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**MR. TERRITAFF:**

**Dark Matters**

**A NOVEL**

**BY**

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# *Part I*

## *Mr. Territaff*

### Chapter 1

**Territaff found her in an alley**, propped upright against a dumpster. Her eyes opened, staring into a lifeless gaze with her face distorted by a ghastly smile, likely forced postmortem by her assailant.

He kneeled on one knee and studied her with a coroner's detachment. Her high cheekbones and full mouth were swollen and blackened with bruises. Both hands had defensive wounds of thin cuts and blackened knuckles.

She must've put up a hell of a fight, Territaff thought, pulling a scanner from his black jacket. He set it for a human bioscan, then ran it down her long body. The scanner's small display put her time of death at 21:34.23.

He spoke into the scanner, "Cause of death?"

"Systemic shock due to intense electromagnetic discharge," the scanner's automated voice answered.

"How could this happen? Less than two minutes," Territaff said. "I could've prevented this. Dammit!"

He gazed at her with regret and anger for not following his instincts. Territaff promised himself that the next candidate would be one of his choosing, not the military. He could trust someone to follow his orders and be dedicated to the mission, not their career.

“Cuz,” Territaff telepathically transmitted to his friend, who was monitoring the situation from the ship.

*“Yes, Terri.”*

*“We’ve lost Tanya. I found her body. Get her back to the ship before she’s discovered. Also, I want a complete analysis of the area, then sterilize it.”*

*“Acknowledged. I’m sorry, Terri. I know you had your differences, but you seemed to like her spirit.”*

*“Yeah.”* He blew out a heavy breath. *“She didn’t deserve this. She was bucking for promotion by trying to impress Cameron and got herself killed. What a waste.”*

*“Tanya’s death is an unfortunate loss. What are you going to do?”*

Territaff thought as he studied Tanya’s empty gaze before closing her eyes. Then he transmitted, *“Search for a new candidate.”*

*“Are we still meeting with Cameron on Monday?”*

*“Yes. I want to know why Cameron had her following us.”*

*“I’ve completed the analysis.”*

*“And?”*

*“Standard low-frequency pulse laser at point-blank range.”*

*“No surprise there.”*

*“However, there’s also a faint trace of negative energy.”*

*“Negative energy? Are you sure? How’s that possible?”*

*“There is insufficient data for a cogent hypothesis.”*

*“Make an educated guess.”*

*“I’m sorry, Terri. The energy signature is unknown.”*

*“Understood. Just thinking aloud.”*

*“I see. You’ve been doing a lot of that lately. Is this related to being back on Earth?”*

*“Maybe.”*

*“Could you be more specific?”*

*“Not now. I need time to rethink our situation. And a stiff drink.”*

Territaff walked for over an hour, searching for the right place. His mind whirled with memories as he passed familiar streets and establishments. He frowned when he came to the corner drugstore on Lincoln Road. After school, he would buy and read the latest superhero comic while enjoying a cherry Coke. Now, it’s been converted into a super drug chain store.

South Beach had given up a lot of its seasonal allure for its glitzy 1990s makeover. Most of South Beach needed the facelift, but to Territaff’s surprise, many old hotels and office buildings were renovated, retaining some of the city’s old Art Déco charm.

When he saw the well-lit establishment, Territaff came to the end of a long block across from the beach. He sensed he was close to what he was seeking. The sign over the double wooden doors read Fat Jacks, Established 1918. *Is this the same Fat Jack’s I frequented in Key West?*

He stopped outside the doors and listened to the sounds of people and music inside. The atmosphere sounded inviting, so he decided this was an excellent place to gather his thoughts and reflect on his circumstances.

Territaff paused inside the doors to observe. The lighting was soft and indistinct, giving the room gentle incandescence to escape his mounting tensions. Soft rock music played under the murmurs of voices talking and laughing.

The bar and grill had the same genuine Key West ambiance. Fishnets draped the walls, and parachutes covered the ceiling like Sloppy Joes. The restaurant was reminiscent of another time and place in Territaff's life. He ran his hand along the old wooden bar, recognizing it. It's just like Territaff remembered. The owner must have moved it from the Keys, he thought. He recalled him telling Territaff he salvaged it from a hundred-year-old yacht. He smiled at the memory as his hand felt its smooth surface. The wood had a marble-like finish, probably made by a century of oily rubbing fingers.

Tanya's lifeless eyes lingered on Territaff as he sat on a stool in the middle of the bar. He spun slowly around a few times to absorb the room into his memory. He caught a young woman staring at him as he completed his third round. He faced her and smiled.

"May I help you, sir?" she asked, arching an eyebrow.

"Pernod, do you have any?" Territaff said.

"Yeah, but we don't get many requests for it." The server gave Territaff a closer look.

"Are you European?"

"No, just taking a short break from a tough day."

"And Pernod will do that for you? I can think of better things than that," she laughed.

Territaff liked her warm and friendly manner. He studied her features. Gazing into her soulful brown eyes, he sensed a strong inner strength within her. Could she be the one? He asked himself.

The server felt the penetration of Territaff's stare. She always had an answer for such looks, but instead, she searched under the counter for a bottle of Pernod.

"How do you like it?" she asked, holding a full bottle.

"In a tall cordial glass," he answered, pointing at the shelf above the wooden wine racks.

My name is Territaff," he said as she filled his glass. "But my friends call me Terri."

"I'm Kathy," she replied, looking into his eyes. She closely studied Territaff. His eyes were like two dark orbs shining back at her. She avoided them to take in the rest of his face. She prided herself on her keen ability to read faces. Her occupation had allowed her to develop the skill over several years of trial and error. Kathy looked closer. Territaff's features were subtle, almost indistinct. There were no age lines around his eyes and forehead to guide her. It wasn't a youthful-looking face. It looked mature but ageless, perplexing her to near frustration.

Territaff waited for her to conclude her examination before draining his Pernod in a few big swallows.

Kathy wrinkled her forehead and asked, "What do you do, Mr. Territaff?"

"Please, call me Terri," he said. "It's a little hard to explain. I guess you could say I'm sort of a diplomatic courier." He held his glass up for a refill.

"Interesting." Kathy's puzzled expression changed to keen interest as she poured his Pernod. "You travel a lot?"

"Yes."

"Traveled around the world, I bet."

"You could say I've traveled around many worlds." He smiled and drank off half his Pernod.

"I guess you've seen a lot of exotic things."

“And beautiful.”

“I wish I could do that,” Kathy said with a dreamy look.

“Be a diplomat?”

“No. Travel. Get out of this place and see the world.”

Territaff looked out through the expanse of windows overlooking the beach. “I don’t know. This doesn’t seem so bad.”

“Just wait until happy hour really gets going.”

As Kathy was about to go, Territaff said, “If you’re interested, I’ll tell you a little about some places I’ve been.”

Kathy placed a hand on her hip and frowned. “Is that your best pick-up line?”

“You misjudged me. I’m most sincere about that.”

She gave Territaff a sly grin before she left to service the ever-increasing number of inpatient, thirsty people crowding around the bar. Territaff remembered his Fridays drinking into the wee hours of the night. He also recalled how miserable he felt the next day.

He followed the homogeneous faces come and go. They mingled and mixed, then broke into cavorting, intoxicated clusters. The room was filled with bodies pulsating and vibrating with rising sounds and emotions. Territaff had forgotten what an overwhelming aura of want and desire a cramped gathering of humanity generated. He reflected on them as they spoke, drank, and solicited for an evening full of promises never to be kept.

“Another?” Kathy asked as her rounds brought her back to Territaff.

“I thought you’d never return and leave me here to decay into a sober cloud of thirsty dust.”

“Really? Oh, you poor thing, let me quench your thirst, but drink a little slower; it’s happy hour.” She reached back, got a snifter off the bar, refilled his drink, and said, “Make this one last,” before resuming her dance around the bar.

Territaff continued to observe with interest, remembering what it was like to be human. An odd-looking, diminutive man walked in and took a seat that opened across the horseshoe-shaped bar from Territaff. Their eyes fixed on one another for a long moment until Kathy approached the man and asked what he was drinking. He ordered mineral water.

The man sat upright on his stool, staring outward through oversized, round-rimmed glasses. His watery blue eyes were cold and almost lifeless if not for the occasional blink. The odd-looking man smiled thinly at Territaff as Kathy served him mineral water. He took a thirsty swallow and then turned his attention to Kathy.

Territaff sensed the small man’s energy and became concerned for her. He finished his Pernod and held the empty snifter to get her attention.

She whispered to him, “There’s something creepy about that guy.”

“Do you know him?”

“I’d never seen him. Hope he leaves soon.”

She cleared off empty beer bottles and glasses from the bar.

Territaff glanced at the man and caught him closely staring at him. Territaff became intrigued with the odd little man and went to speak to him. As he approached, the man sitting to the right of the strange man got up and gave his seat to Territaff. The now-standing man gave Territaff a confused look. He was about to say something but took a long swallow of his beer and resumed conversation with his still-seated friend. Territaff overheard his friend ask the man why he had given up his seat. The confused man shrugged while looking at Territaff. Territaff gave



him an appreciative nod as he took his stool, then leaned close to the man with the oversized glasses.

“Do I know you?” Territaff asked.

“Yes,” the man whispered, narrowing his cold, probing eyes.

Territaff considered him, searching within his memory for who he could be. He telepathically transmitted to the ship when nothing came to mind, “*Cuz, do a quick scan of the man seated to my right.*”

Cuz responded with shock, “*It’s Zohleemay.*”

Well, hello, my old nemesis, Territaff thought with a slow smile. “Nice cover, Zoh,” he said as Kathy brought him another Pernod. She glanced at the creepy guy and told Territaff, “Here, you look like you need this.”

Territaff nodded his appreciation. After Kathy left, he leaned in close and grinned at Zohleemay.

“I guess the rumor of your resurrection was accurate,” Zohleemay said, turning his thin lips into a mocking smile while sipping his mineral water. “I have to admit the Venubians are skillful engineers.” He engaged Territaff with a cold gaze and cruel smile, adding, “But they’re weak, fools, and will soon become part of the new order.”

“It appears that you have developed some new morphing techniques and improved speech. Impressive.”

“If you want to be impressed, ask your friend,” he paused, “Cuz, to sweep the room.”

Territaff transmitted the request to Cuz.

“*There are four morphed Zenti within the crowds around the bar. I will transmit their identities and locations to you now.*” Cuz’s transmission had a sense of concern and surprise.

*“Terri, their ability to morph is far beyond anything we’ve encountered. Please use great care in executing your next move.”*

“So, what now, Zoh?” Territaff asked.

Kathy felt intense and unsettling emotions run through her. She looked up from the drinks she was mixing and glanced at the room. Territaff caught her eye. She focused on the spooky man for a moment. He had a disquieting aura about him. She glanced at Territaff and sensed his energy was robust and different.

"I can feel you," she whispered, looking away from Territaff. A shudder ran through her. She bit her lower lip in thought. Kathy finished mixing the drinks and served them to a couple sitting at the counter. An impulse had Kathy glance back at Territaff. Their eyes met for a beat, and an idea flashed through Kathy’s mind. She grabbed a bottle of tequila, got two shot glasses, and filled them. She held the shots low to her side, keeping them out of her manager’s wandering eye while walking to the two strange men. Kathy picked up on the negative energy surrounding them. She thought they were about to come to blows.

“We’re having a special on Donatello Tequila,” she said, holding the shot glasses up. These are on the house.” She placed the drinks in front of them.

Territaff welcomed her distraction and said, “Don’t mind if I do. ” He tilted it to Kathy, downed the drink, and slapped the empty glass on the bar. Very good.” He looked at Zoh. He appeared annoyed. “That’s most impolite not taking a free round. You’re insulting our server. Live a little and have a shot.” Territaff slapped the stiffly seated man on the back and grinned.

Zohleemay gave him a glaring look, then regarded the shot glass before taking it to his lips and letting the clear liquid flow down his gullet. He slowly placed the glass down, gave Territaff a crooked grin, and said, “Not exactly Klaxon brandy wine, but not bad.”

“Would you like another?” Territaff said, looking at the two morphed Zenti, watching his every move. “Your companions look nervous, Zoh. Why are they so antsy? I hope they’re not expecting something stupid?”

Zohleemay glimpsed their way. “They’ll do nothing unless I tell them to.”

“So, what would they do if I were to pull out a gun and shoot you in the head?”

Zohleemay grinned morbidly. “They’ll kill you and everyone in this establishment.”

“Why don’t we go out and have a little chat?”

Zohleemay stood. The two Zenti closest to him got up as well. He stopped them with a glaring look, then gestured for the other two morphed Zenti to stay put.

Kathy spied Territaff, walking out the beach entrance with the weird little man. They stopped at the water’s edge and stared out into the distance. It was a clear, starry night. The full moon’s silvery glow reflected off the smooth waters, giving the scene ironic tranquility. The two men stood close, their faces reflecting the soft glow of moonlight and the dull orange lights from the nearby pier.

Zohleemay took in a deep breath of salty ocean air. He stood with his slight frame upright as Territaff hovered over him like a giant.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” Territaff said.

“This planet has many wonderful resources. More than its inhabitants realize.”

“They’re learning growing, and I’ll do everything to protect them.” Territaff’s expression changed into an angry sneer as he stared into Zohleemay’s smug face.

“With what? You are alone. You can do nothing to protect them,” Zohleemay said. “I suggest you run while you can. Because the next time we meet, I’ll kill you. And this time, Phillip, it will be permanent.”

“The name is Territaff. You killed Phillip Mann—remember?”

He paused before hissing out, “Territaff? Earthman.” He arched a thin eyebrow and curled his mouth into an ironic smile. “How appropriate. They named you for what you are. A lowly Earthman.”

“Your overconfidence has always been your greatest weakness. These are resilient people who are not as helpless as you believe. But then, they’ll triumph. Like the Venubians, Klaxons, Kaydens, and most other worlds, you tried to conquer and failed. Regardless of what you do. We’ll prevail.”

Zohleemay turned his bulbous eyes and said, “You’ve no idea of the forces at work here. Your primitive people are unprepared for the reign of power that will crush this isolated little pebble of a planet. Everything you know and love will soon be laid to waste, and I want you to see it happen before I kill you.”

Territaff grabbed him by the throat, pulling Zohleemay close to his face. Their eyes became fixed. Territaff struggled to restrain the rising hatred for the gasping, wiry, grotesque within his grip.

“I should snap your neck like a twig and end you now—I want to....”

“Put ‘im down,” a scratchy-sounding voice shouted behind Territaff.

Territaff turned toward the nervous-looking man, holding a small, hand-held pulse laser at him. He smiled at seeing the Zenti from the bar joined by the other three.

“I admire your new morphing technology,” Territaff said as he studied the now-armed Zenti around him. Reluctantly, he released his grip on Zohleemay, letting him fall hard to the sandy beach. He gazed at the anxious-looking group for a moment. None of them were taller than 1.5 meters. While there were distinct differences in their overall facial features, they almost

all looked alike in size and appearance. Dressed in similar dark-colored suits, white shirts, and thin, solid-colored ties, they looked like throwbacks to the 1970s business attire. Territaff realized that the weapon held on him was the same type that killed Tanya.

“You killed her,” he said in a low, angry growl as he faced Zohleemay. “Why? She was no threat to you.”

“She served her purpose—she led us to you.”

Territaff turned and noted the small group of morphed Zenti looking at him with wide-eyed stares.

“You all look so neat I almost hate to mess you guys up,” he said, then grabbed two in each hand by their collars and held them tight.

“Now, drop your weapons like good little Zenti,” Territaff commanded through clenched teeth. Their weapons fell to the sand as the men hissed and gasped for breath. He pulled them closer to his face before slamming their heads together, then flung them like sacks into the rushing surf.

Zohleemay regarded his struggling men for a moment before snarling at Territaff.

“Go. Run,” Zohleemay said in a throaty hiss. “Save yourself while you can, but you can’t hide. I will have you and your homeworld. Your time is all but gone, Earthman.”

Thick clouds blocked the moon, creating dismal, shadowy darkness. A sudden flash of intense, white light appeared, then dissipated in a thin veil that vanished. All the Zenti disappeared. Territaff stood almost mesmerized by the light, pondering the phenomenon in confusion.

“Cuz,” Territaff transmitted, “*do a quick scan of the area.*”

*“Interesting. I’m reading the same energy signature as before. The pattern is familiar, but I don’t have enough data to identify it definitively.”*

*“Can you speculate?”*

*“I can say with some certitude that the phenomenon has characteristics of a negative energy wave but of an unknown type and origin.”*

*“Are you implying that the Zenti somehow developed this energy?”*

*“At this juncture, I can’t imply anything.”*

*“Good point, Cuz.”*

Territaff stared out at the moonlit sea, pondering the dark ramifications of the phenomenon he had witnessed. He looked at the night sky and mumbled, “We’re in some deep shit now.”

He heaved a long, heavy sigh before returning to the bar. Territaff saw Kathy walk ahead of him into the bar and grill. *Shit. Kathy, you saw something you shouldn’t have.* Territaff frowned. *Now, what should I do about it?* It only took a moment, and he smiled inwardly at the thought. *Well, my dear, you’ve unwittingly enlisted into my private little army.*

## Chapter 2

**Territaff returned to his stool** and continued to watch throughout the busy hours. He sat, sipping Pernod through the early morning hours until the bar had emptied to only a few couples.

“You do your job well,” Territaff said to Kathy.

She smiled at the compliment but didn’t look at him as she cleared the counter of empty beer bottles and tumblers. She returned clean glasses to the overhead racks but stopped and turned to Territaff. She leaned close to him and said with restrained excitement, “I saw what you did to those men.” Her voice remained calm, but Territaff sensed her apprehension.

“I know,” he said with regret. “We gotta talk.”

“I should be afraid of you, but for some strange reason, I’m not. It’s as though what I saw was more of an aberration. No one is that strong.... And what was that bright light all about?” She turned away and went to the other side of the bar, mumbling incoherently to herself.

The last customers finally left anxious and clumsy with inebriated passions. Territaff moved to where Kathy was working. She tried to avoid him by polishing the large brandy snifters. Her movements were jerky and full of nervous energy. He gazed at her, waiting for her to acknowledge him. Kathy lifted her large brown eyes and felt a chill run through her as she

peered into Territaff's impassive face. His dark eyes shined back at her with an anticipatory expression.

"I know you're dangerous," Kathy said in a low, controlled voice. But Territaff could feel her strong emotions pushing on her. "I know I should do everything to avoid you." She held herself still as she noticed Territaff's intent stare. "So, why aren't I running?" she whispered.

She avoided Territaff's eyes while placing the rest of the clean goblets into the overhead racks.

"It would be against your nature to run," Territaff answered her.

"What do you mean?" she said without turning.

"You're far too curious to allow all you have seen go. That's my charm."

She squinted as if trying to see him differently.

He gave her a broad smile and added, "It's a great sense of urgency that's compelling you to stay. I sensed you probing me," his voice trailed off with a sudden revelation. "You're empathic." He looked closer at Kathy. "You are, but you don't have control over it yet. You will, however, in time and with my help."

Kathy's jaw dropped in astonishment. "How could you know that?" she whispered, her complexion blanching.

"Kathy, we must talk."

"Have we met before?"

"Unfortunately, no."

Kathy wrinkled her nose. "You're sure?"

"Quite sure. Why do you ask?"

"I don't know. I have this odd feeling I know you from somewhere."



“Why not just think of me as an admirer awaiting his last Pernod and the pleasure of getting to know you better.” He held his hand out to her.

“Goodnight, Kathy,” One of the bartenders said, leaving.

“Goodnight, Frank,” Kathy replied, waving.

“Looks like you caught yourself a man.” A young woman giggled as she passed Kathy out the door.

“Bye, Dorteia,” Kathy said, blushing.

The noisy patrons had left, leaving only Kathy leaning on her elbow on the bar, staring into Territaff’s hand. It wasn’t soft and fleshy. To her surprise, it felt firm. Kathy inspected his long fingers. His nails were, as expected, clean and perfectly trimmed.

“Does my hand interest you?”

“Everything about you interests me,” she answered, gazing closely at his palm.

“He gave her hand a gentle squeeze. "The feeling is mutual, Kathy."

Kathy considered Territaff’s impassive face and said, “Okay,” sounding like she had decided something with herself. “Wait for me. I’ll only be a few more minutes.”

“Cuz, ” Territaff transmitted. *“I think I found her.”*

“*Most attractive,*” Cuz said at seeing Kathy’s transmitted image. “*She’s young,*” he added.

*“She’s old enough, and I believe, highly intuitive with probable empathic abilities. Plus, she’s street-smart. I need to conduct a closer examination of her capabilities. This was something I couldn’t do with Tanya.”*

*“You’re referring to having intercourse with her. Aren’t you?”*

*“Possibly. I find it revealing and the most practical method to find a person's true nature and other qualities.”*

*“Really. I find that fascinating. Would you care to elaborate on what you mean by other qualities?”*

*“Not now, Cuz.”*

## Chapter 3

**“Good night, Jack,”** Kathy called back as she entered the street. Territaff watched her as she took in a deep breath of salty air. Kathy stretched out her back and walked up the block. She passed Territaff and pretended not to notice him, leaning against the restaurant’s wall.

“I understand the beach is beautiful right before dawn,” Territaff said softly.

“It’s my favorite time of day.”

“Would you like to watch the sunrise?” He extended his arm to her.

She narrowed her eyes as though she were examining his sincerity. “Now that I’ve stumbled into your sordid world, you’re wondering what to do about me.” She studied his face and asked, “Am I just an expendable liability you're gonna dump in some dark alley?”

“That would be one option,” Territaff said flatly.

“Oh?” Her face flushed in surprise. “What other options are you considering?”

Territaff scratched the back of his head in thought. He regarded her with his probing eyes. Kathy trembled with fear.

He stopped and placed his long hands on the sides of her face. He spread his fingertips across her brow with his thumbs under her cheekbones. Kathy’s gaze fixed on his dark eyes as he

whispered something incoherent. The tension that had wrapped a smothering hold on her disappeared.

Kathy sighed with relief and asked, “What did you do?”

“Dialed down your nerves a little. You have nothing to fear from me. You’re right. You did stumble into my sordid world.”

She gave Territaff a curious look and, in a timid voice, asked, “Are you going to kill me?”

Territaff shook his head, admiring the brazen question. He extended his hand to her.

“Come, let’s watch the sunrise.”

She hesitated, chewing on her lower lip.

It was a familiar gesture from someone now lost to him. “I promise you’re in no danger from me, and I’ll allow no harm to come to you.” He started to smile, then frowned.

“Unfortunately, you’re no longer safe on your own.”

“I’m not sure who’s more dangerous,” she said with a nervous laugh. “You or the strange little men I saw you with. What was that all about? And that white light. What was that?” She started walking toward the water, mumbling to herself. “I’ve always enjoyed a little risk. It spices things up a bit.” She stopped as she reached the water’s edge, flopped down, and took her shoes off, curling her toes into the cool, moist sand.

Territaff sat beside her and listened.

“Why did you have to come into my life,” she shouted. She pondered the handsome face, looking at her with a compelling smile. *Run, Kathy.* Her conscience yelled at her. *He’s trouble, and he’ll fuck up your life.*

She couldn't help herself. Her curiosity was overriding her usual good common sense. Usually, she would've refused Territaff, but nothing was ordinary about him, making him far too intriguing to let go.

Territaff wrapped his long, muscular arm around Kathy's shoulders and moved her close to him. She looked at him and said dreamily, "I don't have the slightest idea why I'm with you. What is it about you that worries and entices me?" She looked down and dug into the sand with her big toe. "Even your name is strange. You're violent, but I sense a strong, glowing spiritual light in you." She narrows her glassy eyes.

"I'm sorry you saw all of that. Look at me, Kathy."

He pulled a handkerchief from his back pocket and handed it to her. Kathy dried her eyes and blew her nose. She looked at the white material, rubbing it between her fingers.

"What kind of cloth is this?" she said. "It's so soft, but it doesn't feel like cotton. Is it linen?"

"It's synthetic."

Kathy held the handkerchief out to him, stopped, and said, "Sorry. I'll have it dry-cleaned and returned."

"Please. Keep it," Territaff said. "A small memento of our new friendship. Forget about dry cleaning. It'll clean itself. It's a prototype."

She took a second look at the handkerchief. It already appeared dry and clean. "I don't know what to make of it or you, Territaff."

"As I've already told you. You have nothing to fear from me. However, it would be best to be afraid of what you have seen. I admit I'm a walking contradiction." He looked at the soft

blue of the early dawn sky and smiled. “I’m a product of two worlds and belong to none. That’s what’s bothering you. You’re empathic and feel my emotions coming to the surface.

“Don’t allow fear of the unknown to prejudice your innate sensibilities. Kathy, look into your heart. Can you sense my sincerity? You have a similar effect on me. If you knew the risk of me talking to you—” He stopped as if considering his words, then added, “I felt something special about you when you said, ‘Can I help you?’ in the bar. As soon as I gazed into your eyes, I wanted to be with you. I know how this must sound, but—”

In a soft, almost timid voice, Kathy held a finger to his lips and said, “I believe we’re both going against our natures tonight. I never go out with customers. It’s a bad practice, but I feel I need to be with you. Besides, most of the guys I meet are usually just after my body. So, I spend a lot of my time alone. I prefer it that way.”

“It’s apparent that we feel the same, Kathy. I’m no stranger to being alone. I’ve discovered that we all need to be with someone now and then. It’s important to know someone other than ourselves who can appreciate who we are if only to dispel the solitude, share feelings, and compare life.”

Kathy noticed a star-like twinkle in Territaff’s eyes as he kissed her gently, then more passionately. A surge of energy ran through Kathy. She had experienced nothing like it before. When he concluded, she felt numb and exhilarated at the same time.

The dawn broke into a pale orange glow as the first rays of the sun crested the horizon. Then, with its subtle fluidity, the sky glowed in a riot of bright oranges and blues. They watched silently until the morning air became heavy with humidity as the sun warmed the beach.

“It’ll be a hot one today,” Kathy said as she stood and brushed the sand off the back of her legs with her hands. She looked down at Territaff and watched him in the clear light of day

for a moment. His features appeared softer, and those mysterious eyes looked up at Kathy with a disarming quality that surprised her.

He held out his hand for her to take. She regarded it for a moment in thought. Her conscience was nagging Kathy as she grasped his hand, and Territaff stood. Territaff wrapped her into a tight embrace. He felt Kathy's heart pounding with nervous excitement. He also sensed the struggle she was having with her emotions.

"Ahh, crap!" Kathy blurted, stepping back from Territaff. "I'll probably regret this." She blew out a long breath. "I don't live far from here," she paused to take in his now-expressive face. She sensed his anticipation, moved close, and gave Territaff a long, passionate kiss. "Okay, Terri. My place is just a few blocks from here."

## Chapter 4

**They entered Kathy's apartment.** Territaff roamed the three rooms, eagerly inspecting their contents with curiosity. He picked up items from her tables and shelves, studied them briefly, then returned them to their proper places. He smiled, noticing several books on space and time while viewing her collection. Then he flipped through her CD and Blu-Ray albums.

"You have varied tastes. That's very good," he said as Kathy took his hand and led him into the bedroom.

She sat on the edge of the bed and removed her tee shirt. "Yes, variety is important in everything," she said as she slowly undressed Territaff and slid under the sheets.

He paused to observe her before drawing the drapes to block the intruding sunlight.

*She's lovely and trusting.* Territaff hesitated before getting into bed. *I must complete what I've started. I'll test this one. Intercourse can be most revealing.*

"Is something wrong, Terri?" she said as she lifted the sheets and motioned with her eyes for him to join her.

"No." He smiled, then joined her under the sheets.



“Has anyone ever told you that you have a masterful touch,” she moaned as Territaff fondled her breasts and rubbed the inside of her thighs. She felt her whole body relax under his gentle stroking touch. “I don’t ever remember feeling so calm. It’s... It’s as though I was—”

“Don’t talk,” Territaff whispered, then kissed her. “Close your eyes and concentrate on your feelings. Clear your mind of everything and open your senses.”

“Concentrate,” she repeated, closing her eyes.

An odd but soothing tingling sensation ran through her body.

“Oh, that feels wonderful, Terri,” she murmured.

A thin veil of vivid colors appeared in Kathy’s mind. The colors thickened and whirled into bright red, blue, and orange globs. The clumps of colors collided, then exploded into tiny clusters surrounded by bright, white light, forming something that resembled nebulae.

Kathy jerked upright on the bed, almost knocking Territaff to the floor. The images were still whirling around her. She screamed while rubbing her eyes, then blinked several times. She stared outwardly for a moment until the room appeared normal again.

“What the fuck was that?” she yelled, punching Territaff’s chest.

Territaff caught her fist in mid-punch and kissed her knuckles.

“Don’t be frightened,” he said. “Nothing can harm you.” He caressed her cheek, then held her face in his hands. “I promise. Just relax and let your inhibitions go.”

“Relax!” she yelled in his face. “Are you crazy? I’m freaking out, and you want me to relax?” She narrowed her eyes at Territaff. “You’re not what you appear to be... are you?”

“Freaking out? That’s a term I’ve hadn’t heard in a while,” Territaff said, then went to kiss her, but she turned away.

“You’re very weird.” She flopped back and rubbed her eyes again. “I was hallucinating. The room... it was... I mean... I was seeing things.”

Territaff stared at her with his dark, attentive eyes. She thought his facial features had changed. It had taken on a youthful glow.

She screwed her face up into a puzzled expression. Territaff sensed Kathy’s uneasiness and allowed her a moment to calm herself. Their eyes became fixed in a silent stare. Kathy’s heart pounded hard against her ribs with a chilling clamminess.

The strange little men, Territaff’s incredible strength, and the mysterious light flashed before her in a maze of confusion. Now, the sudden hallucinations. Kathy’s face blanched, and her eyes stared unblinkingly while biting her lower lip.

Territaff sat on the bed and held Kathy’s hand. “No need to be frightened, Kathy. I can’t, nor would I ever harm you.” Her shuddering subsided as she leaned into him. He gently wrapped his arms around her, holding her against his chest. “It’s all right,” he whispered. “I know we’ve only just met, but...” He lifted her chin so he could see her face. “I need your trust and friendship. I’ve no one else to turn to.”

She calmed herself within the warmth of Territaff’s embrace. Kathy ran her hand down his smooth arm and over his chest, sensing the invisible weight of his power. The slow, steady rhythm of his heart comforted her.

“Do you really need me?” she said. “Or are you just saying that?”

“I do.” He wiped a tear from Kathy’s cheek with his thumb.

“No one has ever said that to me.” More tears ran down her cheeks.

“I mean everything I tell you,” he whispered. “Are you ready to trust me?”

“Yeah, but what exactly do you have in mind?” she said, wiping her face with a corner of the bed sheet.

“Something that your mind and body can share and enjoy.”

“I won’t freak out again?”

“You mean hallucinate?”

She nodded.

“Kathy, I want you to study me as I study you. Let your disbelief go and set your mind free. Open your senses.”

Kathy fluffed up a pillow and placed it behind her head. Territaff placed his fingertips on her temples. At first, Kathy felt uneasy with his engaging stare, but she could sense Territaff once she cleared her mind. It surprised her, but she believed she could feel his mind touching hers.

“Close your eyes, inhale deeply through your nose, and let it slowly out your mouth,” Territaff instructed. Kathy started to breathe as instructed. “Good. Now, let go of all your thoughts and self-consciousness. Relax your mind and body. Picture a large, white canvas in your mind.”

He lifted his fingers from her head, raised her arm, and let it go. It fell freely. Territaff smiled and said, “I think you’re getting the idea.”

She opened an eye to peek at Territaff. Then she closed it and wiggled a little from side to side on the bed until she got comfortable. She took a deep breath, let it out slowly, and said, “Okay, do your thing,” with a nervous giggle.

Kathy felt a gentle tingling in the bottom of her feet. It rose into her legs. As the tingling moved through her body, her muscles relaxed. It felt as if she were having a precision massage. She smiled, realizing all the stiffness and tension in her back and feet had waned.

The tingling sensation gave way to weightlessness. It felt like her body was floating upward into velvet darkness punctuated with radiant, iridescent colors. Her body tightened with this new sensation but relaxed, sensing Territaff's close presence. Now, she could allow herself the illusion of floating through space.

A part of Kathy was drifting within the great expanse. Another part was teeming with sexual ecstasy as Territaff gently penetrated her.

"It seems so real, Terri," she said dreamily. "It's like I'm out in space and here with you at the same time... How are you... I mean, what are you doing?"

"We're sharing and exchanging pleasure and thoughts. I'm lifting your consciousness to a threshold of another dimension. It's a little complicated," he said, touching the sides of her head with his fingertips again.

"Terri, I feel so at peace and so bizarre," Kathy murmured, her eyes closed. "It's like you can read my mind. No—it's more than that." She opened her eyes with a sudden realization, looking at Territaff in awe. "You're controlling my mind. These are illusions, but they feel so real," she spoke in a hushed tone as though she were thinking aloud. "How are you doing this? No one can do... whatever you're doing."

Territaff kissed her, then transmitted, "*Stop thinking so much and focus.*" She heard Territaff's voice within her mind. He touched her eyelids for her to close her eyes. "*Breathe slowly and let your mind and body drift.*"

Territaff's voice was soothing, and it calmed her uneasiness. He watched her until she capitulated to the dreamy, meditative state he guided her to.

"*Look,*" she heard Territaff in her head.

Kathy watched the Earth shrink from sight. Jupiter swelled into view, and she passed Saturn in the blink of an eye. She looked back at the sun; it had become a bright star fading among the billions of stars in the Milky Way. Kathy was traveling within her mind at unimaginable speed, but there was no feeling of movement or direction. It appeared like a three-dimensional movie, with all the action coming at her as she lay transfixed and exhilarated.

Pressure. Kathy felt a slight tug of pressure pushing against her. The velvet blackness of space appeared to be closing around her until she could see nothing but black. The blackness made her nervous. She touched Territaff's shoulder to reassure Kathy he was still there. She ran her hands up and down his back. It felt smooth and hard under her touch.

"Make the blackness go away," Kathy said.

A hazy yellow-white light burst into a full spectrum of colors, then rushed past her in a tidal wave of luminosity. Thin, yellow clouds with white-hot centers emerged and then approached her. Clusters upon clusters of stars, some so bright it hurt her eyes to look at them, flowed up and formed into shimmering violet and yellow ephemeral geometric shapes. Kathy became excited, realizing she was moving through bizarre and beautiful nebulae and galaxies.

The sudden awareness of what she was experiencing almost overwhelmed her. Her mind revealed a panorama she knew no one on Earth had ever seen in such perfect detail. It astonished Kathy.

"Terri, this is all too fantastic," she said breathlessly. "It's like my mind and body are surging with energy...."

A crackling sound rose as colors erupted out of the blackness. Shimmering blues and reds vibrated like chords plucked randomly on a harp. The colors and sounds mixed and pulsated into a frenzy of visual, sensual music. The colors grew intense, then collided, forming white

voids within the velvet blackness surrounding them. Then, like holes within the fabric of spacetime, they would explode and spew rings of multicolored light illuminating the blackness of space. Kathy could feel a cycle of orgasmic pulses running through her body in consort with each exploding color.

She had never felt so alive. The astonishing beauty and the erotic pleasure her mind and body shared mesmerized her. She felt a heightened rhythmic wave building in her loins like ripples upon the water, undulating outward through her body.

“Terri, you sneaky bastard,” Kathy yelled. “Now I understand. I really understand... Oh, my God! Don’t stop, Terri... pleeease don’t stop!”

Kathy gripped the sheets tightly as the erotic euphoria rushed to her back and down her legs. She wished the sensation would last forever.

\*

Kathy woke and stretched the slumber from her body. She still had a pleasant sensation, reassuring Kathy that what she had experienced was not a dream. With a sudden urge to attack Terri, she turned to find only empty, wrinkled sheets next to her. Kathy checked the clock on her night table. A thin, gold disk lying next to the lamp caught her eye. She picked it up and examined it while weighing it in her palm. The disk was heavier than expected, with lines inscribed on it. She turned the disk over. The other side was blank. Kathy ran a finger across its smooth surface. It appeared to glow. Something about its color and how it reflected her image made her uneasy. It was as perplexing as Territaff.

“Terri,” she called to the other room. She got out of bed, still holding the disk. “Terri, where are you?” The apartment felt empty. “Terri, you bastard... You promised to take me with you.”

Kathy returned to bed. She held the gold object and pondered it before throwing it across the room. It made an irritating ringing noise as it bounced off a wall. She thought she saw a flash of light when it hit the floor. At first, she thought she had broken it but let the thought pass as she lay staring at the ceiling on her back.

“You promised.”

Her eyes grew sleepy as she repeated the words. She turned on her side with a heavy heart and moaned. Her eyes grew heavier, and she gave in to sleep. She dreamed she was traveling through space to meet Territaff for a goblet of Pernod.

## Chapter 5

**A cool shower and two cups** of strong, sweet coffee helped revive Kathy. She sat at the small kitchen table, staring into her coffee mug, thinking about Territaff.

Why did he take off like that? she thought. I thought he liked me. You're too trusting, Kathy. He was so incredible. God, I don't think I'll ever have sex like that again. Was it sex, though? Or did he somehow play with my mind? What a bastard.

She got up and tossed the mug into the sink. To her relief, it didn't break. She shook her head, realizing what she had almost done. It was her grandmother's favorite mug.

Kathy went into the living room and flopped onto the couch. She looked for the TV remote, which wasn't in its usual place. She searched under the sofa, then between the cushions.

"Where's the damn remote?"

After searching the living room in vain, she returned to the bedroom. The disk glistening on the floor caught her eye when she entered the room. She picked it up and held it up to the light. Holding it, she thought of Territaff. She heard his voice in her mind, then found herself placing the thin, gold disk into her Blu-ray player. Kathy flinched in surprise when the TV set turned on.



“Oh, my God,” she mumbled as a pixelated picture filled the screen. The colored squares resolved into a crystal-clear image of Territaff’s smiling face.

“Hello, Kathy,” the image cheerfully greeted her. “I’ve made a few modifications to your disc so I could explain why I had to leave without a proper goodbye.”

“You son of a bitch. You promised to take me with you,” she yelled at the screen.

“I understand how you feel, Kathy. And yes, I’m a bastard. I used you in a way that, under normal circumstances, I’d never have considered, but the circumstances are extraordinary.”

“You can hear me?” Kathy said, surprised by Territaff’s reply. “How’s that possible?”

“What you’re hearing and seeing is a computerized image of me, capable of responding to your questions, but only in a limited context.”

“I don’t understand.”

Kathy sat on the floor close to the TV with her legs crossed.

“The disc you’re now playing is most important.” The image continued. “I left it in your safekeeping. Please place it in the freezer portion of your refrigerator. I’ll return for it soon. I trust you’ll tell no one of its existence. You must do this.”

“Why? What is it?”

“It’s like one of your computer discs, only much more advanced. It contains vital information.”

“Why have you given it to me?”

“Because I trust you.” The image smiled.

“You trust me? You hardly know me and left me with what... fucking responsibility.”

“I know you better than you realize, Kathy. You revealed much about your true nature during our intimacy.”

“You mean we had great sex, and now you know me? That’s a lot of bullshit.”

“It was more than sex.”

Kathy blushed, recalling the experience. It was much more. He had given her a vivid glimpse into a world she could’ve never conceived.

“Why should I ever trust you again? You used me. Lied to me and left me with this thing to keep for you? You ask a hell of a lot for a one-night stand.”

There was a pause before the image continued.

“Kathy, I know I’m asking a lot on faith, but you must believe me. I didn’t lie. I’ll return for you.”

“And when will that be?”

“If all goes well, in a few days or less. Until then, tell no one about me or the disk.”

“If all goes well? What must go well? What aren’t you telling me, Terri?”

“I can say no more. Goodbye for now. See you soon.” Territaff’s image faded.

“Terri... Terri!”

Kathy stood and banged the top of the TV with her hand. She pushed buttons on the Blu-ray player, hoping to get Territaff’s image back. After several tries, she gave up, ejected the disk, and held it tightly. She stared at the shiny object, cursing as she marched into the kitchen. She put it into a freezer bag and slid it under the ice cube bin.

Whenever Kathy was stressed out, she’d jogged on the beach to think things through. It was already hot when she ran onto the sand. Her head throbbed, trying to figure Territaff out. He’s scary, she thought. He’s also mysterious... but he’s great in bed. That’s the problem. I

allowed him to seduce me with his strange charms. But can I trust him? Yet, he can give me my dream. Something I dreamt of as a kid but never thought possible was to travel to new worlds.

“Fuck you, Territaff,” she stopped running and stared at the heavens. “You’re fucking up my whole goddamn life!”

\*

Territaff found his way to Mumz’s Hotdogs at First and Ocean Drive. It was a 24-hour grill that was a favorite gathering place for the younger generation who had taken over South Beach. Their hotdogs were the size of thick sausages steamed in beer. During his long absence from Earth, Territaff often dreamed of eating a Mumz’s hotdog.

The small restaurant was built into the outside wall of a quaint Spanish-styled hotel. Its yellow and black striped awning covered the barstools overlooking the ocean on First Street. Territaff discovered his friend, Cuz, seated on the far side of the long counter.

It was four o’clock on an easy-going Saturday afternoon. The sky was a bright blue with a thin veil of clouds lazily moving along on a soft sea breeze. Territaff smiled as he saw Cuz, studying the sparsely covered, tanned bodies glistening with suntan oil as they wrapped themselves in sheer cotton beach dresses. Cuz’s pale complexion was already turning into a light tan in the short time under the intense Florida sun. He sat with his long frame and square shoulders upright on his stool. His large, dark brown eyes took in his surroundings with great interest.

It was a typical late April afternoon on South Beach. The air wasn’t heavy with humidity yet, and a stiff, easterly breeze brought a pleasant current of coolness from the steamy beach. The ocean sparkled with reflected sunlight off the wave tops. Sailboats were bobbing in the distance, and the Tikki bars were filling with the promises of a lively Saturday night.

Territaff had grown up in the leisurely town of Surfside, located ten miles north of South Beach. In his youth, it was eight blocks of cheap, beachside, low-rise hotels with narrow streets of small seasonal rentals. Territaff lost his family when he was only ten. His paternal grandfather raised him. He grew up on the east side in affluent luxury. This small town mainly consisted of snowbirds and retirement homes on the west side. On the east, along the narrow beach, were the highrise condos.

Bright and vivid memories flowed in Territaff, filled with sounds and scents of a distant earlier life, separated by space and time.

Territaff compared his surroundings with his memories of the area and frowned. South Beach had a little charm when he went to school. Now, it appeared to him like a ritzy few blocks of old and renovated hotels and bars. When I grew up here, he reminisced. It was simpler and a lot less crowded. South Beach had a certain allure and a slower lifestyle from the late sixties until its collapse in the eighties. Spacetime has a way of distorting everything. He grimaced.

He sat next to Cuz and took a deep breath. "There's no smell like ocean air." He followed Cuz's eyes to see what was holding his friend's attention. It didn't take but an instant. Territaff became as mesmerized as his friend.

"Have you had a dog yet?" Territaff asked.

Cuz shook his head. "I was waiting for your recommendation."

Territaff gestured to the waiter. He approached and gave them a broad smile. "What can I get you?" he said with a thick Cuban accent.

"Two Mumz's dogs. One with heavy onions and relish... the other..." he glanced at Cuz and asked, "Do you like spicy?"

Cuz pondered the question for a moment, then said, "Yes. I like sweet as well."

“Great. Make the other one with Mumz’s hot sauce and sweet relish. Also, bring us two Guinness Blacks with bourbon shots.”

“Primo choices, senior.” The waiter nodded, still grinning. He went to the beer taps, dispensed the two beers, poured the shots, and then placed them on the counter. “I’ll bring the hot dogs when you’re ready,” he said, then walked to the end of the counter. He picked up a half-smoked cigar from an ashtray and relit it. Then, he continued to watch Cuz with his round face turned up in amusement.

“Cuz, I don’t think you’re ready for that yet,” he said, noticing how he was studying a young woman rinsing sand off her legs in one of the open public showers, leaving little to Cuz’s imagination as she leaned forward to brush sand off the back of her thighs.

“What do you mean?” Cuz retorted defensively. His boyish features knotted in confusion.

“First off, you have to talk to her. Get her to talk about herself... but you’re not ready. And besides, we have other pressing matters.”

“How does one get ready to talk with a woman?”

Territaff knew Cuz had been reading romance, detective, and erotic novels since they arrived. Cuz’s consuming curiosity about human females worried him. Then he considered that they might all be dead tomorrow... so why not a final fling before Armageddon?

“I got an idea.” Cuz noticed Territaff’s face glowed with the thought. “I’m taking you to a special Gentleman’s Club.”

“What’s a Gentlemen’s Club?” he asked, then a slow grin spread. “You mean a nudie bar?”

Territaff nodded ruefully, thinking they might not get another chance.

“Let’s go.”

He had to hold Cuz to his seat.

“It’s too early. First, we need to prepare.” He dropped a shot glass of bourbon in Cuz’s beer and the other in his. Lifting his mug high, he said, “Here’s to beautiful women everywhere.” He tapped his mug against Cuz’s, then emptied it. He nodded at Cuz.

Cuz regarded his mug for a moment, then drained it.

“Ahh,” Cuz said, banging his mug on the counter. He proclaimed to the waiter, “How about another round for all the beautiful women?”

Territaff laughed and said to the waiter, “Another round, and bring us our dogs.” The waiter acknowledged. Territaff leaned closer to Cuz and said, “Trust me, you’ll need the food and drink....”

Cuz furrowed his brow.

“Well, I do, anyway.”

Cuz arched a thin eyebrow and said, “Okay, let the dogs out.”

Territaff shook his head and beamed at his friend. “Oh man, the girls will love you at Passions.”

“What about Kathy?”

“I tested her last night,” Territaff said.

“Then the test was successful?”

“She’s perfect for us. Intelligent, spirited, and I suspect empathic also. She has abilities she’s unaware of. I trusted her with safeguarding the disk, but I’m fearful the Zenti may already know about her.”

“Aren’t you concerned that they’ll go after Kathy to get to you?”

“That’s a real possibility—one I’m almost counting on. The Zenti will stop at nothing to get to me. I’m waiting for them to make their move.”

“I sure hope you know what you’re doing, Terri. You’ve created a vulnerable situation for Kathy.”

“I know,” he mumbled half aloud, then took a long draw of his beer. “We’ll have to bring her into our confidence soon.”

“May the universe protect her,” Cuz said softly, then took a large bite of his hotdog. “So, this is what animal flesh tastes like?”

Territaff nodded as he took a large bite of his hotdog. “Don’t analyze its contents.”

“Your advice is most sound. However, I think I like the beer better.”

## Chapter 6

**General William H. Dickerson** was a robust man in his mid-fifties. His large frame reflected the wear and tear of three Middle Eastern tours of combat duty. Being assigned as Commander of Strategic Military Intelligence at Homestead AFB was supposed to reward his prior service. However, the general viewed the assignment as something else. Besides the irritations of daily mundane administrative duties, he found his adjutant, Colonel Michael J. Cameron, a pretentious busybody vying for his job. As far as the general was concerned, he could have it gladly.

Dickerson was having another restless night when the phone rang. The late hour of the call and the news of Tanya Ruiz's disappearance surprised and distressed him. He stared, unblinking, feeling a heavy numbness as he thought of Tanya. *She was so young and cocky with confidence.* She reminded him of one of his junior officers he lost during that senseless Middle Eastern war. He slammed the phone on the night table and jumped out of bed, cursing.

"I knew Cameron would fuck this up," he complained angrily. "Now, I've got to clean up his mess and all the other crap that just dropped on my lap."

The general stretched out his aching back, hoping to relieve sciatica, running a sharp, stabbing pain down his left leg. He stared at himself before his walk-in closet's large, mirrored



doors. Shaking his head, the general returned to the bed, searching for his slippers. Finding them halfway under the bed, he sat heavily and put them on.

The news got Dickerson to review the meeting in Cameron's office with Tanya the week before. "She was so eager to impress Cameron," he mumbled while pacing between his desk and closet in a small circle. As he walked, he massaged his tight neck, pondering the disjointed events of the past month, hoping to get a coherent picture. Then he checked the time: 3:50 a.m.

"It's too damn early to go to the office, and there's no fucking way I'm going back to sleep," he barked, feeling the numbness of the initial shock resolving into anger and confusion.

"What the hell was she doing alone? What's Cameron not telling me?"

The general sighed sorrowfully as he went to his elegant, antique writing table in the corner of his spacious bedroom. It was one of the few things he had salvaged from his divorce. It was his late mother's. She had left him little else other than many sordid memories.

The meeting in Cameron's office came to mind. He took a long breath and blew it out, staring at the phone, deciding whom to call first. Then he remembered the meeting he had with the DARPA team. "Who were those consultants?" he murmured, his eyes closed, trying to recall what they said. *They were warning us about getting caught with our pants down.* He remembered that everybody laughed but him. *They were serious about a threat from sources with advanced technology.*

"We missed the point," he whispered.

Dickerson was about to call Cameron but paused, decided against it, and looked up his contacts at DARPA.

\*

It was around ten-thirty when Territaff and Cuz arrived at Passions South. Empty tables circled the dance floor, with a sparse crowd scattered around the two main bars. Two angular, topless dancers moved in perfect rhythmic syncopation to heavy dance music at the central bar while another young woman shadow-danced on a platform in the rear. Cuz gravitated to the naked dancer closest to him. He sat center counter, never allowing his dumbfounded gaze to look away. The two dancers greeted Cuz with a quick circular gyration of their rounded buttocks. One of them finished her greeting with a sensual back-and-forth thrust of her hips. With his eyes fixed on the dancers, smiling ear-to-ear, Cuz appeared to be in Nirvana. Cuz noticed guys approaching the dancers holding dollar bills and stuffing them into their garter belts. Occasionally, a dancer would lean in, temptingly close, taking the dollars between her teeth. Cuz studied how the men and dancers reacted. Some men were bold, getting their lips close to the young lady. She'd backed away with a sexy smile within centimeters of being kissed before resuming her energetic movements to the loud music.

“Terri, I require one-dollar bills, please,” he called out over the din of heavy rhythms and exciting conversations.

Territaff walked across the large dance floor to a cashier's window. She was also topless. Territaff mused how such a thin young woman could have such large breasts. She gave him an indifferent glance as she held the bill under a blue light, then examined the back.

“How many?” she asked.

Territaff looked across the dance floor to check on his friend. He could see him talking between the dancer and the server.

“Fifty,” he said, hoping it would finance his friend's new adventure.

“I’m waiting for the manager to come back with change. Will forty do for now?”

“Guess it’ll have to.” Territaff thought for a moment. “You’d better give the other sixty in fives and tens, okay?”

The cashier nodded, counting out the money.

When Territaff returned, he noticed heavy beads of sweat on Cuz’s forehead and upper lip.

“Cuz, why are you sweating?” he asked, handing him a thick wad of bills.

Cuz wiped his forehead with a napkin. “Wow, I’m perspiring,” he said, looking at the moist napkin. “Keep my seat, Terri. I’m going to the men’s room and freshen up.”

“Hurry back, honey,” the server called to Cuz.

Cuz turned and blew her a kiss. The lovely woman pretended to catch the kiss, then ran her hand across her lips. Cuz grinned like a kid on Christmas morning, then dashed to the men's room.

“You have developed... uh... rapport or something?” Territaff awkwardly asked the server, uncertain about what he saw.

“Oh please,” she wrinkled her nose, looking insulted, “was just having some fun. What can I get you?”

“Bourbon on the rocks.” He studied the young woman as she poured his drink into a large tumbler. Then he pondered on Cuz. He *was sweating. Remarkable.* He smiled at the thought.

“My friend, Cuz, he’s not very sophisticated regarding women.”

She cocked an eyebrow.

“I can say one thing for sure,” he sipped his bourbon, “you’re a first-class server.” He tipped his glass to her, then drained it. “I’ll have another, please.”

She refreshed his drink with a faint smile.

“What are you trying to tell me about your friend?” she said as she cleared the bar counter of trash and empty bottles.

“Just that he has no real experience with women. He views you as a new and exciting species he needs to explore on many levels....” Territaff noticed she was looking sideways at him with a bemused grin.

“I think I get it,” she said, wiping the counter with a clean towel. She narrowed a penetrating stare into Territaff, then placed her hands on her hips. “Are you trying to tell me that your friend’s a virgin, and you want to get his cherry busted?” She laughed sarcastically. “You really expect me to believe that bullshit?”

“I know how it sounds, but yes. Cuz is a genuine virgin.”

“Oh, give me a break,” she laughed again with a dismissive wave.

Territaff was at a loss for how to sound sincere about Cuz. He watched the young woman as she worked the bar. He sighed, thinking, dummy, she’s heard that line so many times.

“Let me try this again,” he resumed his plea when she returned to him.

She rested on her elbows on the counter and gazed at Territaff with bright green eyes. “Okay,” she said with a dubious smirk. “Tell me your friend’s story. The night’s young, and I haven’t been hit on yet.”

“I think I need another.” Territaff held up his empty tumbler.

She scrutinized him as she refilled his drink.

Territaff took a long swallow and said, “It’s like this. Cuz, my friend, has lived a very sheltered life. I guess you can say he’s a real,” he paused in thought, “nerd. He’s been driving me crazy to fix him up, and I heard this’s the right place for him to... eh... You know...”

“Get laid,” she finished his thought.

Territaff nodded and drained his drink.

“So, let me see if I understand,” she said as she refreshed his drink. “You brought your friend here looking to get him fucked by a warm and understanding hooker who will be both gentle and nurturing. How am I doing?”

“A hundred percent, my dear—your beauty only exceeds your wisdom.” He raised his glass in a toast to her. She narrowed her eyes into slits that caused Territaff to swallow hard. “I’m screwing this up, aren’t I?” He gave her his best imploring look, hoping she would soften.

“No, you’re just typical,” she smiled. “You’re also a good friend, and... he’s kind of cute...” She gave Territaff a lingering gaze before leaving to wait on two new patrons.

Territaff studied the server as she waited on two young, anxious-looking men. As he continued to watch her, he thought of Kathy. She reminded him of her, not so much in her looks. It was more in her mannerisms. He liked what he saw and would entrust his friend to her, but he didn’t even know her name.

“You kind of left me hanging,” Territaff said when she returned.

“Sorry, I needed a little time to think about it. I just got over a four-year relationship and haven’t been out for quite a while.”

Territaff sensed an intense negative wave run through him. He looked away from the server then got up. “What’s your name?” he asked.

“Natasha.” She furrowed her brow. “You all right?”

“Yes, but I have to leave for a little while.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a wad of bills. He handed the bills to her without counting them. “Please, take care of my friend while I’m gone.”

She counted the money. “There’s over twelve hundred dollars here.” She looked up in surprise, laughing. “If you want, I’ll marry him.”

“I owe him a lot. I’ll be back shortly.”

Cuz returned from the men’s room feeling freshened up. Natasha was surprised at how young he appeared.

“You cleaned up nice,” she said with an approving smile.

Cuz looked around for Territaff before easing onto the barstool.

“If you’re looking for your friend, he had to leave. He said he’d be right back.”

Cuz frowned, unsure if he shouldn’t go after Territaff until he saw Natasha beaming at him. He gave his best charming smile and said, “While waiting, please, make me another of whatever that wonderful concoction was.”

“Coming right up, sweetie,” she said seductively. She leaned close to him, ran her hand down one side of his face, then moved a finger across his lips.

Cuz let out a slight shudder as he felt the warm smoothness of her hand on his face. “Wow,” he whispered.

\*

Territaff handed the cab driver a fifty-dollar bill for a twenty-seven-dollar fare and asked him to wait for him for a few minutes. The cabby nodded, then radioed his dispatcher that he was still on the meter and would call back in ten minutes.

“Take your time,” the cabby called to Territaff.

Territaff approached Kathy’s first-floor apartment with heightened caution. He peered through the transparent pane of her front door. A soft glow of light leaking from under the bedroom door gave the darkened hall a shadowy look. He tried the front door. The door was

open, to his surprise. Territaff walked into the small foyer, then stopped and eyed his surroundings, listening closely before moving into the hall. The apartment had an uneasy feel to it. Kathy told him she loved listening to music when she got home. Then, it occurred to him that she should be at work. So, why was she home? He thought as he moved toward the bedroom.

He paused for a moment by the bedroom door and listened. There was labored breathing from inside the room and the distinct odor of a profusely sweating man.

The sweat gave Territaff pause, thinking the man was nervous and probably not a professional. He gripped the doorknob. It was locked. With no effort, he forced the door open with incredible force. The impact of the swinging door knocked the large man off balance. Territaff followed with a solid blow to the side of his head. The man fell unconscious into Kathy's night table, smashing a small antique lamp on top.

Kathy lay on the bed with her wrists and ankles tied to the ends of the head and footboards. Territaff removed the duct tape from her mouth.

"That was my grandmother's," she cried angrily as Territaff untied her arms and legs. She wrapped her arms around his neck. He could feel her heart pounding in her chest. "Holy shit, Terri," she wept, tightening her grip around him. "I thought he was going to kill me."

He held her close, then asked, "Was he alone?"

She shook her head. "There were two others," Kathy said, holding back tears. She calmed herself with a shudder followed by a long and heavy exhale. "One spoke with a thick accent, almost like a wheezy-sounding brogue. The other was really big. I couldn't tell. As you can see..." she pointed to the unconscious man, "they were wearing ski masks. What was strange was how awkward they seemed. Like they didn't know what they were doing. Terri, who are

they? How did they find me?” Looking closer into Territaff’s face, she said, in a low, angry voice, “Were they trying to find you through me? You bastard... you set me up—”

“Take a breath, Kathy,” Territaff said, standing over the unconscious man. He went through his pockets and found nothing. “Can you describe the man with the accent for me?”

“I don’t know what I could add. Everything happened so quickly. I... I thought he wanted to rape me at first.” Her face tightened into an angry scowl as she stared at her attacker.

“Don’t look at him. Look at me.”

Territaff sat beside Kathy on the bed, wrapped his arm around her, and pulled her close. Kathy rested her head on his shoulder and let out a long, shivering sigh.

“Kathy, describe their awkwardness.”

“The one with the strange accent was kind of short and walked as though his shoes were too tight. He moved like he was uncomfortable.”

“And the big one?”

“He moved almost mechanical, but not stiff, sort of jerky—if that makes any sense?”

“Unfortunately, it makes a great deal of sense.” He frowned, then gave Kathy a reassuring smile. “There’s a lot we need to do quickly.”

“How did you know?” she asked, rubbing her bruised wrists.

“How did I know what?”

“That I was in trouble.”

She studied Territaff’s face. His features had changed again. He had a hard, cold look, his dark eyes filled with a frightening intensity.

“Just lucky, I guess.” He tried to relax the tension growing in her. He gave Kathy a warm smile. “I was coming over to apologize and pick up the disk. You still have it?”



She narrowed her eyes and grinned. “You must be the most artful bullshitter I’ve ever met.”

Territaff grimaced, “Okay, the truth is I got a... um... a premonition you were in trouble. So here I am. Is the disk safe?” he asked again.

“How the hell should I know? Go look for yourself.” She shrugged and pointed toward the kitchen.

Territaff glanced out the living room sliding glass doors to ensure the cab was still waiting before going to the kitchen. He opened the freezer door and looked under the ice cube bin. The disk was still there and sealed in the freezer bag. He held the bag up to the light. It appeared to be intact. He studied it closer, then smiled.

“I’ve got a cab waiting for us,” he said, returning to Kathy’s bedroom. “Get dressed. We need to get out of here.”

He placed the gold disk in his rear jeans pocket.

“And where are we going?” Kathy asked.

“To meet my friend at Passions.” He grabbed a pair of jeans and a top from Kathy’s closet. “Here, put these on.”

“You don’t wear this to Passions,” she said, tossing the clothes on the bed.

“Grab something and hurry.” Territaff looked down at the unconscious man sprawled backward across her night table. “His friends will return to get him, and I don’t want to be here when they do.”

“Are you going to tell me what the hell’s going on?” She demanded as she emerged from her closet wearing a light blue top over a short, dark blue skirt that stressed her shapely body.

“Yes, when we’re in the cab. We’ve got a lot to discuss, but we must go now.”

He rushed Kathy toward the front door. She stopped and looked around her apartment, sensing she wasn't returning. Then she looked into Territaff's now impassive face. His expression filled her with apprehension and excitement. It was an incredible rush.

## Chapter 7

**Kathy watched Territaff** as he looked over his shoulder through the cab's rear window.

When their eyes met, he sensed her struggle with her stirring emotions. Kathy's eyes fixed into a pensive stare, looking past Territaff.

"What the fuck is going on, Terri?"

"What do you mean?"

"I'm not in the mood for any of your bullshit charms." She leaned in close as if daring him to kiss her. "Now be a good boy," she held her voice to a seductive whisper, "and tell me why people are trying to kill me while they're looking for you?"

"All in good time, my dear." He held a finger to his lips.

Kathy's face tightened into an irritated scowl, then she gave him an upward thrust of her middle finger and flopped back into the seat.

He ignored her belligerence, leaned toward the cab driver, and said, "Take us to Passions."

"The one on first or twentieth?" he said.

"The one on First Street," Territaff answered, then thought, "What's the one on Twentieth like?"

“It’s a little more upper-scale if you know what I mean,” The cabbie glanced at Territaff through his rear-view mirror.

“Interesting,” Territaff pondered as he leaned back in the seat. He brought Kathy in close and whispered into her ear. “You need to tell me everything you can remember. Everything’s important; nothing’s irrelevant.”

Kathy nodded. “I’m scared, Terri. This is all too weird.”

“Why were you home?”

She took a deep breath, then let it out slowly, turning it into a long sigh. Their eyes met, and for Kathy, what was at first a gaze full of tension became calmer.

“You can be such a cold ass,” she snapped.

"But you can't get enough of my kisses."

Kathy's eyebrow rose. "Really...."

"Continue."

"When I got home, they were waiting for me. But it was odd. There were no signs of forced entry. Naturally, I asked how they got in and what they wanted. The short one grunted something with a strange accent—it was nothing I’d ever heard. It sounded like it slithered and hissed out of his throat. It was an awful, eerie, evil sound.

“Then the big guy threw me onto the bed and tied me down. They searched my whole apartment. Then the little guy put something on my forehead, and the next thing I remember is waking up just as you found me, with that big goon hovering over me, holding a big knife. It was dark outside, and I’d no idea of the time.”

“How’d you feel when you recovered?”

“What do you mean?”

“Did you have a headache? Did your stomach feel queasy, or were you light-headed?”

“No. Think you can get more of whatever that was? I got the best sleep I’ve had in years.” She wrinkled her nose and asked, “Do you know what they gave me?”

“I’ve got an idea; if I’m correct, it’s dangerous.”

“Oh, you’re no fun,” Kathy pouted.

“Continue.”

“There’s not much more I can tell you. But I’m sure they were looking for the disk. Before they put that thing on my forehead, the big guy came lumbering into the bedroom and looked through my night table. Two went into the closet while the smaller dude looked under my bed, then behind the headboard. They seemed clueless and clumsy by the way they moved. They were neat, though... left everything just how they found it. If I weren’t so scared, it would’ve been funny. The really big guy bumped into the small one, knocking him to the floor. I almost laughed. It was like being invaded by the Three Stooges.”

“Could you see anything about their faces?”

“That was the strange part.” Kathy closed her eyes for a moment. “There was something about the big guy’s eyes. He must have been wearing special glasses or something because all I could see in the eye holes were two green, shiny lenses.”

“What about the two smaller men?”

“The one that spoke had dark, bulbous, penetrating eyes. They gave me the creeps.” She shuddered at the memory.

Territaff leaned back in the seat, pulling on his chin in thought. He looked at his watch, leaned close to the cabbie, and asked, “What’s your name?”

“Fred.”

Territaff gazed at Fred, studying his features. Fred was staring back at him with tired eyes. His smooth, dark brown skin gave him a younger appearance, but his age was more apparent in his large and battered-looking hands. Fred had gentle features that suggested a kind and disarming personality. Territaff liked what he saw. Fred's large frame still looked firm but showed the beginnings of a small pouch around the midriff. He had all the signs of someone who had spent most of his time in a laborious occupation and only recently became a cab driver.

"Fred, there's an extra fifty for you if you can get us to Passions in fifteen minutes or less." He held up a crisp fifty-dollar bill in front of Fred to see.

"You got it, boss." Fred grinned as he stepped on the accelerator.

"I hope Cuz is okay," Territaff mumbled.

"Who's Cuz?" Kathy asked.

"My friend. I left him to get you."

"He's a big boy. I'm sure he can take care of himself."

"No, Kathy, he's as naïve as a newborn."

\*

Territaff pulled Kathy by the arm as they rushed into Passions. "Hey, that's ten dollars, sir!" The cashier called to Territaff, walking quickly to the bar where he left Cuz.

"Take care of that for me," he told Kathy.

"Terri, wait up," she called him as she fumbled through her purse for money. "Hey Terri, I left my wallet at home," she said, uneasy, as a tall, rotund man came too close to her. "You want to back off a little," she said, checking her pockets for her emergency tip money.

"There's a ten-dollar cover charge, Missy, after eleven o'clock," the large man said with a gravelly voice. "That's ten dollars apiece."

One of the bouncers approached. The large man waved him off. "I got this, Jimmy."

"You want to back off a little," Kathy said in a firmer voice.

He leaned over Kathy's shoulder, looking down her blouse. "If you don't have the dough, babe. We can maybe work something out in my office," he said with a green-tooth smile.

"Are you serious? I know Jimmy. He's an off-duty cop and works my place sometimes."

"I was just kidding yah. Ah, go on..." he waved his hand dismissively, "was just having some fun."

"Really? I'll show you some fun." Kathy's face reddened with a sudden fury and stomped her high heel into his foot. He grabbed Kathy by the arms and lifted her close to him. "That hurt," he said, grimacing.

"You want to put her down, please," Territaff said.

The two bouncers surrounded them.

"Should I throw them out?" a bouncer asked.

"I'm about to press charges against this man for sexual harassment. You're a cop, off-duty or not. You're gonna take my statement."

Jimmy looked at his boss, distressed.

"No—no—" the large man's brow flushed with sweat, "you just took it wrong. I meant nothing. Go ahead, enjoy yourselves." He reached into his pocket, pulled out a thick stack of tickets, and handed her a few. "These are good at the bars. Have a few on me, and let's forget about it."

"Next time, show a little respect," Kathy yelled at him, throwing the tickets in his face, her eyes wide with ire. She turned to Territaff. "So, where the hell were you?"

"Searching for Cuz," he said with a surprised look.

“You know what he was trying to do to me.”

“I’d never let that happen. Besides, you handled the bozo. And from what I saw, effectively.”

“You did, huh?” She placed her hands on her hips. “So, you weren’t worried at all?”

“He was no match for you,” Territaff grinned.

When a few patrons at the bar clapped and cheered, Kathy shook her head.

“Looks like you’ve made some new friends,” Territaff said, pointing to the people giving her a standing ovation.

She nodded to the crowd, trying to hide her embarrassment. A tall man with shaggy, two-tone blonde hair handed her a shot glass of whiskey. Kathy threw the drink back, wiped her mouth with her hand, and laughed.

“I hate to put a damper on your shining hour of triumph, my dear, but we need to get my friend.”

“Do you know where he is?” Kathy asked.

“Yeah.” He took Kathy out of the club. He saw a cab across the street. “Is that Fred?”

Kathy squinted. “I think it is,” she said, then realized Territaff was already getting into the cab.

“What are you waiting for?” he called to her.

“I’m coming,” she snapped. “Can you tell me what the hell is going on?” She sat next to him in the back of the cab.

“Fred, are you married?” Territaff asked as he unbuttoned his shirt, revealing a thick money belt. He pulled out a stack of hundred-dollar bills, counted twenty crisp ones, then re-buttoned his shirt.



“Yeah.” Fred nodded and smiled. “Married my high school sweetheart. I had to wait six months for her eighteenth birthday so we could get married.” His dark brown eyes lit up at the thought.

“How many kids do you have?”

“Three, two boys and a girl.”

“Driving a cab is hard and dangerous work,” Territaff said. “I’m sure you can use a little extra cash.”

“You got that right,” Fred said, looking at Territaff through the rear-view mirror.

“When does your shift end?”

“I just signed off.”

“How much do you take in on a typical Saturday night?”

“Around six to eight hundred, give or take a dollar. Why?”

“I need your services for the rest of the night.” He looked at Fred’s eyes through the mirror.

“Fred’s jaw tightened. “You’re not planning anything that will get me in trouble?”

“Nothing you have to worry about. I just don’t want to chase down cabs the rest of the night, and I may need to make a few more stops. I’ll pay you well for your services.”

Fred smiled. “How well?”

“How about two grand to start with?” He handed Fred the twenty crisp bills. Fred’s eyes widened with excitement as he slowly counted the money. He snapped a few of the bills to make sure they were real.

“This isn’t funny money, is it?”

“Funny money?” Territaff asked.

“Counterfeit,” Kathy explained.

“No, they’re the real things.”

He counted the money again. “Seems like you rented yourself a cab for the evening.”

Fred agreed, feeling like he had fallen into a strange dream. “You’re not fucking with me, man?”

“Can I count on you?” Territaff said, giving the cabby’s shoulder a friendly pat.

Fred turned to face Territaff and said, “I won’t let you down, especially if there’s more of this com’n.” Fred turned his attention to Kathy and smiled. “You sure are pretty. This is the first time I got a good look at you.”

“Thank you, Fred.” Kathy smiled, then gave his hand a friendly squeeze.

Fred carefully folded the money before placing it in his pocket. He patted the pocket as though to assure the bills were real. He turned his attention back to Territaff and asked, “Okay, where to, boss?”

“Passions North, Fred, and step on it,” Territaff said, pointing a long finger for emphasis.

The cab laid rubber as it screeched off. Fred couldn’t stop smiling as they sped up Collins Avenue. It was around one in the morning. The deserted streets with blinking yellow traffic lights permitted Fred to drive fast without worrying about traffic or stopping for lights.

Kathy opened the window, taking a few deep breaths of the cool night air. Her heart was beating hard in her chest, and Territaff noticed her hands shaking. He took them in his.

"I'm fine," Kathy said sharply, pulling her hands away. She sat upright with a heavy sigh.

“I never wanted you to get involved in all this... mess. Please believe me. I never wanted to involve you.”

His heart ached for Kathy because he did involve her, and her life would never be the same.

“Don’t you think I should know what the hell’s going on?” she said.

“The less you know, the better all around.”

“There you go again.”

Kathy looked closely into his eyes. She continued to gaze at him, a corner of her mouth raised dubiously.

“Good old, Territaff, the cryptic bullshit artist.” She spoke with a coolness that made him uneasy.

“Please, don’t bail on me now,” Territaff said. He was in a dilemma and didn’t know what to do. He reached into his rear pants pocket and pulled out the disk. “Kathy, this is what they were after. This disk contains information on extraterrestrials plotting to take over the Earth. I know it sounds like a bad science fiction story, but it’s the truth.”

As usual, Kathy could read nothing in Territaff’s impassive features. It was as though he could turn his expressions on and off with perfect control. She slumped back in the seat.

“What am I going to do with you?” she said, staring out the cab window.

She gazed at the old estate homes along the Indian Creek waterway, and the corners of her mouth turned downward. She viewed their well-lighted, opulent beauty with a heavy heart.

“I always dreamed of owning one of those someday,” she said in a dreamy voice.

“I’ve never lied to you and always promised to tell you the truth. I’ve never broken that vow. But you have to—”

Kathy held her hand up to his mouth without looking at him.

“Save it, Terri. I don’t want to hear anymore.” She swallowed down the throb in her voice. “Fred, please take me home after you drop off Mr. Territaff.”

“Is that okay with you, boss?” Fred asked.

“No, proceed as instructed.” He turned to her. “Listen carefully.”

She continued to stare out the window, ignoring him.

“Kathy, please, you have to believe me. You can’t go home.”

“I don’t want to hear any more of your lying bullshit!” Her bloodshot eyes narrowed with anger.

“Kathy, those men who met you in your apartment will kill you even if you give them the disk and tell them everything you know. You now present a risk, and taking a life is meaningless to them. You can’t reason with them, buy them off, or dissuade them from killing you. They’re like automatons. They have no emotions beyond what they need to fulfill their mission.”

Territaff turned Kathy by her shoulders. His features became full of emotion unlike any she had seen from him. She could almost feel a powerful rush of angst flowing in him.

“They killed everyone I loved. I won’t let them kill you. I wish I could tell you all you want to hear and undo everything that has happened. I had repressed my emotions so deeply that I had forgotten their importance. Most of all, I used you to solve a problem. I convinced myself I was doing everything for the sake of the mission. I was wrong and beg your forgiveness.”

All the blood drained from Kathy’s face, turning her skin pallid, cold, and clammy. She looked as though she was going into shock. He realized he had hurt her beyond words, beyond anything he thought he could. Territaff felt Kathy’s pain and rising fear. He knew anything he’d say would sound hollow, but he had to tell her the truth no matter how it sounded or affected her.

“Please, hear me out. For better or worse, your life is now in my hands.”

She bowed her head into her hands. A moment later, she lifted her head, gasping for breath.

"Kathy?"

"I'm fine," she wheezed.

"Fred, pull over," Territaff said.

"I said I'm fine... I just need to..." she cried through gasping breaths.

Territaff picked up a crumpled bag he found on the floor. "Here, breathe into this bag," he said as he unraveled it and held it to her face.

Kathy understood and breathed into the bag. "It smells like a whopper and fries," she said between deep breaths.

"Keep breathing into the bag. You're hyperventilating."

"No shit!"

"Good, now slow down your breathing and listen," he said as he rubbed Kathy's back. "I know I hurt you, but I must tell you everything because it appears we'll be together for a long time, and we have an important mission ahead of us. Also, I should confess that you've awakened emotions I thought were dead in me."

"What did you say?"

She aimed a hard stare at him. Her burrowing expression was weakening Territaff's emotional restraint.

"I said we'll be together for a long time."

"No. After that."

"You've awakened emotions in me I thought were dead?"

"What the fuck does that even mean?"

She studied his face as if trying to determine his sincerity.

"You've become very important... and I can't continue the mission without you."

"Is this another one of your clever tactics?"

“Believe me. This is as real as it gets.”

“What are you, some kind of covert agent?” Kathy said with a bite of sarcasm between wheezing inhalations.

“Not exactly.” Territaff scratched the back of his head in thought, feeling self-conscious. “I don’t know where to begin..” Then he realized Fred had turned around and looked at them with great interest. “Oh shit, now what will I do about you?” He shook his head and massaged his temples to relieve a mounting headache. His already complicated life became even more so as he stared at Fred’s smiling face. “You’ve no idea how much trouble I just threw your way, my poor friend,” Territaff said with visible regret.

Fred looked at Territaff in alarm. “What do you mean?”

Before Territaff could answer, Kathy asked, “Did you really mean what you just said? That we’ll be together?” Kathy’s eyes lit up as she pulled Territaff’s face closer to hers. “You mean you’re taking me with you... into space, right?”

“I’ve little choice now but to take you on the mission.”

"A mission? What mission?" Kathy said eagerly.

Territaff frowned, then turned his attention back to Fred. “Now, what do I do about you?” He pondered as he continued to massage his temples in thought.

“So, what’s the problem?” Fred said nervously.

“The problem is I’m a big-mouthed idiot and just jeopardized your life.”

“What? How?” Beads of sweat rose on Fred’s forehead and upper lip. His dark brown skin blanched while staring at Territaff’s tense face.

“We need to develop a plan to clear you of any suspicion of involvement.”

“I’ve got an idea,” Kathy said, “but Fred may not like it.”

“Well, let’s hear it,” Territaff said.

“Let’s rob him and steal his cab. That way, they’ll ignore Fred, thinking he’s just a victim, and chase after us.”

A broad smile spread across Kathy’s face until she caught the panic in Fred’s eyes.

Territaff pursed his lips as he regarded Fred while considering Kathy’s plan. “Fred, write your full name and address down for me.”

“Okay.” He grabbed a pen and pad from his sun visor. His hand shook a little as he wrote. “I don’t mind telling you that this whole thing is scaring the crap out of me.”

“Fred, everything will be okay,” Territaff said. “Now, please, get out of the cab.”

“You’re serious about this?” he said, looking back at Kathy with widened eyes and opened mouth. “I’m not sure this is the best plan. I mean, I got a wife and kids that are fond of me and—”

Territaff held his hand up and gestured for Fred to leave the cab.

“We know. That’s why we’re doing this. Fred, I’m truly sorry,” Territaff said, placing his hand on the side of Fred’s face. Fred tried to resist Territaff’s firm hand but slumped into his arms unconscious.

Territaff placed Fred’s limp body on the grassy curb, then went through all his pockets, removing his money, wedding ring, watch, gold chain, and crucifix.

“Shit,” Territaff hissed. “I hated doing that.”

He patted Fred’s shoulder, jumped into the cab, and sped off. Kathy sat in the back seat, her mouth gaping in shock at what she had witnessed.

"What did you do to him?"

"Just put him asleep for a while. He'll be fine."





## Chapter 8

**Territaff parked Fred's cab** in a municipal parking lot a few blocks from Passions North. He filled the meter to its maximum, hoping Fred would come around in time. Fred seems like a savvy guy, he thought. He'll call the police and report the robbery.

"Are you all right?" he asked Kathy, who became quiet.

"Yeah," she said, looking down. "You think Fred's all right?"

Territaff placed two fingers under Kathy's rounded chin and lifted her face.

"Fred will be well compensated, and he'll be okay. I'll make sure of that. They won't waste their time on him. They already know who we are and watch every move we make."

"You sound very sure of yourself, Terri. Are you going to tell me who they are?"

"Yes, but not now. There's no time, and it's complicated."

"How come you always say that every time I ask you for an explanation? Do you think I'm too stupid, or you just don't trust me?"

"Kathy, I trust you with my life. You also must understand that our intimacy was not only sex. Believe me when I tell you I know everything about you. I know who you are as a person. You have a beautiful soul and don't give your trust easily. I'm begging you. Be patient and have faith. I'll explain everything. But first, we must get on our way."

She began a new objection, but Territaff kissed her. “Not now,” he whispered, holding her face between his hands.

“You know the effect of your kisses will wear off on me,” she said.

“We need to find my friend and get the hell out of here.”

\*

Live hard-rock music greeted them when they entered Passions North. A sparsely clad, all-female band was performing on the center stage. Territaff couldn't help wondering how the base and rhythm guitarists kept their well-endowed bosoms from getting caught in the strings as they played their instruments with almost reckless abandonment. He also smiled in surprise at how good they sounded.

“I don't know about you,” Territaff shouted over the pulsating din, “but this is a first for me.”

Kathy smiled in surprise and shouted, “You've never heard of the Dixie-Pops?”

He shrugged and said, “Once your ears get used to the volume, they sound good.”

“They just cut a three-record deal with Coastal Jam Records,” Kathy explained. Then, noticing Territaff's bemused smile, she added, “But they're not exactly your type—are they?”

“I don't know. I could get used to watching them in concert,” Territaff mused, then roamed the room with his eyes.

Three bars crowded with scores of loud patrons enjoying the spectacle of naked dancers gyrating up, down, and around tall brass poles. The crowds of young men drank, talked, and laughed to the harmony of flesh and music. Territaff regarded it as voyeurism at its finest.

“Who are we looking for?” Kathy said, then smiled at the congregation of sweaty, inebriated guys who appeared busy undressing her with their eyes.

It was a familiar scene for her, not unlike a typical Saturday night at Fat Jack’s. She reflected on Jack, the colorful owner of her work establishment, who often threatened to change to all nude barmaids. She viewed it as a hollow threat—one she answered with a cynical smile.

“I’m looking for my partner, Cuz,” Territaff explained as he walked around the center bar.

“Can you give me a hint of what he looks like?” Kathy said with her back turned to Territaff.

“You can’t miss him. He’s a few centimeters taller than me... with dark brown hair, he wears straight back. Fair complexion—

Territaff turned and realized he was talking to himself. After a quick search of the room, he spied Kathy on the other side of the club, standing close to Cuz.

He joined her, and they listened to Cuz telling a joke to a small crowd of women gathered around him.

“... The bartender noticed a customer talking and laughing at his hand. After watching the customer for a few minutes, he got closer to determining whether he was drunk or crazy. When the bartender got to him, he heard him say, ‘I’ll talk to you a little later,’ then put his hand down. ‘What was that all about?’ the bartender asked. ‘Oh, you mean my hand-phone,’ the man answered. ‘What’s a handphone?’ The bartender asked, feeling like the customer was playing a practical joke. ‘No, really, it’s the latest thing in cellular nanotechnology,’ the man explained. ‘You see, a miniaturized mike implanted into the base of my palm, and the earpiece is inside my index finger.’ The patron opened his hand and held it close to the bartender, who angrily pushed it away. ‘Yeah, right. Very funny,’ the bartender grumbled, convinced that the patron was playing

with him. The customer appeared sober, so the bartender asked if he wanted another drink. He said, 'Yes. Thank you.' Just as the bartender was about to fix him another drink, he thought he heard a faint ringing coming from the man's hand. 'Well, I'll be damned,' the bartender said in amazement as the customer answered the call, saying, 'Hello' into his palm. The bartender brought him his drink, then laughed as he watched him talking into his hand. The bartender got busy waiting on other customers. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed the customer had left to go to the restroom. After some time had passed, the bartender looked in on his weird customer to ensure everything was all right. To his surprise, he found the man leaning against a stall with his hand up to an ear and a roll of toilet paper stuck up his ass. 'What the hell are you doing now?' The bartender yelled. The man smiled back and said, 'Waiting for a fax.'"

Everyone broke into hysterical laughter, even some of the guys sitting an earshot away. A barmaid drinking bottled water sprayed a mouthful on the customer before her. And a bouncer laughed so hard; he thought he'd pissed himself.

"That... that was," Natasha was having trouble catching her breath from laughter, "the best one yet, Cuz."

She gave Cuz a long, wet kiss as her hand rubbed the inside of his thigh.

Territaff realized Cuz was a big hit by the crowd he'd amassed. "Wow," he whispered, "They like him."

"And you were worried," Kathy said, beaming at Cuz. "He's adorable."

"Hi, Terri, come join us," Cuz said, drinking a colorful beverage from a large goblet. "Who's the beautiful brunette?" Cuz sounded as though each word was struggling out of his mouth. "Peggy," Cuz shouted to the bartender, who gave Territaff and Kathy a close look-over. "'Nodder round for my friends." She relaxed her intense stare and nodded.

To Territaff's surprise, Cuz was slurring his words. He leaned close and said, "Cuz, if I didn't know better, I'd say you were plastered."

He squeezed himself between one of Cuz's admirers and the bar.

"You mean inebriated?" Cuz asked, blinking at Territaff with bloodshot eyes.

"No, I think you passed that a while ago." He leaned closer, "You're shit-faced." He smiled at Cuz and thought, how's that possible?

"No," Cuz said, with sudden alarm, looking around him. "Who was the rotten bastard that shit on my face?" he shouted. Everyone looked at him and laughed, realizing how wasted he was. "You're wrong, Terri," Cuz poked him in the chest with a finger for emphasis, "Nobody shitted on my face."

"What are you drinking?" Territaff sniffed his breath.

Cuz looked into his large goblet, then held it up to Peggy, who had finished placing a round of drinks across the bar. "What is this?" Cuz burped as he spoke.

"Kamikaze," she said. "What are you guys having?"

"The check," Territaff said to Peggy's obvious disappointment. "We need to go— right now," he told Cuz.

Cuz recognized the urgency in Territaff's face and became upright and sober.

"Please give Peggy a generous gratuity," Cuz said. "She taught me how to French-kiss," then added with a sheepish grin, "and she's a most proficient instructor."

"It was my pleasure," Peggy said with a sultry smile.

Natasha stood up and walked with Cuz as Territaff paid the bar tab.

"Twenty-eight hundred dollars," Territaff barked.

Cuz smiled at Natasha as he heard Territaff's objection.

“That includes the lap dances and two hours in the Champaign Room,” Cuz explained to Territaff’s annoyed expression. “Natasha insisted that my lessons in foreplay and sex needed a proper ambiance to be effective.” He turned to Natasha, then took her hand and kissed it. “I must go now, but I’ll never forget you and this wonderful evening. You have taught me so much, and it saddens me that I must leave you.” They embraced and kissed.

“Wow is all I can say,” Natasha said. “I’ll never forget you.” A slow smile spread across her face. “Your passion and kindness will be something I’ll cherish for the rest of my life.” She wrapped her arms around Cuz’s neck and kissed him again.

“Goodbye, Natasha,” Cuz said softly.

As they left the club, Territaff turned to Cuz and said quietly, “Considering we all may be dead soon, I guess it was a good investment, my friend. You appeared to have acquired some insight into human emotions. Not to mention having a great time.”

“Yes. Now, I can say I’ve experienced both pleasure and sadness. They’re strong emotions and seem to permeate the fabric of human existence. Thank you, Terri, for the opportunity to experience them.”

“You’re most welcome,” Territaff said, then wrapped his arm around Cuz’s shoulders and pulled him into a sideways hug.

Kathy looked at the two men in total confusion. She didn’t know what to make of what she had seen and heard. She thought, who was Cuz, and what was that emotional experience all about? Did Territaff just get him laid? She smiled at the last thought.

Feeling slightly left out of a personal equation between the two men, until Cuz smiled at her and said, “You must be Kathy. I’m sorry Terri didn’t introduce us. He sometimes has lapses in the amenities.”

“Oh crap,” Terri blurted. “I forgot that you two haven’t met. That’s odd.” He pulled on his ear. “I thought you already knew each other.”

## Chapter 9

**“We need to get out** of here,” Territaff said, looking up and down the street. “Kathy, see if you can find us a cab.”

“At this hour? I’ll have the club call us one.”

“No, wait. I’ve got a better idea.” He turned to Cuz and said, “Convertible or hardtop?”

Cuz smiled. “You know I’m a ragtop man.”

“Okay, let’s go find us a nice, speedy convertible,” Territaff said, pointing towards the parking lot.

“Wait a sec,” Kathy said. “First, we beat up and robbed our cabby, and now we’re stealing a car?”

“Yeah?” Territaff gave her a puzzled look. “So, what’s your point?”

“The point is when the police catch up with us, they’ll lock us up for years.” She placed her hands on her hips, glaring. “I don’t want to be some big mama’s bitch for the next hundred years—that’s the fuckin’ point.”

“Who’s big-mama?” Cuz asked.

“Go find us a nice convertible,” Territaff said to him. He placed his hands on Kathy’s shoulders. “What’s wrong?”

“You keep telling me everything will be all right. But it isn’t ... I don’t know what you want from me... and I’m tired of putting up with all this shit.”

“I know, Kathy. Please—”

She placed a finger across Territaff’s mouth. “Please don’t explain anymore, Terri. The truth is the last thing I want to hear.”

A bright red Ford Mustang came to a screeching halt. It was a hi-performance, custom model, all dressed in bright chrome wheels, low-profile tires, and a beefy engine. Kathy saw Cuz wearing a large Panama hat and sitting upright behind the wheel. The top was down, and he was revving the powerful engine against the background of heavy Latin jazz.

“How’s this?” Cuz asked.

“What took you so long?” Territaff said as he went around to the passenger side.

“I was looking for an appropriate convertible. The majority of the vehicles in the lot were SUVs. Then I came across this beauty.” He grinned.

Territaff opened the passenger door. He moved the powered seat forward, gesturing for Kathy to sit.

“I’m not sitting in the back.”

“What’s wrong with the back seat?”

“Have you ever ridden in the back of a convertible with the top down?”

Territaff thought for a moment. “Oh, I see your point. I guess you’ll have to sit on my lap up front.”



Cuz punched the accelerator. The car roared, laying a long stretch of smoking rubber, pushing Kathy against Territaff.

“Do you always drive this fast?” she said with the wind gushing against her.

“This is the first time I’ve ever driven a combustible-engine conveyance,” Cuz informed, Territaff chagrined, “so I’ve no comparable reference to answer your question.”

“He’s kidding, right?” Kathy said to Territaff.

“No, he’s quite serious, I’m afraid.”

“You’ve never driven a car before?”

“No need to be concerned, Kathy. I’m versed in all forms of terrestrial transportation.”

Cuz looked at her and attempted a reassuring smile.

Territaff rolled his eyes, grimacing.

“Cuz, please watch the road,” Kathy said.

“You don’t have to worry. Cuz is a quick learner. He also has fast reflexes and great eyesight.” Territaff said.

“Is that supposed to make me feel better?”

“You mean it didn’t?”

“Wouldn’t you be a little concerned about the competence of a man who, just fifteen minutes ago, was wasted and is now driving a car for the first time,” she glanced at the speedometer, “at, oh my God, over a hundred fifty miles per hour?”

“Not to mention, in an illegally obtained vehicle,” Cuz added.

“That wasn’t helpful, Cuz,” Territaff said.

Territaff looked at Cuz. “Well, he isn’t from around here.”

“Yah—think!” Kathy tilted her head to the side to look at Cuz, then asked, “Cuz, where are you from?”

“Venubia,” he answered to Territaff’s dismay.

“Ah, Cuz, I think it would be better if we waited on telling Kathy your story until we get back to Biomei.”

“Who the hell is Biomei?” Kathy snapped.

“I want to stop you before you get a full head of steam and ask a million questions,” Territaff said. “As I’ve told you all night, this is not the time or place for this discussion. Biomei is someone who’ll be able to answer all your questions, fill you in on all the details of our mission... and new future home,” he mumbled in a low voice. Territaff frowned, then closed his eyes, gathering his composure. “Can’t you wait a little longer and let us concentrate on safely getting you out of here?”

“Sorry, but I can’t stand being constantly treated like a mushroom.”

“A mushroom?” Cuz asked.

“Yeah, a mushroom. Kept in the dark and fed nothing but bullshit.” She grinned sarcastically.

“Query,” Cuz said.

“Not now,” Territaff cut him off.

“Terri, what route do you want me to take?”

“Stay on US1 and take it to Homestead Air Force Base. That’s where we came in.”

Cuz nodded, then smiled at Kathy. “If it helps to know, our situation is also confusing and unsettling for me.”

“Thanks, Cuz. It’s nice to know I’m not the only one freaking out here.” She told Territaff, “Please tell me you know what the hell you’re doing and that there’s some plan you’re executing.”

He scratched his cheek. “Ah, um... I’m working on it...”

“You don’t have a clue, do you?” Kathy said, eyeing Territaff.

“Okay. I’m a little clueless because I’m still gathering data. So, I’m making some decisions on the fly. Satisfied?”

“Thanks, Terri. That’s the first honest thing you’ve said to me.”

Kathy sighed, frustrated with the reality of her life being in Territaff’s hands. She silently prayed for Jesus to protect her, fearing things would only worsen.

The dawn broke the gray into a soft orange glow over the tall Royal Palms scattered throughout the open sawgrass fields. The air felt cooler in the strong currents blowing through the car.

“There’s an old dairy road to your right, Cuz. Take it. It’ll lead us to an abandoned tree nursery,” Territaff instructed.

“This is not the same route we used when we came in,” Cuz said.

“I know, but someone has followed us almost since we left the club.”

Kathy sat more upright with the news. Territaff looked over his shoulder for the black SUV that had kept a safe distance behind them. “Cuz, ease us off the road a few meters ahead.” He pointed to his left. “Pull into that patch of tall grass right over there.” Cuz drove the car into a wide field of tall sawgrass that concealed it from the road. “Stop here and leave the car running. Kathy, I want you to lie across the back seat. Don’t get up or leave the car for any reason.”

“What are you going to do?” Her heart pounded harder in her tight chest. “You’re not leaving me, are you?”

“Kathy, please do as I say and stay down.”

He took Cuz to the side and telepathically told him, “*Stay with her. If anything happens, don’t come for me. Go directly to Biomei. Here, you’ll need this.*”

He pulled a gold, compact disk out from the inside pocket of his jacket and handed it to Cuz.

Cuz returned to the driver’s seat, removed the hat, and regarded it for a beat before tossing it like a frisbee into the sawgrass.

“Kathy, I sense your uneasiness,” Cuz said without looking back at her.

“What’s going on?”

“Terri is trying to ascertain who has been following us. He should be right back.”

“Uh, Cuz, tell me about yourself.”

“What would you like to know?”

“Where’s Venubia?”

“I can’t give you that information right now.”

“How did you meet, Terri?”

“Sorry, Kathy, I can’t reveal that either.”

“Jesus, what can you tell me?” She lifted her head and gave him an angry scowl. “Never mind.” She flopped back onto the seat, rubbing her temples with her fingertips to relieve a headache brewing since she got into the car.

“I’m not being deliberately evasive. We’re only trying to protect you.” Cuz noticed Kathy rubbing her temples through the rear-view mirror. “I see you’re in discomfort. May I relieve your headache?”

She nodded and sat up. Cuz placed his long, delicate-looking hands on both sides of her head. He closed his eyes as though he was in deep concentration. Kathy felt a momentary pulse, and then her headache was gone.

“That’s amazing. How’d you do that?”

“It’s a simple technique. I’ll teach it to you when we have time.”

An odd puffing sound followed by a loud concussion drew their attention. The sounds were close, and in the direction Territaff had gone.

“What was that?” Kathy said as she craned her head up to see what was happening.

“Please, stay down on the seat as Terri instructed,” Cuz said, undisturbed by the event.

There was an even louder impact after another puffing sound. This time, there was also a visible plume of dark-colored smoke.

Cuz had to restrain Kathy as she attempted to climb out of the back seat.

“Stay down. Territaff is unharmed and coming back to us.”

“And how do you know that?”

“I can hear him,” Cuz said, holding Kathy on the seat. “I appreciate your wanting to assist Terri, but you’ll only endanger him and yourself if you leave the car. Stay put, or I’ll have to render you unconscious.”

Cuz pulled the car around, then drove fast from the action.

“Cuz, what are you doing?” Kathy screamed. “You’re leaving Terri behind. Cuz, stop the car.” She leaned over the front seat to pull Cuz's arm off the steering wheel.

Cuz slammed on the brakes as another concussion exploded a few meters ahead of the car. He broke Kathy's hold, reached out, and gripped the front of her head with his free hand. She slumped back into the seat as Territaff emerged about thirty meters ahead of the car. Knowing he was out of position, Cuz slammed hard on the accelerator, causing the car to fishtail on the soft, damp, dirt road. Two shadowy figures appeared a few meters behind as the car sped up. They aimed peculiar-looking weapons and fired. The guns made an odd puffing noise followed by a powerful explosion as Territaff ran ahead of the car. Cuz came beside Territaff. He leaped into the front seat, then ducked. They could hear a whistling noise wiz over their heads, then a blinding explosion. The powerful concussion shattered the windshield and pushed the car sideways, almost into an old irrigation ditch.

"Their aim is improving. I don't think we'll survive another volley," Cuz said.

"They're shooting at the car, not us. They're using concussion grenades and sonics to disable the car. Except they're missing the mark."

"I see." Cuz arched an eyebrow. "Zohleemay needs to know what we discovered. Doesn't he? Otherwise, they would have killed us."

"Precisely, my dear friend. What happened to Kathy?" Territaff asked, noticing her unconscious body, lying awkwardly with her feet on the seat and her head on the floor.

"May I explain later?" Another explosion rumbled just beyond the car. "We need to get some distance from them," Cuz said.

"You don't have to explain. Knowing Kathy, she probably gave you no choice."

"They most likely know where we're going," Cuz said, looking back at the two squat figures running back into a patch of tall sawgrass.

“I’m not so sure about that,” Territaff said. “They’ve been keeping a close tail on us because they don’t know. If they did, they would be waiting for us.”

“What makes you believe this is only a diversion to make us think what you inferred?”

“I think we’re over-analyzing this. Let’s stick to our plan and be ready for anything.”

“As usual, your logic is sound,” Cuz said. “One other thing.”

“Yes?”

“What do we do about her?” Cuz pursed his lips, looking thoughtfully at Territaff. “She’s not part of the original plan.”

“No, she’s not.” Territaff frowned as he looked at Kathy’s unconscious body. “She’ll have one hell of a headache,” he mumbled, reaching out a hand and lifting her head back onto the seat. “We need to get to the base. But it’s Sunday.”

“So, what do you propose we do?”

“First, let’s eliminate our over-anxious friends, then visit Colonel Cameron. We’re a day early, so what? We need to find out what he knows and why he sent Tanya after us. I know she wasn’t acting on her own.”

Cuz glanced back over his shoulder. “They must’ve gone back to their vehicle.”

“Let’s warmly welcome them up the road,” Territaff said.

Cuz sped through the dirt road until it returned to the main highway. He positioned the car, blocking the road. Territaff reached into the inside pocket of his jacket and pulled out a .357 magnum revolver, then waited for the two menacing creatures to approach.

“Where did you obtain that?” Cuz asked, eyeing the gun.

“I borrowed it from a policeman.”

“Borrowed?”

“Okay! I stole it from a parked police car.”

“Have you ever fired a weapon of that caliber?”

Territaff looked at the gun and shrugged. “Not exactly.”

“Under the circumstances, don’t you think I should fire it? I’m familiar with all forms of Earth-based weaponry.”

“Give me a break, Cuz. I was born here.”

Cuz wrinkled his brow and was about to question Territaff but was stopped by an immediate impact, splintering palm trees, throwing a plume of earth and sawgrass into the air.

“There they are,” Territaff said, aiming the large revolver at the black SUV rapidly approaching. “Just a little closer,” Territaff whispered.

“I suggest you aim at the tires. It will cause them to lose control of their vehicle at their speed.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

Another shattering explosion hit a few meters away, discharging a cloud of wet soil and sawgrass on the car.

“Terri, now would be a good time to fire.”

“Just a little closer,” Territaff murmured, bracing his firing hand’s wrist with his free hand.

The SUV was almost on them when Territaff finally fired three rapid shots. The first one took out the passenger leaning out of the window and firing the odd-looking weapon. The next hit the front driver-side tire, causing the SUV to veer left, almost flipping onto its side. The third shattered the rear window. The SUV swerved back around. As the driver regained control of the vehicle, Territaff fired the last three rounds. One shattered the windshield. One missed, and the



third bore a hole in the driver's head. The SUV sped past them and darted across the highway, smashing into a support column of the turnpike's overpass.

They walked to the car. Its front end smashed around a concrete column, and the rest of the twisted frame crumbled like a squeezebox. Both the driver and passenger were dead. Cuz gathered the weapons, threw them back inside, and then placed the passenger, hanging halfway out the window, back on the seat. They returned to their car. Cuz held a pulse cannon, aimed the weapon at the rear of the SUV, then fired. An intense fireball erupted, engulfing the vehicle in flames. They watched for a few minutes to ensure the blaze incinerated the two bodies into indistinguishable charred remains. They hope an autopsy would only bewilder the coroner and may buy them a little time.

"We should go," Cuz said. "Police and fire trucks will be here soon. I'm sure the explosion caught someone's attention."

Territaff nodded, and they both got back into the car.

"Let's go to the base," Territaff said. "Colonel Cameron should be expecting us... or maybe not. I hope he has coffee."

## Chapter 10

**The morning sun hovered** above the horizon, giving the marshy waters an orange glow. A large crane soared out of the sawgrass as their flat-bottom boat glided to their favorite fishing hole. The young boy's dark eyes grew wide with excitement when he saw the thick, scaly body skim the water's surface.

"Look, Grandpa," he cried, pointing at the alligator with half its head above the water's clear surface. Its bulbous eyes looked right at him.

"Oh, he's a big one," the old man said, holding his fishing pole.

The man's weather-worn face remained passive as he studied the mighty predator.

"What's he doing?" the young boy asked.

"Waiting on his breakfast," Grandfather teased.

"Is someone going to feed him?"

The old man let out a warm laugh. "If we're not careful, one of us will be his breakfast."

The young boy jerked backward into his grandfather, almost knocking him down. They both almost fell into the water as the shallow boat rocked. The old man grabbed his grandson as he recovered his balance.

"Be careful," the old man chided, holding the trembling child close with one arm while

keeping his fishing pole in the water.

They both looked intently at the alligator. It seemed unperturbed by the boat's sudden movements.

"Let's go, Grandpa," the boy pleaded. "I'm scared."

The old man stroked the young boy's long, black hair as he spoke quietly, "Don't be frightened by nature. If you show fear to an animal, it will feel your fear, provoking it to come after you. Just respect them, and they'll often leave you be. Remember, you look as big to him as he's big to you. Always put your fear aside until the moment of meeting has passed."

"He didn't move," the young boy said.

"He has probably already eaten and is waiting on the sun to warm him. I think we'll leave him be and go to our other favorite spot."

The young boy nodded, still looking at the unmoving beast. "He looks like he's sleeping."

"Then let's be very quiet, leave him to his rest, and that way, he'll leave us alone."

As the old man reeled in his line, he felt it snag on something hard. At first, he thought he caught a rock, then jerked the line, but it held tight.

"Here, hold my pole," he said, handing his rod to his grandson. "Hold it up as I move forward... reel in the slack."

"Okay," the young boy said, holding the rod almost over his head.

He pulled hard on the starter cord, and the small, outboard motor started with a rumble and a puff of gray smoke. The small flat-bottom boat stuttered forward until it bumped up against something hard. The old man looked over the side into the murky, green water. He furrowed his windswept brow when another alligator moved under his boat. He felt a sudden surge of nervous

energy followed by relief as the gator juttet away from them. He found his line as he continued to peer into the dark water. It had caught on a large, flat piece of metal.

“What are you looking at, Grandpa?”

“I’m not sure,” he said, straining to see through the cloudy water.

The water cleared enough to make out what looked like the roof of a dark green truck.

The old man moved the boat forward a few feet and then circled.

“Reel in the slack,” he called to his grandson. The boy felt the line go free and reeled it in.

The child put down the rod and knelt close to his grandfather.

“That’s a car,” the boy said in surprise. “Are there people in it?”

“I sure hope not,” the grandfather said under a long breath.

He brought the boat to the driver’s side of the sunken truck, then peered into the water.

He waited for the water to clear a little more. A moment later, the old man let out a shocked gasp.

He could see the head and chest slumped forward over the steering wheel.

“We need to call the police,” he said, revving the small motor.

“Grandpa, is that a man?”

The old man gripped the rudder, pushing the throttle forward. “Sit down,” he called over the loud whine of the small outboard’s motor.

# Chapter 11

**The sergeant at the gate** scrutinized the beaten-up convertible with distinct disapproval. His eyes moved back and forth, taking in the ludicrous possibility that the unconscious female and the two disheveled occupants could be friends of the base deputy commander. He asked Cuz if he was sure he wanted to see Colonel Cameron.

“It’s Sunday, gentlemen.” The sergeant scowled. “The good colonel is probably at church. You’re sure you want to disturb him?”

Cuz nodded, meeting the guard’s disagreeable gaze with an unassuming smile. “Please, if it’s no bother.”

“What’s her problem?” The guard asked gruffly.

“You mean the colonel's niece?” Territaff said.

The sergeant straightened. “That’s the colonel's niece?” He regarded the unconscious female lying face down on the back seat. “So, what happened to her?”

“We had a rough night,” Cuz interjected.

“Were you in the car when all this shit happened?” the sergeant asked, walking around the dirty, battered Mustang, shaking his head. “You expect me to call the colonel’s residence at

07:35 on a Sunday morning and tell him that two scruffy-looking men and an unconscious female, allegedly his niece, want to visit?"

"You could leave out the scruffy part, but you seem to grasp the situation, sergeant." Cuz looked at Territaff. "Is there anything you care to add?"

Territaff shrugged. "I think that covers it."

"Open the trunk," the sergeant barked.

A second guard with a restrained smile suddenly snapped to life and inspected the trunk.

"Oh, Sarge, you need to see this."

*"Did you check the trunk?"* Territaff transmitted to Cuz.

*"Didn't occur to me until now. What about the sonic?"*

*"Oh, great."*

"You guys are big-time scuba divers? And what in the hell is this?" He held up the long cylindrical weapon.

"I suggest you put that down, sergeant," Territaff said firmly. "That's the colonel's. As for scuba diving. Oh yeah. Cuz here once speared a three-hundred-pound grouper just off the shore," he added with a broad smile.

"Sergeant, the colonel is expecting us for an important meeting," Cuz said, observing the other guard inspecting the car's underside with a large pole mirror.

"It's clean," the other guard called out.

The sergeant gave them a stern look as he handed back their driver's licenses, then motioned to a corporal in the guardhouse. The young corporal leaned out the guardhouse door and asked, "What's up?"

“Bob, call Colonel Cameron’s residence and tell him a Mr. Cuz Venubia and a Mr. T. Territaff are bringing home his niece as he instructed last night.” The MP sergeant aimed a cold stare and cynical smile. “You realize if the good colonel says anything other than send them right up, I’ll take great pleasure in throwing you in the stockade. You guys have trouble written all over you. I don’t know what kind of bullshit you’re up to, but you better keep it off my base... sirs.”

“Terri, I feel the good sergeant doesn't like us for some inexplicable reason,” Cuz said, emulating his best-hurt feelings.

“Whatever gave you that idea, Cuz?”

“Perhaps it’s the way he’s tapping his sidearm or something in the tone of his voice? I’m not sure.”

“He’s only doing his job, aren’t you, Sergeant Meyers,” Territaff said, reading the cop’s name off his uniform.

“Hey, Sarge, the colonel said to have an escort take them to his office.”

He looked back at the young corporal and growled, “He said what?”

“Have them escorted to his office,” the corporal repeated. “He told me Colleen came in to catch up on paperwork. So, the office is open.”

“Yeah—yeah! I heard you.” The sergeant looked back at the corporal, “So what are you waiting for? Call for an escort,” he shouted. The corporal jumped to the phone and called. “Pull your car up there, sir,” the sergeant pointed to a parking space in front of the guardhouse. “Wait for your escort.”

They only had to wait a few minutes before a jeep arrived. It pulled next to their car. “The colonel’s office is in the HQ Building,” the soldier said. “It’s only a few minutes up this street,”

he said with a cheery smile. "Can't-miss it. It's the only three-story building on this side of the base."

Cuz nodded, then gazed at Kathy in the backseat and frowned.

"We need to wake her," Cuz said.

"You sure you want to do that?" Territaff questioned, eyeing Kathy.

"We can't leave her in the back seat."

"Sure, we can. It'll be best to leave her right where she is now."

"If you think it's best."

Territaff had Cuz put the top up.

Cuz stared at Kathy's unmoving body and grimaced. "Sorry," he whispered.

"Don't worry. She'll be fine." Territaff said, giving Cuz's shoulder a reassuring pat.

They followed the MP's jeep into the HQ's parking lot. The jeep stopped in front, and the driver jumped out and approached their car. He was young and lanky, dressed in green fatigues. Cuz recognized that he was an Army MP PFC.

"Here's a permit that'll allow you to park in any visitor's spaces to your right. Place the permit on the driver's side of your dashboard." He whistled as he looked over the car. "I'm sure there's a hell of a story about this. And I'm sure the colonel will love hearing about it." A broad smile spread across his face with a sudden thought. "By any chance, is this his car? Cause I happen to know Cameron is a ragtop man."

"It's not," Cuz answered, returning the young soldier's smile with a frown.

The MP's forehead furrowed into tight lines, noticing the unconscious woman in the back seat. "I'm sure there's a good explanation for her," he said, looking attentively at Kathy's still form. "She looks dead. Is she okay?"



“We went clubbing on South Beach,” Territaff blurted with feigned embarrassment.

“Oh,” his eyebrows knitted with a big grin. “Looks like you had one hell of a night.”

Cuz reflected on the evening and gave his best interpretation of a bad-boy smile while Territaff looked annoyed with the private’s insistent chattering.

“I’d love to tell you all about it, but we don’t want to keep Cameron waiting,” Territaff said with annoyance.

Noticing Territaff’s sudden change in demeanor, the MP stiffened, “Ah, no, sir. I’ll only be a sec. Please wait for me at the entry. It’s those glass doors just ahead.”

\*

The colonel’s secretary had just arrived as they entered his office’s reception area.

“Good morning, gentleman,” she said, moving items around on a small refrigerator shelf. “Take a seat. It’s a coincidence that I’m here today,” she spoke with a strong Tennessee accent. “Came in to catch up on paperwork for an upcoming inspection. The colonel is on his way.” She stood, giving them a warm smile. She was blonde with fiery blue eyes that seemed to see everything around her with a glance. “Yes, private,” she addressed the young man who stood at attention.

“I was told to escort these men until Colonel Cameron arrived, ma’am.”

“That’s okay. They look harmless enough. You can go back to your duties now. I’ll take it from here.”

“But ma’am—”

“Thank you,” Colleen said, dismissing the young soldier with quiet authority.

“Thank you, ma’am. Have a good day,” he said, then nodded to Cuz and Territaff as he left.

“What can I get you, gentleman?” she asked, sitting behind her expansive, meticulous desk.

“I could use a strong cup of coffee,” Territaff said.

“How about you, young man?” she asked Cuz, looking at him with an uncertain smile.

“I’m fine. Thank you.”

She tapped a few numbers on her phone. A young man’s voice answered, “Yes, Colleen.”

“George, good you made it. Please, bring coffee and pastries,” she tilted her head toward Territaff. “How do you like it?”

“Black with heavy sugar,” Territaff called out.

“Will do,” George said.

“You both look as though you’ve seen a little action along the way,” Colleen observed with a mildly scolding look. “I should warn you, Colonel Cameron is very formal and won’t appreciate your appearance. So, I suggest you be extra polite,” she warned in a hushed tone to emphasize her point.

“Thanks for the heads-up,” Territaff said acerbically. “We’ve already met.”

Colleen's smooth brow creased with faint lines, looking a little unsettled. She forced a quick smile.

A staff sergeant, wearing a well-fitted uniform, entered the office carrying a tray with a pitcher of coffee, cups, fresh pastries, napkins, and spoons, all nicely arranged. He placed the tray on a credenza in the rear of the office, opened one of the credenza’s double doors, and got an oversized dark blue mug. Embossed in bright gold letters was U.S. Army 5<sup>th</sup> Armored Cavalry. He placed it on a small, round silver tray. He poured coffee into it, picked up a tasty-looking pastry with plastic tongs, and then put it onto a napkin next to the mug. It was all done with a

practiced flair. Balancing the tray on one hand like an experienced server, he walked to Colonel Cameron's office door, then bumped his left rear pocket onto a proximity reader. The door clicked open. He held it ajar with his butt.

"Good morning, sir," the sergeant said, entering the office.

"Good morning, George. Sorry to ruin your Sunday. Hope you didn't have any plans."

"Sir, you got me out of cleaning the garage today. So, I should thank you." George let the door go, silencing the room to the outside.

"Gentleman, you can help yourself to the coffee and pastries," Colleen said, pointing to the tray.

"Thank you," Territaff said, got up, and walked to the credenza.

He poured himself a coffee, then looked over the sweet cakes and Danish selection. He picked up an apple turnover and took a hungry bite. To his delight, it tasted delicious. He took another one and sat down.

As he hungrily ate the second turnover, he looked at Cuz with a sudden thought. "You should eat something."

"I don't need—"

Territaff glowered irritably. Cuz stood and walked to the tray.

"This all looks... most appetizing," Cuz said, then looked at Colleen. "Can you suggest something? I rarely eat pastries."

"The cherry Danish is my personal favorite."

Cuz stared at the selection, then looked back at Colleen.

"It's the square with powdered sugar on top," she said to Cuz's puzzled expression.

“Ah. Thank you.” Cuz placed the Danish on a napkin, returned to his seat, and then ate it in slow, deliberate bites.

“Well?” Colleen asked.

Cuz was puzzled by her question until Territaff nudged him. “It’s delicious,” he exclaimed and ate a little faster.

“Will the colonel be much longer?” Territaff asked, showing his growing impatience.

“He’ll be with you as soon as George finishes the morning reports. Depending on the night’s activity, it usually only takes about ten minutes or so. But being here on a Sunday... Well, you can read between the lines,” she said, flashing a sly smile before returning her attention to a neat stack of papers in the upper tray of her inbox.

*“I think we’ll be waiting for a while,”* Territaff transmitted.

\*

Colonel Cameron was a tall, imposing man in his late forties. His pepper gray hair was cropped short in a clean, military fashion. His muscular frame showed off the prominent bulges of his arms and chest through his athletically fitted uniform. Perched on his slightly bent nose was a pair of stylish-looking half-lens glasses. He pointed to the seats in front of his expansive desk for Territaff and Cuz to sit while he finished reading a lengthy report in hand.

He placed the report on his desk and scratched the back of his head with a grim expression. Then he looked at the two messy figures before him and slowly shook his head. He rubbed the upper part of his cheek under his left eye, opened his mouth as if to speak, then clenched it shut. His forehead became tight with lines, and he squinted at them with the right side of his mouth curled into a sarcastic smile.

“You don’t look so good, Colonel. Is there something I can get you?” Territaff said, relishing Cameron’s distress.

“Don’t be so smug, Territaff. I have a good mind to throw both of you into the stockade. You’ve got a lot of nerve coming in here, looking like shit and acting like nothing has happened.”

“Can’t say we didn’t warn you,” Territaff interjected.

“You warned me of what? A possible invasion from an unknown source with advanced technology. I’m supposed to believe that crock of shit you presented to us as real. I don’t know your game, but I’m not buying it. You’re fucking consultants, for Christ's sake!”

“We’re consultants vetted and cleared by every major security agency, including the CIA, NSA, and the President’s Science Council. Yet you still doubt our credibility? This is no game, Cameron. Tanya’s dead. Is that real enough for you?”

Cameron jumped up and walked around his desk to the large glass windows overlooking a small patio garden. He stared out in silence for a long moment before speaking. “I suspected something was wrong when she didn’t report in,” he murmured solemnly.

Cuz’s eyes darted between the colonel and Territaff, then frowned. “I don’t understand—”

“Hold on, Cuz,” Territaff said, looking at Cameron with his face hardened. “Can you tell me why she was following us?”

Colonel Cameron turned, narrowing his stare at Territaff. “Be careful. You may be a civilian, but I still have rank over both of you,” he spoke in a low and very controlled tone. “You were supposed to report to me first. When you failed to report, I told her to check on you.” The colonel’s tone sounded strained with regret. “Do you know how she…” his voice trailed off as he returned to his seat. “Do you know what happened?”

“I found Tanya’s dead body propped against a garbage bin in South Beach. As far as I can tell, she confronted her assailants, and they killed her. Beyond that, I can’t say. As you’re already aware, we were attacked on the way here. They knew our every move. Somebody is talking to them. That wasn’t the first incident.”

Cameron’s face turned ashen, telling them that he didn’t know of Tanya’s death, and appeared genuinely shaken by the news. He gave the colonel a moment to regain his composure. Cameron let out a long, mournful sigh, then sat more upright in his chair. He swallowed to clear his throat and asked, “Do you know how she was... killed?”

“Shot at point-blank range. Beyond that, we don’t have a clue.”

“I see. I guess we’ll learn more from the autopsy.”

“We already took care of that. It revealed nothing.”

Cameron’s face reddened with anger as he leaned on both arms close to Territaff, looking like a great ape readying for a charge.

“Who the hell do you think you are?” he yelled in Territaff’s face.

“The one in charge of this case,” Territaff said calmly. “Now, sit down, and let’s talk.”

Cameron was unaccustomed to being spoken to in that manner but sat. He stared at Territaff with a confused scowl.

“What do you mean you’re in charge? I wasn’t given any instructions regarding your status beyond cooperating with you. So, by whose authority are you in command?”

“Look, Colonel, I don’t want to get into a pissing contest with you. Let it suffice that we share the same interests in what’s rapidly becoming a giant cluster fuck. I’ve neither the time nor the inclination for a bureaucratic tug-of-war with you. We both want justice for Tanya. But there are much bigger issues at risk than who’s in charge of what.”

“All right, Territaff,” Cameron said, “let’s talk. What were... those things in the SUV?”

Territaff hesitated, then blurted, “Zenti.”

“What the fuck are Zenti?”

“The reason we’re here.”

“Can you be a little more explicit?”

“I’m sorry, sir, but I can’t give you any details about the Zenti or our mission beyond what’s in your security brief.”

“I see. But you’re asking for my complete cooperation and assistance with no clue what I’m committing my men and resources to. I’ve already lost one good soldier because of you. I’ll not risk one more life out of ignorance.”

“Ignorance,” Territaff repeated sharply. “That seems to be the way around here.”

Colonel Cameron leaned back, removed his glasses, and placed them into a leather case. He steepled his fingers on top of his desk. Sitting more upright, he fixed a steely-eyed stare at the two men. A long, uncomfortable silence fell between them as though the colonel were pondering the situation, looking more disagreeable by the second.

“I don’t have a damn clue what the situation is, nor who the hell you two are,” the colonel finally spoke, tension rising. “And if I don’t get some answers to the whats and whys of your mission, the only thing you’ll get from me is an escort to the stockade.”

“We appreciate your situation, but any information we’d divulge now would only compromise our mission and place you in further danger,” Territaff stated emphatically. “Believe me, sir, ignorance in this situation is for your protection. However, we tried to warn you that there was an imminent threat to national security.”

“Ignorance is bliss. Is that what you’re telling me? So, I’m supposed to stay happy and stupid? And accept everything you’re telling me. Well, gentlemen, not on my base. I’m not letting you run unsupervised.”

“With all due respect, sir. We don’t report to you. And yes. You’ll let us do what we came here to do with or without your cooperation. Our orders come from a higher authority.” Territaff folded his arms across his chest, staring defiantly at Cameron.

Colonel Cameron glared, picked up the phone, and pushed the intercom button.

“Colleen, call General Dickerson.” He put the phone down, looking closely at Cuz.

“Where are you from, son?”

Cuz glanced at Territaff as though asking for guidance.

“Sir, Cuz’s place of origin is classified,” Territaff interjected before Cuz could answer.

“Really?” He arched an eyebrow. “You two are just full of secrets, aren’t you?”

“I guess you could say that, sir.”

“Well, we’ll see about this. In the meantime, you can just relax in the outer office while I chat with General Dickerson about what to do with you two.”

“Eh, sir,” Territaff remembered Kathy. “There’s a young lady who’s with us.”

“You mean my alleged niece?” Cameron said. “I had her taken to the hospital for an examination when we couldn’t wake her. What’s wrong with her?”

“She’s sedated.”

Cameron eyed Territaff with a raised eyebrow.

“It was for her protection,” Territaff quickly added.

Cuz frowned.



“You’re quite a pair.” The colonel narrowed his eyes, giving them a disgusted look. “Wait in the outer office while I try to get a handle on the mess you created.” He pointed toward the door as the phone rang. “Good morning, sir,” the colonel answered.

Territaff and Cuz stopped to listen to the conversation. Noticing them standing by the door, Cameron stopped talking. He gave them a stern, dismissive look that got them out of his office.

*“Cuz, listen to the colonel’s conversation,”* Territaff transmitted.

Cuz nodded. Territaff started for the door.

*“Where’re you going?”* Cuz transmitted.

*“I’ll get Kathy. The last thing we need is for them to start all kinds of testing on her.”*

*“And what should I tell the colonel?”*

*“I went to look in on his niece.”*

That didn’t go so well, Territaff thought. Colonel Cameron was not on board, which made him wonder what General Dickerson was up to. He blamed himself for letting his guard down.

*Trusting Cameron was a mistake. A mistake that has already cost one life.*

## Chapter 12

**It took Territaff a while** to locate Kathy because they had her tucked away in a private room. No guards were posted, to his relief. He entered Kathy's room and stood over her as she slept. She looked so peaceful that he considered leaving her there. He quickly dismissed that thought. He couldn't abandon her to the military. Territaff viewed them almost as dangerous as the Zenti. She didn't stir. He listened to the rhythm of her breathing. *She's so strong, bright, loving, and vulnerable. What am I going to do with her?*

Territaff's mind reflected on the Zenti. His heart pounded so hard he could barely breathe. Horrific images of decimated bodies and buildings in flames roared vividly in his mind. He closed his eyes, but the images stayed fixed. A sudden sensation of pain and horror got him to his knees, holding his head. "No, not now," he sobbed, trying to regain composure.

A hand stroked the back of his head. He looked up, and Kathy's eyes were smiling back at him. He stood, eyes full of tears, and wrapped her up into his arms and held her close, caressing the back of her head.

"Terri, what's wrong?" she said, sensing his intense emotions.

"Nothing now." He released his grip and smiled. "How do you feel?"

"Outside of a splitting headache, I'm fine."

"Good. We need to get out of here." He searched the small closet, pulling out Kathy's wrinkled clothes. "These are a mess and won't do. He poked his head into the next room. It was

empty. He searched the closet and found a pair of a woman's dark blue pants and a long-sleeved cotton pullover. He sized them and decided they should fit her well enough. He went back into Kathy's room and tossed the clothes to her. "Here, get dressed."

"They're kind of big," Kathy said, pulling on the pants, then rolling the cuffs up. "Where the hell am I? How did I get here?" she asked, sitting on the bed. "What kind of trouble did you get me into now?"

"You're in a military hospital ward. Does that help? Now, finish getting dressed. I'll be right back."

"Damn it. You're always doing that. Where're you going?" Kathy jumped out of bed and dressed quickly. "You crazy bastard. You won't be happy until you get me killed or something," Kathy grumbled.

Territaff went into the corridor in search of a wheelchair. He avoided the nurse's station and found a wheelchair outside a bathroom. Realizing how bad he must have looked, Territaff ducked into the back of the nurses' station and discovered a locker room. A small shower and two sinks with mirrors were on one side of the room. He knew a shower would press things, but looking at the blackened smoke stains and ground-in dirt covering most of his face and hands. He figured a good washing was in order. He stripped down to his briefs and attempted a sponge bath, substituting paper towels for a sponge. The soap and water were so refreshing that Territaff filled the sink with cold water, then stuck his head in as far as he could.

He splashed soap and water all over the sink and floor. He got a wad of paper towels from the dispenser beside a hot-air hand dryer. He knelt under the dryer, wiping his underarms and chest with the paper towels. While on his knees, he tried to mop up some of the splashed water. He stood, feeling a little cleaner and refreshed. Then he looked for a change of clothes.

There was a row of six lockers. Two were empty. The other four had standard padlocks, and one with a cheap combination. Territaff spun the tumbler of the small combination lock and opened it. Unfortunately, there was only a small purse on the top shelf and a woman's thin coat on a wooden hanger. Territaff searched the bag for a pin or anything to pick the remaining locks. He found nothing of use.

"What are you doing?"

He turned to find a nurse standing inside the locker room. She was a youthful, plain-looking woman with reddish-brown hair tied into a tight bun. He grinned at her and asked, "May I borrow a pin from your lovely bun?"

The young nurse was confused and shocked at finding an almost naked man going through her locker, asking for a pin.

"Are you serious?" she said, eyes wide and her legs shaking. "You need to get back in your room, or I'll call security."

She was about to shout, but Territaff held his hand up and calmly said, "You don't need to call security. I won't harm you...." He gave her an engaging stare and slowly approached. The young woman's eyes grew wider, and her mouth gaped. Territaff touched the sides of her head with his fingertips. At first, she squirmed but became still and relaxed under his touch.

"You don't want to call security," he whispered. "I'm not going to harm you. I only need a bobby pin."

"Okay," she said in a low monotone, her eyes fixed on Territaff's engaging stare.

With her eyebrows arched, she retrieved a bobby pin, holding it out to him.

"That was most kind," Territaff said. "By any chance, does one of these lockers belong to a male nurse?"

“Sorry, this is the women’s locker room,” she said.

Although the young woman appeared relaxed, her eyes stayed wide and unblinking. She knew she should call for security but didn’t want to for some compelling reason. Her gaze remained fixed on Territaff, her expression taking on the fascinated glow of youthful excitement. She had never been so close to such an attractive man.

“Damn,” Territaff frowned, then re-engaged the nurse with a light touch of his hand on her right temple. “Would you be a real angel and find me some clothes? I can’t go around in my undies.”

With her eyes fixed on Territaff’s body, she smiled slyly. “With that body, I think nobody would mind. Would you take off your briefs?” Her face turned beet red, realizing what she had said, but she gazed at him with dreamy eyes.

“I need something to wear as quickly as possible.”

“Wait right here. I’ll only be a moment.”

He knew he was taking too long and paced around, anxious to return to Kathy.

*“Terri, they’re taking me to the stockade,” Cuz transmitted. “Cameron convinced Dickerson that we were dangerous and put an arrest warrant out for you. The MPs are on their way.”*

*“Don’t attempt an escape yet. Let them take you to the stockade. I’ll pick you up on the way.”*

*“What’s Kathy’s condition?”*

*“She’s fine.”*

*“Please, hurry.”*

*“We’ll be right there.”*

The nurse returned, holding a set of blue scrubs. "This is the best I can do," she said.

"They're perfect," he said, moving for a grateful kiss on her cheek. Before he could, she wrapped her arms around Territaff's neck and gave him a long, hungry kiss.

"Trust me. I'm nothing but trouble." He smiled warmly and patted her pale cheek. "The right guy will come along and sweep you off your feet," he attempted to encourage the frowning nurse while putting on the scrubs.

He retrieved the wheelchair he had stowed in the corridor and pushed it to Kathy's room. As he turned into her wing, he saw her running from the opposite direction.

"Kathy," he called to her.

"Where the hell have you been?" she yelled, running up and into Territaff's arms. He gave her a reassuring hug.

"Quick, get into the wheelchair."

Two hefty MPs and a male nurse greeted them as they entered the corridor.

"Hold it right there," one of the cops called loudly, threateningly.

"Shit, just a few minutes quicker, and we would have made it," Territaff grumbled.

"I don't like the looks of this, Terri," Kathy said.

"So, what do you suggest?"

"Run like hell for the exit."

"Are you up for it?"

"I'm not going to jail."

"Okay. Relax. Act as if we're giving up."

"I'm not going to jail, goddammit," she whispered loudly as the MPs approached.

Territaff patted her shoulder and said, "I want you to hold on tight. Ready?"

She nodded. When the police got within a few meters of them, Territaff pushed Kathy as fast as possible. They whizzed past the MPs so quickly that Kathy's skin rippled against the friction.

He stopped abruptly by a stairwell door, causing Kathy to fly out of the wheelchair. Territaff caught her right before her head hit the floor.

Kathy looked at him, startled. She glanced back at the MPs, who both looked stunned by their sudden break.

"Terri, give me a sec to catch my breath," she gasped.

He scooped Kathy into his arms and pushed the door open with his back. Then he pulled the wheelchair into the stairwell, broke off an arm, and jammed it into the door, securing it.

"That should hold them," he mumbled, then ran down the three flights of stairs, carrying Kathy.

When they got outside, he put her down. She bent over and threw up.

"Better?" Territaff asked.

Kathy nodded.

"Cuz, *where are you?*" he transmitted.

*"In a holding cell on the second floor."*

*"I'll be there shortly."*

*"I overheard them. They intend on interrogating me. Terri, they seem most worried about us. General Dickerson told them to detain us until he can arrange a secure transfer."*

*"A secure transfer? To where?"*

*"I haven't been able to ascertain that information. However, the guards look afraid of me because of their body language and how closely they're watching me."*

*"How many guards?"*

*“Two, outside my cell, and I saw three more in the outer room. My cell is a converted office. There is a window with high-impact glass, steel bars, and a heavy steel door. However, the walls are standard cinder block construction.*

*“Well, that shouldn’t pose a problem for you. I’ll let you know when to make your break. Please injure no one.”*

*“Acknowledged. I’ll await your signal.”*

Territaff turned to Kathy, “Are you okay?”

She nodded, then turned when she heard the heavy footsteps of the two MPs running toward them.

“Let me handle this. You look for a car we can borrow.”

“Jesus, Terri, they look pretty big and pissed off.”

“Just do what I said.” He pulled her by the arm to his side. “Go.”

She hesitated, giving him an agitated glare before running off to the parking lot in front of the building. One of the cops veered off after Kathy.

Territaff cut him off. “No—no. You don’t want her. You want me. She knows nothing.”

The MP stopped and called for backup. “Lace your fingers together and place your hands on your head, then get down on your knees... Now!” the MP shouted.

The other one moved behind Territaff. From the corner of his eye, Territaff saw the MP nod as if to tell his partner he was ready.

“I know you’re just doing your job. Following orders and all, but unfortunately, I can’t let you take me, fellas.”

“I’m only going to say this one more time, sir.” The policeman facing Territaff smiled menacingly. “I’ll use force if necessary, ” he added, pulling his nightstick from its holster.



“Get on your knees, put your hands on your head, and there'll be no trouble,” the one behind Territaff said.

“Sorry, but I don't want to deprive your partner of all the fun he's expecting.” He grinned at the soldier, holding his nightstick in a readied position.

“I've had enough of your shit,” he snarled, lifting his club and aggressively moving toward Territaff.

The beefy cop stood with a tight smile in an attack posture when Territaff dashed to him with almost blinding speed. He grabbed the MP's arm, swung him around, and threw him into his partner, knocking them to the pavement.

“Please, don't get up. I'd prefer to spare you the pain of engaging me further.”

The MP, on top of his partner, got up wobbly. He reached for his gun. Territaff elevated his leg and swiftly kicked him in the midsection. He fell hard to the pavement. The other one recovered enough to stand and started for his sidearm.

“Don't,” Territaff said firmly, causing the MP to pause. “I'll only hurt you. Attending to your friend would be smarter. He probably has internal injuries.” Territaff eyed him as the military cop seemed to be considering his options. He slowly placed his gun back into its holster, pressed the radio mike attached to his uniform's epaulet, and radioed for an ambulance.

“That was smart,” Territaff said, trotting off to find Kathy.

“You'll never make it out of here,” the young soldier called to Territaff's back.

Kathy pulled up in a military police jeep.

“Good choice. We can listen to the radio while we ride.”

“I think it's theirs,” she said with a crafty smile. “They left the keys in.” She glanced at Territaff. “What did you do to them?”

“Just gave them a lesson in good judgment. At least, for one of them.”

“Good, that means you didn't kill anybody.”

“I'm not a violent man.”

“Really.” Kathy laughed.

“Find the detention center.”

“I think I saw a base directory somewhere on the dashboard. Look to your right.”

Territaff found a directory in an open compartment below the dash. He listened to their chatter while unfolding a base map he found inside the directory.

“The detention center is in building 14 on the northwest corner. Go to your right, then look for a building with many police vehicles in front.”

“That must be it,” Kathy said, pointing to a broad, two-story building surrounded by a chain-link fence with razor wire. The low-rise building had tall pole lights with cameras mounted all around it.

“That must be the place. Drive around so I can survey their security.”

As they made their way around to the center's side, Territaff realized a subtle presence. He turned and took a long look behind. An unsettling feeling of being followed nagged at him, but he saw nothing behind them. Then, he recalled a similar sensation at another detention area on a distant moon. But after reflecting, he realized that enigmatic energy had been lurking around him for many years.

“What's wrong?” Kathy asked.

“It's nothing.”

“Why are you so jumpy?” She stomped on the breaks, causing Territaff to jerk forward.

“Did you ever have an unsettling sense that someone or something was...” his voice trailed off, noticing Kathy's puzzled expression. “Never mind, keep going around to the back.” As they approached the rear gate, Territaff pointed and said, “Stop there just beyond the gate.”

“Got an idea?” Kathy asked.

“Yeah, but I need you to stay in the Jeep and be ready to move on my signal.”

“And what signal would that be? And where do you want me to go?”

“I want you to come wherever you see me and don't stop for anything.”

“Right. Um, minor detail,” Kathy said as he started to get out of the Jeep. “What do I do if someone comes by while you're rescuing Cuz?”

“That's up to you. Just make sure you're here when I signal.”

“That's what I love about you.”

“What's that?”

“You're just full of surprises.”

He grinned at her, then jumped out.

A nervous flutter ran through Kathy's stomach as she watched Territaff make his way to a fire exit in the rear of the building. He opened the door with little trouble and slipped into the building.

Kathy was surprised that no one approached the Jeep or noticed her parked near the gate. She slumped down in the narrow seat, hoping to make herself unnoticeable to a passerby. Kathy worried about not knowing what was happening. Her mind wandered, and she talked to herself to ward off the sudden sleepiness pulling on her.

“What's taking him so long?” she mumbled half-aloud. “What's he doing? How did I get mixed up in this rotten mess?”

Her mind filled with horrible images and sounds as she drifted into a vivid daydream. She was reliving the break-in at her apartment. Her heart pounded rapidly as the images of the three weird intruders came to mind. She couldn't make out the big one's face. She tried concentrating on the images of the intruders, but nothing came to mind. They remained a featureless puzzle. The big guy wearing a ski mask revealed only a distorted impression of some strange features. The smaller one's voice directing the action was full of hissing and wheezing. It sounded freakish and frightening. The third and smallest one watched Kathy silently, giving off an unsettling intensity.

Gunshots followed by a sudden loud explosion shook Kathy. She realized that she had fallen asleep, and chaos was around her. She squinted her eyes to get a better look at two men jumping out of a large hole on the second floor of the building. Kathy gasped as she recognized the men. She watched with her heart thumping in her throat. How could they do that, she wondered as she saw first Cuz, then Territaff, running toward her, looking unimpaired by the 30-foot jump they made.

She crunched the gearshift into first, then stomped on the accelerator. The Jeep lurched forward and stalled.

"Kathy, quickly," she heard Territaff call.

Her hand shook as she restarted the Jeep. The guards at the gate were almost up to her. She re-engaged the clutch, getting the Jeep to peel out and away from the guards.

As she got close enough, Territaff and Cuz jumped into the back of the Jeep. They heard gunfire. The two guards were shooting at the tires.

“Turn hard, Kathy, then go right at them,” Territaff calmly instructed. She turned the wheel so hard she almost flipped the small Jeep onto its side. “Don't get crazy. Calm down and drive straight.”

“Calm down!” she shouted in his face. “They're shooting at us. You stay calm. I'm scared shitless!”

“Shitless? That's an interesting term,” Cuz said.

“Not now,” Territaff snapped.

Kathy aimed the Jeep directly at the guards. She got the vehicle at almost 50 mph, getting on top of them before they dove out of her path without getting another shot off.

“That's superb driving, Kathy,” Cuz encouraged.

“Thanks. Now can you give me a damn hint where in hell we're going?”

“Cuz, help the lady out.”

Cuz's face became impassive, and said, “Turn left in .045 miles. There'll be a dirt road that leads to a fuel depot 1.25 miles. I'll give you more directions when we arrive at the depot.”

Kathy found the road and followed Cuz's directions. To Kathy's surprise, the depot was exactly a mile and a quarter up the road. Kathy noticed they were on the side of a runway from a small airstrip. She parked on one side where two helicopters sat beside two small airplanes.

“Okay, now what?”

“Do you see the fuel tanks to your left?” Cuz asked.

Kathy nodded.

“To the tanks' right is a squat concrete building. Pull around to the front and stop.”

Kathy looked at Territaff, then at Cuz. She felt they were telling her only what she needed to know and nothing more. Kathy resented them keeping her in the dark. She wanted to know why they were being so cautious with her.

Kathy pulled the Jeep in front of the small shed, letting out a long sigh.

“Wait in the Jeep,” Territaff said to her, following Cuz to the shed.

“Are you going to tell me what in the hell is going on or just keep me in the dark?”

“Work the lock, and let’s get the hell out of here,” Territaff said to Cuz.

Cuz glanced back at Kathy, then addressed the magnetic lock on the shed’s door. He placed his long hand on the digital keypad, and the lock clicked open.

“You have to teach me that technique,” Territaff said.

They entered the shed as Kathy looked nervously on. Her anxiety got her stomach churning. “Oh no,” Kathy whispered as she held her aching stomach.

Cuz noticed Kathy’s tight face and rigid posture as he tossed two duffle bags on the back seat and sat beside them. “Are you feeling ill, Kathy?” he asked.

“No, just really nervous.”

“Let me drive,” Territaff said. “I can see how uncomfortable you look.” Kathy arched herself over the gear shifter as Territaff jumped into the driver’s seat.

“God, what I wouldn’t give for a bathroom,” she cried.

“What’s wrong?” Territaff asked, not knowing what to do for her.

“I’ve got a nervous stomach and trying not to crap in my pants,” she cried. “Get me to a damned toilet—now!”

As Kathy’s anxiousness rose, three Jeeps and a troop carrier barreled toward them.

Territaff glared at the rushing troops as he punched the Jeep into gear and took off.

“We can't outrun them, Terri,” Cuz said.

“I know. We need to put a little distance between us. Break out a few toys from the bag.”

“What do you have in mind?” Cuz asked.

“Find one of the sonic rifles set it to minimum. That should do the trick.”

Kathy cried out in pain, “Let them kill us. It will put me out of my misery.”

“Allow me to relieve your distress,” Cuz said.

“You can do that?”

“I believe so, but you must try to relax your mind for only a moment.”

She gathered herself, then looked fixedly at Cuz. “Please do it quickly, Cuz. I can't hold back much longer.”

“We don't have time for that now,” Territaff shouted, looking over his shoulder at the closing posse of troops.

“It will only take twelve seconds. The risk-to-benefit ratio is most favorable,” Cuz said.

“Okay, magician, do your trick,” Territaff said, then drove erratically, hoping to keep the rapidly closing troops from locking on to them.

Cuz gave Kathy a reassuring smile. “Now, close your eyes and try not to think about anything for a moment.”

“Work fast, Cuz. I think Terri's driving is making me nauseous.” She closed her eyes and let out a small burp. “See what I mean?”

“Okay, take a deep breath and try to hold yourself still. Ready?”

She nodded, her eyes shut tight while swaying with Territaff's erratic movements.

“Okay, you’ll feel a slight pressure in your head followed by a pleasant tingling down your spine. Then, you should feel your muscles relax. You may feel a little drowsy but don't fall asleep. Focus only on becoming tranquil.”

Cuz placed his fingertips on the sides of Kathy's head.

She opened her eyes, grabbed his wrists, and gave him a stern look. “The last time you did this, you knocked me out.”

“Yes, I understand your concern, but this will be different, I promise. May I continue?”

“Should I let him?” Kathy asked Territaff.

“It's either that or crap in your pants. Personally, I'd trust Cuz.”

“Hurry up. Go ahead.”

Just as Cuz got his fingertips to the sides of her head, a spray of bullets whizzed by them, one hitting the spare tire on the rear of the Jeep. Another shattered the windshield, but Kathy didn't move or react. She sat transfixed with a subtle but rising feeling of euphoria. It was miraculous how wonderful she felt. Her stomach ceased cramping and churning. Then, her entire body relaxed.

“Thanks, Cuz,” she said with a dreamy smile.

“You're welcome,” he said, pulling her down as a bullet blew a hole in the passenger side door.

A burst of gunfire ripped through the Jeep, shattering the passenger’s side-view mirror and tearing up the dashboard. Another volley tore through the rear of the Jeep and right through Territaff's seat, grazing his arm.

“That was too close for comfort,” Territaff yelled at Cuz. “Will you please get out the baby sonic and stop those idiots before they do real damage!”



Cuz opened a duffel bag, now by his feet, and pulled out what looked like an air gun children used to shoot foam balls at Velcro targets.

“That looks like a toy,” Kathy said as Cuz pushed a set of buttons on the side of the dull, gray weapon.

“This toy packs a big punch,” Territaff said. “I’d suggest you get as far down in your seat as possible, Kathy.”

Territaff turned the wheel sharply to the left while pulling up on the emergency brake. The Jeep swerved sideways. Cuz took careful aim at the lead Jeeps, then fired. A low puffing sound was followed by a strong concussion, flipping the two leading Jeeps onto their sides. Soldiers flew out of the vehicles, hitting and rolling onto the tarmac. The trailing troop carrier came to a screeching halt, swerving to avoid the fallen troops, allowing Cuz to fire a second concussive wave. It struck the transport head-on, blowing its hood off and ripping the canvas cover. The impact threw some of the troops out the rear and onto the short tarmac of the runway.

“Good shooting,” Territaff said as Cuz returned the weapon to the duffel bag. Territaff drove as fast as possible to the hangar at the far end of the airstrip. Then he continued along a narrow path far into a mangrove swamp. The sun was low in the sky, giving the greenish swamp waters a reflective glow. The humidity thinned enough to make the air comfortable. Kathy was feeling sleepy from Cuz's mysterious tranquilizer.

“Do you know where you're going?” she asked lethargically.

“Almost there,” Territaff said, squeezing her hand.

“I don't know what you did, Cuz, but I'm feeling no pain,” she moaned, slurring her words.

“The effect will wear off soon, and you should feel well-rested.”

“I’d love to take a nap.” Her head fell to the side, and she smirked at Territaff. “You really know how to entertain a gal.”

“Close your eyes and take a nap. We still have a little ways to go.”

“Okay, if you insist.” She let out a low yawn and fell into a deep sleep.

He looked over his shoulder at Cuz and said, “I think it's best if she wakes aboard the shuttle.”

Cuz nodded.

Territaff stopped the Jeep, got out, and then stood and listened.

“What is it?” Cuz asked, standing on the other side of the Jeep.

“I'm not sure. It's an odd impression that something is following us. No, it's more as if they're watching us. It's a different feeling than before. They're closer.”

Cuz walked to Territaff's side, then surveyed the area with his eyes. His internal photoelectric sensors scrutinized the immediate area with high sensitivity.

“Can you feel it?”

“Yes, there's a definite presence, but nothing my sensors can detect. It's almost ethereal.”

“Zenti or stealth droid?”

“Neither. It's more like an energy signature,” Cuz said, turning slowly to his left.

“However, it's not like anything I've ever encountered. Stand by a moment.” He studied the nearby swamp. “I've detected two bio-signatures. I believe they're observing us from the cover of the mangroves.”

“Get out, a seeker.”

“It will give away our position. If they're Zenti, they'll surely send more troops after us.”

“We're not far from the shuttle. We could always make a quick break for it.”

Cuz looked into his duffel bag and pulled out a hand-held device with a small display and a cone-shaped muzzle. Cuz reached into the pocket of his cargo pants and pulled out a low-profile headset. It was so small that, except for its eyepiece, it was almost indiscernible when placed on his head. He looked at Territaff. "Ready?"

Territaff pointed to his right. "Three o'clock."

Cuz held up the device, looked through the display for a few seconds, then pressed a button with his thumb. The seeker's broad-spectrum beam painted the mangrove swamp in a green glow. Two ghostly-looking forms came at them. Territaff reached inside one of the duffel bags and pulled out the magnum revolver. He fired off two quick shots, barely missing their heads. They stopped, reversed direction, and ran back into the swamp.

"That should keep them at bay," Territaff said. "That energy wasn't coming from them."

"No," Cuz agreed. "But I know where I've sensed it before."

"Oh?"

"That residual negative energy was present when you found Tanya's body. It was also present when you encountered Zohleemay and the white light."

"Interesting." Territaff pulled on his chin in thought.

They both jumped back into the jeep and drove off. Territaff looked at Kathy and smiled at her. "Lucky girl, you're dead to this world now, but a new world beyond your dreams awaits when you wake."

The narrow path opened into a large sawgrass field. "How far, Cuz?"

"50 meters dead ahead."

Territaff relaxed a little, feeling they would make it to the shuttle, until he heard the whooshing sounds of helicopters approaching.

Cuz looked up through the small headset eyepiece and asked, "Are they for us?"

"Most likely." Territaff grimaced.

"We'll expose the shuttle when we board. They'll see it." Cuz gave Territaff a concerned look.

"Only until we're airborne. Then it will be too late."

"What if the military tries to engage us? They have well-armed aircraft."

"Cuz, you worry too much. We'll be gone in a flash. They'll report us as a UFO, make a report, then go home, shaking their confused little heads. Something to tell their grandchildren."

"Your voice is full of disdain for these people. Why?"

"Because they're hypocrites and liars. They're charged with protecting the welfare of the people they serve, but most serve only what's in their best interest."

Cuz's expression became worried.

"What's wrong?"

"My sensor has picked up a vapor trail indicative of long-range rocket fire. I suggest you veer to the left, then make a sharp roundabout ... Three... two... one... now."

Territaff did as Cuz instructed. A rocket exploded a few meters to their right as he completed the sharp roundabout. The impact was close enough to flip the jeep. Territaff hit the ground hard after being thrown clear.

"Cuz," he called out, feeling uneasy about his friend. Then his heart raced a little, realizing Kathy was nowhere in sight. "Cuz," he called a little louder.

He could hear the whooshing roar of the approaching helicopters coming to inspect the damage.

"I'm pinned under the Jeep," Cuz called out.

Territaff came to Cuz's voice and found him pinned under the Jeep. "What a mess," he mumbled, then asked. "Are you damaged?"

"I believe I'm undamaged but awkwardly pinned. Would you lend a hand to get this vehicle off us?"

"Us? Are you telling me Kathy's under there?"

"Yes. I positioned her into the back seat as the jeep turned over but didn't have time to avoid being trapped."

"So, she's okay?"

"I believe she's still asleep. I guess I misjudged her tolerance to mental induction. I've little experience with your species."

"Amazing. She slept through all of this. I think I'll join you on the ground for a few minutes to throw our curious friends off."

Cuz looked puzzled as Territaff lay face down on the ground. He grasped his friend's meaning and closed his eyes as one helicopter did a close flyover. It made several low passes over their position, and Territaff was concerned one may land to inspect. After several minutes of close passes, the helicopters flew away.

Territaff got on his feet and lifted the Jeep off Cuz. He saw dark green blood seeping from two large tears in Cuz's pants. "Are those serious wounds?"

"They're superficial. I'll attend to them aboard ship."

"Can you get to Kathy?"

"We need to upright the Jeep."

Cuz went to the opposite side as Territaff effortlessly flipped the jeep to Cuz, then he laid it down. Territaff looked at Kathy, lying on her back on the ground, shaking his head. “She's still sound asleep. Unbelievable.”

He cradled her in his arms and walked into the tall sawgrass.

Cuz pulled a small square box from a large pocket in his cargo pants and whispered a few indistinguishable words into the device. The hovering silver hull of the shuttle glowed under a bright sun. Its stubby wings attached to its underbelly gave the ship a sleek appearance. A rounded, opaque dome covered most of the craft. A hatch glided open with built-in foot rails to climb into the vehicle. Cuz went ahead, then took Kathy from Territaff once they went inside.

The hatch closed silently. The craft's interior brightened with soft lighting and a quiet electrical hum. Territaff strapped Kathy into one of the three rear seats and waited for it to adjust to the contours of her body. He gazed at her before joining Cuz, taking the copilot's seat.

“Let's let her sleep until right before we engage the plasma drive. That's when we'll put her in an environmental suit,” Territaff said.

“I agree. Once awakened, Kathy will be too excited to sleep,” Cuz said, then told the onboard computer to power up as he ran a surgical knitter over the gashes in his thighs.

## Chapter 13

**Dr. DeZenti was not a man** of great distinction but powerful connections. Under normal circumstances, he could never have gotten the security clearances he obtained from the DOD and NSA. According to one analyst, his relationships must have gone far up the chain in Washington because his personal and professional backgrounds can be summed up in a word: Vague. His unconventional vetting made people in the security community nervous and suspicious. Against both the CIA and DHS's strong objections, the defense department insisted his project was vital to national security.

All the best efforts of America's investigatory agencies (internal and external) could only gather bits and pieces of Dr. Zoh DeZenti's family and personal history. The few family records the agencies gathered portrayed his family as one of the richest in Colombo, Sri Lanka. A handful of documents, photos, and certificates depicted a marine biologist father who made his fortune developing specialized antibiotics used in fish farms. His mother appeared to be a self-taught computer scientist. Still, no hard or even anecdotal evidence supported DeZenti's claim of her brilliance beyond an incomplete high school record (only 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grades). There were birth records of two younger brothers and an older sister.

When the investigators pressed DeZenti on why there was such a lack of personal history, he claimed they were all tragically lost along with the family records. "It was during that great tsunami," he told them in a dispassionate tone, "that decimated Sri Lanka in 2004," he sighed, cleaned his glasses, and added, "It was as though they were erased from existence." His story and demeanor only heightened some agencies' suspicions.

When Territaff saw DeZenti's name appear in his security briefing, he knew it was Zohleemay. How he pulled off all that artful deception was baffling.

According to Cuz, the military community was skeptical about DeZenti's records. They were as vague as the rest of his background.

"His academic records show that DeZenti completed his undergraduate and post-graduate studies at the University of Sri Jayewardenepura," Cuz relayed to Territaff as they prepared their shuttle for departure to their ship. "His undergraduate studies were in Computer Science and Mathematics. He received his Ph.D. in Biology. He completed all his degrees in six years. Is that a normal duration to complete such courses of study?"

"On average, completing a bachelor's degree takes four years. Six is genius level," Territaff answered.

"That begs the question of how he accomplished such an impressive record. What I have in front of me doesn't refute his attendance and extraordinary achievements. The background investigation didn't substantiate much from professors or former students. No one seemed to remember him. When asked about his academic anonymity, Dr. DeZenti retorted, 'I was at school for one purpose: studying, not socializing.' He further explained that he rarely attended classes outside of required presentations, labs, and testing. He did almost all his academic work off-campus. Is that unusual?"



"Not really, Cuz. The internet had grown sufficiently enough in 2008 to work off-campus. But even the most studious of college students let off steam in one way or another. It's almost comical what he answered when asked during his vetting interview. He said that 'He knew what he wanted from college and found student life to be, for the most part, too pubescent, generally unappealing, and an unwarranted distraction from his studies.'"

"But his academic record appeared legitimate, impressive, and unimpeachable." Cuz's brow lined. "It appears his entire sketchy background is irrefutable. No matter how hard the investigators looked, they turned up nothing to discredit or confirm his story.

"Reading his financial data, the death of DeZenti's parents provided a sizable inheritance from his family's estate. According to the little financial data acquired, upon graduation from college, he used much of his inheritance to purchase a small biomedical company. It was on the cusp of developing a new method for growing artificial organs. DeZenti either had an exceptional eye or dumb luck in seeing the potential in that cash-strapped company and gave it a healthy infusion of capital. Under his management, the company went in a new direction with intriguing and risky applications.

"In only a few years, the company had perfected a process that combined nanotechnology with modified cyanobacteria for organ scaffolding and stem cells to create specialized cybernetic parts for novel medical procedures, cures for a wide range of diseases, and advanced technological apparatuses." Cuz looked up from his console with a sudden revelation. "That's very close to how the Venubians developed their service droids. He's using the information from the disc."

Territaff nodded with a tight smile. "Please continue, Cuz. I'm finding this report quite fascinating."

"Shortly, DeZenti had the company start applying its patented biometric scaffolding directly to the patient," Cuz continued from the report. "The procedure integrated the patient's stem cells with a programmable nanovirus. This method could replicate organs compatible with a wide variety of patients. Remarkably, over 99 percent of the new organ trial recipients didn't experience organ rejection nor required anti-rejection medications. It was a remarkable breakthrough that could have catapulted the young company to the top." Cuz stopped reading. "You're not concerned?"

"No. Because I left enough of the original data to begin the droid but not enough to finish it."

"You'll find this interesting," Cuz said. "Before the Company's CFO announced its new process to Wall Street as an IPO, De Zenti withdrew it from the market. He explained his sudden withdrawal: 'I had something different in mind and decided not to make a public offering.'"

"Yeah. A killing machine," Territaff snidely interjected.

"It didn't take DeZenti long to develop something. Within six months of pulling its IPO, the company created and introduced a prototype of a bio-engineered cyborg."

Territaff looked at Cuz in alarm. "They actually said a bio-engineered cyborg? How the hell did he manage that?"

"According to this report, he took the plans of his prototype to Washington, D.C., where he made an impressive presentation to the Department of Defense. The DOD presented its recommendations to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. It took only seven months for the DOD to get the allocations." Cuz slowly shook his head in disbelief at what he was relaying. "They awarded an unprecedented contract to Dr. DeZenti's company to research and develop the first fully independent, artificially intelligent cyborg soldier. Additionally, the government granted

total access to whatever resources he required to create the perfect warrior. The project was given classification under the name: Cyber Sword."

"This is far worse than we originally perceived. Zohleemay now has all the resources of the US Defense. That's what got DARPA so squirrely during our vetting. They knew this was a dangerous project. What they don't know is that they're unwittingly working with a madman. We must get closer and investigate this, Cuz. He's gotten much further than we thought possible."

"Well, it gets worse. General Dickerson is heading up the project. His original assignment was to ensure project Cyber Sword progressed smoothly. His official title was Chief of Operations. His responsibilities include acting as liaison officer for the DOD and being the official government's Project Oversight Officer. Additionally, the general had the inauspicious job of keeping Dr. DeZenti happy."

"Probably an impossible job," Territaff quipped sarcastically.

\*

General Dickerson was a distinguished and highly decorated officer. He was well-known and respected within the military community as the *consummate professional*. Dickerson viewed his new duty assignment as demeaning and misplaced. He despised his work but also regarded DeZenti with open skepticism and distrust. When asked why he was so suspicious of the doctor, without hesitation, he answered, "I simply don't like the wormy little bastard and trust him even less."

After the confounding incident at Homestead AFB, their strained relationship came to a head. During the subsequent debriefing, General Dickerson questioned Dr. DeZenti on his

knowledge of the alleged spies, Mr. T. Territaff and Mr. Cuz Venubia. DeZenti arrogantly proclaimed complete ignorance and questioned the general's competence in responding to the incident. This pinned the general's bullshit meter.

# Chapter 14

**“Jesus! What in hell** was that?” the helicopter's co-pilot said.

“It just looked like it shot up from the ground. Then it was gone.”

“Tower, this is Baker-Charlie-One-Niner-Seven.”

“Go ahead, Baker-Charlie.”

“We want to confirm a bogie at sector 125-zebra, over.”

“Baker-Charlie-One-Niner-Seven, that's a negative on the bogie. Do you wish to make a formal sighting?”

“Negative tower.”

“Affirmative. Return to base.”

\*

After receiving Cameron’s urgent call, General Dickerson immediately went to the site. His brown eyes reflected an authoritative intensity that could disarm someone with a stare. He looked at the shelled area with surprise and agitation. A short, wiry-framed man approached the general and stood by his side. The general didn’t bother to greet the diminutive man, who was wearing a large, black felt hat low on his forehead and a dark, blue Armani suit, giving him an overdressed appearance.

“Why are you here?” the general asked gruffly.

“I was understandably curious if you apprehended them. By the look of things, I assume they eluded you.”

Dickerson narrowed his gaze down at him. “This doesn’t concern you.”

“On the contrary, General,” the doctor retorted in a wheezy voice. “Anything that could jeopardize the project concerns me.”

General Dickerson attentively stared at the little man for a moment, then said, “Was this your idea or Cameron’s?”

Dr. DeZenti turned the corners of his thin mouth into a mock smile. “If this were up to me, I would’ve used more efficient means to apprehend them.”

“Next time, Dr. DeZenti, you’ll stay the hell out of it. I don’t care about your congressional connections. This is my theater of operations, and you’ll stay the hell out of the way. Are we clear?”

“Very well, General Dickerson, but if you’re unsuccessful in apprehending them, I assure you this will not remain your theater of operations.”

The general’s jaw clenched. “Look, you little son of a bitch, let’s get one thing clear. Never threaten me again. You’ll stay out of my business, or I’ll prosecute you for obstruction. I don’t tolerate insubordination from anyone, including stuffed shirts like you.”

DeZenti looked up at Dickerson with an impassive gaze, pulled a handkerchief from his breast pocket, and wiped his glasses. He walked to his limousine. A chauffeur opened the door for DeZenti. DeZenti glanced at the general with a sour expression before getting in.

General Dickerson smiled, then shook his head at the man's arrogance. I'll get rid of that smug little bastard, he thought, as soon as I can locate the person responsible for allowing that little bug to infest my operations. Then I'm going to kick his stinking ass out.

\*

General Dickerson arrived early for the weekly ten o'clock briefing. He sat in the small, second-floor conference room in DeZenti's factory, sipping on weak coffee. He was watching the activity on the factory floor through a large window. As the general observed the clusters of white-clad technicians doing more talking than working, he decided a revisit with Colonel Cameron was in order. Many loose ends were gnawing at him. He suspected Territaff and Cuz were most likely not spies. Their security clearances required detailed and thorough background investigations and vetting. Either their credentials were excellent forgeries or current security procedures direly needed a complete overhaul. Neither scenario seemed to fit. Dickerson's intuition was telling him things were wrong. Dr. DeZenti was strange beyond belief. What about those two alleged spies? Cameron's handling of them also was disturbing. And why was Tanya killed?

*Why would they go to Cameron and ask for his assistance? Cameron knew they were contracted to monitor and verify the legitimacy of DeZenti's work. The general grimaced. Who was chasing them? They used advanced weapons. Where did they come from? If they were spies, what was their mission?*

Never in his career was he confronted with so many uncertainties going into a project. At the center of this evolving confluence of suspicions was Dr. DeZenti. That's not a coincidence, he told himself. *There's something wrong with all of this. Dr. D, you're up to something, you—*

*wormy little bastard, and I'm going to find out what you're really about.* He smiled at the thought, then gave Colonel Cameron a call.

He had left a message for Cameron when Dr. DeZenti joined him in the conference room.

“Good morning, General,” Dr. DeZenti said with his irritating wheeze.

“Dr. DeZenti,” Dickerson greeted him with a polite nod.

Giving the doctor a narrowed stare, he sipped his now lukewarm coffee and winced disagreeably. “Somebody needs to learn how to make a decent cup of coffee around here.” Noticing Dr. DeZenti looked more confused than upset, he suggested, “If you’d like, I can recommend the vendor we use on the base. He's excellent and has the advantage of already being cleared by us.”

“That's most gracious of you, General. I apologize for the coffee. Few of us here are coffee drinkers, but it would be nice to accommodate our guests.” DeZenti nodded appreciatively but had retained a glimmer of suspicion within his thin smile.

“Where are you in resolving the neural interface problem?” Dickerson asked, “The latest reports were fuzzy for lack of a better term.”

“I believe we have several viable solutions. I prepared a report that outlines our approach and cost analysis for the change orders.” He handed Dickerson a thick, sealed folder.

Dickerson weighed the folder in his hand. “It feels expensive,” he said, then placed it on the conference table. “I hate reading these things. They're so dry and full of technical jargon. Why don't you give me a quick overview of your proposed solutions? Particularly why there's more than one. Multiple solutions make me a little nervous. They usually indicate a vague understanding of the problem and the associated costs.”

General Dickerson leaned back in his chair to prepare for a long explanation.



“I appreciate your concern. There are multiple solutions because there are several interrelated problems. Because of their correlation, they must be resolved relative to their interdependence. This is all explained in the report.” He pursed his thin lips, and his large eyes became fixed. “Now, I must return to the floor if there's nothing else.”

DeZenti stood, then, as if remembering, extended his hand to the general.

“One more thing, Doctor DeZenti,” Dickerson said, still sitting.

“Yes?”

“Why wasn't this discussed in the joint session last week?”

“We needed to review our findings before a cogent resolution course could be detailed.”

His voice went up an octave, and his odd features looked annoyed with the general's implication.

“No need to get testy, Doctor. I'm just doing my job,” Dickerson said. He stood and stuck his hand out to DeZenti.

“Now, if you don't mind, I must do mine.” He ignored the general's extended hand and left the room.

“Interesting,” General Dickerson whispered to himself. He stood, watching the little man rapidly descend the stairs to the factory floor. “It appears I hit a nerve,” he said, rubbing his chin in thought.

## Chapter 15

**“Cuz, you need to revive** Kathy and get her into an environmental suit,” Territaff said, updating instructions into the navigational computer.

“Why are you doing that manually?” Cuz asked, retrieving three biogenic environmental suits from a small storage bin below deck. He tossed one to Territaff, then attended to Kathy. “You’re being a little too cautious with our inquisitive guest.” Cuz narrowed his eyes, looking annoyed. “Why are you so adverse? She has earned the right to know the nature and intent of our mission.”

“I agree.” Territaff glanced over his shoulder at Kathy. “I just need a little more time to figure out how to explain it all.”

“I’m sorry, Terri, but I don’t understand what you mean by *how to explain it*. Your statement infers that there’s a method to relaying this information. This is most uncharacteristic of you. Or is there something more that you need to tell me first?”

Cuz’s eyes probed him with a heavy stare. Territaff regretted what he said. He opened his mouth to respond but found himself lost for words. “Cuz, I’m sorry. I don’t want to slap a transponder on Kathy and hope she can handle it. Trying to tell her anything....” He shook his

head and frowned. "I remembered what I went through when Nicki slapped a transponder on me."

"That didn't turn out so bad."

"You weren't with us then. I thought I was going insane. It's difficult having your brain suddenly full of new knowledge directly dumped into your cerebral cortex. It can be traumatic."

Cuz did a final check of Kathy's environmental suit, then returned to his seat. He glanced back at Kathy's still form. "She didn't stir. The whole time I moved her around while undressing her, it didn't arouse her from her slumber." He gave Territaff a thoughtful glance before sealing his clear-domed headgear to his suit.

"Wait a second, Cuz," Territaff reached out, then grabbed his arm. "Do you understand my dilemma?"

"I'm running all the possible scenarios using all the variables presented to Kathy over the past seventy-point two hours. I also analyzed the events she had experienced since joining our mission. This should give us a range of probable reactions to using the neural transponder versus direct oral narration."

"So, what's your recommendation?"

"Use the transponder to calm her nerves first, then do the data transfer. I've observed her. She can handle about anything you can throw at her. Kathy's resilient and trusts you."

"She trusts me?" Territaff laughed. "She thinks I'm an artful bullshitter."

"Earth idiom is so confounding." Cuz wrinkled his brow, shaking his head. "Terri, Kathy trusts you with her life. You do recognize that most of her dubious retorts are a defense mechanism to hide behind. I'm surprised that hasn't been obvious to you. She's afraid of being

left behind and also the unknown. Give her the transponder. I'll program it into sessions to be less stressful for her.”

“And that's your expert opinion? Give her bite-sized traumas.”

“It's the most logical course of action.”

“I'm curious. How much of that logical opinion is based on your probability analysis, and how much from your emotional bias towards Kathy?”

“Emotional bias?” Cuz's facial features became tight, and his eyes fixed on Territaff.

“How dare you? I never thought you were capable of such slander.”

Territaff sealed his headgear on his suit, then enabled the intercom. “You're not serious... are you?”

“How could you insult me like that?” Cuz engaged the master system switch, and the onboard computer's voice became audible.

“Finally,” the computer's emulated voice said.

“Hanc, can you believe what Terri said to me?” Cuz asked.

“Wait a second. Don't get Hanc involved in this.”

“I was only asking him if he heard your insulting comment.”

“I wasn't being derogatory. Simply attempting to find out how objective your analysis was.”

“I'm a highly-evolved android and incapable of such emotional judgments.”

“In fairness to Terri, Cuz, I don't believe he was being calumnious in his inquiry of your analysis. He is only an insensitive human. He can't help being human any more than you can help being an over-sensitive android.”

“That wasn’t helpful, Hanc,” Territaff said. “And now you’re claiming to be an android. What happened to an enhanced, engineered life-form?”

“I think Hanc attempted humor. As for the other thing, it’s easier to say android.” Cuz looked at Territaff, and they both laughed.

“What’s so damn funny?” a muffled voice shouted.

Territaff looked over his shoulder at Kathy and smiled, “Hanc, turn on Kathy’s intercom.” Territaff turned his couch to face her. “Welcome back.”

Kathy looked around with her mouth slightly opened. “Am I aboard your ship?”

“Not yet. You’re on the shuttle that will bring us to Biomei. I have an idea of how nervous you must be. I know what you’re about to experience can be awesome and nerve-racking. If your gastric distress acts up again, let it go. Your environmental suit will absorb any bodily waste. Trust me. I’ve soiled myself many times.”

Kathy smirked at Territaff’s joke, then asked, “Where’re we going?”

“A little beyond the orbit of Europa.”

“That will take years. Won’t it?”

“No. It’ll take a little over four days.”

“What? How?”

“This little baby can travel really fast. To protect us from g-forces and increased mass, the ship will fill up with a suspension liquid. Space is vast, but when traveling within a solar system, there’s an incredible number of high-energy particles from the sun, meteorites, and countless pieces of debris left over from the solar system’s creation. Our environmental suits protect us from space’s hostile environment. The suspension fluid is for everything else.”

Kathy nodded, but her eyes grew big, then her face lit up with a wide smile. “How close to light speed?” Kathy felt excited about traveling through space at incredible velocities. “I read about this but can't believe it's happening. I'm really in space. Shit. I'm a fucking astronaut!”

“I know,” Territaff said, reflecting on his first experience. It was different but just as exciting. “You're in for quite an experience.”

“So?”

“What?”

“How fast?”

“About 198 kilometers per second.”

“That's almost three-quarters light speed.”

“Impressive. How do you know that?”

“I read a lot.” Kathy looked at both sides of the narrow cabin. She frowned at the opaque dome. “Why can't I see anything?”

“We're in stealth mode. Once we get a little distance from all the orbiting spyware, I'll have Hanc clear the dome so you can sightsee. But you must be patient. Your eyes will take a little time to adjust. There's a complex array of instruments and sensors built into your helmet. They'll learn your capabilities and then adjust the images to something your brain can understand. It's amazing. So, are you ready for the ride of your life?”

“Yeah, let's get this baby moving.”

\*

Kathy became full of exhilaration as the dome cleared. Her wide, staring eyes barely blinked as she tried to comprehend the striking vividness of seeing the Earth, moon, and sun in such a breathtaking fashion. Is this real? She kept asking herself. Am I dreaming? She would

look up around the small confines of the shuttle's cabin to reassure her she was really traveling through outer space.

Kathy became at ease after the initial shock of going from a dead stop to three-quarters light speed wore off.

*I'm immersed in a transparent liquid, dressed in a surprisingly comfortable environmental suit, and on my way to meet a ship named Biomei. Wow. This's weirder than Territaff's psychedelic head-fuck. God, I can't believe this is happening.*

## Chapter 16

**“How's your stomach?”** Territaff asked Kathy after the suspension liquid evaporated.

Kathy thought for a moment. “Good.”

“Think you can eat?”

“I'm starving. But how can I eat in this get-up?”

“There's a display panel on your right forearm.”

She looked down and saw a small rectangular pad with a dark display. “Okay, I see it.”

“Tap it.”

Kathy gave the pad a gentle tap. The display lit up, and then a pleasant, feminine voice asked over her intercom, “How may I assist you, Kathy Jordan?”

Kathy smiled at the device and liked the voice's friendly tone. Then she realized what it had said. “How does it know my full name? Did you program it?”

“You did,” Territaff said.

“I did.... How?”

“Your environmental suit is intuitive. It tapped your memory and gathered all the required information to serve and anticipate your needs.”

“It read my mind! I don't think I like that.”



Territaff turned his acceleration couch to face her. “Kathy, there's nothing sinister about the device. It can't harm you, nor can it incite you to do anything against your will. You can erase any unwanted information by saying so.” He leaned a little closer. “You’ll experience much new technology about seventy-five years ahead of what you’re used to. Most of it is intuitive, but they’re just tools and appliances. I promise nothing I’ll introduce can harm you in any way. If this were a perfect situation, I would’ve given you a complete tutorial on all the new and wonderful things you’ll experience. Unfortunately, we don't have that luxury. Use these seemingly miraculous tools, and I promise, after a little exposure to your new toys, you’ll have a hard time living without them.”

Kathy gave Territaff a dreamy stare. “I'm in for lots of surprises, aren't I?”

“I can't describe what you’ll experience over the next few days. All I can say is you’ll adjust. Cuz and I will answer all the questions we can. And once we get aboard Biomei, I’ll provide you with all the information you'll need for the mission...,” his voice trailed off, then he regarded Kathy with an almost solemn gaze.

“Terri, what is it?” she asked.

“Some of this will be unpleasant.”

Kathy wished she could reach out and comfort him.

“What are you afraid to tell me?”

She could almost feel the pain that became apparent on his face.

“I just wish I could’ve spared you some of the ugly details of this mission. But my options are limited, and time is precious.” He laughed ironically. “Time’s a cruel joke that the universe plays upon the ignorant. It's an illusion—a very real one. You’ll soon discover how arbitrary time is, yet we’re compelled to live in its ironic limits.”

“That sounded cynical,” Cuz said.

“Sorry, Cuz. I didn't intend to sound cynical, only honest.”

“Sometimes, I have difficulty distinguishing the difference.” Cuz looked at Kathy and said, “I think you need to overlook Terri's present mood. This mission has injured his objectivity, souring his usual amenable attitude.”

“Are you trying to tell me he's moody?” Kathy laughed.

Cuz nodded. “Precisely.”

“Let's eat,” Territaff said, wanting to change the subject.

“Okay, how does this thing work?” Kathy asked.

“Think of what you would like to eat,” Territaff said.

“Oh, I'd kill for some pancakes and bacon. You know, those really fluffy ones with gooey centers, chewy, thick bacon, and strong, sweet coffee with rich cream.” She drooled, then frowned, realizing that her desires were impossible.

“Your order is ready,” the friendly voice said.

“Huh?” Kathy's face screwed up in surprise as a tube appeared, then rose to her lips.

“Take a taste,” Territaff encouraged.

Kathy took a careful draw on the tube. Her eyes lit up in surprise. “Oh my God,” she cried, then took a long draw. “I can't believe this—it tastes exactly as I remember. It hits your taste buds just like I took a fork full of pancakes. You... you can taste the syrup and butter, and I got a mouthful of bacon on the second taste. I need coffee.” She took another quick pull. “It's coffee! Rich, sweet coffee!”

Territaff and Cuz looked on in amusement.

Territaff looked closely into Kathy's eyes and asked, "Are you still upset that the system can read your memories?"

"Not if it means I can eat like this. How's it doing it?" Kathy asked excitedly between sucks on the tube.

"It's nothing more than a liquid protein suspension and vitamin supplements. A series of memory taps create the taste experience," Cuz explained.

"Wow. A girl can get fat with something like this."

"You can eat to your heart's content and only retain what your body needs," Territaff said.

"What else can this contraption do?"

"Almost anything you can think of," Cuz said.

"Really? Anything?"

"Don't get carried away," Territaff cautioned.

"Cuz," Kathy called over the intercom while gazing out the port side of the dome.

"Yes, Kathy."

"May I ask you a personal question?"

Cuz turned his couch to face her.

"You may ask anything you wish."

"I hope I won't offend you, but I need to know." She knitted her brow, thinking about what she was about to ask.

"I'm not capable of the emotional response you're expecting. Ask anything you like."

She pondered his face for a moment. Territaff knew what she was about to ask Cuz and decided not to turn his couch around.

Kathy opened her mouth, then hesitated and smiled. “I’m not sure how to frame the question.” She frowned, then looked down within the confines of her helmet.

“I believe what you wish to ask me is, what am I?”

She looked at Cuz, relieved.

“So, ask,” Cuz said.

“Okay, what are you? You’re not human, but you don’t appear alien, either. You’re just different. Do you understand what I’m asking?”

“Yes.” Cuz asked Territaff, “May I tell her now?”

“I think it’s time, but prepare for an endless stream of follow-up questions.”

Kathy sneered at Territaff and then returned her attention to Cuz. “Okay, spill your guts.”

“How does one spill their guts?”

“Sorry, that’s just an expression. It means to tell everything.”

Cuz’s expression turned pensive for a second, and his eyes took on an alert glow. “I understand, but I can’t relay everything to you. Biomei will better serve you in that regard. Nevertheless, I can satisfy your immediate curiosity.”

“Okay, so tell me—what the hell are you?”

“I’m a genetically engineered life-form.”

Kathy gawked at Cuz, and her eyes grew wider, then said, “You mean… you’re AI… like a real android or cyborg?”

Cuz thought, then said, “Kathy, I’m aware of the breadth and depth of the literature and various depictions of artificial life-forms in your culture. May I ask you to put that aside and keep an open mind?”

She nodded vigorously within her helmet.

“I'm none of those technologies... but in a real sense, I have aspects of them within my construct.”

“I don't understand. How can you be both none and all? What are you then?”

“In your understanding, I'm a genetically engineered android. However, it would be more precise to say I'm a different life-form. I'm sentient. I can learn independently of my initial programming and grow through my experiences. I eat and drink like you. And as you've observed, I have learned emotions that I find confounding sometimes, but I'm learning how important they are. However, many things about me are not humanoid. I'll never grow old or get sick. Although I'm fully functional sexually, I can't procreate.” Cuz's eyes reflected a sense of regret. “I hope, at some point, that will be made possible.”

Kathy pursed her lips into an approving smile. “I think you'll make a great dad, and I hope someday they'll find a way of making that possible.”

“Thank you. It's my greatest desire. The engineers in my homeworld have been developing an adaptation to my species for procreation. However, there are concerns that this may have—”

“Cuz she's not ready for this,” Territaff interrupted, turning his couch around. “She needs to be given an orientation beyond what we can share with her now.”

“Damn it, Terri, what are you so worried about?” Kathy snapped.

“It's not that I don't want you to know. We're dealing with a tenuous situation... the less you know, the safer you'll be.”

“Terri, I appreciate your misguided belief that keeping me in the dark will somehow protect me. The Zenti already must know I'm part of the team. What difference will it make what I know? They'll assume I know everything, anyway. So how does that protect me?”

Territaff and Kathy's eyes became fixed into a silent struggle of minds.

*"How do I tell her my real concern?"* he transmitted to Cuz.

*"She deserves to know the truth of the matter. You can't protect her in this. If she's captured, her knowledge will be irrelevant."*

*"You're right, but I fear for her safety and the mission's success."*

*"As am I."*

"You know it's rude to exclude me from the conversation when I'm here," Kathy said, irritated.

"How did you know we were conversing?" Territaff asked.

"I can see it in your eyes."

"Really," Cuz said. "Interesting."

"Sorry. I also have a mission to consider. I fear not over-trusting you, but the Zenti have methods to retrieve all you know if captured. But Cuz reminded me that the mission must already be compromised if you're taken."

"Well, my two brave heroes—you're just going to make sure I'm never captured." She arched an eyebrow with a sarcastic grin.

She returned her thoughts to Cuz, realizing how uniquely different he was. *He was an artificial life-form, and she wasn't sure what that meant. Kathy only saw Cuz's humanistic qualities and found them beyond definition. Gazing at Cuz, she understood why Terri felt close to him.*

"Your species?" she asked. Cuz was part of a race of androids? The thought was perplexing. "You mean you're not unique?"

“I am unique in that I was designed specifically for Terri. As for the android population, there are 128,743 androids, of which 873 are sentient on Venubia,” Cuz said.

“Venubia?” Kathy looked at Territaff and asked, “Is this on a need-to-know basis?”

Kathy could see condensation on Territaff's helmet as he let out a long, aspirated moan.

“You're incorrigible. I can't make you understand that Biomei will answer all your questions.”

“What's the harm in knowing where Cuz is from and his genealogy?”

“Because it's complicated and, in a real sense, it's part of what we're trying to protect. It will only invoke more questions. Trust me. There's an easier and safer way to do this.” He turned his couch back to its forward position, feeling full of doubts and guilt.

Cuz gave Kathy a thoughtful gaze, then almost frowned. “Perhaps you're right,” he said to Territaff. He regarded Kathy with a strange intensity that made her a little uneasy. “I can appreciate how consuming curiosity can be. Terri has a unique perspective on what you're going through, and I concur with his caution. Too much information can be dangerous for you and the mission. Biomei will serve your interests well. One of your proverbs is appropriate now: Patience is a virtue.”

Kathy tried to shrug in capitulation but could only manage a slight upward jerk. Cuz turned his couch forward. Kathy stuck her tongue out.

# Chapter 17

**Jupiter was breathtaking** for Kathy. She stared, mesmerized by the Jovian world's colors and surreal beauty. Then she forced herself to take in Europa. It shined so brightly that her intuitive helmet darkened.

There was a preponderance of questions within Kathy, but she had resigned herself, at least for the time being, to wait for Biomei. When Territaff had asked her if she had questions, she said, “By your admission, you can no longer answer my inquiries.” Kathy repressed her enthusiasm and became quiet.

“I think you've misunderstood our intent when we suggested that Biomei could handle your questions,” Territaff said, trying to placate her sober mood.

She tried to drown out Territaff's voice by sucking loudly on her feeding tube. Her sudden, chilly attitude made it clear she wanted nothing to do with them.

“Hanc, what's our ETA to Biomei?” Territaff asked.

“T-plus 1750,” Hanc answered cheerfully.

“I'm going to shut down for a recharge, Hanc. Notify me at 1700.”

“Acknowledged. How about you, Captain Cody of Space Patrol?” Hanc said to Cuz.



“I'll recharge once aboard Biomei. And Hanc, make a note to have your personality subroutine refitted.”

“I thought that was pretty good.”

“It wasn't funny,” Cuz said.

“How about you, Miss Kathy? Would you like to take a rest period?”

“No, Hanc. I'm not tired.”

“I'm just a shout away if you need me.” Hanc cheerfully offered.

Kathy smiled at the computer's animated mouth on the small display screen on her arm. She wiggled a little on her couch to get more comfortable. The environmental suit felt almost like an outer skin, light and flexible. Even the helmet didn't inhibit her movements. The only real restriction was the small interior of the cabin. Kathy slumped and found a sweet spot of comfort. Her mind wandered as she gazed, transfixed in awe of the view from the clear, domed canopy. A sudden realization welled in her. Kathy's life would differ significantly from now on. How would she adjust to an ordinary day after exposure to the extraordinary? Would I miss my life on Earth? It was comfortable but stagnant. I knew something better was out there... something that would make a difference. The thought grew within her as she drifted into an exhausted sleep.

\*

A soft tone roused Kathy. A quiet voice announced, “Your rest period has ended.”

She was still tired. Her body felt heavy and sluggish. Then her eyes caught a view of Europa that invigorated her.

She had read that Europa was a little smaller than Earth's moon, but at this close distance, it looked vast. At first, Europa's bright features glared up, causing her to squint. Then, she looked outward at the surface as the fluid motion of the ship's orbit took them across the moon.

As Kathy pondered on Europa's vivid tans, brown, and gray complex features, she wondered what form of life could exist below its forbidding surface. To Kathy, Europa looked like a frozen wasteland, curiously inviting and frightening at the same time.

Kathy overheard Territaff speaking to Biomei, "...Okay, we're on final approach to you now."

"So, I'll finally meet the mysterious Biomei?" Kathy said.

"Mysterious? What do you mean?" Territaff asked.

"Well, you've avoided telling me anything about her. But you've been referring to her since I got mixed up in this incredible mess. Haven't you?"

"Hi, Kathy," a pleasant-sounding feminine voice greeted her. She looked around to see if someone had suddenly appeared. "I'm Biomei, and I thought it would be helpful to introduce myself before we meet on board."

Kathy was startled at first. She heard Biomei in her mind and not over the ship's intercom.

"Where are you?" she said.

"Where's who?" Territaff asked.

"Terri, if you don't mind, I'd prefer to speak with Kathy privately," Kathy now heard Biomei over her intercom.

"As you wish," Territaff said, then turned his couch to face Kathy. "Don't be alarmed. Biomei can communicate telepathically. You may find it a little peculiar, but you'll quickly adjust. Your helmet has a built-in linguistic transponder—"

"That's quite all right, Terri. I can take over from here. Thank you." Biomei's tone was dismissive and protective sounding to Kathy.

“What's with the attitude?” Territaff asked.

“You and Cuz have a lot to do to prepare for the continuance of the mission. We’ll talk later. Kathy is my focus now, and we’ll have a nice, long chat.”

Kathy couldn't help smiling. “I'm liking you already, Biomei,” she mumbled.

## Chapter 18

**Territaff and Cuz listened**, perplexed by Kathy's occasional laugh or giggle over her open intercom while she was engaged in a telepathic conversation with Biomei.

*"What could they be discussing that's so funny?"* Territaff transmitted to Cuz.

*"I've got a feeling it involves us."*

*"What makes you say that?"*

*"Knowing Biomei, do you have to ask?"*

*"I see your point."* Territaff nodded. *I sense a possible conspiracy between those two.*

*Need to avert a sudden tide of feminine logic."*

*"I'm not sure I understand your meaning. Would you care to elaborate?"*

*"Bad joke. Let's get aboard."* Territaff asked the computer, "Hanc, give me our position."

"We are five-hundred and thirty kilometers from the glide path," Hanc said, then asked, "What are Kathy and Biomei discussing?"

"Hanc, it doesn't concern you. Stay focused on our final approach."

"I can multitask."

“Cuz, please note to have the techs do a full diagnostic on Hanc’s personality subroutine. He's becoming a real pain in the ass.”

“Will do,” Cuz said.

“You are not serious—are you?”

“As a heart attack,” Territaff said.

“What has happened to your sense of humor?”

“What's happened to your sense of priority on this ship?”

“Okay. I am sorry. It will not happen again,” Hanc said in his best conciliatory tone.

“That's better. Cuz, scratch the diagnostic.”

“Acknowledged.”

“Autopilot is activated,” Hanc said. “Glide path is locked.”

“Okay,” Kathy said. “Thanks, Biomei, that was really helpful. See you onboard.”

“Sounds like you had a good chat,” Territaff said, hoping to get some insight into their conversation.

“Oh, she's wonderful. I can't wait to meet her in person,” Kathy said, beaming.

“Well, if you look a little to your left, you’ll get a look at her as we approach,” Territaff said.

Kathy leaned to her left and stared out into the velvet darkness. “I see nothing,” she said.

“Biomei, disable stealth mode.”

Kathy's eyes widened, and her mouth dropped open as she viewed the mammoth ship.

“Oh my God,” she muttered. “She really is a ship.”

Biomei was enormous in both length and breadth. Her presence filled the blackness of space with a golden radiance. She looked nothing like Kathy had imagined. Biomei had an

extended rear tapered to a rounded nub, almost like a tail. She half expected it to wag at their approach. Beneath and slightly forward of her tail were the engines. Four massive, elongated cylinders are mounted on two V-shaped struts, tapering into large funnels at one end and forming a rounded cone in the front.

As their small craft turned a few degrees to the port, Kathy got a close-up view of Biomei's forward sections. They were bow-shaped with a bulge in her midsection, giving her a well-endowed appearance. The upper forward sections widened into a three-quarter disk shape with countless large, curved windows interspersed above and between rows of portals. Then Kathy noticed something resembling a shark's fin on the dorsal section. As they approached, it appeared to be a complex array of equipment and strange-looking devices.

Biomei was beautiful to Kathy. She looked majestic and so striking in form. She appeared more like a living creature than a great ship. It was hard for her to reconcile with Biomei's state. In one sense, she looked alive, yet she had all the apparent inanimate technology of an advanced starship.

"She's something to behold at first sight," Territaff said, sensing Kathy's awe.

"She's beautiful and incomprehensible," she said dreamily.

"I had a similar reaction the first time I saw her. Seeing her onboard will be another experience altogether."

"I know this will sound kind of weird, but I already have a fondness for her."

"I feel the same way each time I board. She has a way of growing on you to where you forget she's a ship."

"She seems so alive."

“That's because she is. You'll soon come to appreciate her as another life-form. As we all are.”

“I never would've dreamed that there could be so many unique life-forms and that they would become part of my life. Wow, Terri. This is so unreal, yet it's happening. Have you ever dreamed of something you didn't know you wanted until it happened?"