

True Tales

Of the Multiverse Volume 1

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EPILOGUE

**I could not have done this life without you, the
goodest of boys, and my best friend, Bones. Thank
you for all the love you have given me.**

Chapter 1:

The Choice

It was evening when Johnny and the girls drove up to old Alamo Peak, just outside Lincoln National Forest and an hour's drive from the famous town of Roswell. A dry breeze was blowing down on them and the sun was beginning to sink behind the hills. As the old green Ford trundled up the hilly terrain, Johnny looked irritated behind the wheel. Beside him, his girl, Peggy was looking around at the greenery. In the backseat Sandra and Beth were chattering away, though Sandra instinctively knew something was eating at Johnny.

Finally, he broke the silence by directing a question at Sandra, "So, sis. I was under the impression that this was a double date. Where are you hiding him?" It was intended to be mock serious, but Sandra did not miss the edge in his voice. Sandra started as Beth pinched her hand, wide-eyed.

Peggy provided the briefest of diversions by running her finger down his chin, as she asked, "You shaved today?"

"Well, you know how it is—I just didn't—well, I would rather spend some time with y'all here," Sandra was at her incoherent best, which did nothing to soothe

Johnny's temper. At 17, he was no longer a boy. His clean-shaven profile gave him that endearing sense of manliness but Sandra concluded that he was clearly not as mature as he liked to present himself.

When they finally reached the peak, Johnny cut the engine, and said almost sulkily, "Well, you girls gimme a moment. I'm going to have a smoke."

"Ugh!" Peggy muttered.

Sandra had no intention of leaving Johnny to brood by himself and return with a towering tantrum. She quietly squeezed Beth's hand in her lap, and told Peggy, "I'll just go talk to him." Peggy nodded in response.

Sandra went over to Johnny and said, "Just because I didn't bring a boy doesn't mean you can't have a good time with Pegs, you know. Don't ruin your time with her over this, silly."

Johnny turned around and interrupted her, "Why did you have to bring her along?" He jerked his thumb toward the backseat of the car. Sandra did not immediately answer, though she felt a sudden stab of anger—or perhaps it was pain.

When she found her voice she said at last, "She is my friend, whether you accept it or not!"

It could have been something in her voice or the fact that both Peggy and Beth were looking in their direction—Johnny immediately piped down and said, "Sorry. I just—I guess I had planned this outing a little differently. Beth is welcome, of course."

“As she ought to be,” Sandra interrupted. Segregation had ended two years ago and Sandra knew that, legally, Beth’s dark skin should not deter her from doing whatever she wanted and with whomever. Still, in practice it would be a while before people would accept her wholeheartedly.

Sandra moved closer to Johnny and lightly took the cigarette from his lips, took a small puff, and handed it back to him. His face was somber as he reflected on how his little sister seemed grown up so suddenly and no longer needed his protection.

Beth rolled down the window of the car and hollered, “Hey, Sandra, let’s go for that walk!”

“So, shall we?” she asked, raising her eyebrows. “Pegs and you can have the car all to yourselves.” Johnny could never hold out long against Sandra’s teasing smile.

“Alrighty, sis, as you wish,” he replied and laughed, all the tension between them dissipating.

As the pair of them walked back to where the car was parked, Sandra ran forward to open the door for Beth, saying, “Boo!” and scaring no one. They had only been a couple of feet away from the car. She then looked at her brother and briefly wondered whether she should tell him about her and Beth. Then, suddenly remembering his words from earlier: *‘Why did you have to bring her along?’* she subdued the impulse. He wasn’t going to understand it, and he might not be kind to Beth. She would reveal their relationship when the time

was right. *If such a thing even exists*, she thought a little sadly.

When they reached the car, Peggy had just stepped out with Beth and was chuckling at some joke Beth had just made. Peggy looked up at Johnny and gave a deep bow as she said, “Oh, the mighty keyholder of the car hath returned.”

Johnny was just about to give a fitting reply, when the sudden rustle of branches nearby made him stop. Peggy gave an involuntary shudder and continued, “This place is really creeping me out. Don’t you guys feel like something is watching us?”

Sandra sighed. As if a switch had flipped, Johnny’s ill humor resurfaced. Even if he said nothing she could almost read his thoughts—*why are all the women being so difficult today?* But instead, he said looking around, “Come on, nothing is watching us. You probably watched one horror movie too many—beware, my lovely,” Johnny laughed. His words referenced one of the most popular horror movies of the previous year.

Peggy was unimpressed and said coldly, “There is no need to laugh. It came from somewhere there. After all, Roswell is not too far...” Her trailing words and involuntary shudder accompanied the emphasis she laid on the name of the town. “Please just go and check so we can all relax,” she finally said.

Annoyed, Johnny said, “Fine. Be right back.” He walked off into the tree line until they couldn’t see him.

A light mist had begun to creep along the edges of the trees. It wasn't as hot as before. "Let's wait inside," Sandra said, opening the back door. The other two followed suit. The sun was sinking behind the peak a little at a time, and the shadows were lengthening rapidly. The three girls were lost in the scenic beauty right before them, and yet unconsciously, their ears kept track of Johnny's returning footsteps and they glanced at the tree line every few seconds as if waiting for something to follow Johnny.

Some time slipped by as they continued to talk about the view before them. Peggy was the first to ask the question that nobody wanted to ask, "Where's he gone? It has been nearly ten minutes. He should've come back by now, right?" There was a palpable electric energy oozing between the three of them, and yet they knew it did not emanate from them. Their hair was on end and they shifted restlessly in their seats, when suddenly they heard a *THWACK!*

Sandra could see Peggy's eyes drawn wide in fear. Beth had shrieked, and her own hands were trembling. But it turned out that it was only Johnny, who had reappeared without them noticing. The sound had been his hands at the door handle. He was grinning from ear to ear as he said, "Took y'all by surprise?"

"Let's go Johnny, something doesn't feel quite right," Peggy said, echoing all of the girls' thoughts. Sandra could feel Beth wriggling with the same thoughts. It was amazing how she could almost read Beth's mind.

Johnny turned the key, but instead of the ignition and the whirr of the engine, they were greeted with—nothing!

“That’s strange... I’m sure I filled her up yesterday,” he muttered. Sandra could see his perplexment turning to worry.

“Give it some gas...” Beth said.

“Hurry up Johnny! Something is out there!” Peggy whispered, clutching at his sleeve and suddenly feeling frantic.

Johnny shook the car, stomping the gas pedal. He gave the key a couple of energetic twists before saying, “Dang! Looks like the battery has died on us! Lemme go take a look.”

Sandra was just beginning to suggest the same when Beth’s expression of horror caught her eyes a split second before she screamed. She was frantically pushing herself away from her window and crawling over to Sandra’s side. She screamed again, “Lock the doors, for heaven’s sake!”

When Sandra saw the gray-skinned, dome-headed creature with large black eyes just outside Beth’s window, it was her turn to scream. Johnny and Peggy saw it last, but they were just as violently terrified as the rest of them.

Exactly then the radio came back on at full volume. It kept scanning through the stations, until it came to one that was playing Ella Fitzgerald’s “My One and Only.”

However, the words kept glitching and a line kept repeating itself, “only one, my one.” As the four looked up, the creature outside pointed to the backseat, held up one of its scaly fingers, and stepped away from the car, motioning for them to follow. All of them saw it—clear as daylight, even though the sun had long sunk beneath the peak.

Nobody dared to even breathe for a few seconds, but finally Beth said, “What was that?”

Johnny was the first one to regain his composure. He said, “It didn’t look human, and since we saw it here, near Roswell, I’m assuming it wasn’t.”

“So did it just...” trailed off Peggy, seemingly afraid to complete the rest of the sentence.

Johnny said drily, “Yes, it wanted us—one of us.”

Though everyone had surmised as much, his words were confirmation as they looked at each other.

Peggy was half screaming and half mumbling, “No, no, no, no.”

Johnny’s sense of humor, which was at times inopportune, kicked in and at a loss for other words he asked, “Volunteers?”

Peggy looked like a deer trapped in headlights as she said, “I don’t want to die, please.”

Sandra exclaimed loudly, “Johnny!” And Beth looked at him with a stony glare.

“Yeah, I didn’t think so—it was worth a try though. But you all saw it as I did, I don’t think all four of us will be walking away from here on foot. It won’t let us. We need to be rational and just vote on who’ll go.”

Everyone looked at each other as he spoke and everyone knew exactly who Johnny would be voting out. By Beth’s obstinate refusal to stop staring into his eyes, she knew too.

Sandra’s heart sank as she said, “Johnny—how can we just let somebody out like that? After we have—seen—that—it.”

Johnny’s voice was hoarse as he said, “It’s what civilized people do,” staring back at Beth.

“We know who you are voting out, don’t we? I’m not going,” Beth spoke up defiantly.

With a nervous tic at the corner of his lips, Johnny said, “And we know who you’ll vote against.”

“No—please you guys,” Sandra begged but she was drowned by Peggy’s outburst.

“I can’t breathe, please—I think I need some air.”

Beth was angry now as she said to Johnny, “You think I don’t know that I am the outsider here?”

Sandra was tearing up by now. In between her sobs she blurted out, “We can’t vote her out. I love her!”

For a split second nobody said a word, though Peggy's eyes darted from Sandra to Johnny in concern more than surprise.

Johnny kept staring at Sandra, and finally said, "You—are—are—*queer*?" The last word sounded like it was choked out of him.

"We are," Beth said and held Sandra's hand.

A moment later, Sandra quietly added, "Yes. I figured out only about a year ago—we are together."

"You know you can never be together," Johnny said obstinately. "It's hard enough for a Black man and White woman. As for you—" he nearly spat out the next words at Beth. "I don't know what you have done to my sister, you—"

He had to pause because Sandra chose that very moment to open the door and run out. It took him only a split second to realize what was happening, but when he did, he gave chase.

He couldn't see his sister in the mist-turned-fog, but he chased a steady footfall a little ahead of him, his voice breaking as he shouted, "No, please Sandra—just don't. You don't have to—"

She screamed back, "I can't let you do it to Beth. You don't understand what she means to me."

Johnny ran like a madman and then paused because he couldn't hear her anymore. "SANDRA!" he shrieked.

And just about 20 yards away, in a little clearing, he suddenly saw her illuminated by a monstrous glowing ship. There were three more of the gray creatures, who were circling around her. She was sobbing hysterically and wildly now.

“No—take me. Please, I was voted out,” Johnny panted loudly enough for the nearest gray man to look up at him. The creature placed one bony finger up as Johnny nodded, running toward them.

A blinding flash erupted in front of him and all he could feel was getting knocked back. When he opened his eyes, they were gone—Sandra, the four aliens, and the ship.

He walked back to the car, grasping his injured arm, his eyes red and filled with tears. He looked at Beth whose eyes were flooded and Peggy who was hysterically sobbing into her handkerchief. When he quietly turned the key, the radio blared “Only You.” His first impulse was to turn it off, but then he slowly withdrew his hands determined to hear The Platters’ song to the end.

Chapter 2:

Vanished

I was cleaning the shelf and came across his photo again. The memories of that final day flooded back so intensely as if they happened only yesterday...

I remembered finishing supper when Ben called. Skype was the only way we could look each other in the eyes. Ben worked in the US as an engineering contractor for the Department of Defense. Even I, as his wife, was only vaguely briefed about the entirety of his role. And though we had discussed it a million times, both of us knew that me moving there and leaving Perth was unlikely. I couldn't imagine leaving my daughter, Carter, or moving her there, and this was home after all. Ben understood me well enough not to insist.

Yet, sometimes the loneliness of waiting all day for the only person with whom I could fully connect weighed on me. And then to have only an hour or two—given our time zones, the fragility of the net connection, and so many other impediments—I often wondered if this long-distance relationship was worth it and whether I should just move over to him.

When the call finally came, I was still amazed at the way my heart leaped just to be able to see his smiling face. It was nearly 7:15 p.m. for me in Perth, while Ben was just starting the same day, fresh after a shower. It was 7:15 a.m. in DC. His hair was still wet and he had only a towel around his waist.

“Hey, babe, how was your day?” His deep baritone was as exciting as when we had first met some three years ago. He started crooning our song, “Only you...” without waiting for my reply. He knew as I did that my day was instantly better when he called.

I couldn’t help smiling. “Only You” had been the song playing at the restobar the first time he came into my life. He had just happened to walk into the bar where I was a waitress. Ben was overseas on a navy vessel that was porting near Perth and looked cute in his uniform. We hit it off and he was not shy in pursuing me. Knowing him now, he must have been feeling lucky. After he was out of the military, we spent time together traveling and eventually got married. We applied for an Australian partner visa and were waiting on its approval.

“How is work going?” I finally asked him when I got an opportunity to speak.

I might’ve imagined it, but there was a momentary flicker in his eyes as he said, “Well, you know how it is.” He distractedly combed his hair with his fingers, as he continued, “We are working on something super confidential that could potentially change everything.” He sighed and then said, “I wish I could tell you more, but you know—”

“Hey, that’s okay,” I tried to soothe him. “We knew this would always be so. This was something we discussed, remember? I know that what you do for your country is important.” Ben looked a little cheered up by that. That was when I noticed the new streaks of gray in his stubble and the dark circles beneath his eyes. Work was definitely taking a toll on him.

“But hurry up and move here already!” I mock-pleaded just so I could hear his chuckle and distract him from whatever was worrying him.

His last words before we ended the call were, “Babe, I love you. Have a good night.” That was the way he signed off every day, so I had no warning about anything out of the ordinary.

The next day, I checked my phone, and there wasn’t a message from Ben which was unusual. He *always* messaged when it was 6 a.m. for me—a tradition he never veered from in all the time we were together. This was the first red flag. The second was his online activity. He was last online just a couple of hours after we spoke. That was definitely strange. He was always online during the daytime. I tried calling his number a couple of times, but each attempt went to voicemail. Ben wasn’t really a fan of too many voicemail alerts, so he always tried to respond to them immediately.

I put aside my fears and left for work, thinking that he would call back in a little while. But that was a mistake. I ought to have gone with my instincts and done something sooner.

When I did not hear from him by lunchtime, my heart was racing with all the dreaded possibilities. What if something had happened to him? Hating the way I felt, I kept trying his number for the umpteenth time without any success.

My panic wouldn't let me think straight. I alerted all my friends and my mom, but my lack of knowledge of Ben's nature of work held me back. I could think of only one thing. Long ago he had given me a number, "For emergencies only," he had told me. I had never had any use for it before, and I wasn't sure where I had placed it.

It was evening before I could locate the number. I could barely keep my shaking hands steady as I dialed the number and waited tensely before a man responded, "Yes?"

"I want to speak with Ben Casey, who works there. I'm his wife. He hasn't responded to my messages or calls for almost twenty hours now. I don't understand it. I'm worried—"

The man cut me short to ask, "What name did you say, ma'am?"

"Ben Casey. B for bravo, E for echo—" I thought perhaps he hadn't heard me right.

But he never let me complete my words as he said brusquely, "I think you've made a mistake. This is the number for Travis' Estate Agents. There is nobody by the name of Ben Casey here."

“What do you mean? Did he quit?” Even to my own ears my voice sounded high-pitched and alien.

There was barely a pause as the person replied, “No. I mean to say we’ve never had an employee by that name. I think you should check the number, ma’am. If you don’t mind now, I have other calls waiting. Have a great day and hope you locate your husband,” the voice said as the call was cut.

I rechecked. I had made no mistake with the number. I googled it, and the man was right. The number was listed under Travis’ Estate Agents. My head was spinning. I arranged things with my mom who would take care of my seven-year-old for the time being. I booked my tickets to DC, and looking back on it now, I really don’t remember the journey at all. My mind blanked out all the details.

When I reached the apartment he stayed in, which wasn’t far from the Capitol Building, the first thing I noticed was that his car was in. It was now five days from when I had last heard from Ben, so it seemed strange for him to be in his house all the while. I knew the combination to his door so getting in wasn’t a challenge. Just for a minute, I imagined him running out to hug me like he had before.

When I opened the door Bones leaped out at me. God! Had I forgotten about the 13-year-old blue pit bull terrier who was Ben’s most trusted aide. I bent down to pat the sweet fellow. He seemed hungry for company, and nearly wet himself in his excitement. He rushed past me, after a brief hello, to the yard and relieved himself. I looked around at the apartment which was

littered with dog urine and poop, and called out, “Ben?” As I half expected and half feared, there was no reply.

As Bones ambled back in, I asked him, “How long has it been since you were fed, boy?” He whined a little as he continued to sit at my feet obediently. I opened one of the bottom most kitchen cabinets and located the dog food and fed him. He ate it up ravenously and I knew in that instant that something had happened, and that Ben hadn’t been around for a while. He never left Bones unfed or on his own for long. He loved that dog like his own son!

I didn’t really know anyone in this city. I took buses and cabs to police stations, and government offices. Nobody knew a Ben Casey. I showed them photos of us at holidays and from his last visit to Perth, a couple of months ago and only his neighbors confirmed that they knew him by sight. But they couldn’t provide me with details of when they saw him last.

They were a smart couple. Slick was the word, perhaps. Though their house looked urban chic and they were dressed well, something about them seemed off. At the time, I just put it down to my nerves. The man had asked me, “What does Ben do for a living?” When I told him, he was eager to know whether I had contacted people from Ben’s work. The woman, on the other hand, seemingly concerned for me, kept asking me about Ben’s family. On the whole I found it a strange exchange because it seemed I was being interrogated rather than the other way around.

I couldn’t contact anyone from his work because I did not know whom exactly he worked for—I had no name

or person to contact. I went to the address of the estate agency and confirmed that they were what they said they were.

At my wit's end, I kept calling the police station, where they half-heartedly filed a missing person's report. Frustrated, I knew that Ben hadn't just abandoned us. That was not the kind of man he was. The police were even less willing to help because I wasn't an American citizen. That day, I was so angry and tired that I shouted at the police department. To be honest, I don't remember all the words I said. I just remember coming to my senses at the end and walking out to hushed whispers of, "Karen. Her husband is missing—or so she claims."

All the fliers I posted around his home with his photo remained unanswered.

It was around the same time that a viral meme of me started doing the rounds. Somebody had caught me on my bad day in the police station yelling at the officer in charge. I officially became "Police Station Karen" and that was that. What hope was there of being taken seriously with that nickname?

When I drew a blank everywhere, I took Bones with me back to Perth. The old boy did not survive very long afterwards. It was a hard time and only for Carter's sake did I eventually make peace with Ben's disappearance.

It had been four years since I last saw Ben. As I finished cleaning the photo of him I kept in my

showcase, my attention was caught by what I heard on TV. I usually kept it on for a bit of noise and bustle in my house.

This was a special announcement from the US President. His words made me catch my breath. He said, “The existence of aliens and UAP have been confirmed. The species have integrated into society and we are aware of at least two species that currently coexist with us...”

“What the hell?” I muttered under my breath as I hung onto every word of his.

When he completed his speech, two journalists started their barrage of questions. What caught my attention first was the woman’s perfect teeth and the man’s shiny, almost waxy appearance.

I knew these two. In fact I had spoken to them! They were the ones staying next to Ben, who said they had known him by sight. They had looked, then, like the perfect couple. Now, of course, they did not seem married at all. I listened intently to what they were asking.

“Mr. President, what would you like to tell us about the abductions rampant in the city?” the glossy haired woman asked. I felt the same sense of unease and panic rising up like bile in my throat.

“Abduction...” I repeated. Something had clicked into place for me at last.

As I turned back to look at Ben's photo again, I knew I wouldn't see him. Somehow, imagining him dead had seemed less painful. But even that comfort would not be mine. He was taken. In bitter anger, my knees weakening, I collapsed and began punching the ground. I wanted to draw my pain out to a physical source.

As I lay there, I heard a soft call, "Mum?" Carter looked at me with her blue eyes, filled with concern. As she bent down to hug me, I could almost feel Ben with me.

Chapter 3:

The Passenger

It was a sultry evening at the Los Angeles airport and people waiting to board their 6:20 p.m. flight to New York were frustrated by the several hours of delay. When the boarding had just been completed, airport officials received a message for additional maintenance procedures. The passengers were asked to deboard as the officials did the required checks.

They knew she was a tough customer at the outset. Everybody had their eyes on her. She was the voluble complaining sort who wouldn't calm down easily. "So much time wasted. No value for one's time these days—that's what—" Her words were loud enough for all to hear. She had given the flight attendants a hard time, and though everyone was on edge, she was quite the limit.

They had all just boarded the flight again and the passengers were anxious to just take off and reach their destination without more ado. To add to the woe, this lady was now claiming that her pillow had by mistake gone with the check-in luggage instead of the hand luggage.

"I just want my pillow," she told the flight attendant.

“I am afraid that won’t be possible, ma’am. Company policy will not allow that. You can collect the check-in luggage in New York.” It was clear the flight attendant was trying hard to maintain her cool. She had undoubtedly explained the situation a couple of times already without much success.

“But really, it would be so much better for me to have it with me now,” the lady insisted. The attendant kept telling her that it simply wasn’t possible to open check-in luggage after boarding. The lady had an aggressive jawline and severely combed back short ash-blonde hair. You couldn’t call her fat exactly, but her heavysset structure added to her belligerence. She was about to say something when her attention was diverted by the arrival of the passenger who was to be seated next to her. You could tell by her face that he did not please her. A young thin Asian man was asking to get through to his window seat. The lady’s concerns about her pillow were soon a thing of the past, as she told the flight attendant, “I believe I am allowed to change seats at least?”

The flight attendant repressed a sigh as she answered, “No, ma’am, the flight is full, and I would have to request another passenger to switch seats with you. But as takeoff is imminent, you will have to wait, I’m afraid.”

The lady was unwilling to give up. “But the lighting here doesn’t suit my eyes. I have weak eyes, you see, a rare condition. I could do with the seat a couple of aisles down.”

Other passengers and the staff could guess that it wasn't the lighting, but her fellow passenger that was making her uncomfortable. It had not been two years since the Vietnam War was over and many felt justified in their anti-Asian sentiments.

"The lighting will be just the same everywhere in the aircraft, I assure you, ma'am. You will have to adjust for the time being. I can just get you a sleep mask in the meantime." This time, there was an icy coldness to the flight attendant's voice. Though the lady's mouth was working, she couldn't really find an argument against this line of reasoning. She did, however, keep audibly tutting and glaring at the young man, who had by now pulled the hood of his parka jacket over his head and was shifting in his seat, seemingly preparing for a nap.

A moment later, much to everyone's vexation, the lady again piped up, "Hello there. What's wrong with your face? Something is wrong with this man's face."

Some passengers gasped. It was horrid that this woman now seemed to be making comments on the racial features of the man. This was too clear an outrage to be ignored. Somebody shouted at her, "Hey, woman! You seem as ugly on the inside as on the outside!" Some of the others sitting in the back seats were now craning their heads to get a better look at the pair of them. The flight attendants were now again scrambling to their feet to hush the lady, when she gave a cry of alarm.

"Oh... This man! He's—" She did not complete her sentence, eyes wide with alarm.

The man meanwhile attempted to be soothing her saying, "Please, ma'am calm down, I beg you—"

But the woman had let out another scream. "His mouth! Good Lord! Please get me away from this thing! Don't touch me!"

The passengers were now grumbling. They had already been held up for so long and the woman's comments irked them to no end. They were now chattering among themselves.

"Oh my days! Have that lady removed."

"How much longer will we be held up?"

"The bigotry of some people!"

"What a bitch!" someone roared.

The lady was shouting hysterically now, "What the hell are you? Get me away from him. His eyes—Oh, Lord please. I'm not crazy!"

Meanwhile, unbeknownst to the passengers and staff who couldn't see what the lady could, the Asian man no longer looked anything like he did moments ago when he boarded. His skin, now two shades paler than before, was melting like petroleum jelly kept out in the sun for too long. His eyes were two vertical slits blinking in the depths of the hood of his jacket. His hands which he stuffed back hastily into the pockets of his pants were turning a scaly white-gray. His mouth, while it retained the faint holographic imprint of the Asian man's lips, seemed to be melting. The more the

woman screamed, the more he seemed to metamorphose.

The woman was now tugging at the collar of his jacket in an attempt to pull his hood off his head shouting, “Look! Look at him! He—”

The entire aircraft had erupted in hisses of protest and angry shouting.

“Get that crazy lady off!”

“She’s physically assaulting him!”

“Shame on you, you fat walrus!”

“Stupid bigoted witch! Look at your own ugly face!”

In a moment more perhaps the woman may have exposed the man to the world but just then, a sturdy pair of hands ousted her from her seat and said, “Airport police, ma’am. Please get up and walk with us.”

“But I—please—listen—him—that thing—arrest it!” The lady’s bizarre explanations fell on deaf ears as her grip on the Asian man’s collar loosened and she was dragged from her seat, frog-marched between the crew and a few policemen.

The passengers breathed a sigh of relief. Some of them even hooted and cheered as the lady was finally forced off the flight. In all the chaos, they missed one of the policemen blinking vertically in commiseration with the Asian man.

Chapter 4:

Faded Memories

I was back in Dr. Wiseman's office for the second time this week, but this was an unscheduled session. My old anxiety was peaking and the meds were no longer as effective as before. I was getting more dysfunctional and I knew it. Talking to Dr. Wiseman was generally the only thing that would help and that's why I was there a good four days earlier than my regular visit.

My mind had wandered and I had to struggle to bring it back to what Dr. Wiseman was saying, "...isn't that a little far-fetched? Maybe we should try some breathing exercises."

My smartphone was beeping and I had to locate it in my pocket as I cut the call, mumbling my apologies to Dr. Wiseman. She hated it when clients did not switch off their phones during therapy.

She gave me a look before saying, "Ok, Andy, if not breathing exercises, what are the reasons for the unscheduled visit? It is important we are on the same page."

I began to rattle off, "Wherever I go, I have felt like an outcast."

I remembered my schooling at Santa Barbara and the names the kids used to scream in my face—*Weirdo*, *Sicko*, *Idiot*, the *Poor trash*—the names were varied but the message was clear—I was unwelcome. I couldn't figure out why I stuck out like a sore thumb, or how others figured out that I hailed from the kind of family I did. Taking substances and liquor never really quelled the pain—but I did it anyway.

When I came home from school, my dad would be sloshed out on the couch and my mom would be screaming at the world, “What on earth have I done to deserve this family? I will leave one day and they'll know that their selfishness drove me out—” The days Dad wasn't passed out on the couch were worse, because it would end in him hitting me, my mom, or my sister. This was the semblance of family life I had grown accustomed to.

Laura—my sister—was the one ray of hope in my bleak world. But she passed away in the 2020 pandemic. My brief marriage to Vivian was a farce. It crumbled before it started. Though she knew of it, my addiction to porn disgusted her. It disgusted me. It didn't come as a surprise when she walked out on us. I couldn't really blame her.

“What is far-fetched about wanting to end it all?” I finally asked, half-exasperated and half-angry that Wiseman could not see the futility of my life.

Dr. Wiseman looked me in the eyes once before she turned her attention to my file. She continued jotting down her notes.

“We chalked out a plan of action, which was working fine till our last session. Why the suicidal thoughts again? Can you think of a trigger which we haven’t discussed yet—drinking, perhaps?” she asked.

What I liked about Dr. Wiseman was her matter-of-fact attitude. There was no dillydallying with unsolicited sympathy. She just got right down to the facts. *A little unprofessional and unorthodox for a therapist*, some might say. But I, who had gone through my share of shrinks, knew that she knew her job.

“My sister was abused. I found her diary entries dated from the nineties. My dad—” I thought back to what I had discovered—facts that sickened me to the stomach.

“Hmmm,” was the only rejoinder I got from her. It did not seem like she was encouraging me to go down this path.

“There’s the black car too,” I reminded her.

“What car?” she asked almost absent-mindedly, though I did see her hand jerking over the page once. I was too slow to catch her expression as she bent over her notes again.

“Haven’t I told you before? There is a car. Or perhaps cars. They keep following me, everywhere.” I said now a little angrily. *How could she not remember this?*

“You have been off your meds again. You take them to prevent hallucinations like these.” She was reading this off my chart, I could see. She continued to scribble away.

I wanted to meet Mom and ask her things. I wanted to shake Dad by his collar. I was debating whether to introduce the subject of visiting them but Wiseman seemed to read my mind. She said, “I don’t think you should visit your family. It can only mar the progress we’ve made so far. You need to focus on living more in your present and take your medication. That is all I can tell you. Therapy isn’t a wonder drug. It can’t magically cure you, if you won’t do your work.” I nodded my head, not wholly convinced.

As I walked out of the room, I was sure the doctor was speaking to someone on her phone. Exiting her office, into the street, I lit a cigarette. When I looked up, Wiseman was looking at me through her window, phone pressed to her ear. I gave her a wave. She raised her hand briefly, before moving inside and closing the blinds.

When I walked into my apartment I knew where I needed to go. Despite Wiseman’s advice, I quickly got dressed and took a cab to my family home—the home I hadn’t visited since I was about 18, though it wasn’t more than a few hours away from where I stayed.

“Wait for me. This should not take long,” I told the driver and got down and walked in through the gate. Something did not feel the same. It felt like I was walking out of a dream or into one.

I rang the bell and Mother opened the door. She had more gray at her temples now. She said, “Andy?!” She moved forward as if to hug me, but I quickly stepped away.

“Where’s Dad?” I asked tersely. My mother looked stunned as I rebuffed her.

“He’s in his study—” She was perhaps going to say more, but I brushed past her into my dad’s study. I did not owe her a thing.

He was reading a book.

“Andy?” he asked quizzically when he saw me.

“I know what you did to Laura. You filthy old man. I wasn’t enough. You had to dirty my memories of her too?” I said, my voice breaking.

My dad stood up now looking more alarmed than concerned. He was exchanging glances with my mother, who had now come into the study behind me.

“Memories of Laura?” he echoed my words. “What do you mean?”

I was furious. “Laura—your daughter! She died in the pandemic, remember? My sister. You abused her too, didn’t you? Will you blame that on liquor too?” I was screaming now.

My mother stepped in between us. She was looking scared, but her words were clear. “What are you talking about? Laura is the mayor of our town here. She’s alive and well, with her family. Your dad never abused anyone or touched alcohol all his life! What is going on with you?”

I was stupefied that Mother was still lying about it after all this time. For a minute it all felt jumbled, and then I vaguely remembered another train of memories. This time, I remembered a happy childhood and adolescence in Santa Barbara with Laura and my parents. I was never bullied or abused. I remembered baseball games at school to which my dad accompanied me, picnics to the zoo, and birthday parties thrown for us at home. It seemed I had two equally true histories!

Nothing made sense anymore. I was reeling and was seized by an unbearable headache. I needed to get out. Before my parents could stop me, I ran out of the house and jumped back into my cab, instructing the driver to take me back to my apartment. As our vehicle turned the corner I caught sight of a black car behind us. The dread in my stomach mounted again. When I reached home, I felt restless and exhausted. I stumbled into my bedroom and opened one of the cabinets. Sure enough, a bottle of vodka greeted me. I opened it and glugged directly from it, but it tasted unfamiliar and alien on my tongue. I supposed that it was an old bottle which had been opened and left unrefrigerated for too long. I kept drinking despite the growing sense of unease.

In another hour, I was spread out on my sofa, spent with my drinking and the rut of thoughts in my head. The blurred vision and pounding headache assured me that I would pass out any time now but my ears picked up the sound of talking in the next room. The window curtains which I knew I had closed, were slightly open now.

The blurry forms that walked into the room took on more definite shapes now. I tried to ask who they were, but my own slurred mumbling sounded foreign to my ears. *Do I know these men?* I asked myself. They looked familiar, and yet I couldn't recall anything about them.

One of them was on the phone and I couldn't understand what the man was saying.

"We followed the target on the file. Yes—his home. He is in a drunken stupor. Are you certain? Yes, copy that." He cut the call, placing the phone back into his pocket and drawing something else out from it.

The two agents stepped toward me wielding a gun. My alcohol addled brain suddenly realized that it was a syringe—not a gun.

One of them said, "So, Mr. Failed Project. Looks like the end of this story for you too."

"Who are you?" I asked frantically clawing at the air, trying to keep them at bay.

"Don't worry, Andy. It will be just as easy as falling asleep—" the other man said.

The guttural moan that escaped my mouth did nothing to alleviate the pain I felt as the first man held me down. The other plunged the contents of the syringe into my neck. I felt the world spinning. I felt sleeper and sleeper... Finally my eyelids were so heavy I could no longer keep them open.

Chapter 5:

Among Us

The atmosphere in the War Room at Camp David was tense. Many of the highest ranking government officials were gathered in a SCIF for a deliberation that required all their attention.

The president of the country was joking with an entrepreneur who had sponsored several of the defense projects, “—he couldn’t even remember his name!” The talk had been about a diplomatic relations party.

When the director walked in five minutes later, a calm had descended upon all the officials. He quietly sat down, drawing a cigarette and lighting it. Everyone looked at him curiously. They knew him. He had successfully navigated the political intricacies of the government, and made his career out of the FBI, CIA, NSA, and now he headed secret special access programs, though they did not have clarity on which programs.

The president broke the silence. Though the words could have been addressed to anyone, everyone knew they were for the director. “Did anyone else read the reports or can offer any intelligence on the little green men?” The president’s emphasis on the word “green men” was obviously intended as a slight to the director.

There were scattered bursts of laughter and some snickering, but the director only nodded. The others looked at each other waiting to see who would speak up first. Each had knowledge and reports of UAPs but why risk their reputation by going first they thought.

The president continued, "So, this is your meeting. What are they and where are they?"

"Everywhere, Mr. President. They have fully infiltrated our society," the director drawled, taking another puff of smoke. This time the laughter that followed his words was more pronounced.

"Don't you have somewhere to be?" The official was alluding to the congressional hearing the director had to attend in an hour.

Another jumped in. "Feeling the walls closing in, are we?" One general kept aside his glass of water, as he paused to sneer at the director.

They weren't wrong. The director did feel the pressure. He was supposed to be in front of Congress in a little over an hour but he remained unfazed by their attitudes and the lack of support. All of them knew about the UAPs and many of his reports came from branches they headed. He had been there before. He knew they would jump at the chance to take his career.

They need me, he thought to himself. "We need your aid. We need congressional consent and executive support to take action now," the director said.

The president was dismissive as he scoffed, "Really?"

The director looked him in the eyes as he said, "We need to get ahead of this and you're going to have to give a speech. I have intelligence that says one of the creatures is in this room, now and I'll prove it."

The president looked visibly shaken at that and for once his veneer of placidity had slipped. One of the officials got up, his eyes large Os, clawing at the air, trying to break free of some inner turmoil that wasn't apparent to the others. Suddenly, he gasped for air, sputtered once or twice like a fish out of water, and then slumped over the back of the chair he was seated in only minutes ago. He was dead and one look at the half-drunk glass of water in front of him told people the reason. One of the generals checked his pulse and confirmed what they all suspected.

Everyone was roused to action now. They murmured angrily amongst themselves. Somebody shouted, "Aren't we doing anything? Who else drank the water?"

The president was trying to bring some order, while everyone was shouting. "Please calm down everyone. I assure you we will capture whoever is responsible for this atrocity. Please, men—" His words were ineffectual in the general hubbub that had erupted.

The argument between the general and the entrepreneur had reached a fever pitch. He was saying, "People like you! Swines commercializing the whole security of the country! We have had nine breaches including this one now!" The general, whose eyes were bulging dangerously, had the other man by the lapels of his coat. If the others hadn't intervened to separate the

two, the general would have easily throttled the entrepreneur.

After this, the room quietened down a little, though tempers were running amok. The president called for the medicos who carried the official out. An eerie silence took over the SCIF while the doors were open. They all knew the rules and operated within them.

As soon as the door shut the director said, "It's too late for him, but I urge you to give me your support."

"How do we know that if this wasn't your ploy to get our attention?" the FBI head asked angrily.

The steely glint in the director's eyes couldn't be missed. "Do you mean to suggest I killed a government representative to get your support? Do you know how dangerous that accusation is?"

The FBI head piped down a little at that.

The secretary of defense, who was more reasonable, said, "Alright, men. We need to quickly come to a consensus. We know the gentleman needs to go in front of Congress. What are you expecting from us?"

The director, who had been waiting for this very moment, said, "I have a plan. The president must deliver a speech which will outline our findings to the public. We also need congressional aid in expanding upon the Patriot Act, and more funding, of course. We need to be on the same page and share our intelligence on this."

Out of the eleven men, nine raised their hands in support of the motion. The two left were the FBI head and the general who had sneered at him earlier.

The director addressed the two men almost like he was analyzing them, “What'll it take, gentlemen?”

The FBI man said, “I just don't see how a man being poisoned among us has anything to do with an alien invasion—as you seem to be suggesting.”

“And the unprecedented number of abductions? How would you account for them?” asked the director.

The FBI head seemed to consider this. Meanwhile, the general still held out and now sweating said, “I don't see why we must get worked up and involve the public in all this. There is no concrete evidence to suggest—”

The director locked in on the general. “The report I have submitted—if you cared to read through it—is only the tip of the iceberg. There are still many more Americans missing. How many more deaths, missing persons' reports, and crimes will it take to convince you?”

The general seemed at a loss for words. The director was as swift as he was ruthless with the next words he chose. “You! You aren't the general! You are one of them—shapeshifters. My team has known about creatures like you for some time now. Men, don't let him go!”

Like under a trance, the men pounced on the general and held him down. With ten men holding onto him, the general could hardly breathe.

The director reached for the only landline that adorned the otherwise stark room, and told the other, “We got the support.”

The door to the War Room opened and four armed men stood there. “Were you able to identify which one of them it was, sir?” one of them asked.

The director pointed at the general who was now mumbling something inaudible in his fear. He said, “Take this thing to the facility.” The men marched him away, and none of the others made a move to oppose.

Chapter 6:

Crossroads

It was a quiet morning when a mother and two toddlers, aged two and three, waited by the curb in her van. The promise of a day in the city filled all three with laughter and happiness. They were playing I Spy and the giggles of the youngest filled the vehicle. They had stopped for breakfast in a cafe nearby and were just settling down to restart their journey.

“I spy with my little eye something blue,” the mother said, easing the vehicle onto the crossroad before her. The signal had just turned yellow. She kept tapping her finger on the steering wheel, eyes ahead, waiting for the signal to turn green.

One of the boys in the backseat said, “Oooh, Mom, look! That blue car!”

The mother’s lips were just framing the response, “No,” when she realized the boy wasn’t playing the game.

She screamed, scrambling to release the car into first gear. But it was too late. A blue SUV came hurtling into the van from the left, even before she could release her foot from the brake pedal. The impact was deafening

and catastrophic. Through her searing pain, her final thoughts were, *My precious boys*.

Victor gazed at the inmate newly brought into the cell across from his own. He remembered how he, too, had been transported here handcuffed four years ago. The judge's words from his hearing were still fresh in his mind: "*Victor Slazinsky is a threat to public safety. He is sentenced to fifteen years in jail without parole.*" He did not question the wisdom of the judge's sentence. It was the right thing to do.

He had been a brash, confident man. After the crash, he had become a shadow of his former self. The nightmare of the accident still haunted him. He would see as clearly as he did on that day the mother turning around to address one of her boys, right before the car—his car—rammed into them. That's the part where he woke up—drenched in cold sweat—remembering the smell of burnt rubber and metal, mixed with that of charred human flesh. The memory still made him sick.

Prison life was akin to atonement for him. Sometimes he couldn't say which was worse—the bullying by the other criminals or the torment of the correctional officers. He was called "Crash," by some of the others—a nickname that referenced his crime. It was a moniker he detested. He had no friends within these walls and he strived every day to keep it like that. He had no intention of talking to others or receiving their sympathy. The routine of his life reminded him he was alive—and that was enough for now.

One fateful day, two men in suits arrived to visit him. He had never met them before, but they seemed to know all about him.

“We have a proposition for you,” one of them told him.

“How so?” he replied.

“We can give you a second lease on life. All you would have to do is to volunteer for our project.” The man who spoke wore a black suit and glasses. If Victor had to pick him out in a room full of men, he doubted he would be able to.

“What if I decline?” He had to ask, though he had a good idea about the response that would follow.

“You think this can't get worse for your family?” The evil glint in the second man's smile was enough for him to understand what was meant.

It was blackmail, pure and simple, but Victor did not have a choice. It was not just his life that hung in balance.

Victor was put on a stretcher. Around him everything was a pristine, starched white. Attendants were wheeling him into what looked like an operation theater and in the distance, he could hear a person issuing commands. The voice was muffled and he could not make out what was being said. He was probably on some painkillers by now. He could kid himself into believing that he was at the hospital, just undergoing some minor surgery but he knew there was no point in

deceiving himself. Any chances of being reunited with his family seemed impossible.

When he thought about his family, he thought back again to the beginning of that fateful day...

Victor and his daughter had just been preparing to go to the beach—their favorite destination on a Sunday morning, when the daughter, Vivienne, asked, “Can’t I drive today? After all, I’ll need the extra practice for the driver’s license test!” She even had a perfectly valid reason.

Being cautious, like all dads, Victor’s initial instinct was to decline. But his little girl was growing up. Besides, he would be right there beside her as she drove. *What harm could there be in it?* Victor asked himself and setting aside his paternal fears, he tossed her the keys. She squealed in delight, reminding him of the three-year-old he had often tossed up into the air.

Victor would never forget how they were singing along to “Wrecking Ball” on the radio as they drove up to the signal. Viv stepped on the gas so she could make it through just before the signal changed. Both of them did not notice that it had already turned red. Victor couldn’t guess how the two men wheeling him away knew this secret.

He could never get the thoughts of them out of his head. That poor woman and her sons. He smelled the mix of blood, metal, and burned rubber every day. Vivienne made it, luckily, without too many injuries.

Victor was able to come to his senses and pull his daughter out of the wreckage and get her onto the side of the road. That was when he saw what she had done—the bodies of the mother and kids was an image he'd carry into his grave.

Victor knew that he couldn't let his daughter take the fall. She was his angel—the girl who brought love and joy into his existence. She had a long, bright life ahead of her and he couldn't let this one mistake blight her future.

As Victor was wheeled away, he knew that those few moments were probably all the time he had left to think of anything close to his heart. He shut his eyes and thought of Viv's innocent smile, dimpled cheek, and the way her hugs always filled him up. A few stray tears wet Victor's cheeks, but he ignored them in the knowledge that whatever happened to him, Viv was safe. He repeated to himself, *Viv is safe and that's all that counts.*

Chapter 7:

The Vision

Just below the present-day Mogollon Mountains, among her tribe dwelt an old woman named Eztili. The village children loved to gather around her and listen to her stories. She never tired of telling one particular story and began telling them about an unforgettable occurrence that happened when she was around eight years old...

Her father had just become the chieftain of their tribe, and he was still trying to gain the trust of his tribesmen. This was around the time Eztili first started having visions about the star people. Her father was proud of her gift. He wondered if the key to winning his people over lay in trying to communicate with the star people.

Eztili sat not far from their hut, doodling in the sand with a stick. She drew the figures of the people she had seen in her dreams. The strange whiteness of their skin, their large eyes, and their dome shaped heads fascinated her. Another girl might have been scared—but not Eztili. She knew instinctively that the creatures meant no harm, and that they could perhaps help her people find a better way of living. *When will their next visit be?* she wondered.

When she was tired of her drawing, she got up to stretch her legs and to wander a little way away. Eztili loved to explore the edges of her settlement. She often wandered to the edge of the forest where its magical greenery seemed to beckon her. But her elder brother, Yaotyl, appeared from nowhere. Today would be one of those days she wouldn't be able to break free from him. He always wanted her to stay close to the village and was trying to shepherd her back. Sworn to protect her and the other younglings of the village, he was especially protective of her, and though Eztili loved him, she was often irritated by his impulsive nature. She tried to give him the slip, but he persistently caught up with her.

Eztili gave up and returned to the village center where her father was giving a short speech about his duties to the tribe. In his powerful baritone, the new chief was proudly saying, "We have a way to communicate with them now, in time my daughter will see them, and I am confident—"

"Stop speaking in dreams. What will we do when the winter comes and the buffalo leave the land? We need to hear plans of the earth—not your visions of the sky!" a tribesman shouted, interrupting the chieftain.

Eztili heard the exchange and was alarmed. She did not want her father's words to be doubted and knew she could help. She was beginning to run forward, when Yaotyl caught her by the arm.

"Let me go," she hissed at him.

“Tribe meetings are no place for young girls to speak up. Be quiet,” he retorted.

She was wiggling away from his tight grasp when a bright light from above caught all their attention. A big vessel with legs had landed just a few paces from where they were all gathered.

“And then did they talk to you? What happened?” one of the naughtiest among the boys quipped.

“Yes,” Eztili replied, “I’m coming to that... now listen!” Then she continued narrating her tale.

The village people were amazed by the beauty of the huge, round silver object with legs but Eztili recognized it from her dreams. By now, several more of these ships had landed around them. She ran from her dazed brother’s grip and went nearer to the ship, mesmerized by all that she saw. Suddenly, a man appeared. It was a man like no other they had seen. He had white and gray scaly skin and a round head devoid of hair. His eyes were vertical slits. He was motioning for Eztili to come nearer. Nobody else would have dared approach him but she had no qualms. When she reached him, the being stretched out his hand, and gently tapped on her shoulder. Eztili’s eyes opened wider, but they had a glazed expression. Her smile was fixed unwaveringly in place.

Slowly, Eztili started levitating a few feet above the ground. Her father knew instinctively that she was in a trance and that the creature would guide her visions. Everyone waited with bated breath for the revelations to come from her.

Eztili saw a rapid succession of visions. She wouldn't have known to name them as they would come after her time—but she saw the Industrial Revolution unfolding and glimpses of machines and aircrafts. She was amazed at the marvels about to come. She saw hospitals, people being cured of diseases and living to an old age. The alien was speaking through her and though it was her voice, they were not her words, "Peace be with you. It has taken us time to learn to communicate with you. But we intend to work closely with you all. We intend to share our knowledge with your tribe."

But something strange was happening. Eztili's visions took on a different tone. She saw war, hunger, poverty, and orphaned children crying. She saw ambition turning to violence through the ages. She knew of the great wars that would rock not just her land, but the world. She started to flinch, but at the end she saw a man—a white man in black clothing, wearing a hat. He seemed to be shrouded in smoke. He had cold eyes which were gazing right at her. She knew without being told that he spelled doom, danger, and destruction. The being seemed to wince too. He was also wheezing and looking distraught. It was stretching out an arm to touch her, when a spear whizzed past Eztili's ear and lodged itself in its chest.

The creature looked at the weapon once before closing its eyes and reeling backward. Its blood was flowing freely now. Eztili felt the creature's panic in her body. Abruptly, her visions stopped. She snapped back into the present and fell to the ground. The villagers were staring at her. She was gasping, fighting the urge to cry.

Eztili turned back and saw it had been Yaotyl's doing. He was huffing with the effort of throwing the heavy spear but he looked pleased with himself. Eztili shrieked once and buried her face in her hands. Yaotyl's smugness turned to concern first, and then to fear.

The being's body was now surrounded by others like itself. They were circling around it, muttering what could have been incantations or prayers. Eztili tried her best to communicate with them in the language that had been briefly hers. "Please," she said. "It was an accident. Please tell me about what I saw—what did they mean? They feel like painful memories lodged within me. I need your help to decipher them."

The villagers stood around dumbstruck at this bewildering exchange between one of them and the star people. They did not know what was being said.

"We cannot. Not for the present." Eztili felt rather than heard the words in her mind. One of the creatures gently stood near her, looked at her, and then one by one they filed back into their ship. As the ship left, Eztili felt a semblance of solace.

When Eztili finished narrating this, one of the kids asked, “What else, Elder Mother? Did they ever come back to you? In your dreams?”

Eztili smiled and said, “Not yet, son. They will come in their own time—Talking of time, it is time to go back to your homes now. The darkness will soon settle and you all need to be with your parents.”

The children were disappointed that story time had already ended. Grumbling, they got up and left.

Eztili turned back to the walls of the cave. She embellished the pictures she had made of the star people and their ship. She would never tire of drawing them. It was her way of keeping her memories of them alive.

When she emerged from her cave, a lone star seemed to glow more brightly than the others in the sky. As she watched it, it seemed to be coming right at her—falling through the skies in pursuit of her.

Eztili smiled and murmured, “At last. You’ve remembered me.”

Chapter 8:

Need to Know

I was recruited into this team just over a month ago then. I had been in the FBI prior to this, and so starting fresh as a rookie agent here posed its own challenges. That is why I was paired with Michael on most missions. He had been with the Special Access Program for a while now and knew the ropes. He was expected to be my mentor, and for the most part, I admired him. He was quiet and efficient. What I did not like so much was a streak of sadistic ruthlessness that lurked just beneath his professional persona.

Of course, Michael was his agency-given name, just like Lily was mine. We weren't ever allowed to disclose our real names to anyone. We were issued government IDs, badges, and weapons, which we had to turn in at the end of every shift. They were reissued for the next. Like other rookies, I stayed in a building within the city that resembled army barracks. We signed extensive NDAs when we came here—it told us how we should talk, sit, walk, behave—the works. We weren't even permitted to sneeze without authorization. Okay, I am exaggerating a bit—but you know what I mean.

The great part was the salary. Come the 15th of every month, we would receive a lump sum deposit into our accounts from the “Department of Defense.” I

doubted if I really worked for the defense wing though. Fact of the matter was, none of us knew who we worked for exactly. We were briefed before the start of every project and we just did our jobs, came back, and were paid for it.

Michael was easy to work with—until he wasn't. As mentors went, he was doing a splendid job of teaching me everything I needed to know. And yet, he was a dangerous man. I sometimes felt scared of him. I saw how he dealt with people as if he was superior to them and it turned my stomach. He did not shy away from violence—so much I can tell you. At times, I also got the feeling he liked me in a primal way. It wasn't anything he said—it was in his eyes and the way he avoided touching me, even unintentionally. But on that count, I knew I was safe. He loved his job too much for anything, including me, to get in the way of it. He would never jeopardize his career over a woman.

On that particular day, I was spent. We had been on a top secret mission. The field had been trying, the stakes high, and we had been interrogating suspects associated with possible alien abductions. The last was perhaps why Michael was so keen on us bagging the project in the first place. Anyway, though it dragged on for a week—we had wrapped it up. Only one tiny pawn had escaped. But we were sure he too would be picked up soon by the surveillance team.

I just wanted to do my laundry and go up to my room. When I entered the room, I saw a rather attractive blond man reading a magazine while waiting for his wash cycle to be done. He was muscular and tall, with a

clean-shaven, open face. When he looked up, he had startling blue eyes.

He smiled and waved at me. Rookies weren't banned from talking to others, but we couldn't fraternize or reveal personal information. I smiled back and waved cautiously.

"Hi. I was hoping there was somebody I could have a decent conversation with here," he said.

"I'm Lily," I said. "Are you new? I haven't seen you before," I asked.

"Yeah, I just moved in from Alabama this week. I'm Jason—Agent Jeff though, for you," he said with the widest smile ever. It was almost as if he thought we were at some party, socializing over drinks.

"Uh. I don't think you're allowed to tell me all that—Jeff. We sign NDAs, remember?" I was shocked that this guy was so cool about it all.

"Yeah. But you aren't going to tell them, right?" He looked me in the eye and I had butterflies in the pit of my stomach. *Shit!* I thought. *This is neither the time nor the place!* But the guy was definitely hot and he was definitely being flirty. I was also at a loss. My training manual hadn't prepared me for how to maintain my clearance when I hadn't been laid in over a year. I was thinking of ways to keep the conversation flowing without revealing too much about myself.

Jason—Jeff—whatever his name was was talking about how he grew up in Birmingham and how his folks were

basically farmers. He talked of going to college and being an intern at the CIA before this. Like me, he had been recruited here and was being trained for some top secret mission, which even he didn't know much about. I listened intently to him talking in his Southern drawl, but never ventured to give any details on my end.

He told me finally, "Listen. I gotta head out. I liked talking to you. I'm in 303. Swing by when you are free." He stopped and then said, "I didn't mean for that to come out in some creepy way. We can just hang out or whatever. The minute you came in—there was something special about you—" He broke off while unloading the machine. He straightened up, smiled at me one last time, and walked out. Just like that.

I exhaled a long breath. I was feeling giddy, to be honest. It had been a long time since anyone had treated me like a person, let alone a woman. *The attention was nice. I hadn't given out any of my details*, I reasoned. I definitely wanted to speak to him again.

The next day, I woke up fresh and deliberately took the stairs to the mess downstairs. When I reached the third floor, I paused. *We weren't told not to wish fellow agents good morning*, my heart said. My brain wasn't really happy about this argument, but for lack of a counter argument, I walked toward room 303.

My surprise turned to shock almost immediately. The room had been cleaned out. As I stood there, another man came by. He was dark haired, big built, and stingy with his smiles. "Can I help you?" he said.

“I was—uhmm—Do you share your room with another agent? A blond guy?” I finally asked.

“Nope. I just shifted to this room today. There’s no one else here. Think they mentioned a guy was moving out—but I really can’t be sure.” His eyes were narrowed and he was looking at me suspiciously.

“Okay,” I said guardedly, as I made my way down to the mess. Agent Jeff hadn’t “moved” he had “been moved.” I was certain that his frankness with me had cost him more than just his room. I was sorry he had to go, but also thankful that I hadn’t revealed anything about myself, which might have resulted in a similar fate for me.

It was around that time that I first started feeling uneasy. Our jobs had never been fun but this was the first time I felt like I was on someone’s radar. They were random little things. The stuff in my room was rifled through. I inexplicably felt the prickly sensation at the back of the neck as if I was being watched on some occasions. I also started noticing that rookies were changing rapidly around me. I couldn’t spot the same people for more than a week in my building. It seemed they were being replaced by fresh faces more often now. I honestly didn’t know if this had always been the case, but it was the first time I was so acutely aware of it.

And then there was Michael. He was decidedly crossing his limits. He seemed angrier than ever before and weirdly possessive around me. He would snap at me and then turn around and behave all sorry about it. Sorry in his way—he would never openly apologize.

Instead, he would try to make small talk and make it worse. He would gaslight me, though I wasn't always clever enough to spot it at first.

On one mission, Michael was so mad at a suspect that he drew his weapon and shot him point blank. I could only blink in confusion. We were specifically trained never to gun down enemies, unless it was in self-defense. I saw the man fall before my eyes, and the image of his body spurting blood everywhere was something I would not easily forget. Michael was unrepentant. When I looked at him, he had a smug expression.

"Did you see him come at me?" he said. That's all the explanation I was to have as to why my partner had veered from the plan. And no, I hadn't seen the man try threatening or trying to attack Michael!

I was in bad shape and I knew it. A year had passed and I endured being on the team. There were nights I couldn't sleep. I felt caught between Michael's growing madness and the feeling that I was being analyzed under a microscope at all times. I had to keep filtering my words and actions for this invisible shadow that seemed to always be following me around.

I had my annual review coming up with Dr. Wiseman, whom I had never met, and the lieutenant. My reports were good. And on the face of it, I should have been happy considering that everyone was hailing me for my good work on the force. But I was apprehensive. There was something I did not know and it scared me.

Generally, these meetings happened with Michael and our sergeant, but this was a review to see if I would keep working under the program—one I hadn't experienced yet. I hoped that I would be able to get in a quiet word with Doctor Wiseman when Michael wasn't around. I wanted more than anything to talk about my growing suspicions.

When the meeting was in full swing Wiseman asked, "So, how is it going with the both of you?"

I stammered and looked away so as not to answer this question. I dreaded it. I wanted to ask to be paired with a different partner. Yet I was scared. I did not know how deep Michael's connections went. I did not want to end up being the next Jeff.

Michael answered this question on my behalf saying, "Lily is a great partner. With her I know she has my back."

There was something hard in Wiseman's eyes as she said, "And what about her safety? About the last operation in particular, how is it that a suspect was shot? I know you said it was in self-defense, but we found no weapon on the dead man. He was a much smaller man than you, Michael. In what way did he *threaten* you?"

Michael had gone a shade paler. His knuckles clenched and unclenched. I couldn't tell if he was more scared or angry. In a line of work such as ours, having the favor of our bosses meant everything. Michael was probably sweating under his tough-man act.

Dr. Wiseman chose her next words with care as she looked at us both and said, "You must often wonder what exactly I do here. I belong to a branch that conducts experiments on agents such as you. But I choose my subjects. I take agents who have *overstepped* their boundaries or *aren't ruthless* enough. You see what I mean?"

I gulped remembering my episode with Jeff. I hadn't turned him in. *Was I not ruthless enough?* Through the corner of my eyes I could see Michael fidgeting. He had definitely overstepped many times over now.

The lieutenant now broke his silent observation and told Wiseman in a lowered tone, "We need to get cracking. The boss wants to know who'll go to the Mexican site." The lieutenant then got up to leave.

Wiseman turned back to us and said, "So I am in a dilemma. I need to pick one agent to go to Mexico to investigate some cave paintings." She put up a hand as though we were about to interrupt, "I know you aren't historians. These paintings are perhaps a thousand years old or more. What is interesting is that they depict UAP and UFO sightings." Michael and I were craning forward, taking in every single word.

Dr. Wiseman then excused herself for a moment. She said she just wanted to show us some papers. When she left the room, without warning, Michael swiveled my chair around and had me by the throat. His grip kept tightening and there was a crazy gleam in his eyes. I frantically clawed at his face, but he swerved to avoid my hands. I kicked out, but he got his legs out of the way without loosening his grasp even a bit.

“Only one agent...” he repeated Wiseman’s words, as he continued to squeeze the very breath out of my windpipe and lungs.

Not ruthless enough—the words were just beginning to form a pattern in my head as his fingers around my throat got tighter and tighter. I felt suffocated and only a moan escaped when I tried to scream. It seemed unlikely that I would ever see the outside of this room again. I grabbed the only item within reach and slashed wildly.

When Wiseman opened the door, my inarticulate mumblings and Michael’s wide, lifeless eyes greeted her. Blood was beginning to trickle from the pen lodged in Michael’s temple.

Wiseman coolly reopened the door she had just shut behind her as she called out, “Lieutenant, I think we have our agent! Just give us a few moments.”

When I got out of the aircraft in Mexico, an agent had already been stationed there to receive me. He saluted me and asked, “I can take you to the site now, ma’am. How do you want to proceed?”

Chapter 9:

The Cycle

Nikolai's parents held onto him as they brought him to the hospital for the umpteenth time. Baby Nikolai was screaming profusely as his parents awaited test reports.

"We have to get the blood work done. But everything looks normal for now," the doctor told them. Nikolai's parents only nodded.

This pretty much summed up Niko's life until he turned three. There would be frequent, inexplicable illnesses and visits to the hospital; however, no doctor ever found anything wrong with him. After his third birthday, he started falling sick less often. He learned to walk, talk, and eat on his own. In another two years he was cycling expertly on the street. He was good at his studies and did moderately well at baseball—an average boy, you could say.

It was his 13th birthday and he was excited. In two days he was trying out for the official school baseball team and he had prepared as much as he could. He was pretty confident about being selected to be a part of the team.

On the day of the tryouts, he was in his gear and was walking toward the diamond when he felt a little

uncomfortable. When the pitcher threw the ball at him, he felt wobbly. Suddenly, everything went black and the next thing he vaguely remembered was being carried in a stretcher with his dad beside him.

When he regained full consciousness in the hospital, he saw his parents talking to a doctor just outside his room. Of course they were too far away to be heard, but something about their stance struck him as odd. Exactly at that moment his mom turned back to look at him. When their eyes met, Niko's mom looked surprised. She turned and leaned toward her husband, quickly whispering something. When they turned around this time, they had tears in their eyes. They hurried to him and told him in soothing whispers, "It's going to be fine. We will figure out everything. Don't worry."

Niko wasn't alarmed by the news of his illness. Being 13 he was perhaps too young to understand the full implications of being diagnosed with leukemia. But he wondered about his parents' reaction. They seemed to be concerned when talking to him, but otherwise it was almost as if they had always known something he wasn't privy to. This worried him more than the imminent grueling treatment.

He kept an eye on them and was observant as only young teenagers can be. His fears were confirmed rather than dispelled. There definitely *was* something odd about the way his parents were behaving. They seemed to be too casual about his illness. Every time they walked into his room, he felt a strong sense of déjà vu. At first, he attributed this sensation to the strong medicines that he was on—that's what he was told by

the nurses. But soon, he realized that it was related to his parents—how they made him feel. It was disturbing and Niko did not know what to do.

One day, when Niko could no longer put his fears to rest and sleep, he gathered the strength to climb out of bed. He crept out of his room. He did not know where he planned to go next, but he was transfixed by the sight of two people in the waiting room. His dad and mom were laughing loudly at some shared joke.

When he got closer, he heard his father say, “—we just need to try with the next one I guess.” His guffaw turned to surprise and then to shock as he saw Niko standing in front of them. His mother’s expression had also turned from happiness to stupefaction.

They recovered a moment later, and started talking together, “Niko! What are you doing? Why did you get up from your bed? The doctor advised complete rest. You know better than this!”

Niko wasn’t having any of it. He said, “I heard what you were saying right now. ‘The next one?’” His parents looked horrified. But finally they looked at one another, shrugged, and looked back at Niko.

His dad said, “You might as well know, boy. None of what you see here is real. This is a manufactured dream. The programmer who controls all this runs different scenarios to enable people to better deal with reality.”

Niko was furious. “No that can’t be it. You’re lying!”

“No, Niko. He is right. You aren’t real. Everyone you see around you is logged into this reality. You are hooked up onto machines somewhere, your mind is a software in this whole episode,” his mother said.

“Enough! Stop! Just be honest with me, please,” Niko screamed.

“That’s what we are doing. Can’t help it if you won’t believe it,” his dad said.

“I want to wake up! I will end this! WAKE UP!” Niko screamed his lungs out.

When Niko opened his eyes, he was no longer in the hospital. He was wondering if this was some new “scenario” that his dad had talked about when a violent cough made him splutter up some white fluid. That’s also when he noticed the same fluid spilled about him. He was in a sterile white room and it looked like he had burst out of his glass pod and was sitting in its shattered remains. He took out the tubes that went into his throat, nostrils, arms, and legs. Each limb was hooked onto monitoring devices at the other end, most of which were giving out alarms and beeps now.

Shakily Niko scrambled to his feet. When he looked at his hands, he could see that they were wrinkled. There was also something unfamiliar about them. The pool of fluid was reflecting his image. And that’s when it struck Niko. He wasn’t 13! He looked like an old man. Who was he? He passed a hand across his chin and sure enough there was some stubble there. His hair was wispy and gray.

“No, no, nooooo,” Niko screamed. But he could also hear somebody else shouting. Like through water he could hear his parents from the dream screaming. Niko wanted nothing more than to escape from this hellhole.

He ran out into what appeared to be a corridor lined with doors on both sides. Every room had people in pods, hooked up to machines—exactly like he had been a little while ago. His panic had risen and he was frantically opening one door after another hoping for an exit. He did not know what would happen to him, but he did not want to wait to find out.

Finally, up ahead he saw a door that did not look like the others. It was narrower and not as tall. Hoping for the best, he used all his strength to push it open. Nikolai’s eyes were blinded by the bright light. He was taken aback by the warmth that suddenly greeted him after the icy chill of the building.

When his eyes adjusted to the light, he was thunderstruck. He saw his baseball bat leaning exactly where he had left it—under the tall chestnut tree. The bird feed hadn’t been touched since he had last filled it. The more he looked at the scene, the more familiar it became—it was his own backyard!

Chapter 10:

Fantastic Voyage

Officers Carol Smith and Nick O'Brien were testing the new jet engine issued to the navy. They were flying low and trying a few routine maneuvers, all as per the manual. It was a beautiful day and they were bound to enjoy their flight. The new jets were state of the art and reportedly some of the fastest beasts that the navy owned. They were itching to give them hell.

O'Brien, who was in the front, was saying, "How'd you like it, Smith? This rock your boat?"

Smith laughed as she said, "You bet. That is, if you meant the aircraft." She was alluding to O'Brien's gaffe a year ago when they were trainees and he had made a move on her. He had just not been her type. But ever since that day, they were fast friends.

"Yeah, yeah. Laugh all you want. But you don't know how many other women would die for the opportunity to date me," O'Brien teased her.

Smith guffawed and said, "I make a better wingman, don't you think?"

O'Brien smiled as he pushed the engine to full throttle. The rush they felt was incredible. It was no wonder the craft was nicknamed "The Beast."

“Amaaaaaaziiiiinggg,” Smith screamed and O’Brien had to agree with her.

Suddenly, out of the corner of his eye, O’Brien saw something. This wasn’t anything from the navy, this airspace was theirs for the next eight hours. It was round and silver—almost disc shaped. He had never seen anything so flat so high up.

“We’ve got company,” he said, pointing to his right.

Smith, who just saw what he did, asked, “What is that?”

“Beats me,” he said. “Never seen anything like it.”

“Ground control, is there another aircraft near us? Permission to check out suspicious UAP,” she said into her headset. “Maybe some secret squirrel shit?” she asked O’Brien.

“Some 99 Zulu Flying Field Ninjas,” he replied as they continued to joke to each other.

They were cleared to investigate.

“Let’s introduce them to The Beast,” Smith chuckled.

They urged their aircraft as near as possible to the strange disc. When they got closer, they felt as if they were passing through an invisible magnetic barrier.

“I guess we’re not the only ones testing out here today,” O’Brien said.

What came next seemed like it was right out of a sci-fi movie.

The world was suddenly oversaturated with colors. It was like eating magic mushrooms in high definition. They had never experienced anything like this.

“Oh my god!” Smith exclaimed.

“Yeah, wow! It’s like a Grateful Dead concert,” was the only rejoinder O’Brien could manage.

They were frightened because there was no rational or scientific explanation, but they weren’t immune to the beauty of what they were undergoing either.

They could now feel a whole different gamut of sensations. They could taste their emotions in addition to feeling them—sweet for happiness, sour for fear, tangy for anger and so on. There were even small gradations to them like Smith tasting vanilla when she felt calmer. They could feel the colors correspondingly. Closing their eyes, they seemed to see visions of world events in a fantastic montage.

“Amazing,” O’Brien said, as words failed to adequately express what they were experiencing.

The craft remained ahead of them, no matter how much they pushed The Beast. Finally, the flying disc out maneuvered them and performing a ninety degree horizontal pattern, easily escaped them. As the other aircraft moved further away, the sensations of the two officers faded. Looking around, they could no longer see the other aircraft.

“What was that?” Smith asked tentatively.

“I have no clue. Let me try ground control again.” She was hearing O’Brien’s voice as if from a funnel.

When ground control came back they were shouting at them frantically, “Where the hell were you for the last six hours?”

The two officers were astounded. To them, the whole experience seemed to last for about 30 seconds at most.

When they landed, they began telling everyone their experiences. Reactions varied from incredulity to skepticism. The more scientific among their colleagues and supervisors tried to explain how the whole thing was a “speed high” which could have caused them to black out. They were experienced pilots who knew what a speed high felt like. This wasn’t that. Nobody could really explain a blackout lasting six hours though, and the unsaid implication was that they had gone rogue.

They asked for the footage from the camera in the nose of their aircraft. This was the usual means by which UAP and other enemy activities were monitored. Suspiciously enough, the footage was termed as being “under review” by the commander, and they were told that they would have no access to it. The two felt deflated. It was as if their words were being discredited.

O’Brien and Smith sent out a million reports to people they thought might be interested in investigating the phenomenon they had witnessed. Their initial euphoria

turned to frustration and bitterness as people either did not respond or politely declined to interfere in the matter.

O'Brien was the more impulsive of the two so when he called Smith to tell her that after waiting around on their reports, he had had enough and that he had barged in and tried to take the footage from the commander's office, she was worried. He continued, "But the footage wasn't there. They already sent it to higher ups, or so I was told."

Eventually, Nick was booted from his position. The higher admin did not want a troublemaker like him around. Official reports on him showed a discharge based on disrespecting a senior officer. But Smith knew that it was the questions that he had raised that got him into trouble.

Smith continued to write to the higher offices and placed calls to every single contact she had. She even used a relatively new form of technology—email—to contact people from other branches of the defense wings. No one would take her seriously. She was dismissed or scoffed at. People took her for a nutcase and her gender was used against her to paint her as "hysterical." Still, she did not back down and kept doing what she could.

Twenty years later, she was finally able to retire from her military life. She got an honorable discharge almost as if to make up for the years of humiliation that she had been made to suffer. But of course there wasn't an official apology or explanation. About five years prior to this, Nick had committed suicide. She had not been

in touch with him for a long while and she received the news via a colleague and mutual friend of theirs. He had had enough of being taken for a joke. Nobody had yet answered her queries about the footage from that day either. She would never forget what she had experienced on that day though.

Carol was getting ready to fly the next batch of tourists above the islands to give them a tour of the place. After her retirement, helicopter tours became a hobby-turned-passion and she now worked for a private company that provided guided tours. She was in the pilot's seat ready to take off, when one of the popup news updates on her phone caught her attention. In screaming, bright letters it said: *President Confirms Presence of UAP and UFO*. She had to read it again and again to make sure her mind wasn't playing tricks on her.

She clicked on the link and saw a middle-aged man giving the updates just after the president had spoken. He spoke about a past phenomenon which had been declassified recently for public viewership. Carol's heart gave a leap when she saw the footage—the one from their craft all those years ago. She didn't have to look at the whole thing. She knew what it contained. She was just relieved that finally she did not feel like a lone madwoman anymore.

As she took to the skies with her passengers, her heart was already singing when one member shouted, "We have company."

In a moment of déjà vu, Carol looked to the right and, sure enough, a familiar craft was gliding beside them.

She smiled and told her passengers, “Looks like it’s your lucky day, folks! This will be a tour you all won’t forget in a hurry!”

Chapter 11:

Devil in the Details

John loved his family, even if he had strange ways of showing it. He never mollycoddled his children and the same went for his grandkids. His eldest were a pair of twins aged 28 now—Lionel and Leonie. The younger son, now a grown man of 22, was Leon.

He often taught the grandkids interesting life skills such as cooking, but never gave a word of praise even when they did well. John wasn't a very expressive man and his kids could have written reams about it.

His general disposition with his children was one of disappointment. He dismissed his eldest son as irresponsible. Lionel was carefree and did not want a family of his own—something his dad could not understand. At his age, John had already become a father. The middle one—a girl—disappointed him in her gender and for not carrying on her father's family name after her marriage. If John hadn't taken this so personally, he would have conceded that, among his kids, only Leonie had the sharpness of mind and acumen that her dad possessed—she was most like him. Yet, several arguments with her later, he still did not take her seriously enough and she grouched about that often. The youngest, Leon, who had once held so much promise, recently came out as gay, much to the

consternation of his father. Leon was John's last hope for his legacy. He was bright and always topped at school. John had great plans for him, which were now dashed. Every time Leon's orientation was a point of discussion, John brushed it off. It was almost as if denying it would make the subject disappear.

John often wondered why his kids were fooling around, wanting to sabotage his name and legacy. If he had paused to consider things, he might have observed that there wasn't really anything *wrong* with any of them except for some serious lack of paternal acknowledgement. In fact, nothing they did could have redeemed them in his eyes, because John wasn't a man who was easily satisfied, and his children carried the knowledge of their inadequacy throughout their lives. With his grandkids, John was just as exacting, but perhaps less verbal about his disappointment. To that extent, they loved their grandpa and he loved them.

Christmas holidays were always something the family looked on as tradition and they gathered under John's roof. This was also the time when the family sparred most over their differences in opinions, which only seemed to be growing as the kids got older. John often cooked for his children and took the lead in putting up the Christmas tree and decorations in the house. Even if no one exactly sang, John ensured that Christmas songs were played in the house throughout the week that they stayed over. He definitely put in some effort, though in his own estimation, his family had let him down.

It was 5:00 a.m. on January 1st. A new year had dawned. John got up from bed and as his family slept, he bathed and got dressed. He went from room to room to just have a final peek at his brood. He adjusted the blankets for the smaller kids and watched as their chests rose and fell in the steady rhythm of their breaths. They would be leaving that day, and he did not feel especially sorry about that.

It was a big day for him—there was a lot he had to do. As he wore his black suit and adjusted his tie in the mirror, he looked at his own creased face. A sardonic smile played at the corner of his lips. He slid a tablet and headset into his leather suitcase before picking it up and put on his hat—more a force of habit than a necessity these days.

An unmarked black car waited at the front gate. He quickly got in and was soon on his way. The driver was chatty, probably a sign of his Christmas hangover. He wanted to tell John of his Christmas and was beginning to ask John about his. John cut him off, however, by raising his newspaper between them, and they continued in silence.

The car stopped at a nondescript building and John got out. He strode purposefully into the building after a security scan at the entrance. To John's irritation, everything was slow that day. The security staff were taking their own time over people waiting to enter, and had John not been waved in by the supervisor via an express lane, he might have just spent his entire day outside the building.

He quickly took the lift to the fourth floor where the secretary saw him and immediately buzzed him through the glass door. A sprawling office area led to rooms on either side. His own office, at the end of the room he was now in, was sparsely furnished. There was only a wooden desk and chair near a large window. Apart from this, the only other object that would capture one's attention was a primitive looking spear which was in a glass case on the wall right behind his chair. The nature of the office was as enigmatic as the person to whom it belonged.

His personal secretary walked in to find John sipping his coffee and gazing out the window. He was lost in the sprawling city view. She was about to give him some important news when he waved her off with a peremptory, "Later. Whatever it is, it can wait."

John walked out toward a private elevator and scanned his badge. It opened and took him down a few floors. When he emerged, the guard stationed there said, "Good morning, sir." The lighting was eerily dimmer here than on the top floors. He walked across a hallway toward a room where two agents were waiting for him.

Lily and her partner, Michael, stood up in unison as he entered the room. She spoke up as soon as she recognized him, "Director, We have him, sir. It wasn't easy to take him back, but we managed to. What do we do with his daughter? We have her here too."

The director replied, "Good work. Hold on to the child. Wait for my signal." He then addressed the other agent saying, "Hand me a weapon."

The director walked into the room where the kid was waiting on a chair next to a two-way mirror. They could see into an interrogation room where a man was handcuffed to the chair on which he was sitting. The kid had tears in her eyes as she watched the man struggling against the restraints.

The director roused the girl from her sad train of thoughts by saying, "Hey, kid. This will all be over soon." Handing her a tablet and headset from his suitcase, he continued, "Here. Keep yourself engaged while we talk to your daddy. Lily will help you find something that interests you and if she doesn't, you just let me know, okay?"

He walked into the inner room. The man had his chin on his chest and was slumped in his chair but looked up. He was a man of average build and had started to go bald. He had a beard and his features were unremarkable. He looked beaten and there was a dead tired look in his eyes. It looked like he had been weeping by the deep furrows on his cheeks.

"Enjoy your holidays?" mocked the director.

"Please, let me go," the man said.

"But you know why you're here, don't you?" The director had a hard gleam in his eyes as he laid a gun on the table.

The man sighed deeply, unhappily as he asked, "What do you want of me?"

The director said, “Atta boy! You have to be in a couple of important meetings. We will brief you on what to say—”

“I won’t—I can’t,” the man wailed interrupting him, “It’s killing me—”

“Killing you?” the director repeated his words ominously. He called out to Lily who was just outside the door, “The kid!”

Lily brought the kid to the door. The girl was busy watching something on the tablet. The other agent was guarding the door. The man saw his child, though she did not look up at him.

“No—no—please,” the man interjected. “She is young, and has no part in any of—”

“I agree. She has a bright future. So, comply and we can put this behind us.” The director said as he picked up the gun on the table, removed the magazine, and slowly pushed each bullet down, one after another, until he slammed the magazine back in. He slowly took off the safety catch and handed the gun to Lily. The child was still staring at her tablet.

“Please don’t ask this of me. I beg—” The man was so agitated he tried to stand up lifting the chair with him. He could hardly complete the sentence, when the director turned to the door and made a gesture with his hand to Lily. It was almost immediately followed by a gunshot that rang out loud and clear. The man saw the body of his daughter collapsing.

“NOOOOOOOOOO!” the man wailed.

“I’ve tried being nice,” the director said coldly. “Now. I understand your wife and son are looking for your daughter. It would be unfortunate to interrupt them and have them join us here—” The director was examining his nails casually as he said this.

Defeatedly the man asked, “What do you want me to do?”

“Excellent. Lily, brief this man here,” The director said.

Lily removed the handcuffs. As the man stood up, it seemed that his body was melting—part by part. However, simultaneously the fluid oozing from him was reforming and taking on a new shape. Lily knew what was coming and yet her breathing intensified as she saw it happening. It didn’t matter who or *what* this man was, she had to brief him for his mission.

At the director’s orders, a voice from within the room told Michael, “Please handle the mess back there.”

Meanwhile, the director stood gazing at his own image in the mirror, straightening his tie. He looked accomplished.

He remarked darkly to himself, “We managed to clear up their mess, didn’t we? But we now need to think of a new name for the projects to come. Everything we achieved so far will stand exposed soon...”

Chapter 12:

The Whistle

It was past eleven at night and I was looking forward to unwinding, having some fun, and talking shop at the club. It had been a grueling week with the discoveries I had made at work. I was still wondering how to employ this knowledge for my own good. The multimillion-dollar company for which I worked, BioSynth Pharmaceuticals Inc., was in the process of developing a new confidential product. The proposed model included getting consumers hooked on its convenience and then working on their addiction to mint money. I had two options—I could sell my knowledge to a competitor and make money off the deal, or I could reveal my knowledge to the public—but there is no money in that. Of the latter, I had my doubts, even if I cared enough, the conglomerate of companies that BioSynth was a part of worked hand-in-hand with the government and other monied interests. I doubted if I would even survive long enough to get my information across to anybody who cared to oust them.

As I walked in, I scanned the faces until my eyes landed on her—I thought she fit the bill for a good lay. She was by the bar drinking by herself and our eyes had met briefly before she withdrew her stare. I was sure she must be the one. As for convincing her about the deal, I thought it would be easy. As for the other, even

assuming she wasn't interested in me personally, the night was still young, and there was enough time to change her mind—or so I thought. I sidled up to her and asked her if I could get her a drink.

“You alone?” she asked me.

“Yes—quite alone,” I replied hoping that she would understand that I did not hope to finish the night alone. She made no other move, and so I started talking to her. “Alone is pretty much the mantra of corporate America, right?”

“What do you mean?” she asked, turning on her barstool to face me.

“I mean that you can hardly trust anyone these days.” I paused to down my first shot, and then continued, “People double-cross you in business. I worked my way up. I am well acquainted with the political world of buying senators, insider trading, backstabbing, coke, steroids, escorts, drinks, and clubs. I'll admit, it was all a heady feeling at first. But I know that people like us have to work as hard as we play. Once, long ago, I followed my *friend's* inside trading knowledge. Turns out he screwed me over for a raise and a piece of ass. We all know that one day our time is going to be over, so we work like rock stars—we make the most of our time in the sun before it sets on us.” I downed my second shot and then said, “I mean companies get their employees hooked on parties, sex, drugs, and other excesses and then throw them over when they are done with them.” I took up my next glass, gulped it down and then said, “I mean, I myself am a part of it—I know how it all operates—”

Looking back, it wasn't exactly my best moment I suppose, but who could say? I had used variations of similar lines on other girls before.

"Lily, right? They told me I might find you in the VIP lounge," I said and held out my hand to her.

"Yeah," she replied, briefly touching her fingers to mine before withdrawing them.

"No boyfriend?" I asked. *Like it matters*, I thought to myself.

"Nope," was the only rejoinder. This girl was irking me with her monosyllabic responses.

"If you want this deal, you're going to need to put in some effort," I said.

"What's your story? Why so bitter?" she asked at last.

About time she opened up, fucking bitch! I thought. "You know that was some confidential shit I took from my company. I'm going to need a better deal," I said.

"You better have concrete proof then," she said. She was less impressed than I had expected.

"You bet. I work for BioSynth Pharmaceuticals and they make—" I was saying when she completed my sentence—

"Chemicals, medicines, and stuff, right?" she asked.

“Yeah. You know—I was hired only a year ago and was pretty much promoted right away to a top leadership position,” I said.

“That’s great. Why cry about them now?” she asked, unfazed.

“They have manufactured a top secret ingredient which can reverse aging,” I said.

She stopped sipping on her drink, considered my words carefully with narrowed eyes, and then said, “What’s the evidence? Did you work on the drug yourself? Do you have the formula with you?”

“Not exactly. I have something even better. See, I—ummm—slept with this girl. She was in her mid twenties, sexy, brunette—” I was warming up to this story when Lily interrupted again.

“Yeah—I don’t see why I need to hear of your conquests,” she said coldly.

“I’m getting to it,” I said, sipping from my glass. “I had met her at a company party and we hit it off pretty much immediately. It was a great night—I can tell you. So, when I came back to the office, everyone wanted to know how it went. I mean, that’s corporate life. I mean, people are always so nosey, right?” I asked.

“Quite,” she said. “I’m still hoping there’s a reason for this story,” she said.

“I told them the truth,” I said, ignoring her. “I said that I banged her loads of times, and that she seemed to

want it as much as me.” I continued before Lily could stop me, “But that’s not the end of it. The woman was eighty years old! I confirmed it with the guys of the R&D team who had tested it on her.”

Lily was looking at me now intently. I was flattered by her interest in my story.

“That’s also where I got my idea. One of my friends told me that the formula could make us rich, or richer for the right price,” I said, now half-drunk with the spirits and having at last captured her attention fully.

“What’s the catch?” she asked. *Boy is she a smart cookie!* I thought.

“As my friend and I walked down the corridor, I saw the third body being wheeled out. I’ll admit it made me a little queasy. I asked him then what it meant and he told me that drug users had only a fifty percent survival rate. It’s a kind of plant that produces sap or honey or something that can, on one hand, reverse aging, heal, and shit, but it is highly toxic. It grows on everything. It releases spores when it blooms and if you breathe that shit,” he chuckled, “you’re fucked.” I stopped, thinking that I may have been talking too fast for her to catch onto all the details.

“So, you’re telling me the wonder drug also has its own inbuilt venom?” she asked.

“Yeah, dangerous shit. ‘If they would rather die they had better do it and decrease the surplus population’” I quoted Scrooge from *A Christmas Carol*.

“Oh—how Dickensian,” she responded, before asking, “And then?”

“My friend and I discussed the possibilities of course. And we realized that gaining access to it would be worth billions. There was only one little snag—we’d have to break in and steal it,” I said. “I did what I had to do. I James Bonded my way into my organization and got hold of everything including the plans and papers on the origins of the drug,” I bragged.

“What about your friend?” Lily asked.

“Oh, you know. I told him I had to do what was best for business. I sealed him inside the lab where the spores of the plant were already beginning to release. They’re going to have some time cleaning up that mess,” I said modestly. “I then jumped from the third floor, onto the roof of the adjoining driveway, before finding an unlocked car and making my getaway as company officials chased me—”

“Okay. So someone has seen way too many movies, eh?” Lily said, breaking my narrative of a heroic escape.

“Does this look like a movie prop?” he asked as he pulled out a vial of the plant from his pocket. “The thing is, I have already been approached by a couple of buyers who did not offer me anything worthwhile. I hope the company that sent you will not disappoint,” I finally said. I added, “Not that they have to offer anything more than the market rate, if you’re part of the bargain,” I said, gently grazing my finger across her shoulder and arm.

“You could be quite disappointed, Alex,” Lily said. “I was investigating a report and heard of an idiot who was shopping around for a price. This man was stupid enough to try and extort the federal government. All of which led me to you. Your words have been recorded and will count against you on espionage and potential treason charges. Bye-bye, Alex. Hope you will learn to cope with loneliness soon.” She made a gesture with her hand without looking behind her.

And that’s when I turned around to see the two men in black suits who were stationed at the door of the club earlier. They had appeared to be bouncers at first glance, but were now approaching our table. I was suddenly so pissed—

Lily was carefully considering the tiny plant within the vial she had just gotten from Alex, while she was talking to somebody over the phone. “We have a big problem...”

Chapter 13:

Nectar

The spacecraft moved on course and was orbiting Jupiter now. Its seven-member crew continued their daily lives on it. They had been on this craft exploring the solar system for the good part of a year now, and they were just as enthusiastic as when they started. They had made a couple of breakthroughs and managed to get along well with one another. They knew their mission would take longer and by now they had come to accept it as a part of the duty. And yet, astronauts were still only human.

“Anyone miss being able to eat without the velcro patches yet?” Luna said. She was referring to the food packages having to be affixed to trays or tables in the craft so that they didn’t float away.

“Hell yeah! Can’t wait for some pizza with salami toppings on it,” Gary responded. Though astronauts could eat a variety of food onboard, certain items weren’t on the menu.

“Some soda pop to go with it would be great I guess,” Richard piped in.

Yuri did not comment. But he was generally a silent man who hated small talk. An excellent scientist, he

usually conducted experiments in the lab of the space station, and left the talking and socializing to the rest of them.

The other three—Patrick, Vicky, and Nick were now engaged in their daily exercises in a different pod of the spacecraft. Astronauts had to keep up their two-and-a-half hour daily exercise regimen strictly, as people tended to lose muscle mass faster in zero gravity. Owing to the lack of space, the seven of them generally took turns in two batches to be in any given room of the craft.

After their breakfast, and while the other three had just started their meals, Luna checked the reception from mission control back home for important updates. Meetings were a regular part of their travels. Patrick and Vicky were in charge of spacecraft maintenance and they set out to check that all the equipment was functioning well. Nick was also a scientist by nature and while he occasionally helped in navigating the craft, he was usually Yuri's lab buddy. These tasks weren't compartmentalized so strictly, of course. All seven of them were trained to do all the various bits and pieces of their jobs in outer space, but they had their preferences.

It was another humdrum day as far as they were concerned and they planned to dock at the space station near the southern part of Jupiter soon, if all went according to plan. It hadn't been the first time they had been stationed there either.

Minutes before they were supposed to anchor to the South Jupiter Space Station, however, the crew heard a

loud bang followed by system alarms that screamed automatically to alert them that landing was to be undertaken only with caution. Luna, who was in the command module, swore, "Damn! What could that be?"

"Could we have missed a meteor or something?" Richard asked.

"Impossible," Gary said. "Our sensors would have picked it up a mile away. This has to be something smaller. And no, even before you think it, I did not forget to check the sensors before breakfast. They are working just fine."

The sound had displaced even Yuri from his lab. "Guys, I think we should go out and take a look. It would be better than landing and then being blown up into smithereens or something." Yuri wasn't always the most optimistic among them as one could imagine.

"Yeah, sounds like a plan," Vicky said.

Patrick did not want to miss a chance for a spacewalk. He and Yuri decided to go check out the problem. They donned their heavy space suits and slowly made their way to the airlock compartment of the craft. This was where the internal pressure of the craft would be gradually reduced to match the external pressure, so that their bodies could get accustomed to the conditions outside the craft. After this, the hatch to the outside was slowly raised and they moved outside single file.

Using the tethers and handles, they were able to maneuver and check all parts of their craft, before realizing that the explosion had emanated from the space station in front of them. In fact they could see something on it right then. With great care, they used the routing ropes to slowly ease themselves onto the space station.

Going around it, one at a time, they soon discovered the source of the problem. A frozen rock seemed to have crashed and attached onto the space station. It wasn't very large, in fact no more than the size of an average fist. The fact that it should have created such a loud bang confounded them more than ever.

They knew they would have to take it back onto their craft to study it further. The Jupiter space station wasn't all that damaged, and with a little bit of work, it could mostly be restored. They were relieved about that at any rate.

The ice rock proved to be a bit of a mystery. No tools in the spacecraft could melt it enough for them to see what was inside it. So they waited. One morning, the ice had partially melted and a thick honey-like fluid was oozing from it. Closer inspection revealed that there was something like a plant fossilized within the ice from which this liquid was flowing.

Excited, Yuri ran the first couple of tests to check what kind of a plant it was. There weren't many matches and the team was a bit despondent. The closest family member that they could think of was milkweed. The plant looked like it—but the juice was like sap from a

tree or an ivy plant. Every other test drew a blank and they could not guess at the properties of the nectar.

It was Nick who ultimately suggested, “It’s going to take a long while before we get to a proper lab. We don’t even know if the plant will survive that long. Let us just test it here on one of the lab rats. One of them is dying anyway. I think if the nectar kills it, we’d be doing it a service.”

Everyone agreed with this logic. There was no point holding on to a chemical without learning more about it, and they were not going back to their home planet for a long time. So, they placed a drop of it on the tongue of the lab rat. They were amazed at the result. The lab rat not only did not die, but also showed greater vitality and energy. It was almost as if it had grown younger.

They were now silently thinking the same thing. *What if this drug could reverse aging? Most chemicals that work on rats work on humans too!*

Luna voiced their thoughts, “Should we do it?”

“What if something goes wrong?” Gary asked.

“At least we are in it together,” Richard said.

When they voted, Yuri and Luna were in favor of testing it. Nobody else wanted to ingest the “space goo” as Richard called it. Both of them collected a spoonful of nectar and swallowed it. It was sweet like honey, but of a thicker consistency and white in color. The results weren’t as immediate as they were on the

rat. Yuri was the first to show it. The gray hair at his temples was transformed to a light brown and the crinkles around the corner of his lips and mouth were almost totally gone. Luna became thinner and fitter—she looked like herself when she was in her twenties.

The results so amazed Nick that after spending a couple of days on the fence about it, he too decided to try it. Nick became more muscular and lost the gauntness of his face. His hair was thickening on his pate, where it had formerly been thinning. He looked years younger than he was. Vicky, Gary, Patrick, and Richard wanted nothing to do with the anti-aging serum.

The ice block had fully melted enough to reveal the plant. It was a blue-green bulb of a flower with leaves that hadn't bloomed at first. The sap dripped down the stem. As the plant bloomed—a little more every day—it released spores. Yuri who entered the lab caught a whiff of the spores and sneezed. This seemed to hurry up the spread of the spores, which were attaching themselves to anything and everything within the lab. They finally had to seal off the lab so that the spores wouldn't escape the unit—or so they thought.

Something strange was beginning to happen to the ones who had not consumed the nectar. They started feeling sick. This wasn't just stomach cramps or loose bowel movements as with food poisoning—minor ailments that they sometimes caught while onboard. This illness went deeper.

The three who had consumed the nectar started noticing changes in the other four's behavior patterns. They were having hallucinations and nightmares. In

fact, they looked frail. Patrick had it the worst. Even in between work, he would go into what looked like a trance and then scream out loudly and incoherently. It was getting increasingly tough to establish communication with Patrick. He could hardly describe what he was undergoing. Initial tests seemed to suggest that the plant was growing inside them and feeding off its hosts. The plant seemed to be an invasive species.

Richard said one day, “This thing—I can no longer clearly remember myself or my work at times. It’s messing with my brain.” Bulbs were beginning to grow from his mouth and orifices. They were tiny bulbs at first, before they started ballooning. It was horrific to watch.

Vicky could no longer see or recognize people clearly. Talking to her was like talking to an amnesiac on most days. On the few occasions that she surfaced, her words were garbled and she spoke of things that made no sense.

Gary seemed least affected, and yet even he started losing time and talking disjointedly as the days passed. As their shipmates became weaker, it seemed that the spores had taken hold of the entire laboratory. It took them some time to figure out that closing the laboratory may have slowed down its spread, but had not completely prevented it. Micro particles had escaped and been ingested by everyone. The nectar had probably made them slightly immune to its effects while the four who had not taken it were slowly being preyed upon by the spores.

Luna, Yuri, and Nick tried their best to revive their colleagues and yet, though they kept testing the properties of the plant, they couldn't discover anything more. They recorded all their observations daily—both of themselves and of their ailing shipmates.

Finally, Luna decided to establish contact with mission control back on Earth. They broke the news of what was happening onboard, including the emaciated condition of their mates. They were told to abort the mission and immediately return. They knew they would have to stay in quarantine for a while before being able to meet their respective families.

Meanwhile, the spores continued to multiply within the lab, and a growth was beginning to show on the equipment. The sick astronauts became shells of themselves. Patrick was the first to go. His remains had to be shifted to the cargo hold of the aircraft. Their experiments had revealed that in patients where the nectar had created the contagion, the spores would slowly take over their systems. After one's death, the spores would just transfer to the next nearest victim at hand. Vicky and Richard went the same way and their bodies too were finally sealed off within the cargo hold. Gary battled it for days before he too was no more. Each time the others went inside the lab or the cargo hold, they wore their space suits so as not to inhale the spores themselves.

Mission control had told them to hold on to the bodies and the plant, even as they made their way back to the home planet. A few days after Gary's demise, the crew started smelling a floral scent emanating from the cargo bay.

Fearful of what they would discover, they opened it to realize that the bodies of their fallen friends had disintegrated and new vegetation—blue-green flowers and vines—had sprung from them. The whole cargo area had become a mini-garden of sorts. The vines were also spreading onto the space vessel, which was worrying them. It was a breathtaking sight, if one could ignore the fact that they carried a contagion within them.

“Wow! How is it growing on the ship?” Luna asked.

“We’ll be taking this home. It’ll spread everywhere!” Nick said, panicking.

“It might mean wiping away half the earth’s population. But it will also regenerate plant life, and possibly reverse the pollution crisis. But perhaps only half the present population are going to see the changes,” Yuri responded.

Nick gave voice to what was actually disturbing them all. “What should we do? Take this home? Or fly off course and let it die with us?”

Luna and Yuri thought that the world deserved a new lease on life, while Nick vehemently thought that they had no right to play God and endanger the lives of people already living there.

The fight escalated and so did the spread of the plant. It grew so rapidly that the walls of the lab and cargo bay—sturdy as they were—could not contain the vines pushing against it. When the walls gave in, the plant was soon able to latch on to the rest of the spacecraft. The

spores were now free to spread at such an alarming rate that even the nectar was no barrier against it...

Eventually, mission control lost contact with the craft. People and scientists wondered what had become of the crew. It was an enigma that was debated for several years.

The ship was on autopilot when it was intercepted just outside of Earth. It was greeted by astronauts eager to investigate the ship that had been silent for years. They tracked it on its way home but never knew what became of the shipmates. If one saw the craft, and had to describe it, one would say that it looked like a dark green ball drifting through the skies toward our planet. The spacecraft was overgrown with thick green foliage. Everyone wondered at this floating jungle in space. There were conclusions and surmises drawn.

Conferring with mission control, they were told as before, "Bring it back home." That's how the blue-green flowers made their way to Earth, with curious scientific minds hoping to study it further...

Chapter 14:

Second Chance

The director was in his office on the phone with Lily telling her, “Great job with that traitor and the report on the cave painting. Big promotion coming your way.”

He was just hanging up and getting ready to go home. He stood up, looking at the spear hanging on the wall over his desk. It was an artifact that always seemed to pull his gaze toward it. He poured himself a drink from the bottle he kept in his cabinet. As he gingerly let the cognac wash over his tongue, he closed his eyes momentarily thinking of his life. On the whole, he couldn’t say that he was unhappy. He wished his grandkids would care more about the legacy that they would leave behind, just as he did.

He had reached the front of the building and was waiting for the driver to bring up his car, when a familiar white light from the skies seemed to envelope him. In the rudeness he had raised his arms across his eyes, trying to shield them from the glare. He did not know how long he stood like that. But after a while he gingerly lowered his arms, looking all about him.

He was in a white room without any windows. The only outlets to the world outside were barred with glass and presented darkness through it, almost as if they were

looking on at the night sky. When his eyes adjusted to the light in the room, he saw that he wasn't the only person there. There was a youngish man and a couple of others. They were all a little groggy, but coming to their senses.

Looking up, the director was shocked by the eyes that were looking down on them. Many aliens had gathered and were watching the drama unfold as it were. It was unnerving—like being pet hamsters in a cage.

A doorway seemed to open and a Native American woman stepped out. She came forward, and somebody introduced her as Eztili. At first, nobody could understand her words because she spoke her mother tongue. But slowly, it was as if a translation was playing in their heads and it became clear that she was only a mouthpiece for their captors.

“Greetings,” she said. “A long time ago, there was a plant that yielded nectar that could alter human destiny for it had the power to keep people alive for longer than they would have lived in the natural course of their lives. This secret plant was found in a cave on Earth, and would have remained dormant, but for the exploration of a young girl who loved to paint us on its walls. The drug did not affect everyone equally. In fact, it was as toxic to some, just as it provided longevity to others.” Eztili paused here.

The director was smirking as he said, “The hell is this?”

Eztili ignored him and continued speaking to the others. “We had to take away some of those who were affected by the nectar of the plant. The power of the

drug was inordinate and we couldn't leave it to chance. We also found that it grows indiscriminately and will even take itself when it has nothing to feed on." Eztili was eyeing the director now.

"The plant from space was so powerful that it could infect everyone, including us. We weren't humans, and even so our lot was also facing the same consequences. So here we are now, responsible for the awful consequences of our actions.

"If you are here, then you are at a crossroads where you can choose to reset your timeline. We can do that for you. But, the choice is upon you, but it can only be done this once. Everyone gathered here will have to put their trust in us, if we are to do this." Eztili again stopped.

She took a long look at everyone in the room and then sighing deeply continued, "With every choice we made, the universe gave us an opportunity to open up a doorway to the multiverse, of an infinite amount of timelines and possibilities. These possibilities meant exploring new dimensions, one which we hailed as home long ago. It was an experiment we started millions of years ago, and even we could not have imagined the proportions to which it would grow. But we will not shy away from admitting that perhaps it has gone on for too long and led to unnecessary suffering for both our peoples. We get only one opportunity to redo some of our mistakes, and we beseech you to make that decision wisely."

“But where is the guarantee that we would meet our loved ones, or whether we will even exist?” somebody asked.

Eztili looked at her with compassion in her eyes. “The universe does not reveal itself wholly to anyone. We can’t guarantee you anything, but there is a possibility.”

Everyone in the room was by now debating the consequences. And yet, most of them also knew that it was better to give the planet and their loved ones a second chance, even if it meant altering their stories to some extent.

The only person who stood apart was the director and he had a sarcastic smile playing on his lips.

When the motion was put to vote, every hand save one went up in support of the proposition of the aliens. The hand that stayed down, unsurprisingly, belonged to the director.

People were now looking askance at him. He cleared his throat and started talking fast. And though he tried his best to suppress his emotions, everyone could see that it was an effort for him to speak clearly, appealing only to his reason.

“I think it’s all a cosmic joke. Clearly they want to steal our discoveries and use it for their own benefit. They should in fact, be submitting to us, who are stronger. Instead, are we to allow them to dictate terms to us? Our race would have a chance at longevity, and you would allow them to urge us to vote it out of our own hands?” he said.

Eztili spoke up in her own voice, “You would have the earth dead and leave it covered by the plants as it is, so that people can live longer?” Her eyes were glinting dangerously. She looked angry that somebody would be so foolish as to even contemplate such a move. She was referring to how the plant had eaten away the planet a bit at a time after it was let loose upon humanity.

“Lies,” the director shouted at them. “I have taken chances. I have lost family to your monsters.” His voice held a hysterical edge to it by now. “What can you teach me about loss?”

A voice interrupted his angry tirade, “Johnny?”

Whooshing into the past, the Director felt as though he had fallen through a chink in the timeline. In his mind, it was 1956 near Alamo Peak again. He saw somebody walking toward him through the gloom. It was Sandra. She looked untouched by the malevolence of time. She came near him and her voice was full of emotion as she said, “I know I did the right thing to volunteer that night. And yet, I could not have foreseen how bitter and ruthless it would make you.” Another figure joined them. It was Beth. She looked a few years older than on that fateful night. She stood beside Sandra taking her hand in hers.

The director asked Sandra, “Why on earth would you like to go back? Humanity is on the brink of breaking through the Great Filter. I led the charge, and it was because of you—”

Sandra smiled sadly as she said, “Eternal youth isn’t worth the things I have missed.”

Beth added, “The real adventure of life is living—enjoying the ride, and leaving, so that the next person has a chance.”

The director looked at them skeptically. But he would be lying if he said he was not moved.

The girls led him to a crowd of people who now stood to the side of the scene. They pointed to a person in the crowd and suddenly he saw one gray haired lady who stood mute, looking at him with an expression he had loved so many years ago. He could tell just by looking at her that she was not all there in her mind—that she hadn’t been so in a long time. It was Peggy, his former sweetheart whom he had stopped keeping a track of. She was now aged and lined as he could have never imagined the sweet girl he dated would become. But even in seeing the shell of the person he once knew, he could remember what he had lost.

The director was no longer so sure of his views. He had two choices before him. He silently patted the pocket of his coat where he carried some of the nectar and the plant in a test tube, replete with its ability to aggressively grow and kill its hosts. He knew he could be abducted and he always carried it around, hoping to kill all of them if he was taken. He pulled out the test tube from his pocket and was pleased to see the shock in the eyes of his abductors. He had replayed this part in his head so many times and had been sure that he would do it too, except now he felt unsure and nervous. Things seemed altered. Unaccustomed to questioning himself, the director found himself in a unique predicament.

He wondered for the first time in his life if he had been wrong. What if he had not had as much control over things as he had supposed? What if what the world needed was a second chance at restoring order and peace? What if... He considered the alternative, of resetting the timeline—What if, just this once, he decided to surrender, rather than act? He was tired of the thoughts at war in his head. He wanted so badly to throw his arms up—to rest—to be at peace. He closed his eyes just to draw all his thoughts together.

When he looked up, he saw Peggy looking at him with recognition dawning in her eyes. Suddenly, it was as if his questions were answered. He knew what he must do.

The director walked out to an oasis. There were plants and vegetation of every hue imaginable. A waterfall in the middle of the scene completed what he could have only described as paradise. It was a place that looked like it had been regenerated from the plant he carried about. He wondered if all of it was some hallucination. He was wondering what would happen next and what his role in it would be when, somewhere in between the luscious greenery he spotted his old green Ford.

He opened it, half expecting the door to be stuck, and sidled into the driver's seat. He sighed, breathing in the smell of the car that hadn't changed over the years. He spotted the radio knob and turned it almost instinctively. A forgotten yet familiar song played from it— "Only you—"

The director knew then that sometimes second chances were all you got...

Epilogue

As the light faded, all that was left behind was an empty room and a vial with the plant. The beings looked at each other seemingly communicating. Their thought sharing was interrupted when a bright flash momentarily illuminated the room they were in. Space had parted and distorted as it made way for a portal to open up in the galaxy. They knew their moment had come and that they had to act quickly. Their time here had ended—the calling to leave had dawned upon them.

And so they left the dying planet Earth in the distance and opened a portal for themselves. The blaring of what sounded like a war horn echoed across the empty galaxy...

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