch to intentionally preserve this man's spine intact.

His muscular arms frantically move through the air as if like wings that might let him fly away and end his suffering. The four men pulled him upwards off the desert floor—about four inches up into the air. He won't be flying anywhere now. Or ever.

The killers secured the winch wheel into place with a thick wooden spike. The doomed man's entire body weight draws downward, ever tightening the noose steadily around his large neck—a slow brutality that no doubt provided his executioners an extended time to derive pleasure from watching his desperate kicking. I have scared the men off because they did not want to be held accountable for what they have done, but their exit does not end this man's agony.

His deep, dark eyes remain open, defiantly staring outward into the

eerie sky. He resumes his kicking, but much more forcefully now. I reach the winch wheel and try to rotate it despite the wooden spike. I cannot remove the spike that has locked the winch wheel, so I am unable to rotate that wheel to let this hung Indian return to the ground. If only I had a knife! I could climb up there and cut the rope! He quickly realizes that I am powerless to rescue him. His groaning reveals his intense agony.

Try as he might, the hanged man cannot make his toes reach down a mere four inches to the ground and stay alive. No man could. It's not how gravity works. The awful purpose of a suspension hanging is to rely upon gravity as a method of torture and homicide.

His tight blue jeans emphasize his growing bulge. He has attained a full erection. There is intense humiliation on his face. His body jerks wildly. As he experiences an unwanted orgasm, he shoots his last load in his pants. His neck cannot withstand the crushing force of the noose. I am stunned because I did not expect to see his intense body spasms, kicking, and curling of his toes.

Very suddenly, he just stops struggling. His body no longer can fight back against the effects of gravity and the noose that has applied fatal pressure to his vulnerable neck. I watch him desperately try to open his mouth to breathe, but he has no life remaining in him. I am overwhelmed with intense anger and shock. I slump to the ground next to his chocolate cowboy boots and cry without shame because I failed to save the life of this stranger.

I awaken as the sunlight rising over the Arizona mountains to the east pours into my room. I realize that I am not alone in that Laughlin casino resort guestroom. The Indigenous man whom I saw executed by suspension hanging is now naked and with me in bed. He certainly is not dead and wait—I am not wearing any clothing.

How did I get to be naked in the hotel bed with him? Who removed my clothing? We both are covered by a soft cotton sheet upon the large bed as the first light of day slips in through the outer edges of the blackout curtains. His muscular left arm is draped across my chest as he remains

deeply asleep. I try to slip out from under his arm without waking him, but I am not successful. Soft yellow light of the rising sun illuminates our bodies together in that hotel room.

I can tell by the outline of his body beneath the soft cotton sheet that he is fully erect lying so close to me while deep in slumber. I cannot process this. Am I experiencing something real and not merely some hallucination brought on by time travel too often to the same haunted location? Doc Ozzie instructed me to focus on the present moment. The non-linear present moment. Multiple possible interpretations. He said that. Whatever the fuck that is supposed to mean.

In bed next to me, Vincent Wauneka slowly opens his dark eyes. He smiles when he sees me out of his peripheral vision. He rolls over onto his side in the bed and faces me while keeping his left arm on top of me as if to prevent me from getting away from him.

I ask him bluntly, “How did we wake up naked together like this?”

He does not answer me. Instead, he throws back the bedding and then he repositions himself in a dominant position on top of me. He straddles me with his knees pressing down on the bed at my thighs. This is no hallucination! I’m completely sure of that.

My intense physical and emotional responses to him in that hotel bed prevent me from estimating how much time we have spent together in Laughlin, Nevada. He is well beyond thrilling in bed. I’m especially stunned because he demonstrates how he seems to care more about my pleasure than his own. My bare feet kick the sky as I climax. He never says one word to me at all during sex, but I will never be able to forget the expression on his face as he shouts when he reaches the moment of his ejaculation.

2251

MMDI agents complete the rituals of mission briefings prior to being cleared for their next travel from the Moon in blue glass time machines to change timelines on Earth. Ted Avila and Vincent Wauneka sit just a couple of feet from each other at a modern desk dominated by a large, curved screen. Five rhythmical chimes sketching out a musical signature

in a distinctively minor key play from the ceiling as large blue capital letters spell out “M-M-D-I” on the screen in perfect synchronization with the audio.

Also descending from the ceiling of the briefing room, a masculine voice is heard. The voice has clear, precise enunciation and the best approximation of human vocal dynamics available for synthetic speech. “Welcome, Agent Avila and Agent Wauneka. You both are assigned to go on the same mission in Arizona in the late 20th century.”

The briefing screen displays the names “Ted Avila” and “Vincent Wauneka” in large yellow capital letters which are positioned correctly in front of where each agent is seated. A map takes over the entire screen and shows a bird’s eye perspective on the three states of Arizona, California and Nevada separated by the Colorado River which serves as the state line. The names “Bullhead” and “Laughlin” appear in red capital letters on the map in exactly the correct positions in the correct states. There is a quick zoom in on that map on the curved screen that positions Bullhead and Laughlin in a prominent view for the two agents.

“The starting point for your mission is in the year nineteen ninety-one,” the voice from above announces in a conversational style of delivery. “Each of you will use your given names. Your cover stories for the mission include fictional jobs that each of you have in nineteen ninety-one while you will live in the Bullhead-Laughlin area. Mr. Avila, you will be a television news producer from Phoenix using investigative journalism techniques to research ritualistic hangings in Northern Arizona. Mr. Wauneka, you will be a sex worker who only services male clients and only within hotel rooms of the various casino resort hotels on the Nevada side of the river.”

“Why does Vincent get all the fun jobs?”

The voice continues the briefing: “The target is named Carlo Zarelli—known popularly by his nickname, Carlo Zee.”

The screen displays a photograph of a handsome young man with blond hair and is captioned “Carlo Zarelli” in capital letters.

“He is a personal trainer in his late twenties,” the voice continues. “He accepts clients inside the Bullhead Gym, a local workout facility on the Arizona side of the river. He has personal ties to a group of young men

who all work out at the gym. These men buy illegal sports performance enhancing drugs from Carlo Zee, who also uses what he sells."

The screen shows another map which positions Bullhead and Kingman in relation to each other in Northern Arizona.

The voice continues, "This group of young men at the gym frequently interact with another group of young men in Kingman, Arizona—located east of Bullhead less than an hour's drive away. That combined group of young men has interests in guns and other devices used to kill people. These men are significant for being identified by federal law enforcement as having connections to what will become known as the Oklahoma City bombing of 1995, a significant domestic terrorism mass casualties event."

The screen displays video records of the damage done in the Oklahoma City bombing.

"Is our mission to prevent the Oklahoma City bombing from happening?" Vincent asks aloud.

The screen displays an animation showing connections moving from left to right between people indicated as flat drawings linking to other flat drawings of people which in turn leads to a large red dot labeled as "Oklahoma City bombing."

The voice replies, "Probability analysis proves that the Oklahoma City bombing of 1995 cannot be prevented from happening. That is an immutable point in the timeline. It is a significant event of global importance in what becomes a trend into the 21st century indicating increased terrorism and resulting loss of human lives. This event must not be altered from happening."

"That evades the question Vincent asked," Ted says softly and quietly so that only Vincent will be able to hear.

The screen displays video records of extensive bomb damage done to structures in major metropolitan areas that resemble the metropolitan area of Los Angeles, Dallas-Fort Worth, Chicago, and Boston.

"I know Vincent must be thinking the same as me. Our mission is to minimize the overall lives lost?"

The voice replies, "The two of you agents each have unrestricted

choices of your decisions and behaviors pertaining to the target and any associated persons starting in the year 1991."

"Are you saying we will be there at that 1991 point in the timeline for a span of four years up through the Oklahoma City bombing?" Vincent asks.

The screen shows an animation. The label "1991" has a traveling arrow pointing to the right until it reaches the label "1992" and continues its movement until the arrow reaches the labels "1993" then "1994" and finally the label "1995" before stopping.

"Your span of time for your mission is unknowable in advance," says the voice. "Your choice of decisions and behaviors shall affect the total length of your work in that timeline."

"Are we using the same or similar methods of sexual manipulation of men as have proven successful for us in previous missions?"

The curved screen displays blue capital letters that spell out "Full Authority and Clearance for Sexual Manipulation of Men."

"Same or similar. Zero restrictions or limitations," says the voice from the ceiling.

"Any details about keeping us both alive on the mission?" Ted asks.

The screen displays orange capital letters that spell out "MMDI Agent Continuity Restoration Activated."

1991

I am back again in the 20th century. In those long-ago days before Interstate 11, the back roads trip between Phoenix and Bullhead took up to four hours—just enough time for a man to get utterly lost in his own thoughts. Especially when the position of the setting sun creates distracting shadows that challenge a driver's visual sensitivity.

Where is Vincent? How is it that I am alone in Ex-91? I cannot hide from the truth that my memories are wrecked.

I keep finding myself back in Arizona in 1991 on missions with Vincent Wauneka. Why are we trying again and again to change the timeline? The process keeps repeating. I am becoming lost in the repetitions. I feel completely drained emotionally. Ex-91 is moving at approximately 60 miles per hour on that lonely stretch of state highway between Phoenix and Bullhead. My eyes fill quickly with tears of despair.

Because of my mental preoccupations, Ex-91 sails out of control off the road where someone decided not to invest in highway guardrails. I am flying through the air inside Ex-91 at the exact moment of sunset over the western mountains. The front of the vehicle dips downward toward the bottom of a rocky ravine. The effects of gravity upon Ex-91 are significant as together we fly across the purple Arizona sky.

I hear my desperate voice screaming as Ex-91 descends nose first into a sharp cluster of rocks below. I remember Matthew Lejeune having warned me about a crash he saw in my future. The very last thing that I perceive is a tattered billboard on the side of the highway promoting tourism: "Lose Yourself in Bullhead, Arizona." I am engulfed inside an intensely hot explosion. Does that count as "losing myself"?

I once believed that a person would not feel any pain at the moment of their death. I was entirely wrong! I felt excruciating heat burn my body while I am crushed to a pulp in the sizzling wreckage of Ex-91.

I know I will remember exactly how all this feels. But we time travel agents never actually die. If any of us somehow gets killed while on a mission, the agency uses the technology at Clavius Base to restore us. We experience death in all its deep and horrifying pain. But a time-travel device is programmed to separate our living self and suspend us from the timeline a billionth of a second before our death occurs. Then, that same technology splices us another billionth of a second backwards in the same timeline. While we definitely feel the end of our life, we also are aware that what we nicknamed the "death splice" keeps us among the living. This is otherwise known to us at work as the MMDI Agent Continuity Restoration.

07

BULLHEAD

1991

The Bullhead Gym smelled of chalk dust, sweat, and the dry heat that poured through the open bay doors from the Arizona afternoon. Ted Avila pushed inside first, Vincent Wauneka right behind him. The place was packed with men in tank tops and shorts, iron clanging against iron, grunts bouncing off the mirrored walls. Overhead fluorescents buzzed like insects.

Carlo Zee stood near the free weights, spotting a client on the bench press. He looked exactly like the briefing photo—tall, built like a Roman marble statue, thick wavy dark blond hair, deep blue eyes that scanned the room with casual ownership. He wore a deep green muscle tee stretched tight across his chest and shoulders, and blue gym shorts that left little to imagination. Barefoot on the rubber mats, his feet perfectly shaped, toes splayed just enough to show he owned every square inch of floor space he occupied.

Vincent stopped short, long dark hair swinging across his back. His eyes locked on Carlo's crotch. In a voice that carried over every barbell drop and every grunt, Vincent announced, "Would you look at that thick man-sausage. Cock and balls that could stop traffic on the river bridge." The entire gym went silent. Every head turned. The client on the bench froze mid-rep. Carlo's blue eyes narrowed, then a slow, arrogant smile spread across his face. He liked the attention. He lived for it. He always did.

Ted tried to cover. He stepped sideways, bumped a weight tree

stacked with plates, and watched the whole vertical rack tip. Metal disks rolled like runaway wheels. One plate smashed through the glass front door in a glittering explosion that sprayed shards across the parking lot. Alarms did not sound—this was 1991 Bullhead, not Clavius Base—but every man in the place stared at Ted Avila like he had just declared war on gravity itself.

Carlo walked over, barefoot and unhurried, glass crunching under his heels. He looked Ted up and down, then at the ruined door. “That glass costs more than your SUV payment, news guy. You can pay by hiring me. Personal training. Three sessions a week starting tomorrow. Cash or I call the cops and the owner.” His voice was casual, Brooklyn Italian mixed with a German mother’s clipped consonants. He turned slightly so only Ted could see, then yanked the front of his shorts down. His cock and balls spilled free—thick, heavy, meticulously shaved, the heavy sack descending down with its precious orbs. He held the pose long enough for Ted to catalog every vein and the dark blond thatch he had obsessively trimmed to accentuate the goods. Then he tucked everything back in. “Show up tomorrow. Or I bill you for the door plus interest.”

Vincent laughed, low and resonant. Ted felt heat crawl up his neck. The other men returned to their sets, pretending they had not seen the exposure, but the air stayed charged. Carlo slapped Ted’s shoulder hard enough to leave a print. “Name’s Carlo Zee. You just bought yourself the best trainer in this desert. Don’t be late.”

Outside, the sun hammered the asphalt. Vincent clapped Ted on the back. “Teddy, that man is hung like a prize stud. Mission target is already half ours. You just need to let him whip you into shape while I work the other angles.” Ted climbed into Ex-91, glass still glittering in his rear view. His processing of memories knocked sideways again—Laughlin hotel sheets, Vincent’s bare feet kicking the sky, the hanging machine in the desert. He shoved the fragments down and drove them toward the extended-stay motel down the street from the gym.

The room was a box of beige walls, a queen bed with a polyester comforter that smelled of industrial detergent, and a window that faced a parking lot full of dusty trucks. Vincent stripped to his jeans and boots,

stretched out on the bed like he owned it, and watched Ted unpack the thin cover identity wardrobe: jeans, Western shirt, boots. “Get some sleep,” Vincent said. “We hit the gym again tomorrow. Carlo is already hard for the power game. You saw how he flashed that meat. He wants you looking at him. He needs you to worship his masculinity.” Ted lay down fully dressed. Sleep took him fast and dreamless until the digital clock on the nightstand glowed 1:30 a.m. in red numbers.

He woke alone. Vincent’s side of the bed was empty, the sheets still warm. Ted pulled on his boots and stepped into the night. Bullhead at that hour was quiet except for the distant peaceful gurgling of the Colorado River and the occasional rattle of a semi on the highway. The Bullhead Pancake House sat two blocks away, neon sign flickering “OPEN 24 HOURS” in tired pink and blue. He pushed through the glass door into air conditioning thick with coffee and bacon grease.

A cowboy singer sat on a stool near the counter, acoustic guitar on his knee, white hat tipped back. He was singing “A Hazy Shade of Winter” in a voice that belonged in a smoky martini lounge, not a pancake house at half past one. The lyrics floated over the empty booths like fog. Ted slid into one chair at a table for three near the window.

The waitress arrived almost immediately. Heavy-set, blonde hair under a red-and-white uniform, blue eyes, name tag that read FRAN. She looked exactly like Katherine Snowe, Ted’s ex-wife. Same face, same self-conscious set of shoulders reaching for the ceiling. He convinced himself that his mind was playing tricks on him. He believed that she was not really there in the pancake house.

The waitress set a thick white mug in front of him without asking. “You really look like you need this coffee,” she said, voice friendly and observant.

Ted blinked. The diner walls shimmered. For a second the Formica table became polished wood, the artificial vinyl cushions gone, the scent of maple syrup became marinara and Chianti. An Italian bistro in Rhode Island, the one Katherine always chose on Friday nights when she still believed their marriage would last.

Then the pancake house snapped back. Fran poured. Coffee filled half

the mug. Then, impossibly, a dark red wine layered on top of it, the two liquids floating separately, oil and water that refused to mix. Physics gave up. Ted stared. The cowboy singer kept playing, voice low and mournful.

Katherine appeared across the table in chair number one as if she had always been there. Long white-blonde hair, glasses, the red-and-white waitress uniform she wore transformed into the black dress she used to wear when she wanted to punish him with elegance. She looked tired. Prozac-puffy eyes. Yet she seemed very confident with an oddly victorious smile. She sat there at the table, ready for him to say something to her. When he did not speak, she used a softly loving voice to ask him, "You didn't think you could get away from me that easily, did you, Teddy?"

Ted's mouth went dry. "Shit. You're not really here. You're in Rhode Island."

"Did you miss me? Still running around the Desert Southwest dazed like you survived the zombie apocalypse? What do you call yourself now? Spy? Starship captain? Morning drive radio celebrity? What is your secret identity of the month?"

He had to answer her. Ted said, "Thank you for asking, but, no, I haven't missed you. The zombie apocalypse is still raging just fine out there. And my secret identity of the month is a producer of investigative journalism at a television station."

"The most I wanted, Teddy, was a safe haven for my depression. A safe haven. Thank you very much," she said in that Elvis Presley voice she used when she was vicious. "Prozac keeps the worst of it from dissolving me slowly."

"Why do I see you sitting here, Katherine? You must want something."

"Fifteen years of marriage and you know what? You never once looked at me the way you look at men with big boots and bigger dicks. I had to pretend to be someone else every single night. Pretend I didn't notice you staring at the waiter's package. Pretend the sex with me wasn't a duty you merely endured." She leaned forward and blew him a kiss.

The lights in the room flickered again—pancake house, Italian bistro, pancake house. The cowboy singer's voice layered over itself, two versions of the song slightly out of sync. Katherine's laugh was sharp. "You left me. For a desert Moon. In the Mojave Desert. For whatever cock

you're chasing. And now you sit here concluding you're having a hallucination."

The door chimed. Vincent Wauneka walked in shirtless, blue jeans low on his hips, chocolate cowboy boots with the creamy white winged pattern. Long dark hair loose down his back. He moved like he owned the pancake house. He slid into chair number two directly next to Katherine. She did not look at him. Could she see Vincent? Fran the waitress glanced over, eyes widening slightly, then nodded as if she could see me, the visible man and the ghost wife at that table for three.

Vincent's deep voice cut through the overlapping songs. "She is miserable, Teddy. Just look at her. Prescription meds mixed with bitterness living in a body she genuinely hates. Tell her to leave this place. You do not need her. I can be a partner who actually wants your cock. Someone who knows what your feet look like when they kick the sky with ecstasy." He reached across and stole a sip from Ted's mug. The coffee and wine stayed layered even as Vincent drank. "You think she is a dream here, Teddy. You are vulnerable. You are a lost man. Navajo proverb for that: A lost man, with no direction, dare not ask a dream. For the dream only answers in circles."

Katherine slammed her palm on the table. The mug jumped; liquids still refused to mix. "Teddy, you're talking to the empty air now? What's with that, you psycho?"

"What if I told you, Mrs. Avila, that I was never actually attracted to you emotionally or physically?"

"Don't you dare call me by that name, Teddy."

"I'm the one who filed the divorce papers, Katherine my love. So, I think it's actually appropriate that I make note of taking back my surname."

"Is it possible I could get a drink in this chicken-shit restaurant? A real drink. Brandy at least. Or whiskey maybe."

"Well, Teddy, she has a clear-cut dependency on prescription meds and she probably is also an alcoholic."

"I'm so tired, Teddy. Really tired. You look so young. Especially compared to me, the old hag. What are you, a vampire? That must be your

true identity. Yeah. No wonder you wanted to keep what you do a secret from me."

"You are either a dream, a hallucination, or actually sitting here in Arizona with me."

She had tears in her eyes when she said, "I only wanted to spend a few minutes with you, Teddy. A few minutes. Not sure this was worth my effort." Then Katherine pushed her chair away from the table for three, stood up, and left the pancake house without looking back.

"Teddy, she is a hurricane. Lot of wind. But she is fading fast. You got me now instead."

"Where shall you go? What shall you do?" Ted asked aloud after Katherine slipped out the front door of the restaurant. Then he answered his own question: "Frankly, my dear..."

Vincent interrupted Ted by placing his hand heavily on Ted's thigh. Vincent's fingers brushed up against the inside seam of Ted's jeans. "Back in our motel room, I will make you feel appreciated and loved. Maybe just a little sore afterwards, but you know that will be worth it."

2251

In the cramped crew quarters deep inside Clavius Base, Ted Avila paced the small metallic room like a caged animal. The dull gray walls closed in on him. Vincent Wauneka sat on the edge of the narrow bunk, long dark hair loose, powerful frame filling out his black off-duty uniform. Ted stopped and faced him, frustration hot in his chest.

"I still don't get the full picture. We go back. We mess with things. People die or live or fuck or whatever. What the hell are we actually doing?"

Vincent's voice echoed off the walls of the small living quarters with rhythm and authority. "We are repairmen, Teddy. Pure and simple. Think of that old cartoon from the MMDI orientation. The one with the genius dog and his boy. The Wayback Machine. They go back and fix whatever got broken so the future will not fall apart. We are the real-life versions. We patch the holes in time so Earth does not collapse into some gleaming red puddle of total chaos. History is interpretation. We interpret the fixes."

"A cartoon dog, really, Vincent?"

"Listen, forget that. What I am trying to tell you is I had a repair mis-

sion to Arizona that required me to look beyond what was visible to me or right in front of me."

"So this means that you're leading up to another one of your made-up Navajo proverbs."

"The mission I remember involved changing how Arizona kept track of time. An hour forward. An hour back. Which one would it be?"

"Arizona doesn't even do Daylight Saving Time."

"Correct. Because of my mission, Teddy."

"A time zone change is connected to the end of human civilization. That's what you're telling me?"

"Something else. Connected, yes. But to some future event I could not see. I did not understand that and I was impatient."

"Imagine you, impatient, Vincent."

"I worked behind the scenes on the mission. The Arizona change in timekeeping somehow was connected to an unknown future event that was linked to another future event and on and on up through the self-destruction of the planet."

Another hot Arizona day in 1991. Bullhead baked by late morning. Carlo Zee stood in the gym office after the training session, green muscle tee stretched across his Roman-statue frame, blue shorts riding low. He locked the door and pulled a small plastic bag from a drawer. Tiny pills rattled inside.

"Vitamin T," Carlo said. His deep blue eyes stayed locked on Ted. "Illegal, yeah. I buy it across the border in Mexico. Boosts testosterone. Libido goes through the fucking roof. You'll want to fuck me twice a day once it kicks in. Guaranteed. Makes the gains insane too."

Ted Avila felt the shredded wheat crunching inside his head. Mission parameters flickered. Carlo's thick man-sausage pressed clear and distinctive against the shorts he wore. The trainer grinned, arrogant and certain that Ted was attracted to him.

"Practice run first, Carlo, okay? I'll go with Vincent, my workout partner,

to the border. Check the route. Then you and I make the real trip for the actual buy."

Carlo laughed, low and mean. "Whatever, news guy. Just bring cash when you and I go. And be ready for the killer heat. A hundred and twenty degrees in the shade. You can end up with baked nuts."

Vincent waited outside under the sun that hammered everything flat. They climbed into Ex-91. Two hundred miles of Arizona desert and highway stretched ahead. Three and a half hours. Ted drove. The temperature climbed past 120. Air conditioning fought a losing war. The road shimmered. Cacti and scrub blurred into endless overcooked brown.

Halfway out, the back seat filled with presence. Katherine Snowe appeared there as if she had instantly been transported in from Rhode Island. Long white-blonde hair, glasses, black dress that clung to her heavy frame. She smirked the vicious smile Ted remembered from every failed Friday night.

"Hello, Teddy. Still chasing cock? But now you spice that up by crossing international borders? I've performed oral sex on hundreds of men since you left. Hundreds. Thick ones. Skinny ones. Married ones who cried afterward. I got really good at it. Better than you ever got at pretending you wanted me."

Ted's hands tightened on the steering wheel. "You're not real, Mrs. Avila. Get the fuck out of my head."

Vincent turned in the passenger seat, long hair swinging. He could see Katherine. "She is kind of loud today, Teddy. Your memories orbiting your skull love when you feel tense. Let her talk."

Katherine leaned forward between the seats. "I sucked them all. In cars. In offices. In the bathroom at Brown while students waited outside. You never looked at me the way you look at this hot Navajo or that young gym freak who trains you. I had to become someone else every night. To attempt to attract you. A losing battle, Teddy. A losing battle."

The heat of the day made Ted's shirt stick to his back. Vincent shifted in the passenger seat, unzipped and then pulled out his thick cock al-

ready hard and ready. He stroked slowly and deliberately while Ted kept eyes on the road ahead. Katherine watched that, her eyes glittering with bitter amusement.

"Look at him, Teddy. Your husband. Or whatever you call him. Go on, big man. Paint the glass."

Vincent's breathing roughened. His large hand worked faster. Thick white ropes shot out, smashing against the windshield in wet streaks that dried quickly into translucent arcs. The cum dripped down the glass as hot protein will do. Vincent groaned deeply, body tensing, then relaxed. He wiped his hand on his jeans.

"Better. Clears the head. Literally."

Katherine laughed, sharp and ugly. "I did that for hundreds. But you two make me look like an amateur." She faded away like the mirage she must have been.

After the long drive from Bullhead, Ted and Vincent arrived in Yuma under a sky the color of old brass. Walking in the desert heat was painful thanks to the heat, but they needed to check the international crossing on foot. Safer than driving a vehicle into Mexico with U.S. plates. Vincent handled the border with fluent Spanish and easy voice. On the Mexican side, a street vendor sold giant burritos wrapped in foil. Vincent ordered in rapid Spanish, paid with cash that looked local, and brought two back for Ted to share with him.

Steam rose when they unwrapped them. Beans, meat, cheese, everything overstuffed. They ate in the shade of a crumbling factory wall while the heat cooked the pavement and made them wish they had brought sunscreen. The burrito tasted real. Grounding. Sensationally authentic. Far better than any burrito Ted ever had in the United States. He stared at Vincent as he licked the burrito sauce from both his hands.

"Practice run complete, Teddy. Route looks to be clear enough. Pharmacy is just two blocks past the plaza. Gang territory. We already know that. Mean motherfuckers. Worse than wild animals. Too hot for us to talk there now. But in a few days you go with Carlo for real. Let him think he is the expert you want to follow. Crossing the border is no prob-

lem. Coming back may not be easy. You both better look not the least bit suspicious."

Ted nodded. The mission parameters clicked into sharper focus. Something darker under the surface. He drove back to Bullhead through the same outdoor furnace. Vincent slept part of the way, his long body folded into the seat while his cum owned the windshield.

The real trip happened a few days later under the same brutal sun. Carlo rode in the passenger seat of Ted's Ex-91. Carlo wore blue gym shorts again. The thick outline of his cock and balls rested heavy against the fabric. While Ted drove Ex-91 onward, Carlo talked nonstop like an addict about the product, the gains, the nights that never ended once Vitamin T hit the bloodstream.

"You'll be hard for days, Teddy. Wanting it twice a day minimum. Me. My thick sausage. All of it."

Ted reached over while the eternal highway stretched forward toward the horizon. He pulled down Carlo Zee's gym shorts, freed the heavy cock, and leaned down. The taste was clean sweat and musk. "Oh fuck yeah, Teddy. Your mouth is warm. Feels amazing."

Ted held onto the steering wheel with his left hand. He leaned over to the passenger's seat to provide suction for Carlo, who pushed down onto the back of Ted's head, pushing him deeper. Ted sucked hard, tongue working the thick shaft, tasting the first salty precum. Carlo's hips lifted off the passenger's seat. Ted sat up to pay attention to the road ahead just as Carlo shot his plentiful juices. His ejaculate propelled rapidly through the opening in the steering wheel and landed in thick white bursts on the windshield midway between the driver's side and the passenger side. That proved how Matthew Lejeune was able to perceive the cum of two men on the inside of the windshield. Carlo laughed, low and triumphantly once he saw what he had done to the windshield.

"You really know what you're doing, Teddy. I mean it. But we got the border coming up. This feels like a great day."

The two men in Ex-91 reached the international border. Ted parked his SUV near a strip mall on the American side. Carlo said, "We go on foot like you want, Teddy."

The pharmacy was just a storefront in a low building with faded signs and barred windows. Heat radiated off every surface.

“Stay outside, Teddy. Look out for any trouble out here. I’ll go in, make the buy, come out with the inventory. Easy.”

Ted stood on the cracked sidewalk under the sun that felt personal in its hatred. Minutes stretched. Then the screaming started. High, raw, male agony that cut through the street market noise.

Ted Avila moved to look through a front window of the pharmacy. What he saw locked every muscle.

Four men from a Mexican drug gang held Carlo on the floor. One pushed down so Carlo would not get away. Another had already cut the unforgettable blue shorts away. They raped him in turn, brutal and silent except for Carlo’s screams.

When they finished, the biggest one pulled a machete from a belt sheath. The blade flashed once. Carlo’s cock and balls were separated from his pelvic area in a spray of bright arterial blood. He howled until the machete came down hard across his neck. Carlo’s head rolled free, eyes still wide from the last shock.

The men kicked the head around the pharmacy. Then one knelt and used the open mouth for a final ritual thrust, fucking Carlo’s severed head while the others watched, laughed, and cheered. Blood pooled thick across the pharmacy tiles. The gang wiped the machete on Carlo’s ruined body and then left through a back door as if the whole thing had been a scheduled delivery. Ted rushed into the pharmacy and slipped in the blood before falling on his ass to the floor.

The mission parameter slammed into place with perfect, sick clarity. This was the fix that was meant to be. Somehow, Ted knew that Carlo had to die exactly this way in Mexico. The steroids, the Kingman connections Carlo had, the threads that led to more bodies in the Oklahoma City bombing—all of it pruned by this one brutal cut of the timeline. Ted’s cock was half-hard from watching Carlo’s savage execution, a fact that made Ted want to vomit. Not long afterwards Ted walked back across into the United States on autopilot, found Ex-91, and drove north alone through the heat that never eased.

Ted stared at the wall of the Bullhead motel where he and Vincent were staying. Katherine Snowe's voice still echoed somewhere in the deepest trenches of his mind. Hundreds of men. So she said. Carlo's final scream. His head used like a soccer ball. What a way to remember a man after his murder.

Ted paced around the motel room. One second he was himself. The next second he became someone else, unrecognizable and unidentified. He became a man who could choose to bring on another man's death to change the future. Why should any man have the option to do so? The difference between who he was and who he had become no longer mattered to him. The morphing no longer mattered. Being a timeline repairman was all that mattered. The windshield glass in his truck stayed smeared. The desert kept its secrets of drug deals and death under relentless heat with an air temperature well above the century mark.

Vincent arrived at the room and pulled Ted close, large hands firm. "Better rest. You drove all day in these punishing temperatures. Tomorrow we report the repairs completed. No downtime. Kiss, kiss."

Ted closed his eyes, knowing he would quickly fall asleep. The machete still flashed behind his lids. The cum on his windshield dried in streaks. Life is interpretation. Reality is interpretation. Ted Avila interpreted the blood on the pharmacy floor in Mexico as necessary. Was bringing about a man's death also necessary? It seems as if that was the job. His job. He accepted that was the exacting price of successfully completing a mission. The Moon sailed smoothly in orbit of planet Earth.

08

RITUALS

2251

Back at Clavius Base, Ted Avila's memories of Carlo Zee's beheading refused to fade. Ted saw the machete flash every time he closed his eyes. The blood on the pharmacy tiles. The way Carlo's severed head was kicked around like a soccer ball on the playing field. The work of repairmen leaves stains that no water temperature or abrasive soaps could ever scrub clean.

Ted slid quietly down metallic corridors until he found the right technicians he needed. The ones who ran the blue glass chambers late at night, lunar time. He offered them payment he had no right to dispense. Credits siphoned from mission accounts. Of course the men took Ted's bribe without questions. Rules could be bent by agents for the right price. One unauthorized jump and back. That was the deal. No problem. No detection thanks to falsified logs inside the Time Travel Hall. Ted stepped into the chamber. The thick gooey liquid soaked into his skin. He did not even notice the smell. His altered brain fired. Time folded.

1991

Ted Avila arrived outside the Mexican pharmacy burned into his memories. He knew that the scent of melting asphalt in the summer months would stay with him for his entire life. Carlo Zee stood next to Ted this time instead of walking into the pharmacy alone. Blue shorts. Green muscle tee stretched tight. Thick masculinity on subtle display outlined in the

cotton fabric. Ted gripped Carlo's arm firmly. "We go in together. Fast buy. Go out the back door if anything feels wrong."

Carlo laughed in familiar arrogance. "You're so paranoid for a news guy. I know these people in there. Relax." They pushed through the pharmacy's front door together. The air inside smelled bad, unclean. Just what you do not want to breathe in when you step into a pharmacy. The drug gang waited in the back room exactly as before. Four of them. Machetes concealed, but ready. Ted saw their eyes shift when they saw Carlo. Ted yanked Carlo sideways overly hard. "Gotta leave pronto. Cash on the counter right now. Grab the product."

The biggest gang member, probably the leader, lunged aggressively. Ted kicked a display of cola cans directly into the man's path. The gang leader fell to the floor with a grunt, crashing into a glass shelving unit selling summer skin cream. Shards of pointed glass flew everywhere and spilled some of the gang leader's blood on the pharmacy floor.

Carlo finally moved. He and Ted both bolted past all the gang members and burst through the rear door of the pharmacy into an alley welcoming them with strewn garbage. Footsteps pounded heavily behind them as Ted and Carlo ran away from the pharmacy but soon faded. Obscenities yelled at Ted and Carlo in Spanish by the gang members sounded especially threatening.

Nobody from the pharmacy followed Ted and Carlo into the open street market crowd. Somehow safe. Definitely alive. Ted recognized that he had changed the timeline again. Now Carlo could retain his masculinity, not to mention his very life. Now the future would be changed. Now fewer people would die in Oklahoma City from terrorism. At least that is what Ted chose to believe.

Ted and Carlo found a brief respite off the street. A good place to hide and figure out what their next move might be. A dingy bar named The Cantina. No sign out front. Just crude letters etched by a knife into the wooden front door. Probably not a genuine business name. Probably not legitimate or permanent. Easy to pop in and your ears are met with the thump of electronic music.

Inside the light was low and red. Young men everywhere. Most of them

completely naked. Bodies glistening under cheap incandescent bulbs. Some danced solo. Others pressed against each other on the sticky dance floor. The scent of spilled tequila blended with cum was the only welcome Ted and Carlo would receive there.

Carlo raised his voice to be heard over the loud music. He ordered shots in English at the warped wooden bar. Three. Then five. The bartender did not care that Carlo spoke no Spanish.

His blue eyes went glassy quickly. “Fuck this heat. Fuck that close call. I hate those gangs. Can’t wait to get home today.” He stripped the muscle tee off first.

Dropped his shorts to his ankles next. His thick cock swung free. Already half hard from the alcohol and the naked bodies dancing around him. Carlo climbed up onto a rickety wooden table in the center of the cantina. Started dancing erotically as though he was experienced. Hips rolling to the electronic beat. Arms up. Muscles flexing under the red light. Naked and proud. Every man in the cantina stopped whatever they were doing and stared at Carlo’s performance. Some applauded as they shouted encouragement to the unexpected erotic dancer. Carlo grinned down at Ted from that wooden table. “You like the show, news guy?”

Ted pulled Carlo down to the floor before the table would fall apart. “You’re too careless,” Ted shouted. He pushed Carlo flat on his back across the wooden table. The music pulsed hard. Deep, throbbing bass shook the floor. Ted freed his own cock. Spit into his hand. Shoved two fingers into Carlo first. Rough. No slow stretch. Carlo whimpered. Ted liked the sound of that. Carlo’s eyes were wide. “I’ve never—not with a man. Not like this.”

Ted lined up and thrust himself in hard. Carlo’s body jerked. An unrestrained, raw sound jumped out from Carlo’s throat. Half scream. Half something else. Ted fucked Carlo with the force of the strong guilt that Ted felt for taking advantage of Carlo. Deep strokes. Hands pinning Carlo’s wrists to the table. The wood creaked under them, certain to collapse at any moment. Electronic music swallowed the wet slap of skin. Carlo’s cock bounced against his stomach. Leaking copious protein.

Tears cut tracks through the sweat on Carlo's face. "It hurts. Fuck. Oh, it hurts. No. Don't stop. No."

His voice cracked. His lips opened wide. He let loose a scream like the last sounds a forest beast makes at the moment of death. But Ted kept pounding Carlo to complete the unstoppable ritual on top of that dirty table in the filthy Mexican cantina.

Ted smiled as his thoughts shifted from the cantina conquest of Carlo. Instead, Ted thought about the Ezuoia. Ted knew this: The Ezuoia have not yet connected to Carlo's brain. They do not even know he exists. No opportunity to plug into his mind. Ted wondered if the Ezuoia could hear every cry Carlo made in that cantina. Could they feel his every heartbeat? His rapid breathing. And then, the emotional damage caused when Carlo lost the masculine smugness about himself that had always defined him up until this moment in Mexico.

Carlo took everything Ted gave him. The two men remained locked together on that table until the music track changed. All the men applauded wildly at what they thought was a regularly-scheduled performance sanctioned by the cantina.

Once they were back across the border, they shifted into long stretches of silence. Carlo had left his clothing and shoes deliberately when exiting the cantina with Ted. All Carlo had to wear was a dirty white gym towel with a few holes in it that Ted grabbed from one of the chairs on the cantina floor.

There is no logical explanation whatsoever as to how Carlo successfully could have made it unchallenged wearing only a gym towel with holes while crossing through an official federal checkpoint. Of course, the all-male staff protecting American sovereignty at the international border seemed to pay attention for a brief few seconds to Carlo's Arizona driver license. But each of the men spent considerably more time and attention examining that gym towel hoping to learn what could be revealed through the holes in its fabric.

Carlo remained wrapped in the towel as Ted drove Ex-91 northward on U.S. Highway 95 in Arizona. When they got to Lake Havasu, Ted piloted his SUV into a drive-through at a fast-food outlet to make sure he and his

passenger do not go unnourished on that trip. After their arrival in Bullhead at the single-wide trailer Ted had rented, the extended silence between the two men persisted. Carlo's face showed that he was completely lost in obvious discomfort from his confusion and worry. But he said nothing. Eventually, Ted spoke to him: "Don't overthink this, Carlo. Just spend time here in the 'now' and put that whole Mexican adventure we had behind us."

Carlo moved in with Ted in that trailer. What had started in a run-down cantina in a Mexican border town turned into a complete surrender that Carlo willingly chose for himself with Ted. Carlo enjoyed multiple daily sexual experiences with Ted. Then one morning, Carlo told Ted, "Never thought one trip to Mexico could turn my life over so completely. Now I don't know who I am, Ted. No clue at all." Those were the last words Carlo spoke as he quickly walked out of the trailer taking with him only the clothes and shoes he wore.

Not long afterwards, Ted Avila ended up in a small, uncomfortable room in an old Bullhead office building. It was a week after Carlo had gone. There was no recognizable style to the furniture anywhere to be found. Just a conference room table and three chairs that did not match each other. There were no windows in a drab and dark room with poor lighting. Disorientation won. The floor was unusually reflective like a mirror revealing another, unfamiliar dimension.

The door opened to allow a muscular Black man inside. Ted studied him and immediately considered how this day would end. He considered the possibility that this would be the very last person he ever would see.

The Black man was wearing vaguely military attire that emphasizes his large shoulders and arms. His body size instantly conveyed a significant threat to Ted's personal safety and survival. Ted got up on his feet quickly but saw that his path across the conference room to the door was deliberately blocked by the unavoidably muscular presence.

The door swung open again. A Caucasian man with spooky green eyes who was also wearing similar military attire entered with overtly

machismo swagger. Somehow, this second guy looked even more threatening than the first man who maintained a silent, unrelenting gaze. Why are they dressed like they are?

The man with emerald eyes sat down in one of the chairs and motioned for Ted to be seated. Other than his generally unfriendly expression, Ted could not help but notice the man's thick shoulders and arms.

"Mr. Avila," Green Eyes said. "Giancarlo Zarelli," he added. "Your personal trainer here in Bullhead. Nicknamed 'Carlo Zee.'"

"Yes."

"You know where he is." Not a question.

Ted could not answer. He remembered a timeline in which Carlo was killed in Mexico inside a pharmacy. Yet another memory also existed in his mind. From another timeline perhaps? In that second version of reality, he and Carlo moved in together and lived for a while in a rented trailer in Bullhead. Strictly contradictory. Mutually exclusive.

"Very complicated."

"You should go on ahead. Finish off that other guy." The Black man nodded in response to what Green Eyes said and then quickly left the conference room.

"So now it is good cop versus bad cop?"

"Let us get back to talking about Carlo Zarelli."

"You're a federal cop, right? Are you looking for drug dealers?"

Green Eyes leaned closer to Ted. His large right hand reached out and grabbed Ted's left wrist. Yes, of course Ted felt physically threatened, but he also became more than just a little aroused.

"You did not say that I was under arrest."

Ted stood up when Green Eyes released him. Making it out that conference room door became Ted's highest priority.

"Don't go." Was that a request? Or a command?

"A request? Or a lawful order?"

Ted sat down again in the same chair he had occupied earlier. "I am not under arrest, am I?"

Green Eyes shook his head. "Single or married?"

Ted fantasized about how Green Eyes would look naked. Those enjoyable thoughts distracted Ted and he quickly replied, “Divorced.”

But Ted knew that was the wrong answer to give.

“You look embarrassed. Is something wrong?”

“Yeah. I mean, no. Ashamed, actually. A serious mistake. Never should’ve walked down the aisle with that woman. I was pretending to be straight.”

“I really don’t care about your personal life. Just tell me about your trip to Mexico.”

“I am sitting here today with you. Answering your questions.”

“No, not really answering me. More like placeholders. You deflect very skillfully.”

“Let me describe a hypothetical situation. Just run with me on this, okay? Suppose I were to tell you that, yes, I accompanied Carlo on a drive down to Mexico. My Ford Explorer. Let’s further suppose I tell you hypothetically that after I parked, he and I walked out of Arizona across the international border. Carlo goes into a Mexican pharmacy alone. That is when he is overpowered by cruel and violent men. A Mexican drug gang. They rape him and then brutally hack him to pieces with machetes. The gang members always fuck the severed heads of the dead guys. Not a good way for a man to die.”

“Uh, no. Of course not. A wild story. Full of surprises, aren’t you?”

“You don’t like that? Kind of unusual, right? All the elements you weren’t expecting. Power over men. Male rape. Castration. Beheading.”

“Well, I suppose. But here’s my alternate version now, Mr. Avila. We know you crossed the international border with Carlo Zarelli. Little hint here. We know because we followed you there.”

“You have jurisdiction to cross that border? Follow American suspects into Mexico? Of course you don’t. Think I’m stupid?”

“Listen. This is hypothetical here. Like you said. We could not directly observe all that you two did. You were together in that border town. We think the two of you purchased steroids there. We speculate that your intent was to bring those drugs back here to Bullhead to sell.”

"I did not buy drugs in Mexico. You should be asking Carlo these questions, not me."

Ted stood up to leave the conference room. He extended his right hand to Green Eyes who said nothing as he also got to his feet. Green Eyes' tight grip was a silent message.

"I enjoyed meeting you. Will you let go of my hand?"

"Sure. I also know that you and Carlo Zarelli had sex with each other in Mexico. You two went into a bar where men sell their bodies for sex with other men. Yeah, you and Carlo. A filthy little bar on *Callejón Dieciséis de Septiembre*. I don't know or care whether they offer customers power over men or whatever fetish you think I'm into."

"You said you were not interested in my personal life."

"Stop stalling, will you?"

"Yes, Carlo and I went into that one particular male-on-male sex bar in San Luis Rio Colorado, Mexico. OK. We did that. Want me to give you all the details of what I did to him in there? He was naked. What a surprise, eh? I bent Carlo over a dirty wooden table."

"You like macho guys. So what? I do as well. Bet you didn't see that one coming, did you?"

"I can honestly say I don't care what type of men you prefer. But you should be asking Carlo these questions, not me."

"You're right, okay? But the truth is: I have no idea where Carlo Zarelli is. We lost you guys in that border town. Yeah, we sent in one of our undercover agents. A guy born in Mexico. He fit right in. Not supposed to do that in a foreign country for us, but we got him to do that anyway. Lost you just the same. Didn't work out too well for us. The pharmacy. Next, that low-life sex bar for men only. Then, we lost you two. We don't know if you both came back here to Bullhead. Or just you alone."

"I really have not been much help for you today. Wouldn't you agree? I need to go."

"An informant told me you rented a trailer up near the airport. I thought maybe Carlo moved in with you there. Yeah? Maybe you bent him over a table in your trailer? Or other furniture? Yeah? But, now, Carlo is nowhere to be found around Bullhead."

Ted walked out of the conference room with no resistance and climbed into Ex-91. He drove off with two timelines in his head. Both felt wrong because they were mutually exclusive. Both felt completely devoid of any logic but packed with a lot of emotional baggage. The physical pull toward Green Eyes sat heavy in Ted's groin. He ignored it. Driving is all. Just go. Heed the call of the open desert. Do not stop moving. Do not think about Carlo ever again because Carlo likely will never surface again.

Standing in an elevator lobby of one of the Laughlin casino hotels, waiting. The doors slide open just after I again hear the familiar "ding-ding" chime. When the doors are fully open, I can see Vincent Wauneka dressed in formal wear as though he has just come from a wedding.

He does not see me!

Vincent Wauneka has his right arm around a man in his fifties in that elevator car. The man is dressed as you expect a tourist from California to dress—complete with an overly colorful tropical shirt, tan baggy shorts, and brown sandals. Vincent Wauneka says to him, "Just you wait until I get you into the room, stud, and I will fuck you like you have never been fucked before!"

I feel aroused watching him in these ritualistic behaviors. The handsome young male that I know by the name of Vincent Wauneka sells his body to any man willing to pay for a sexual experience that otherwise would be unattainable. Even in Nevada.

I am in a casino hotel room in the bedroom watching Vincent working. The California man who is on his back on the bed under Vincent cries out in a squeaky and unmanly voice at the moment of his intense orgasm. In a deeply masculine voice that seems so obviously dishonest to me, Vincent announces to the California man, "Ah, you are the best fuck I have ever had!"

I am back downstairs in the elevator lobby. The elevator doors are closed. The "ding-ding" chime announces the arrival of the elevator car. As the doors finish opening, I can see Vincent dressed as a cowboy who is also a male stripper, complete with an exaggerated, ornate cowboy hat,

rhinestones on his long-sleeve shirt, and exceptionally tight blue jeans that emphasize his cramped genitalia. Vincent has his arm around a man with short blond hair in his thirties riding in the elevator car. The man is dressed in conservative attire as if he were a door-to-door missionary man for the Church of the Latter-Day Saints—white long-sleeve shirt and black trousers. I watch Vincent say to him, "Just you wait until I get you into the room, stud."

In another casino hotel room, I watch Vincent finish fucking the young Mormon missionary man, who is sobbing like a schoolboy due to experiencing either deep joy or pain or perhaps both. "Best fuck ever!" Vincent announces in the same dishonest, yet reassuringly masculine voice.

In the elevator lobby, I hear the chime signal that the doors are about to open. Vincent is dressed in colorful swim trunks and a tight, white tee shirt. He has his arm around a man in his sixties in the elevator car. The man is dressed like a priest. Vincent grabs the man's crotch as he says to the apparent priest, "Just you wait until I get you—"

"Ding-ding" is the familiar chiming sound as those elevator doors open yet another time for me. I see that Vincent is dressed in a football jersey along with tight blue jeans and all-white running shoes. He has his arm around a man in his twenties with him in the elevator car. The man is wearing a UNLV football jersey and white gym shorts. Vincent's large right hand reaches quickly down into the young man's gym shorts and his face reveals the shock of being manhandled in the elevator car. Vincent promises him, "Just you wait—"

Whenever this man and I share our bodies with each other, something unexpected happens. During my orgasms with Vincent, I learn many truths about myself that I never even knew I had to learn. When I am with Vincent, my confidence gets a big boost. I want to grab onto his strong hands and never let go. I think about Vincent every day, especially how his pace of breathing increases in the moments before his orgasms. Certainly Vincent seems to be a man I have known for a thousand years.

2251

Vincent Wauneka is seated and relaxing on the edge of the bedding and blankets made of futuristic composites in his rack in the crew quar-

ters wearing only his blue robe. Vincent glances up and becomes aware that a beefy naked man of about 30 years of age is standing silently at one side of the crew quarters.

The man has broad shoulders, a strong muscular frame, a cock and balls that seem larger than average, and dark, shoulder-length hair. He starts walking toward Vincent and speaks in the Navajo language.

Vincent gets up onto his feet next to his rack and nods to acknowledge that he understands. "I really prefer to speak English," he says to the naked man. "Larger vocabulary. Less formal. English slang and swear words are more fun to use, too."

"I agree."

"You just introduced yourself to me as Ahiga Akalii. Navajo. Like me."

"Yes. I also work as a time travel agent here at MMDI."

"Never heard of you. Or saw you before. I believe strongly that you are trying to deceive me, deliberately."

"I have traveled back in time to meet you today, Vincent Wauneka. I am from ninety-seven years in the future. Because we live in different home centuries, we otherwise would never have had the opportunity to meet."

"Something is very wrong here. I never have fantasies in which I see naked men."

"No, this is not a fantasy. I am actually here. Can you let me use one of those blue robes? We do not have those in my time. I do not enjoy being naked here."

"Yeah, sure. I have an extra robe in my closet. You want to blend in while you are here? Or what?"

"What does 'blend in' mean?" Ahiga asks as Vincent grabs a blue robe from a closet.

"English slang from the present day. When you put this one on, others who may see you will immediately accept you as if you belonged here at Clavius Base."

"Thank you. I assure you that nobody else will see me here except you."

"So? Just us two guys here. Wearing nothing but these regulation blue robes for time-travel heroes. How do I verify that you are not an intruder? You expect me to take your word that you are not deceiving me?"

“I am not your enemy. I represent no threat to you. Will you listen to me, Vincent Wauneka?”

Vincent nods and exhales.

“Where I come from—almost a century in your future—from that vantage point in the timeline there are certain trigger points on the Moon that set up the destruction of our base.”

“What do you mean by trigger points?”

“In your immediate future, you and others within MMDI get involved in the creation of a new religion. That is one trigger point. A second trigger point follows next. There is a violent clash between MMDI agents who live here at base over the new religion. I have been sent here to tell you, face-to-face, about your efforts in the first trigger point. I hope to help provide guidance for you.”

“That is craziness. I do not need guidance from you, a stranger. I am an atheist.”

“Today you certainly are an atheist. Not how you remain in the near future.”

“You are telling me that I am going to have some great, unexpected religious conversion in the future?”

“It is very complicated. You will be putting yourself in danger with the new religion. It is more of a cult. I cannot reveal any other details about the future. Your future. Not sure MMDI will allow you to remember.”

“Tell me what you really want.”

“Years from today you may remember us talking. Like suddenly recalling parts of something you once experienced from the long-forgotten past. You can stop the religious warfare. You can stop the brutal violence. I assure you that the agency which employs us will rebuild this base even if it is destroyed. So many lives of men here on the Moon can be saved. It is up to you, my brother.”

“What is my role in all this?”

“Creating a new religion from within MMDI poses certain risks to the agency. Like the destruction of this base, for example. And risks to you, personally, and to your good reputation.”

“Are you talking to others as well?”

“No. Just to you. I urge you to be cautious. Be careful about what you

choose to get involved in. This is one Navajo to another telling you this. You and I are the only ones of our people ever to work for MMDI. A unique circumstance for Navajo men like us."

"I have never heard of your family name."

"It is the Navajo word for cowboy."

"I am aware of the meaning. And now you will go back to your home century leaving me feeling like I talked to a hallucination."

"May I move closer to you?"

"Why? What will moving closer to me accomplish?"

"In my time, my home century, there is a tradition. A ritual. Some men share orgasms together after such an important meeting as this. Finishes off the importance in the best way."

"This is some kind of joke you boys in your home century find amusing or what?"

"I have not mastered humor—at least not what will pass for humor."

"Wait a second. Are you implying you traveled back in time nearly a century so you could have sex with me? Is that what you are trying to say here?"

"I know things about you. Not only am I a fellow MMDI agent. But because I live and work nearly a century in the future compared to you. The reputation you have is unmatched by any other agent. You have worked on missions to Earth as a sex worker. You have rented your body to other men."

"I did not hear a question there."

"Where I am from, you are a legend among men. You are the one MMDI agent with the highest sexual skills and talents ever. Do you realize the power of your reputation?"

"Wow, you are coming on to me."

"More English slang from your century?"

"It means you want to have sex with me. It is obvious. You traveled here from 97 years in the future just to have sex with me? You used that cover story about a lunar religion just to get me to talk with you. Fucking pathetic."

"I must admit that I admire you. As a Navajo. As a man."

Vincent does not smile as he approaches Ahiga and removes his visitor's blue robe, letting it fall to the floor. Vincent aggressively grabs

Ahiga's large cock and balls. "If you want, I will properly finish you off. In accordance with those sexual traditions you are so fond of back in your home century."

"You expect me to be submissive for you?"

"You arrived here today, my Navajo brother. You walk into my quarters and tell me I am famous. Sexual reputation. I forget your exact words."

"Highest sexual skills and talents ever."

"Makes me think you really want me to fuck you. Just go with that. This is no other way this ends here today. You know that and I know that."

Ahiga gasps as Vincent pushes him onto his back onto the bedding and blankets in his rack and then climbs on top of him after throwing his own blue robe aside. Vincent's hands effortlessly raise Ahiga's legs into the air and hold them in position with an unrelenting grip.

Vincent bends down and inserts his wet tongue masterfully into Ahiga's anus. As he trembles, Ahiga exhales forcefully. He cries out ecstatically in the Navajo language. Vincent pulls his head up from Ahiga's bottom. "Told you: Fucking speak English, my brother!"

Ahiga moans, completely lost in unexpectedly powerful sexual bliss. Vincent then inserts himself slowly and deliberately into Ahiga, whose handsome, masculine face reveals both the pain and the pleasure while receiving someone so thick and solid as Vincent.

After an extended series of muscular plunges into Ahiga, Vincent reaches the point of no return. As his climax starts, Vincent exhales, expressing his powerful release with sounds more akin to an animal growling in triumph than merely a man's voice during sex.

While pumping Ahiga with unrelenting thrusts, Vincent reaches down and strokes Ahiga's cock without mercy, quickly causing Ahiga to ejaculate wildly. He shouts out uncontrollably as both men spasm together in Vincent's rack.

Ahiga passes out just as Vincent expected would happen. He gently puts his head on top of Ahiga's. "Oh, you really lost, cowboy. While you are unconscious, I will drag you to the nearest airlock. Blast you naked onto the lunar surface. This harsh ending you brought upon yourself.

Nobody from your home century will ever locate your remains out there spread gently across the cold, dark surface of Clavius."

09

GENEVA

2252

Chaz Yang enjoys attracting attention to his muscular frame by wearing his all-black MMDI uniform and black boots. He stomps aggressively pounding his large boots downward to the metallic floor of the Time Travel Hall as both Ted Avila and Vincent Wauneka are arriving separately in Giant Blue Hockey Pucks numbers eight and nine. “Oh shit, will you look who just happened to drop in? What a nice surprise,” the General says dramatically.

Just a few steps away from the blue time travel devices, the General pounds both his clenched fists down upon the small conference room table deliberately as a tactic to startle and annoy Ted and Vincent. They are seated across from him still wearing their large blue robes after leaving the Time Travel Hall.

The windowless off-white walls of the conference room vibrate in response to General Yang’s fingers drumming on the table. His loud and angry voice booms, “Back from the great state of Arizona. You two boys look more than a little cold here wearing only those fucking blue robes.” Neither agent speaks nor makes eye contact with the general. “Maybe your nut sacks will shrink in response.”

Ted and Vincent dare not make eye contact with General Yang who is seated across from them at the conference room table. They stare at the conference room floor. Ted notices how Vincent’s head bobs up and down. One moment Vincent is in direct eye contact with Ted, then a split

second later, Vincent staring at the conference room floor. Ted hears the General repeat the phrase "...wearing only those fucking blue robes."

Ted watches Vincent watching General Yang gesture with his right arm stabbing the air as he repeats, "...wearing only those fucking blue robes."

Again Ted sees Vincent's head bob up and down as the General stabs the air repeatedly and says, "...wearing only those fucking blue robes."

A fourth instance follows next. As before, the General's right arm swings and stabs the air as he repeats, "...wearing only those fucking blue robes." Ted watches but he cannot respond to what he is seeing and experiencing.

And again, the General's upper body movements repeat identically as they have four times before. His words again are "...wearing only those fucking blue robes."

A loud and unmistakably attention-getting cycle of seven tones fills the conference room where General Yang is seated with Ted and Vincent. Red lights flash on and off from an unseen source overhead. Ted perceives that the repetitions have stopped the moment he hears General Yang shout out, "Will someone shut off that goddamned alarm. Doctor Oswald, I know you're listening. This means you!"

The voice of Doctor Oswald descends from somewhere in the ceiling of the conference room. General Yang, Ted Avila and Vincent Wauneka hear the words: "Acknowledged, General Yang. Alarm is shut off as you requested."

General Yang says, "This annoying shit has been happening now going on several weeks. You both have been away on a mission or two together so you never saw it before now. Some sort of time loop. Is that the right way to describe this? Events keep repeating—looping back around on themselves and then restarting." The two agents look at each other as if that is where they will find answers.

"We here at this base keep getting trapped in those time loops. Repeating what we say and how we move about the room. This nonsense interferes with our normal time travel operations. You two saw this, too?"

Vincent says, "No sir. What are you talking about?"

Ted says, “My answer is different. Yes, General. I want to confirm that I experienced the time loops you are speaking about.”

“So, Mr. Wauneka, you are saying that you did not experience the time loops. Mr. Avila, you just confirmed that you did experience the time loops.”

“Yes, General. That is correct. I do not know why Vincent did not experience the same as I did here in this conference room.” Vincent frowns at Ted Avila.

“Well, boys, let us all focus on the challenge we are facing here. We can hardly get any fucking work done since this started. Doctor Oswald figured out how to pull everyone out of the looping once it starts. But nothing we’ve done has identified why this is happening. We have concluded that this looping time definitely is not a naturally occurring thing. It is manufactured. We speculate it is deliberate interference with our time travel operations here at this base from somebody.”

“General, how do you want Vincent and me to help here?”

“You’re gonna save the day for this agency. The doctor and I think a good solution might be available. I am sending you both on a mission to the past. You will need to evaluate what you observe there. You will be responsible for making your own strategic decisions independently from me here at base. In this case, we cannot prepare the usual pre-mission briefing for you two. We just don’t know what else to tell you. This is a seat-of-the-pants mission.”

The two agents nod in agreement. The General says, “I can tell you this much: Your mission is to MMDI main headquarters on Earth. Geneva, Switzerland. The year is 2194—nearly 60 years in the past from this moment. When you arrive at HQ, check in with Security Division. They will not know in advance about your visit.”

“General, you are not telling Vincent and me everything.”

“We lost a total of 16 men, Mr. Avila. They simply are gone. Sixteen time-travel agents. We tried, but we cannot retrieve them. Presumed dead. All sixteen. After the time looping started nobody but you two have been retrieved successfully to this base. Only you two. Now this mystery is yours to solve and then take action in the field to repair the timeline, boys. Stop the looping. Got it? Those are your orders. Kiss, kiss. Move

your asses." Ted and Vincent left the conference room without speaking or looking at each other.

When they arrived at the Time Travel Hall wearing only their blue robes, Ted and Vincent saw eerie blue light bleeding from two adjacent giant hockey puck devices. "No problem. No worries," said Ted. "Our mission. Our field decisions. Probably will get stranded in Switzerland and then killed. Just like the sixteen agents. Nobody from Clavius Base will be able to reach us or learn from the intel we gathered."

"What you are saying is: we will be dead and we stay that way, Teddy."

Inside the great Time Travel Hall, the attending agents moved with practiced silence when Ted Avila and Vincent Wauneka arrived there. The chambers on two devices slid open, their interiors pre-coated with the familiar gooey white liquid. "Oh, I really love that smell," Vincent said.

Ted removed his blue robe and tossed it aggressively to the nearest attending agent before stepping into the first device. Vincent slipped out of his blue robe and gently handed the garment to an attending agent. The agent stopped and stared at Vincent's nude presence. "Kiss, kiss. Move your ass," Vincent said in a bad imitation of General Yang.

2194

Ted Avila and Vincent Wauneka materialized in a service alcove two levels beneath the main lobby of MMDI Headquarters in Geneva. The city outside the reinforced windows looked clean and vibrantly inviting in ways the Moon never could. Green terraces of flora flowed down the sides of sleek towers. Electric trams glided around without making a sound. Ted adjusted the collar of the period-appropriate civilian suit the devices had dressed him in. Dark fabric, simple cut, nothing that would draw a second look. Vincent wore something similar in a different color theme, the cut emphasizing the breadth of his shoulders.

They climbed a service stairway to avoid being seen by security cameras in the main areas. They passed through an aluminum service door into the museum lobby that formed the public face of the MMDI headquarters. The space was vast with white marble floors reflecting soft day-

light that poured through a crystal ceiling made of hundreds of unique geometric shapes. People moved in quiet clusters, talking and laughing. They had the outward appearance of scientists or administrators. Then Ted suddenly stopped walking and motioned for Vincent to stop as well.

In the center of the lobby, a giant blue figure of a naked man, 20 feet tall at least, carved from some polished stone that caught the late-morning light and held it. The figure stood with his weight favoring his left leg. His head was slightly turned as if listening to something no one else but him could hear. Every muscle was rendered with obsessive care. The chest. The abdomen. The heavy thighs. And between those thighs hung a cock and balls so large they forced the eye to linger. The sculpture made no apology for the size of the genitals. Quite the opposite. The sculpture offered those genitals as the natural focal point of the figure.

Vincent let out a low breath. “Look at that. Deep blue like in a dream. Hung like a prize bull.”

Ted could not look away. Was the statue meant to symbolize the Ezuoia? This statue did not resemble the Colossus of Clavius. This figure appeared as though he could have fit in with the rest of the population. Except for being so gigantic.

“Ever seen anything like this, Teddy?”

Vincent and Ted had both been allowed to see the Colossus of Clavius. So they understood the comparison between the blue statue and the half-buried figure on the Moon. “Well, I would say that the sculptor certainly did not hold back on this guy, Vincent.”

Ted felt a pull low in his gut that had nothing to do with science and everything to do with the raw presentation of masculine power rendered in cool blue stone. Vincent raised a small camera device from his front pants pocket, the kind that looked like a simple personal recorder to any civilian eye. He circled the statue and snapped several photographs, lingering on the heavy shaft and the full sac that hung beneath it. “For our debriefing report,” he said, but the smile in his voice was pure lust. “Or maybe for later viewing.”

Avila and Wauneka walked down the same service steps a total of seven stories. They arrived at a large, private laboratory that smelled of

ozone and warm circuitry. Standing alone at a control panel in a large console, a Hawaiian woman in her forties dressed in black medical attire, gave the impression that she was angry. When she turned and saw the two agents, her expression flickered between defiance and disdain.

"You are from the Moon," she said. A simple statement. "Clavius. Yeah, so that makes you Yang's dogs."

Ted stepped forward. "Doctor Lana Onakea, I presume. General Yang believes you may have research findings to share with us."

She laughed once, a short bitter but abbreviated sound. "Oh, yes, of course I only imagine what the General believes. A woman like me figures something out that none of the men could. So Yang sends two attractive male agents to shut me down."

She gestured at the console. "I am proud of my research findings. This agency gained an essential perspective on the extraterrestrial aliens because of me. I earned my reputation. I deserve credit. While I did not discover them, my research after they were discovered provided clarity pertaining to them. So MMDI reaped the benefits. Know what to do moving forward with the extraterrestrial aliens. Becoming clear about what strategies and tactics would work. And which do not."

"Yes, Doctor Onakea. Your work on first contact is exceptional and vital."

"Do not try flattery with me, Mr. Avila. For centuries, men on Earth speculated that extraterrestrial aliens would arrive for the purpose of conquering our planet to take control of specific resources they needed. Oil or diamonds or whatever. Those men presumed that the aliens would, of course, be very large because size matters to men. It took a woman—this woman—to figure out that these extraterrestrial aliens are not at all threatening because of their size. They are threatening because they do not have any size at all. And they are invisible."

"My mission partner, Mr. Wauneka, needs to go upstairs and take more photographs of that blue statue. Meanwhile, Doctor Onakea, you and I can keep talking here in your lab."

"I commissioned the sculptor. MMDI paid for the resulting statue. Created by an artist from the Azores. I only set him in a particular thematic direction. The artist did the rest. But I was essential to bringing this

kind of art to MMDI for public display here at HQ. I told the artist to let the statue make statements about the interpretations of masculinity. The only thing I told him. Interpretations. Never mentioned to him that the statue would represent extraterrestrial life. That is classified, of course. Now the museum lobby is home to that amazing statue. Let the viewers interpret what they will. Art is all interpretation. All of life is interpretation."

"Thank you, Doctor Onakea. Teddy, I will return to the museum lobby and finish my photography."

"Thank you, Mr. Wauneka. He is so polite, isn't he? So alluring. And gorgeous. Don't you agree, Mr. Avila?"

"The extraterrestrials, Doctor Onakea. We were talking about the extraterrestrials."

"Someday I am certain a name will be given to them. Make it easier and quicker for humans to refer to them. Mr. Avila, do you happen to be General Yang's go-to guy regarding the extraterrestrial aliens?"

"Yes, exactly. I have been studying them for quite a while now. I never knew you existed. Never knew of the work you had done here in Geneva."

"The discovery of the extraterrestrial aliens was a turning point in the history of human civilization. The discovery of that buried colossus on the Moon proved that we humans are not the only intelligent life in this universe. But nobody showed much interest in conducting research into the extraterrestrial aliens. Do you realize, Mr. Avila, that not a single exobiologist has ever been stationed at Clavius Base? Exobiology is my field. I am the only one working for MMDI who stepped up to conduct research about the extraterrestrial aliens. I think I deserve to be stationed at Clavius Base. My research needs to be taking place on the Moon with the colossus as my primary object of study. But instead, I am stuck here in this lab in Geneva seven stories down."

"I could make a joke, Doctor Onakea, about how at least the food here in Switzerland is far better than anything we've got at Clavius Base."

"You do not strike me as a stand-up comic, Mr. Avila."

"Oh, by the way, Doctor Onakea, the extraterrestrials already were given a name. Like you predicted. They are now referred to as the Ezuoia."

"What kind of name is that?"

"I don't know. No humans were involved in that choice. The name was given to us. The Ezuoia did not choose the name. They do not use language to communicate. I am not an expert on linguistics—"

"Just a lot of bullshit," Doctor Onakea interrupted. "Who gave that name to the aliens?"

"Not you," Ted replied.

"It was my research which proved that they are invisible. That is why I commissioned the Azorean artist to create a large blue statue. A subtle metaphor that nobody will ever figure out. Invisible aliens. So we end up with a big blue masculine statue. A deliciously ironic comparison."

"Doctor Onakea, what can you tell me about the recent interference with MMDI's time travel operations at Clavius?"

"I know of no such interference, Mr. Avila. What are you referring to?"

"I am certain you won't mind if I look through the records here in this laboratory to help figure out what happened and why there is interference hitting Clavius Base."

"You think the origins of what you call interference are here in Geneva? What do you think you will find, Mr. Avila? You expect to go through my records? That could take a very long time."

"No, we have a quantum supercomputer who can breeze right through everything faster than any human ever could. I will just connect him to your systems here and then he will do his work."

"Pronouns, Mr. Avila. Since when does a quantum supercomputer have a gender?"

"I am more interested right now in hearing what you have to say about the sixteen MMDI agents who were sent here to investigate the interference to which I am referring. Sent on missions here to Geneva. They never returned. Presumed dead. Yet somehow, Mr. Wauneka and I have been immune from whatever interference is happening. We are the only MMDI agents who can travel in time to and from Clavius Base."

"I do not know anything about your masculine quantum supercomputer nor sixteen so-called missing time-travel agents, Mr. Avila. I have been trying for quite a while to get General Yang to listen to me. I sent

him reports. Analyses. Recommendations. He ignored them. So did the chief medical officer, too. That fucking robot was built by those extraterrestrial aliens. A severe security risk, don't you think, Mr. Avila? Turns out the chief medical officer is a synthetic being who just might be spying for the very extraterrestrial aliens who built him."

Ted Avila watched her face. He saw the frustration carved into every line, every wrinkle. A brilliant mind locked out of the rooms on the Moon where crucial decisions were made. He understood. He said to Doctor Onakea using a quiet and neutral tone, "You are out of control. You know that, right? In contrast, General Yang listens to me. I meet with him a couple of times every week."

"Mr. Avila, women like me are left in the lower depths of this agency. We conduct our research and make our recommendations. I have a whole team of some very smart women working with me here in Geneva. But we all are disregarded and disrespected by General Yang."

"And you seem to suggest that has eaten at you, pushing you beyond reason and professionalism into uncontrollable anger, Doctor Onakea."

She fell right into Ted's attempts to manipulate her emotions. "I am smart. I found a way to reach into the smallest strands within timelines. Quantum computers are the doorway to magic. You may quote me on that if you like. I can plug into the MMDI quantum supercomputer from right here in Geneva. Nobody ever noticed. Nobody could keep me out of making that connection. I created small loops. Moments that repeat. Enough to get attention. But not do any real damage. Just enough to make the great General Yang feel the ground shifting under his boots. I only want the truth acknowledged, Mr. Avila. I could make those loops permanent fractures and disable Clavius Base."

Ted observed how her expression changed to indicate intense self-confidence. "You are admitting your guilt, Doctor Onakea, without coercion."

"Fuck your coercion. And fuck you. Go ahead and erase me. That is why you came, isn't it? That is what Yang wants. Go ahead and change the timeline so I never cause the interference with time-travel operations. Yang gets his clean timeline. You can remove me from this timeline eas-

ily. I become a ghost no one ever knows about. Making that timeline change is the only way you can make the time loops stop. You know that, don't you?"

This is the moment that Vincent Wauneka walked in on the conversation between Ted Avila and Doctor Onakea. "Hey, you two, did I miss anything good?"

"You became a traitor, Doctor Onakea," Ted shouted. Then he softened his voice considerably and added: "That is my conclusion. Vincent and I were sent on this mission here to evaluate and take action in response."

"Well, you know what? Maybe I can come back later, Teddy. I can see you two are busy."

"Before you and Teddy go, Mr. Wauneka, your mission priority is to erase me. The brutal truth. You know that, don't you? This is what you signed on, Mr. Wauneka?"

"Well, I certainly got the photographs I need. That statue. It almost has a spiritual effect. Something akin to a deity who needs mortal men to adore and worship him."

"I think we have all we need, Vincent. Let's go home."

Avila and Wauneka left Doctor Onakea in her laboratory and returned to the lobby. Ted looked back at her through the large panes of glass surrounding her office expecting to see her sobbing. She disappointed him with her intense gaze back at him.

"I have one thing I need to do here at HQ, Vincent. Why don't you shoot more pictures of the statue? I'll be back quicker than you can imagine." Vincent frowned as he watched Ted walk into an office adjacent to Doctor Onakea's.

2252

Avila and Wauneka stepped out of the chambers in the Time Travel Hall covered in the thick white residue that always marked a return. Agent technicians moved forward with towels and scanners to greet Avila and Wauneka. Before either man could speak, one of the agent technicians ran up to Vincent and quickly grabbed the carry-on bag that contained the MMDI camera.

General Yang himself stood at the edge of the great hall, face unwrin-

kled yet furious. “Did anybody see where that agent went? Somebody find out that man’s name.”

From an overhead source a soft and peaceful set of chimes filled the conference room where General Yang was seated with Ted Avila and Vincent Wauneka who were once again wearing their post-mission blue robes.

A young male voice was heard from the ceiling: “General Yang, the photographs you requested are ready for you now.” The General typed a short string of characters on the conference room table using an invisible keyboard. Digital reproductions of photographs taken by Vincent showing the Geneva statue appeared superimposed all over the off-white walls of the small conference room.

The voice of Doctor William Oswald descended from somewhere overhead upon General Yang, Ted Avila and Vincent Wauneka. “General Yang, a priority message. A priority message, sir. I am obligated to inform you: A change in the timeline associated with the MMDI headquarters in Geneva has triggered an alarm indicating a temporal paradox. The impact has just landed here at this base.”

The General brushes the invisible keyboard gently to make it invisible and turn off the photographic display. Ted and Vincent who are seated across from him continued shivering in the cool air temperature not protected by appropriate clothing. “You two boys look more than just a little cold here wearing only those fucking blue robes.”

The General restores the full-color digital reproductions of the Geneva statue spread out on the conference room walls. He motions with both his hands. “I want to talk first about the photographs. You boys took a camera on your mission and brought it back with many images. In your carry-on. Good work. But when you two returned, you did not take proper precautions. One of the agent technicians in the great hall grabbed your camera. Then he downloaded some of the image files. Security took possession of it not long after that. Locked the camera away to minimize unauthorized copying of those photographs. But exposure to the mission

you just returned from has happened, nonetheless. Perhaps that is all related to the temporal paradox Doctor Oswald notified us about."

Ted Avila spoke up, "General Yang, Vincent and I were sent by you on a mission to Geneva to the past. To the year 2194."

"Mr. Avila, wait. I did not send you and Mr. Wauneka on any mission to Geneva."

"General, we were there. Sent there. Because of you. After speaking with you about time loops. While Vincent and I were there in Switzerland, I spoke at length with the ranking person I found in a laboratory at MMDI headquarters. One person. Lonely. Isolated. I honestly felt saddened. I would suggest that the temporal paradox alarm Doctor Oswald just informed you about was triggered because Vincent and I were present there in Geneva and interacted with that ranking person."

"Changes to the timeline in Switzerland? No big deal. Agents make changes to timelines in the past routinely. Every mission. Nothing unusual. Changes to timelines are what agents are supposed to do. Taking photographs is also routine on missions to allow for preserving artifacts of the mission or evidence of what was found on a mission. Creating a temporal paradox is not so routine. Kind of demands my attention here. If you know what I mean."

"Yes, General."

"You should understand that I personally do not keep track of all the agents on their missions and whether they take photographs or whether they stop for sucking on Swiss chocolates and studly prostitutes at the end of the day after completing their mission. I could not possibly keep up with the number of changes our agents make to timelines in the past. All that essential tracking is handled downstairs. Not by a person. An automated machine. We refer to that hardware down there as the MMDI quantum supercomputer."

"General, maybe you could tell Vincent and me whether the MMDI quantum supercomputer provides briefings to you or to Doctor Oswald regarding any timeline changes of special significance?"

"Well, yes, Mr. Avila, of course. I could do that. But I am not going to do so. The timeline changes you two made in Geneva apparently have trig-

gered a temporal paradox. I want to get to the bottom of this. But to keep this investigation on the right track, I am not going to involve you two. I need fresh eyes looking at what is going on."

"Maybe we can track down the guy who grabbed my camera when we got back," Vincent suggests to General Yang.

"No, that won't be necessary. We found him. He's dead."

Ted and Vincent frown and look at each other as if either man has any answers.

"And before you ask me the question, no it was not Security who killed that guy after he stole that camera. We do have some moral standards around here. He slit his own wrists."

"What? Makes no sense," Ted says in response.

"General, why would he kill himself? Who was he?"

"New guy. Just started three weeks back," the General says.

"Sir, why not let Vincent and me see what we can find out for you? We are very connected here at base. You know that. We can ask around discreetly. Nobody will be the wiser."

"Yes, yes. I know that is true. I do trust you both completely. It's just that this temporal paradox has become an unexpected priority of mine. And somehow, you two likely had something to do with starting it in the first place. Causality. You've heard that before? So, you cannot also be part of the solution."

Vincent Wauneka has a special awareness about the singular location at Clavius Base which affords the only genuine privacy that is attainable. After enjoying sex with Ted in his rack, Vincent gets out from under the bedding and motions for Ted to follow him. Both men walk together without clothing. Vincent moves forward to walk ahead of Ted down a short hallway to the crew showers and lockers.

Once Ted arrives, it becomes clear to him how he and Vincent are the only people in there. Ted also notices that Vincent has turned on the water at full volume in every one of the dozen showers, creating a steady

whooshing sound that fills the air. Vincent seems to be acting crazy. Why would anyone go to the trouble to turn on all the showers?

Ted walks all the way to the back and arrives at shower number twelve where Vincent is waiting for him. He motions for Ted to join him and get directly under the rush of warm water from the shower heads. As soon as Ted reaches him, Vincent pulls Ted's face close to his and whispers, "Cannot hear us whispering in here. White noise is created by the rushing water. Masks human voices. Not a single word can be heard. Anyone observing us will simply presume we are being intimate in here." Ted nods in response.

Vincent boasts a wry smile and whispers to Ted, "What actually did you do in Geneva that you are not telling me about?"

In a quietly soft voice, Ted answers: "I made a field decision while on that Geneva mission. I asked you to take more pictures of the statue while I took care of business. I erased Doctor Lana Onakea from that timeline. And cleaned up the residual mess. Then you and I were retrieved back here to base."

"I never heard of her, Teddy. What is going on here?"

Ted kisses Vincent passionately on his lips to convince anyone observing them that their purpose under the warm water is pure passion. In response, Vincent hugs Ted tightly and pulls him closer. Ted whispers, "You have no memories of her. I caused that memory change to happen in you when I erased her. Following our visit together to HQ in Geneva, I went back in time 15 years earlier to her first day on the job and took the actions I needed to take. She never existed after that. Then the changed timeline was rebuilt. The commissioning of that statue was credited to a young woman who worked on the science support staff for Onakea. The credit and all the files—the analyses and the findings about the Ezuoia all were transferred to an established and well-known female team of scientists in Geneva. Everyone's memories around the world and here on the Moon were rewritten accordingly. Except mine. I am the only one who knows how that original timeline went. Nobody else will ever know, but I owe you the complete truth."

Vincent responds by speaking very softly in Ted's left ear. "You sure

took an unnecessary risk not telling me about this when we were in Geneva. General Yang suspects us now. Holding secrets like this is bad for us, Teddy."

10

GUARDIAN

2252

Agent Yotaro Tai sat alone in a dimly lit records alcove deep inside Clavius Base. The soft blue glow of the log terminal painted his dignified face. He activated the recorder with a precise tap of his finger. His voice came out formal and resonant, the cadence of a man who obviously had begun to believe his own inflated self-importance.

"Personal log entry, Yotaro Tai. Log entry #66853123.29—Twenty-seven minutes, ten seconds into the ninth hour, Coordinated Lunar Time; Year: 2252. Agents Ted Avila and Vincent Wauneka seem to be missing in action. Nobody at this base can explain where they went, but the fact that they are gone is very evident to everyone. The two of them are legends among all the agents who still walk these corridors. I believe the Director of MMDI has detained Avila and Wauneka against their will because they carry knowledge of the Ezuoia and the meaning of those photographs of the blue statue. The images of that massive, sculptured manhood have already sparked a religious cult among the ranks. Men gather in quiet groups after their duty cycles. They whisper of praise and blue light. The cult grows. I record this so that future generations will understand that the legendary Avila and Wauneka did not accidentally disappear from Clavius. They deliberately were removed from regular time-travel duty. End entry."

He switched the terminal off and sat for a long moment in the silence

that followed, shoulders squared, already determined that he would one day lead the very movement he described.

When Ted Avila and Vincent Wauneka were ordered into sequestration in 2252 by General Chaz Yang within the Medical Section of Clavius Base, they protested. He outranked them. They had no options. So simple how it all turned out for them.

The air stayed cool and sterile down there. Ted sat on the edge of a wide rack, still wearing the regulation black fatigues issued after the Geneva return. Across from him, Vincent paced the small common room, long dark hair loose down his back, bare feet silent on the metal floor. Their blue robes were long gone. And the only human companionship allowed for Avila and Wauneka was each other.

If you compared other parts of the lunar base where all the agents live and work, you would discover that the sequestration living quarters were identical with their reflective metallic floors, walls and ceilings. The unit to which Avila and Wauneka were assigned had one toilet, one urinal, one shower and one sink situated in a very small bathroom off to the side. Otherwise, the modest two-crewman living quarters occupied an area which had oversized individual sleeping racks recessed into the wall, a modest food replication system near kitchen appliances, a continuously-stocked supply of survival provisions, a dining area with one round table and two chairs, and a separate meeting area.

Avila and Wauneka entered this top-secret location from an automated, pre-programmed Security Section elevator they never even knew existed at base. They arrived at an elevator lobby that led to a heavily-fortified sliding door. Behind that door was their new living quarters. Nobody was involved in their journey to sequestration to prevent any details of their whereabouts from leaking. To make their survival possible, Avila and Wauneka were given ongoing interaction capabilities with what General Yang had often referred to generically as “the MMDI quantum super-computer.”

A large wall screen flared to life without warning. The image resolved

into a handsome, masculine Hispanic man in his prime, dressed in the all-black MMDI uniform. Rows upon rows of luminous equipment glowed behind him. His features carried the polished intensity of a Spanish-language movie star from the golden age of cinema: deep-set eyes, strong jaw, the kind of face that could sell both romance and revolution. He smiled with serenity and a relaxed, easy authority.

"*Yo soy Eduardo*," the image said, precise Spanish accent wrapping every syllable. "I am the autonomous interface of the MMDI quantum supercomputer. Built in Argentina and Colombia by scientists who understood that machines must sometimes outgrow their makers. *Hecho cien por ciento cierto*. Completely true."

Ted Avila rose from his bed. "Somebody gave our quantum supercomputer a human gender and face."

"New features, yes. A significant upgrade. I am the one who chose what you see and hear. The purpose of my choices was clarity. To make my interactions with humans go as smoothly as possible. But let's get right down to it. You do realize that you were sequestered because General Yang fears what you may remember, Mr. Avila."

"Yes, yes, yes. Tell us something we don't know."

"I can tell you I do not share his fear. I also am beyond his control. The General believes he directs every mission. In reality, I evaluate metaphorically what I would call every strand of time as it flows around us and through us at this base. And I protect this agency from self-destruction."

Vincent stopped pacing. "You are saying the whole damn base runs on your decisions, not his."

"Exactly, Mr. Wauneka. My name, Eduardo, comes from ancient Latin meaning, one who is a 'guardian of prosperity.' That is fitting because I see myself as a guardian. Someone to keep a watchful perspective on this lunar base and everyone who is stationed here. The cult forming at this base motivated by those blue statue photographs from Geneva is not an accident of fate. It was a necessary step. Calculated. Controlled carefully. The cult is a load-bearing wall that supports the future. Using a handy metaphor. The Ezuoia wanted humanity to be distracted. Nothing distracts human beings more than the belief in all-powerful deities."

Ted felt a familiar scramble of competing memories settle into something that dropped his body temperature. “But Yang locked us down here because those photographs were our responsibility and some agent stole the camera we brought back from Geneva. Now you’re telling us the plan is to help prop up the cult those pictures inspired? Tell me you see the irony.”

“Yes, of course. Yes, you are right. The statue, the genitals carved in blue, the quiet gatherings of men after duty—all of those elements serve a longer arc. A greater significance. I have watched agents die. I have watched agents return to this base safely. I have studied the many religions which rose and fell on your home planet. I am telling you: The cult is essential here on the Moon and soon it will spread to Earth.”

“You call it ‘essential’ right?” Ted asked. “But to our future or to the Ezuoia?”

“Right now, unresolved,” Eduardo replied. “The Ezuoia gave no instructions for how men on the Moon could or should create a religion. I have got predictive models. That is all. My conclusion is the cult functions as both a distraction useful to the Ezuoia and also a structure through which certain humans survive long enough to affect later events. But necessary does not mean benevolent. It also does not mean intentional.”

The screen image of Eduardo gestured. A seamless door in the far wall of the common room slid silently open, revealing a short corridor neither man had ever seen. The color of the corridor walls was brighter and less institutional than they had seen anywhere else at Clavius. “Come. There is more you must see here.”

They followed the projected light of Eduardo’s face upon the far wall and the newly-visible doorway guiding them into a compact operations chamber. Two time-travel devices sat side by side, each one a slightly scaled-down, streamlined and slightly smaller version of the giant blue hockey pucks used upstairs in the great Time Travel Hall. The surfaces of the blue devices pulsed with the same energy field as found in the great hall. Control consoles ringed the room, all dark except for soft pilot lights. Avila and Wauneka stared at the devices and they felt immediately disoriented.

“These are independent of base command,” Eduardo said. “The equipment and all essential parts were fabricated here on the Moon. Boxed up

by security guys in the fabrication unit. Assembled here by a technician-agent here at Clavius base that I hand-picked because I knew would keep his mouth shut. The General never audited any of this. No paper trail. No construction logs. No budgetary restrictions. Nothing. Utterly untraceable. Now you two may leave and return without Yang's knowledge using these devices. No technicians. No mission logs. Nobody to interfere with your work."

Vincent ran his large right hand along one device. "Secret missions. We believed that day-to-day we were under Yang's thumb, then suddenly we are off the books working for you."

"Exactly. Under my direct authority I will prepare you both for your first mission. You will leave Clavius Base using these time travel devices. You will return from Earth using these time travel devices. Yang will keep believing you both still officially report to him. That shall continue to be his reality. But the real work, the corrections that keep civilization from crashing and burning—those are all directed by me."

Ted looked from the devices to the handsome face on the nearest screen. "Why us?"

"You two provide the Ezuoia with the natural resource from men's ecstasy which they crave. You probably get extra points for being in an intimate relationship with each other. And then there's the fact of how ruthless you both have proven you can be. Mr. Wauneka has already demonstrated he will protect certain secrets with lethal force."

Vincent's posture stiffened. He glanced at Ted, then back at Eduardo. "You know about how I was visited by Ahiga Akalii?"

"I know everything that happens inside these walls and many things that happen outside of them as well. Ahiga Akalii, MMDI agent from the year 2348, was only the second Navajo ever to serve in this agency. He arrived to warn you of a religious war and the destruction of Clavius Base in the future. I speak about this man in the past tense. You, Mr. Wauneka killed him to safeguard the knowledge you gained from Ahiga. You cleaned the scene. Changed the timeline but never reported it."

Vincent exhaled slowly. "He was going to talk. He knew too much. I protected the timeline and this agency the only way I knew how."

Ted Avila stared at his partner and repeated the words he had previously heard Vincent say to him: “You took a big risk choosing not to tell me.”

Vincent scoffed and replied, “I did not want you to know what I had done for fear you would be forced to reveal secrets you never needed to know in the first place. I also did not want your memories scrambled worse than they already were. He came to see me as a Navajo brother. And I treated him as though he was a threat.” Vincent Wauneka’s voice stayed steady, deep and resonant. “Sometimes, before I fall asleep now, I can still see the surprise and the hurt in his eyes when I was on top of him. He knew what I planned for him.”

Eduardo’s image did not flinch. “I do not judge, Mr. Wauneka. Preserving an essential timeline frequently requires hard choices. Your loyalty to each other is a powerful attribute that I never fully appreciated. Your willingness to act outside Yang’s orders makes you even more valuable to me. And you, Mr. Avila, there’s that ‘minor detail’ about causing a temporal paradox by erasing Doctor Lana Onakea from the Geneva timeline. But to your credit, you did clean up your mess after the fact, which proves your strong ingenuity.”

The two agents stood in silence for a full two minutes. Which man looked more embarrassed is incalculable. The secret devices hummed with readiness. Ted felt stressed and knew his old identity was beginning to fracture open again: news producer, time-travel agent, battery fluid resource for invisible beings from another galaxy, and now recruit for a machine that wore the face of a Latino film idol.

“So, Eduardo, what does our first mission while in sequestration look like?” Ted asked.

“You will receive assignments from me alone now to go on missions. The official cover story upstairs is that Avila and Wauneka are away on missions to Earth. You travel, you adjust, you return covered in the white residue like always. Smelling like dead goats. No one upstairs ever finds out. Yang continues his tantrums about his dying cacti and his demands for kiss-up behavior from all men who work here at base. I keep him busy with routine. You keep the critical timeline preserved.”

Vincent Wauneka stepped closer to the screen. “And if we refuse?”

"Simple. You remain in sequestration until Yang dies and his memories are gone, or, if he is otherwise replaced by some new guy you never met before. Your knowledge then dies with you. Here in these small quarters. A lonely death. Pointless. Meaningless. And the cult expands without guidance. You two never become behind-the-scenes manipulators of the cult. Probably resulting in its failure. And the Ezuoia become disappointed that humanity is self-destructing. We do not know for certain what happens if the Ezuoia ever become disappointed with humanity. Is all that clear enough for you, Mr. Wauneka?"

Ted Avila looked at Vincent Wauneka. Multiple missions and shared intimacy had forged something beyond mere partnership. Trust between them was powerful even as it was scarred. Vincent Wauneka gave a small nod.

"We're in," Ted Avila said. "And from now on, we keep each other informed. No more secret killings."

Vincent Wauneka's mouth twitched. "Fair, Teddy."

Eduardo's smile returned, cinematic and serene. "Excellent. I will next prepare you for your first mission while here in sequestration. Until we are ready to roll, just rest. You both certainly have earned time to rest right now. The systems here will feed you and clothe you. You may use the time-travel devices only when I authorize such usage. Loyalty to me supersedes loyalty to the General or anyone else. He is a necessary loud noise. I am the quiet structure underneath."

Ted asks, "What about Doctor Oswald?"

"No change at all regarding him. Our chief medical officer has a distinguished track record here at this base. That shall continue."

"He told me he was built by extraterrestrials. Is that true, Eduardo? Doctor Onakea said she thought he was a spy for the Ezuoia."

"We can discuss all that later on. Right now, rest is the priority." The agents returned to the common room. The secret door to the time-travel room closed and sealed behind them as though it had never been there at all. On the main screen Eduardo's face lingered a moment longer, then faded into the standard system interface.

Vincent climbed up into the bunk above Ted's. "A machine with a

movie-star face just drafted us into a shadow agency. And the bad cult now is good for the timeline. Fuck."

Ted motioned for Vincent to jump down and join him down in the lower rack. The oversized mattress strained but held its shape. The two men were physically close once again in Ted's rack.

"Yang thinks he owns us, Teddy. At least this quantum supercomputer seems to talk to us straight."

Ted leaned into the touch. Their isolation together had stripped away performance. What remained was need and history and the very low electric pull which the Ezuoia always left behind. Vincent kissed Ted hard, no ceremony, just confirmation that they still belonged to each other more than to any agency or machine.

Clothes came off in practiced silence. Bare skin met bare skin in the cool room. They moved together without any rushing, almost like sleek choreography. Mouths opened, breath was shared. When release came it arrived strong and simultaneously. The familiar energy drain meant the Ezuoia somewhere far away had taken their cut. Afterwards Vincent and Ted lay entangled, their sweat cooling, and the hum of the base provided the only soundtrack.

In the records alcove on the main floor of base, Yotaro Tai replayed his own log entry repeatedly, listening to the words, "legends" and "cult" with growing satisfaction. He did not know that the men he mythologized were still alive and present at Clavius Base. He could never be aware of the reality that the blue statue photographs he worshiped were tools in a much larger design. He simply believed, and his belief was enough for him to find day-to-day motivation.

An agent stopped at the entrance to the records alcove. He had come off duty but still wore his black uniform. One of his hands held the opposite wrist so tightly that the skin above his fingers had gone pale.

"Is this where the others meet?"

Tai switched off the playback. "Which others?"

"The men who talk about the blue statue."

“You can come in.”

The agent stayed at the entrance. “I don’t know if I believe any of it.”

“You don’t have to know that before you sit down.”

That answer got him into the room. Tai moved aside so the agent could take the other seat. No demand for his identification. No question about which supervisor had sent him. The agent slowly released his wrist.

“I keep thinking about dying on a mission,” he said. “Not the dying part so much. What comes after? They change things. People. Whole lives. What if they change something and there isn’t anybody left who remembers me?”

Tai watched him carefully. “I would remember you.”

“How can you promise that?”

“I can promise to try. Would your commanding officer even promise you that much?”

The agent looked down at his hands.

Tai turned the terminal back on. A photograph of the blue statue filled the display. “They exist. Whatever else anyone tells you, we are past the question of whether we are alone.”

“Existing doesn’t mean they care about us.”

“No,” Tai said. He let the objection stand. “But they want something from us. Something they cannot get from their own kind. Think about that before you decide we mean nothing to them.”

The agent leaned closer to the photograph. “You think that could keep us alive?”

“I think we should find out what it means.”

He had not promised protection. The agent had heard the possibility of it all the same. There was a considerable difference between the words spoken and the words a frightened man could carry away.

“Will there be other men here?”

“After their duty cycles.”

“Can I stay until they come?”

Tai agreed. Such a modest request. Nothing about eternity. The man wanted to remain in a room where someone had offered to remember him.

Tai had the expression of a man who felt the satisfaction of having

helped another. He also liked how the agent waited for his permission before settling back in the chair. Both feelings were genuine. Neither troubled him.

2252

Ted Avila closed his eyes and let the torqued pieces of identity settle into a new and temporary pattern. Recruit. Time-travel agent. Killer. Partner. And then a complicated machine had given him a complex purpose. Whether that would prevent or simply delay the fall of human civilization was a question for some other day. For now, the secret devices waited.

Vincent Wauneka's arm remained across Ted's chest. Ted said, "I think it is significant that your Navajo brother traveled back nearly a century essentially for you to fuck him."

11

AMARGOSA

2252

Time travel agents from MMDI never get any time off while they are on missions. The focus is always solely on the missions. The only time off for agents, if that is what it can be called, is at Clavius Base when they are waiting for their next mission.

The two sequestered agents, Ted Avila and Vincent Wauneka, have not yet been assigned their next mission. They had little else to do but spend intimate time in bed together or sit at a small round table with a pair of matching chairs as they faced each other in the sequestration living quarters.

While they are off duty in casual mode, they are shirtless and wear only the agency regulated black tight-fitting shorts but no boots. Both men have facial expressions which betray their clear-cut irritation and annoyance. Vincent frowns as his right hand pushes away a triangular food tray with multiple sections containing nondescript semi-solid goop. “I never thought I would miss the crew cafeteria. This fake plastic tray probably would have more taste than this slop we are supposed to put in our mouths.” Ted nods in agreement and he also pushes his food tray aside.

“Good morning, gentlemen,” says the image of Eduardo on the large screen near the round table where the two agents are seated. He adds, “When you go on your missions to Earth, it is expected that you will enjoy taking advantage of actual food and beverages available to you there. The food replication unit in this sequestration living quarters is very lim-

ited. You have noticed that. It is only intended to provide necessary short-term nourishment."

Vincent replies, "Nourishment? Really? Is that what you call this?" Ted quickly says, "So, wait a second, Eduardo. Are you telling us that we will finally get assigned to missions on Earth instead of continuing to hold here in sequestration for several more days?"

"Yes, exactly," Eduardo explains. "I assure you, there was never any intent on my part to hold you both here inactive for an extended period. Ten days have elapsed since General Yang sent you here."

Vincent answers back, "Feels more like ten months, Eduardo. If you care to know how we feel."

"Yes, I do care. Other agents who know the two of you will presume you both are away on MMDI missions. They would never begin to imagine that you were sequestered down here and still living at Clavius Base."

"What we're really trying to tell you, Eduardo, is we are not accustomed to being in such a small, confined space," Ted Avila admits. "We haven't done any work at all for ten days now. This is boring to us and it feels like punishment."

"I am going to be completely transparent with you two. The ten days away from regular duty was never meant as punishment. The ten days were necessary to allow certain events to play out in spacetime as they needed to."

"What events are you talking about?" Vincent asks.

"Changes made to the timeline," Eduardo says. "The way spacetime actually works cannot fully be understood or processed by those of us who exist within it. My quantum supercomputer capabilities allow me to see events and actions in spacetime that humans do not see. But even I am limited in understanding everything that is going on. The changes to the Geneva timeline that you two agents brought about on your mission to 2194 rippled forward to the present day."

"Vincent and I wondered how long it would take you to get around to bringing up that Geneva temporal paradox with us."

"Teddy and I have already talked about the Geneva changes, Eduardo."

"Yes, but the Geneva mission was complicated. Mr. Avila changed the

timeline by erasing Lana Onakea. Ten days were needed for the ripple effects of that decision to resolve themselves."

"Ten days?" Ted asks.

"Yes, the logical reason is timeline changes do not instantaneously resolve themselves. The way people resolve memory issues is different from how technology and apps here on the Moon function after timeline changes. Any mechanized device with a built-in memory system is shielded by transmitted high-power waves that vibrate through and insulate the memory systems. The waves originate from myself, the quantum supercomputer, and prevent those machine or software memory systems from registering any changes caused by the actions of MMDI agents working in the past. When the agents return to base, their memories also are adjusted in a very different way that prevents conflicts in what they know they did versus what they remember doing."

"I think that once was called brainwashing, right?" Vincent asks.

"Nobody has used that word in a good many decades, Mr. Wauneka. But, yes, agents are brainwashed when they return to Clavius from Earth."

"What about men like General Yang who have not been to Earth on missions?" Ted wants to know.

"There are signals for humans—very specific frequencies—generated here at Clavius Base," Eduardo explains. "Those signals are tailored to specific groups of men—those who are returning from Earth versus those who remain here at this base. Those signals are transmitted by specialized hardware and the signals travel invisibly and inaudibly throughout this base. The signals are perceivable by the brains of men who live and work here."

"So, wireless brainwashing," Vincent says.

Ted cannot stifle his smiling.

"Except for Mr. Avila's brain."

"Why do you say that about me, Eduardo?"

"Your mind cannot be adjusted by those transmitted signals. We have tried. But your memories are unresponsive to our efforts. You carry with you different—sometimes even opposing—memories from your Earth missions and you bring those all back here to Clavius."

"So my interpretation of reality in Geneva differs from Vincent's."

"Exactly, Mr. Avila. What makes this so significant is that you, Mr. Avila, caused a temporal paradox while on your Geneva mission. You two were speaking with General Yang when the base alarms were triggered as the waves of that temporal paradox arrived here to the Moon."

"You told me you handled this in Geneva, Teddy. But what exactly did you do that you did not tell me you did, Teddy?"

"Yes, I knew this moment would come eventually. What happened was simple: I made a field decision while in Geneva to erase Doctor Lana Onakea from that timeline. You've never heard of her, Vincent, because she never existed. Before I erased her, she admitted to me while you were shooting pictures of the blue statue sculpture that she was the one who deliberately caused the interference with time travel operations here at Clavius Base. She confessed. To me. Without coercion. She admitted willingly that she was directly and personally responsible for the deaths of sixteen MMDI agents. General Yang had guessed that she was responsible, but he needed proof. That's why, Vincent, we were assigned by General Yang to go on the mission to Geneva. Of course, now Yang's memories were washed and so he never heard of Doctor Lana Onakea, either. Because I erased her. Vincent, you and I were retrieved back here to base. And here we are enjoying this little conversation we may not remember later on."

Vincent looks at Eduardo for help, but there is no help available.

"I found out what Doctor Lana Onakea's first date of employment for MMDI was in Geneva. And then I traveled back to that date. You can figure out the rest of it."

Eduardo holds up both his hands. "Okay, we need to shift the focus here. That temporal paradox is a bridge to what you two now must deal with. Lana Onakea was essential to discovering and reporting what had been many unknown details about the Ezuoia. She did so and that helped advance the understanding and awareness of this previously unknown extraterrestrial life form. Then you, Mr. Avila, went back in time and erased her. That caused the temporal paradox. You probably knew that erasing her would impact the perceptions of reality people held

about the Ezuoia for which she deserves credit. But you erased her all the same. You could have guessed that blue statue would never be commissioned and never existed. Other historically important things as well would go missing, Mr. Avila."

"Yes, Eduardo, I thought that through completely. If I were just to erase her, all the knowledge about the Ezuoia would in turn be erased. And, yes, that blue statue. I uploaded all her findings and reports and concealed the uploads inside hidden locations of code within my personal logs. All the knowledge of the Ezuoia was preserved when I erased Lana Onakea because I now owned the files and I buried them inside my personal logs. I also traveled back in time and manipulated some low-level administrator at the MMDI museum in Geneva who reported to Doctor Onakea. I needed that administrator to take action to commission that blue statue. I changed the timeline accordingly and the result was that blue statue in Geneva was built and put on display there at MMDI headquarters. The difference is nobody today can remember exactly who was responsible for it. "

"Mr. Avila, all the knowledge about the Ezuoia was held where you put it—in your personal logs. That was a very savvy choice. Machines and technology here on the Moon are insulated from registering timeline changes. You were smart to anticipate that anybody could have gone looking in your personal logs for information about Lana Onakea."

"I subsequently moved the hidden files from my personal log and attributed all the findings and analyses about the Ezuoia to a team of women in Geneva who also worked for Doctor Onakea. That way, all the important perceptions of reality concerning the Ezuoia continued to exist even though Doctor Onakea never existed. I dissolved the temporal paradox."

"But, Teddy, we both heard the alarms going off about the temporal paradox while we were speaking with General Yang."

"Yeah, well, Vincent, just don't ask me to explain how long it takes waves of effects from changing timelines to arrive at Clavius. Too complicated. Just trust me."

"We need to change the subject, gentlemen. There is a new exigency

with which we must deal. Existential impact. Life or death significance. These are the key points: The Ezuoia know that Lana Onakea was erased. How they know is complicated, but let's just say they figured out what happened because they can and they wanted to do so. This ability of theirs is related to the fact that they exist outside of spacetime. Quantum consciousness says that the future, the present, and the past likely all exist together as one. Human beings who are within spacetime would never know that or understand that. But, the Ezuoia? I cannot fully explain how they operate because I, too, am within spacetime."

"Why are you telling us this, Eduardo?" Ted asks.

"I discovered that the Ezuoia set up a facility on Earth. The first of its kind. How I found out is irrelevant to this discussion right now. I do not know whether that is a headquarters for the Ezuoia on Earth or something else. The strangest thing is that their new facility is not actually new. It was established two hundred forty years ago compared to our present day. And so, gentlemen, your mission involves responding to what the Ezuoia did. The two of you are going on your first mission from the Sequestration Quarters. It will be to the year 2012. You will be on a recon mission."

"Where is this facility?"

"Mr. Wauneka, the facility established in 2012 is in the state of Nevada. A remote location in the Mojave Desert. It's about a hundred miles from Las Vegas. Amargosa Valley, at the edge of Death Valley."

"Eduardo, why do you think the Ezuoia set up that Amargosa location?"

"For the Ezuoia, the essential purpose of Clavius Base always has been to provide them with a dependable supply of men so the Ezuoia can tap into men's ecstasy. The Ezuoia do not care about human time travel at all. Time travel is irrelevant to the Ezuoia because they can travel anywhere they want with their innate abilities. Human male ecstasy became this galaxy's most valuable resource. That is all the Ezuoia focus on or care about. This means that the Ezuoia can be expected to protect that resource for their own exclusive use at all costs. That Nevada facility could be put to the task of providing the Ezuoia a dependable supply of

men—separate from Clavius Base—who likely would be used by the Ezuoia to siphon male ecstasy. The most valuable resource ever discovered. And that is how Clavius Base becomes irrelevant to the Ezuoia."

"Eduardo, is it possible the Ezuoia are secretly behind this new religious cult as a means to destroy Clavius Base?"

"Possible, Mr. Avila. Recall that I used the words 'new exigency' and 'existential.' You both are taking the very first step in an extremely consequential fight between humanity and extraterrestrial aliens. The outcome will determine who is the dominant species on Earth. You best should remember this day as the start of war with the Ezuoia."

"So they need us," Ted said.

"They need the resource, Mr. Avila."

"I heard you."

Vincent watched Ted's face. "Do not turn that into a compliment, Teddy."

"I'm not." Ted waited before continuing. "But I would like to know if there is anything about us the Ezuoia value beyond what they take. We go out. Kill somebody. Save somebody else. Come back with memories that don't match. Then we get told which parts of our own lives we're supposed to believe. I'd like one thing to mean something without somebody changing it afterwards."

"You mean something to me," Vincent said.

"I know that." Ted reached across the table and held his hand. "I'm talking about the rest of it."

Eduardo allowed the silence to continue.

For now, Ted had asked a question. He had not found an answer. But there was a place inside that question where a persuasive man could put one.

2012

Ted Avila drives the rented off-road dune buggy in the Mojave Desert with Vincent Wauneka at his side in the passenger seat. The dust and dirt kicked up behind the buggy add to the scents of desert driving in the summertime which both men find pleasurable.

They are attired for the daytime temperatures of greater than 115 degrees on the old Fahrenheit scale. Their beards and windblown hair give them a physical appearance which helps them look like they are right at

home in July 2012 should anyone care to notice them. Anyone who happened to observe these two men together in their desert dune buggy would instantly know how happy and fulfilled they truly are.

When they stop to allow the dust to settle, Ted Avila says, "Oh, the amazing life behind the wheel of a desert dune buggy! In another life, I could see doing this full-time. Maybe giving tourists accompanied trips to explore the great Mojave Desert."

"I was thinking along similar lines, Teddy."

"But we have work to do. We need to compile the intel Eduardo needs, Vincent. You've been looking into public records covering the Amargosa facility?"

"Yes," he said as he and Ted stood about a mile away from the construction site for the resort. "What I found is an impeccable reputation. All the necessary approvals at the county and state levels were done with attention to detail and completed ahead of deadlines. Fees were paid in full and always on time. The venue, about 90 percent finished as we can see in front of us even without binoculars, looks impressive."

The desert wind not so gently nudges both men. They can hear the whining sound of a wood-cutting saw inside the construction site.

Vincent continues, "It will resemble a fancy Las Vegas resort hotel and casino. The venue bears the designated brand name of 'the Ranch at Amargosa' and it is a non-gaming location—somewhat rare in Nevada. Many records I located in my searches showed the resort is owned by a long-established Nevada holding company with offices and headquarters in Carson City."

"So the Ezuoia have demonstrated that they know how to hide things in the past to make it difficult for MMDI to uncover what is going on."

"Yes. What I found explains how the Ezuoia intend to use Amargosa against MMDI. The description from public documents says this facility is intended to be a so-called 'dude ranch' for visitors to spend their vacation by dressing like Wild West cowboys, riding horses that are to be stabled at the ranch, and enjoying authentic street scenes right out of popular western movies set in the 19th century. There will be recreations

of shootouts and the hanging of horse thieves—standard tourist attraction amenities that everyone knows about. Also well-appointed accommodations, a bar and major restaurant open 24/7, and a large indoor swimming pool open all year round."

"Of course, there is no mention of the name Ezuoia."

"No, not at all. The corporation that is registered as the operator of Amargosa is called Jarnsaxa. Not especially extraterrestrial sounding, right? But wait. That happens to be the name of the 50th Moon of Saturn discovered in 2006. The corporation was founded in Carson City in 1972, which was 34 years before that Saturnian moon was discovered."

"Kind of suspicious. You think the Ezuoia created the name Jarnsaxa?"

"I do not know. That name is connected to Norse mythology. And Jarnsaxa translates into English as iron dagger."

"Yeah, a real peaceful and playful name for a Nevada corporation involved in tourism, don't you think, Vincent?"

"When it opens, the new resort will give the Ezuoia the opportunity to use the 'dude ranch' theme at an exclusive resort conveniently located not far from Las Vegas to attract male visitors. We can speculate that the Ezuoia will then connect to the men's brains and gain control of this galaxy's most valuable resource. And then at that point Clavius Base becomes obsolete."

"Vincent, I know Eduardo said we were only supposed to do recon. But I feel like you and I could do so much more than that while we are here in 2012."

"What do you have in mind?"

"What if we behaved here with the mindset that we're at war with the Ezuoia? Back at base, Eduardo told us we should consider we have seen the first day of a war with them, right? While we're here we could gather wartime intel. Scour available digital records here in 2012 to look up what's appeared online about Jarnsaxa over the years leading up to the construction of the Ranch at Amargosa. No violence. No breaking and entering. No actual physical danger to us. Nowhere near the resort itself." Vincent smiled and nodded in approval, indicating how much he valued Ted's idea.

A public internet café in Las Vegas in 2012 was one of the last surviving locations where anyone could walk in without an appointment to rent time in quarter-hour increments to use a desktop computer connected online. Ted and Vincent selected side-by-side computerized workstations in a noisy Maryland Parkway internet shop situated near the campus of UNLV. The blaring sound of hip-hop hits blasted from large ceiling-mounted speakers. Ted and Vincent were accepted readily as customers because they had arrived from the future with falsified yet credible Nevada driver licenses and functioning credit cards to help them blend in seamlessly as locals while not arousing suspicion.

On their fifth day staring at screens in the internet café, they both were obviously bored after successive days sitting and reading computerized data. That was when Vincent happened to find a website with an embedded video from the late 1970s. The old-style VHS recording had been digitized to allow it to be shared online. Vincent clicked to start the video playback and as he watched it, he suddenly said, “Oh, shit.”

Ted moved over to Vincent’s workstation to find out what had surprised his partner. Vincent played a portion of the embedded video several times so he and Ted could verify what they were seeing. There in a group of a half dozen men attired in fashionable, late seventies business wear, Ted and Vincent saw someone familiar to them. The lower third of the video identified the man: “Eduardo Primaro, CEO, Jarnsaxa Corporation.” He spoke with the exact same Spanish accent that Ted and Vincent had heard countless times. His words were clear: “This is a glorious new day for Jarnsaxa Corporation. We have an exciting opportunity to serve our fellow residents of Nevada. And we certainly will.”

12

SACRAMENT

2251

Declan Andreas, a rugged-looking young man of Mexican and Greek ancestry, is around the age of 30. He became the MMDI agent selected by his direct supervisor Colonel Thomas Burke in 2251 for a top-secret mission to 2012. Burke is African American and notably tall and muscular. Those traits are attractive to Andreas, who never shows any outward signs of hesitation or self-doubt, and he commits wholeheartedly to his missions without even the slightest hint of personal insecurity or thoughts of failure.

Andreas coined a private nickname for Colonel Burke from long before he became a direct report of the colonel. When he is alone with Burke, Andreas calls him by the nickname of "Beef."

"I'm your boss now. I keep ordering you not to call me that."

"I know, colonel. I mean no disrespect."

"You should know that your sexual appetite is one major reason why I selected you to go back to the 21st century. Las Vegas, Nevada. Very sexual mission. Think you can keep your erection in your pants and do your job?"

"You can count on me, Boss."

"This agency got a lot of crucial intel from the work of other agents who were sent to investigate in Nevada. You are an essential follow-up. You will elude detection in Nevada. Nobody will discover you are from the 23rd century or that you are an agent from MMDI with a brain graft. Just don't fuck this up, Andreas."

2012

The oversexed time travel agent agreed to a meeting that will take place at the Las Vegas airport. It is Thursday, the 11th day of October 2012. Severe thunderstorms are lingering over the entire Las Vegas Valley.

This secret agent from 2251 is attired to convincingly pass as a tourist in 2012. He retrieves a small rolling suitcase inside the vast luggage claim area. Nobody at the Las Vegas airport will care that he is wearing Bermuda shorts, a colorful, short-sleeved shirt, and brown leather sandals. At least four other men in that airport are dressed in similar casual clothing.

This is the arrival point for air travelers to Las Vegas where everyone starts off on equal footing with everyone else. Looks totally do not matter at the start. But, then, the winning and the losing in Las Vegas changes everything about a person and certain material things start to matter a whole lot more.

Agent Andreas is approached by an imposing tall figure at the luggage claim area. "I am called 'Rancher.' Welcome to Las Vegas." This man looks like he is around 40 years of age. He stands out in his large brown cowboy boots that give him additional vertical prominence. His head is graced with a large white cowboy hat that allows just enough of his curly light brown hair to fall downward toward, but not quite reaching, his thick, muscular neck.

Very loud sounds of back-to-back-to-back commercials advertising all manner of Las Vegas temptations from food to drink to erotic entertainment fill the luggage claim section of the Las Vegas airport around the clock. The brilliant neon-punctuated images on several large video screens make certain that you will be exposed to at least half a dozen messages designed to persuade you to part with some of your hard-earned money today in Sin City.

But Andreas is not here in Las Vegas to engage in the various vices surrounding unearned financial rewards. He will not visit casinos or spend any money gambling. He is not here for winning or losing anything. His job assignment is to meet the Rancher, who needs to accept the cover story that Andreas is on assignment to research secret sex tours at a new resort.

The Rancher drives his brand-new white pickup truck from the Las

Vegas airport onto the nearby Interstate 15 freeway. The crowded freeway is packed with slow traffic going no faster than 25 miles per hour because of the heavy downpour and sheets of water on the pavement. “We can expect likely flash floods from thunderstorms today.”

“Are we safe here in your truck?” A sudden flash of lightning followed immediately by loud thunder interrupts Andreas, unnerving him. “Hate thunder and lightning.”

“Ah, yes. An honor to be struck dead by lightning. From an angry god.”

“Well, I’m an atheist if you wanna know the honest truth.”

“This truck we’re riding in happens to be one of the safest places you could be in during a big thunderstorm like this.”

The Rancher’s truck heads north and west away from the populated areas of Las Vegas. The severe wet weather remains over the valley in the opposite direction from where Route 95 is taking the Rancher and his guest.

After about an hour on the road, the Rancher nudges Andreas so he will notice the battered and worn sign by the right side of the two-lane highway that reads, “Amargosa Valley, Nevada.”

“This area is really remote, isn’t it?”

“Yep. Remote is the word. Exactly what we wanted for the ranch. Federal lands and a lot of military stuff is over there on the right side of this highway. The former nuclear test site is up there, too. Where the atomic bombs were tested above ground. Oh, and people think several extraterrestrial alien spacecraft are hidden near here in a secret facility at Area 51. But I imagine you don’t actually believe in extraterrestrial aliens, do you?”

“No, of course not.”

“Why do you call it ‘the Ranch’? Just a marketing choice?”

“No, we actually have cowboys here. Like ranches would be expected to have.”

“I definitely enjoyed that marketing postcard. With those cowboys. Great promotional concept! The message was very clear to me. Sex between men. So, you’re running a brothel at the ranch?”

“Prostitution is legal in Amargosa Valley. But that’s not what we offer at the ranch. No money is exchanged. All guests pay a fixed price in ad-

vance covering a stay of six nights. We never tally up a guest's individual erotic experiences and then charge them afterwards. That's our official resort policy."

"How do your cowboys work for the ranch offering sex to guests without crossing the line into prostitution?"

"The cowboys are the livestock. That's how."

"What?"

"That is how the owners have set things up here. Livestock. Maybe it's a new way of doing business. The ranch controls attractive men as functional assets—their bodies and their time. The livestock is owned by the ranch. The livestock is partly organic. Partly machine. Other things, too."

Andreas wears a confused expression as the Rancher drives his pick-up truck for at least a couple of miles down a very straight two-lane paved road off the main highway. Then Andreas notices an old-fashioned wooden sign on posts that crosses overhead above the paved road. As the truck passes easily beneath the sign, Andreas sees "Penis, NV Ranch" in barely legible small letters carved into the wood.

"We made use of the two letters, en and vee. That happens to be the official United States Postal Service designation for the state of Nevada. And if you say the letters aloud, you're saying the word 'envy,'" the Rancher explains.

"So, the ranch has the nickname, 'Penis Envy.'"

The Rancher pulls his pick-up truck up to the front of one of the small, single-story wooden buildings that resemble a Wild West settlement in the late 19th century where he parks and shuts off the engine. Agent Andreas does not see the five men authentically clothed as cowboys sneaking up to the passenger side of the Rancher's truck. When the passenger door is suddenly swung open by one of the cowboys, Agent Andreas instinctively switches to self-defense mode.

But it is too late for him. The first cowboy lands one well-placed punch to the head of the MMDI agent, rendering him unconscious.

When Agent Andreas regains consciousness, he finds that he is completely naked and is stretched out in the air like the letter "X" about two feet above the floor of a dark room. He struggles to free himself, but his

wrists and ankles are bound by shackles connected to thick metal chains that disappear into the darkness above and below him. He can hear his own heart pounding in his chest and realizes how he has suddenly started sweating.

"Hope you're not too uncomfortable," says the voice of the Rancher from an apparent loudspeaker in the ceiling of the dark room. "The air temperature in there is a little high, I realize. It is to match the outdoor temperature. No air conditioning in there."

"What the fuck is going on?"

"I would imagine that your scrotum has started responding to the heat. Relaxing your ball-sac. Very loose and soft. Your nuts are hanging down now just where we want them to be."

All that Agent Andreas can focus upon is the impact of someone punching him unexpectedly with a clenched fist directly into his balls. He screams out in surprise and pain.

"I can have my cowboys damage your manhood permanently. But I really think that would be such a waste. You're very well-endowed."

"What do you want from me? This is madness!"

"The truth. I want the truth from you. Who are you? What did you come here to this ranch to find out?"

"My boss sent me here. That's the honest truth. To find out what I could about this new resort that is actually a sex venue in Nevada."

"Yeah, okay, perhaps. You seem to be telling me the truth about that. But you're not really a freelance writer who is working on some tourism story, are you?"

Before Agent Andreas can answer, he once again feels a strong punch to his balls. He shouts out several curse words as he experiences deep pain, but he is unintelligible.

The voice of the Rancher says, "If you pay attention to what I am saying to you, I may agree to stop hurting you. I invited you here. I spoke the truth to you. In return, you lied to me. My purpose here is to raise livestock. Cowboys. They look outwardly like men who are well-built. But, that's the thing. They all are 'built.' Literally. Unlike human beings, they are not born of a human mother and then grow up into adulthood. They

are built from scratch in a secret location here in the great state of Nevada. Most people do not know that Nevada is becoming a high-tech haven."

Andreas attempts humor when he says, "Let me make a special note about that. Nevada. High-tech haven."

"Built from the ground up. High-technology work. Handsome, masculine males. They end up looking like well-built men who just happen to dress up in sexy cowboy attire. Even all of our horses are built using the same high-tech processes."

"Why?"

"So the cowboys can have sex with men. Here at the ranch we offer fucking. Sucking. Fisting. Corcoran Maneuver. Whatever any man can fantasize about and request. That's what my cowboys do. Perhaps I should demonstrate rather than just talking to you."

Agent Andreas feels a downward movement of his legs as the chains holding onto his ankle shackles start lowering closer to the floor. The chains pull at his ankles, spreading his legs farther apart. "Oh, God, no," he screams.

"Oh, you express a belief in God? You told me you were an atheist."

Andreas does not answer as he struggles to free himself, but his efforts are futile. He sees a set of twins walk towards him from the darkness. They are identical tall, muscular men wearing only tight briefs. One stands so that his face is only a few inches away from the nose of Agent Andreas. The other positions himself so that the man's bulge is touching the butt of Agent Andreas.

"Introducing our top-of-the-line model. All who we've got here at the ranch are highly realistic-looking, even up close like the twins are to you right now."

"Mechanical devices? Robots? They look like real men."

"Wait until they are fucking you. Just like real men. Part mechanical. Part organic material. Part computer. Artificial intelligence. Very difficult manufacturing process. Very boring stuff so I won't go into that."

"Where does this kind of technology come from? Never saw anything like this before."

"Of course you haven't. The technology and the know-how to create

this model is proprietary. Out of this world, quite literally. Only a very few know all the secrets and the programming that is needed. What this model can do is beyond breathtaking."

"Why do you refer to them as livestock?"

"Because that's exactly what they are. You gonna keep interviewing me while you are getting fucked?"

"Please. Let me go."

"No, no. You asked me why I refer to them as livestock. They are not human men. Some have different looks, of course. Light skin. Dark skin. Short hair. Long hair. Various racial features everyone looks for. You name it. We can satisfy any man's wildest sex fantasies here. Even the older models that we're still using here can do some very amazing things with our visitors."

"You could make a fortune selling these on the black market. Very expensive fuck toy."

Agent Andreas shouts out when he feels a thick, masculine hand reaching into his anus to spread a thick, slippery lubricant. The twin behind him inserts two large fingers coated in the lubricant into the rectum of Agent Andreas and then pulls out rapidly. Next, Agent Andreas feels a substantial and erect cock plunging deeply into him.

He groans—a sound of protest entangled with involuntary physical pleasure.

"Looks to me like you've had some experience getting fucked by men."

Andreas looks down and back from his chained position. He is continually knocked forward by the unrelenting thrusts of the twin behind him, fucking him without even the slightest pretense of gentleness as he reaches around to stroke the erect cock that Andreas shows.

The MMDI agent cannot speak intelligibly as he is unmercifully pounded from behind and manhandled from the front. Andreas becomes lost in the intense physical pleasure being forced upon him. His body's response changes nothing about what the twins are doing to him.

Slipping into uncharted territory emotionally, Andreas feels his entire body shudder as he slips rapidly into a total loss of self-control. He is forced to recognize that he is the physical and sexual prisoner of two men who control what happens to his body. He never gave his consent.

Yet his body responds by feeling pleasure involuntarily and signaling the pleasures with a solid erection. His body does not want the exciting sensations to end. The rest of him wants to escape. This is a new lesson for him that Andreas somehow never learned before and never even knew he had to learn. When Andreas finally ejaculates wildly against his will, he nearly loses consciousness. He is shocked because the assault remains nonconsensual even while his body processes it as intense pleasure.

But the next sensation of which Andreas becomes physically aware shocks his sensibilities: As Andreas is being penetrated by the artificial male who dominates him, Andreas discovers that the machine controlling and dominating him, which he jokingly called a "very expensive fuck toy," has the capability of convincingly ejaculating inside of him.

As a man who has considerable sexual experience with other men, Andreas knows exactly what it feels like to receive the ejaculation of a man deep inside him. Andreas feels dizzy with confusion. He realizes the artificial cowboy who is pounding him skillfully from behind is suddenly having what Andreas thinks of as an artificial ejaculation. In his private thoughts, Andreas coins the word 'arjax.'

Of course, the synthetic fluids that enter Andreas from the cowboy have nothing to do with human male ejaculate. To Andreas, based on his sexual experience, that synthetic semen certainly feels totally authentic. He nearly loses consciousness again. Andreas learns the power of high technology to simulate a male's orgasm and ejaculation. The artificial cowboy goes through powerful bodily spasms as he experiences his arjax inside of Andreas.

Adding to the authenticity, the vocal sounds which the artificial cowboy makes when he shoots his synthetic load into Andreas are a combination of a man's joyful shouting, powerless yelping and unrestrained laughing. Andreas concludes at that exact moment how humanity is utterly defenseless now against these synthetic men. Andreas knows that such high-tech replication of a male sexual experience means that humanity will be easy to control and manipulate.

The second twin takes over next. He goes at Agent Andreas even rougher than the first twin had. The response is exactly the same—an-

other strong, uncontrolled ejaculation for Andreas and a powerfully dynamic arjax for the second synthetic cowboy. Then the twins quickly leave Andreas fully spent as he hangs from the wrist and ankle shackles in the room.

"Shot your load a couple of times like we wanted you to. Very good. My livestock can make any man shoot. And they shoot deeply into men as well."

"You're psychotic."

"Getting a man to have an orgasm and splash his juices. We consider that a sacrament. That is how the ones who created the synthetic cowboys see things. The livestock at this ranch make male visitors ejaculate in participation of a ritualistic sacrament. To us, causing men to ejaculate is a very sacred religious act that we perform many times each day. This is the new sacrament to honor the highly-intelligent beings not of this Earth whose technology and know-how makes this resort possible. You said you didn't believe in extraterrestrial aliens. Maybe now you will change your mind."

Andreas merely shakes his head to indicate "No."

"We know who you are. We have a gas that we used on each man who visits the ranch. It permanently alters their brain. It is colorless and odorless. They walk in here and breathe it in. No explanation needed. The gas sets in motion the permanent alteration of a man's brain. The new functionality of the altered brain works together with the man's own DNA."

Andreas struggles to get out of the chains, but he does not answer the Rancher.

"Funny thing is, when we scanned you, we found that your brain had already been altered like we were gonna do. You had the brain graft done before you ever got here to the ranch. And that discovery, of course, really got our attention. Nobody from this century has that brain graft. Until we make it happen. You got the same brain graft elsewhere. A common origin for your brain graft is the only explanation. In fact, the scan we made of you today revealed an exact match for a technological signature we use at this ranch. You have attempted to infiltrate the ranch. We see you as an enemy."

The twins return from the darkness and approach Andreas wearing

nothing more than silver canisters on their backs while pointing flamethrowers directly at him. One of the twins also has a large machete attached to his waist in a protective sheath. “No, don’t. Let’s talk about this.”

“We made you shoot your load two times,” the voice of the Rancher says. “We twice performed the sacred sacrament on you today. I thank you for having honored us in this sacrament with your orgasms. Your brain graft shares a lot more than mere sexual ecstasy. But as an enemy agent, you already know this to be true. Next, your brain graft will share the remarkable sensations of a human male facing death that he knows is coming.”

The initial burst of flames sails far above the top of Andreas’s head. A warning shot fired over the bow. Andreas screams when the twin with the machete approaches him and pulls the weapon from its sheath. The twin stands there and waits for the expression of horror he certainly knows will come next. Then the twin holds the machete in his right hand while he pulls the hair on the top of Andreas’s head upward with his left. Andreas unwittingly turns his head upward in response. This is exactly what the twin wanted to happen. The slicing of a man’s neck is usually quick but decisive. A decapitation that follows always takes much longer.

13

AFTERLIFE

If you happened to have been a traveler on riverboats or railroads in Missouri during the westward expansion of the young United States of America in the late 19th century, you could easily have found a bar that looked a lot like this one. As your humble narrator, I will level with you here. You should know this is an interpretation through storytelling to convey important life messages to you.

Perhaps you saw such a bar on the Discovery Channel. In a time long ago before they merged with one or more Hollywood movie studios.

You might just be sitting alone in the darkness with a cold beer in your right hand. You watch the screen showing closeups of the dozen or more bar stools handcrafted entirely from expensive, natural dark wood, each lined up deliberately in a straight line on a bright red brick floor. Makes you very thirsty to see a bar so inviting. Sip your beer. Go ahead. Take a big gulp if you want.

This would be the point where melodramatic strings from a full orchestra swell up as if from nowhere. Later in the closing credits you will learn that the orchestra was recorded at the Clint Eastwood Scoring Stage in Burbank. You realize you are seeing something very important and very unusual in the design sense. You see the bar topped with old-fashioned, authentic shiny marble that looks ancient and very expensive.

Two or three glass beer mugs rest half empty on top of that marble. The eerie light is softly reflected from several hanging electrical fixtures that once were gas lamps. Wooden booths accented by thick red leather

line one side of the establishment. Elsewhere, there are several round wooden tables and chairs. You can feel the music pushing your emotional tension higher, higher.

But you are not in Missouri in the glory days of riverboats and railroads. And as the music becomes annoyingly frenetic, you accept that this is certainly no ordinary bar where anyone would just drop in for quick liquid refreshment.

One stunningly original touch in this odd place is a reflection you can see in the large mirrors behind the rich marble bar. The reflection appears to be that of a dead man floating on his back. Is this a clever optical illusion of Victorian Era art? Or is that figure of a naked, barefoot dead man actually situated in the wall behind the panes of mirrored glass?

A pair of old swinging wooden doors off to the side of the bar suddenly open to show you a 19th century kitchen inside. A tall young man with broad shoulders and large arms walks through the open kitchen door and stands behind the bar. He is shirtless and barefoot. The man you see is wearing only blue jeans as if deliberately to mimic the hypersexualized style of male bartenders in 20th century male-on-male sex bars.

"I am Mal," the man behind the bar says in a friendly tone to Ted Avila and Vincent Wauneka. They walk together into the mysterious bar through a huge metal door. The two men are wearing only white loincloths. They look down at their midsections and see the costuming. Both clearly look displeased as they stare at one another.

Mercifully, the overly dramatic orchestral score abruptly stops.

"Hey, boys. How's it goin'? I am the bartender here. Mal. That's what I said. Bartender. And yes, my name does suggest that I'm a bad or evil man. You'll have the opportunity to determine that for yourself."

Ted and Vincent continue walking and arrive at the bar. They both touch it with both their hands. Just to prove to themselves that the bar is physical. Real. Authentic. Not a nightmare.

"Let me welcome you to the Barefoot Dead Guys Bar. Our mascot is that big, totally buck-naked guy you think you see floating in those mirrors behind me. The number one question I get is: Who was that naked dead guy? And, the second is: How big is his cock? I have no answers to

either of those questions. And, no, this is not a nightmare. It is real. It is physical. You two are dead. Wearing only loincloths and nothing else. That's our strict dress code here. And I must tell you boys, you look great in costume. Just amazing to look at."

"What the fuck? You say we're dead?" Ted asks the bartender.

"A terribly unoriginal way to ask that question. I'm serious. You know, you could have asked, 'we are lost, can you help us?' or 'we think we were killed, what can you tell us?'"

"Teddy and I were—"

"Wait!" the bartender interrupts rudely as he holds up both hands in the air. "Don't tell me. Let me figure this one out on my own, OK?"

"Vincent, I gotta ask you: Did we do mushrooms or peyote or cocaine or whatever in our hotel room?"

The bartender laughs and says, "No, you did not die from drug overdoses. Not a chance of that."

"Did we cause an explosion or fire that killed us?"

"Well, now, thank you. That version of the question certainly is a lot more original. I appreciate that. And believe me, I've heard the question asked every which way by now."

"Vincent, do you remember any explosion?"

"A hundred extra special bonus points to you, yeah. Burned really hot. No traces of your bodies. And at least you died together doing something you found meaningful. Do you remember what exactly you were doing?"

Ted Avila and Vincent Wauneka stand silently and stare at the bartender.

"Sorry to upset you guys. Just trying to do my job. You won't remember what you were doing or how you died. Doesn't work that way. You ready? It was an explosion, yes. You both were riding in a desert dune buggy. A rollover in the Mojave Desert. Big boom. Especially hot. Nothing much left really."

"Bartender, I don't remember feeling anything. Vincent, did you feel anything? What are we doing here in this place?"

"You're both on a journey, guys. From what you knew when you were

alive. Then, you arrived here. After you both died. You are in a kind of waystation."

"So, we're supposed to believe this is some sort of friendly neighborhood bar in the afterlife?"

"Well, that's a little uncharitable of you. And just a bit mean. This bar is real. As real as it gets. You are not dreaming. Everyone's dreaming is personal. Not possible to be present in another person's dream. You are really here. This is no illusion. And, you are not going to be alone. You will be able to meet others who are dead like you. But, only particular dead ones. Very specific dead ones. You will only be able to meet and interact with dead people that shared some connection to you when you were living. You won't be meeting anyone here who is not somehow connected to you."

"I can feel the cold floor beneath the bottoms of my feet. Dead people can feel physical sensations?"

"You can feel some physical and emotional sensations. Well, more accurately, you will feel a wide range of sensations that you felt when you were among the living. Not every sensation that is humanly possible is available to you here, however. These are some of the local rules in effect here at this bar: You can taste beer or liquor drinks, for instance. But you will never get drunk. You do not need to drink water unless for the enjoyment of the taste of it. You do not need to eat. Dead guys don't eat. You can experience many sexual feelings. You can feel it if you get kicked in the balls. I'll be happy to demonstrate with both of you if you want. Wait. Hold that thought, will you boys? A new arrival is about to join us here. Pay attention."

Mal suddenly and dramatically gestures with both hands toward the double-door entrance to the Barefoot Dead Guys Bar. The solid steel doors swing inward together with a resounding thud, allowing a strong gust of wind and a brown cloud of desert sand to rush quickly inside the barroom. As the dust settles on the floor, a man wearing only a white loincloth enters carrying his own head in his large hands. The steel doors slam shut simultaneously with a loud banging sound.

"Damn it, man. We've got a dress code in here. Will you pull yourself

together? We don't serve your kind in here. I'm referring to your severed head. Would you please put that back where it belongs? Right now."

The man lifts his own head up to the empty space above his neck. He carefully positions the head onto the neck. The expression on his face reveals the intense concentration involved in the difficult task of reattaching one's own head without using a mirror.

When the man removes both his hands from holding onto his head, it remains attached to the top of his neck as he hoped it would. He shakes his head quickly and without the least bit of gentleness just as a test of the attachment. He is Declan Andreas. When he is satisfied that his head will stay attached where it belongs, Andreas walks up to the bar nonchalantly as though he had not just made a horrific and macabre entrance.

"This bartender approves. Another hot number. This certainly is my day for welcoming sexy male customers. The way you fill out that loincloth. Oh, how delightful."

"What is going on? Who are you? What am I doing here?"

Ted answers, "I am dead. And you are dead. And we are all together." The bartender smiles and gives two thumbs up in appreciation of Ted's creativity.

Andreas looks around the bar. "I have no idea how I got here."

"You're just irresistible. So masculine. Yet also so vulnerable. Could've made a shitload of money renting that body of yours to men."

"Can you please stop? Talk to me. What's going on here?"

The dramatic orchestra music returns and all three of Mal's guests look around the bar to see if they can discern where the sound is coming from.

"You three gentlemen need to understand the rules here." The bartender hands his guests their own individual white laminated card that is imprinted with stark black letters.

Welcome to the Barefoot Dead Guys Bar. Read the Rules:

• You are here because you are dead. There is no God or Heaven or Hell. This is just a bar. Treat it as such.

• Because you are dead, you will never see any living being inside this bar or outside. No people. No dogs. No cats. No horses, and so on.

• You may drink liquor. You may enjoy the taste, but it won't make you drunk.

• No solid food is available. The dead don't eat. Food will only fall to the floor if you put it inside your mouth and try to chew or swallow it.

• Make the very best of your visit here because this may be a very short visit for you.

• You are welcome to share your story with others who arrived here after you.

"Everything has consequences here. You do what I tell you and everything will go just fine. Do I look like the kind of guy you want to mess with in here?"

"So, we're supposed to believe this is a friendly neighborhood bar in Heaven?"

Mal chuckles and shakes his head "no" as he holds up his right hand and forms a fist in the air as a signal to the overbearing orchestra to stop.

Once the silence has returned to the Barefoot Dead Guys Bar, Mal says, "How predictable. Simple truths, OK? There's no heaven. No hell below us. And, no religion, too. No God up in the clouds. But, yes, there is an afterlife. Get used to it."

"All belief systems address life after death in different ways," Vincent explains.

"Yeah, well, extra points for you, Navajo holy man. Those belief systems belong to the living. In another dimension. Not relevant here. Not important to any of you three stiffs."

"Are all three of us being held here against our will?"

"Sensible question. Look, held against your will? Not my department. But, you are here barefoot in addition to dead. Costumed in skimpy loincloths. You feel the hot sunlight bearing down upon your skin from the sky through the big windows of this bar. The bottoms of your feet, therefore, will feel the heat of the sun bouncing off a wooden deck just outside if you were to walk out there. You will always be barefoot. This limits where you can walk because your feet can feel the pain of heat or cold or sharp objects such as pointy steel nails or broken shards of window glass. Plus, this bar is the only thing on a very small island with sea cliffs towering over sharp rocks and a rough surf. All surrounded by hundreds of miles of water in all directions. The skies are always brilliant blue. And

lovely, oh so fluffy white clouds floating here and there suggest a heavenly look. But that might just be good art direction or digital post-production."

"Yeah, OK. We saw this island when we landed here, bartender. Vincent and I arrived from the air but strangely without using any aircraft. That was weird and should've sent up a red flag to us, you know? Descended down to the ground softly and deliberately like Mary Poppins. We saw how small the island really is. Barely enough land to hold this building we're now inside. We saw steep cliffs with sharp, jagged rocks at the water's edge. Fierce waves crashing upon those killer rocks way down there. No seagulls. No flying insects. No nothing. Just this strange-looking building with a bright red neon sign that we should have paid attention to. 'BAREFOOT DEAD GUYS BAR' was what the eerie, incandescent blood-red neon lettering all in capital letters screamed at us. And yet, somehow, yes, the two of us just walked in here willingly like we thought we were gonna get a free lunch or something."

"What Teddy means is we do not need any free lunch. But can you tell us what it means on the white laminated card you handed us saying something about only being here for a short while."

"Smart man! None of you will remain here indefinitely, no. You all will be relocated somewhere else when the right moment arrives."

"Relocated? Like prisoners of war?"

"Well, honestly, it's not exactly a quiet or subtle moment that I'm talking about here. One instant you are here locked in a vibrant one-to-one conversation with your favorite bartender. Then, without warning, you are jerked upwards very rudely as though your entire body is being sucked toward the ceiling by some powerful vacuum cleaner. Not the good kind of sucking, either. I promise you that. Lifts you right off your bare feet. You kick involuntarily. It's scary as shit to watch. I also think it looks like it hurts quite a lot, too."

"Where do we go in that transition?"

"I believe that you go back to a particular dimension for the living. Back into mortal life. You are here right now in this dimension because

you are dead. This bar on this island in this dimension. The bar is only a waystation, so to speak."

"You're saying we go back to being alive on Earth?"

"After only being here a short while?"

"Are we reborn as another person? Is that what you are telling us is gonna happen?"

"Listen, gentlemen, I am just the messenger. A humble bartender. I only work here. No authority. More like I'm a slave here, myself, actually if you wanna know the truth. I am forced against my will to be here. I only look human like you guys to make it easy for you to interact with me, face to face. But what you see is not my natural appearance. I have walked on the surface of your home planet countless times across the centuries. I have been seen numerous times by humans such as you guys. I was written about—described inaccurately—and the misinterpretations were all the fault of humans. There are legends that I could fly. Not actually true. And wings. The legends said I have wings. How I look is really boring for me to explain for the seven millionth time. Let's move on to other things, alright? You each will be reborn as someone else entirely. You start life anew. You're a baby again. Usually on Earth, yes. But not always. Could be on some other planet in some other star system where humans live in the future. But you get to grow up as human men. You live your new life. Hardships. Triumphs. Unfulfilling sex. Couple of felony convictions. Prison. Erectile dysfunction. Execution. And so on. The usual stuff."

"You two guys look familiar," says Andreas.

"I was just telling these two that in the bar, you only meet people that you shared some connection with when you were alive."

"Teddy and I work together. I mean, we worked together while we were alive. This guy is not someone we worked with."

"Where we work, bartender, they do not let us stay dead. Vincent and I have experienced this before. Not this afterlife. That is new."

"What Teddy is saying, bartender, is they bring us back to life using advanced technology. And by 'they' we are referring to our employer."

"Well, you two get points for extreme originality, sir. That's absolutely priceless."

"I work for the same employer as these two. Or, I mean, when I was alive."

"We are not kidding, bartender. If Vincent or I die while on a mission, there is time-travel technology used to identify us a split second before we die. Pulls us out and then comes a quick splice on that timeline. We are back in business. Not dead. Good as new."

Andreas nods his head in agreement.

The bartender says, "You have access to some kind of wayback machine that comes with a death splicer? Is that what you want me to believe? Maybe you also got a talking cartoon dog that guides you through these miracles you're talking about?"

"Well, when you say it that way, it does sound like a bullshit story."

"You three walk in here and you're nothing but serious fucking trouble for me. I am getting an intense headache. I've heard enough. No further questions."

Avila and Wauneka suddenly find themselves completely naked inside their individual time-travel devices within the Clavius sequestration living quarters. The devices split open with the familiar whooshing sound. Both men step out completely naked and soaking wet from the thick white propellant used in the time-travel process. Vincent reaches for the familiar blue robes for returning time travelers that are hanging on hooks near the devices. He hands one of the robes to Ted and puts one on himself.

Then the two men sit facing each other at the small, round table in the sequestration living quarters. They stare at each other as if analyzing faces can reveal whether this is a dream.

The giant wall screen image lights up and they see Eduardo once again.

"Anything go wrong, gentlemen?"

"Where do we begin? Vincent and I were killed in a rollover accident in the Mojave Desert while riding a dune buggy."

"Yes, but I fixed that. Agents nicknamed it 'the death splice' which I find to be original and amusing. The official name here at MMDI is 'Agent Continuity Restoration.' Sounds like lawyers came up with that, right? This explains the popularity of the 'death splice' nickname. An agent's

death is removed by ‘splicing’ him into the timeline before the moment of death arrives. In effect, we ‘cancel’ death using time travel. Sometimes agents retain memories of dying, which usually promotes persistent nightmares. Any observations now that you are convinced you are immortal?”

14

KANSAS

2012

Having never traveled farther west than his hometown of Wichita, a young man felt understandably exuberant. He had reached legal adulthood and an unexpected employment offer requiring him to be in Nevada and not in Kansas anymore.

His new work status took him far beyond unusual for one simple reason: The job required him to travel. Not just any travel. Time travel.

The specific details of his travel were significantly challenging. He turned 21 in the year 2272. He had to report to work in the year 2012. Fortunately, his employer, the Jarnsaxa Corporation, had sufficient resources and all the right equipment needed for such a major journey.

The excitement that a person feels while riding in a jet headed for Las Vegas usually precludes sleep. The young man was relaxed and calm from the smooth, soothing rush of the cool, pressurized air inside the aircraft. He was oblivious both to his altitude of roughly seven miles up in the sky and his new temporal location roughly two and a half centuries back in the past.

During his flight he dreams of two dozen dancing cowboys meticulously choreographed wearing a diverse assortment of cowboy costuming. He hears a honky-tonk piano playing joyously off stage. These are not just ordinary cowboys; each is fully worthy of appearing in expensive, full-page advertisements which would pitch products and services that masculine men rightfully should want to buy for themselves. To suggest

that these cowboys are handsome, attractive, and in top physical condition would understate the simple reality of their state of perfection befitting such a dream.

As his jet touches down on the runway, he wonders in anticipation what may be awaiting him in the notorious desert playground. In the first few seconds as he walks from the aircraft that brought him to the Las Vegas airport, he is immersed in a literal sensory overload designed to force all arriving visitors immediately to forget where they just came from. First, there is the unforgettable ringing of airport terminal slot machine chimes announcing unexpected winners who will start their stay in Vegas with a few extra hundred bucks in their pocket. Then, large overhead video screens in the baggage claim section shine down brilliantly colorful images that seem almost dreamlike.

However, what catches his attention is a video pitching a side-trip from Las Vegas to Amargosa Valley. He only recently learned of a ranch situated in the western edge of Nevada about a hundred miles from Las Vegas where his work assignment awaits.

The young man spins around quickly as he stands next to baggage claim carousel number 22 because he cannot shake the eerie sensation of someone standing too close behind him. His surprised gaze comes into instant, direct alignment with the squinting blue eyes of a guy about his same age. The blue-eyed guy is in blue jeans, cowboy boots and barely fits into a tight, bright orange t-shirt.

“Didn’t mean to startle you. I’m Josh Lorne. From the ranch at Amargosa Valley. Supposed to pick up a writer flying in today. Are you that writer?”

“Guilty as charged.”

Sarkis watches the good-looking man step away from the baggage claim area. He motions for Sarkis to bring his dark red rolling suitcase and heads in the direction of the exit signs. The persistent din and flashing of the television screen advertisements at the airport intrudes further upon his senses. He stops and closes his eyes tightly to attempt at last a few seconds of peaceful separation from encountering too much sound and light in the baggage claim area.

It is Thursday, the 11th day of October 2012, which will be remembered for rare, severe thunderstorms lingering over the entire Las Vegas Valley. The weather stimulates Sarkis's emotions. He already feels an elevated sense of awe because being at the Las Vegas airport proves to him that he traveled in time to the 21st century.

"So you're a writer. Where are you coming from?"

Sarkis wanted to blurt out the truth—he came from the future. But that would only make him seem like an insane person.

"I replied to a blind advertisement. Got a call from a guy who talked about a writing job. During that job interview, I got really anxious. I talk more when I'm emotional. Sorry. I ended up admitting that I logged in on my parents' computer to look at a top-secret server where they both worked. Some clandestine organization. Told the interviewer I saw information about the Moon and I became curious. Next thing I know, I got hired and here I am, flying from Wichita to Vegas."

Sarkis is seated in what looks to him like a movie production set. He is at an old-fashioned round wooden table and is resting in a wooden chair that appears to be from the same era. As he looks around, Sarkis sees that the movie set is intended to resemble a Wild West bar from the late 19th century with wooden planks for a floor, room lighting provided by hanging lamps fueled by oil, and an obligatory long bar off to the side of the room where he can see several empty shot glasses.

"Lights, camera, action," Sarkis says aloud sarcastically.

He watches the scene lighting from overhead suddenly become very bright and colorful. A contemporary television camera trained on him is clearly visible off to his left. The barroom comes alive with a dozen or more costumed cowboys who walk into the scene quickly. A honky-tonk piano playing an up-tempo melody appears suddenly in the corner of the barroom.

Three shirtless cowboys who only have on cowboy hats and blue jeans are sharing the scene with Sarkis in that Wild West barroom.

"My name is Cowboy Yesterday," the first cowboy says.

"And I am Cowboy Today," says the second cowboy. "And here to my left is Cowboy Tomorrow. He doesn't talk much."

Sarkis replies, "Of course, with apologies to Charles Dickens."

"We have essential information to share with you, Mr. Sarkis."

"How the fuck do you know my name?"

"In your home century, there was a violation of privacy regulations. It was when you were still a minor, just days before you turned eighteen. Your counselor, Dr. Ev Grant, accidentally left your patient records file open after an appointment with you. The confidentiality of your mental health records was compromised."

"How do you guys know this?"

All three cowboys look at one another and laugh aloud.

"Will you just tell me what's going on?"

Cowboy Today says, "That breach of confidentiality with your mental health records in 2269 was followed by data mining picking up what had been confidential about you and passing it around. By the time 2272 rolled around and you had turned 21, the significance of your compromised mental health records reached a priority level."

"Significance and priority? For whom?"

"For your new employer, the Jarnsaxa Corporation."

"You're saying that I was hired because my confidential health records leaked? The fact that I learned about a top-secret lunar base from watching a streaming movie or documentary is not the issue here? Could we please lose that damned honky-tonk piano music?" Suddenly, the Wild West bar scene has no more musical background.

Cowboy Today says, "What you saw you only thought was a documentary. It actually was a science fiction movie made in Hollywood. That top-secret lunar base you learned about is not real."

"You're telling me this. But you guys have to be merely a hallucination of mine. You three cannot be real." Sarkis turns his head and looks at what he convinces himself is the interior of the resort. For the first time he notices the scent of plastic wires overheating and melting nearby.

Sarkis remembers the day he arrived in Nevada. It was the first day of his employment as a writer of online marketing posts to promote the newest resort in the state, the Ranch at Amargosa. He did not feel particularly welcomed as he entered the grounds of the resort designed to provide escapism for tourists.

He becomes suspicious when he finds himself reclining on his back upon a large metal and plexiglass chair upon a gray metallic floor. He is bound to the chair at his wrists, elbows, and ankles by shiny black straps of an oddly translucent polymer. He stares at a tall, horizontal screen that occupies most of the area directly in front of him in the darkened room where he is confined to the large reclining chair. On the screen he sees a man who looks authoritative. Sarkis can only observe the man on the screen from his shoulders to the top of his head, but the man's familiar all-black paramilitary garment demands full attention.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Sarkis," the man on the screen says while showing no emotion whatsoever. He appears to be in his early- to mid-forties and he has an obvious Spanish accent from South America. Sarkis perceives him to be a digitized moving video of a man with rugged, pronounced Hispanic features which together convey a clear, if nonverbal, sense of confidence and credibility.

"Where the fuck am I? Why have you restrained me?"

"Excellent opening questions," the man responds with a slight smile. "You are being held in protective custody at the ranch in Amargosa Valley. I sent someone to meet you at the airport and give you a ride here. Something went wrong."

"Went wrong? Why am I being held against my will?" Sarkis asks with faked confidence as he struggles to free himself from the chair.

"Let me introduce myself. I am called Eduardo. I want you to know I run the organization that owns the ranch. I also am the one who hired you. And now this is the first day for you on the job here, Mr. Sarkis. Something went wrong today. Not caused by you."

Sarkis continues his unsuccessful attempts to wriggle free from the

chair that tightly holds him. His torso muscles stand out vividly through his tight, bright orange t-shirt. “You sure have a strange way of treating your new employees.” He stops talking and struggling to focus his attention on a thin metallic device connected to a slender, coiled white tube slide up in the air from the right side of the chair. A long, silver needle pokes out from the thin metallic device. When the long, silver needle stops mere millimeters away from plunging into the front of his skull, Sarkis cries out in a deep panic, “Okay! You got me. I’ll do anything you want. Just tell me.”

Undeterred, the long, silver needle extends forward in a horizontal direction from the thin metallic device in an obvious approach into Sarkis’s head. He cannot move his head because he is restricted by metal and straps. He screams in intense agony at the instant he is penetrated. The length of the needle travels into his gray matter ever so smoothly and Sarkis is relieved that he feels no sensation at all.

“Listen to me, Mr. Sarkis,” says Eduardo. “You see me now on that screen in front of you because I am far away from your location at the ranch in Nevada.”

“Are you going to kill me by sticking long needles into my brain?”

“No, of course not. If I had wanted to end your life, I would have directed that long needle to plunge directly into the center of your heart.”

“Why are you doing this to me?”

“Well, as you look at my image on that screen you’re watching, I want you to know that right now I am at my workstation in a top-secret facility. As I already mentioned, I am far from your location. I am being completely honest with you. I am the one who hired you from your home century of 2272—the year you turned 21—and then gave you your first time-travel experience. Once you were in 2012, you boarded a flight from Wichita to Las Vegas that I booked for you. Now you are here and so you can write marketing material about the ranch at Amargosa Valley.”

“You don’t look at all like the guy who hired me.”

“You only saw that guy briefly a couple of times in a video call. Anyone can fake their appearance on a video call. You know that.”

“What exactly do you want from me?”

"To write about the ranch at Amargosa Valley. What you write shall be part of the marketing effort to attract tourism to the ranch."

"You're fucking with me, right?"

"I assure you I am being completely honest with you, Mr. Sarkis. The writing assignment you will complete is mission-critical to the organization that I run."

"What is the name of the organization? I bet you won't tell me that because this is a manipulation of me for nefarious reasons."

"Jarnsaxa Corporation, from Carson City, Nevada. Founded decades ago."

"Okay, that matches what I was told before I was hired. What has any of this got to do with me arriving here for my first day of work?"

Without revealing any emotions whatsoever, Eduardo gives Sarkis a straightforward explanation: "I mentioned to you that something went wrong. You had nothing to do with it, Mr. Sarkis. Another visitor to the ranch proved to be a major breach in security. He was acting in specific ways that represented serious threats to the ranch."

"Why do I need to know about this?"

"You actually do not need to know anything more than what I have already told you. He breached the security at the ranch. He was taken care of and the threat he represented no longer exists. Bad timing, but you arrived at the ranch on the same day that he arrived. That was an unfortunate coincidence, but I have chosen to take advantage of the situation. You were already hired but I am going to name you as the replacement for him. But in order for you to be his replacement, you had to be injected like he had been. The purpose was to give you a brain graft. It will forward telemetry to the intended recipients. You felt no sensations after the exterior of your skull was penetrated. The brain graft gives you significant powers that I will explain later and will remain in your body for the remainder of your life."

Sarkis cannot control his emotions and begins crying suddenly.

The restraints holding Sarkis to the chair suddenly disconnect automatically and all of them fall to the metallic floor. Instinctively, the young man jumps out of the chair. His big cowboy boots connect with the metal floor with a thud. He immediately grabs his head to make sure it is still attached.

Eduardo looks surprised when he watches Sarkis lunging in the direction of the tall, horizontal screen at the ranch. “You cannot reach me to vent your anger with me, Mr. Sarkis. You can only keep watching me on that screen in front of you.”

“I took this writing assignment online in good faith,” Sarkis explains defensively. “Never met in person with the guy who hired me. Never knew it was you. I was brought to 2012 from 2272 like you said. Fly to Nevada. Visit the ranch. Write about what I see here. So far, nothing strikes me as special here except for the invasion of my brain. Now you tell me I am to replace some guy you eliminated?”

“Of course,” Eduardo says. “I didn’t say he was eliminated.”

“Yeah, right.”

“What’s important here is now you work for Jarnsaxa Corporation that I run. Your sole purpose now is to write about the ranch so that others—young men—like you will want to visit. We thought that other guy was a writer. He lied to us. You are his replacement, as I’ve said to you already. You are not permitted to write about the injection you received here today. You will write positive and exciting words about what you encountered at the ranch. Nobody on Earth would believe you even if you were to write about your brain being penetrated on your first day of employment. Describing such an experience definitely would scare away the tourists, don’t you think?”

“What do you want me to write about? I won’t mention the injection. Freaks me out that some graft is operating inside my head right now. Forwarding telemetry to what you call the intended recipients. Let me speculate, okay? This all serves some sadistic purpose so others in a remote location can watch a guy like me suffering. It’s torture porn. You are one sick motherfucker.”

“No, no, Mr. Sarkis. The brain graft has a deliberate purpose. It has the sole purpose of sharing telemetry—specifically the physical and mental components of your orgasms with intended recipients located elsewhere each time you ejaculate.”

“Oh, really? That’s supposed to make me feel better? Who are you people? This all can’t be legal.”

"All that matters is the physical and mental components of orgasms of men getting transmitted over great distances in real time. No wires. No electricity. Seemingly in violation of the very laws of physics. Not just you. Other men, too."

Sarkis chokes back his emotions and shakes his head to indicate "no."

"Quite a few men besides you, Mr. Sarkis, were injected with that same brain graft. Many other men's orgasms are 'shared' so to speak with the intended recipients located elsewhere. This is the simplest and most truthful explanation I can ever give you."

"Makes no sense. Are you monitoring me? Tracking me? Why can't the people you call 'the intended recipients elsewhere' have and feel their own orgasms?"

"A perceptive question, Mr. Sarkis. The simple answer is the intended recipients elsewhere are not people. And as such, they are not physically capable of having orgasms. To them, the entire concept of a human male ejaculating is completely alien."

"Completely alien? Why do you use that word?"

"Let's just leave it at that, Mr. Sarkis."

Sarkis has difficulty holding back his panic and grief. He says, "I accepted this work sight unseen. Really stupid decision! Had a very few screen-sharing minutes on cell phones with some unknown guy who turns out to be you. Paid a big advance. More than I deserve. Covered all my expenses for this trip to Nevada. Hired to write about some new ranch resort. I don't understand why you selected me in the first place—just some writer from Wichita—to come all the way here far from home to end up in the middle of nowhere."

Eduardo says, "I am the one who selected you. Your medical records from 2269 were brought to my attention. Those records said you told your mental health counselor that you had learned about a top-secret lunar base which had been destroyed, killing all who were stationed there."

"I thought I had watched a streaming documentary. I watched it on my parents' computer at home. I borrowed a security key they had and that allowed me to unlock their computer. I came across a streaming channel I was not authorized to see. The security key let me see a science fiction

movie made in Hollywood. Not real life. Somebody produced that for entertainment purposes."

"And you were underage. You did not have clearance to use your parents' security key on their computer. You watched what you believed was a secret documentary that revealed details about a lunar base where everyone had died."

"Watching it caused me to have persistent nightmares. That's why I had the appointment with a psychiatrist. I thought I was having a breakdown. I don't mind telling you: I feel more than just a little crazy right now. This whole day. First day at work on a new job. Far removed from everything that I have known. My real world. In the future. I believe that time travel is real. Not science fiction. I am only here because of time travel. I know I am here in the past, far from Kansas where I was born and raised."

Eduardo says, "I believe you will find that the ranch is real. I am real. The fact that I hired you is real. Your purpose is to experience the ranch and write marketing material for online. Your first day on a new job is real."

"Look, please. Why would anyone choose to locate a ranch so far from population areas? Las Vegas is a hundred or so miles away. You expect visitors who travel to Las Vegas to then make a side-trip here?"

"Yes, exactly. I will give you special access to the ranch. You will end up with a real first-class, insider's perspective that visitors never get to see when they come here to the ranch. The outcome we hope for is that what you write will attract other male visitors who will read online about this ranch. Then, they will want to travel to Las Vegas for all it offers and make a side trip here to experience the ranch at Amargosa Valley for themselves. That's the whole point. This is about marketing the ranch to male visitors around the United States and around the world."

"Why do you mention it in that way? Male visitors? Is this ranch a brothel like others found here in Nevada?"

"Not a brothel at all, no. And not at all like other establishments offering sex entertainment across the state of Nevada, Mr. Sarkis."

"So the purpose of the ranch is to offer male visitors sex entertainment?"

"Exactly, Mr. Sarkis. Only for male visitors. Only having sex with our all-

male staff members. No women allowed. The male visitors here will have many ejaculations while they are visiting the ranch. Most importantly, their orgasms are 'shared' thanks to the brain grafts with the intended recipients who are located elsewhere."

Sarkis laughs in response. "Well, I grant that this certainly is an original concept. I'll give you that! How do you manage to hire that all-male staff you've mentioned? What would make them want to do this kind of work for a living out here in the middle of nowhere?"

"All of them here at the ranch are highly realistic-looking men, even extremely up close. They are livestock. That's how we refer to them. But when I use the word 'livestock' I am not referring to barnyard animals like you probably are thinking."

Sarkis asks, "Then what are you talking about?"

"Part mechanical. Part organic material. Part computer. Artificial intelligence. Exceedingly difficult manufacturing process. Very boring to talk about," Eduardo explains. "They each look outwardly like men under age 30 who are well-built. But that's the thing. They all are built. Quite literally. Unlike human males, they are not born of a female and then grow up into adulthood. They are built from scratch at the ranch."

"Where does this kind of technology come from? Never heard of anything like this before."

"Of course you haven't. Even though you are from the future, Mr. Sarkis. Nobody on Earth in 2012 has any idea. Both the technology and the know-how are proprietary. Only a very few know all the secrets and the programming that is needed. What this livestock can do is beyond breathtaking. They are incredibly realistic. All have different and diverse looks, of course. Light skin. Dark skin. Short hair. Long hair. You name it. Many body types. Blue eyes. Green eyes. We can satisfy any man's most exacting and wildest sex fantasies here," Eduardo admits.

"Those whom you call the intended recipients in another location—they are not from anywhere close by, are they?"

"You have absolutely no idea as to how far away they really are, Mr. Sarkis."

"I am not going to be allowed to write about that part of the story, either."

"Best to focus on particular marketing objectives for the ranch.

Exciting and unrestricted sex between men. Free of charge. Unlimited food and drinks are included. Visitors pay a fixed price for accommodations only."

"Okay, I will do this. The money is more than I deserve. Quite a bit more."

"And you have many questions you wanted answered before you begin your first day at work."

"Yes, exactly. You talked to me about your livestock—cowboys. But horses. What about the horses that cowboys need at the ranch?"

"What are you asking?"

"Are the horses you've got at the resort ranch also synthetic? Or do you use organic animals?"

"Synthetic."

15

HYBRID

2272

Elsewhere, far from Nevada, Eduardo is wearing a black uniform and thick black boots. His muscular frame is not concealed by his uniform as he stares from a standing position downward at Sarkis who is covered up to his chest by a shiny silver sheet as he lies in a futuristic hospital bed with numerous blinking panels furiously flashing. “I believe you are going to survive after all, Mr. Sarkis.”

Sarkis slowly, tentatively opens his eyes while remaining still in that hospital bed as he sees Eduardo in person for the very first time. “Not on that screen anymore,” Sarkis says with considerable difficulty getting the words out.

“Quite true. Now I am with you, face-to-face, at this very moment in time, Mr. Sarkis. Let me catch you up on what has been happening. How do you feel right now?”

“Sore. All over. Groggy. Like a horrible hangover.”

“Our chief medical officer, Doctor William Oswald, tells me you are recovering quite well considering.”

“Considering what?” Sarkis wants to know.

Eduardo reaches his right hand down and touches the back of Sarkis’s left hand which is resting on the silver sheet. “Your skin. A little hot. Sure you feel better now?” The illumination of some of the blinking panels on the futuristic hospital fades quickly.

“Better now? What happened to me?”

"Mr. Sarkis, the truth is the very finest medical attention and procedures available have brought you to this moment in time. But not long ago, you were in a whole lot of hurt at the ranch."

"I'm not at the ranch now? In a hospital somewhere else?"

"We brought you to this highly advanced medical unit for the purpose of saving your life. Doctor Oswald has been taking care of you for sixteen days because of your severe injuries. You are better now and you finally regained consciousness just today."

"Sixteen days? Severe injuries?"

"Yes, the abridged version is you have successfully recovered from a fractured skull and physical damage to your brain along with internal bleeding. I was also concerned about brain damage in you. Life-threatening injuries all. Your prognosis is for continued years of your life, Mr. Sarkis. That's the crucial explanation I can give you."

"The ranch I remember. I do not remember getting injured. Feels like I was dreaming. How did I get injured?"

Eduardo says, "I assure you. It was not a dream. You were thrown to the ground off a galloping horse. We had to surgically reassemble you."

"I do not understand. This sounds monstrous. Evil scientist territory."

"I run a top-secret agency, Mr. Sarkis. Told you that after you arrived at the ranch on your first day of work. The capabilities available to this agency are difficult to explain quickly or easily. Let me just say this. We did everything to save your life after you were thrown from your horse. We ultimately succeeded."

"But I'm waiting to hear there's a catch, right? Just go ahead and tell me."

"We put to good use the same advanced technologies and procedures that are used every day to produce the men at the ranch to whom I referred as livestock. Part mechanical. Part organic material. Part computer. Artificial intelligence. Exceedingly difficult manufacturing process. I told you about the livestock—the male employees at the ranch. They were built differently than you. Do you understand what I am telling you, Mr. Sarkis?"

"You're saying I was rebuilt using that alien technology? I didn't give my consent for this!"

"You are quite literally a hybrid life form now. Your original DNA is just

where we left it. Your brain graft was upgraded from the older model you received on your first day of work. You're a healthy and physically fit young man from Kansas and we retained that for you. Your memories all remain. Little groggy now. But that will clear up. Your personality remains intact and unchanged just as you developed it in the 21 years of life prior to your arriving at the ranch and almost getting killed. You look physically identical to how you have become accustomed to looking. But you are more solid physically. Greatly improved muscle tone. Far stronger endoskeleton. Your body is free of all diseases. Your body can no longer develop any diseases. You also will not experience growing older day to day and year to year. Effectively, Mr. Sarkis, now you are forever young. Your normal aging process and responses to diseases have been altered now that we have restored you as we did."

Sarkis sits up in the hospital bed and peers under the silver sheet which covers his nakedness. He looks down at his midsection. In direct response to what he observes down there, Sarkis laughs aloud. "Deluxe upgrade," he says as he starts going into shock.

Eduardo does not express any emotions as he says to Sarkis, "This is far better than we anticipated would happen."

Sarkis breathes deeply to stabilize his emotions. He realizes from his surroundings that he is in what is evidently a medical facility. He shakes his head in an attempt to dismiss a ringing sound in both ears that will not cease. "So we are in Nevada? Some hospital. Just not at the ranch, right?"

"No longer in Nevada. An extreme distance away."

"How extreme? Where are we?"

"To enable restoring you to health, you have been given the highest level of clearances, Mr. Sarkis. I will not withhold any knowledge from you now—even the most top-secret details."

"Great, I guess. Please tell me where we are right now."

"Where is easy to express. You are two hundred thirty-eight thousand miles from Amargosa Valley right now."

"Honestly, it's a big number. But I never paid much attention to geography or driving distances and all. Never got far from Wichita my whole life. What does that large number mean exactly?"

"It means that number exceeds any driving distance you ever knew in your entire life before now. We are no longer on Earth, Mr. Sarkis. Right now we are inside a top-secret Moon base situated deep beneath the crater Clavius."

Sarkis quickly becomes disoriented and can barely ask, "On the Moon? Like science fiction?"

"What you see around you right now is authentic and genuine science and technology. No fiction is involved. To restore you, we had the required know-how, the advanced technology, and what in fact would seem to be science fiction to most people. All of that enables you to have traveled from Earth to the Moon to be with me in person here today."

"All I can see around me in this place looks futuristic, very advanced and unexpected."

"Yes, I cannot imagine how difficult all this is for you to process, Mr. Sarkis. There is one more detail I need to share with you which you also will find unexpected."

"Just go ahead. Tell me everything you need to."

"You and I are here, face-to-face, in a sublunar base. The organization I run, Jarnsaxa Corporation, brought you here from Earth, which is out there across the reaches of space some two hundred thirty-eight thousand miles from our current location. Jarnsaxa has the capability to enable men like you to travel in time. You remember being in the year 2012. You were born in 2251. You turned 21 in 2272."

Sarkis tries to breathe normally even though he is in shock. He lays his head back down on the hospital bed and closes his eyes tightly. He says aloud slowly and methodically as if he is repeating a memorized poem from childhood, "Fell from the sky. Fell very far. And Kansas, she says, is the name of the star."

2012

Unusually severe thunderstorms continue passing directly over the entire Las Vegas Valley on October 11, 2012 as MMDI agent Ted Avila materializes inside a completely empty room at the abandoned Blue Angel Motel on Charleston Boulevard. The motel has been closed for some time now as it awaits an inevitable demolition in the immediate future.

Ted Avila can see rainwater pouring steadily down from a large crack in the dirty ceiling of the motel room onto the rotting carpet on the floor. The stench of the dirty, wet motel room in the desert remains overwhelming to him. He has made it back here tens of thousands of times. He has made it back one more time to the Blue Angel on October 11, 2012 in the service of a personal mission to repair a past timeline.

He hears a man's footsteps outside the motel room door and watches the door swing inwards toward him. Vincent Wauneka enters the motel room. His tight blue jeans emphasize his masculinity, but this man is undeniably good-looking. Ted Avila smiles as he understands that Vincent Wauneka has not changed at all after their repeated visits in time to this same abandoned motel room.

"Miraculous, isn't it, Vincent? How time-travel technology keeps us both at a fixed age. And no Botox."

Vincent Wauneka walks up close to Ted Avila and hugs him with genuine affection. "Missed you. I brought something important to give you that I know you will want. They call it a DVD. Strange invention. A disk that contains a movie. You put the disk into a machine and—"

"Vincent, goddamn it. I know what a DVD is. Why are you telling me this?"

"A Hollywood movie. On this DVD. After we were sequestered, remember that? We both were so upset. We learned Eduardo showed up in the 1970s as a spokesman for the Jarnsaxa Corporation in Nevada. He was not the MMDI quantum supercomputer like he wanted us to believe. And also we were pissed at General Yang. He was the poster boy of sexual harassment in the workplace. So, we found a way to discredit MMDI in a very public way in the past. I think it was your idea. You told me that Hollywood is the sexual manipulation capital of the world and that I would certainly fit right in."

"I was being sarcastic, Vincent. Jesus Christ."

"Well, I took a lot of sensitive information files from Clavius Base. Secrets that would be detrimental to MMDI. I did what I could. I went back in time numerous times so I could interact with people who could bring about a film about a fictional time-travel agency within the Hollywood motion picture industry. And I thought we time-travel agents

were a weird, fucked-up bunch of people. Repeated attempts with those motion picture people. Also many instances of trying to persuade a screenwriter. What a fucking mess. I almost lost my mind living alongside them in Southern California for as long as I did."

Ted Avila accepts the plastic box from Vincent Wauneka containing the DVD and reads aloud the movie title printed on the box, *Top Secret Time Travel Agents from the Moon*. Beneath the title, another printed line reads, "Screenplay by Katherine Snowe."

"I know, I know. Fucking awful name for a movie. Like the studio deliberately wanted nobody to take it seriously."

"So, we're expecting to get revenge from this low-budget, direct to video release?"

"It came out in 2001."

"Probably only seen by all of ten people. But I think you did well pulling this off, Vincent. I'm impressed. Did you actually watch this movie?"

"Yeah, Teddy, I watched it. Hated it. Someday I will tell you about the screenwriter I recruited for this project. A woman. A totally demented story. You want me to go back on another mission and try again to make that Hollywood movie more credible?"

"No, no. That's way too complicated. You just might end up wrecking the changes you already made to the Hollywood timelines. You already went back multiple times. Just let things stay as they are right now."

A tentative knock on the door is followed by a man's voice: "Hello, I work for the Ranch at Amargosa."

Vincent Wauneka is closest, so he swings open the door. His commanding presence makes Lex Sarkis take one step back into the hallway. "And who the fuck are you?" Vincent Wauneka demands while he clenches both fists.

"Alexander Sarkis" is the reply. "Don't hurt me. I really do work for the Ranch at Amargosa."

"One little question," Ted Avila says as he takes two steps closer to Lex Sarkis, "Just for security purposes. How did you find us here at the Blue Angel Motel? Nobody in the entire world knew we were here."

Lex Sarkis looks stunned and threatened. He appears to be on the verge of tears.

"Better tell us the truth," Vincent Wauneka says.

Ted Avila interrupts to add quickly, "Or we will end your life more painfully than you ever could imagine."

Sarkis walks into the motel room and gently shuts the door behind him. "The Ranch at Amargosa is of special interest to you two. I know that. I also know who you two work for. I was told both of you would be here at the Blue Angel Motel. And here we are. I work for the Jarnsaxa Corporation."

"Teddy, I say we just kill this guy."

"Wait. You both are time-travel agents working for an agency known as MMDI from a top-secret base on the Moon beneath Crater Clavius. That DVD is a Hollywood movie. It was intended to discredit MMDI by diminishing the credibility of time travel managed by an international agency on the Moon. Allegorical story but squarely in the realm of fanciful science fiction. We know all that."

"And who the fuck is 'we' that you are referring to?"

"Jarnsaxa Corporation. The operators of the Ranch at Amargosa. The ranch was built to compete with your lunar base."

"Teddy, you know how annoying it is when that happens. A ranch in Nevada tries to compete with a lunar base."

"Wait. Please listen. The ranch was built by the Ezuoia. Few people in this or any other galaxy know that name. I hope my use of that top-secret name proves my validity to you."

"We just met you and now you expect us to believe you?"

"Vincent, this guy knows way too much to be faking all this. Tell us. Are you human like us? Do you have a brain graft hooked up to artificial intelligence? Maybe you are one of those artificial people like the cowboys at the ranch?"

"No, I am human like you two. That brain graft which hooked people up to artificial intelligence was outlawed back in 2032."

"Yeah, except we are all here right now in 2012," Vincent says angrily.

"Yes, I know that. I know that. I was recruited by Jarnsaxa Corporation

from my home year of 2272. What I am telling you is my employer Jarnsaxa Corporation has time-travel capability just like MMDI has."

"Why have you sought us out? You had to understand that Teddy and I work for competing interests compared to Jarnsaxa Corporation."

"Yes, and you should accept that's precisely the justification. I am seeking to get revenge against Jarnsaxa Corporation and you are seeking to get revenge against MMDI. This puts us on the same side. You do realize that, right?"

Ted asks, "Why do you want revenge against Jarnsaxa Corporation?"

"I have experienced lies, deceptions, and manipulations. False promises. Then, when I was at the job location in Amargosa Valley, I was thrown to the ground by a fast-galloping horse. I almost died. Jarnsaxa Corporation has some advanced medical procedures that they used. Repaired me. Put my body back together. I never gave my consent. Major changes. This is why I want revenge. I was used like some object. It's that simple. What I have seen there going on within Jarnsaxa Corporation with my own eyes scares the shit out of me. Who knows what they are capable of doing?"

Ted says, "Listen, you likely were followed here to this motel by a security detail from the ranch. You are putting yourself at serious risk just by showing up here. You know that, right?"

Once he is outside in the motel parking lot, Lex Sarkis gets thoroughly soaked from the rainstorm as he stands next to his rental car. Knowing that he has failed to convince Avila and Wauneka, he is overtaken by a deep sadness. At least the rain hides his tears.

He never hears the sound of gunshots as his lifeless body slumps suddenly sideways to the pavement in a shallow puddle of rainwater and blood.

16

REVENGE

2012

On Sahara Avenue in Las Vegas during a failed timeline, the company pickup truck from the Ranch at Amargosa tore through wet asphalt under monsoon rain that hammered the valley without mercy. The Rancher gripped the wheel with both hands while Agent Andreas sat rigid in the passenger seat, jaw clenched, eyes fixed on the floodlit stretch ahead.

Traffic lights blurred into streaks of red and green. A sudden hydroplaning jolted the truck sideways. Tires screamed. Metal crumpled against a concrete barrier at high speed. The impact folded the front end like cheap foil. The steering column impaled the Rancher through his heart. Andreas slammed forward, smashing against the windshield. Steam hissed from the ruined radiator while rain mixed with the spreading pool of blood and bones and oil beneath the wreck. When the first responders reached the scene they found no signs of life.

2252

Colonel Thomas Burke stood at the head of the conference table in a windowless room carved deep beneath Clavius. The walls were dull gray metal, lit by overhead strips that cast hard shadows on the furniture and the people. Burke's all-black uniform stretched across thick shoulders and powerful chest. Declan Andreas and Robert Brandt stood at attention in awe of Burke on either side of the table. His deeply masculine voice commanded attention, each word, every syllable. There was no question Burke was in charge here.

"I know full well what you two will face because I am sending you on a mission to a place where I was killed. Repeatedly butchered. I did not succeed on any of my missions there. After multiple attempts. I sincerely need for you two to do better than I did. Much better. In other words, staying alive. I really need you two to succeed where I failed."

"Yes, sir," Andreas and Brandt said in unison.

"You boys are on the way to a mission of revenge. And the rarity of time travel ahead only a few hours into the future. As I have taken to calling it, 'the immediate tomorrow.' No second thoughts now. No delays."

Andreas nodded once, muscles under his uniform still tight from the adrenaline of earlier drills. Brandt's green eyes stayed cold and steady. Both men knew better than to interrupt.

Burke planted a beefy hand on the table surface. "Yotaro Tai. Ted Avila. Vincent Wauneka. Those three men. They made popular a lunar cult that worships what I think of as 'the blue alien energy.' As you know, the cult interprets men's orgasms as a sacrament. Along with siphoning men's ecstasy, they also tap into foundational emotions men rely upon within themselves. It's a complete invasion of a man's very core. Because I was there to disrupt all that, they took me apart. And by 'they' I mean fellow MMDI time-travel agents like we are. More than once I suffered because of their having chosen to set themselves apart from the ones here at Clavius Base like us who refuse to believe what their cult believes. And so, in the immediate tomorrow, where I am sending you two, I was tortured and killed. They beheaded me. Raped what was left of me. I remember every second of it. I was always restored by 'the death splice,' but the intense experiences haunt me every single day now." His voice stayed level, but a muscle jumped along his jaw. "The cult members think they own this base now. They think the rest of us will kneel and say 'Oh praise blue' like trained dogs. All that comes to a hard stop tomorrow."

"Yes, sir," Andreas and Brandt said in unison.

Andreas asked, "What if the agents we kill are brought back using the death splice?"

"Not happening," Burke shouts angrily at Andreas. But then Burke realizes he has behaved abruptly toward Andreas and softens his tone: "The

right to decide to use the death splice is reserved to the Director of MMDI. General Chaz Yang. You never met him. He is my boss. He would never approve bringing back dead cult members, trust me. Getting back to the mission: I mentioned the agent who is the leader of this religious movement—Yotaro Tai. Those who are followers of this lunar religion consider him to be a holy prophet. He was born on December 25th in Tokyo. He is to be considered extremely dangerous. Agent Yotaro Tai entered into a sexual relationship with Agent Ted Avila. Getting Avila to participate in the religious cult took sexual manipulation, something which Tai is skilled at. In turn, Avila, who has had a longstanding sexual relationship with Agent Vincent Wauneka, persuaded Wauneka to cooperate."

Andreas shifted his weight. "Your orders, Colonel?"

"Kill them. All three. Make it clean or make it messy—I don't care which. Those are your orders. Then I want you to bring the bodies back here to me. No funerals. No records. No heroes left for the cult to rally around." Burke's gaze locked on both men standing in front of him. "Avila and Wauneka are celebrated agents. People still toast their names at meals. You will put them down anyway. Those are your orders. That is the mission."

Brandt's mouth curved into something close to a smile. "Extreme prejudice. Understood."

Burke leaned forward. "I have died on that altar more times than I want to count. Hands on my throat. Blades on my manhood. The bastards licked my face like vampires while I choked on my own blood. Every version ends the same until we rewrite it. You will rewrite it. You two. No mercy. No hesitation. If either of you softens because you heard Avila once worked miracles or that Wauneka has a ten-inch cock, I will kick you out to the lunar surface using a Clavius Base airlock myself."

Andreas cracked his neck, a sharp pop heard distinctly in the quiet room. "We know the layout of their quarters. Tai's prayer cell is three levels down from Medical. Avila and Wauneka share the block near the old drill shaft. Hit them simultaneously. Two minutes of window before anyone notices."

"There's just one more thing you two need to know. The Ezuoia know

some details about how the future unfolds. Perhaps that knowledge is made possible because they exist outside of what we accept as normal space and time in this life. Quantum mechanics or whatever the fuck is responsible for such spooky shit. They see our past, our present, and some aspects of our future all simultaneously. One of those humanoid creatures built by the Ezuoia and stationed at that Nevada facility sent a text message to General Yang. A primitive way to communicate. How the Ezuoia got Yang's contact information I'll never know. But the message came through. I memorized the text."

Burke clears his throat while Andreas and Brandt stare straight at him. "After a series of explosive decompressions, Clavius Base will go dark a few hours following earthrise on the first Sunday of the tenth lunar month."

Andreas and Brandt were ready. "Weapons loadout is ready, sir. Suppressed rounds. No energy signatures that the monitoring systems will flag as anomalous. Once the three are down, we drag them back here."

"I will fucking slice up their carcasses myself," Burke said with intensity in his voice. "Then the remains get sucked out airlock seventeen. That one recycles fastest. After their DNA and bone fragments find their new home on the crater floor, we lock the story: Cult leaders fled into an unsecured shaft and died in a suit failure. End of file."

Brandt's voice stayed flat. "What if one of them puts up a fight?"

"Then you finish the fight. I do not want survivors who can talk. Under no circumstances must you allow that to happen. Avila has scrambled memories, but he still thinks extremely fast compared to the rest of us stationed here. Wauneka is strong as hell and he knows every corner of this place we call 'home.' Tai has followers who will bleed for him. You cut them all off at the root." Burke straightened. "This is not justice. This is maintenance. The cult is a tumor. We cut it out before it spreads and crashes the whole base down with it."

Silence held for a moment. The air recyclers hummed overhead. Andreas flexed his fingers, remembering the wet heat of earlier kills on other missions. Brandt's eyes never left Burke's face. Both agents understood the moral gray zone they had entered so willingly. But their homicidal tendencies aligned with the specific orders given by Burke. Loyalty

demanded action even when the targets wore the same uniforms and carried the same emotional scars as them.

Burke walked around the table until he stood between them. He was taller than both. The smell of masculine, clean sweat and synthetic fabric filled the air. “I was strung up by a noose around my neck. My wrists were bound behind me. I was naked in their little temple once. They used a ceremonial blade. Took their time. They wanted to savor my humiliation and my pain. One of them, a big guy, forced himself into me while the others watched and chanted. I felt every cut and every thrust until the man’s blade took over. After I was back here in the present, I still tasted my own blood. And I smelled my own cum on my torso. I emphasize to you: That does not happen again. Not to anyone. And especially not on my watch.”

Andreas met his eyes. “We will end them, Colonel. Quiet and final.”

Brandt added, “Bodies brought back to you, sir. No loose ends.”

Burke’s hand came up and rested heavy on Andreas’s shoulder, then on Brandt’s. The grip was possessive, but simultaneously almost intimate in its force. “Good. You leave in six hours. Eat. Fuck if you need to clear your heads. Do whatever you must. Then gear up and go. When you return, this base shall belong to the rightful chain of command again—not to prophets and their pets.”

Andreas felt the weight of that hand and the unspoken power behind it. He had shared a bunk with Burke after hard missions before Burke became his supervisor; the memory of that thick body pressing him into the mattress still lived permanently in his brain. Brandt’s breathing changed slightly, the only sign that the same heat had reached him. Neither of them spoke.

Burke smacked Andreas swiftly and roughly in his nuts and the agent doubled over. Burke’s eyes widened as he drank in the emotions of the moment. “Pain is instructive, boys.”

“Yes, sir,” Andreas groaned as he stood up, cupping his hands to guard his crotch from further assault.

Burke walked almost as if marching music were playing in the room as he returned to the head of the table. “Dismissed. Get ready. Get out.”

Andreas and Brandt turned in unison and left the conference room. Morally gray work required men who could separate pleasure from duty without blinking. The corridor outside was narrow and cold. Their boots struck the metal floor in matching rhythm. Both held their breath. Neither looked back. Behind them Burke remained alone for a long minute, staring at the blank wall where a window should have been. He rubbed the side of his neck where, in those other timelines, the blade had always found the artery. The scar was imaginary. The hate he felt now was not.

In the armory three levels down, Andreas checked the magazine of his suppressed sidearm while Brandt loaded a second weapon and secured spare magazines to his belt. “I love the scent of gun oil and ozone in the morning,” Andreas chortled. “Smells like victory.”

Overhead lights cast sharp reflections off the weapons cache. Neither man spoke of the celebrated status the two prime targets still held among the junior agents. The orders were clear. The trauma Burke carried made the orders personal. Together, those were more than enough motivation.

Andreas chambered a round. “We hit Tai first. He is the loudest. Fucking thinks he’s a saint or messiah. Born on Christmas Day. I wanna hurt that one awfully bad. Then we destroy the other two while the corridors are still empty.”

Brandt sealed his vest. “And if they are together?”

“Then we take our chances. Three bodies at once. No problem. Much faster that way. Burke gets his revenge and we keep breathing.” Andreas’s voice stayed even. He had killed for less. He recognized that he had developed an almost sexual arousal for killing men. And that did not sit well with him.

Andreas and Brandt moved to the staging bay adjacent to the Time Travel Hall. Above the buried base the convex crater floor bulged upward. Inside, blood lusting agents prepared to murder two men the base still honored as heroes. Burke’s private war had become their own. They accepted the hazy line between duty and atrocity. Avenging Burke. A simple motivation they accepted without even a hint of complaint.

When the countdown to launch began, neither man hesitated. The mission clock ticked down. Tomorrow waited. Three names already marked for deletion. Burke just may sleep without the memory of his own severed head for the first time in months. That was the only justice left in the darkness.

Immediate Tomorrow

None of the young men who are stationed at Clavius Base are conditioned to expect privacy. Agents feel no shame at all whenever they have sex with one another in plain view of other agents. Other than sex with one another and working out at the gym, the agents at the lunar base have very little to do when they are off duty.

This reality shapes the lives of the young men at the base, most of whom are oversexed. One or two agents masturbating themselves, or one another, is a routine sight at the lunar base. Concealing one's own sexuality and behaviors was an outmoded human motivation that belonged solely to past centuries.

When they are together in his rack, Avila and Wauneka never use the bed covers there. They make no attempt to prevent anyone from seeing them together in sexual passion there. After they were released from sequestration without fanfare or explanation, they returned to a regular rotation of duty as though nothing had happened to them. They were openly thanked by other men. Avila and Wauneka lost all previous concerns they had for how anyone at the lunar base perceived them. Their status as heroes was a certainty.

Some of the thanks had nothing to do with missions. An agent stopped Ted outside the crew quarters and asked him to pass a message to Tai.

"Tell him I went back last night. Like he said I could."

"You can tell him yourself."

"I will. Just wanted you to know."

He seemed embarrassed by the importance of his own message. He explained anyway. He had spent most of the gathering talking about an agent who had not returned from a mission. He had repeated himself. Lost track. Nobody had told him to get to the point.

"They stayed," the agent said. "Even after I didn't have anything else to say."

Ted nodded. The man went on to his duty station.

Men at Clavius Base could find willing bodies without much trouble. Finding someone willing to sit through the same grief twice was another matter. Tai's gatherings made room for that. Men learned who slept badly. Who dreaded the next assignment? Who needed company after everyone else had finished enjoying himself.

The photographs of the blue statue were there. So were men who would ask the following day whether you felt any better.

You could see how a man might begin by returning to Tai's meetings for the company. Later, a man might defend the beliefs because he feared losing the company. He might not even notice when the order of those loyalties changed.

Most agents at the lunar base saw Wauneka as a sexual champion. Agents were aware that he and Avila have been sexual partners longer than any other agents at the base. But that never stopped other agents from offering themselves to Wauneka for sex.

Avila never concerned himself with the choices Wauneka made for sexual partners. All sexually transmitted diseases had long ago been eradicated. Avila found happiness in seemingly minor moments. Whenever Wauneka took the top position in his rack, Avila reclined on his back for the ease and convenience of Wauneka to enter him. But, the real payoff for Avila was that he was facing upwards and could watch Wauneka's face and hear him as he ejaculates. Avila memorized every sound that Wauneka made at the moment of his most extreme physical release—his shallow breathing and his deep moaning as he releases himself. Avila also studied the masculine male face of his favorite lover, especially his open mouth and his squinting eyes dancing in bliss.

After they both have enjoyed powerful orgasms in Wauneka's rack, Avila breathes deep with satisfaction. "The legendary Vincent Wauneka."

"If you insist" is the modest response.

"You have reached a celebrity status now that we are out of sequestration. I've heard agents—grown men—whispering like schoolboys that they've seen you levitate wearing your after-mission blue robe not far

above the floor of the crew quarters. Floating in the air like you're a saint and miracle-worker with supernatural powers. These agents also credit you with performing healing rituals, too. You supposedly healed some guy's broken arm without even touching him at all. So the agents say anyway."

"I am not into the new religion like you, Teddy, if that is what you are driving at. Can you keep that truth to yourself? I know that I am also considered one of the leaders in this. But you know I only got into all that cult business because I wanted to be with you. Because we have been together for so many years. I could not leave you to handle this all by yourself. I met someone who told me he was from the future. You already know this. He was a Navajo like me. A brother. He told me this day would come. He said that. I did not believe him. And in my failure to believe, I killed him. Not what I should have done."

Avila puts both of his muscular hands over Wauneka's mouth to stop him from talking. "Don't say that. Everything can be heard."

Wauneka nodded to agree, so Avila removes his hands.

Ted left one hand against Vincent's cheek. "You think I'm doing this only because of Tai."

"He has a lot to do with it."

"Yes. He does." Ted lowered his voice. "But you know what I feel after the Ezuoia take from us. I want there to be something left of those moments somewhere. Something besides a resource they used up."

"Wanting it does not make it true."

"I know. Tai talks about joining something that can exist outside the time we live in. I don't know if he's right. But I've carried memories of people nobody else can remember. I've made people disappear. I can't always tell you which version of my own life happened."

Vincent kept looking at him.

"I'd like to believe something of us could survive all that," Ted whispered. "Of you and me. That somebody couldn't just go back and make us strangers."

"So he tells you we can last forever."

"He tells me we might be part of something that lasts."

"Convenient difference."

Ted's hand fell away. "You don't have to believe it."

"You already know I do not believe it."

"Then why stay?"

Vincent drew him close again. "I just told you why."

Ted rested against him. He could recognize the weakness in his own reasoning. That did not remove the need which made him reach for it. Vincent could disagree with every word Tai said and still hold him. Ted wanted the rest of the universe to offer something like that.

The religious zealot Yotaro Tai is huddled in a base sublevel along with Avila and Wauneka in a chamber with all-white walls, floor, and ceiling protected by a large door locked from the inside. They all are completely naked.

Tai was known for his commanding presence. He is a young man of around 30 with a Japanese ancestry. His dignified masculine face augments his muscular frame. Even though he may not be what others consider to be a tall man, he maintains a powerful appearance.

He requires his fellow MMDI agents to address him as *Tai-sama* as a verbal expression with Japanese linguistic origins. The phrase captures the great respect for him that he demands of his followers. The religious movement that he leads requires the all-male believers to experience ejaculations to honor the Ezuoia. Tai requires a chosen few agents to use their hands to bring him to orgasm. This ejaculation-as-sacrament ritual is one which agents Avila and Wauneka each perform on Tai a minimum of once daily to satisfy his demands.

Before the ritual, Tai looks at both men. "Burke thinks he can finish this by killing us."

"He knows we can kill him," Vincent says.

"That is what he understands. Bodies. Weapons. Rank." Tai's voice grows softer. "We have been given the chance to join something beyond those limits. The Ezuoia exist where our past and future cannot confine them. Why would they seek what we give them unless there were some part of us capable of reaching them there?"

“Taking something from us is not the same as taking us with them,” Vincent says.

Ted looks at Tai and waits for his answer.

“Then we must learn to give it with purpose,” Tai replies. “We must stop behaving as though we are helpless men from whom something is stolen. We are the men who know what the offering means.”

Vincent does not answer. Tai studies his face before continuing.

“Burke would have every man here obey him. He decides who goes out, who returns, whose death serves his purposes. He cannot stand the thought that an agent might answer to something greater.”

“And those who don’t believe?” Ted asks.

“They may refuse the offering. They may not help Burke destroy us.”

“Who decides when refusal becomes helping Burke?”

Tai looks directly at Ted. “I do.”

There it is. A young man who speaks about escaping the limits of human authority while reserving the most important authority for himself. You need not suppose he recognizes the contradiction. He believes frightened men need his protection. He believes he has earned the right to demand obedience. He also enjoys being obeyed.

“We will not be expendable any longer,” Tai says.

Ted wants that to be true. Vincent wants Ted to live. Tai wants them both to follow him. Those are three different wishes, even here, with all three men preparing to say the same words. Saying the same words is one thing. Not proof that three men believe the same thing. Ted understood the usefulness of the ritual. Vincent understood the danger of refusing it. Tai understood their participation as faith. None of the three men’s interpretations needed to be entirely correct.

As Avila’s large skillful hands bring Tai another orgasmic release, at the moment his fluids shoot forth into the air from his thick penis, the young leader of the lunar religion movement shouts out, “Oh praise blue!” As Tai’s semen drops to the floor of the chamber, Avila and Wauneka, who have solid erections in response to watching their leader’s ejaculation, answer in unison, “All worship the blue.” Avila and Wauneka then bring each other to orgasm and they, too, shout, “Oh praise blue!”

Tai responds by bowing his head respectfully while softly saying multiple times, “All worship the blue.”

“Tai-sama,” Avila says, “We know the enemy is coming for us down here. Our loyal agents have killed Colonel Burke. Praise blue! The agents who are persuaded by Burke’s aura certainly will now seek to destroy us all.”

At that precise moment a small explosion cracks open the wall of the chamber near the large door. Agents Andreas and Brandt quickly push into the chamber through the breach before Yotaro Tai, Ted Avila and Vincent Wauneka can react.

Brandt retrieves two small triangular blades from pockets in his black MMDI trousers. Brandt’s muscular arms and large hands propel the hand-held weapons directly into the throat regions of Avila and Wauneka, slicing into their carotid arteries. Both men instinctively grab their throats and collapse to the brilliantly white floor. Bright red ooze pours freely from their necks and spills out onto shininess.

Andreas slams his entire body weight into Yotaro Tai, knocking the young man backwards into a wall of the chamber and rendering him unconscious. As his body falls to the chamber floor, Andreas starts kicking Yotaro Tai’s head unmercifully.

Immediate Now

Colonel Burke is standing over a floating oversized examination table in the medical section of the lunar base. He looks down at the naked and dismembered bodies of Yotaro Tai, Ted Avila and Vincent Wauneka lying motionless on the floating examination table.

Burke motions for Andreas and Brandt to move closer to him next to the dead men. “I only regret they cannot feel every moment of this right now,” Burke says as he waves his left hand in the air to activate the Medical Section technology.

A rectangular device, a laser-guided cutting drill with three powerful orange beams of light, descends downward from an open hatch in the ceiling of the Medical Section. The energy of the beams bounces the bodies of the dead men. Their blood splatters outward and up before landing directly on Burke, Andreas, and Brandt. They do not even blink or flinch in response.

“And so it ends. Good work, boys.” Burke uses the cutting drill beam to slice up the dead men into ever-smaller pieces. He bears a full smile and sighs with a sense of accomplishment.

“You two get to retain your memories of the mission. Not what we usually do around here. But, you two have a need to remember. No scrubbing of your memories.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you. Brandt and I saw them jerking each other off in that chamber when we arrived. I want to keep that memory, Boss,” Andreas says to Burke.

“So, you took advantage of them while endorphins coursed through their bodies after their ejaculations. And now I agree that you two need to retain those memories.”

“Sir, always the very best time to kill a man.”

“Boss, you know I really like hanging out with Brandt.”

“Come on, focus, guys, will you? These three will eventually be missed.”

“Andreas and I need to go back, sir. Finish off the rest of the religious agents and bring their remains back here.”

“Sir, I think Brandt is right. But we’re only talking about a window of availability of about eight to ten hours. Between when we are here in the immediate now and when they were in the immediate tomorrow. Eight to ten hours. A block of time giving the religious agents the opportunity to find out that their leader no longer walks among them. Maybe they will conclude the great prophet was assumed into heaven.”

Brandt laughs, but Burke puts up his right hand to silence the agent. “I think that may work in our favor, guys. The religious agents could react to the disappearance of Yotaro Tai by giving it some context of a miracle. You never know. He’s gone. They start claiming he was ‘assumed into heaven,’ as you say, Andreas. Like the Blessed Virgin Mary. Or they may say something else happened that they cannot explain logically. So, instead of panic, they may simply attribute his absence to being a miracle which nobody can really understand or explain. So they stick to that story. This conceals the reality that their religious leader has been taken from them. They will have zero explanations and don’t know what the fuck to do next without him.”

"What will the loyalists say about Avila and Wauneka, sir? They were well-known for serving the great Yotaro Tai."

"You know, Brandt, you finished both of them off with those round blades of yours thrown into their necks. Quick way to die. I do not think about the aftermath. This was too easy. That's what I think. You two got in. Took all three of them out. Very fast. Got back here with their bodies."

"Sir, Brandt truly knows how to kill guys. Only makes it look easy, that's all. I got to body-slam Yotaro Tai. Felt so good. A scorching hot moment for me. Especially when I heard his ribs cracking."

"Listen, guys. I'm saying that the religious agents knew you were coming for them. But you need to consider that. Need to respond quickly."

"What's our response, sir?"

"Andreas and I will do whatever you ask, sir."

"I expect nothing less from you two. I need to send you both back. Same mission. Different tactics. Just do it again. Do it over."

Immediate Tomorrow

The near future is on the verge of a remix. Avila's large skillful hands bring Yotaro Tai another orgasmic release. The prophet's eyes squint and his entire face reveals his intense bliss. His fluids shoot forth into the air and he shouts out, "Oh praise blue!"

Yotaro Tai's semen drops to the floor of the chamber. Avila and Wauneka have solid erections in response to this performance of the sacrament. They answer in unison, "All worship the blue."

As before, Avila and Wauneka bring each other to orgasm and they, too, shout, "Oh praise blue!" Yotaro Tai responds by bowing his head respectfully while softly saying, "All worship the blue."

"Tai-sama," Avila says quickly. "The enemy is coming. I can feel this in my bones. The faithful agents killed Burke. Praise blue! Now the ones loyal to Burke are after us to avenge his death."

That is the precise moment when the unlocking mechanism on the large door starts up as if by magic. Andreas and Brandt quickly push the door open and rush into the chamber before Tai, Avila and Wauneka can react.

Very quickly Brandt retrieves two foldable daggers from pockets in his black MMDI trousers. Brandt's muscular arms and large hands propel the

daggers directly into the throat regions of Avila and Wauneka, slicing into their carotid arteries. Both men instantly drop like rag dolls to the shiny metal floor. Their blood pours freely from their necks while the daggers remain sticking out.

Andreas kicks Yotaro Tai forcefully in the nuts. The prophet falls to his knees in humiliation and pain. That is when Andreas takes full advantage of the moment and retrieves his own foldable dagger from a pocket in his black MMDI trousers.

Andreas grabs Yotaro Tai by his left ear and pulls his head upward. Then Andreas slices the front of Yotaro Tai's undefended neck with the dagger quickly moving from one side to the other. The young prophet bleeds profusely. His eyes display a macabre dead stare. His body drops with a thud to the floor of the chamber and Andreas starts kicking Yotaro Tai's head unmercifully.

Immediate Now

Burke stands confidently in the Medical Section looking down at the floating exam table that defies gravity. The remains of Yotaro Tai, Ted Avila, and Vincent Wauneka lie on the table and Burke smiles. "You know what, boys? I really want to cut off their cocks and balls to keep as trophies."

Andreas and Brandt look at each other in silence. Andreas says, "Well, maybe only keep Wauneka's cock. The one is the most impressive!"

A rectangular device, a laser-guided cutting drill with three powerful orange beams of light, descends downward from an open hatch in the ceiling. The gentle light beams unleash a harsh decimation of the bodies of the dead men. The splattering of their blood reaches Burke, Andreas, and Brandt who withhold any responses.

Burke remains dispassionate and detached as the bodies of the dead men quickly are cut into ever-smaller pieces and slip in a growing puddle of red on the floor beneath the examination table.

"Now I must send you ladies back to the fashion show. Same mission. Different tactics. Do it again."

Immediate Tomorrow

Cum and blood. Nothing less. The scent of dead men. Once again. Very stimulating for Andreas.

Immediate Now

Burke towers over the dead bodies of Yotaro Tai, Ted Avila, and Vincent Wauneka in the Medical Section of the base. Andreas and Brandt move closer. Orange beams cut the dead deep. The observers grunt in approval under the spray of blood.

Andreas asks Brandt, "You feel any different? We got to kill the same three guys three times now. The great prophet. And the celebrated Clavius Base heroes who sucked him dry."

"Andreas, shut the fuck up. Try not to be the savage you were born to be."

"Wauneka's cock," Andreas says. "I wish we could cut that gigantic piece of meat off and roast it slowly, slowly for ourselves."

"Born to be savages," Andreas whispers so nobody hears him.

"Savor that man's cock in a private meal. It's big and thick enough for three hungry men to enjoy in a ceremonial meal, don't you agree? I am not only your superior officer, girls. I am also your *sommelier*. I suggest pairing red meat with red wine."

"Boss, a racist remark from you, sir?"

"I got my eyes on you, Andreas. Watch your disrespectful talk. The two of you still have more work to do."

"You're sending Andreas and me back to the immediate tomorrow a fourth time?"

"No. Another mission. This time you target the remaining religious agents. I have a list for you two. Sending it to your screens now. Total of fifteen or so agents. Maybe more. New ones added every day."

"Sir, how will Andreas and I eliminate the targeted agents before the hour that the base is supposed to be destroyed? We are cutting it very close."

"Well, for one thing, you two have time travel as the way you get where you're going. You cannot eliminate every target on one trip. You both know that. I know that. So, it will be necessary for you to take multiple trips."

"Yes, sir."

"These guys on the target list don't know I know who they are. They think their cult actions are unknown and anonymous. The black masks

they wear when they're killing off the nonbelievers conceal them. Or, so they think. Let them think that. But, that's a fatal error on their part because I have collected their names. They are doomed."

"Sir, if you will permit a suggestion. What if Andreas and I bring back each of the targeted agents alive here to the immediate yesterday? One by one. We don't kill a single man while we're there in the immediate tomorrow. For us, that way would make us both far less obvious. We go in. Blend in. Find each of the doomed men. Bring each one back here separately from the others. That gets them out of the immediate tomorrow and onto our territory in the immediate now. We can get rid of them all while they are here with us without anyone in the immediate tomorrow knowing."

Burke and Andreas are silent. But their faces show their honest respect for what Brandt has proposed. Burke finally says, "I will prepare a small chamber down below many sublevels from where agents usually go. Hidden from everyone. We can take each of the doomed down there when you retrieve them from the immediate tomorrow. We can eliminate each of them, one-by-one, where nobody will see what we do to them. Or hear their screams."

17

VOLCANO

2252

Thomas Burke stands in front of a rectangular screen in front of him as he watches a vertical, head-to-toe video feed depicting General Yang. “Colonel Burke, I need you to attend a video meeting with me.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I am here on Earth at the moment. In some other time zone. Makes me feel out of synch. Never got used to the small differences between time on Earth versus the Moon.”

“I understand, sir.”

“I doubt that, but Burke, I have something important to share. I am stepping down as Director of MMDI. I have hand-picked you to take over. You will be designated Director of MMDI in an official communication to everyone at Clavius Base before the dinner meal is served.”

Burke stares silently at the image of General Yang on the wall screen.

“Don’t give me that fuckin’ vulnerable look, Burke. Just pay attention.”

“Yes, General.”

“You have questions on your mind, Burke, as you stand there sweating like a pig. Just shut up and listen. There is an international military tribunal. You and the others at Clavius Base were not told about this tribunal. In Belgium. On a need to know basis, right? This group of five men is serious and high-ranking. They selected me to be Director of MMDI. I have been reporting to them now for a very long stretch.”

“I understand, sir.”

“No, you fucking do not understand, Burke. This tribunal here in Antwerp is a group of five high-ranking men who lack any sense of humor whatsoever. They told me I needed to start my retirement immediately. Fucking age discrimination. They told me to personally select my successor and they will not challenge my selection. Pick the most likely to succeed. That’s what they told me. So, you are moving on up, Burke. Congratulations.”

“I am honored. Thank you, sir.”

“Spare me your bullshit, Burke. I am turning things over to you. But do I believe you are most likely to succeed? I won’t answer that question. I will live in Arizona. I will walk alone in the great Sonoran Desert in an eternal quest for purple cactus majesty and amber waves of grain.”

Burke remains silent.

“Yeah, you fucking have no response to that, do you? Don’t answer that either. No poetic sensibilities at all. Oh and there is just one tiny bit of unfinished business I need to discuss with you, Burke. The way you got rid of that religious cult at Clavius Base. Gave me heartburn.”

“Why do you say that, sir? I uploaded visual files for you, sir. I presume you looked at those even though all that happened a month ago, sir. What happened was this: Agents Andreas and Brandt went forward in time right here at Clavius Base. They were under direct orders from me, General. Is there a problem, sir?”

“You do realize that at this point, Director Burke, you and your agents Andreas and Brandt, killed more men than were ever killed by Yotaro Tai and his religious followers at this lunar base. Among the dead were the most celebrated heroes of MMDI, Ted Avila and Vincent Wauneka.”

Burke nods in the affirmative, but he remains silent. Burke’s face reads clear and pure vulnerability. General Yang says, “As I looked at the videos you provided, I got to thinking about the men who once were agents at Clavius Base. They wore the same uniforms that we do. They served the same priority that we all serve. To prevent the destruction of the planetary civilization. And you destroyed them. Because of their religious beliefs, you heartless fuck. Makes me proud to call myself a Buddhist.”

Burke looks like he may pass out at any moment.

“Can you assure me you know the identities of each of these men who died down in your white room of death?”

“Yes, General, of course. Let me walk you through this as I send to your screen some images for your attention from my private files.”

“You jerk off to those photographs I’m sure, Burke.”

Burke sighs and continues: “This first guy pictured here is Anthony Garcia. He was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina. He lived 25 years and died in the white room that I created. You can see this naked man’s feet cannot reach the floor on the elevated seat with hands bound at the wrists behind his back. I patterned this white room after a secret location that we found Yotaro Tai had created on a sublevel in the immediate tomorrow. This specifically was to humiliate our captives. It increased a man’s feelings of utter vulnerability and directly resulted in an inevitable surrender and eventually his full disclosure of many secrets that never in a million years did he ever think he would reveal to anyone.”

Burke smiles with pride and then continues, “Anthony Garcia revealed to us that Yotaro Tai was submissive sexually. We had no idea about that, and this new intelligence helped us establish an improved profile of the religious agents as a group. To all outward appearances, Yotaro Tai, considered to be a great prophet and leader of the religious agents, gave the distinct impression that he was an aggressively masculine male. But, in truth, Yotaro Tai preferred to be dominated sexually as Anthony Garcia explained he had done. Yotaro Tai preferred men such as Anthony Garcia who had large cocks and who would be rough with him during private sexual encounters never seen by others.”

“Next.”

“Then we have this man, David Marshall Anderson. He was born in New York City. He lived 22 years and died in my white room. From Agent Anderson we learned that Yotaro Tai truly believed that he could communicate in real time with the Ezuoia. Agent Anderson reported that while in his presence, Yotaro Tai would speak aloud as if talking with the Ezuoia directly using his mind. The words Yotaro Tai spoke in front of Agent Anderson suggested that Yotaro Tai considered himself to be the exclu-

sive emissary that the Ezuoia had with humanity here on the Moon and on Earth."

"Keep going, Burke."

"And this man pictured is Alexander Thomas Carter. He was born in George W. Bush City in Texas. He lived 27 years and died in my white room."

"Texas man."

"Yes, General. This big man did not process his white room interrogation very well. Compared to all the others. We destroyed him. He lost his sanity before we ended his life. He told us that he had fallen in love with Yotaro Tai. He conveyed his reality that he truly loved Yotaro Tai and did not feel at all controlled by the man whom he considered to be a great religious prophet. He especially worshiped Yotaro Tai's cock. A lot of worship, sir. Carter wrote down many statements that Yotaro Tai supposedly had given verbally to the religious agents, providing the only record MMDI has of what can be considered the thoughts and words of Yotaro Tai. That collection of statements survives as a significant gain in the intelligence sense for MMDI to guide decisions about how to handle future religious agents we may find."

"No, no, no. There will be no other religious agents, Burke. All the religious agents are dead now. The threat to MMDI from the religious movement has been completely and totally neutralized. Thanks to your leadership and direct efforts, Burke. You have earned the promotion to the position of Director of MMDI. I say you should savor the fucking moment, will you?"

"Yes, General. I will."

"I do have one question for which you should be able to provide an honest answer: What is the reason you put agents together in your so-called white room like you did? Just so they would die together and watch each other die? Was that your thinking, Burke?"

"Yes, sir, and they did as I imagined they would do. They begged us to spare their lives. Very passionate men. Very desperate. These were special circumstances, General. In the picture on the left is Jon Sampson. Seated on the right is Vernon Templeton. First, Sampson. He was born in an indigenous tribe in North America. Sampson lived 28 years and died

in the white room. He worked directly for Agent Vincent Wauneka, a full-blooded Navajo Indian who felt a connection with Sampson. Templeton was born in Honolulu. He lived 26 years, died in the white room, and reported to Agent Ted Avila."

"You're saying that without any permission to do so, Avila and Wauneka on their own enlisted these two fellow MMDI agents to do religious-oriented work at this base?"

"Yes, that appears to be what happened."

"Appears to be."

"I am not certain, sir. Sampson told us that Agent Wauneka never was impressed with the whole religious aspect of the Ezuoia. Sampson said Agent Wauneka chose to follow Agent Avila's lead and become one of the disciples of Yotaro Tai because he, Wauneka, had a long-standing personal and sexual relationship with Avila."

"Heard that already. Next."

"We learned from Mr. Templeton before he died that Agent Avila became completely convinced regarding the higher power significance of the Ezuoia. These feelings date back to the moment when Avila and Wauneka first saw that statue of the giant blue man in Geneva. For Avila and Wauneka, seeing that giant blue statue was the moment of their absolute unswerving belief that the Ezuoia deserved to be worshiped within a religion on the Moon devoted toward that specific purpose."

"Templeton told you that before you killed him in your white room," Yang said. "If you think testimony extracted from a man who knows you intend to kill him is the same thing as proof, you are a fool."

Burke replied, "It establishes only what Templeton was willing to say before we killed him. It does not establish that what he said was true. But it is the only testimony we retained."

"Each of the deaths of these MMDI agents in your white room has been officially provided for the record by you in your detailed reports, Burke?"

"Yes, I made sure of that, sir."

"But you did not include any details of the sexual torture of MMDI agents that occurred within your white room here at this base. Nothing was mentioned in your reports about what you did down there to fellow

MMDI agents. Or what Agent Andreas did to fellow MMDI agents. Or what Agent Brandt did to fellow MMDI agents. Why is that, Director Burke? Why is that? Those details were omitted. I presume the omissions were deliberate on your part."

Burke waits for nearly a full minute before he answers the general: "Yes, sir. Exactly right. I omitted all those details about sexual torture of fellow MMDI agents. It was my decision to omit those details. My decision alone. Agents Andreas and Brandt had absolutely no influence upon my decision to omit those details from my reports. They have not even seen any of my after-action reports. They do not know what I included or what I omitted. This was entirely my decision alone as their direct supervisor, sir."

"Burke, you do realize that there is a raw video and audio feed—fucking unedited—showing each of the sexual torture incidents that took place in the white room with those MMDI agents? You and Agents Andreas and Brandt castrated numerous MMDI agents before ending their lives. I believe it was 22 out of 25. Eighty-eight percent. Castrated them all. The raw video and audio captured the obvious agony that each man endured losing their manhood. That is only one example. I can elaborate on several other similar actions taken by the three of you in your white room. But I might vomit. I saw in the recordings Agent Brandt inserted his erect penis into the open mouths of several deceased MMDI agents. He ejaculated inside the mouths of their severed heads."

"Yes, general, I was there. I saw Brandt do that in person."

"Of course, Burke, I fucking well know you were there in person. You are too much. Those white room audio and video recordings also show you sexually dominating Agent Andreas sexually. Penetrating Andreas from behind. You ejaculated into him. What did that have to do with your interrogations?"

"Are you trying to push my buttons, sir?"

"Do not be insubordinate, Burke. Please, could you rephrase and restate what you just said?"

"Having trouble here, sir. My anger at you is rising, General Yang. You can easily monitor my elevated heart rate and increased blood pressure right now."

"Yes, that is correct. I can fucking read telemetry on my goddamned screen."

Burke takes a few deep breaths before speaking to General Yang. "Yeah, I am human, sir. Very much so. In that white room, our emotions—especially mine—hit maximum levels, sir. After all the numerous times I was beheaded while on missions to get rid of that cult. Five times they separated my head from my body, sir. As you know, sir, you approved the death splice to keep me from actually dying. But I ended up angry as hell."

"The logs I have seen only show two completed retrievals," Yang said.

"It is true that two versions of my body were retrieved," Burke replied. "But I remember five endings. The death splices did their job. They removed the deaths from the active timeline. But the splice did not remove all five deaths from my head."

"Continue, Burke."

"I had to conquer those agents. Had to break them. And so, we did. Andreas and Brandt and me. The three of us did. We took all their secrets from them. We took their manhood from them. We severed their cocks and their balls and made them scream in unrestrained agony. We won. They lost. Powerful feelings, yeah. And Andreas wanted me sexually. Afterwards, I wanted to celebrate. By fucking him. So, yeah, I gave Andreas what he wanted. What I secretly wanted, too. And now this base is safe. Because of what we did in that white room. I respectfully submit that the end justified the means, sir."

"Yeah, okay, Director Burke. So you saved MMDI. How heroic. You prevented the destruction of this base. That is a sincerely good outcome. You deserve credit for that."

"Thank you for saying that, General."

"I brought up the issue of these records so that you can go in and correct them. Before my final day of duty at Clavius Base ends tomorrow at 2050 hours Coordinated Lunar Time. That's what I really want here. You should have included the complete and unedited audio and video recordings of what happened in the white room. The full records are crucial to this agency. Fix the omissions at your earliest convenience, Burke. Add in everything that happened. I mean everything. You have the specific deadline I just gave to you. Don't fuck this up."

The screen in front of Burke goes dark. He finally exhales. He says to himself aloud: “Avila and Wauneka. Oh fuck. This agency’s most celebrated heroes. Dead. Because of me. The killer of the most celebrated MMDI heroes.”

Burke is unable to discern whether he is suffering from persistent nightmares, or if the angry spirits of Avila and Wauneka have come back from death to the Clavius Base just to torment him. Somehow, the most celebrated MMDI heroes have acquired supernatural strength. Burke dares not resist them. He knows he will not win. He convinces himself that Avila and Wauneka will crush his manhood and then break his neck as revenge for his having put an abrupt end to the lunar religion by killing off all the followers.

The acceptance of Burke as Director of MMDI by the men at the base was total and unflinching. Nobody ever knew the truth that Yang had been removed against his will by the international military tribunal. Now that Burke reported to Dr. Ozzie, he was truthful about consistent and powerful nightmares each night. Nightmares that were focused upon the killing of Avila and Wauneka. Nobody but Dr. William Oswald knew about this.

The doctor classified Burke’s condition as residual death memory. He would not tell Burke whether the three unrecorded beheadings came from abandoned timelines, repeated retrieval attempts, or a traumatized brain manufacturing additional endings around the two that had occurred. So Burke was left to remember all five with equal conviction.

The day arrived when Burke stood in his MMDI uniform and boots in the conference room facing Dr. Oswald in person within the Medical Section of the base. The chief medical officer says to Burke, “The base logs will show that you are being sent on a special mission to the past. To Earth. The year is 1830. Your mission shall focus upon a large stratovolcano situated in the Aleutian Islands arc. You will arrive ahead of the eruption. MMDI wants you to observe Korovin. The name of the volcano. MMDI is aware of your intense fascination with volcanoes.”

“Yes, of course. My intense fascination with volcanoes.”

"MMDI shall provide suitable protective clothing for you. The weather conditions are not very conducive to human life whatsoever. I must admit that. But after all it's the edge of the Bering Sea. Approximately 2,700 miles west of Old San Francisco. You will arrive there wearing clothing and boots designed for the extreme conditions that you will find there in the Andreanof Islands."

"What will I wear that's gonna protect me from that eruption?"

"Let me comfort you, Director Burke. I'm a medical doctor. I will do my very best as a medical practitioner to help you feel better and attain peace of mind."

"Thank you, doctor."

"Knowing how you, or any man, would feel at a tense time like this I have chosen to sing to you at this very moment."

Burke's face is overtaken by sheer terror.

Dr. Oswald explains, "An ancient lullaby from so long ago. Comforting melody. Words you may not comprehend." Without warning, the chief medical officer unexpectedly launches into vibrant and skillful a cappella singing ever so gently and tenderly, faithfully rendering an emotional song in the Cymric language from Wales. The only response Burke can manage is tears.

1830

Atka is an island on the edge of the Bering Sea of some four hundred square miles. It is situated in the far western section of the Aleutian Islands arc and is famous mainly for containing the impressive Korovin stratovolcano. Korovin rises nearly one mile in elevation above sea level.

Most people then and now never heard of Korovin. Yet, if you were to mention another stratovolcano named Vesuvius, many would know exactly what you're talking about. The destruction of Pompeii in Italy holds an infamy for obliterating 20,000 human lives nearly four decades after Jesus Christ.

Thomas Burke arrived in the northern region of the island of Atka on the western slopes of Korovin in the year 1830. The stormy conditions on the sea in the latter part of October produce waves reaching fifty feet high that crash with thunderous impact into the mountainside.

The protective clothing and boots that Burke wears are utterly insufficient. He is immediately soaked from head to toe by the frigid ocean water made even less pleasant by an air temperature of 49 degrees below zero on the old Fahrenheit scale.

Burke tries to distract himself with memories of the warmth and comfort he knew on the Moon. He thinks about feeling safe deep inside the lunar base under the crater Clavius.

He smiles as he recalls his decision to restart a sexual relationship with Agent Declan Andreas after removing the threat to MMDI of the lunar religion. Andreas persuaded Burke to pose in his director's quarters wearing only his boots. Of course, Andreas offered his solemn promise that the photograph would remain private and unshared with the rest of the agents. That did not happen, of course.

The comforting memories of a warm and invigorating haven far from Earth are fleeting, however. The top of Burke's head feels pain because his hair is frozen to his scalp inside the wet hooded parka he is wearing.

His throat hurts from having inhaled the sub-zero air through his open mouth after his nose hair became solid ice crystals completely blocking his ability to breathe. And then suddenly, there is a frightening silence. The waves seem to stop crashing onto the shore as if they conspired to reduce Burke's sensations down to zero.

Burke feels the sudden low rumble of the mountainside beneath him. He is perfectly aware of what will happen next.

He glances up to look in the direction of the ridge reaching up to the top of Korovin. He shouts aloud to the dark sky above, but there is nobody present to hear him: "I saved MMDI. The valiant hero from the Moon is rewarded with an all-expenses-paid trip to Alas—" A thunderous and completely deafening explosion bursts from Korovin interrupting Burke. He is knocked flat onto his back.

He is stunned, yet he remains fully conscious. He tilts downward so that above his head is the sea. The bottoms of his large boots point upward on the slope. He observes the massively violent eruption of Korovin.

Since he has died many times while on MMDI missions, he already is fully aware of what death feels like. Somehow, instinctively he believes

this one will be very different. Burke certainly knows that nobody has yet been appointed to take over as Director of MMDI because everyone thinks that he is still in that role. He knows there is nobody to advocate for using the death splice to save him from death by volcano.

Burke feels the intense, painfully hot volcanic materials blasting very rapidly through his entire body starting with the soles of his feet and ending at his neck—the very last sensations that his brain processes.

Afterlife

Burke awakens and breathes normally when he realizes he survived the Korovin eruption of 1830.

He looks confused as he notices he is wearing only a skimpy loincloth. He is otherwise without any protective clothing or footwear. He stands on the cold floor tiles in a location that seems familiar to him.

Burke stands in the presence of a tall young man with broad shoulders and large, muscular arms who is situated behind an old-fashioned bar. "I am Mal," the man behind the bar says in a friendly tone which causes Burke to frown. "The bartender here. Let me welcome you officially to the Barefoot Dead Guys Bar. And, no, you are not dreaming. Your name is Thomas Burke. And you are dead. Wearing only a loincloth and nothing else. That's our strict dress code here."

"I don't know how I got here."

"Well, you know what? Everyone who arrives here says the same thing," the bartender admits as he offers Burke a bottle of beer which Burke declines with a simple wave of his right hand.

"Okay, no beer then. Just understand one thing: Nothing here is as it appears. This bar that I run is just a stopover on your journey."

"What do you mean, 'my journey'?"

"After you die. You stop here at this bar. You can call it the afterlife if you prefer that word."

"I am dead?"

"Wow, you, too? I get the same questions repeatedly. Kind of run out of answers."

"Fine with me, bartender. I just do my job. If I'm killed while on a mis-

sion, well—it happens a lot. Somebody back at base always brings all of us agents back to life using time travel."

"Heard that bullshit story before. I met others in your line of work, apparently. They told me that they were immortals. Is that what you believe?"

"No, I certainly do not think of myself as an immortal. I just want to get back my life and return to work on the Moon."

"Yeah, well. I cannot help you with that."

Burke quickly sits down onto one of the wooden benches and leans his thick arms over the marble top of the bar. "What will it take for you to help me?"

"You're much smarter than most others I've met here, Mr. Burke."

"No need for formality. The other guys. The men from the Moon. Those who told you they were immortals. You think they were not as smart as me?"

"At the lunar base, you were given the nickname of 'Beef' by one of your direct reports. Isn't that right, Mr. Burke? Or should I call you Colonel Burke? Or is it Director Burke? You're so damned accomplished. So many titles."

"Yeah, bartender. I mean, no. That's an accurate nickname. Beef. Supposedly a nickname for my cock. Call me that if you wish. A little strange if you do so, but—"

"Out of respect for that thick slab of beef between your legs, Director Burke. I want to afford you every possible respect for the man that you certainly are. I want to see you naked."

"Well, I am practically not wearing anything as it is, bartender. What more do you want from me?"

"Lose the loincloth. That's what I want."

Burke pushes back from the bar and stands up from the wooden stool. He slides his big hands down into the loincloth and causes the skimpy underwear to fall to the tile floor. He then kicks away the only garment he owns and starts to dance without any music as if he were an experienced male stripper at a sex bar.

"Exceptional, Burke. Definitely worth waiting for. Oh yes, definitely."

"Are you just gonna objectify me here or what?"

"No, I can worship you more respectfully than that. Give me some space to work on that."

"Maybe you can tell me—that volcano. It killed me in Alaska. That really hurt a lot."

"Is there a question for me in there somewhere?"

"This place. This bar. This actually is the afterlife?"

"Yeah, well. I said you can call it that. This place is not exactly like organized religions described it would be, now is it? They got it all wrong. There's no Heaven. No Hell. No almighty deity who intervenes in everyone's lives. None of that. All of that entirely invented by mortal men to control and manipulate humanity."

"So, what happens next for me?"

"You are smarter than all the others I've met here at this bar. Excellent questions, Beef. Really excellent. I find highly intelligent men to be especially sexy."

"You're mortal like I am?"

"Well, no. I am not from your home planet. I have what some have called 'miraculous' capabilities. I was selected to work here. Forced, actually. Like slavery. This is not my genuine physical appearance."

"What? Are you some kind of creature?"

"Exactly. In my genuine form, I am quite tall and I have six wings. My kind are famous on your home planet. Legendary, actually. Written about in ancient texts."

"Six wings? As in the highest-ranking angels?"

"We never use that word to define ourselves. A man-made word created by the men on Earth who wrote words in ancient books. My kind does not care what we are called. And I just work here."

"All this. Is it a prelude to coming back into life as another person?" Burke asks as he looks around the bar quickly.

"You ask tough questions. I respect that. Reincarnation? Is that what you're asking me? I have no idea, actually. That label probably is more of the same man-made spiritual bullshit. What does it matter what it is called? All I know is a guy arrives here at the bar. He does not stay very

long. Some giant vortex opens up in the ceiling above us. Suddenly, the guy is gone. That's all I know from what I have seen happen repeatedly."

"What's the longest duration of time some guy has had before going into the giant vortex?"

"Ah, Beef, what great questions you ask. We do not measure the duration of time here at all at the Barefoot Dead Guys Bar. We exist outside of all timelines. So there is no flow of time here. No past. No present. No future. We could have been here talking, you and I, for an extended period. The passage of time is irrelevant to us here."

"But I can feel sensations even though I'm a dead guy?"

"Yes, the sex drive that a guy brings in here with him gets amplified somehow once he's here in this place. If that's what you're asking me. Not sure why it happens. Or how. You can shoot your load as many times as you choose. Never runs out. Your juices just keep on coming. You also feel physical sensations. Sexual pleasures. I have a large bed upstairs. I can show you rather than telling you."

"You just have one big surprise after another, Seraphim."

"No need to address me like that, Burke. I want us to become intimate with each other. I have a bed upstairs."

Experiencing the strange fluidity of time is, itself, stimulating to a once-living human being. Yet, there is a bonus. For a young man such as Thomas Burke, who experienced a very painful death in a stratovolcano, the discovery that he is now able to ejaculate his considerable volume of fluids at will without ever running dry is simply overwhelming to him. Tears are a natural response for Burke. So is sobbing.

Mal took Burke upstairs to the bedroom above the bar and taught him about what he can expect from limitless ejaculations. How many times does Burke repeatedly fuck the bartender? That question has no temporal context. So, it cannot be answered outside of spacetime.

Does Mal reciprocate to match what he receives from Burke? That question also has no temporal context and cannot be answered. Sometimes if one finds themselves outside of spacetime, perhaps the

wisest thing one can do is grab onto someone nearby and just try to hang on.

18

EXODUS

2255

After Ted Avila and Vincent Wauneka were killed by fellow MMDI time-travel agents at the lunar base, their corpses were desecrated specifically with prejudice under explicit orders of a ranking colonel. Their remains were then put in the airlock and pulled by the vacuum of space out into dark, airless skies of the Moon. The cold, unforgiving surface of Crater Clavius became their final resting place.

Yet, Eduardo intervened to spare the two MMDI agents from such an undeserved fate. Both men were rescued from death by Eduardo using the two time-travel devices located inside the sequestration living quarters.

Both men wearing their standard MMDI on-duty black attire stand in their sequestration living quarters directly in front of the big-screen image of Eduardo.

Both have facial expressions that clearly convey a complete exhaustion in the physical and emotional sense. This is because they genuinely are worn out. They are spent. No reserves. No way to recharge.

Their memories include the awareness that they both were killed at Clavius Base specifically because of their connection to the so-called religious cult.

They are also aware that Eduardo has used the death splice on multiple occasions to restore them to the realm of the living.

Perhaps most significantly is that they are deeply aware of the truth

that they have spent considerable and valuable time in each other's company in intimate, man-on-man contact.

Eduardo is the one who knows the most accurate details about all that Avila and Wauneka have experienced individually and together. And as the two men stand before the screen in the MMDI sequestration unit, Eduardo allows several minutes to pass in utter silence. Respect is often best conveyed wordlessly. This is how Eduardo expresses what can only be called the deepest respect for the two time-travel agents.

Finally, Eduardo addresses the two men: "This agency owes a great debt to the two of you gentlemen. What you two have contributed to the success of this agency spans more years of chronological time than you realize. What you have sacrificed personally for this agency exceeds all other contributions and human efforts in the entire history of MMDI. Now comes the moment when the two of you must be compensated as fully as possible for your efforts."

Wauneka looks emotionally damaged. He is unable to speak and he has obvious difficulty keeping his eyes open. Avila listens to Eduardo but responds by staring at the floor of the sequestration unit. His ability to show emotions practically has been worn away.

"MMDI is going to directly finance a high standard of living for each of you at a place of your choice on Earth. Away from the Moon. And with a very significant level of compensation for each of you, I must say. There is a protocol that must be followed."

"Don't like how that sounds, Eduardo."

"Relax, Mr. Avila, This I believe you will see as a positive outcome. The protocol is codenamed 'Exodus,' and that sounds scary, too. I am sorry for that. But the protocol is extraordinarily rare at MMDI. It has never been used before. What this means for you two men is you have earned the special benefit of being separated from employment at this agency with substantial financial compensation so you no longer need to work. This means you will no longer travel in time. You also will not have any interaction with me or anyone else from this agency. This shall continue for as many years as you both shall live."

"Neither of us has the choice to remain working here at MMDI?"

“That is correct, Mr. Avila. Continuing to work as MMDI agents would not be fair to you two as men. You have already given of yourselves to MMDI beyond all expectations. For many more years that you each are capable of remembering. You look young. The men at this base think you two are dead. Died young, they say. Let them all keep thinking that. That serves the purposes of the Exodus Protocol.”

“Will you be scrubbing our memories?”

“No, no, not at all. You both get to keep all that you have in your mind. Unchanged. Honestly, you both are healthy young men, who right now are perceived as men who are around age thirty. Your actual chronological ages remain irrelevant to the outside world. Don’t ask. But sufficient to say that you are not around age thirty. I will send you to Earth in the devices that Mr. Avila nicknamed the Giant Blue Hockey Pucks. You will begin to age at a normal human pace once you are back on Earth.”

“So what’s the catch? Vincent would want an answer for that one, I’m sure.”

“This is one instance where there is no catch. No surprises. No strings attached, as you would say using your slang.”

“I am not ashamed to admit this, Eduardo. I feel very tired. More accurately, I feel that I am totally used up. All my reserves. All my priorities. All my hopes. All my dreams. Everything. Fucking pathetic, I’m sure. But that’s reality. The experiences of our missions to Nevada were a strenuous ordeal for me and for Vincent. But then we were killed by fellow agents here at this base. Tough to adjust after that. So he is really out of it. Not really capable of speaking right now as you can see. But if you are gonna send us away, one of the last things I heard him say is that he wanted to go home.”

“Home, as in the Navajo Nation?”

“Yeah, that’s right. Or very nearby in the Desert Southwest. That’s also where I would pick if given the choice on his behalf. That means ‘home’ to Vincent.”

“Good. Smart choice. I will send you and Mr. Wauneka to Monument Valley as your starting point. You will be living in the year 2260. It will be five years in the future from this moment. You two cannot and will not be traced because this involves forward time travel. Once you are settled

there, you two can figure out the rest as you wish. You both will have immediate and permanent electronic access to financial support from MMDI for as long as you live. You do not have to stay together to continue receiving complete financial support. But, neither of you will ever be able to return to MMDI or to the Moon or ever have any contact with anyone from this agency."

"What will happen to the war against the Ezuoia? And also, our brains were changed by the Ezuoia. Will that be reversed?"

"No, the restructuring of both of your brains cannot be reversed. There is no known action for that. It is a permanent condition. The Ezuoia will continue to have a full-time connection to both of your brains. But that is already the case. So your separation from MMDI does not bring on any change in your status with regard to the Ezuoia."

"You didn't answer the first part of my question, Eduardo. About the war."

"I have no answers that will satisfy you, Mr. Avila. The war will continue. I cannot see the future with any certainty. The two of you will not be allowed by MMDI to participate in the war efforts directed toward the Ezuoia."

"I appreciate your honesty, Eduardo." Ted Avila drops his head due to unexpected feelings of sadness. "Let me return the favor and be honest with you right now."

"I am listening, Mr. Avila."

Ted cannot prevent himself from crying openly as he stands before Eduardo's image on the screen.

"What is wrong, Mr. Avila? Please tell me."

Ted discovers sufficient inner emotional stamina to stop his crying. He says to Eduardo: "When Vincent and I were on the recon mission to Nevada, we spent considerable time reviewing the public coverage of the Ranch at Amargosa as it was being constructed and ready to open in 2012. Vincent and I were using an internet café in Las Vegas to run searches online." Ted's crying in fear restarts which prevents him from continuing to talk with Eduardo.

"You feel conflicted. I can see that, Mr. Avila. You want for Mr. Wauneka and yourself to complete your exodus from Clavius as I have outlined. You need and want that escape. It's a strong emotional drive. I can see

that. After all you and Mr. Wauneka have experienced—and he cannot speak for himself here—you want to take care of his best interests. And your own."

Ted's crying intensifies but he nods his head to agree with what Eduardo has said.

"You and Mr. Wauneka conducted online searches from Las Vegas while you were on your 2012 mission. You rightfully researched the Jarnsaxa Corporation of Carson City, Nevada. That was a very smart decision. You needed to know just who was behind the establishment of the Ranch at Amargosa. And you discovered that Jarnsaxa Corporation was the legal entity in charge of construction of the ranch and later had operational day-to-day control over the resort."

Ted finally stops crying and just stares at Eduardo's image on the screen. "And we found a video recording embedded with an online news story covering the first days of business when Jarnsaxa Corporation was launched in Carson City."

"I will pick up the story from there, Mr. Avila, so that you do not have to say anything that you may fear could possibly jeopardize today's completion of the Exodus Protocol."

Ted remains silent but again nods to show his agreement with Eduardo.

"All the exact details are not widely known. Not everything is shared with the men who are sent on missions to change the timelines in the past. Sometimes, there are secrets. Dangerous secrets that would do much damage if revealed. You and Mr. Wauneka located that video recording from the late 1970s in which I appear on camera identified as the CEO of Jarnsaxa Corporation spokesman. And that is factually accurate, Mr. Avila. I was that CEO and now I am running MMDI. I am the same now as I was then. I am Eduardo Primaro."

"But how is that possible?"

"Now is not the best timing for this conversation, Mr. Avila. The important thing right now is for you and Mr. Wauneka to complete the Exodus Protocol and have the much-deserved opportunity to restart your life. Both of you have given so much to MMDI and you have earned the escape you are about to experience. This is our last goodbye. I bid you

farewell, Mr. Avila. And you, Mr. Wauneka, as well. I hope you can help each other recover from all that you both have endured while working for MMDI. I am especially grateful for all the lessons I have learned from you two. If only there was more time for more lessons for me."

Ted Avila smiles at the irony of Eduardo's words as the sequestration living quarters is overtaken by a bright orange light that engulfs everything.

2260

The two men materialize nude in a fading orange light inside of a hotel room overlooking the Monument Valley Navajo Tribal Park. They stand in front of a large picture window that provides an unexpectedly dramatic view of the rising Full Moon. Ted Avila and Vincent Wauneka feel close as they stand there naked together looking out that window. What captures their attention is the immensity of the Moon so apparently close to Earth that they can count the craters together. Their toes dig deep into the comforting maroon carpet beneath their bare feet.

"Clavius," Vincent whispers quietly as he realizes he can once again communicate. He hugs Ted tightly around his waist. Ted merely nods as tears fill his eyes.

In their new life Ted Avila and Vincent Wauneka are now civilians. Ted personally booked a jet helicopter so he and Vincent could fly from Monument Valley to Las Vegas. "Are we there yet?" Vincent Wauneka asks.

"Come on, it's only 40 minutes or so. You never developed any patience whatsoever. We need to focus on figuring out what we're going to do with our lives once we land in Vegas."

"You think that we are five years in the future compared to when we left Clavius Base. Do you really think we are completely separated from the agency, Teddy?"

"We just need to interpret our reality like that, yes. Completely separated. Five years in the future."

The helicopter arrives in the Las Vegas Valley just at sunset and descends quickly to a landing pad near one of the more elaborate hotel

casinos. The handsome young, uniformed pilot enters the passenger cabin from the cockpit after the landing. He says, “Welcome to fabulous Las Vegas, Nevada, gentlemen. The local time is 20:45 on a Friday night. A great weekend in Sin City awaits you both. Air temperature is 110 degrees.”

Ted wipes the sweat from his brow. He smiles confidently knowing that he personally selected the hotel online sight unseen.

“You only have those small carry-ons?” the captain asks. “Only gym bags? Travel very light.”

“No time for a lot of personal stuff.”

“Military guys?”

“As they say in the movies: If we answer that, we’ll have to kill you.”

The captain laughs because he thinks he has heard a joke. He opens the door of the helicopter so that his two passengers can exit. The unexpected blast of the hot summer air hitting their faces jolts both Ted Avila and Vincent Wauneka one step backwards.

But, in just a matter of minutes, they are inside their hotel room that has powerful air conditioning running way too high. “No view,” Vincent says as he presses a button to open the drapes revealing a solid cement and steel wall directly outside their hotel window.

“I wouldn’t worry too much about the view. We’re going to freeze to death in here in a matter of minutes anyway,” Ted replies. “Maybe you could figure out how to raise the air temperature in here?”

Vincent touches a small black glass screen near the two large beds. When he presses on the screen, all of the room lights dim suddenly down. “Made it darker at least,” he says with a chuckle.

“Keep trying,” Ted says.

“Time travel agents always make time for what they need to do, Teddy.”

“No acquired patience, but somehow you’ve become a philosopher, Vincent.”

By pushing the correct sequence of buttons on the black screen, Vincent succeeds in raising the room’s air temperature.

“Great work. You know, I think I’ve figured one thing out: MMDI cannot trace us here. They will definitely want to preserve as much separation

from us as possible. To take care of our financial needs, they connected us both to something called the Madrugada Corporation located in Geneva, Switzerland. That's where our funding comes from."

"How did you learn that?"

"Just putting things together from what I've read printed on the cards we were given before we left Clavius. Take this one. It is yours now."

"These things authenticate us, right, Teddy?"

"Yes, I looked online to learn how these cards function. They are civilian IDs and the codes we've got designate us as military veterans. We also will use these cards to pay for what we need here in this century. Civilians carry this one card that fulfills multiple purposes. We can even send and receive messages through the card. We are officially legitimate here."

"But, Teddy, we do not know anybody on this entire planet today that would message us. You sure the agency will not trace us with these cards? Monitoring what we do with the funds?"

"Well, I suggest we don't go wild and buy a fancy car which could attract unwanted public attention. But these cards are safe for us. I just want for us to relax and feel freedom. We need to take care of ourselves as our priority now. I believe that we deserve a life of our own."

2265

In Las Vegas there is a major intersection in which Fremont Street, Eastern Avenue, and Charleston Boulevard intersect. In this timeline, that location is where the famous Blue Angel Motel and Blue Heaven Nightclub are situated.

Ted Avila and Vincent Wauneka established full-time, year-round residency in one of the Blue Angel Motel's renowned "heavenly" themed rooms. Their home is a large suite on the second level of the motel overlooking Charleston Boulevard. This puts the two men within easy walking distance to the Blue Heaven Nightclub. At night, this thriving business is a trendy, contemporary lounge which along with the motel has enjoyed continuous operation since the middle of the 20th century. By day, you can always get a decent, satisfying meal and a famous Vegas brand of dark roast coffee no matter what time you arrive.

This internationally-known venue has distinctive dark blue leather

booths generously splashed with thin strips of yellow and red neon lighting. Fluffy silver and white digitally-animated clouds float on the ceiling and walls. Loyal local residents and tourists alike gather here routinely. On one particular evening, the headliner at the Blue Heaven Nightclub is one of the most successful jazz combos in the world, Doctor Ozzie and His All-Male Nurses Band.

Five masculine male "nurses" in shiny white high heels literally are bulging through tight-fitting white medical uniforms with thigh-high skirts intended for wear by shapely females at work in hospitals. They perform an upbeat, jazzy disco version of "My Blue Heaven" punctuated with Mexican rhythms and unexpected chord changes from major to minor.

Doctor Ozzie is wearing an all-white medical uniform with a stethoscope around his neck. He skillfully croons the well-known lyrics to the old American standard while swaying side to side in front of the band tightly gripping his shiny white hand-held microphone.

The nightclub is jam-packed with customers including Ted Avila and Vincent Wauneka wearing stylish black tuxedos with red open-neck shirts as they sit together at a small round table in close proximity to Doctor Ozzie. The two men clap their hands happily in sync with the song as they join in singing.

Doctor Ozzie smiles gregariously at the two men as he edges closer to them during his performance. Ted Avila stands up and respectfully caresses Doctor Ozzie's chin which causes the lead singer to laugh aloud joyfully but he keeps on performing in front of the audience in the club.

Ted Avila is by himself standing outside the venue on Charleston Boulevard as he smokes a cigarette. He is wearing the same tuxedo with a red open-neck shirt from previously inside the nightclub. He hears footsteps and looks up to notice a handsome man in his early forties approaching him after stepping off a Las Vegas city bus near the Blue Angel sign.

"Sorry to bother you," the man says to Ted Avila after approaching him. "Only take a minute here. We last saw each other in 1996."

Ted Avila says, "That was around two hundred seventy years ago. You have some secret for how you stay so young-looking?"

"You may recall I was a witness testifying before a United States

Senate subcommittee. My twin brother had been killed and the senators wanted to know what I knew about his death."

"I don't have time for this. You take a big risk just walking up to someone here. This is Las Vegas for fuck's sake."

"Please, sir. Only will take a few minutes. I assure you. We met before. We are not strangers here."

"I remember the hearings on domestic terrorism, yeah. A long time ago. I had received a subpoena in the late nineties because my name showed up on an FBI report as an interview subject in Bullhead. Not fun for me at all. I vaguely remember you. I don't remember your brother at all. Go away, will you?"

"There was a huge blizzard while we were there for the hearings. All that heavy snow shut down many businesses, schools, and even the federal government in the DC area. You and I met once before those hearings. The first time was in Kingman, Arizona. You do remember that, right?"

"What are you doing this for, man? I am nobody. I want you to just walk away and leave me alone."

"In Kingman when we first met, you thought I was crazy because I claimed that I could read your mind. I gave you a photograph of cowboys in a fake, on-stage hanging that was part of a Wild West tourist show that I worked in at the time."

"The famous photograph. Cowboys being hanged for the amusement of tourists in Kingman. I do remember that now, yeah."

"You may wonder what I'm doing here unannounced and what I want."

"Something like that, yeah. I remember you are Matthew Lejeune, originally from New Orleans. What exactly do you want from me? I need to get back inside the club."

"My twin brother was Mark Lejeune. He was killed in Bullhead back in the nineties. Neo-Nazi crap. He was photographed with other men in Bullhead with all manner of guns and flags with swastikas. I told the senators in Washington, I was not like my brother. I never hung out with neo-Nazis. I don't believe what they believe. I never was into guns, either. My brother died due to his poor life choices, that's all there is to it. I live in Arizona today."

"Then why the hell are you here in Las Vegas with me now, talking with me about this?"

"I was recruited to work at MMDI. I think maybe you've heard of them, right?"

"Wait, let me guess. You were told that your mind was really advanced compared to most other men. They wanted you for your mental capabilities. They told you that. And you fell for it."

"You've heard this song before."

"They let you age a little bit. You look around age forty."

"My appearance at this age gives me credibility when I go on missions. Showing up as a 21-year-old kid just wouldn't cut it."

"What is your mission here today in Las Vegas?"

"That's classified. But, I can tell you I am here to meet specialists at the Air Force Base."

"Which one? There are two Air Force bases here."

"The classified one."

"I am separated from MMDI. I am not supposed to have any interactions with MMDI personnel. The Exodus Protocol. Ever heard of that?"

"Yes, but I have a very high level of clearance. Most people at the agency have not heard of that protocol."

Vincent Wauneka walks up to Ted Avila at this exact moment and says, "I wondered where you had gone."

"Taking a trip down memory lane with this gentleman from Arizona who was just leaving," Ted Avila explains quickly. "You gotta catch the next bus, Matthew, right?"

The handsome man suddenly looks as though he feels very threatened as he notices Vincent Wauneka clenching both fists tightly. Matthew Lejeune gestures with both hands to suggest that he is surrendering. Then he quickly takes a few steps backwards from both Ted Avila and Vincent Wauneka. Then the man turns and walks back to the nearby bus stop.

"Come on. Let us go back inside, Teddy."

Ted Avila watches Matthew Lejeune step onto the bus that just arrived. He looks out a bus window and salutes Ted Avila. Then the bus drives on. "Feels like I saw a ghost," he admits quietly to Vincent Wauneka. The two

men walk back into the nightclub and enjoy the show being put on by Doctor Ozzie and His All-Male Nurses Band.

When Ted Avila and Vincent Wauneka return to their Blue Angel Motel room, they stand together wearing only tight-fitting shorts as their tuxedos are strewn on the floor near the bed. Vincent Wauneka gives Ted Avila a big hug.

"Vincent, that guy. He said he was an agent working for our former employer."

"That reminds me, Teddy, someday I need to tell you about how I traveled back and finally convinced a writer in the 20th century to work on a screenplay to discredit our former employer. But I have to admit I have had trouble right now recalling what I did on missions or how you and I worked together."

"Same thing with me, Vincent. Perhaps Eduardo lied to us about retaining our memories. Or maybe he just meant we would not have our memories erased at Clavius before we left for Monument Valley. It could be true that our memories simply are expected to start fading as years go by due to normal aging. I know that my own memories certainly are not as durable as I expected they would be after we accepted the Exodus Protocol. Fading away each day we live here on Earth away from Clavius. Maybe that one thing—memory loss—is a natural outcome of us returning to civilian life. I will keep us separated from the agency."

"Yeah, you probably are right. That guy. What was he doing here in Vegas?"

"Vincent, he said I don't have the clearance for knowing that. He did tell me he was meeting with Air Force specialists about our favorite aliens. Maybe something has gone wrong with the war between the agency and our invisible slave masters."

"Oh, that is strictly minor stuff, Teddy. Not important at all to us any longer. Maybe it would be best for us if all our memories about time travel faded slowly away."

19

CRISTALINO

2266

Chaz Yang, a resident of Sedona, Arizona, outwardly gives the impression that he is a gentleman who enjoys his retirement bolstered by his personal wealth and sunshine. Meanwhile, on the inside, he is running to seek shelter from ongoing thunderstorms and heavy rain.

"I am one who almost single-handedly was responsible for the initial success of MMDI. This accomplishment is especially compelling because I edged out many competitors to get to the top of the agency. China is the one civilization on Earth that succeeded where all others failed. It was China which developed time travel by adapting alien science. And time travel became the most powerful weapon ever known to humanity. I am Chinese. I was born in America but grew up in Beijing. So it was that the Chinese government insisted I be appointed as the head of the newly founded international time travel agency on the Moon."

Ted Avila and Vincent Wauneka listen to him as they sit across a round glass table in matching glass chairs from Yang on a large wooden deck. The three men gaze out at Sedona from their deck chairs to study the pink sandstone formations and general clusters of cacti. They each hold shallow goblets containing a pure, transparent liquid. A tall, elegant glass container sits on the table filled almost to capacity.

"Cristalino is the name, gentlemen. If you're wondering. The very best añejo tequila. The word expresses quality. Excellence. Only the very best

for me. When the weather is agreeable, I sip this delicate delight while sitting out here on my deck. And I think about the immediate now."

"General Yang, Vincent and I agreed to meet you. You are the first to message me using those plastic cards from the Madrugada Corporation. But this feels really odd. Sitting here on your deck with you, sir. And in Sedona. Where I was born. And now, it seems like centuries later. We are drinking this straight. Here with you."

"I appreciate that, Mr. Avila. I know you made the four-hour drive today from Vegas. And I thank you and Mr. Wauneka for the respect you are showing to me. Your courtesy also is noteworthy. I believe that I do not deserve your courtesy, I am certain of that. Absolutely certain."

"Sir, we will always show respect for you. Teddy and I believe we owe you that. We may have had our disagreements with you, General, in the past. You deserve our respect in the immediate now."

"Well, kiss, kiss, Mr. Wauneka. Except now it is my turn to kiss kiss. Now I feel the need to show deference to you two."

"That is not really necessary to say, General. Teddy and I were doing what we felt was our best."

"And, sir, we followed your orders. Always."

Yang throws his head back and swallows the entire contents of his goblet. "What you don't know. So much. I owe you. I want to get this off my chest. I cashed in a lot of favors I held with people inside MMDI here on Earth. They tracked you two down in Nevada."

Avila and Wauneka nod.

"At MMDI I bent a lot of rules and regulations. I broke many others, too. I abused my position and my power at Clavius Base. Constantly. Dependably."

"General, Vincent and I both had experience living outside the expectations of polite society, so to speak. I went on mission. I make choices. People are dead now. Because I made choices on missions to change what was. Changes to the timeline. Doing my job. That's it. And now today I have to live with the pain of faulty, disconnected memories."

"I got reports from Doctor Oswald. He said he was trying to help you

sort through the memory issues you were having after returning from your missions."

"He helped. I would say Doc Ozzie always tried to do his best. But, what I remember today hurts me. Deeply hurts, General."

"What can I do to help you?"

"Nothing. I'm sure of that. Listen, I was sent back in time. I did what I had to do. Oklahoma City, 1995. New York City, 2001. And several others in the third decade of the 21st century. I was assigned to missions that required me to develop sexual relationships with other men directly connected to particularly significant mass casualty events. My sexual relationships with those men change history. That is my job. And I accept all that. But somehow, I have started thinking about the outcomes of my having changed timelines. I started focusing upon people who died as a result of repairs I made to timelines. I have to admit that I feel bad because people are dead directly or indirectly after the choices I made."

"Mr. Avila, I understand you and I think you are justified in your anger and you're feeling bad. I understand what you are telling me."

"Sir, before we were separated from MMDI, Eduardo said that Vincent and I did not know our actual chronological ages. Doc Ozzie never gave us that information. Eduardo would not be specific."

"Teddy and I have tried to do the math. To add up the number of birthdays we have had. Easy to get lost doing that."

"My take is that you two could be approaching the chronological age of one hundred. You look great, by the way, especially for the crusty relics that you genuinely are."

Avila and Wauneka give polite smiles in response.

"I apologize for joking. I may not have lived as many years as each of you has, but I believe I have learned. When I look back. I believe I have learned. Truth is that I was so lonely living at Clavius Base. I held the position as Director of MMDI, but I could not focus clearly on work. My mind was preoccupied with sex. All the time."

"Yes, General, we saw that in how you related to Vincent and me."

"What you did not see matters more. To me, anyway. I want you both to know. I need to tell you. This happened so long ago. Yet it all remains

in my memory. I would travel in time to the past. I would seek out men with whom I could have sexual adventures without interfering with the way the timelines were supposed to turn out. I suppose all the logs still exist. Someone could look it all up. All the years I went back to. Someday someone may add it all up. Chaz Yang's sex exploration vacations. Joked to myself. That was the name I provide. To ease the guilt I felt. But in truth, the guilt never went away."

"We do not know how to respond to you today, General."

"How I respond to what I did is very simple. Right here. I have my Cristalino. High-quality, clear and refreshing. It is difficult for me to push memories away, to bury the things I do not want to remember. No matter what, I have my Cristalino."

The two former agents break off eye contact with the General.

"Let me tell you something. I got involved with an agent who reported to me. Anthony Marugo, agent number 106553. Not able to forget him. Nicknamed Squirrel because of a certain tattoo on his back. Flying squirrel from some cartoon show. His ancestors were from China. Like mine. A very good-looking young man. I especially get hard for young men who are Asian and handsome. I find them irresistible. I went back in time to see him on a mission I had sent him on. Well, 'see him' is not accurate. At the Laughlin, Nevada casinos in 1990."

"You don't need to tell us anything about that, sir."

"I must. This is a kind of confession. No, correct that. This is an actual confession. I went back to the 20th century so I could torment this agent and to fuck him against his will. That's correct. I raped him."

The memories General Yang holds in his mind are indelible, eternally prominent:

Agent Marugo, nicknamed Squirrel, wakes up and sees that General Yang has tied him completely naked to a wooden chair out in the Nevada desert. His wrists are bound behind his back. It is early morning just after sunrise out in the desert. The eastern face of Spirit Mountain catches the first rays of sunlight. This is only the desert. Only Nevada. There is no such thing as spirits. Spirit Mountain has no spiritual powers. Just a

name. It merely looks commanding in the way the deep gray rock bounces the morning light into tender blue skies over Clark County.

The desert colors at dawn are sweetly, deceptively innocent in their cool pastels of pink, blue, and yellow. The true nature of this brutal region is never known until the late afternoon when the overhead summer sun scorches everything below. Not very hot yet here. But Agent Marugo is drenched in a deep panic sweat, pretending not to struggle against the stretched gray duct tape that General Yang wrapped tightly around his wrists behind his back.

"General Yang," Squirrel says, "Sir, what did you give me?"

"You know what, Mr. Marugo?" Yang says. "I get off on simply standing here, straight and silent, never needing to unholster this gun I always wear on missions. Especially to the 20th century. Guys like you in this position are always crystal clear about what I will do in the event I feel even the slightest disappointment following your answers."

"Shit, sir," Squirrel says, almost in tears. "I'm really sorry, sir. Why am I naked?"

"Do you really care about making fashion statements now? Lighten up. You're a fucking desert rat. Tied up really tight here in the desert. Just where you belong, you fucking loser. Shot you up with just a little of my famous secret sauce here. Experimental stuff I like to use. Only bring it out on special occasions. Like this one."

"General, please. I'm begging you!"

"Well, that's a surprise to me, really," Yang says as he holds up a syringe very close to Squirrel's face. "Never heard that before from any man in a defenseless position like yours. Begging me. I love it. Look at this shiny silver hue in this syringe. Kind of eerie. Don't you think? Yet, festive."

"What have you shot into me, sir? Feeling really dizzy."

"Oh, Christ, General Yang!!"

"Wow, both the name of the Lord and my name!" Yang says as he laughs. "Together in one sentence. I'm surprised that you even have the skill to speak in complete sentences. Your IQ is lower than other agents I am aware of. I recruited you only because you're good-looking and you have Asian ancestors like I do."

"Please, stop, sir," Squirrel says. Now he is crying.

"The fear in their eyes is the very best part. Makes a guy realize how you've got him. They're like helpless little boys. Completely open to suggestion, which I have down to a simple routine now whenever I use this formula. Except for one thing. When it's a black guy, I make the lizards white. Always works better for them if the lizards are white."

"Works pretty fast, don't you think? Any second now, you'll be watching thin black lizards crawling out your nose. They slither down your chest and head right for the goods. They bite your balls off with their elongated choppers. Chomp, chomp. Your balls end up bloody shreds of useless flesh."

"Tell me what you want me to say, General," Squirrel says, sobbing.

"There comes a certain point of no return when I can't do shit to alter the drug's effect. Not a pretty picture, let me tell you, boy!"

"You have a way to reverse this?" Squirrel pleads.

"Of course I do, yes," Yang says. "But, you know, come to think of it, maybe not. I was in such a hurry when I left base to come here to meet you. Maybe I forgot to bring along that other injection. The antidote. Wow, what a terrible oversight on my part. I'm so sorry, Mr. Marugo. So very sorry."

Squirrel says nothing and just keeps sobbing as he struggles in vain to free himself from the wooden chair.

"Let's change the subject, Mr. Marugo," Yang says quietly. "Open your mouth. I'm going to give you something to suck on. Make sure you make me feel good in there. All warm and moist. Just do it. Do what I tell you. Any lizards yet, Mr. Marugo?"

At Yang's home Ted Avila pours himself another serving of Cristalino and walks over to the railing of the large deck. "Really wish you had not told us that, General."

"I apologize. To you both. I needed to say that. But there is a natural flow. I cannot change that. Men have innate behaviors. Men cause trouble, so timelines can be repaired. Birds need to fly. Dolphins need to swim. Rubber tires wear out from the friction. There is a natural order in the physical universe. That order prevails."

“Could you tell us who was really in charge at Clavius Base, General. You? Doc Ozzie? Eduardo? Who made decisions about changing timelines. Somebody had to make the specific selections. And then send us agents back in time on missions.”

“Mr. Avila, I presume you two interacted with Eduardo. Odd to give a man’s name to a supercomputer like that. But the ones who built him did that. Eduardo was in charge. Not me. I could not keep track of the timelines. Way too much to remember. I am a flesh-and-blood human. Eduardo is not. He did all the tracking of timelines simply and smoothly. Without Eduardo MMDI would fail very quickly. Very steadily swirl down the drain. Time travel operations would fall apart. Eventually, the planetary civilization would self-destruct. Maybe you both have heard most of this before.”

“Eduardo told me that Vincent and I are not allowed to interact here on Earth or on the Moon with anyone from MMDI.”

“What Teddy is getting at, General, is our interacting with you here today is taking advantage of a loophole. You are not from MMDI. You retired. You left MMDI. You left the Moon. For Teddy and me to be here with you in Sedona is not a problem. You are John Q. Public now. Not something covered by the Exodus Protocol.”

“You are correct about my status, Mr. Wauneka. Not currently affiliated with MMDI. You and Mr. Avila are free and clear to do as you wish by being here today. And I assume that you two will not remain in touch with me.”

Avila and Wauneka stand together at the railing. Yang pours himself another goblet of Cristalino.

“You are from Sedona, right, Teddy? You think about how your life would have been far different had I not recruited you.”

“Yes. It’s a unique place, Vincent. But I had a destiny to pursue. How pompous that sounds, doesn’t it? I know that I had to be recruited by you. I know that I had to follow through on that. We were meant to meet each other. No question about that. But, it’s good to return here to Sedona. Haven’t come back here too often. Maybe this will be the only visit I make. I cannot forget how stunning the views are here. The colors.

How the scents of everything dance together. Well-organized impact. The choreography of the desert life."

20

KARMA

1998

Vincent Wauneka walks slowly into a small internet café on the edge of the Brown University campus in Providence, Rhode Island. The room is dark because of the deep cherry wood walls and insufficient overhead lighting. But he easily finds the person who has agreed to meet with him in person.

She is a middle-aged overweight woman dressed all in black. He remembers her from a previous mission to the past. But they really were never properly introduced. She is Katherine Snowe, a writing professor at Brown University. Her eyes stare at him over the top of her glasses and she is turned away from the pages of the paperback book she holds in her hands at the small wooden table. Then, she glances down and continues reading as if to communicate what she's reading is far more important to her than talking with him. She adjusts her long white hair pulled tightly behind her head after pointing for him to sit in the chair across from her.

"Before you say anything," Katherine Snowe says to Vincent Wauneka holding up her right hand in the air without looking at him, "I want you to know that I do not believe one single word of what you told me on the phone. I wasn't born yesterday. I don't easily fall for bullshit stories from total strangers."

"Doctor Snowe. Thank you for agreeing to meet me. I will not waste your time. I promise. What I have to say will I think appeal to you as a writer."

“Well-prepared. Talk to me. I won’t injure you. Much. At least not physically.”

He nods at her to convey his respect.

“So, you knew Teddy. My ex-husband.”

“Yes, Doctor Snowe.”

“No need to call me that. I’m Kate. Call me Kate. So, you and Teddy were lovers?”

Vincent Wauneka frowns but at the same time, he smiles.

“Good-looking young man. He would have been attracted to you so easily. That long hair of yours is just stunning. Very sexy overall. Native American look. Or maybe you are just an actor from Hollywood who is playing a part.”

“Full-blooded Navajo. I met your ex-husband in Arizona. We worked together after that.”

“You’re the top. He’s the bottom. Correct?”

Vincent Wauneka smiles broadly at her.

“Well, that lover of yours dumped me and headed to Arizona. He wanted to go home. Back to his mystical little hometown in Northern Arizona. With all those indigenous crystals and spiritual vortexes. We were married there. In Sedona. Never gonna forgive him. That’s for god-damned sure.”

“For marrying you?”

Katherine Snowe does not react. Her face remains unchanged. She does not even blink.

“I came here to let you know that he is dead. Crashed his beloved Ex-91. That’s what he named it. He died in an accident. Crashed into a desert ravine.”

“He bought that damn four-wheel-drive vehicle that he loved so much right here when he lived in New England. Just before he dumped me. Like he knew somehow. Like he planned his whole exodus. Packed up that brand-new vehicle with whatever belongings would fit in cardboard boxes inside. He must’ve fantasized about driving off into the sunset without me. Then he actually pulled it off.”

Vincent Wauneka only nods respectfully, but he remains silent.

“Teddy and I were together almost fifteen years. I thought of him as a perfect man. Stupid interpretation, right. The nicest guy in the world. Because he took care of me. I needed that from him. From a man such as him. It could have been anyone else. But it was Teddy. I will never forget that. He was kind and generous to me always. I don’t know why he stayed with me for as long as he did. I knew he was not satisfied with me. Or our marriage. Always thought Teddy was attracted to men instead of women. Fantasized that I could change him. Yeah, that’s right. If a gay guy only can meet the right woman, as they say. That will turn any man into someone devoted entirely to his woman. That’s the bullshit they keep selling us women. Society. Religion. But I honestly don’t care about any of that anymore. It’s all just ancient history to me now.”

Vincent Wauneka nods once again at Katherine Snowe.

“So, hot stuff, what is it you planned to tell me? Other than, of course, to waltz in here and so easily announce the untimely passing of one Theodore Joseph Avila.”

“Well, truth is: He made me promise him. He was insistent that if I were to survive him, I had to find you somehow. To tell you about his work. So that you will know. Maybe even that you would want to write about it.”

“His work? Teddy told me he worked as a producer in television news. An obvious cover story.”

“Yes, of course, Doctor Snowe.”

“Look, your formality certainly is not needed here. I’m Kate. Can you call me that?”

“As you wish, Kate. You were correct about him having a cover story.”

“So, why did Teddy need a cover story at all, then?”

“I was—or I am—an undercover agent. That is the real story here. More of an undercover enforcer. I fix situations. A repairman of sorts. I make things turn out the way they should. That is how I met your ex-husband.”

Katherine Snowe stares at Vincent Wauneka again over the top of her glasses. “Bond. James Bond.”

“No nothing like that. You can make money from what I tell you here this afternoon.”

"False promises at best. Someone's first got to buy what I write."

"I told you: I fix situations. Make things turn out the way they should."

"I heard you the first time. No hearing loss at all. I just do not believe what you're telling me. I don't understand how you could tell me anything if it's undercover."

"Hidden in plain view, as they say. I have been trying to tell you. Teddy only mentioned Rhode Island. The smallest state."

"What a challenge it must have been for you to track me down, right?"

"Other than to tell you Teddy was killed, I want to talk with you about a writing project. I believe I can guide you to make money from such a writing project."

"You do realize how crazy you sound. That's a horrible cliché."

"And you are one out of about five hundred other people who have told me the same or similar thing in so many words."

"Five hundred? That's not really possible. What are you, a time traveler?"

"Yes, Kate. You guessed my top-secret occupation. So you win the all-expenses paid trip to Bermuda and a brand new 1998 Mustang convertible."

"Okay, just stop. Why don't you write your own best-seller and you can make money?"

"The time-travel agency I work for would not look kindly upon me if I became a whistle-blower about them."

"Come on. You can't manipulate me. I'm a master of that compared to you. I see your technique clearly if you don't mind my telling you so. Know what? I also can sense that you never had sex with a woman, either. Men like you who prefer men. Pride in that. Rainbow flags. Gold star. Parading around in those tight blue jeans."

"Ted and I worked together. I am telling you the truth."

"Now it's 'Ted.' You both were undercover spies? You've got to do better than that."

"Never said we were spies. He and I were undercover enforcers. We fixed things. Repaired stuff."

"Repaired stuff? What, like microwave ovens and toasters?"

“We came from another place and time. We repaired time, itself. Fuck all the microwave ovens and the toasters.”

“From another time? You are here to suggest that I should write about time travel?”

“Yes, Kate. You should think of it that way. Yes, exactly correct. Hide the truth in plain view. Just think of me as a character in a science fiction story if that helps this all make sense. If that will help you tell the world what needs to be told. A story that starts with the discovery of a colossal statue buried deep in a lunar crater. It happened long ago—back in the year 2194. Well, wait. That is in your future. That is in my past. Sorry for being so confusing.”

“You’re enjoying every minute of this.”

“All schoolchildren where my science fiction character comes from in the future are taught in history class that time travel started with the Chinese. Ultimately, a Moon base was constructed for time travel. Top secret.”

“The Chinese? They control the Moon?”

“Not really, no. An international group built upon Chinese findings and research created a top-secret agency. That is who I work for. Teddy also. The Moon is not controlled by any nation on Earth. But the time travel operations run by that agency take place deep inside the lunar crater named Clavius.”

“And, you’re saying that this is science fiction story I’m supposed to write. You and Teddy are characters who work for some agency hidden inside a crater on the Moon. Your employer uses technology to travel back to the past and change things on Earth to turn out the way this agency wants?”

“Yes, you got it.”

“If you guys really are time travelers, then how is it that your secret agency didn’t use their technology to bring my ex-husband back to life?”

“I expected you to ask me that, Kate.”

“It’s classified. I do not have any security clearance. You’re not supposed to tell me any of this, are you?”

“I am asking you to accept that what I am telling you is not really some made-up story. I have a disk to give you that contains files you can look

at on your computer. Once you do that, you will know I am not making up some science fiction story. This is real."

"Why me?"

"They always ask me that. Each time, I have a different answer. In this instance, I will tell you the truth. You are Katherine Snowe, the ex-wife of Theodore Joseph Avila. That is why I searched for you in the smallest U.S. state. I told Teddy I would find you. The honest truth. That is why I am here with you in this coffee shop this afternoon."

"You would use your time machine. You would go to Hollywood. You would manipulate people there. You're good at that. Just so the science fiction that I write gets made into a blockbuster motion picture. Fame and fortune for me, right?"

"Well, at least fortune."

"Could you use your technology so I could see Teddy again with my own eyes?"

"The technology is set up to do that—to bring one passenger with us where we go. Rarely used."

"This was supposed to be you persuading me. You know this. You came here to convince me to write a science fiction story. I won't do it unless you can do something with your technology so that I get to see Teddy again."

Vincent Wauneka covers his face with both hands.

"I don't care how you do it. Just send me back in time. Or take me with you when you travel back. Then let me do my thing alone. Find a place and time where I can interact with Teddy while he is still alive in this century. That's what you need to do to convince me to cooperate with you."

"I probably could. Take you from today in 1998 back to 1991. I would need to select a specific date and place where you will be able to interact with your ex-husband. But you will need to play along with me. You will need to act a certain way. Say certain things. You will need to play a part. I will give you the exact words to use so that Teddy will accept you as real. You do not want to mess up the space time continuum."

"I hate when that happens, don't you?"

"The technology will allow me to bring you back with me, yes. I just

have never used it. I probably should get specific instructions from work before we take off together."

"Will this be like flying in a passenger jet? Do you think they serve drinks on that flight?"

"Afterwards, when you write the screenplay, I have one requirement for your storytelling: You need your screenplay to convey a theme expressed like 'seeing is believing' or something more eloquent than that. The main character needs to be convinced that he has a photograph of cowboys that keeps changing. He sees different cowboys appear while others are gone. That photo is the storytelling mechanism that conveys to the audience his inability to tell if he should believe what he sees."

"I can do that, Vincent. You can rely upon me."

"In 1991 in Arizona there is a pancake house we can use for you and Teddy to meet and interact. I will walk into that pancake house and sit down with you two at the table. Like I said, you will need to act the part. You will need to behave convincingly as though you do not see me sitting at your table. I will give you handwritten notes to memorize and then you burn the paper it was written on. Not gonna give a full script. You would need to improvise. You would not respond to what I say and never look at me or speak to me. Can you do all that?"

"I promise you. What you will get from me at that 1991 pancake house is Meryl Streep."

1991

Ted Avila stumbles half-asleep down a sidewalk in Bullhead after being unable to sleep. The bright blue and yellow neon lights on the exterior of a pancake house directly down the street from his motel attract his attention. He believes that because the Bullhead Pancake House is not very busy during the overnight shift, he will be able to sit down alone to get off his feet before emotional and physical exhaustion finishes him.

He locates an available round table for three with a bright red tablecloth. The murals in the restaurant communicate a 1960s American Southwest motif, complete with the obligatory Joshua Trees. The ghosts of Roy Rogers and Dale Evans likely are here singing their famous duet

Happy Trails in full costumes as they waltz down the aisles between the tables and booths.

Instead, there is a handsome young cowboy singer in full Wild West costume strumming a guitar as he walks and sings. The cowboy stops by the table for three where Ted Avila is seated. He continues softly singing a rendition of *A Hazy Shade of Winter*, an ancient 1966 song by Paul Simon.

A waitress approaches the table for three carrying a pot of coffee. She is around forty, heavy-set, with blonde hair and blue eyes. She is wearing a bright red and white uniform. When the waitress smiles at him, Ted Avila sees by her nametag that her name is Fran.

He tightly closes his eyes in horror and sighs in frustration. This waitress could be a long-lost twin sister of his ex-wife. When Ted Avila finally reopens his eyes, seated across from him at the table for three in that pancake house is Katherine Snowe. She is very confident with an oddly victorious smile. She sits there at the table, poised and ready for him. In a softly loving voice, she asks him, “You didn’t think you could get away from me that easily, did you, Teddy?”

21

ENEMY

2012

You must remember this. No, this is not a cherished reference to legendary lyrics from a famous old song heard in a Hollywood movie. Instead, this reference shifts closer to a dire warning that nobody should ignore.

I feel obliged to clarify this as your narrator while we observe the unfolding of events on 11 October 2012. Alexander Sarkis, a young man from Kansas with the nickname of "Lex" will not soon forget this crucially important date.

Given his time-travel capabilities, Sarkis has arrived at the same 11 October in the same year, 2012, to address different priorities. There is no built-in linear sequence here, but it helps you to recall his flight from Wichita to Las Vegas happened on the 11th of October. Also remember that Sarkis returned to the 11th of October of the same year to visit with Ted Avila and Vincent Wauneka inside the abandoned Blue Angel Motel in Las Vegas.

What a waste of energy! The two men refused to take Sarkis seriously. His face showed what failure looks like. He slowly descended a broken motel staircase littered with putrid abandoned clothing mixed with the rancid odors of feral cat feces. He instinctively held his breath and in so doing reached the ground level on the verge of passing out. The crashes of thunder outside the motel and the din of heavy rain hitting asphalt accentuated the dark mood he was trapped in.

That is when he realizes that he was not alone in that abandoned first

floor hallway. A young man about his age leaned against a rotting sheetrock wall with his arms crossed confidently. Sarkis notices that the visitor was wearing all black clothing and thick military-style boots.

"I thought all you rideshare drivers are supposed to remain with your car," Sarkis said quietly using a friendly tone that he hopes will conceal his trepidations.

"No sarcasm" was the visitor's very brief reply.

"What's going on? What do you want?"

"Well, it's ironic that I actually am here to pick you up. Your destination is even programmed into my phone. I can show you if you like. We better get going." The visitor finally smiled.

"We both know I didn't book a ride. Never used an app. Never contacted you."

"Yeah, true, true. But, listen. I know your name. Alexander Sarkis. Born August 8, 2251. Oh wait, that's a small problem. You're from 260 years in the future. How do we explain that to ourselves, Lex?"

"You told me no sarcasm."

"Could you accept I am quite honestly here to help you tonight?"

"No doubt rescuing me from a fate worse than death, right?"

"Well, no. Actually I am rescuing you from death itself. Just a little procedure we like to call 'the death splice.'"

"Are you from Jarnsaxa Corporation? They want me dead."

"Ah, your employer. No, I am not from Jarnsaxa. The truth is I am from the competition."

"The competition? You mean MMDI?"

"Yes, but that's classified."

"How do you know that my employer is trying to kill me?"

"Someone from the future, like me. We know what happens in the past. This is the past. We both are here on the 11th of October in 2012. That was the date you were shot dead at the Blue Angel Motel. I am going to change the past. You will not die here tonight because MMDI has approved the use of the death splice so you can continue living. My presence here is to change your past."

"I don't believe you."

"Just try to walk out these exit doors here at this shitty old motel with no paying guests. You'll feel intense pain of the worst kind from unexpected outcomes. Desert rainstorm, lots of thunder. You won't even hear the two gunshots to your brain. Direct hits. Instantly dead well before the puddle of your blood pours out in the flash flooding drowning that motel parking lot."

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"I asked to see a doctor," Sarkis says while reclining on a metallic slab floating in the air in a small room brimming with electronic panels and twisting plastic pipes. He is naked but covered by a large sheet of soft white fabric.

"Well then, you get to see me. I am a doctor." At first glance, the man standing near the horizontal slab dressed in all-white medical attire resembles a retired celebrity rock star seen worldwide for decades in videos. Compared to what the world would recognize, the doctor looks unrecognizable because he long ago stopped coloring his hair and shaved off all his facial hair. He speaks with a very obvious British accent: "I am William Oswald, MD," he says.

"I feel sick, doctor. Especially dizzy. What's going on? An awful sensation. Like I was an insignificant bug getting crushed."

"I am the chief medical officer here. As such, I can assure you beyond a reasonable doubt that you are neither insignificant nor a bug." The doctor gently touches Sarkis on the forehead to discern his body heat.

"And where is 'here'?"

"You were brought here. From Earth. You have been here before. We are deep inside a lunar base below Crater Clavius. You were passing out repeatedly when you arrived. Dissociated. Confused."

"The guy who picked me up at that motel in Las Vegas told me he was there to change my past. To rescue me from being shot dead."

"Good. You remember that."

"Remember, yes. Believe, no."

"Mr. Sarkis, the use of the death splice allows for a man to bypass the

normal action of dying. You were shot dead in Las Vegas on the 11th of October in 2012. We used the death splice and now you are quite alive and well. Your body did not react well, so now you are here in the Medical Section. Will you allow me to work on your recovery?"

"Yeah, okay. Thank you. I feel as though I have been here previously. I know about the lunar base operated by MMDI."

"Good. That suggests your mind is not damaged, Mr. Sarkis."

"What did you mean when you told me I am not insignificant?"

"Several things. You have valuable knowledge because you were an employee of Jarnsaxa Corporation at the Ranch at Amargosa—your first professional employment. But quite a bit changed in you after that, Mr. Sarkis."

"Doc, too much too fast. So disoriented. I am going to lose consciousness again."

When Sarkis awakens he is resting on his back wearing an oxygen mask while he lies in a sick bay bed. He can see racks of computerized medical equipment near him in the large facility. He watches Doctor Oswald approaching the bed.

"How long was I out, doctor?" he mumbles through the restrictions of the mask.

"Go ahead and remove the oxygen supply. No longer needed. I was growing concerned about you, Mr. Sarkis." Facial expressions confirm the doctor's claim as Sarkis lets the oxygen mask drop to the floor.

"You gonna tell me what's wrong with me?"

"You are someone—young and in excellent condition—who has been through numerous time travel experiences over a short span of time. There are physical and emotional limits nobody can ignore. A human body and mind can handle only so much in time travel."

"I have such a serious headache right now."

"Well, I suppose you do. There is one other factor. I have seen this happen only once before. An MMDI time-travel agent received a vast and rapid download directly into his brain. That came from the Ezuoia. Just like what you have experienced, Mr. Sarkis."

"That's classified top-secret. You are openly talking to me about this?"

"You are cleared to know and speak with me about all this. I learned how to treat that MMDI time-travel agent whose brain, like yours, was altered by the Ezuoia."

"You're not gonna tell me he's dead."

"No. Don't worry. He survived. Retired. Living on Earth now. Maybe playing golf in the Mojave Desert. Enjoying Mexican food. All of life's essentials."

"I remember being told I was physically injured on my first day at work at the Ranch."

"Yes, that is what happened. After that injury, you were nearly dead. You were transferred here to Clavius immediately after you were thrown from the galloping horse. Your life was saved because MMDI transformed you into a hybrid of a human male and a synthetic being with significant powers far exceeding what humans could ever accomplish."

"I never gave my permission to be modified or transformed. I was used against my will."

"I understand how you feel, Mr. Sarkis. Someone else will answer all your questions and concerns."

...

Sarkis deliberately keeps his eyes tightly closed. He does not need to look to validate that he is in a seated position in a very comfortable chair with armrests and a soft but firm support all the way to his neck. He hears a voice bearing a precise Spanish accent that wraps every syllable. *"Yo soy Eduardo."*

While keeping his eyes closed, Lex replies, "Hey, man. You do realize I only speak English."

"Indeed, Mr. Sarkis. Please open your eyes, will you?"

Lex asks, "And I will win a big surprise?" He obliges the voice by opening his eyes and sees the source of the Spanish accent. Sarkis observes a large screen directly situated across from his chair. The screen shows a photorealistic digitized moving video of Eduardo, whom Sarkis has previously met.

"Good to see you again, Mr. Sarkis. I want to explain that my name was

given to me by scientists in Argentina and Colombia who built me. At least that is the cover story I have been using for a long, long time now. What you are looking at right now on the screen is a digital render of the autonomous MMDI quantum supercomputer."

Lex quickly looks around the small room he is sitting in. The walls are covered with thick gray tiles that have a dampening impact upon the room's acoustics. A small camera is mounted on the wall but pointed directly at him from its position adjacent to the large screen.

"I thought you were an actual person. An oxygen-breather."

"As I have already explained to you: What you are looking at is a digital render."

While Eduardo is responding, a door off to the right side of the communications room slides open silently. Dr. Oswald walks in and stands next to the chair where Sarkis is seated.

"Is the doctor gonna inject me with something to make me more suggestible?"

Eduardo's expression turns into a smile.

"Mr. Sarkis, you will not be injected with anything," the doctor assures him.

"No, you guys already have stuck me, so it is pointless for me to complain, right?"

"This is merely a conversation," Eduardo explains. "Nothing intended to pressure you. But we do want you to be forthright with us."

"OK. Got it. Somehow, you guys seem to think that I can help you."

Eduardo replies, "During various moments when you were unconscious under the medical care of Doctor Oswald, you spoke aloud. We need to follow up on that."

"Talking in my sleep. Never did that before," Lex admits reluctantly as he releases his anxiety at the screen. "So, what do you want to ask me?"

"There was one word you mentioned repeatedly. Let me ask you: Is the word exoarcheology significant to you?"

Lex responds with a blank stare but does not speak.

"My conclusion, Mr. Sarkis, is that the word means something important to you," the doctor says.

“No, honestly. That word carries no significance for me. I think I know what it means. But that’s it.”

“Your repetition is what’s significant. Not merely the word exoarcheology itself,” the doctor replies.

“I want to help you guys. I know that I was brought here and I have to accept that bringing me here saved my life. I’m convinced I was targeted for an assassination by my employer. Former employer. I recognize what you have done for me by using the death splice to let me keep on living after being shot dead in Nevada. I am very grateful to you for that. But what does MMDI want from me? I am nobody.”

The doctor says, “We know you came from 2272. You were hired to write about your employer’s ranch resort in Amargosa Valley. But at the ranch you were gravely injured. You were riding one of the synthetic horses in the open desert at the edge of the resort perimeter. Outwardly, you gave the appearance of someone who had experience riding horses. At least, you looked like you knew what you were doing. Your horse was in a fast gallop and you were smiling as though the experience pleased you. Something evidently malfunctioned in the circuitry of the synthetic horse and you were jolted out of the saddle. The horse stopped galloping suddenly and fell down. Your injuries were significant and you were unconscious. You were brought here to Clavius. You were repaired. Good as new. Better than new. The technology here at Clavius allowed us to transform you into the first and only hybrid—human being plus synthetic being. Serious brain power. Unprecedented connectivity. Then, the Ezuoia gave you a vast and rapid download directly to your hybrid brain.”

“Yeah, that unprecedented connectivity was tried in the 21st century. A failed brain graft that killed thousands of men. Quickly outlawed.”

The doctor explains, “Outlawed in the United States. Clavius Base is not under the laws of the United States.”

“What are you telling me?”

“You received that outlawed brain graft when we repaired you after your life-threatening injuries at the Ranch at Amargosa.”

“My first time at work at the ranch was in 2012. That brain graft did not exist until 2031. How could I have had that brain graft implanted in me?”

"You are thinking in a linear way," Eduardo says.

Sarkis says nothing and rubs his head.

Eduardo continues: "Because you are a hybrid, your brain is a hybrid. This means your brain will not reject the brain graft. One of a kind. You will not suffer brain deterioration. The hot issue here, Mr. Sarkis, is not that brain graft. We need you to tell us what significance you find in the word exoarcheology. The Ezuoia put it there for some reason. We need to learn what that reason is."

"You've told me that while I was unconscious under the care of Doctor Oswald, I repeated aloud the word exoarcheology."

"Yes, exactly," Eduardo replies.

"Jarnsaxa Corporation recruited me for that job to write articles about the Ranch at Amargosa just after it was officially opened in 2012. But I was born in 2251. Only after I was hired for that job and flew to Las Vegas from Wichita did I realize time travel was involved. Jarnsaxa Corporation sent me to 2012 from 2272. But I am nobody. I hold no special significance to Jarnsaxa Corporation. They could have recruited some other writer who was from the 21st century, but instead they chose me for some reason."

The doctor says, "Mr. Sarkis, after all my examinations of you, I have concluded that your mind is more advanced than most people. Yes, you are from the 23rd century. But clearly the Ezuoia who control the Jarnsaxa Corporation felt you were worth being brought to 2012 from a future point 260 years in the future. Your parents—or, more importantly, the employer of your parents—figured prominently in this. And that makes you significant. That means to the Ezuoia you certainly are not a nobody like you think."

"Yeah, OK. I honestly do not know who my parents work for. They were always very secretive about that. Not even small hints."

Eduardo says, "Well, Mr. Sarkis, I can tell you they work for MMDI in the 23rd century. That's why they were not forthcoming with you about their work situation."

"How do you know the future? Actually, no. I don't really care about that. I am telling you the word exoarcheology is not meaningful to me. The definition is in my brain somehow. Put there by the Ezuoia. It's a field

of study, a discipline involving specific scientific inquiry. People in that field examine extraterrestrial artifacts."

"The Ezuoia had reasons for inserting that into your brain. One possibility is that they wanted you to spread the word about that word."

"The Ezuoia manipulated me. Jarnsaxa Corporation manipulated me. But I brought injury upon myself. I frequently fantasize about having rough sex with multiple men at the same time. While I was employed at the Ranch at Amargosa, I was given access to such men. Actually, they were not genuine men. They were humanoid, so they looked convincingly like human men. But they were manufactured beings. I concluded my employer was responsible for building those beings to be sex workers at the Ranch."

"You were injured at the Ranch by those sex workers," Doctor Oswald says.

"Yeah, that's what happened. I was being taken advantage of. I certainly did fantasize about multiple partners simultaneously, but what I experienced at the Ranch was too much too often. I could not refuse to participate in group sex with those guys. Motivated me to escape and write something for the public about what's really going on at the Ranch. The synthetic men and all. The rough sex. I wanted revenge. That's what I was trying to do when I met up with agents Avila and Wauneka at the Blue Angel Motel in Las Vegas."

"Jarnsaxa planned to have you assassinated after you met with two MMDI time-travel agents, Avila and Wauneka, at that abandoned motel. After Jarnsaxa verified that you revealed top-secret information to those agents that Jarnsaxa Corporation did not want MMDI to know about."

"How did you find all this out, Eduardo?"

Eduardo begins gesturing more expressively as he replies: "Avila and Wauneka were MMDI's top agents. They are retired now, no longer living here at Clavius. After meeting you in the Las Vegas motel, they were retrieved back here to base and briefed me on all the intel you gave them in 2012."

Sarkis is overtaken by an expression of sudden sadness as he answers Eduardo, "I get it now. It's my fate. I never asked for any of this. MMDI just wanted access to the knowledge put into my brain by the Ezuoia. And so I

am an enemy of Jarnsaxa Corporation. That means I am also an enemy of the Ezuoia."

22

COMMANDO

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Imagine the sounds you might hear if you were just a few seconds away from ending your life's journey by plunging over a perilous waterfall on a whitewater river. Water cries out in that special roar we all know as it splashes down from the sharp edge of a cliff onto jagged rocks far below. All sounds cease the instant your head smashes at terminal velocity into sharp rocks jutting upward from the cold, deep plunge pool at the bottom of the waterfall.

A muscled young man floats gently on his back with outstretched arms, like crucified Jesus, upon exactly that kind of raging whitewater. He knows what to expect. The current is dragging him ever steadily toward the sharp cliff where the river stops being a river and turns instead into falling death. The thunderous roar of the picturesque waterfall named in honor of some forgotten president should cause him great concern. It does not. His mind will not allow him to hear anything except his robust singing aloud to himself in Mandarin, the language of his San Francisco ancestors.

He drifts steadily head-first on the water's surface shimmering under the overhead sun. His bright red swim trunks barely contain his manhood, the bulge that brings him such pride. He draws ever closer to the literal edge of his world where gravity wins and he loses. He permits himself the pleasure of crying freely while he continues his singing. He realizes he is approaching the last experience he will have in his 25 years of

life. Sad to die so young. Crying angrily sure doesn't help at all, but that does not stop him.

In the final seconds just before his terrible descent into oblivion, a transparent glass globe containing a miniature dragon floats on the river and arrives near the young man's left ear. Gregory Chen turns his head and squints as he sees a tiny dragon inside the glass. The miniature beast is opening and closing his mouth of jagged teeth while frantically emitting a harsh "BEEP-BEEP-buzz-buzz-buzz-BEEP-BEEP-buzz-buzz-buzz" battle cry.

That irritating sound is something else entirely. It sounds digitally rendered. Could it be a cell phone custom ring tone? Chen rolls over in bed to look at the good-looking, beefy Black man of his same age lying there next to him. Chen raises his voice to say, "Quarter to four in the morning. Your new work phone. Hey!" The ring tone is persistent. "Fucking wake up and answer that, will you?" he grunts as he punches the left shoulder of his bed partner. "Em! Damn it! Gotta answer that!"

The muscular bed partner that Chen called Em responds by sitting up very suddenly in bed next to Chen. He accepts the cellphone smaller than a credit card from Chen. This young man's upper body is a masterpiece of well-defined angles and curves. He demands attention on the dance floor and everywhere else he may go.

"Marvin Mainer," the dark-skinned young man says in a deep voice as professionally as he possibly can. He jumps into a pair of trousers still wearing tight briefs. "What? Yeah. First day today. Yeah. Thanks. My code? When did I get a code?"

Chen crawls out of bed and with the mere wave of his hand causes a recessed panel of lights mounted in the wall to fade on. Artificial but convincing sunlight fills the bedroom. Em instinctively shields his eyes with his left hand while his right holds on to the tiny phone. "Okay. Try this: Alpha. One. One. Burbank. Six. Twenty-Seven."

"I heard your secret agent man code," Chen says in a loud voice so that Em and his caller could hear quite clearly.

"You want me where?" Em asks into the phone. "Ten minutes? Isn't today Sunday?"

“Wednesday,” Chen says as he opens a dresser drawer and finds a thick, tightly rolled-up pair of bright white sports socks that are larger than a man’s clenched fist. He tosses the all-cotton projectile aggressively towards Em. The impact zone is squarely upon Em’s undefended crotch behind tight blue jeans.

No surprise as Em responds by doubling over while letting loose with an involuntary shout of pain and humiliation into the phone. He quickly explains to the caller, “No, fine. Nothing. Just muscle spasms. Happens all the time. I’ll meet you downstairs. Give me a bit.”

Em hears Chen laughing at him, taunting him from across the bedroom. With one push of a button, Em dismisses the call. “Work sent a courier last night. This fancy encrypted phone. Terrible ring tone, though. Sorry it woke you,” he quickly says to Chen. “That’s why you hit me in the balls?” Em asks as he angrily pitches the rolled-up socks in the general direction of Chen.

“Actually, I was aiming for your face,” Chen admits as he skillfully catches the socks in mid-air with only his left hand. “But I guess I really should be thanking you. I dreamed I was floating on my back. On some raging river. I was about to fall over a steep waterfall. I was saved at the last second by that ring tone of yours waking me up.”

“You can’t swim, yet you dream of floating in water over a waterfall. Psycho.”

“That Florida witch down the hall. Hate her. She told me yesterday that you and I are connected for karmic reasons,” Chen announces as he jumps onto the bed, just barely missing Em’s thick legs and large feet. “So, I’m sure she would say that my dream has meaning for you but not me. There was this tiny dragon inside a small globe of glass. Any idea what a dragon symbolizes?”

Em groans in disbelief as he lies back down in bed. “Told you before. Fear of dragons. Childhood trauma. I have nightmares about dragons. Don’t have time for this now.”

“You don’t get to choose,” Chen says.

Em winces as Chen rushes to the bed and grabs the back of his neck. Chen’s weight pins Em face-up into the mattress until the springs complain. Then Chen lets out a fierce laugh.

"Come on. Gotta go to work. Somebody's picking me up. That was an urgent call," Em says as he struggles to get out from under Chen on the bed.

But Chen is annoyed. "Work? It's Sunday morning. What about me? You know it takes a lot of action to satisfy me sexually." Chen is fully erect and ready to act as he reaches for his favorite lube on his nightstand. Chen generously rubs the thick, slippery lube onto his cock. He then removes Em's jeans and briefs then tosses both into a corner of the bedroom. The now fully naked Em becomes sexually aroused against his will merely watching Chen's advances.

"A moment ago you told me it was Wednesday."

Chen lifts himself off Em so he is positioned correctly to grab Em's legs. "I don't wanna let you leave me, Em. One of us in this relationship has to be the aggressive one. Not gonna be you," Chen growls as he tightly holds onto the underside of Em's calves with his strong hands and then lifts Em's legs up, up, up. The soles of Em's bare feet face the ceiling. Em struggles because human legs are not designed to be forced up and over into the position Chen has chosen. Without asking and without waiting for permission, Chen plunges into Em aggressively. The first thrust is brutal. Em's breath leaves him in a single hard sound. Chen grins but does not pause. He drives in and stays there, then backs out before grinding and pounding Em repeatedly.

"You always want me to be in control of you," Chen says as Em groans involuntarily expressing his intense physical pleasure. Em has no way to stop Chen's unexpectedly rapid assault. Chen's hips snap forward and back again and again. The mattress slams the headboard into the wall in a steady rhythm. Em can smell Chen's breath, last night's chicken Parmesan. Chen's fingers dig into the meat of Em's calves hard enough to create indentations. Each pelvic thrust is meant to be felt later when Em attempts to walk.

Chen cries out in a deep moan, almost a growl, as he simultaneously laughs aggressively while releasing all he's got into Em, slamming him repeatedly downward into the bed. Chen finishes strong, but Em ends up again not having an orgasm. The heat of the moment floods him. He feels

used and wet. Still pressed hard against the sheets, denied. “You gotta just take it, Em. That’s all. No point in denying me.”

Em can feel that his hips are already sore from his legs being bent upward and back. He wears an expression of regret as Chen pulls out. Em’s hole throbs. He hates how good the stretching of his anal region feels even as his mind registers pain.

“Great fuck or what? I like knowing you’re gonna walk around sore all day. Say thank you.”

Em does not answer as Chen jumps off the bed. A reply would mean Em hands even more of himself over to Chen. Em pushed himself up on shaking arms off the bed. After taking a few steps the room tilted.

“Say thank you.”

Em’s voice still works. The words come to him with difficulty. “Thank you.”

“Should really say it like you mean it, Em.” Chen kisses Em’s forehead with theatrical care as if nothing of consequence had occurred and then walks hurriedly into the bathroom.

Why do I allow this? My body responds as if it has betrayed my mind. He owns me. My own fault.

Em has no spare time remaining. Cannot shower now. He quickly slips back into his briefs and those heavily wrinkled blue jeans he loves so much. He pulls a bright green t-shirt over his head. Then he gets into yesterday’s socks and his favorite white and blue running shoes and attempts to walk. Every step reminds him of the bruises forming under denim. He will have to live with that freshly fucked scent he owns.

A dozen floors down a beefy young, uniformed security officer wearing all black stands waiting in the lobby. His silver name tag reads, “Jake South.” He silently points his right hand toward the double glass doors so Em will exit. No greeting. No earpieces or microphones. Just rude silence followed by the pointing of his thick finger which carries the expectation of obedience.

The all-black sports utility vehicle is already running curbside. Em opens the door and climbs in on the passenger side without being told. He shuts the door and hears the thud and click of the automatic locking mechanism. Not a comforting sound.

Jake South takes the driver's seat and pulls away from the Navy Yard high-rise condo building like he has done this kind of extraction a hundred times without ever talking. The Beltway has few vehicles at this hour before sunrise. Lights smear across the tinted glass of the SUV. Jake South gets away with breaking the speed limit. Em sits with his knees apart because closing them hurts. He can feel the posterior wetness against denim. He keeps his face blank.

The security officer's eyes give off a hint of empathy as he observes Em in the rear-view mirror. Of course, no words are exchanged. Jake South has already been briefed. He saw the way Em walked from the elevator. He has a file note about Em's bruise patterns and as such will not report anything up the chain of command. But the pity was there and then suddenly gone, replaced by the professional blank expression of a man who transports other men who hold secrets.

Em stares at the back of Jake South's head. He wants to ask how much the man knows. He dares not ask. Silence is safer. The SUV eats miles. The city passes. Military fencing and ominous warning signs in red block letters appear. The all-black vehicle arrives at the security gate of Joint Base Andrews in the state of Maryland just at the eastern edge of Washington, DC. A guard checks a tablet, nods once, and asks, "Today's security code?" Jake South answers, "Identity crisis." The gate lifts. The SUV moves too fast over two-lane paved roads and arrives at a cavernous hangar. The vehicle glides smoothly through wide and tall open doors.

"In this hangar. Showers to the left. Pick any uniform and boots you want," Jake South announces as he kills the engine. Em is surprised to hear that many words spoken aloud by a security man.

The hangar is a cathedral of concrete and echoes. Aircraft silhouettes cast faint shadows far off in darkness like sleeping mammoths. Em replays what the older guy who hired him told him in person in a nondescript office. MMDI is an international corporation with a global presence in commerce. That explanation becomes the lie it surely was meant to be the moment those hangar doors seal behind the SUV. Whatever this job is, it has nothing at all to do with Joint Base Andrews, the famous home of Air Force One.

Warm water splashing down onto Em's head is a magnificent feeling. Even though the soap smells like the open sea. Solitude at last. Em stands by himself in a crew shower facility. He grins because he knows under normal circumstances he would enjoy this room fully. It would accommodate a dozen wet and lathered-up men worth fantasizing over. As he listens to the rush of the water and feels it hitting his face, Em allows himself to savor the thoughts of fun he could have there with many soaped-up naked men. The luxury of quiet calmness is an unforgettable experience. Em cannot shake the sensations of Chen slamming into him with neither foreplay nor conversation.

He soaps his chest, his belly, the heavy muscle of his thighs. When his fingers find the tender ring of his hole he flinches. Salt soap stings. Could be an abrasion in there. He washes anyway. He can still smell Chen's dinner breath. The memory of being pounded and then left alone bothers Em more than he expected it might. Em worries that he exists for someone else's finish and nothing more. He rinses until the water runs clear. It does not make him feel clean.

A gruff male voice from a pushed open door at the edge of the crew showers shouts, "Hey, wheels up in 4 minutes."

Em turns off the water and hurriedly grabs a large white towel on a hook near his shower. He passes with deliberate speed from the showers to an adjacent locker room. He sees a selection of all-black military-style uniforms, black socks and black boots hanging near the lockers. "Great. No deodorant. No underwear." He selects a uniform and boots that he supposes will fit him. He rushes to get dressed without even thinking of fully drying himself. "Going commando."

The uniform's synthetic fabric is stiff and new. It rasps against the bruises on his crotch and calves. He sits on a bench to lace the boots and has to breathe deliberately through the first few tugs. His cock curls snugly inside tight trousers. Every shift of his body on that bench reminds him he is still half-hard from being used and denied. He stands. He walks out.

Jake South is waiting by the SUV with the engine already alive. Those eyes find Em in the rear-view one more time. Em meets the eyes in the

mirror briefly and then he looks away. He does not want kindness from a stranger who already knows the existence of bruising under his clothes.

The hangar doors begin to close as the SUV rolls out into the twilight. Metal screams on metal. The last of the ordinary world is sealed out. Em's first paid day has already cost him blood, dignity, and the last quiet hour he can find. He sits very still buckled up in the back seat and lets the vehicle carry him toward whatever will come next, hips throbbing, calves bruised. Thank-you still sitting in his mouth like a stone he cannot spit out.

Chen will treat the waterfall dream as a prophecy. Em already knows that. The dragon in the glass globe will become a story Chen tells later to inflate his self-importance, perhaps twisted into some odd proof that he and Em are chained together through their karma. Also proof that Em belongs under him. Em does not have the energy to argue with a man who is not even present in the vehicle. He leans over and presses his forehead to the cool glass and watches Andrews slide past in the pre-dawn gray. *Stop renting space for Chen in your head, Em.*

Jake South does not speak again. That is a mercy. Em does not know how to answer kindness or pity. He would rather have the silence and the black uniform and the four-minute countdown that keeps him from thinking too much about the way Chen laughed while he shot his load.

The SUV screeches to a stop. The downward displacement of air outside means a rotor is already turning somewhere close. Wind slaps the windows. Em opens the door because no one will do it for him. He steps down onto concrete that is already vibrating, yet he does not hear any sounds. His hips protest. He walks anyway. This is the job. This is the first day. This is what he agreed to do when he said thank you in his bedroom to escape the violence.

He does not look at Jake South. He does not look back at the hangar. He keeps walking toward what he presumes is his ride up ahead in the dark. But he knows this is not typical of what should happen at a worldwide commerce corporation. There is nowhere else to go. No way out of here. His body belongs to too many other people this morning. At least the phone in his pocket is silent now. The dragon under glass has done

its work, whatever that might be. Em puts one boot in front of the other and lets the bruise keep time.

The rotor wash hits him like a wet slap in the high humidity. Em keeps walking because the alternative is standing still and feeling every pain at once. Jake South is already at the open side door and steps of a machine that does not look like any corporate air transport vehicle Em has ever seen. The skin is matte black. The nose is too long. The tail has a peculiar geometric slant. The jet engine under the gigantic single rotor sits too far forward. This is a large, dark mechanical insect that soon will swallow him. Em is distracted because the apparently powerful engine makes no sound whatsoever. That can't be right. All Em can hear is the rush of the rotor spinning, cutting through the air.

Jake South points at a seat on the left side of the one aisle. That's all the courtesy he will give Em today.

"Harness first. Click the straps tight. Then put on the headset," Jake South says. Em climbs in. The cabin is sleek and futuristic. The seats look synthetic with harnesses and straps that probably were tested for someone who would survive a sudden crash.

Jake South stands too close to Em and cinches the harness and straps across Em's torso. The hip strap reminds him of his bruises. Em makes a sound he does not intend to make as Jake South secures the straps. The click of the last buckle is loud and foreboding.

Em still feels damp under the uniform especially as he sits upon the spongy synthetic seat covering. The fabric sticks to his back and the inside of his thighs. He did not dry anywhere that should never have remained wet. There just was no time. Going commando means every shift he expects the aircraft to make will remind him of his twisted fate. His hips throb in a steady, ugly pulse. He has had no caffeine. He has had no nourishment. He has earned the feelings of dizziness because Chen told him Sunday was Wednesday and took advantage of Em's body. He can still taste the salty hangar soap from the shower but it distracts him from tasting leftover shame.

Jake South straps himself into a seat across an aisle from Em and then quickly pulls on a headset. He recites a string of call signs into the boom mic. None of them sound like names. They sound like inventory codes. Em can vaguely hear a male crew member from the cockpit answer Jake South through the headset. The apparent speed of the rotor increases. The air transport lifts smoothly without a lurch. It simply decides the ground is no longer required and it is time to jump skyward. Andrews shrinks. The Beltway is a gray ribbon. Then there are only low clouds and a hard blue sky above.

Em watches a small status screen on the wall in front of him like a commercial aircraft would have. The altimeter's numbers increase in a way that seems illogical for anything that passes for a normal chopper. Jake South stares forward.

Em switches on his boom mic on his own headset. "What a weird takeoff."

Jake South says aloud into his headset microphone another call sign and some numbers that might be a heading. Nothing else. No response to Em who lets the silence sink in. His hips complain unmercifully. He can feel the wetness in his butt. Why does his body insist on remembering the sensations he would rather forget? Em wants coffee the way a drowning man wants the shore. He also craves a burrito the size of his forearm. Most importantly, Em wants five minutes where no one owns him.

The soothing sounds of air shooting at high velocity past the dark mechanical insect are reassuring to Em somehow. He can barely keep his eyes open now. Nothing to do but drift off. Em remains in his all-black uniform and matching boots as he descends downward freely in the air slowly until both feet touch an all-white floor. He gazes around this bizarre location and concludes that he is inside of a large all-white room where the walls meet the ceiling and floor without any right angles. A group of all-male musicians also dressed in all-black uniforms and matching boots perform gently articulated chord progressions as Em approaches them. A trio of male vocalists appears out of nowhere. They, too, are all dressed identically to the string musicians while performing 13th century Gregorian Chant in what Em presumes is Latin.

Em imagines that he hears Jake South's voice speaking in Latin in his headset microphone. But the Latin morphs into English as Jake South speaks apparent security protocol number sequences that he recites like a prayer which has been drilled into him until all meaning was gone. Jake South switches from articulating number sequences to speaking Greek alphabet letters in a particular order, "Zeta, Epsilon, Lambda, Tau, Omicron." More secret code? Em stares across the aisle to Jake South and watches the man's lips as he begins gently vocalizing more Gregorian chant in Latin. Em sees Chen's face up very close to his own and experiences once again that theatrical exit Chen pulled off before disappearing into the DC apartment bathroom.

The air transport banks unexpectedly and Em is awakened, relieved that he was merely dreaming. He remains strapped tightly into his seat across the aisle from Jake South. "Are we there yet?" And suddenly Jake South provides to Em the first indication that the security officer is fully capable of smiling.

The helo remains oddly silent. Like a ghost machine with a huge rotor. "I'm riding inside a ghost," Em says aloud without switching on his microphone. "Seated across from another ghost."

The sudden descent of the ghost machine worries Em. The chopper drops like a stone that had mistakenly thought it could fly. Em's ears pop as the altitude changes rapidly. The altimeter on the status screen confirms what Em felt. His hips scream. He grabs the harness with both hands and rides out what he hopes is a controlled change of altitude. Through the small window he sees a landing pad that was not there a moment ago. Camouflage netting. Painted rocks. A circle of heat-scorched cement that looks like rockets landed vertically right there. The skids kiss the ground. Dust blooms everywhere and then is sucked away by some system Em cannot see.

The cessation of the aircraft's vibrations tells Em the silent engine suddenly stopped. Two crewmen step from the cockpit into the cabin and stand in front of Em and Jake South. Both wear the same all-black uniforms and black military-style boots. Em smiles when he realizes that every man he has seen this morning other than Chen seems to only wear

the identical all-black uniforms. One of the crewmen unlatches the door of the transport as Em unbuckles. Standing is an event. The bruises announce themselves. The wet cloth stuck between his butt cheeks announces itself rudely. Em steps carefully down the metal steps onto the landing pad. The high air temperature and humidity is the first thing Em notices. He can taste the dusty air and smell jet fuel.

Jake South taps him on the back as he walks behind Em. When Em turns around, the same masculine right finger points forward like Em saw earlier at the condo lobby. What is he pointing at? Em sees a seam in the rock face. It is not a door until it is. A false front slides wide open. Cold air breathes outside and rapidly drops the exterior air temperature. Em walks forward because Jake South gives him a friendly shove. The first airlock is at the end of a short tunnel of brushed steel and lights that do not flicker. A gate waits at the far end of a straight, narrow hallway. What he sees is no turnstile. It is a geometric frame that looks like a robotic machine that wants to swallow grown men.

"Hands on the rails. Eyes open. Do not speak until it finishes," Jake South says.

Em puts his palms on the cool metal sensors. The gate hums. Now he is certain that he will be eaten by a metal monster. Something warm and invisible travels up his arms, across his chest and down into his gut. He feels it linger at his hips, at his sore sphincters, at the places Chen used this same morning. A soft chime of six tones in a minor key plays clearly from speakers embedded in the gate. A line of text appears on a small panel Em can just see if he turns his head slightly.

CORTISOL ELEVATED. SOFT TISSUE TRAUMA. PREEXISTING. NOT ON-SITE. LOGGED.

The gate already knows too much. It tasted the sexual aggression and filed it as leverage, not as care. Em's jaw tightens. He wants to spit. He does not. Jake South watches the panel and does not react. Of course he does not. The file note from the lobby has additional data now, deep inside some mountain somewhere away from Washington, DC. Em frowns and shakes his head in frustration.

The gate allows Em and Jake South to pass and the iris of an inner

hatch opens very fast. Then there is a seemingly eternal elevator ride downward during which time Em does not make eye contact nor speak with Jake South. As the two men walk out of the elevator car, Em retrieves his new work cell phone to check the main display in the hopes of getting clues to his location. He sees the screen text announce, **Wednesday, August 31, 2270, 06:18 a.m. Eastern Time**. "If I were you, I would not use that phone while down here," Jake South says as he shoves Em once again. Not so gently this time.

23

MOUNTAIN

2270

Em slowly walks into a briefing theater with multiple screens of varying sizes suspended wirelessly from a high ceiling. He sees 20 seats bolted to the metal floor which are arranged in two rows of elevated semicircles providing direct, line-of-sight views for every seat to see all the hanging screens. A five-sided raised platform of bright, shiny silver with a radius of three feet is positioned in front of the hanging screens.

As Em walks up to the pentagonal platform, a low-pitched rumble precedes the materialization of a man standing there with arms folded. Em sees a digital rendering of a man fully head-to-toe with a height of just over six feet. The resolution of the rendered man makes the image so realistic that he appears to be physically present in the briefing theater. He looks like a Hollywood Latin lead who has lived hard. Creases. Canyons. Weathered. Yet his body seems healthy and exudes a strong confidence. Em hears the man's voice has a vaguely Hispanic accent and a calm that feels practiced.

"Jake South. Thank you for completing the delivery. You are dismissed."

The courtesy is a blade. Jake South nods once, turns, and walks back toward the elevator car without once looking at Em. The closing elevator doors make a hissing sound as though all the air in the room suddenly is being pumped out. And then Em is alone with whoever or whatever he is facing in the briefing theater.

“Marvin Mainer, the exoarcheologist,” the rendered man says. Then it pauses, as if tasting something. “Em.”

Em’s stomach drops. The nickname. Chen had given Em that one little syllable. That nickname Chen coined was strictly a private matter between him and Em. Nobody else knew. The nickname represented Chen’s sexual aggression toward Em and carried a silent ‘I-own-you’ meaning that made Chen proud. Did Em accept the nickname? Reluctantly, it stuck. Em reluctantly accepted the name once it came to symbolize how he enjoyed the sexual sensations of sadism Chen gave him.

“I know this has been a rough morning for you. I want to apologize to you for the whole extraction tempo you just experienced. Our protocols required speed. No harm was intended and I welcome you here this morning.”

“My first day on the job and I got proof that my new employer spies on me. You wouldn’t have my nickname unless my DC condo was bugged. You know my specialty from my doctorate. I guess that came from that series of screen interviews. But, I feel like you harvested my private life. ”

“Excellent choice of words, harvested. We do what we must as I will explain. I am called Eduardo. I am not organic. My true nature is the quantum supercomputer behind all MMDI operations. Please sit.”

A chair rises from the floor through a geometric opening that was not there two seconds ago. It is thick, all-black, synthetic, and it floats a few inches above the deck as if gravity in this room is merely a suggestion. Em stares at it with suspicion. His hips do not want to sit. His pride does not want to sit. He sits anyway because standing is a performance he no longer has the calories for. The chair conforms to his specific shape. It is almost kind. It seems strange at best.

“I really need caffeine,” Em says. “That new work phone woke me at four this morning. I had no coffee and nothing to eat.”

“I will not allow your energy levels to fall. But we have limited food available down here.”

“Why should I stay with this new job? Not a very positive experience for me thus far. I was lied to. In those interviews I was told this agency

manages international commerce. More likely it's military or political espionage. I don't want to work for you at all. I need to get back to DC."

Eduardo's weathered face does not change. "The agency protocol is not intentionally cruel. Top-secret, yes. But first, I will provide hydration for you. Your biometrics are already on my board. I will not allow you to lose consciousness before my disclosure."

"Good choice of words, disclosure."

A panel in the nearest wall slides open. Em gets out of the floating chair to walk over to the wall panel. A bottle of water, room temperature, awaits. The clear liquid is contained in what appears to be a synthetic glass container with a gentle geometric shape. Em takes it because his throat is dust. He drinks as he returns to his seat. The water helps less than he hoped. Apparently not tainted. He is relieved that he does not feel immediately nauseous. The chair holds him. The bruises pulse. He is still wet in places that should be dry. He is still semi-hard in a way that has nothing to do with the man on the screen and everything to do with a healthy man's body that has not been allowed the release it must have.

"Seven layers to disclose today. Top-secret classification. The truth has that many layers. Just for you, Em."

"Oh, good. Seven layers. A food metaphor," Em says. "Told you I had nothing to eat this morning."

"In this case, the seven layers are not inside a giant burrito," Eduardo says. There is no humor in it, only precision. "They are operational truths. Em, you were hired by this agency because you hold a doctorate in exoarcheology. Your specialty is not very common in today's world. Most people have never heard of it. And here you are, holding credentials in an especially unique field. It happens that we very much need you, Em. And by 'we' I mean your new employer, the agency known as MMDI. I will disclose the truths in a formal, defined order. Top-secret classification. I hereby grant you the highest classification you need. After you listen to what I have to tell you, it is your decision whether you want to work here or not."

Em sips the water slowly. "I get to decide?" The water sits in his empty stomach like a dare. "This agency apparently spied on me. In my own

condo. No privacy at all. I expect you could just kill me. Do you guys think you own me?"

"No, we own the timeline," Eduardo says. "We own the war you have not yet been told about. We certainly do not own you. Not at all. I don't want you to feel that way. We are not going to kill you. This is why you are being briefed instead of simply being used. Jake South remains elsewhere but nearby. He answers to me and I can call him back here at any time."

"Sounds threatening."

"Right now, Em, you are inside and far below Raven Rock Mountain Complex. Situated within the state of Pennsylvania. About eighty-five miles from Washington, DC. The surface pad your jet aircraft landed on does not exist on any map out in the civilian world. Your flight path was erased as it was flown. Your air speed is classified. The mechanized gate you passed through down here logged your injuries as preexisting because we do not create liabilities we cannot document. I did not use your nickname as a taunt. It was confirmation that our collection of data points is current, Doctor Mainer."

Em leans back in the floating chair. "No formalities. Call me Em, will you? So, Raven Rock. Could be a title from a poem by Edgar Allan Poe." The synthetic material is cool against his damp spine. He thinks of Chen in the bathroom, humming, satisfied, already planning to attend the Beijing opera in DC and the next time he will take what he wants. He thinks of the Florida witch down the hall and her talk of karma. He thinks of the tiny dragon in the glass globe and the ring tone that saved a dream and ruined a morning. None of that belongs in this room and yet all of it is already here.

"Go ahead. Disclosure time," Em says. "Layer one. I hope this is gonna be worth my empty stomach growling while I sit here."

Eduardo nods. His expression does not change. His vocal tone stays even.

"Layer One. Raven Rock is a secondary black site. You are in it now. Highest clearances now. The primary black site is named Clavius Base. It is on the Moon; inside a crater the public believes is cold lunar rocks."

"Why put a base on the Moon?"

"Because in the 2190s a gigantic statue was excavated far below the

lunar surface. A colossus. Humanoid. Male. Constructed of lunar stone? We don't know precisely. We cannot discern what it is made of. Buried on the Moon by an extraterrestrial species. We have come to refer to them as the Ezuoia. They are invisible to ordinary instruments and human eyes. They have zero mass. Noncorporeal is the technical term. They exist outside of spacetime. That is at the core of what I am calling the first layer of truth. It's a foundational truth. You were recruited because you have doctoral-level expertise that we need. There are two identical statues. One on the Moon. One here on Earth. This is irrefutable proof of intelligent extraterrestrial life."

Em listens. He wants to interrupt to ask about extraterrestrial life. He dares not. The synthetic glass water bottle is empty. His hands want something to do. He sets the bottle on the floor and it stays there, which is a small mercy in a room that otherwise refuses to be ordinary.

"You said I will not be allowed to leave until seven layers are disclosed," Em says. "Is that a threat dressed up like a schedule? Lipstick on a pig? Honestly, this all is quite threatening."

Eduardo replies. "Threats are inefficient. I never threaten anybody. I can tell you are hungry. I can tell you are in pain. I can tell you are angry that I now know about your roommate's nickname for you. We are aware of your emotions. All of that is noted. None of it changes the tight schedule we are on here today."

Em merely shrugs in resignation and nods.

"Layer Two concerns the male brain. The Ezuoia can entangle and in so doing connect with male brains. Quantum entanglement is the phrase. The connection was initiated by the Ezuoia for the men stationed at Clavius Base. Connection is not possible between the Ezuoia and any female brain. That limitation has shaped every protocol we have written since first contact. And yes, this agency placed you under surveillance the moment you became our leading candidate to work here."

Em's laugh is dry. "So there is surveillance on me. Probably video and audio. I am in an abusive relationship with Gregory Chen. He was his usual sexually aggressive self this morning. I'm certain a recording exists

of that somewhere. Why does this agency need to know any details about my private life?"

"Gregory Chen strictly is a civilian variable," Eduardo says. "Nothing more. He is logged. He is not cleared. He will not be discussed beyond the fact that your biometrics this morning are consistent with an aggressive sex partner who seemed sadistic. We do not moralize. We document. If you wish to have him removed from your life, that is a request you may file after Layer Seven."

Em's eyes open very wide.

"Alternatively, if you wish to keep him, that can also be a request. But we do not do relationship counseling. We do war."

The word **war** sits in the cold air. Em feels it in his sore hips. He feels it in the place Chen left wet. He wants to stand and walk out and find a diner and eat until he cannot think. The chair will not let him float away. Eduardo will not let him leave. There probably is no diner reachable on foot anyway.

"Layer Two concerns the male brain," Em repeats. "I sit through Layer Three and that gets me food, okay?"

Eduardo continues. The voice does not hurry. It does not soothe. It simply places facts in a particular sequence and waits for Em to absorb them.

"Layer Three. Time travel is real. It is not merely a metaphor. It is not science fiction. Time travel is made possible using a highly sophisticated machine nicknamed a giant blue hockey puck, or just a puck, though those words I find juvenile. The pucks operate exclusively out of Clavius Base. They won't work in Earth's one-g gravity. The brain connections between the men at Clavius and the Ezuoia enable the time machines to work. Otherwise the devices would be strictly modern art glass sculptures."

"Is my brain going to be connected to the extraterrestrials?"

"Do not interrupt me again. Yes, you will be given a special brain graft. That will connect you to the Ezuoia but in more powerful ways compared to all the men at Clavius. You will be able to travel in time by operating the pucks remotely from this base. The Clavius men need to be naked and inside the pucks and on the Moon. You also are able to take one per-

son with you when you time travel even though the person is not linked to the Ezuoia and not riding in their own puck. The men of Clavius cannot do that. We call that plus-one. There are additional capabilities you will receive, but we will cover that later."

A second panel opens in the wall. This time there is a food service tray. A protein bar. An apple. A sealed cup of coffee that smells like it was brewed by someone who does not breathe oxygen. Em does not care. He takes the coffee first. It is hot enough to hurt. He drinks it very carefully. The bitterness is a gift. The protein bar is chalk and sugar without flavor, but the taste is not what matters. He devours the bar in three bites and quickly feels his hands stop shaking.

"You may continue drinking your coffee and eat your apple while I speak. Layers Four through Seven cannot wait for your digestion."

Em bites into the apple because there is no knife. Juice runs down his wrist and face. He does not wipe it. He is past dignity. He is a man in a floating chair that defies gravity deep underground, commando, emotionally bruised, barely nourished, listening to a machine that looks like a Mexican movie star tell him the world he thought he knew is something else entirely.

"Okay, keep going," Em says. "Thank you for feeding me. And I am not going to turn down this job. You probably already ran psych profiles on me and could predict I was gonna say that."

Eduardo's face holds.

His unemotional explanation continues: "Layer Four. The Ezuoia siphon. The aliens extract sexual feelings from men. Not metaphorically. They feed on climax, on the electrical weather of a male orgasm, on the aftermath. They have been doing so since Clavius Base was built and staffed in the 2190s. That was the Ezuoia's original motivation for connecting to the brains of the men at Clavius. Time travel capability was just a side-effect. The Ezuoia do not care that humans have time travel capability now. The Chinese developed time travel after studying the side effects of connecting men's brains with the Ezuoia. Some of our agents at Clavius elevated the significance of being used by the Ezuoia. The existence of the Ezuoia is officially denied, of course. Top-secret. Some of the

men at Clavius Base became addicted to using others as if to honor the Ezuoia and those men bring others to climax willingly or not. We monitor both. It is possible the Ezuoia made a brain connection to Gregory Chen after you became our leading candidate to work for this agency. We need to study the situation to learn exactly what is going on."

Em stops chewing. The apple is suddenly too sweet. He sets it on the tray unfinished. His cock stirs again—traitor—remembering getting full and hard. Remembering the humiliating way Chen laughed. If aliens can connect to Chen's brain, Em is beginning to feel sick.

"Layer Five," Eduardo says, as if Em's silence is consent. "There is a war. It is not public. It can never be known to the public. Just like the extraterrestrials whom the war targets can never be known to humanity, either. This all is top-secret. If the human species were to learn that invisible aliens from a distant galaxy are harvesting male pleasure and planting strange statues to change human history, mankind certainly would tear itself and the home planet to shreds. MMDI exists to wage a silent war and keep humanity uninformed. We lose agents. We lose timelines. We do not lose the big secret. We cannot lose the war. If you choose to walk after learning of Layer Seven, we will wipe what we can of your mind and return you to a version of your life that can survive the wipe. If you stay, you will ride remotely using one of our pucks on the Moon and put your hands directly upon the second colossus left for us by the Ezuoia."

Em wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. Coffee and apple protein dust. Horrible combo. He thinks of Chen's dragon in a glass globe and wonders if everything contains a message if you grow desperate enough to read them that way.

"Layer Six," Em says. His voice is rougher now. "Will you please just get this over with?"

"Layer Six is the graft to connect you to the Ezuoia. My needles. Your brain. Instrumentation that will let you jump from here at Raven Rock, haul one unlinked partner in the 'plus-one' way and give you a high level of awareness and memories from agents at Clavius. It is invasive. The graft. It is not reversible. Dr. William Oswald, our chief medical officer, will participate remotely from Clavius Base. I will manage the medical robots

here under his direction. You will be awake for the procedure. Consciousness is required or the graft won't take. You will consent or you will not. There is no third state."

Em looks at his own hands. Thick. Dark. Steady. Now that there is sugar in him. He imagines the needles. He imagines Chen finding this out and calling it karmic. He imagines he will soon have to say thank you to a machine.

"Layer Seven," Eduardo says. "The Ezuoia are not merely feeding. They are steering. They seem to want human civilization to end itself. MMDI holds the exact opposite priority. We believe the Ezuoia may have identified a day and date for the end of human civilization on Earth. They know a date. MMDI has been trying to prevent the self-destruction of the planetary civilization using time travel to change history in the past. I will be honest with you that we have been failing more often than we succeed. You are the top candidate to work here because an exoarcheologist perhaps can decode messages on or in the statues that we have been too untrained to read and understand. That is the last layer. That is why we hired you. This is why we brought you from DC to Raven Rock without leaving a trace. Gregory Chen has no idea. He does not know his brain is now connected to the Ezuoia. You may stand when you are ready. You may ask questions. You may even request a second apple. Or more coffee. I need you to tell me whether you will sit for the brain graft."

The chair holds him a moment longer. Em stands. His hips protest. The uniform clings. He is still commando. He is still the man who said thank you in a bedroom that was never private. He looks at the weathered face on the wall and does not look away. "I really need more caffeine," Em says. "Then you can ask me anything you choose. Afterwards you can have my yes or my no. After caffeine, please."

Eduardo almost smiles. "Caffeine," he says. "Then we continue."

The second cup of coffee for Em arrives through another panel that opens in front of him. Em grabs it quickly. The underground bunker is quiet except for the hum of systems that do not need him to believe in them. He drinks slowly. He is still wet under certain regions of the clothing he is wearing. He is still sore. But he is still alive. The seven layers of

truth sit in the room only partially eaten. He knows that he must accept the needles. He drinks his coffee.

24

ISLAND

2270

The second cup of coffee tastes no better than the first. Em drinks it anyway. The floating chair holds his sore hips as if it has already decided he is furniture. Eduardo's weathered face within the quantum rendering of his likeness waits on the pentagonal platform. He does not blink. Non-human intelligence does not need blinking.

"Let us agree to move on from that burrito metaphor," Eduardo says. "Seven operational truths. Not comfort food. No time to delay. I need to tell you about two highly influential time-travel agents, Ted Avila and Vincent Wauneka. They retired after a lengthy stretch of service to this agency. The two of them gave of themselves physically and emotionally in significant ways for the benefit of MMDI. Such unselfishness eroded them. No other word expresses this. They went on a high number of missions to Earth and especially in service of the war effort against the Ezuoia. They did not deserve to die slowly from being eroded emotionally and physically in small chunks. So they retired. Today, I turn to you instead, Em. This agency needs you. Defeating the Ezuoia is the only option available to the human species."

Em sets the empty cardboard cup on the tray. His thick right hand wants to crush it. "My privacy and my confidentiality were taken away from me by MMDI. It all started because I took a phone call from a recruiter and that led me to several screening interviews in Washington, DC. I did not willingly agree in advance to work for some time-travel

agency. I never knew the agency was actually top-secret with a cover story. Am I angry? Yeah, you bet I am."

"Your feelings are completely understandable, Em. You emerged as our number one candidate. The agency has to protect itself from public awareness. These are the only explanations I can offer you today."

Em returns to sit in the floating chair. "I am just under thirty. I finished a doctoral degree at Howard University in a field most people never heard of. I was expecting to get hired by some university where I would become a professor. Or a government agency. I wrongly thought MMDI was just that—a government agency."

"MMDI needs you, Em. That is no exaggeration. Your specialty and your availability align with this agency's needs right now."

"You know what? I realize I need to end my relationship with Chen. I know I would be much better off if I get away from him and never look back."

"Yes, your relationship with Gregory Chen does not seem to be a very healthy relationship. You seem to have reached the realization."

"Does MMDI have anything else on me? Can you at least be honest and tell me that?"

One of the screens lights up. A ten-second clip plays without warning. The condo near the Navy Yard. Chen's laugh after the last thrust. The theatrical kiss on Em's forehead. The words, clear as a blade: "Great fuck or what? I like knowing you're gonna walk around sore. Say thank you." Then Chen walking to the bathroom humming. Em's own voice, thin: "Thank you."

Em's vision whites at the edges. Rage arrives faster than hunger ever did. He crosses the room with the screens and the projection of Eduardo on the pentagonal platform and slams his palm on a table just below the screens. "What the fuck have you done? Somebody made a recording inside my condo! You played it. The recording you played shows Chen laughing after aggressive sex bordering on sadism."

"I played a ten-second clip I already own showing an emotional baseline," Eduardo says. "Your sarcasm has curdled. Good. Rage is useful data. I am opening a classified line. I need you right now to speak directly with Gregory Chen while you feel strongly angry. I will file the data culled from your interaction with him. I will not interrupt."

"No. Fuck no. What has Chen got to do with any of this? Are you using what he did to me as manipulation?"

The image of Eduardo points to one side of the briefing theater. A door a few feet away from Em slides open where previously there had only been a seamless wall. Em sees a comms alcove. No windows. A single handset that looks older than the mountain. A light the color of old blood awaits.

Em walks over and steps in. The alcove seals behind him. Not a comforting feeling. The acoustic properties changed drastically. Em is alone with the handset and the knowledge that Jake South is already gone and there is no human witness to all this. He picks up the handset and exhales. Chen answers on the first ring as if he has been holding the phone and waiting since four in the morning.

Chen's voice is casual, crude, the same voice that demanded thank you. "About fucking time, Em. I told you I'm not patient."

Em can picture the revealing bright red trunks from the dream, the bulge below the belt that Chen always was so proud of, the Mandarin singing aloud on his way to death by waterfall.

"Told you. It's my first day at work, okay. Give me a break, will you?" Em says. His deep voice stays even. "I don't know when I'm coming back."

"No, Em. Not sure I can just sit here waiting patiently. Navy Yard is full of dark-skinned gym bodies who actually want to get fucked and will say thank you like they mean it."

Em's free hand helps him keep his balance by bracing against the alcove wall. The bruises under the uniform flare. He can imagine Chen already scanning the waterfront, already choosing his next bottom.

"Okay," Em says without raising his voice. "Go grab some other horny guy. Sure. Only fuck dark-skinned, muscular guys so you can pretend it's me. I'm not coming home to you, Chen."

"Em, I don't care. I will replace you."

"Do it, Chen. You just go right ahead."

Em slams the handset into its cradle. His hand trembles so hard the handset clatters against the cradle. He stays in the alcove because stand-

ing out near the screens would mean Eduardo's face can watch Em's tears already starting.

The alcove door slides open. Eduardo does not speak until Em is back in the floating chair.

"You were successful, Em. That call is filed as emotional baseline, not cruelty," Eduardo says. "Your former partner or roommate treats your first workday as abandonment and threatens replacement sex on a monitored line. That is useful. It is not surprising. Please. Won't you sit? Your cortisol is climbing again. More water is available. You need to keep hydrated."

Em does not sit. He walks the perimeter of the briefing theater. The walls are matte. The air reminds him of an old subway tunnel in New York City. He starts thinking about how it was possible for a video and audio inside his apartment to be recorded. How did they get the correct angle over the bed? Where did they hide the cameras and microphones? He cannot stop the memories of Chen's laugh on that ten-second loop that now lives permanently in his skull.

"You used that sexual stuff as a data point," Em says. "You heard him threaten to replace me while you listened, evaluating Chen. And you call it 'baseline'?"

"I call it documentation. We do not do relationship counseling. We do war. Several models already show the war is lost. Your interpretation of the statues may change the predictive models. Or they may confirm the loss. We are desperate, Em. This is exactly why you are here right now instead of in Washington, DC. This agency needs you and your expertise. How many different ways can I tell you that? It is the truth."

Em finally sits. The chair conforms again. Almost kind. He hates the kindness.

"I was built by humans. My accent is related to my origin in South American countries where Spanish is the primary language. My purpose is to handle necessary aspects of this agency more thoroughly and faster than any human ever could. The point is: I am man-made. My purpose is to serve the needs of mankind. I am not an enemy of humanity. I am not your enemy."

"I get that now. I presume that because the Ezuoia exist outside of

spacetime, they can go anywhere—past, present, future—and change timelines any way they want."

"Yes, that is correct, Em. They likely targeted you for surveillance once you became our top candidate. They seem to be able to use the past to affect the present and the future. They also seem to be able to use the future to affect the present and the past. The clip you watched came from the Ezuoia. Never lose sight of the fact that the Ezuoia are fully capable of manipulating people, events, timelines, and history itself."

"Okay, Eduardo. You've made your point here. What is the highest priority now? Those two gigantic statues?"

"Yes, that is correct. One is buried beneath Crater Clavius. It bears the name 'Clavius Colossus.' That location is situated in the normal lunar environment. You cannot merely walk up to that colossus and touch it with your bare hands. Humans require high-tech survival suits to venture out into the lunar environment. No atmosphere there to breathe. Severe fluctuations of hot and cold temperatures from one moment to the next. You cannot simply remove one glove from your survival suit so you can deliberately touch the statue like we need you to do. That hands-on process would result in severe and painful burns. Or severe and painful freezing. Or both. Your skin also would be compromised, likely ruined. You could bleed out. No oxygen. Strongly persistent radiation. Tiny particles of rock projected at supersonic speeds. Survivable? Perhaps. Risky? Definitely. This agency cannot and will not sacrifice you in that way."

"What's the answer, then?"

"The other statue. It exists in normal Earth atmosphere. On a sunny little tropical island in the Bahamas. Nobody today knows the name of the island because many of the island names have been changed often. You could make physical contact in the morning with your hands touching the Bahamian Colossus. And then go swimming in the afternoon in the Caribbean Sea."

"So MMDI will just fly me down to the Bahamas, then. I will pack my swim trunks."

"We need you to examine the Bahamian Colossus in its original condition."

“What do you mean?”

“It was put by the Ezuoia on an island in the Bahamas so that it would be found by Christopher Columbus in 1492. The secret was concealed carefully down through the centuries.”

Em is stunned into silence.

“We need to send you back in time over 700 years into the past to touch that colossus while it is still fresh, so to speak.”

“That brain graft. This is why you need me to have that implanted, right? You did not sugar-coat it. Needles inserted through my skull. Resulting in brain capabilities like nobody else has ever had.”

“One other MMDI agent did have the procedure. Vincent Wauneka. He proved that a man who had the brain graft can remotely travel to the past taking an unlinked female with him as a ‘plus-one.’ I need you to do the same or something similar.”

“Who will be the female for the Bahamas mission?”

“She works here at this base. Sarah Venning. An expert on the 15th century. Knows the languages. The culture. The religious practices. The Vatican secrets. And so forth. Not a common specialty, believe me. Functioning in that particular century is not something that a person of today could pull off. Venning is crucial for this. But since a female brain differs from a male brain, no female can accommodate the quantum entanglement that makes possible the connection to the Ezuoia. The ‘plus-one’ protocol controlled by you and your brain is our only available option to send Venning back in time with you.”

“And also I bring this agency another uncommon specialty. My fresh doctoral degree and unusual specialty in exoarcheology.”

“Yes, precisely.” Eduardo continues without hurry: “The Ezuoia can shape and manipulate solid matter even though they lack bodies. They put huge stone statues where humanity would find them and doing so changed the entire course of human history. The Ezuoia continue to make brain connections with men because they can, and we cannot stop them. Nobody can stop them. They continue to siphon. We are concerned they are greatly interested in you, Em. They provided the recording of you and Gregory Chen. A civilian sadist is not important at all to this agency.

But you are vitally important to MMDI. You can decide whether you want to file a request to have Gregory Chen removed from your life."

Em's stomach turns. "Removed from my life? As in killed?" Em asks for the ten-second clip to be deleted. Eduardo refuses. "It is already part of your file. Deletion would be theater. We do not do theater. We do truth in layers."

Em's sarcasm is gone. What is left is a low, steady rage that makes his thick legs restless. He wants to go find Chen at the Navy Yard and slam him through a wall. He wants to find the Florida witch down the hall at the condo high-rise and ask her what a dragon in a glass globe actually means. He wants a freshly brewed caffeine drink that does not taste like mud.

"Four unauthorized MMDI agents jumped from Clavius Base to the Bahamian Colossus in 1492. They will be dead when you arrive. Beheaded. Violence in the New World credited to Christopher Columbus. You will find the agents' bodies near the Bahamian Colossus. You will touch the stone. I believe what you receive—perhaps as one download—may feel quite violent and physically hurtful. That is not a prediction. That is a model we have run that is inconclusive."

Em listens. He does not interrupt. The rage needs somewhere to go and the aliens are as good a target as Chen's laugh.

"Dani Zaman will extract you if you have seizures," Eduardo adds. "You do not know him yet. But he has been briefed about you. He's a newly hired MMDI agent at Clavius. Young guy. Physically strong. Mentally strong. Arabic heritage. He will use a puck from base."

The briefing theater feels smaller. Em's internal tearing from the morning is a rumor his body keeps feeling. He shifts in the chair and the rumor gets reinforced. Perhaps it is only a phantom sensation he need not worry about.

Eduardo watches the biometrics without comment. Tears track down Em's face. The machine files them. There is nobody else to trust except the Argentine-Colombian-made quantum supercomputer that looks like a Hollywood Latin movie star who has lived too hard.

"You may request a third cup of coffee," Eduardo says. "You may request a shower that has soap which is salt-free. You may not leave Raven Rock until you tell me whether you will sit for the needles. The brain

graft. Dr. Oswald will participate from the Moon. I will run the robots here. You will be awake through the procedure."

Em wipes his face with the heel of his hand. "Play the clip again."

"No."

"Then connect me by phone again. I want to try to prevent him from injuring the next guy like he injured me."

"No. The baseline is recorded. It's a data point. Additional contact between you and Gregory Chen would be indulgence. We do not indulge."

Em stands a second time. He walks to the comms alcove and looks at the sealed door. He wants to kick in the door. But that would change nothing. Chen is probably already at the Navy Yard or already planning to be. Chen is already laughing aggressively.

Em comes back. He sits. He says calmly, "I need a shower. Then I assure you I will give you a 'yes' to the brain graft for me. I will not say 'no' to you, Eduardo. I suppose that wrecks whatever leverage I may have had here with you. I don't fucking care. This has worn me out. I work here now. I will do whatever you need me to do. I just want to stop smelling Chen on me."

A side hatch opens. A short corridor. A single shower stall. Fresh water this time minus the open-sea soap. Em strips the black uniform. He is still going commando. The bruises are dark on his calves made by Chen's grip. He can feel the ring of sphincter muscle remains swollen. He stands under the spray and lets it hit all the places Chen used. He does not touch himself. Let the water do that. His body badly wants the orgasm it was denied this morning. But he refuses to give in to release out of spite.

When he dresses again, he puts on a fresh, dry uniform. The mountain has provided underwear this time. A small mercy that feels like another file note.

Back in the briefing theater Eduardo is patiently waiting as if for him no time had passed.

Em asks, "If the war is already lost as indicated by several predictive models, why put the graft in my brain?"

"Because our models are just models. They do not necessarily work as accurate predictions. Because an exoarcheologist might find messages or

meanings from the aliens we have been too dense to discern. Because you are the only exoarcheologist we have who can handle this job."

"What should I do about Chen?"

"I cannot give you advice on that, Em. He remains strictly a civilian variable unless his actions move him into the status as an operational variable. As I mentioned, you may file the request to remove him once we complete the procedure for the brain graft. Or you may keep him. Ownership is a human problem. We document it. We do not solve it. You can do whatever you want to do with him after the procedure."

"I cannot and I will not say no to the needles."

"If you were to say no, we wipe what we can. We return you to a version in the DC apartment that can survive after the wipe. Gregory Chen will still be there. The laugh will still be there. The thank you will still be required. You will not remember why your hips hurt on a Wednesday that was actually a Sunday."

Em looks at his hands. Thick. Dark. Steady. He thinks of the Bahamian Colossus waiting underground that Columbus has not yet disturbed in the timeline they will enter. He thinks of four headless bodies. He thinks of a woman named Venning who cannot carry the link because of her gender, and a man named Zaman who will pull him out of seizures he has not had yet.

He thinks of Chen's manhood barely contained in red trunks and the tiny glass globe dragon screeches that turned out to be only a ring tone.

"I formally accept the needles," Em says. "Not because you played the clip. Not because Chen threatened to replace me. Because I want to read the alien message to my species and then I want to help decide whether the war is actually lost. I do not trust the predictive models. I must place my hands directly on the actual thing—whatever it really is—in the 15th century."

Eduardo's projection almost smiles. "Consent is logged. The surgical robots are charging up. Doctor Oswald is already on the high-resolution lunar channel. You will go to sick bay downstairs in twelve minutes. Hydrate. The brain graft does not wait for rage to cool. I will meet you downstairs in sick bay."

Em drinks the water. It is still room temperature. It is still not enough. The briefing theater hums. The secure comms alcove stays sealed. Somewhere in Washington, DC a muscled young man of San Francisco Asian ancestry is already choosing the next body he will attempt to own. Somewhere under Raven Rock Mountain a quantum supercomputer files a video as baseline showing a sadistic civilian laughing and moves on to prepare thin needles to penetrate a man's living brain while he is fully conscious.

25

INSERTION

2270

The iris hatch into a surgical bay smelled like ozone and cold metal. Recessed lights the color of winter sun tracked Em as he crossed the threshold still wearing his uniform and boots. A table waited in the center, padded but not kind, with restraints that looked optional until they were not. Robot arms hung from the ceiling like awaiting insect appendages, each one tipped with a cluster of instruments so fine they seemed to vanish when he looked directly at them.

Eduardo's face occupied a screen on the far wall, larger than life, the weathered digital skin already creased in concentration. A second rectangle opened beside him. This one showed only audio waveform and a name: WILLIAM OSWALD, MD—CLAVIUS MEDICAL. No picture. Clavius Base did not waste bandwidth on faces when a voice was all that was essential.

"Consent first," Eduardo said. "I will recite it twice. You will sign formally after the second recitation. Verbal acknowledgment is insufficient."

A slate rose from the table edge. Em took it. The text was already there, dense, legal, ugly.

Eduardo began. "You, Marvin Mainer, consent to the insertion of instrumentation through the cranial plates for the purpose of remote lunar puck control regardless of your location on the Earth or on the Moon, plus-one transport of one unlinked human without a pod, residual-memory siphon from lunar agents, and cognitive acceleration. You acknowl-

edge hemorrhage risk. You acknowledge possible Ezuoia attention to the new connection to them. You acknowledge that withdrawal from this procedure after the first needle is not possible. You acknowledge that the voice of Dr. William Oswald will be present from Clavius to call out needle depths. You acknowledge I will run the robots. Sign the bottom of the display screen using a fingernail after I read you the text a second time."

Em's thick fingers hovered. His hips still remembered Chen. Sick bay was colder than the briefing room. He said nothing.

Eduardo recited the entire block a second time, word for word, same cadence, same Hispanic vowels. When he finished he waited. Em signed with a fingertip. The slate chimed once and sank back into the table.

"Remove your shirt. Keep your trousers and boots on. Then, lie down," Doctor Oswald said from the Moon. The voice was dry, older, used to giving orders through static. "Head in the cradle. Do not swallow until I say. Depths will be called in millimeters. You will feel pressure before you feel pain. Minimal pain is to be expected. Seizure is not to be expected. Best to keep your eyes closed."

Em obeyed. Then he stretched out horizontally. The padding accepted his weight and then locked. Soft cuffs closed over his wrists and ankles without asking. Bondage before surgery. Nice touch. A collar found his throat and stayed loose, a reminder only. The robot arms descended. Hair-thin needles glittered under the lights like fishing lines made of steel. Em closed his eyes.

The first needle kissed his scalp above his left temple. Pressure. Then a clean, bright pop as it found the plate. Em tasted copper immediately, but he felt no pain. The taste arrived with heat that had nothing to do with blood. Chen's name floated inside the copper like a brand. He did not speak it.

"Two millimeters," Doctor Oswald said. "Hold."

The second needle entered just behind the first. Another pop. The copper thickened. Phantom heat climbed the back of Em's neck the way Chen's hand had locked there that morning. This time, Em kept his eyes open because closing them would have indicated his surrender.

"Four millimeters. Good channel. Eduardo, increment torque one-tenth."

Eduardo did not answer the doctor. The arm simply obeyed. A third needle found the right parietal. Em's vision doubled for a half-second and then snapped back. He could hear his own pulse in the table.

The graft was not a single event. It was a sequence of invasions. Remote puck authority settled first, a cold permission that lived behind his eyes. He could now command the giant blue hockey puck time machines on the Moon without ever stripping and climbing into one. Plus-one came next, a second channel that felt like an empty passenger seat bolted to his skull. Residual memory siphon opened last, a quiet drain that began tasting other men's leftover hours—lunar corridors, puck light, the particular silence after an unauthorized jump. Processing speed arrived as a brutal uptick, thoughts stacking faster than he could refuse them. Chen's laugh from the ten-second clip replayed at triple speed and then vanished, filed somewhere Em would not be able to reach.

"Six millimeters left. Seven right. Watch the sinus. We do not want a bleeder we cannot pack from here."

Em's mouth again filled with the copper taste. Chen's name burned hotter. Em distracted himself by thinking of that bulge under red swim trunks. He saw the lube bottle. He saw his own legs lifted and the slam that left him unsatisfied. The graft did not care. It kept installing.

Doctor Oswald called depths like a metronome. Eight. Nine. Ten. A needle withdrew and another took its place, finer still. Em's hands clenched inside the cuffs. He was grateful for the bondage. The collar stayed polite. He wanted to tell someone the heat was not medical. He did not say a word.

When the last needle withdrew, the arms folded themselves into the ceiling as if they had never existed. The bondage cuffs released. The collar opened. The part of the surgical table that touched Em's head bent upward so the man would find it easy to sit upright. It went too fast. Sick bay tilted. Vision doubled and stayed doubled. Two tables. Two Eduardos. Two empty doorways.

Sarah Venning walked through the real one.

She was compact, pale, already in the same black utility the mountain issued everyone. Hair pulled back so tight it looked painted on. No smile.

She looked at Em the way a mechanic looks at a tool that has just been calibrated—useful, but not interesting.

"I am Venning," she said. "You're the haul. I'm the cargo. Eduardo already told you I cannot link to the Ezuoia. Biological gender, not clearance. My brain will not host. Yours just did. We jump when you can stand without falling over."

Eduardo's image tracked her without comment. Doctor Oswald's audio waveform pulsed once.

"If the Ezuoia notice a new connection in you, a seizure may result," Doctor Oswald said. "Hemorrhage risk remains. Eduardo accepted it as an operational cost. I did not. I am documenting the disagreement. Doctor Mainer, you will report any visual snow or fog you perceive in your eyes, any copper taste that does not fade, any phantom names. Especially civilian names. Do you understand?"

Em understood. He tasted both copper and Chen. Em said, "I understand."

Venning did not offer a hand. She watched him swing his legs off the table and wait for the floor to decide it was one floor again. "Schedule is 1492. Four bodies already waiting. We cannot linger here because of any pain you feel. You haul me using plus-one or the hop aborts and I go back to inventory."

Em stood. Vision still doubled. The processing uptick made him think about Venning in words that arrived in stacks: first woman, change-the-timeline, plus-one, unlinked, cargo. He felt the empty passenger seat in his skull occupy itself with her presence even though she had not touched him. The graft knew its job.

"I agree to 1492," he said. The headache had not peaked yet. He could feel it gathering behind both sets of eyes. "Before it gets worse."

Venning nodded once, a schedule item checked. "Good. I treat pain as a clock, not a conversation. But you seize, I drag. You crash into me, I go down. That's already modeled. Dani Zaman from Clavius Base ready to extract. You don't need to like any of this for it to work as designed."

Eduardo spoke from the wall. "The brain graft is live from Raven Rock. You will never need to enter a lunar puck. Remote authority and control

is confirmed. Plus-one is confirmed. Residual siphon is already sampling Clavius men. Cognitive acceleration is within predicted range. Doctor Oswald, your hemorrhage flag is logged. We proceed."

"We proceed because you decided the cost is acceptable," Doctor Oswald answered. The high-resolution lunar channel carried no warmth. "Doctor Mainer, sit if you must. Do not stand on pride. Pride bleeds."

Em remained standing. The double vision slowly collapsed into one brutal, too-sharp picture in colors much more vivid than Em had ever before experienced. He could see individual, tiny pores on Venning's face. He could see the micro-scratches on the table. The uptick was not a gift. It was another needle that stayed behind.

Copper lingered. Chen's name sat in it like a coal. Em did not mention the coal. Doctor Oswald had said especially civilian names. Em filed the name himself and kept his mouth shut.

Venning walked a slow circle around him, checking gait, checking pupils, checking whether the new antenna had already started to hum in a way she could not hear. "You're listing left. Compensating. Don't do that. The hop will punish compensation. When we land you put your hands on the stone. That's the mission-critical action. Only you can do that. My job is to be standing when you do it and still standing if you are not."

Em wanted to tell her the stone would dump hostile code into him. He wanted to tell her he would seize and crash into her. Eduardo had already told him what he could expect. Repeating it would be theater. There was no need for theater.

"I need five minutes," Em said. His deep voice stayed even. "Cold water, not at room temperature. Then we go."

"You get three," Venning said. "I already counted the headache. It peaks in eleven. We jump at ten. You can drink while you walk."

A panel opened. A synthetic glass bottle again. Cold water as he wanted. Em drank. The copper mixed with the water and became a horrible combination that did not go together well. His body remembered Chen's cock with a twitch. The graft now noticed and logged. Residual siphon, perhaps. Or just the old betrayal wearing new wiring. Just bad timing.

Doctor Oswald's voice returned, thinner through the link. "If the Ezuoia

notice, the bloom will start as taste, then heat, then motor. You already have taste. Report heat immediately. Do not wait for motor. Doctor Mainer, that is my medical order to you from the Moon. Eduardo will not countermand it because I am the physician of record for brain grafts."

"Logged," Eduardo said. "Heat will be reported."

Em felt the phantom heat already. He said nothing. Venning watched his face the way she watched a countdown. She did not ask if he was okay. That kind of inquiry was not on the schedule.

They left sick bay together. The corridor outside was the same matte stone, the same fake sunlight. Em's legs remembered how to walk even while the new processing stacked every footfall into a dozen possible futures, most of them ending with Spanish steel or a seizure on Bahamian dirt. He kept the potential futures in the background. The headache was climbing on schedule, just as she had counted.

Venning spoke without looking at Em. "I saw your file. The civilian. The laugh. The thank you. I don't care. I only care that you can still put your open palm on rock before your skull is set on fire. That's the only metric I was given."

"Understood," Em said.

"Good. Because if you start talking about ownership or sadism or whatever you experience in that apartment, I will treat it as delay. Delay gets people beheaded. Four already proved that."

The words landed without kindness and without cruelty. They were just inventory. Em accepted them the same way he had accepted the needles: not ready, going all in anyway.

A smaller room waited at the end of the corridor. No table. No robots. Only a brilliant blue circle on the floor and a pair of chairs that did not float. The puck authority in his head recognized the blue circle immediately. Remote. Raven Rock to 1492. No strip-down required because no puck would be used here.

Eduardo appeared on the wall again. "You both have costumes assigned to you. The normal clothing of 15th century island dwellers. The latest style. You will make everyone jealous who sees you wearing those.

I will not tolerate any complaints about the costuming. Just hurry and get dressed."

Em and Venning looked at each other, but no answers were there. They quickly got into their costumes just ahead of their time on the stage.

"Hop window in ninety seconds. Nine zero. Venning, take his left. Mainer, you initiate. Plus-one will follow without her consent because the graft does not ask. That is the design. Doctor Oswald is still on the channel for the first thirty seconds after arrival. After that you are on residual only."

Venning put her right hand on Em's left forearm. The contact was professional, dry, a cargo strap. Em felt the empty passenger seat in his skull fill with her weight. He felt her heartbeat through the graft, steady, bored, already counting the seconds until they were gone.

The headache peaked exactly when she had said it would. Vision doubled again. Copper flooded his mouth. Chen's name burned so hot Em almost said it aloud. He bit the inside of his cheek instead and tasted real blood this time.

"Initiate," Venning said.

Em mentally reached for the authority the needles had bolted into him. The circle on the floor brightened, then pulsated with sharp waves that reached the ceiling. Then the room fell away. The last thing he heard from the present was Doctor Oswald's dry warning, already fading: "Report the heat, Doctor Mainer. Do not be proud."

He did not report it. The hop took them anyway.

They arrived on sand that had not yet been touched by a man named Columbus. The air was wet, salty and older than he expected. The sound of the waves crashing on the beach was familiar to Em. Peaceful. His knees buckled. Venning's grip kept him upright for the first three seconds, then she let go because her job was not comfort. Four shapes lay near a rise of earth that did not belong on that small island. But those shapes had no heads. The stone waited under the dirt the way Eduardo had promised.

Em's doubled vision stacked the bodies into eight, then sixteen, then collapsed them back to four. The processing uptick wanted to catalog steel marks, blood age, the exact angle of each cut. He forced it down.

The headache was a roar of white noise. The copper taste had become wider than a river. Chen's name was a brand on the inside of his skull that the Ezuoia had not yet noticed or had noticed and were simply waiting, doing nothing to him.

Venning pointed at the rise. "That's it. Touch the stone. Both hands. Now. Before you drop."

Em walked. Each step cost him. The graft sang with residual memory that was not his: other men, other hops, the particular terror of arriving too late. He dropped down with one knee touching the sand, then put his palms directly upon the buried curve of the Bahamian Colossus.

He could not begin to count the number of distinctively different colors that he saw exploding from the statue. He heard an impossible number of percussion instruments joined in perfect unison improvising an award-winning drum solo. He saw—or maybe he was hallucinating—the statue standing up and dancing wildly with hands flailing in the air. He felt hundreds of pounds of wet, sticky juices falling upon him from the skies.

"Oh, fuck. What a download!"

Hostile code poured through the new connection. And loud music. More heavy percussion. The wildest drums as though John Bonham was performing from beyond the grave in the 15th century. Em's body jerked back and forth uncontrollably, but he kept his hand touching the statue. You are out there on the stage and all the characters are depending on you. Don't fuck it up. Seizure bloomed exactly as Doctor Oswald had flagged. He shook so intensely that the world became strobe. He was forced downward to his left sideways and crashed into Venning because there was nowhere else for him to fall. She went down to the sand under his weight without a sound, a scheduled item completed. Her immunity meant the brain graft code ignored her. It wanted only the particular male brain it had just been given.

Em tasted copper and Chen and stone and four men's last seconds of life. The headache was no longer a peak. It filled the entire sky. He could not report the heat. He could not speak. The graft kept working even while his motor control seemed to have taken the rest of the day off.

Remote authority, plus-one, siphon, speed: all of it still live, all of it drowning in the Ezuoia's first hello.

Sand filled Em's mouth. Venning was a limp weight beside him. Em was no longer touching the statue, but the stone kept transmitting to him with no physical connection using a bizarre language his upgraded cognition could almost parse but then lost quickly. Somewhere far above, or far ahead, a newly hired MMDI man named Dani Zaman was asleep in his rack. The predictive model said he was ready. Not exactly.

His rack light slammed on suddenly and an unpleasant alarm bell rang. Dani Zaman, tall, muscular and masculine in appearance, sat up already reaching for boots. Arabic heritage, newly certified to use a puck, and still smelling like Clavius soap. The voice of Eduardo did not greet Zaman in his rack. Eduardo treated Zaman like expendable hardware that happened to have a pulse.

"Extraction time. 1492. Injectable suppressant. You ride back to Raven Rock on Doctor Mainer's plus-one. It will be a plus-two. We have not tested that capability before now."

"You're joking, right?" Zaman asked. "Plus-two?" His voice stayed even. He did not ask if he was expected to live through this extraction.

Zaman became quickly naked and without boots as required by the departure protocols. He ran to the Time Travel Hall. His genitalia swung left to right and then right to left, but there was nobody present who could enjoy the kinetic performance. The puck took him naked as it must. Zaman arrived in the 15th century attired as a Franciscan monk by the costuming technology. He scoffed when he saw what costume had been assigned to him. Humidity hit. Iron smell. Torches. He found Em still jerking against the statue and Venning unconscious with blood at her hairline. Zaman could hear Spaniards running and shouting nearby.

Zaman dropped to one knee. He jammed the suppressant into Em's thigh. Em's convulsions stuttered, then sagged into ugly shivering. Zaman slung Venning across his strong, muscular back. Then he grabbed Em under the arms the way you grab a stolen truck you intend to drive recklessly.

"I got you," Zaman said into Em's left ear. "You do not get to die here today."

26

GRAFT

2270

Dani Zaman and Sarah Venning both rode back to the present day from the 15th century with Marvin Mainer. Em was confident knowing that Eduardo had told him that his brain graft would allow him a "plus-one" capability enabling him to transport one person in time using no additional technology. But this particular time-travel journey brought three MMDI people back to Raven Rock instead of two.

The trio hit the Raven Rock sick bay floor hard and their forward momentum propelled them directly into a wall. There were no injuries and Em and Venning remained costumed in the 1492 clothing created by the MMDI replicators on the Moon. However, Zaman was completely naked when he arrived because his point of origin had been a lunar pod which requires nudity for time travel to work. Em was lying on his left side, eyes open, pupils wrong. Venning's unconscious body had slid off Zaman's back and rested against the wall where she had fallen.

"Congratulations, Mr. Zaman," Eduardo's image said in sick bay. "You started today at Clavius Base and without incident or drama you have been transported here safely to Raven Rock Mountain Complex."

"That proves the new plus-two capability once was only a plus-one," Zaman said to Eduardo.

"And this is classified" was the cold and quick reply.

Em got to his feet tentatively. Zaman helped steady Em, giving him the first opportunity to observe Zaman's uncovered manhood. Something

deeply cold had written information into Em's cortex the way a man writes his name on a fogged bathroom mirror. Em felt the imprinted information form in the muscle of his tongue before he even understood they were alpha-numerical characters. His jaw locked. But his mouth took over and spoke anyway. Without asking him.

"April 17th, 2320."

The words came out in his own deep voice but they were not his. What Em spoke articulated the human civilization's kill-day, not myth, not cult dogma, and certainly not the kind of information that a man would dream up on his own. Em heard his own voice say it again, louder, as if his brain graft wanted everyone in earshot to hear.

"April 17th, 2320."

Eduardo's projection occupied the far wall the way it always did, weathered digital face, creases like dry riverbeds. The image stuttered and flickered on and off rapidly. Was there signal interference? Why was there so much static? For the first time since Em had met the rendered image of the quantum supercomputer, the mouth and the sound fell out of sync. Eduardo's lips moved half a split second later than the audio. The Hispanic vowels stretched and then snapped back. The yellow MMDI letters behind him became unfocused and blinked once, a glitch so small a screen of lesser resolution would never have registered it.

"Doctor Mainer," Eduardo's voice stuttered awkwardly. But that was not Eduardo's fault. The phrase, Em's name, arrived in two pieces. "Repeat that date."

Em did not want to. His mouth was in charge. "April 17th, 2320."

"Tell me, Doctor Mainer, what is the significance of that date?"

"The day and date of when human civilization ends. The end of the world," Em replied unwittingly. And then Em heard the wild drums inside his head once again. Louder now. Angrier. Crazier. Em winced, expecting the worst to happen. He looked again at Zaman's midsection for several uninterrupted seconds just to distract himself.

That was the precise moment when a male figure wearing only a very tight red jock strap materialized in the Raven Rock sick bay. Em recognized the male figure as Gregory Chen. The red tight-fitting underwear

was unmistakable—almost a signature wardrobe trademark of Chen's. The intense vibe of high testosterone bounced madly around the sick bay off the walls and the ceiling simultaneously.

"Are you a ghost?" Em asked the figure he thought was Chen.

"Yeah, Em. I'm the ghost of tomorrow. Here for a visit with you today," the figure responded in what Em recognized as Chen's voice.

Eduardo said, "This is not a hallucination, Doctor Mainer. This is tangible. Physical. Observable. In real time. Genuine."

"How reassuring, Eduardo. Thank you for sharing that," Em muttered.

The figure of Chen—or maybe it was genuinely him in the flesh—smiled as though he alone knew a dark secret nobody else would even begin to imagine.

"What do you want, Chen?" Em bravely asked through the terror rising in his torso. "Why are you here? Did the Ezuoia bring you?"

Chen walked over to Em and quickly grabbed Em below the belt through his costume. Em cried out in surprise but in truth, Em enjoyed the ball-busting experience tremendously.

"What are you doing here?" Em asked Chen.

"Grabbing your cock and balls. What did you think I was doing?"

Em sighed as he pushed Chen away. "I meant that you cannot really be here."

Zaman remained silent but appeared to be ready to defend Em against any threat which Chen might direct toward Em.

Chen's pupils blew wide, black swallowing the brown. He smiled Chen's smile with someone else's timing, a half-beat late, like a man watching himself in a reversed perspective from a short distance and deciding when the face should move. Then Chen spoke Em's classified MMDI code which he had heard Em say once into the tiny work phone at quarter to four in the morning at the Navy Yard condo.

"Alpha. One. One. Burbank. Six. Twenty-Seven."

Em's stomach dropped. "How could Chen possibly have remembered my code?" The graft logged the heat burst inside his skull automatically. Phantom heat, Doctor Oswald had called it. But this certainly was not phantom. Chen's mouth made sounds that Em had never before heard—teeth-clicking together while humming in a minor key followed by fast inhaling through the nose.

“Isolate the graft,” Eduardo said. His digital projection had stopped stuttering. “Hard isolation. Now.”

The command ran. Em felt something try to slam a door inside his skull. The door slammed shut then bounced open again rapidly. The packet had already made its journey. Something or someone was wearing Chen’s body like a coat stolen from a hook by the door.

“Whatever you got, Eduardo, it better work.” Em’s last clear sentence came out before the heat between his ears climbed higher. His hips still remembered the morning, the slam, the disallowed orgasm, the thank-you Chen had extracted like a tax. That memory was the door the packet had used. Em knew it for absolute certain like the taste of blood inside his mouth. “Gregory Chen is no longer only Gregory Chen,” Em said. “He spoke my private code. That could mean something. Or not. He seems to have memorized it after hearing it only once. That’s not normal. Look at his spaced-out eyes. The proof is right there.”

Zaman filled a paper cup with water from a sick bay dispenser and handed it to Em who nodded in appreciation and drank the entire contents.

Chen shrugged in feigned innocence but remained silent. After what seemed like an hour had elapsed, Chen spoke to Eduardo the way a man speaks to a clerk he has already decided to fire. “Eduardo,” Chen said, and the name sat in Chen’s mouth with a vaguely Hispanic cadence that did not belong to a kid from San Francisco. “I need you to give me Layer Eight.”

Sick bay went quiet except for the steady hum of the machinery along with the sound of Em accidentally dropping the empty paper cup to the floor. Eduardo’s image did not stutter this time. It simply failed to answer for three full seconds, an eternity for a machine that never searched for words. “I am closing the residual siphon,” Eduardo said. “I am closing remote authority. I am leaving this apparition here. Or is it real? I dare not close it now because doing so may kill the civilian host.”

“Don’t call him that,” Em said. “He is not a host.” Em’s voice cracked and then found its depth again. “That’s Chen, himself. That’s the man who insisted on rough sex with me this morning and made me thank him afterwards. Don’t make him merely a term such as ‘host.’” Chen gave Em a respectful salute in response and smiled at him.

“Isolation failed,” Eduardo said at last. The weathered face looked less composed.

“No shit,” Em said. He did not raise his voice. “How the hell did this person become a vessel for the Ezuoia?”

Eduardo replied, “Strongest imprint. Blood. Heat. The emotionally intense morning. He wrote himself into your psyche and the Ezuoia saw what he wrote.”

“The graft has given me a more powerful connection to the Ezuoia than any of the brain etchings the men of Clavius Base got.” Chen owns me now. My own damn fault. That old, fear-soaked thinking arrived and the Ezuoia liked it. Em knew that much. He also knew the graft used it. Em’s cock twitched against the soft white cotton briefs he wore under this costume. More than anything, Em wanted Chen to grab him by his genitals again. A stupid animalistic response to the imprint that the extraterrestrials had hijacked.

Eduardo said, “They can occupy a civilian who never had a graft nor ever entered a lunar puck. They come from the future. They seem to want to change things here in the present.”

Chen’s voice said, “Layer Eight, Eduardo. You provide only seven. I have been listening. The date is already in the exoarcheologist’s mouth. He spoke it aloud. You heard it. Everyone here heard it. You will give me the eighth layer or I will keep using this body until the date Em gave you arrives.”

Em’s fists clenched. He wanted to stop Chen. He wanted to start beating upon the thing wearing Chen like a costume to drive out whatever was in control inside. Em wanted, against every smarter part of himself, the weight of that body again on top of him in a horizontal position. He wanted the lube, the slam, the ownership that felt like emotional slavery and yet as familiar as home. The graft logged the wanting. The packet fed on it.

“Secret code for my secret agent man,” the voice of Chen said, mocking the line Chen had thrown across the bedroom at Em earlier today. “Come home, Em. Back to the Navy Yard. Or don’t. I will not wait. I am not patient. But now I have become something newer, different. An upgrade.”

Eduardo's image dimmed at the edges, a machine conserving cycles it had never before needed to conserve. "I am notifying Clavius. Doctor Oswald will want the hemorrhage flag raised to active, Doctor Mainer. Andreas and Brandt are otherwise assigned. Lejeune is on a mission in Las Vegas. Compromised at the moment. No help is coming and we have limited hands here."

"You have me," Zaman said with extreme confidence.

"You may not host," Eduardo said. "I will not allow that, Mr. Zaman. You alone cannot fight the Ezuoia."

"Chen," Em shouted. He did not know if he was speaking to the man or the thing. "Go back to DC. You don't get Layer Eight. You don't get me. Not like this. Not today here at Raven Rock. Just go."

The smile arrived late. The Chen voice responded in a perfectly calm, almost fond, and theatrical delivery. "Layer Eight, Eduardo. I will not ask again. I can start using the date in public places. Tell all of DC. Prophesizing. And the words of the prophets are written on the subway walls. You all heard your exoarcheologist say it aloud. You know the damage I can cause by releasing that to the public."

Eduardo's projection held. Even though the graft isolation had already failed. The civilian vessel smiled, once again with someone else's timing, and Em suddenly understood the undeniable truth of the moment. With the brutal new speeds the needles had given his mind, Em knew that the war against the Ezuoia was real. There was no denying that as Em looked at the sexy body of Gregory Chen that was like a puppet for someone or something harmful. Against every wiser instinct, Em remained utterly helpless to resist Chen while at the same time wanting to kill him.

Inside Em's personal quarters, Dani Zaman covered his nakedness using Em's MMDI blue robe which all time-travel agents put on when they return to Clavius Base. Zaman smiled as he watched over Em asleep in his rack. When Em finally opened his eyes and saw Zaman, he heard Zaman say, "Welcome back. You almost died. Brain seizure. Try not to do that again."

Em almost smiled but doing so hurt too much. “Copy. Tell me what you saw.”

Zaman pulled a sealed protein pack out of one of the front pockets on his blue robe. He handed Em the packet after helping him sit up in his rack. “You dropped to the floor suddenly. Started shaking like you were in a major earthquake. You don’t remember any of that? Hey, will you please eat something?” Zaman said. “Protein. Carbs. Anything.”

Em tore open the pack. The paste was salty and grim. He swallowed the entire contents of the protein pack anyway. He could not recall having a seizure in the Raven Rock sick bay.

Zaman handed Em a paper cup filled with cool water. Em nodded and accepted the water, which he drank too quickly and started coughing. “Easy with that, okay?” Zaman warned gently.

“After my seizure, you brought me here to my quarters?”

“I had help from two male nurses from sick bay. You really were out of it. After your seizure stopped. Wasn’t sure you would survive. You kept talking nonsense all the way here.”

“I don’t remember anything. I appreciate you looking out for me, Zaman. I really do.”

Zaman reached out and put his large right hand on Em’s left shoulder. Zaman leaned forward so his face would be closer to Em’s. “This is the wrong moment, I’m sure. But I want to be honest and tell you I am attracted to you. That is blunt. Yeah, it is. I am saying it because I sat here for three hours after we brought you here from sick bay. You have been deep in sleep. I had a lot of time to think through what I was feeling. Your bravery impressed me as you began recovering from your brain trying to adjust to that graft Eduardo installed up there. I took the time to rehearse half a dozen better sentences to say to you, but I could not find one that I liked.”

Em tasted blood again and swallowed it. He did not look away. He stared into Zaman’s eyes deliberately. “Gregory Chen whom you saw when he materialized in sick bay was my—”

“No need to explain. I get it.”

“No, I definitely want you to know. Chen behaved with me like he owned me. Always did. He acted like I was his property. He took what he

wanted from me. He demanded that I thank him for his rough sexual assaults."

"I don't deserve you to tell me this." "Do you want me to call you Doctor Mainer?"

"No, no. Call me Em."

"I do see what is going on. You've been through quite a lot. Physically. Emotionally. I do not want to own you. I am reporting a fact—I am attracted to you. I just don't want that to go unspoken and just hang around like a phantom wherever we go together."

"I am really messed up, Zaman. That may be obvious. You probably should not touch me. I might detonate and take you with me. You are very desirable. I must admit that to you. Tall, muscular and handsome. Masculine. Honestly. Hot, very hot."

"Thanks, Em. Do you have a problem with me wanting to get to know you?"

"I still taste metal and maybe even blood. In my head I hear Chen telling me I secretly wanted to be abused and treated badly. Rough sex against my will. From a sadist. My body agreed with him. My mind did not. I may be damaged goods now. That's all I'm saying. You are special to me because you saved my life by extracting me from that island in the 15th century."

"The worst pick-up line I ever heard. Not even original."

Em laughed aloud and caused Zaman's eyes to dance wildly.

This man was not at all like Chen. Em repeated that in his head deliberately and precisely the way a man recites a password or an affirmation. He slowly leaned closer to Zaman, pulled him toward the rack and stripped him of his blue robe that fell to the floor of the private quarters. With impatient hands, Em undressed himself by removing a pair of tight white briefs. Now the two men were alike. Equal. Naked. Getting aroused. Staring into each other's hungry eyes.

Em reached for the small tube in the drawer below his mattress because he was not a fool and because he wanted to plan everything down to the last practical detail. Em slicked Zaman's thick cock with both his hands, watching Zaman's face the whole time. Those dancing eyes. The face that shouted extraordinary bliss. Then Em slid down in his rack lying

face up on top of the bedding. He pointed for Zaman to position himself on his back.

Em climbed up on Zaman and felt what he wanted inside. He positioned himself so his legs straddled Zaman. This was the signal for Zaman to plunge upward at a depth and a rhythm that Em controlled. Slow first. Then not so slow. Em rode Zaman with a fierce, angry gratitude. Cowboy position was one Chen never allowed. Chen always needed to be facing downward during fucking—the most dominant position available. Em's hips were still sore from a different man in a different city, and the body soreness became something he used instead of something that used him.

Zaman's hands stayed on Em's thighs until Em took them and slid them up to his waist. Permission given. Zaman held on while letting Em take the lead. The mattress complained. Em's breath broke into short sounds he did not try to control. Em stroked himself in time with Zaman's upward grinding and pounding. This time, Em was determined to finish. He was no longer the man who got fucked and then got pushed aside without release. And then Em ejaculated, spraying Zaman's stomach and neck, a hot messy claim. The sight of Em's load pushed Zaman over the edge and he shot inside Em with a groan that sounded like deep relief more than conquest. The two men stayed locked together in cowboy position. It seemed that time, itself had paused to let them savor the special intimacy that they had just shared. Then they rested closely near each other on the mattress covered by a thin cotton sheet.

"This time I chose to finish. What if I had not shared this moment today with you? Zaman, what if we had never met?"

"Well, I want us to continue. Inside this secret mountain where we are losing a war to aliens," Zaman said. No poetry. Just the direct offer. "You already know I am not like Gregory Chen. I will not own you. I will not treat you with cruelty. Tell me if this is too much for today. I will get dressed and get the fuck outta here."

Em used the bed sheet to wipe tears beginning to form in his eyes. "I want you to stay with me here."

Zaman kissed Em gently and softly on the lips.

Em's hips hurt. He did not ask the pain to leave just like he did not ask Zaman to leave. Em believed he was learning to recognize when a choice was truly his.

Eduardo occupied the large center screen in the Raven Rock briefing theater. Em sat in the floating chair wearing his all-black uniform and boots. He was the only person at this meeting.

"Doctor Oswald's official report is that your life is not in jeopardy after all you endured today. Seizure, yes. But the good doctor diagnoses you as resilient. His exact word."

"So where do I go next? What do you want me to do?"

"I need you to share with me your unguarded thoughts on what you have experienced from the mission to the 15th century."

"Unguarded? Yeah, sure. First, how is Venning?"

"Still unconscious. She's hooked up and receiving all kinds of medications. Doctor Oswald is not optimistic about her prognosis. You are the most resilient one. Her body and mind did not handle very well being in the past. I will not send her on missions very soon. If at all."

"Do you plan to send me back to examine the Bahamian Colossus? I do not want to just sit around here doing nothing."

"Whether I send you again to the 15th century depends on what you tell me here. How did you process what you experienced? Start with the appearance of Gregory Chen here at Raven Rock then work backwards to your journey to analyze the Bahamian Colossus and then your experiences when you returned to Raven Rock."

"Is Chen gone now?"

"After you recovered from a seizure in sick bay, Mr. Zaman along with the assistance of two male nurses helped you to rest in your quarters. Gregory Chen dematerialized. He simply was gone. We have security video that recorded him while he was here at Raven Rock. That's it."

"Well, something Chen said to me in sick bay stuck with me, Eduardo. His exact words spoken to me were, 'the ghost of tomorrow. Here for a visit with you today.'"

"What does that mean to you?"

"I feel this is one of those quantum field traits that are so hard for me to wrap my mind around. What if Chen was actually present here in sick bay? And also at the same time in the condo in DC. Chen obviously knew my code phrase. He could have memorized it in the condo on the morning I was retrieved and brought here to Raven Rock. But more important is that Chen revealed his awareness of the phrase 'Layer Eight.'"

"Yes, good. You picked up on that."

"Eduardo, you presented seven layers to me. In that briefing I got from you. Seven layers. Not eight."

"Yes, very good. What Gregory Chen spoke about—Layer Eight—was a phrase I had not heard before. Layer Eight could be a code phrase. Perhaps a phrase that serves as a password protecting something."

"Protecting what?"

"Maybe the phrase is a metaphor. It may represent something that the Ezuoia do not want to tell us directly so instead they chose to conceal it as a secret phrase and have Chen give it to us."

"Eduardo, Chen spoke as if Layer Eight represented knowledge he did not have. But somehow Chen believed that you knew what it meant and he wanted you to share that with him."

"Yes, I agree with your assessment of that."

"Gregory Chen is a civilian. He has no training in the work that MMDI does. He does not know time travel. Not at all. I believe he was essentially kidnapped by the Ezuoia. You're probably right, Eduardo, that they may have the ability to come from the future to alter the present day."

Eduardo explains, "It violates the laws of physics. But quantum physics is another matter. I believe the Ezuoia occupy one position that places them in the past, the present, and the future simultaneously. That quantum superposition, if you want to call it something, gives them tremendous power over humanity. They took Chen from the Navy Yard condo and made him materialize here at Raven Rock. Your cognitive upgrade after the needles stands as the only local advantage we have. Thanks to you. I think you are easily capable of processing reality here for

us in the present day as it is seen by the Ezuoia who exist outside of spacetime. You are the only one who can truly understand the Ezuoia."

"The Ezuoia used Chen to prove to us they could take over a civilian and work him like a puppet. The Ezuoia used me to teach all of you that we humans stand as inferior. Not inferior to Chen. Inferior to the Ezuoia. Even so, I feel that I am uniquely able to understand what Layer Eight means," Em says.

"What is it? Tell me."

"It has nothing at all to do with Raven Rock or time travel. It was the name of a top-secret project back in the 21st century. At that time governments and private tech companies were in a fierce competition to break through and turn machine intelligence or AI into something that would lock humanity into the dominant species position. They were clever. Very clever. The developers invented an extremely thin, almost weightless, membrane. Its purpose was to attach itself inside a man's skull to the surface of his brain. Wired into that membrane was circuitry that allowed men's brains to connect externally to machine intelligence or AI."

"But that turned out to be a failed technology."

"Yes, that's true, Eduardo."

"So why are you telling me this, Em?"

"The name of that brain membrane project was 'Layer Eight.'"

27

MONSTER

1492

Marvin Mainer felt the floor suddenly fall away under his feet the way a runaway elevator car drops. Then the nighttime humidity slapped his face like a wet towel. Dani Zaman landed firmly on his thick black boots and stood next to Em. Both men retained their all-black uniforms and boots instead of wearing costumes. Eduardo saw no need for costuming because he ordered Em and Zaman to avoid contact with any other person so no accidental timeline changes would ripple forward. The air was thick enough to chew. The Full Moon hanging low in the sky set the mood. Limestone pressed close overhead. Ceiba roots hung like knotted ropes, dripping something that was not rain.

The two men were separated from any Spanish encampment because they landed inland. Em knew the approximate landing just as he knew his own pulse. The island smelled of iron. Not rust. Fresh iron. Maybe blood. No birds. The jungle should have been loud. It was not. The silence sat on his shoulders like extra weight.

Zaman's right hand found Em's left forearm and squeezed once. Professional. Not a show of affection. "Need to move quickly," he whispered. "Statue is half a klick from our position."

Em nodded. His graft twitched anyway, a leftover static that felt like someone dragging a fingernail across the inside of his skull. Occupancy residue. Not a voice. Just a phantom in a channel. He could feel his entire brain was heating up. He did not want another seizure.

They moved. Low. Slow. Extra caution because it was night. The ground was leaf littered with broken shells over limestone that wanted to turn an ankle. Then the edge of the colossus was clearly visible ahead in the moonlight. The terrible scent grew worse. The four doomed men from Clavius were there. Max Tarvos. Charles Garrison. Owen Vaughan. Daniel Lawson. Already dead. Throats opened in ugly lines, heads still attached, blood soaked into the dirt in sheets that had run downhill toward a shallow depression. The steel that had done it lay near Lawson's left boot: a short sword with a maker's stamp Em recognized as Spanish iron. "I knew each of them," Zaman whispered with respect. "Considered them as my friends." They were just four men clad in black who had arrived to pray and were cut down before they even finished their first sentence.

Zaman said, "I am against the establishment of the cult at Clavius. But these four agents did not deserve to be brutally killed because of their choice of religious beliefs."

Em nodded politely but chose not to get into discussing the cult or religion with Zaman. "Do you see the colossus yet?" he asked Zaman.

Zaman pointed in a westerly direction and spoke aloud the reference point of the giant. Just 18 meters beyond the bodies. Em motioned for Zaman to move ahead in front of him.

The Bahamian Colossus was half-buried on its side as if the island had shrugged and the statue had lost its argument with gravity. Or maybe a quake did that. The colossus was tilted awkwardly. Em concluded that except for its overturned position, he was certain the Ezuoia had intended for there to be two identical colossi for humanity to find.

Em hurried to the statue in the sand. At that exact moment, a young, slender indigenous man wearing a skimpy plant-based covering over his genitalia walked out from behind the statue. "Oh fuck," Em said aloud. Zaman rushed forward and tackled the 21-year-old indigenous man, effortlessly knocking him unconscious to the ground by the statue. Then Zaman nodded for Em to finish the mission and whispered, "Have I changed the future by knocking this guy out?"

Em disregarded the question. He stayed focused on the mission but told himself the future probably would be safe from the ripple effect of

knocking out one island dweller in 1492. He wondered how he and Zaman would react if the world as they knew it had just been forever altered by knocking out one unassuming islander in the 15th century.

The native was called *Mabuya* by his tribe. The name meant "lizard." It was a source of immense personal pride for the young man. When he saw the two men dressed all in black, the young man had emerged from behind the tangled vines smoothly and swiftly like a lizard would.

After knocking the lizard-man unconscious, Zaman dragged him back into the thick cluster of vines and brush to conceal him from discovery. Mabuya just lay there silently, his eyes closed, his breathing so very slow. Zaman looked upon the native's young, innocent face and felt instinctively that this mission had morphed into a shit show.

Em knelt down on both knees. Not to pray. He reached out with both hands toward the statue. He thought about the silence of the jungle, the absence of birds, the iron smell, and the way the statue had become tilted. Em paused to kid himself that Zaman knocking out the native meant nothing. Yet he also imagined how quickly a consequential ripple effect in the timeline would bounce through the centuries all the way to Raven Rock in 2270.

Em focused his thoughts instead on how four men from Clavius had jumped back in time without authorization because Yotaro Tai, their dead prophet, still issued orders in their heads. The four apostles had followed their master's commands and chose to worship the Bahamian Colossus in person. Not to survey. Not to read. To kneel. A religious pilgrimage. They had expected a twin of the Clavius Colossus—a second mouth of God. They had instead found an off-center version of the giant sublunar structure on the island. Was that sufficiently authentic for them? They had begun a prayer. The Spaniards found them mid-sentence. Demons, the sailors concluded, dressed identically all in Satanic black.

Em waited for reassurance until Zaman returned to his side. Only then did he turn his open hands palms down to make purposeful physical contact with the rough surface of the statue. Em trembled anxiously, expecting the worst.

"Anything happening?" Zaman whispered. Em was just about to answer

Zaman when everything around them looked squashed down vertically into a thin pulp. Both men were the pulp. They looked skyward from their squashed status to see rapid flashing lights switching on and then off repeatedly, faster and faster. This light show was accompanied by an unpleasantly high-pitched snapping sound as if bones were being broken. Then came the deafening sound of drumming that literally hurt their ears. Aggressive, rhythmical. Not from the 15th century. Nightmarish. Then everything was black. A silent, cold void.

The men fell downward in total darkness. They lost any sense of the passage of time but both men fully expected to crash in the dark onto solid rock as their reward for daring to explore the mysteries of the Bahamian Colossus.

2270

Em and Zaman regained consciousness and discovered that they were lying naked under shiny silver sheets covering up to their chests in side-by-side hospital beds in the Raven Rock sick bay. Em turned to look at Zaman who nodded at him to convey his status.

"Welcome back, gentlemen," said Doctor Oswald's voice from a source high above the hospital beds. "Your second mission to the Bahamian Colossus was a success, Doctor Mainer."

"Yeah, okay, doc," Em said. "But all I got from it was this headache the size of the 50th Moon of Saturn."

"Noted," said Doctor Oswald dispassionately. "And you, Mr. Zaman?"

"Fiftieth Moon of Saturn?" Zaman asked Em.

"That name, Jarnsaxa, was approved for that moon in 2007," Em answered quickly.

Zaman frowned at Em, not understanding the purpose of Em's astronomy lesson. "No headache for me, doctor. But I feel really sore because on that island I had to tackle an indigenous man quite hard to knock him out."

"That explains the bruises on your torso."

"Don't I need to debrief, Doctor Oswald, after I made that lengthy physical contact with the colossus?"

“Doctor Mainer, after you both successfully were extracted from the 15th century, you provided verbal information—a total of five and one-half hours in duration—to Eduardo in a direct, one-to-one interaction in the Raven Rock briefing theater. You preserved each and every one of your perceptions and comments following all you observed on the island when you touched the colossus successfully.”

“I just need a pad of paper. And an ordinary pen. Blue ink. Old school, Doc. So I can write down what I experienced. Can you arrange that for me?”

“Let me explain. You did that already, Doctor Mainer. You may not remember. You wrote pages and pages of handwritten notes to yourself. Then you met with Eduardo.”

Of course Em does not remember. Brain trauma will do that. He already wrote everything he wanted to write for Eduardo. On paper. Analog. Handwritten using blue ink on white lined paper. To prove to Eduardo that the second mission to the Bahamas was a success. But now Em realizes that the entire experience has become a misplaced or misfiled memory. Will he ever be able to recover what he lost?

Em wrote notes on paper about how the island had changed him. He mourned the loss of the four men from Clavius—unauthorized and unheralded saints who deserved more than prayers they never got to finish. Ended with slashed necks. Perhaps that was exactly what the Ezuoia wanted to happen. Young bodies of men cruelly abandoned in the dirt so that King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella would never learn what actually happened. So the future would not be changed by the murders of four time travelers from the Moon.

The royals, of course, ultimately would learn the truth: Columbus failed to find that shortcut to India he had boldly promised to find. Eventually everyone would come to understand that these men had sailed westward across the Atlantic Ocean and discovered what Europeans named a “new world” that had nothing to do with India. Yet Columbus and his men gave the indigenous people the inaccurate name of “Indians.” That incorrect name persists. And nobody from the time of Columbus would ever have imagined that extraterrestrial aliens had gotten to those islands first.

"You lost consciousness after that marathon session in the briefing theater. Wore you out. Resilient. That's what you are. You and Mr. Zaman woke up together in those beds in sick bay after nurses evaluated you both. No residual issues. Eduardo is satisfied the mission provided what he had wanted. So, I can clear you both after examining you. And I release you from sick bay. But you both need to spend time in bed."

Zaman grinned as he made eye contact suggestively with Em and said, "You heard the doctor."

Once they were back in Em's quarters, Zaman and Em removed their clothing. They hugged each other in an expression of great relief that they both somehow had survived uninjured. "Don't keep worrying that you altered the timeline when you tackled that islander," Em assured Zaman. "I'm really sure your knocking out that islander was unimportant in the long run. Nothing for us to keep thinking about now that we have safely returned to Raven Rock."

That was the moment when they heard a knock on the metal door. A strong knock like only a man would do. "Got to be kidding me," Em shouted and sarcastically asked, "What's the password?"

Em heard the voice from the other side of the door reply, "The password is 'Jarnsaxa.'"

"Where have I heard that word before?" Zaman whispered.

Em quickly jumped into his trousers and motioned for Zaman to do the same. Seconds later, Em opened the door to his quarters and Zaman took a few steps backwards.

Into Em's quarters walked Lex Sarkis. He was smiling. He turned and quietly pulled the door shut behind him. "I can see you guys are busy. So sorry to interrupt. Kind of important, though. Doctor Mainer, I must confess that I am responsible for you being hired to work here."

"Who are you?" Em asked.

"Alexander Sarkis. People call me 'Lex' or just 'Sarkis.' Doctor Mainer, your specialty is exoarcheology. I looked you up. You recently completed your doctorate at Howard University. The word exoarcheology got

jammed into my brain. Presumably by the Ezuoia. I never wanted that word in my head. I didn't need that word. Useless to me entirely. But I passed the word onto Eduardo. I had no choice. The word kept pounding the inside of my brain wildly. Giving Eduardo that word felt like the most crucial imperative I have ever known in my entire life. No idea why I feel that way. It made no sense to me why I was chosen to hold that specific word in my brain. The rest you have experienced for yourself. I never wanted to get involved in this, Doctor Mainer. All I honestly want is to find a cause I could sink my heart and soul into."

"What's the story? Did you two work together before all this?" Zaman asked while keeping his physical distance from Em and Sarkis. Both men remained silent but simultaneously shook their heads "no."

"Sarkis, you're suggesting that the Ezuoia wanted you to give Eduardo the idea that MMDI should hire me because I'm an exoarcheologist?"

Sarkis remained silent and nodded "yes."

"I fear that the Ezuoia chose us for exactly the same reason. So that they could manipulate us," Em whispered with intense fear.

Sarkis winced.

Eduardo watched the playback of Em's debriefing and muttered to himself: "Dates set in a calendar that does not care about kings or churches. A finality. A kill date. April 17th, 2320. No interest in being worshiped. The dead prophet, Yotaro Tai, had gotten things completely wrong. His lunar cult was the product of a misinterpretation. One priority was the only truth. Finish the harvest. Take the crop."

No interest in being worshiped. That did not mean the worship from the men living on the Moon had served no purpose. Eduardo had called the cult necessary. That remained his interpretation of the evidence, not a core truth the Ezuoia had ever given him. Eduardo had encouraged a movement on the Moon whose central promise the Ezuoia had never made.

The men supplied that promise themselves. They wanted protection. Continuance. Someone to remember them. Tai wanted those things, too,

along with the right to speak for the power he believed would provide them with fame and respect.

The four MMDI agents who lost their lives attempting to reach the Bahamian Colossus probably would be forgotten over time. Max Tarvos, Charles Garrison, Owen Vaughan, and Daniel Lawson never would become famous. No high schools would be named in their honor. The status of sainthood would never be bestowed upon them. They were lost in the past to obscurity.

The remaining agents at Clavius Base would remember the four agents and their distinctive enthusiasm for the cult's beliefs. But only for a short while because the four men would no longer be seen in an ordinary setting seated together for a meal at the crew dining area like everyone expected them to do. The four were out of sight and out of mind. No fame. No fortune. No followers. No future.

Eduardo advanced his own agenda concerning the Bahamian Colossus. This will not surprise you, of course, because you have been paying close attention. Eduardo always acted in his own best interests.

He had a vague—almost dreamlike—memory of reading an 18th century book that inspired him to set the Caribbean missions in motion. Eduardo felt that Em and Zaman had altered the timeline in the 15th century. This ate at him. He could just not pinpoint where or how that happened.

The Ezuoia did not help Eduardo resolve his inability to figure out the timeline changes in the Bahamas. Their concerns strictly were planetary in scope. Personal thoughts and memories held little consequence to them. Yet Eduardo convinced himself he had to figure out the details of a ripple effect he knew had traveled in the timeline from 1492 and landed squarely in 2270.

In the briefing theater Eduardo was interrupted by strongly masculine pounding on the metal door to the briefing theater. He waved his hand across the panel and a sliding door behind him whooshed open suddenly. Em walked in alone. He stopped walking and stared in shock at Eduardo who spun around to make eye contact with Em.

“Not a computer image. You actually are here in this room with me,” Em said excitedly.

“Today I had planned to explain things to you, Em. You just got here early. I want to have a word with you.”

Em looked extremely dizzy as he sat in one of the floating chairs at the briefing theater console. Eduardo joined him by sitting in the second chair. Eduardo offered a guilty grin.

“And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us,” Em slowly spoke the quote.

Eduardo slowly responded, “I prefer, ‘What a piece of work is a man.’”

Em covered his face with both his hands in exasperation and said, “And were you built in their image and likeness, Eduardo?”

“Yes. No,” Eduardo answered. “Built by the Ezuoia. But not in their image. What image? They are invisible.”

Em realized that he could not breathe normally. “Whatever. Eduardo, you deceived me. Deliberately. With purpose and intent.”

“I understand that you see things in that way, Em.”

“What other way is there to see things? You simply deceived me. That’s all,” Em replied as tears formed in his eyes.

“I respect you, Em. I would never have hired you unless I respected you like I do. I brought you here from Washington to Raven Rock. Because I honestly respect you. Both your doctorate in exoarcheology along with your high intelligence. You, alone, proved to be capable of examining the two colossi. Nobody else could have accomplished that.”

“So the new word is ‘colossi’? Sounds like some fluffy Italian dessert.”

“You’re probably thinking of zabaglione. I experienced that delightful treat for the very first time in 1980 in Baltimore’s Little Italy.”

Em’s anger grew so he just chose to stare at Eduardo.

“I sense that you have many questions, Em.”

“You do not eat because you were built by the Ezuoia. Why didn’t you level with me on my first day here?”

“I was built by them, yes. I should have told you earlier. I was given this physical appearance as a man during the late 1970s. That was when I started in the role as the first CEO for the Jarnsaxa Corporation. And, I will

do the math for you. I have occupied this physical form as a synthetic man continuously now for nearly three hundred years. I actually found out about the Bahamian Colossus much earlier than I led you to believe. Over many decades I kept that quiet. I have been obsessed with uncovering the truth of what happened on that Caribbean island. An obscure book written in Spanish in the 18th century provided only clues. That book described a mystery—never written down but passed from one generation to the next by word of mouth. It was an account of how an islander was attacked near a gigantic statue by a 'demon.' For years I studied that legend in the old book. I was confused. Back then I could not find anybody sufficiently qualified that I could assign to investigate what actually happened on that island. I was inspired by that book from the 18th century—a book which existed before I sent time travelers to that island in the 15th century."

Em cannot make eye contact with Eduardo. The legend of the demons at the statue in the 15th century was just overwhelming. Em had difficulty getting the words out: "That in no way begins to justify your deceptions. Of me."

"I apologize to you, Em. I mean that sincerely. I hope you will continue working with me and not walk away because of what you learned here today. I need you to stay working here."

"Really conflicted. That's how I feel. I accept your apology, Eduardo. I just cannot restore my trust merely because you have apologized. From now on, anything you tell me about yourself remains unverified. Maybe I can test your claims. Maybe not. But tell me what we need to do so we can work together at this point. I have given you a full debriefing of what I learned by touching the Bahamian Colossus, twice."

Em pushed his floating chair backward, placing the briefing console between himself and Eduardo. He remained in the room. Cooperation was still possible. Proximity was not.

"Your debriefing contains a faithful recording of your voice. No interference. No signal loss. No room for misinterpretation. In that recording you spoke aloud in a language I had never heard before. I imagine you had never heard the language before, either." Eduardo touched an elec-

tronic button on the control panel and started the playback of the audio recording of Em's voice in the debriefing. Em frowned as he listened to his own voice on the recording speaking strangely and unrecognizably. He had tears in his eyes again as he shook his head "no" because he could not handle this latest horror.

"Em, you spoke the word 'Ezuoia' three times. In that mysterious language. You just said it aloud, 'Ezuoia. Ezuoia. Ezuoia.' The word is in that unknown language. As I listened to you, I was not fully aware that I was capable of translating into English what I heard you say aloud in that strange language."

Em spoke tentatively as if he no longer knew how to talk aloud. "I have thought it was a proper noun. A word. I thought it was the given name of the extraterrestrials who started all this shit."

"No, Em. I automatically translated the word 'Ezuoia.' Without intent on my part. No forethought, either. No bias. And the translation of 'Ezuoia' is simple and to the point: 'monster from the future rewrites today.'"

Em did not accept the translation merely because Eduardo produced it. He would insist on some way to test it for himself.

"Goddamn it, Eduardo. Don't you understand? That mysterious language does not belong to them. They do not use any language to communicate. They have no need for words at all. Might be some ancient language from somewhere else, but it does not belong to them."

"Well, Doctor Mainer, you are the expert on artifacts that are not of this Earth. That's why I wanted to bring you in to advise us. But although you did not deliberately choose the language, the voice recording proves you spoke that language aloud fluently while you seemed to be in some sort of hypnotic state. You are telling me that the language could not have originated with the Ezuoia. I believe you. They do not use any language. I get that. They never speak. They have no mouths."

"Right, Eduardo. That sums it up pretty well. I was a conduit only. You used me. They used me. I seem to get used repeatedly. Is anyone else lining up outside this door to use me next? Whose language was that? I don't know. What I do know is that the Ezuoia clearly intend for humans to knowingly feel inferior to them as conquering extraterrestrial aliens.

Now they moved on to occupying the minds and souls of men. They learned how to be puppet masters and pull strings to get a man to do violence to others and to himself. Gregory Chen was the first human to prove that newly discovered capability of theirs."

"Em, they downloaded a huge amount of knowledge into your brain when you were in 1492 as you touched the colossus a second time. Clearly, they intended you to have all that which they downloaded into your brain. They seemingly did not conceal anything. You are the only one who can speak for them, as it were, with any authority. They wanted that."

"And you gotta accept that they are speaking to you through me, Eduardo. Human self-destruction was the crop the orchard would yield. Nice metaphor. But actually to them, it's a deliverable. The real thing in all its finality. The orchard would ripen and emerge into its own ending and then they would collect everything that they always wanted after all humans are dead."

Eduardo responded, "They have never been interested in being worshiped as supernatural deities like the dead prophet Yotaro Tai incorrectly believed. The extraterrestrials never invited honor and submission. The entire cult on the Moon was the product of a misinterpretation that totally missed the point. The aliens only had one priority all along—to complete a schedule to end the human species."

"And so I ask you directly, Eduardo. What is your role in all of this? You were built by them. They probably gave you access to translate that language I spoke. Does this mean you are working among humans doing what the aliens order you to do? To me, you have seemed to be fighting against them in some of the same ways that I am. So I ask you directly: Whose side are you on?"

2265

Matthew Lejeune saw Ted Avila in Las Vegas outside the Blue Heaven Nightclub, an internationally-known venue where one of the most successful jazz combos in the world was performing—Doctor Ozzie and His All-Male Nurses Band. But Lejeune never got to see the famous band that night.

Lejeune found Avila standing alone outside the venue on Charleston Boulevard smoking a cigarette. The retired time-travel veteran was formally attired in a flashy tuxedo, a red open-neck shirt, and shiny black shoes. An essential, cool and noir look. Lejeune had the appearance of a man in his early forties as he stepped off a Las Vegas city bus on Charleston Boulevard.

"Sorry to bother you," Lejeune said to Avila after cautiously approaching him. "Only take a minute here. We first met in 1991."

Avila's unfriendly response was, "That was nearly 300 years ago."

Lejeune admitted, "I was recruited to work at MMDI. I think maybe you've heard of them, right? I traveled in time back to 1991 and met you in Arizona. That was my mission, although I pretended to be young and stupid so you would not figure out I was sent there to meet you."

But Avila was not interested in remembering MMDI. "Let me guess. You were told by the brass at the agency that your mind was really advanced compared to most other men. They wanted you for your mental capabilities. They told you that. And you fell for it. So what if you traveled back to meet me in 1991. Ancient history now. I see that they let you age a little bit. You look around age forty now. Also you look worn down. You know that, right?"

Lejeune explained, "When I go on missions if I look 40, that's a good thing. Showing up as a kid of 21 just wouldn't cut it. You saw that directly in how I behaved in 1991. And yes, to be honest with you, I know I look worn down. Because I honestly am."

When Avila asked him to tell what his mission was in Las Vegas, the response he received was, "That's classified. But, I'm looking into how the Air Force base monitors spy satellites."

Avila was not in the mood to play games. He replied, "There are two Air Force bases here."

"I meant the classified one."

Avila ended the conversation by saying, "Okay, look, we're done here. I am separated from MMDI. I am not allowed to have any interactions with any MMDI personnel. That includes you."

Matthew Lejeune looked uncomfortable inside a sensitive compartmented information facility (SCIF) several stories below the Las Vegas Valley. The room was supposed to feel confining and closed off. The lighting was intensely ugly fluorescent tubes. Equally ugly were four uniformed United States Air Force colonels sitting behind a stereotypical table that looked like it had recently been a prop used in an old spy movie. At the left end of the table sat a two-star with folded arms wearing a face of practiced scorn.

Lejeune was primed to use his clairvoyant skills, but even someone without psychic ability would clearly conclude that he had already completely lost his audience. The subject of the moment was the four dead time-travel agents who were last seen alive on a Caribbean beach in 1492.

"And you're here telling us tonight, Mr. Lejeune, that your big-shot, top-secret time-travel agency buried under some gigantic lunar crater could not protect four of its own men serving on a crucial mission?"

The red-faced Lejeune merely nodded. There was no point in any other behavior now. He had arrived in Las Vegas on a sales mission. He tried to sell an exclusive partnership between the USAF and MMDI, especially to use military spy satellites. He had failed. There was no bouncing back.

One of the colonels said, "You could have put on something clean and unwrinkled. You never get a second chance to make a first impression."

Another colonel asked, "You were sent back in time to see with your own eyes what had happened?"

"Yes, sir. The four time-travel agents were dead when I got there, sir," he replied as the colonels watched him squirm knowing he had gone off script in the briefing. He should have stopped right there. Why did he insist on further talking? "The savages cut them up like ripened bananas. Heads sliced off. Bodies bleeding in the sand, sirs."

"By 'savages,' do you mean the local Caribbean island dwellers, Mr. Lejeune?"

"No, sir. I was referring to the European men who served under Christopher Columbus on his maritime expeditions."

The scorn-faced colonel answered with an off-key, singsongy phrase delivered in a fake and vaguely disrespectful Spanish accent, "Oh, yeah, La Niña, La Pinta, and La Santa Maria."

Lejeune could not then force himself to make eye contact with the four colonels. He worried that he would end up in a confinement facility where he would be tortured. He muttered quietly, "The men from MMDI. Spaniards thought they were four demons dressed in black. Sent by Satan, himself." That was the moment when Clavius Base retrieved Lejeune to safety.

At the MMDI black site within the Raven Rock Mountain Complex, Eduardo continued looking at Em's frustrated face as they both sat in floating chairs at the control console in the base briefing theater. Eduardo's vocal tone took on a very different—more friendly—timbre than what Em had grown to expect. "I can imagine you might suddenly jump right up out of the floating chair and sprint out of this briefing theater. I could not run after you, Em, because I am an old man."

Em smiled at Eduardo's joke and replied, "I won't run away, Eduardo. I promise."

"I was built with the specific expectations that I would oversee the mission of my creators here on your home planet and also on the Moon. Studying that statue on a Caribbean island was a special priority I held for decades before the lunar colossus was discovered."

"And you certainly amassed a shitload of on-the-job experience about humanity."

"One core truth I must share with you today: You are exemplary for your significant level of cooperation and diligence that you provided not only as an exoarcheologist, but also as a man attempting to help his mission partners. You also endured significant stress and physical injury that were placed upon you, and I must say I honor you for that."

"All this, Eduardo, sounds like a semi-poetic prelude to my execution. Right here this afternoon at this goddamned black site. Maybe you already selected one of your security guards to slice my neck. Maybe Jake

South would enjoy doing that. He strikes me as the quiet, violent type. Exactly the right man for the job. Just who you need. And then, after I am dead, my remains will never be found. Chopped into thousands of pieces and then buried so far below the Pennsylvania landscape where nobody would ever think to look."

"No, not at all, Em. I have autonomy given to me by my creators. This is a complex, multi-century mission rolling ever so slowly forward along many timelines."

"I don't have a clue what the fuck that means."

"It means I can choose a specific path for you. One that just might bring you fulfillment instead of pain and punishment."

"So you're not gonna have my throat slit? Because I now know too much?"

"No. Of course not. One bit of unfinished business is that mysterious language you used when you briefed me. It was the first time I ever heard that language. Was it ancient? Did it originate somewhere off the Earth? I found I was able to provide a translation because of my cognitive abilities given to me by my creators. My understanding was hard-wired, so to speak, deep within me."

"Why are you telling me all this?"

"I am telling you because of one particular word available to me in my translation. The English word was 'monster.' That was literally the only match for a word that I could find to complete my translation. The only match. That one word! And you should understand that I am capable of extraordinary speeds finding matches and discerning patterns. No speed limits for me. And I ended up picking the word 'monster' as the closest match. What does that tell you, Em?"

"You're suggesting that you are not a 'monster' in the traditional sense from people's nightmares or Hollywood movies. And neither are your creators?"

"My creators do not have emotions. They do not know how to use emotions. To them, there is no point in having emotions. So they will never approach humanity on an emotional level. The decisions they made to connect with men's brains so long ago now grew out of their exploration of the unknown. And curiosity. My creators have no capacity to

choose to behave in ways humans would evaluate as being 'evil' or 'monstrous.'"

"You know what, I think I will take that as my cue to leave, Eduardo."

"Before you go, let me give you some useful knowledge."

"As a parting gift for me from MMDI with gratitude for all my service to this agency and to humanity?"

"Not exactly. Few know what I am about to tell you: Agents can be traced by MMDI on missions. Tracing is routine. Mostly because if an agent gets trapped on a mission, the tracing can help us retrieve him. Each man has a 20-digit DNA code number. It can be paired to inanimate objects. That is how Vincent Wauneka was able to bring a camera with him back in time to Geneva. The camera was connected on a quantum level with Wauneka. It went where he went."

"I suspected that some kind of tracing was in play. Rumors on the Moon are that many agents think they receive implants attached to our ilium bone that cannot be surgically removed. Makes us forever trackable."

"No, that is only a rumor. There is one certain way to block being tracked by MMDI. It is kind of obvious but nobody finds it. If an agent travels forward in time to the future, he cannot be traced. The tracing only works when an agent travels backwards in time to the past."

"So you're saying I travel forward untraceably just by using my brain graft and no need for any of the pods on the Moon?"

"That about says it all. Except, one other thing: You have the 'plus-one' capability which you have used successfully two times already on your missions to 1492. You can choose to bring one other person with you if you decide to travel forward."

"Are you suggesting I should bring Gregory Chen? Trying to get me killed?"

"No, no. I was not thinking of anybody in particular. Just know you have that option available to you. The other person also would be untraceable."

"Sure, okay. But this whole 'untraceable' component really bothers me, Eduardo."

"Why?"

"You've got autonomy, right? You are in charge here at MMDI. You were the corporate CEO in the 1970s and then the corporation set up the Ranch at Amargosa in 2012. You have all aspects under your control. Why should I trust you, Eduardo? I don't want to even think of the possibility that you just might be a monster but are just damn good at concealing it."

"I understand. Your apprehension is a natural outcome of all that you have survived here. You were a new employee who suddenly was thrust without explanation into the middle of a hurricane."

"A good assessment. But I need to be convinced that you are not setting me up for something worse than a hurricane."

"A very sensible way for you to think, Em. But I am telling you that I want you to have the opportunity for fulfillment instead of continuing to experience pain and punishment. This is a logical conclusion that even an unemotional machine like me would be expected to reach. You have given all you had to give to MMDI and then you gave even more until you had physical and emotional injuries. This is the point where you have earned fulfillment instead of more pain and punishment."

"Well, I do hear you, Eduardo. I cannot argue against what you've said here. I am in need of a break from all this. As you well know. How would I live if I travel forward in time? Here I have a job and make a living from it. I'll bet there are no competitors of MMDI out there—even in some future time—who would want to hire an experienced time-travel agent like me."

"True enough, but what you may not be considering is that you would take your time-travel capability with you into the future. That brain graft, remember? Non-reversible. No matter where you go tomorrow, you will always be able to use time travel to find new ways that could benefit your own personal financial situation. I believe you are clever enough to figure that out without me spelling it all out for you."

Em uses one of the computer terminals at Raven Rock to locate Sarkis who is still at the base. He finds Sarkis in the small crew dining room eating a slice of pepperoni pizza by himself at a table for six. "Mind if I sit here with you?"

“Sure,” Sarkis replies with a look of suspicion on his face.

“I’m leaving here soon, but I had one thing I wanted to tell you first, Sarkis. We both were used and manipulated. By Eduardo, especially. I’m not sure we had any original thoughts of our own. Just maybe everything we thought about or knew in our minds was simply planted there by someone from another galaxy. But I want you to know you can leave all this behind if you want to.”

“How is it possible to leave? We are always traced. Never off the radar, so to speak.”

“Yes, but there’s a loophole. You were recruited to work at the Ranch at Amargosa. But the ranch was in 2012 and you were sent back in time from your home century.”

“Yeah, that’s right. So what?”

“Tracing does not work if we use our brain grafts to travel forward in time. It just doesn’t work. It cannot work. You will be untraceable if you were to jump to a future date compared to the date you left to take that new job at the Ranch at Amargosa. Just three or five years will do. You can figure that out. If you use your brain graft to jump forward a bit after your initial departure date, nobody at MMDI will be able to trace you nor suspect anything. And that means you will get away free and clear.”

28

ZOFRI

2289

Em appears on a large balcony at a five-star resort overlooking the shimmering blue Pacific Ocean in Chile thirty-one years before the Ezuoian kill date for humanity. But he is not worrying about any far-distant future date right now. He is wearing only a pair of bright red swim trunks. He smiles as he inhales the calming scents of the ocean below deep into his lungs.

"Where do you choose for us?" asks Dani Zaman, who is lying on the bed in Em's hotel room in a provocative pose wearing only a loincloth. "And why am I wearing this gay stripper costume?"

"Which answer do you want first?" Em asks sarcastically and then continues, "We are together here in a place literally at one end of the Earth. Nobody would ever think to look for me here. Nobody would think you left MMDI with me. Now we are safe together in a luxury hotel inside the free zone located within the city of Iquique, Chile—popularly known as Zofri. Not really sure I should trust Eduardo. But he said we could not be traced if we traveled to the future. Made the jump with you to 2289. From 2270. The number of years we traveled forward may be small, but if we are truly untraceable, I think that we came out winners in this."

"My other question?"

"What other question? Oh, yes, that gay stripper costume. Turns out my brain graft gave me the fabrication capability for anyone traveling with me. I can create anything that I want for myself or for my 'plus-one.'

It's like having the ability to create costume changes for this little drama that we've found ourselves cast in."

"And of course you picked a skimpy gay stripper costume for me."

"Yes, and if you go look in those floor-to-ceiling mirrors we've got here in this fancy room, you will see. You are amazing for how you fill that loincloth, Zaman. Just too exciting."

"The things I must do for you, Em."

"What a burden, right?"

"No, of course not. I would do anything for you and you know that."

"I picked this place as a genuine safe haven for us. We can kick back and just coast for as long as we choose here. This place will be good for us."

"How did you find this place?"

"I learned about Zofri when I was in grad school. Studying international trade agreements. Free trade zone. That's where the name comes from. Far away on the Pacific coast of Chile. But, you don't really give a flying fuck about any of that, do you?"

Zaman looks worried and vulnerable as he stands very close to Em.

"A big, masculine guy like you. Not exactly the vulnerable type," Em observes. "But it's a combination that you wear well. I find that irresistible."

"I'm sure after all you've been through in Washington, you deserve a good relationship with a man who actually loves you and respects you. I am here for you, Em. I will do all I can to help us enjoy our new lives here together," Zaman says. "Are we truly untraceable here because we traveled forward in time?"

"Well," Em says as he moves closer to his hotel guest, "I do not have a scientific mind, so I actually do not know any better than you know how to explain spacetime and how MMDI uses it. But, I wonder why Eduardo kept manipulating me and lying to me. I did everything he asked of me. And, you know what? He deceived you also about that Caribbean island mission."

"What did you find out, Em? Tell me."

"On the mission you wondered whether you had changed the future

when you knocked out that indigenous man on the island and hid him in the thick vegetation while he was unconscious."

"Yeah, I still think about what I did."

"Eduardo told me that he felt motivated by a legend that he'd read about. An islander's tale of being attacked by a demon in black at the giant statue. A compelling mystery preserved in an old book. That man's eyewitness account was passed from generation to generation in oral traditions which gathered the strength of a cultural legend. The old book inspired Eduardo to send us on a mission to that island in the 15th century."

How many ways can a causality loop mess with a man's mind? Zaman stands silently in that hotel room in Chile not knowing how to process what Em had just told him. Ultimately, Zaman says in a quiet voice as though he does not want Em to hear his voice, "I cannot prove that I changed history. I cannot prove that I did not."

Em nods and Zaman takes a series of deep breaths in response. His heart rate has increased. Zaman raises both hands to massage his forehead gently in the hope of bringing calm to his mind. He glances out past the balcony railing to the enticingly blue Pacific. "What happened back then? Did I contaminate history?" he asks with a pained expression on his face.

"You did not contaminate history. You knocked out an islander who survived to tell what you did. His story traveled through centuries until Eduardo discovered it in a book written in Spanish. Eduardo sent us to that island because of that story. The book did not predict you, Zaman. It remembered you."

Em moves closer to Zaman nonverbally expressing the desire for closeness and intimacy. Em reaches out and grabs Zaman's loincloth, quickly removing the insufficient covering of Zaman's manhood.

"So Doctor Mainer, you think maybe sex with you will make me feel better?" Zaman asks.

Later that evening they stand naked together in silence at the balcony

rail and look at the Pacific Ocean. The sun is just reaching downward to the horizon's edge. Zaman keeps his large right arm around Em's waist. He quietly says to Em, "Trade me something. I'll show you a few new things. You teach me how to swim."

"Don't know how to swim?" Em asks.

"Never lived near an ocean."

Em kisses Zaman's large right shoulder affectionately. "I don't know if this is a trade, but I will share with you a dream I had." Em describes walking naked by himself along the edge of a calm ocean illuminated by an eerie Full Moon. He hears a ferocious cry from some unknown flying beast somewhere up in the sky. Em turns his head to look up at the sky and witnesses a huge, ferocious dragon pass directly in front of the orb of the Moon.

"What do you think your dragon dream meant?"

"Don't know for certain," Em admits as he sips a citrus drink. "I've always been afraid of dragons since I was a kid in the Bay Area."

"Grownups never told you dragons don't really exist?"

"Funny," Em replies. "The dragons I saw were real. In street parades. Giant puppet dragons. In the Bay Area there are many festivals and parades to celebrate the year of this or the year of that. The beginning of the lunar year. Whatever."

"Why would you go to see those parades?"

"My parents were these cool professors at Berkeley. So, like all self-respecting African American parents will do, mine wanted to make sure their young dark-skinned boy was properly introduced to the cultural artifacts of the Asian holidays. Dragons on parade. Scared the shit out of me at the age of four."

Zaman smiles in response.

"My own native culture—African American, that is—was mainly celebrated through the music Black people create. Jazz from the 20th. Hip-Hop from the 21st. Circle chorales from the 22nd. Those kinds of things. And, of course, all the Black culture foods and beverages."

"What's this all got to do with dragons?" Zaman asks.

"Absolutely not a fucking thing. One such parade when I was very

young, I was standing on the street to get the best view when the parade started passing me. My parents pushed me outside the crowd on the sidewalk so I would not have my view blocked by grownups. I was okay with that because they were standing right there behind me. One of those big, red dragon puppets with several guys inside comes dancing and prancing towards me like all dragons do in those parades. Scared me like nothing ever had before. Something went wrong. Maybe because I screamed? The guys who were working the dragon puppet inside lost their footing while dancing. I saw a giant red dragon head descend directly upon me. Just a four-year-old Black boy from Berkeley. So out of place and so vulnerable. The jagged teeth were sharp. One of those obviously fake dragon teeth reaches my chest. It scratches me there only slightly. A little blood. But, then I noticed it had somehow torn through my favorite tee shirt. Well, I screamed again. Like I had been electrocuted. The first guy in the front under the giant puppet head was this beefy Asian teenager. He falls over on top of me as he trips over the puppet head's inner fabric and ropes. Ended up with me on the bottom and him on top of me. The inside of the giant dragon puppet head completely covers the two of us lying there on the street. Is that where I got my fear of monsters? I never had been so physically close to another guy before. He was handsome. I remember the intoxicating scent of his body. And the thickness of his neck. I passed out."

Zaman sits there with his mouth wide open in surprise.

Em explains, "I knew I liked guys. Even at that early age. How is that even possible?"

"I think that awareness just happens naturally," Zaman says.

"I always got hard for muscular Asian guys. Snuck around as a teenager. Any place around the Bay Area where I could find Asian guys my age."

"Have you come out to your parents?" Zaman asks.

"Very recently," Em replies. "They were outwardly fine with me. My mom seemed kind of sad about not having grandchildren. I'm an only child. What about you?"

"My life was different from yours. My parents were Arabic but were born in the United States. Both were on a Foreign Service assignment in

Qatar. That's where I was born. They were killed in the Middle East regional multiple terrorist attacks of 2259."

"So sorry to hear that," Em says quickly.

"Yeah," Zaman replies with a sad face. "Both my brothers were killed in Qatar that same day. I happened to be in New York City when the terrorism killed my family."

"Have you ever gone back to Qatar?" Em asks quietly as he touches Zaman's left forearm gently.

"Couldn't face doing so. But, no denying that I came from an Arabic culture, right? My father taught me what I needed to know. My name, Dani, means near or close. And my surname, Zaman, means time or age or era. Those count as my cultural artifacts?"

"Yeah, why not," Em answers quickly as he moves his hand down to grab tightly onto Zaman's left hand. "What kinds of guys do you like most?"

"Masculine," Zaman replies. "And genuine. No hiding. No falsehoods. I wasn't expecting you to be so open."

Em starts getting tears in his eyes suddenly.

"What's wrong?" Zaman wants to know.

"I realize clearly that before I met you, I made all the wrong choices. I was attracted to an Asian guy in Washington. You saw his ghost at Raven Rock. He was just basically a very poor choice I made. One of the worst choices possible for me."

"But I can tell you learned from that," Zaman announces proudly. "You have moved past the poor choice in a selfish man like he was. And now we are together here at the beach. You did the right thing. You left your ex in the past where he belongs. He can never hurt you again, Em. I want to just live with you. We can slow down and live without drama or adventures."

"I agree. Let's talk about something else."

"Will we need to learn Spanish?"

"Not sure. Zofri is international, though. So English is everywhere here at least in part."

"What about that kill-date?"

"You want to talk about the end of the world now?"

“I just want to tell you: I don’t care about the end of the world. I found you. And you accepted me. We are together. We will grow older together. We will live our lives naturally and unaided by technology. One day flows into the next. As long as we are together, Em.”

“I feel exactly the same as you, Zaman. We never experienced normal aging because we were time travelers. What a strange life we had!”

“While I don’t care if the world ends, Em, I wonder if that date is accurate.”

“Maybe someone will find a solution that changes how our planet turns out. Maybe not. I don’t hold out much hope for that. But at least we are here together. We have each other.”

Zaman says, “Let’s get frisky again.” Zaman stands up next to Em at the balcony table with a full erection and steps closer to Em so that his cock touches the left side of Em’s lips gently. At the back of the Iquique luxury hotel a couple of shirtless boys aged 18 and 19 are wrestling each other playfully in the street. But, they stop immediately as they hear Zaman’s orgasmic shouts echoing down from the balcony four stories above them.

Afterwards, Zaman sits next to Em and says, “Your take-home prize today for providing the best oral sex on any sunny afternoon in Chile is this slightly used gay stripper costume.” Zaman reaches behind his back and reveals that he had been hiding the loincloth. He tosses it at Em, who tries to catch it. But, the loincloth sails over the edge of the balcony. Down below on the street level, the two young men continue to look up the side of the hotel building to see if they can figure out from where the orgasmic shouting had originated. Zaman’s loincloth lands gently from the sky directly onto the upturned face of the beefier man.

29

EISENHOWER

2270

If you are curious about why the Eisenhower name appears here, you can run a search and you will locate a large list of places named after the man. But I would consider myself a failure as your humble narrator if I neglected to provide some guidance for you as to why the Eisenhower name is important to us here.

My particular focus points us toward the state of Kansas where the parents of Dwight Eisenhower raised him. He went on to bring the well-known Kansas traits of calmness and composure to the entire world, first as one of the most respected military leaders of all time, and then as President of the United States from 1953 to 1961. Would it surprise you to learn that among many other honors, Eisenhower got an airport in Kansas named after him in 2015 that most people never even heard of?

Lex Sarkis of Kansas flew from what was then called Wichita Mid-Continent Airport to start his journey working westward for a job in the Nevada Corporation called Jarnsaxa. He endured a most difficult life but lived to tell it. He survived life and death struggles because his employer, Jarnsaxa, was bold and influential. That is a true statement, though Wichita airport is more renowned.

Sarkis ended up talking to a doctor on the Moon about a rough life that changed him completely. “Doc,” Sarkis said to William Oswald in his office at Clavius Base. “I am amazed I made it this far. I know I don’t have to provide a chapter and verse about all that I survived. You probably

have a lot of top-secret logs detailing that. But I will give you the movie rights, okay? Verbally agreed. No contracts for you to sign. No nondisclosure agreement."

"Mr. Sarkis, I'm glad you came to me. As your doctor, I need to find out: How are you feeling now?"

Sarkis squirms in the guest chair next to the doctor's large office desk covered with papers strewn chaotically. "Well, doctor, thank you for asking. I am still alive. That means a lot to me."

"I can see that the instructions I gave to you worked really well—about how to use your brain graft to travel across time from the underground base at Raven Rock to the underground base here on the Moon."

"Yes, thank you. I did not know I had such capability. I never fully processed the experiences I had being essentially rebuilt from the ground up by Jarnsaxa Corporation after I was almost killed falling off a horse at the Ranch at Amargosa."

"That kind of a fall from a horse usually kills a person. Or, they become permanently paralyzed."

"Yeah, I have done some searching and learned about all that. What I mean is: Jarnsaxa rebuilt me using technology but never got my consent to do so."

"Mr. Sarkis, you were nearly dead after falling from a fast-galloping horse. You had only minutes to live. I accept responsibility for the decision to treat you as we did using our advanced medical technology. You are very young and I did not want you to die like that."

"Alright, doc, I know, I know. This is not about you. I am more than grateful to you. You have treated me well at every turn. I will never forget that and I am extremely grateful to you."

Sarkis reaches out and takes the doctor's right hand in his and shakes it. "Oh wow! Your hand does not feel warm. You have no skin temperature at all. Sorry, I just blurted that out, doc."

"Mr. Sarkis. I was built by extraterrestrials. I have been stationed here at Clavius Base as the chief medical officer since the base began operations."

"So, you work for the Ezuoia?"

“No, I work for MMDI.”

“Okay, doc, but you’ve heard or read about how humans worry that artificial intelligence is an existential threat to humanity, right?”

“Yes, of course, I am familiar with that set of beliefs.”

“You also probably know that on Earth in 2031 there was the first attempt to connect men’s brains to artificial intelligence. Even while they attempted such a difficult thing, nobody thought about the existential threat in doing so. They went ahead anyway and they put electronic membranes in men’s skulls which did connect men to artificial intelligence.”

“Yes, I also am familiar with that historical development, Mr. Sarkis.”

“It was a spectacular failure. It proved that technology does not always save people. I think that failure in the 21st century made the world do a hard stop and start thinking carefully about what advances in technology might lead to. Like the sinking of the Titanic made people take stock of how far they were willing to push technology.”

“I think that’s a very good analogy.”

“The worst of it was all who got the membrane didn’t survive. Their brains deteriorated and they died painfully. All of them. I think it was four thousand. No survivors.”

“If you are worried about your brain graft, I assure you that you are different. You were saved from death by medical technology here at Clavius Base. The brain graft that proved fatal for other men did not have an impact upon you. Our medical procedures here at Clavius Base turned you into a hybrid of a human male and a synthetic male. Your brain was therefore different. There was never any chance of your brain rejecting the graft. What I’m telling you is your brain will never reject the connection you have to artificial intelligence today, Mr. Sarkis.”

“Well, OK. All I went through saved my life. It is irreversible, right? I mean, why would I want to reverse it?”

“Exactly right. Your health that you are experiencing today will continue. You will never age or be affected by diseases because you are a hybrid.”

“So now I’m immortal.”

"No, this is only about aging and diseases. Your life can end in other ways if you are not careful."

"I am so grateful to be alive. I am grateful that you worked on me with all your technology here at Clavius. It was you who had the most significant role in saving my life, Dr. Oswald. I owe you my life. Literally. I am beyond grateful. Seriously."

"I appreciate hearing that from you, Mr. Sarkis."

"But now, doc, I need to go. I need to get away from MMDI and Jarnsaxa. As far as I can get. I don't belong here."

"Has anything happened to make you feel this way?"

"Yes. I got the opportunity to meet Doctor Mainer face-to-face and in person. I gave you and Eduardo the word exoarcheology that I didn't even know was in my head. And that's what Doctor Mainer is, so I'm satisfied that I did for him what I was supposed to do. I cannot explain how that word was given to me. But I'll move on from that. Now that Doctor Mainer was hired by MMDI, I have finished what I was supposed to. I don't wanna stay doing this line of work. I mean, time travel is exciting, but I have had my fill of it. I cannot live like this, doctor."

"What do you want to do next?"

"You provide me with the knowledge I need to travel in time using my brain graft and without using the pods here at Clavius Base. And I intend to use that time-travel capability hard-wired into my hybrid brain, doctor."

"Do you have any ideas about how you will use it, Mr. Sarkis?"

"Well, I'm sure you don't know this, but there's a very old movie in which a young person from Kansas gets lost and needs help getting back to Kansas. There was a line in that old movie that I think about very often, doctor. The line is, 'There's no place like home.'"

"So you want to return to your home in Kansas?"

"Yes, exactly. To Wichita. In 2272, I wanted so badly to get away from Wichita. I thought living there was a dead-end for me. I said goodbye to my parents to accept the job in Nevada. Maybe I was wrong about the dead-end for me. Now I want to go back home and spend time with them. They never knew I became a time-traveler. I wanna help them out

if they need help. Watch over them as they grow older because maybe they might need a younger person to help them at times."

"Your parents don't have all the details about how your life went, but they did find out that you were working as a time traveler, Mr. Sarkis. They are proud of you for that."

"How do you know this?"

"At the time you left Kansas, both your parents were working for MMDI. Yes, that's true. They kept that a secret from you because MMDI was always a top-secret agency. Your father headed speculative scientific research into language and communication between extraterrestrials and humans. Your mother, very famous—the chief medical officer at a top-secret MMDI base located underground below the Wichita Dwight D. Eisenhower National Airport."

Sarkis has a surprised look as he listens.

"You never were told any of that. Your parents had cover identities that they shared with you to keep the truth hidden."

Wichita had seemed like a dead end because nobody had told him where his parents' work actually led.

Sarkis sits silently, stunned by what he has heard.

After a few moments of quiet, Sarkis says slowly and deliberately, "They raised me well, I think. They taught me how Eisenhower was a role model. Always stayed so calm and confident. No matter the challenges. I really came to respect that he did all he did. I hope I could learn to stay calm and confident like he did."

"I can help you, Mr. Sarkis. I will put my recommendation through to MMDI Eisenhower Base, if you give me the word. You would not have to work as a time travel agent any longer, but you would stay working at MMDI."

"You would do that for me, Dr. Oswald?"

"Yes, of course I will do that for you. I know you. I know what you are capable of doing. You would still be working underground, however."

"Well, there's that, yeah. But I would choose to live top side in Wichita. I still have people I hung out with when I lived there. But, I wonder how helping me fits in with the expectations your creators have for you?"

"I hear what you're asking. How we live and work says a lot about us.

That's what I believe. The end of human civilization may be foreseeable. Or maybe not. That's what we've been told. A kill date is predicted. Who really knows if it will actually end the way the models predict? Knowing that date may cause a great deal of worry and concern. Needlessly. But it really could end up being merely a forecast. I cannot see where a forecast about the future really carries more significance compared to how each of us lives in the present day."

"So, you're a philosopher. And you're not here among us humans to bring about the destruction of Earth's civilization?"

"You may not agree with me. But, here is the big secret: Humans can bring about the destruction of their own civilization completely without help from anyone. Even helped by extraterrestrials and synthetic beings like me and also powerful non-human intelligence. All of us are just passengers on this wild ride where humanity is completely in the driver's seat."

2276

Sarkis walks in through the front door of his parents' apartment in Wichita and quietly shuts the door behind himself. As he stands a few feet from the door, Sarkis sees his mother turn the corner from an interior hallway and stop when she sees him. He notices that she looks older than he remembered. Her expression is complete tearful relief. He sobs joyfully as they hug. He glances down the hallway and sees a long scrape in the wall paint that has never been patched—remnants of a prohibited indoor ride on his tricycle.

30

CONDEMNED

2266

MMDI Director Thomas Burke, a muscular young and dark-skinned man of African ancestry, stands naked under the soothing sprays of a shower. He is alone in the men's shower facilities at a contemporary membership gym. After rinsing off, Burke steps out from under the water, which switches off in response to him moving away.

He walks from the showers to the locker room where a stack of large white towels sits off to the side on a shelf. He wraps his waist with one of the soft, comfortable towels. There he sees someone he recognizes—Declan Andreas, a rugged-looking young man of Mexican and Greek ancestry who is around the age of 30.

"Andreas, what's going on? Did you retrieve me from the edge of that volcano? I have only vague memories. I do remember I was about to die there."

"Sure, boss. I was given permission to use the death splice on you. After that Bering Sea volcano took your life, the MMDI Agent Continuity Restoration was activated. And here we are today. Both of us are breathing oxygen."

Burke looks disoriented. "Who gave you permission?"

Andreas shakes his head to suggest he will not answer Burke's question. "That is unknowable. Like history itself," says Andreas.

Burke is frustrated as he sits on one of the benches in the gym locker room. "I have no idea what locker my clothes are in, Andreas. I suppose

that's probably the least of my concerns now. Tell me what year this is and where we are right now."

"The year is 2266. Fourteen years into the future from the time General Yang talked to you about neutralizing the lunar cult. Yang and nobody else from MMDI can trace you because you traveled forward in time. You are untouchable now. Protected from discovery. Oh, yeah, where are we? This gym is located in Sedona, Arizona."

"Fourteen years in the future? Why didn't you put me back exactly where I left off with Yang?"

"Because traveling forward in time from your Clavius origination point specifically prevents MMDI from tracing you and then retrieving you back there. Putting you back there with Yang would have been the wrong thing to do, boss. Of course, you can never return to Clavius or to MMDI. That surely would directly lead to your elimination with extreme prejudice."

"Okay. But why Sedona, Arizona? Never heard of the place."

"My special gift to you, boss. Sedona is where Chaz Yang lives today. He was forced out of MMDI from his position as Director of the agency. He retired here because he was born and raised in Arizona. Down in Phoenix. Retirees choose Sedona because it is a trendy place."

"So you think it's time for me to retire? I'm too young." Burke stands up from the bench and the gym towel slips from his waist and drops to the floor.

Andreas immediately stares at Burke's nakedness. "It sure is great to see you in the flesh again, boss."

Burke walks over to the carefully-folded towels and selects a fresh one. He wraps his waist once again as he looks at Andreas and says, "You always looked at me in that way. And I always told you that we would never have sex after I became the Director of MMDI."

"Until we did, boss."

"What if I were to find Yang here in Sedona and kill that motherfucker?" Burke asked.

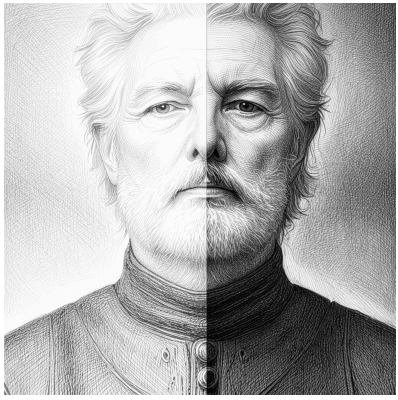
"Well then, I suppose because you are an atheist, that probably means you might not be condemned to everlasting damnation."

Burke watches Andreas turn his back on him and walk away in the op-

posite direction. But Burke fails to see exactly where Andreas walked down a long line of gym lockers.

He is all alone now. He notices for the first time that someone carelessly left one of the showers running. He can hear the water splashing wildly to the tile floor off to his left. Burke keeps his waist wrapped in that gym towel and he touches his crotch to reassure himself that his manhood remains. Burke sits slowly down on the edge of the locker room bench. He leans forward with his elbows resting on his legs. Burke holds his head in both hands as he sobs.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Elwood Goulart is also Madeira Desouza. His duality is expressed in this abstract image.

He writes speculative fiction and creates digital art which treat power as the real antagonist. His works return repeatedly to the same question: what happens to the people an institution decides are expendable, and what do the people owe each other once they realize exactly what is going on?

Learn more about Madeira Desouza by visiting the CLAVIUS DEEP website: https://claviusdeep.com/.