

**6 13 23 THE
FEDERATION OF
EARTH BOOK 1**

Jim Reid

The Federation of Earth, a Blueprint for a Just
World

Book I – First Contact

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Book I — First Contact

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Preface

Writing this book saved my life.

I am a gay, 73-year-old building contractor and bleeding-heart liberal living in San Francisco. I get up at 4 a.m. every morning, take a five-minute cold shower, make coffee, and write for three hours. Then I go to work, using detailed blueprints to gut older houses and rebuild them from the foundation up. This book is a blueprint for gutting the many tragically flawed socioeconomic systems we use to manage our home—Earth.

I've listened to 50 digital audiobooks each year for the last 30 years, covering such topics as history, philosophy, religion, politics, biographies, fiction, and science.

I know too much, all the wonderful and despicable things that we humans do to each other and to the other innocent animal species who share this amazing planet with us. Our immeasurable cruelty to humans and animals depressed me, and I considered killing myself in 2012. Instead, I began writing about benevolent aliens who come to Earth and fix all the things that dishearten and infuriate me. It's a long list.

I know the history of humans over the past 10,000 years. The creativity we show in our art, architecture, literature, and technology is extraordinary, yet we have always allowed ourselves to be governed by the dysfunctional idiot children of our avaricious ruling class.

Over four billion people today suffer under the inequitable rules and economic structures managed by the 6,000 political, religious, and corporate “leaders” who now rule the planet. Most citizens,

especially those in developing nations or under religious or political oligarchies, have few choices and little control over their lives.

In the last 10,000 years, we have gone from being an inconsequential species to the dominant predator on the planet, the only species that consistently preys on its own.

In the last hundred years, our out-of-control population growth has led to the natural extinction rate skyrocketing from one or two species per year to a few dozen vanishing every day, the largest planetary extinction in 66 million years

In the last 30 years, we have poured more concrete in Asia and released more carbon dioxide into the atmosphere than we produced in all of human history before that.

I recently read two books on climate change. The optimistic one was called *We're Doomed*. The most recent one was titled *The Uninhabitable Planet*.

If we all stopped driving cars today and never flew on jets ever again, it would be too late. We are already cascading headlong over the extinction cliff, yet we are planning and building new and bigger airports in booming cities around the world, trying to emulate the unsustainable lifestyles that those of us in countries like the United States have enjoyed since the 1950s.

The average tree incinerated in the worsening annual California fire season releases approximately one ton of carbon dioxide it was safely storing back into the environment. One new seedling planted could take decades to recapture the carbon released from one burned tree. Some climate scientists believe that the best way to mitigate our human carbon footprint is to plant a trillion trees. That's

134 trees for each of us. Maybe we should all go to the garden center rather than the airport to catch a flight.

What if we discover too late that Wall Street, capitalism, and endless financial growth are all fatal to the environment and only massive degrowth will save the planet? What good will stock certificates, cryptocurrency, second houses, insurance, or even gold bars do for your family and pets when the power goes off because the planet gets too hot to breathe for a single day?

Tragically, there is no adult in charge of this planet. Global warming and catastrophic climate change will be Mother Nature's correction for our errant species. The Sixth Extinction will be almost total.

The fever that Mother Earth will experience in the next 30 years will rid her body of the human virus, taking most other sentient beings with it. She will exhale and survive for another six billion years, but we will not. How stupid is that?

If we burn our house down, the closest solar system to Earth is 4.2 light-years away—and there's no guarantee that it contains a habitable planet. That's almost 25 trillion miles. On our fastest passenger jet, the Concorde, it would take 20 billion hours to get there. That's almost two and a half million years. The wealth of all the billionaires on the planet couldn't pay for that trip. And by best estimates, it might take a hundred years to terraform Mars, if it's even possible.

Am I being too alarmist? Maybe I read too much. We are all in this together.

If you are a heterosexual couple and have children or grandchildren, this book might help you think about their future or the

fact that they have no future in this, the end of human history.

If you are a millennial or younger, this book is about what I and all other baby boomers, and every previous generation, did to harm your planetary home—or failed to do to protect it. If this makes you angry, use that anger as jet fuel to pick up the pieces and secure your future and that of your friends before it's too late.

If you are a lover of animals, beyond your pets, we should kiss them goodbye, as you and I have failed in our biblical dominion of Earth.

If you believe in a god, the next time you are in his house, you should stop the show, sit him down, and have a parental talk with him. “So, God, what’s going on? Why would you allow our leaders to destroy this amazing planet you created and murder innocent children and animals? Is this what free will looks like? Do you want us to experience hell firsthand?”

If you are conservative, own a gun, and think liberals like me are your enemy, this book might help you realize that only 6,000 humans out of 8 billion, not one in a million, have any real power, and they don’t give a damn about either of us.

If your skin is any shade darker than white, if you have a vagina rather than a small dangling appendage, or if you are a shark, elephant, or chicken, this book is about you and your probable future.

Artificial Intelligence and androids are quickly learning to do all human jobs better, cheaper, and faster, making billions of us, from factory workers to store clerks, tech workers to writers and poets, members of a vast, unemployable, and, as some argue, useless and likely homeless class.

When you next see a homeless person on the street, imagine four billion homeless, including your family, your dog, and yourself. Then think about how compassionate and generous our current capitalist economic system will be to you.

And then the coronavirus arrived, a full-stop reset—a crisis—an unprecedented opportunity to take a different path.

Why don't we think outside the box and empower our best minds to imagine a new global socioeconomic system where people find meaning in doing what they love and not working for others—a post-work, post-coronavirus unified world without private property, internal combustion engines, or corrupt politicians?

We are at a turning point in human history, a fork in the road. One path, the one we are on, will lead us to catastrophic climate change that will render most of the planet uninhabitable—and our current technological promise history.

I believe that we must take the opposite path, one you might only be able to imagine if you were an alien, like ZEno, from a distant Earthlike planet with a unified socioeconomic system that benefited all sentient creatures and protected the biosphere. Earth in the original *Star Trek* is such a planet.

My mission is to get a critical mass of people, human Guardians like you, to believe we can and must change the world by using the technology we hold in our hands to overthrow the status quo. I believe *The Federation of Earth* provides a clear blueprint for a world governed by just universal laws and powerful AI that serves the common good, not corporate greed. We must follow this blueprint and build such a world.

We have at most 30 years to change the course of this great blue marble spaceship 180 degrees or die. The book vividly imagines how a better world might function.

What say you, citizen? Are you in?

Jim Reid

“The ones who are crazy enough to think that they can change the world are the only ones who do!”

–Steve Jobs

Prologue: Sleep and Dreams in the Status Quo

The Western Hemisphere revolved toward the sun, as it had for untold millions of years, ready for a new day, September 27, which would forever alter the course of Earth's history.

In millions of beds across North America, homeowners slept fitfully, troubled by dreams of losing their jobs, health insurance, and over-leveraged houses.

College graduates worried about finding the ever-elusive jobs they'd been promised to get out from underneath their staggering student debt.

The dark man, whose family had pulled the strings of many past presidents, dreamed of completing his global scheme of social and economic domination.

Troubled dreams haunted a young alien from a distant planet. He doubted his ability to transform enough ordinary humans into competent Guardians in time to save Earth. His shapeshifting friend imagined helping them board the last starship if he failed. They both feared that volunteering as Planetary Transition Observers and making Earth their home had been unwise.

An old woman in Arkansas enjoyed her first cigarette of the day as she prepared to feed her growing family of stray and abused animals.

A recently appointed Supreme Court justice imagined leveraging his new position to propel his robotics company to make him the first billionaire on the bench. He dreamed of his killing machines replacing all human police officers.

In Idaho, the patriarch of a small, off-the-grid community stroked the cracked exterior of a rifle his grandfather once treasured,

imagining the coming battle to defend his right to bear arms.

In her news van in Oakland, a TV reporter tore up the pink slip notifying her that her battle to highlight the economic plight of workers, renters, and students was over. AI would replace her.

In luxurious bedroom suites from San Francisco to Silicon Valley, tech executives dreamed of AI increasing their market share with the pending introduction of their latest app or device.

In San Francisco, a Catholic nun thumbed the last bead of her rosary across her callused palm, praying for a just world and wondering if she would have enough to feed the growing number of poor.

In a street-level room in the heart of the City, an aging builder sat by candlelight, typing away at a burgeoning document, his life's work, a blueprint to change the world. He dreamed of the technological wave that could extend his life another hundred years so he could live in the just world he was now imagining.

Endless tankers entered San Francisco Bay, laden with the residue of a million years of decay, black goo, long sequestered by the Earth, now headed for refineries to be processed and released into the atmosphere by millions of internal combustion engines.

A mammoth cargo ship lumbered out of the Golden Gate, piled high with old TVs, computers, and cell phones—a mountain of obsolete techno-junk destined for a Chinese hazardous waste dump.

In the vast oceans to the west, 18,000 factory ships continued their endless task of wrenching fish from the seas to feed growing human populations.

Millions of shark families swam through the ocean, fearing that their stewardship as apex predators had been usurped by air-

breathing creatures with floating islands and sharp hooks and knives, bent on their extinction.

One small but dominant shark dreamed of vengeance. If only he could speak. He'd make them all understand his bitterness, his pain . . . his wrath.

In a factory dormitory in Beijing, several thousand young women dreamed of escaping the 80-hour workweek. Some dreamed of revolution, though even their dreams were cautious.

In the palaces of the two capitals of a divided Korea, leaders on opposite political poles dreamed of strengthening their grips on power.

In villages across India, farmers dreamed of feeding their families without being forced to buy genetically engineered sterile seeds from the new economic colonialists of the 21st century.

In a small town outside of the holy city of Mecca, a young woman dreamed of freeing Muslim women from the slavery of patriarchal religion.

Deep below the Alps, near the mountain pass that Hannibal had taken thousands of years before to invade Italy and challenge the power of Rome, a vast computer waited to take control of the planet, as he was programmed to do.

In the Papal Apartments, the 267th successor to Saint Peter dreamed of using his power to improve the plight of the poor and powerless while he still lived.

In castles, palaces, and townhouses throughout Europe, the progeny of feudal kings dreamed of holding on to what little remained of the privilege of their blue blood.

In countless forests, the dreams of billions of animals were disturbed by their terror of the big machines, chainsaws, and fires used to destroy their primordial homes.

In the Philippines, uncounted youths dreamed of escaping the slavery of prostitution, while devout Catholics dreamed of acquiring ivory icons of the crucified Jesus, which they believed would protect them and secure their place in heaven.

In an African forest, an aging elephant slept in fear that she and her family might be slaughtered at any moment for their coveted tusks.

Industrial farming entrepreneurs dreamed of acquiring rainforest land by any means to further profit from the growing worldwide demand for velvety palm oil.

In a Sumatran rainforest, an old orangutan sat high in a tree, unable to sleep, troubled by the smoke and the coming fires that would drive her species to extinction.

In the White House, the last U.S. president sat up in bed, wondering how today's announcement would affect his chances for re-election as he tapped furiously on the screen of his cell phone.

A few thousand of the richest humans dreamed of increasing their wealth and moving up "The List." A handful dreamed of making the world a better place.

Three miles above Manhattan, a large, lizard-like alien—the commander of five starships—waited to fulfill the plan that advanced beings had set in motion over a hundred years before.

The billions of humans who had little power over their lives were unaware of the five alien ships high above them. Soon, though,

they would have a priceless tool, a gift that would empower them and transform their lives and the planet.

Chapter 1

First Sighting

Day 1: Monday, September 27

JOe was giddy with excitement. He'd waited 25 years for this moment. His alien creators had brought computers to Earth, built the internet, gradually released cell and smartphones, and finally introduced AI chatbots, so most humans would easily accept what would happen today.

High above the Statue of Liberty, aboard an invisible galactic cruiser, dozens of iridescent hummingbird bots, JOe's eyes, hovered near the domed ceiling of the command deck. As they observed the room, lines of blue and green blended with vibrant red and orange swirls on the trans-molecular surfaces of the floor and the ceiling, reflecting the diverse expression of thoughts and emotions of the hundred Guardians. They'd soon have word to begin their sweep of Earth.

Ambassador Taract Freeman stood at the high command desk, strumming his bony fingers on the translucent surface. Red rings circled his fingertips with each touch. He reached into the pocket of his white linen robe and felt the cleft of the polished, heart-shaped rock, a gift from his human mother. It always calmed him. He'd made a promise to her over a century ago on a planet 12 light-years away. He'd keep that promise today.

The light in the room changed, and grass sprouted in the empty floor spaces. A door behind the command desk slid open, and the room grew silent.

T'sade Aedra, the strategic commander of the five starships, marched into the room. Her serpentine tail separated the now-tall

grass as she trudged across the floor. Her yellow eyes twitched as she scanned the Guardians as if assessing them in nanoseconds. Argon Hobox, Guardian of animals, walked beside her, carrying a small ape.

Taract noticed the look of satisfaction on her sinewy face. The command deck dome transformed into the primordial sky of her planet. Even the air smelled moist and pungent, like decomposing vegetation and lush jungle trees. Predatory birds flew overhead. JOe's bots darted aside.

With a touch of her three-fingered hand, the command desk became a 3-D map of the landmass below. Manhattan was their first target. Four other ancient starships hovered above other major cities of the Americas. Each had half a billion trans-molecular devices—and a hundred shuttles to deliver them.

T'sade tapped her earpiece and clapped her declawed hands. "Guardians, it's time to go. Your shuttles are ready on Subdeck C." Her voice sounded like a muffled roar from a Jurassic jungle. It jarred people on first hearing.

Argon and most of the human Guardians stopped what they were doing and prepared to leave the deck.

Argon looked up at T'sade. "KudOwsid."

She bent down. "Uxow!"

They each touched the other's heart and gently butted heads. Argon gave Bobo to the ambassador.

Taract remembered the vid of T'sade's time in Hell, when Federation surgeons had removed the horn on her head as part of her rehabilitation. The scar reminded him of photos of rhinoceroses

slaughtered for their horns. Her appearance would cause humans to panic—not a tactic they'd use today.

Taract watched as the deck emptied. He'd interviewed most of these Guardians over the decades. Many were now friends. Each was committed to protecting an animal or plant species, a community, the environment, or even noble ideals. They had dubbed today *First Contact*.

Taract looked around. Only the android technicians remained. "So, it begins."

T'sade caressed the tiny ape Taract held with the back of her scaled hand. She nodded.

A door opened, and galactic journalist Sasha Sartori sauntered in. "Waiting around makes me nervous. Did I miss anything?"

Far below, the morning sun burned off the chill. Hundreds of protesters filled the street across from the New York Stock Exchange. Protesters on bicycles circled the block, frustrating people trying to get to work. NYPD officers mingled with the crowd, keeping things moving.

New York Mayor Glen Whitehead and his bodyguard, Alcippe Smith, stood at an open window above the street, watching the protest below. At 72, he was in better shape than all but a few members of the police force.

He had met Alcippe a year ago at the Mayors' Conference Against Gun Violence. Her sharp features and piercing eyes had caught his attention, not to mention she was six foot seven. She had been the first Federation Guardian he'd met. She'd soon become his

bodyguard, as few of New York's finest could keep up with his pace, especially his hour-long predawn workouts. Many speculated that she was more than his bodyguard.

"They're here," she said, leaning against him and pointing.

They looked down the street. Two blocks away, a black armored semi-trailer with "F.P.U." stamped along the sides in red unloaded troops and equipment. The mayor had objected to having President Neilson's new Federal Police Unit in his city, but to no avail.

The recent Supreme Court decision to strike down the modest Financial Reform Act, narrowly passed by progressive Democrats, had proven to most citizens that Wall Street had finally secured full control over all three branches of government.

Neilson's latest appointment to the Supreme Court, Alberto Vinyez, a pretty-boy lawyer and early supporter, had been the deciding vote. His company, El Paso Robotics, was under investigation for campaign finance violations.

Before his nomination, Vinyez had been the White House legislative advisor who had promoted two constitutional amendments that would reword the Second Amendment to declare that only state militias would have the right to bear arms. The First Amendment would be revised to require federal permits for free-speech demonstrations, limit their duration, and disenfranchise convicted violators.

The protests preceding his Senate approval had united groups as far right as white nationalists and as far left as social justice warriors. The nationwide riots that resulted in the deaths of 587 demonstrators and 126 police officers had spurred a panicked

Congress to approve Neilson's Federal Police. If history were a guide, Vinyez would be on the court for the next 40 years. Many political pundits believed Neilson's thugs had initiated much of the violence.

"Here come the troublemakers," said Alcippe.

They watched as a group of teenagers approached the FPU barricades. Most had protest signs and backpacks. The leader carried a sign: "RESIST THE BEAST."

Glen closed the window. "Let's follow them."

On the street, an unshaven, shaggy-haired young man, Clyde Andrews, stood with a bullhorn. He'd been in college for so long that many considered him a professional student. He was a purveyor of street theater, and the mayor knew him well.

His low stilts put him two feet above the crowd. His green t-shirt read, "Serve Love, Not Capitalism," and the tall, floppy top hat on his head made him look like the Cat in the Hat. Omnidirectional speakers were taped to his shoulders. He walked in a circle, as it was now a federal crime to stand in a public place for more than five minutes without a federal permit.

As he spoke, suited men rushed by, some shaking their heads. Glen knew they thought this was another futile protest by the have-nots against those who'd always held power—and always would.

"Our generation is being drowned in a flood of debt. How many of you took out student loans? Or a credit card or two to help with expenses? How many of you are still behind on that debt?"

"Even our parents are still trying to pay back loans they took out to help us. How many people are trapped by this debt, which forces us to work, work, work all the damn time to only break even?"

"It wouldn't be so bad if everything had worked out the way they promised. It's not like we didn't expect to pay those loans back. But they sold us a bill of goods!"

The crowd, young and strident like the speaker, expressed its approval. The encouragement spurred him on.

"They promised that if we played by the rules, we'd end up with a good job and a stable future! But what did we get instead? Thankless, repetitive, pointless, menial jobs that don't pay enough—if we can even find a job—no money to enjoy, no time to enjoy if we had it, and a life of loan repayments, late fees, and higher interest!"

Facing the Federal Police Unit, NYPD officers in riot gear blocked the street, their backs to the protest. A block away, FPU officers dressed in armored black and gray uniforms lined up in formation.

Matt Collins and Grace Savoy stood at the edge of the crowd. They'd met in the registration line at Columbia University four years ago. They'd both been considering careers in law.

As they listened to the speaker, Matt smirked. "Well, a world without work, debt, broken promises, or your parents making you feel guilty does sound great. But after that, what's Santa going to get you this Christmas?"

Grace tightened her lips. "It sounds like you're not taking this seriously."

With his closely cropped hair and pinstriped suit, he felt conspicuous among the proud shabbiness of the rest of the crowd. He didn't know what he was doing here—pleasing Grace, maybe.

He'd talked with her father last weekend about marrying her, and today he'd dressed for lunch with her parents at a posh eatery a block away.

"Personally," he said. "I've always thought it would be a good idea to tax the obscene profits that banks earn. After all, if you think about it . . ." He stopped. Grace's eyes had gone wide. The day seemed to be getting darker. Even the crowd had grown silent.

"What, did I say some—"

"Matt, look." She pointed.

There was something overhead. It looked like a classic flying saucer from an old movie. As it glided silently across the sky, everyone froze.

The speaker on the street stared, cyclists stopped, drivers got out of their cars, and Matt did not notice Grace clinging to his arm.

Flying so low that it hardly seemed to clear the spires of the tallest skyscrapers, the ship blotted out the sun. When it reached the open area over Trinity Church, it stopped, casting an eerie light over the crowd below.

On the underside of the ship, a door opened. At first, nothing seemed to happen, but then a dark cloud billowed out.

A few people screamed, but there was nowhere to run. As the cloud lowered, it slowed. Finally, the mass broke into pieces that swarmed like locusts over the city.

As the objects came closer, Matt saw they were rectangular, but they soared like wooden gliders coming in for a landing.

"They're credit cards!" someone yelled.

People grabbed them in a frenzy, like shoppers at a Black Friday sale. Others swatted them with whatever they were carrying,

trying to avoid contact.

Each card seemed to seek out a particular individual. Grace let one fall into her open hand as though it were the first snowflake of winter, just for her.

Matt grabbed at one, but it eluded him and flew off to another protester. Another darted toward him. He grabbed it. Whatever it was, it was thicker than a credit card, more like six, the colors of a rainbow, stacked together.

A cosmos of stars shimmered within it. The blue-green image of the planet slowly revolved on the surface, along with the words “The Federation of Earth.” A thumbprint appeared at the edge.

Matt held his thumb over the print and pressed. The design disappeared, and the device warmed and became fluid, growing to the size of his cell phone but now only as thick as two credit cards.

The image of a man appeared on the screen. He looked familiar to Matt, like his mom’s uncle Joe, who’d died a few years back.



MATTHEW EDWARD DOLAN – 22/058 EARTH YEARS/DAYS
CITIZEN # 000,000,000,001
LAW STUDENT – MBA CANDIDATE. FIANCE OF GRACE MARIE PETERSON
GPS LOCATION: 40°42'24.6"N 74°0'39.7"W
30 BROAD STREET NEW YORK, NEW YORK USA
CITIZEN CONVERSATION META-TAG # 0000000000000000000000007
CHAT AVATAR: UNCLE JOE

“Hello, Matt. It’s Joe,” the man said, sounding almost euphoric. “Congratulations. You are the first to activate a trans-molecular device, making you the first registered citizen of Federation Earth.”

The resemblance to Matt’s uncle was uncanny. He had the same creases around his mouth when he smiled and those same knowing eyes. And like Uncle Joe, his eyes were different colors: one green, the other blue. Reflexively, Matt replied, “Federation Earth? What’s that?”

“It’s the last government Earth will ever need. Soon everyone on the planet will renounce their national citizenship and come together as citizens of Earth. Then you can join the Galactic Federation of Blue-Green Planets. I’m so glad you gave up your U.S. citizenship to become the first citizen of Federation Earth, Matt. You’re going to be famous.”

“I didn’t join anything. I only put my thumb on this card.”

“Read the small print.” JOe pointed to the spot where the thumbprint had first appeared. His hand seemed to come out from the screen like in a 3-D movie.

Matt scrutinized the card. It seemed to be only a screen. As he flipped it, his uncle’s front appeared and then his back.

“What small print?”

JOe laughed. The original screen image reappeared, semitransparent and superimposed on Joe’s face. It zoomed in on the thumbprint button that Matt had pressed. He could now see that there was tiny text in the ridges of the print.

“By pressing your thumb against this device,” JOe read, “you agree to relinquish your national citizenship and accept all the rights and obligations of a citizen of the Federation of Earth.”

Matt frowned.

“Don’t worry, Matt,” said JOe. The image of the thumbprint faded, leaving only his smiling face. “The small print also specifies that you have three days to return the device and cancel your citizenship. You can throw it into the air and say, ‘Return to JOe,’ and it will fly away, and your old life will be restored.”

Matt exhaled forcefully.

“I was going to tell you all this later,” said JOe, “once we got to know each other a little better.”

[END TRANSMISSION—1:29]

Matt looked around. Grace was talking to her card. Everyone was engrossed in conversation with these strange new cell phones. Even the police were talking to them. Only the Federal Police, he now noticed, were standing at attention, unmoved. The stacked credit cards fluttered around their heads like flies. He recognized their leader, a short, stocky man with a shaved head, shouting into his cell phone. Matt had seen him on CNN. His name was Tyson. Erik Tyson.

Matt felt Grace’s hand press softly on his shoulder.

“This is cool!” She turned her TMD toward Matt. “Have you talked with Jo?”

The young woman on the screen waved. “Hi, Matt.”

“This is the best cell phone I’ve ever seen,” said Grace.

“I don’t like them,” said Matt. “They’re insidious!”

“Excuse me,” said a voice from behind Grace. A diminutive, plump woman in her late 30s, in baggy pants and a plaid shirt, extended her hand. “I’m Jean Meyer, one of the protest organizers.” She had short hair, graying at her temples, and a few proud whiskers

on her chin. She wore a button that read, "Overthrow Misogynistic Pigs."

Matt just stared, confused.

"Jo has a plan to help us outwit the police and get into the stock exchange. This protest might be more successful than we could have imagined."

"How can we help?" asked Grace.

"You two look more like traders than protestors. Jo asked me to conscript people to take down the stock exchange before we are noticed."

Matt thought back to what he had been saying earlier. Was that protest speaker right? He had no idea how he fit into the world. Things were changing too fast. He looked at Grace. His thoughts were interrupted by a whirring sound. Hummingbirds hovered above them. The birds seemed to be staring at them.

"Whoa," said Grace. "Strange time of the year for hummingbirds to be here."

They seemed to be everywhere, hovering above the protesters and police.

"If you are coming," said Jean, "we should go before the Federal Police attack."

Grace took Matt's hand and nodded to Jean.

Jean led them down the side street to an emergency exit at the back of the building. A hummingbird followed them.

A tall, thin African-American woman dressed in a black uniform with a gold badge on her chest held open the emergency exit door. She was taller than Matt and looked a bit like a younger version of Grace Jones. He'd seen her somewhere, TV maybe. He thought she

smelled subtly of machine oil. And then it hit him—she was the spitting image of the mayor’s bodyguard, Alcippe Smith.

“Place your TMD on your chest and say, ‘Nametag,’” she said. “It will give you the visitor credentials to get you up onto the trading floor.”

Matt looked up at the sky and saw the spaceship was gone. The speaker began talking again, and Matt saw a few dozen well-dressed protesters behind him, leaning their signs against the wall. At the end of the street, a local TV reporter pointed at the sky and held up one of the thin cell phones as his cameraman recorded.

The mayor and Alcippe ran down the block to the line of FPU officers.

“Where’s Tyson?” he demanded.

A short, broad-shouldered man walked over. A long scar ran across his shaved head. “What do you want?”

“I want you to pack up your goons and get out of my city. The NYPD can handle this.”

“Like you did last summer?”

The mayor glared at him.

“Federal law mandates we stop violent protests.”

“This is a peaceful protest,” said Alcippe. She towered over Tyson. “We issued a permit.”

“All protests of more than 10 people require a federal permit. We didn’t issue one.”

“You turn them all down,” said the mayor.

“We’re backlogged.” Tyson looked up at the sky and grimaced. “Besides, things have changed. We’re in charge now.”

Screams and the sound of shattering glass came from down the street. Tyson ordered his men to move out. One of them grabbed the TMD flying around his face and slid it in his pocket.

“Collins, keep an eye on these two,” said Tyson. “If they give you trouble, arrest them.” The FPU officers marched down the street.

When the mayor followed, Collins grabbed him with both hands, but Alcippe dove into the officer’s knees. He rolled over her back and hit the ground hard. She had his legs and arms bound in no time.

She and the mayor headed toward the protest.

On the trading floor of the stock exchange, hummingbird bots hovered high above. As the African American woman distracted the security guard, Jean and the other protesters filed past him.

A man on the balcony above the trading floor said into a microphone, “Listen up! You all saw that reporter on the street demonstrate the new cell phone. This is going to make cell stocks crash. There’s money to be made dumping old tech stocks and finding out who makes these TMDs.”

A trader on the floor yelled, “Precious metals—buy them!”

The traders attempted to return to business. Grace held Matt’s hand.

“Die in!” Jean shouted.

The protesters followed Jean’s lead and lay on the polished wooden floor, making it difficult for the stock traders to get around.

Some of them tripped. Several tried to use their cell phones to call the police, but cell service was dead.

The security guard sitting at the desk near the door picked up the landline and pressed a button. All the TMD nametags worn by the protesters flashed like the bulbs of antique cameras, and then the room went dark. Matt's TMD transformed into the stack of credit cards and slid into his vest pocket.

Sasha Sartori had arrived to record the process of bringing this planet under Federation rule for the respected 800-year-old magazine *Galactic Geographica*.

She reveled in the human tradition of wearing clothes. She could transform her TMD into any garment she imagined. Today she wore a sleeveless yellow polka-dot dress she'd seen in a 1950s teen dance movie. It barely contained her voluptuous body.

She stood at the command desk, across from T'sade and Taract, watching a 3-D map of the Western Hemisphere. The five starships hovered over Montreal, New York, Havana, Lima, and Santiago. The ships disgorged their shuttles like giant tortoises laying eggs. The shuttles spread out to smaller cities and towns on the delivery grid. The names of the humans aboard each shuttle floated above its image.

Sasha pointed to one flying over Charleston. "Argon Hobox" glowed in luminous blue letters. "I'd meant to see him before they took off."

"He'll be back aboard the mothership within 24 hours," said T'sade.

“I haven’t seen him in 20 years. He was such a sensitive little boy then.”

“He’s grown into a fine young man despite his mother,” said Taract.

“Sophia was brilliant but deeply troubled,” said Sasha. “She told me the whole story in confidence.”

“She hasn’t changed, but she was a good mother. I think Argon was traumatized by her sudden departure.”

“I met her at the spaceport on the other side of the moon,” said T’sade. “I’d arrived on a star tanker. We spent a few days together while the tanker dipped into the Pacific near the equator, taking on its cargo of sea life. She left on the tanker three days later. She asked me to adopt Argon.”

“JOe knows why she left,” said Taract, “but he refuses to tell anyone.”

“You didn’t know?” asked T’sade. “He found her a lover.”

“So, she ran away?” asked Sasha.

T’sade nodded.

Taract shook his head. “She activated JOe’s emotion program without working out the bugs.”

“He’s become a matchmaker,” said T’sade.

“It’s so annoying.”

“Well, he could fix me up!” Sasha twirled her hands in the air. Her shoulder-length brown hair and long dress billowed, exposing her white mesh stockings and low-heeled emerald slippers.

The swirling made her dizzy. She thought about Argon. She’d be traveling to the Pacific with him tomorrow for a story on the

overfishing of the oceans. She'd reveal her secrets to him then. Her skin turned a reddish green.

A hummingbird bot flew up to her left eye. She sat at the command desk and snapped her fingers. It transformed into a clear glass screen the size of a dinner plate.

On the screen, a dozen hooded figures smashed store windows, sprayed graffiti, and attacked other protestors. She watched the NYPD officers break ranks as the violence began. The Federal Police officers pushed past them on their way into the conflict.

Her skin turned from dark to pale green as she watched the action through the eyes of the hummingbird bots she controlled on the streets below.

It looked like the Federal Police officers were beating the perpetrators and then quickly taking them away. Something didn't look right to her. They then sprayed protestors with red paint and some sort of gas.

"Have you seen violence like this before, Taract?"

"I have. I was on the staff of the Swiss embassy in Berlin in 1933. I was standing on the street near the Reichstag building the night it burned. This act of violence led to the newly elected chancellor being given dictatorial powers. I spent the next 12 years in Germany, Poland, and Switzerland."

"Could this happen in America?"

"I've long feared that it would."

"Humans shouldn't run this planet," said T'sade. "Some of my tribe should come here and manage it as a protectorate for the Federation."

Sasha looked at Taract. They both knew T'sade's history.

"JOe will manage the planet, thank you," said Taract. "He and Universal Law."

Sasha continued to watch the violence as it unfolded below.

NYPD and FPU officers battled over possession of the protesters. The NYPD officers drew their guns.

Sasha tapped her temple with her fingers as if typing.

The mothership headed west over the Hudson River and then turned south toward Washington.

Chapter 2

The Last Days of the Status Quo

As Abbie Dolan waited at the edge of the crowd on the White House South Lawn, she bit into a muffin. The bits of dried lemon made her mouth water, and the seeds popped as she chewed. It was much better than most of the food she'd had at events her father had forced her to attend.

President Arthur Neilson was hosting a breakfast to celebrate the passage of the Banking and Debt Act, which removed the limit on interest and fees banks could charge. It also removed bankruptcy protection for most citizens. Progressives argued that this bill would cause most of the middle class to fall below the poverty line. Today the president would sign it into law.

He had invited the families of all his closest campaign contributors and political allies. Tastefully dressed in designer clothing and expensive jewelry, the assembled crowd, whose collective wealth was greater than most nations, gossiped inanely, paying little attention to the address.

“What do you think of the muffin, Miss Dolan?”

She looked up into the smiling brown eyes of a tall, thin African American man. He was wearing a white suit and a small chef's hat. “Durante Blugre” was embroidered onto the breast pocket in blue and green thread. A deep-blue rosebud bound to a sprig of lily of the valley with a green ribbon protruded from his lapel.

“It's exceptionally good!” she said.

“I baked it myself.”

“Do I know you?”

“I've seen you here many times. I knew your grandfather.”

“He died too soon.” She pursed her lips.

“The world would be a better place had he lived beyond retirement.”

She nodded, wondering who this man was and what he knew.

“You work here?”

“I am afraid I do. I am the president’s personal chef. It was my first job out of culinary school in 1921. I’ve known 14 presidents.”

She peered at him. “You don’t look that old.”

“I take care of myself.”

They were interrupted by the press secretary announcing the president. As president Neilson made his way to the lectern, he was greeted with polite applause.

“Welcome to this historic day. For too long, the burdens of regulation have made it impossible for job creators and entrepreneurs to grow this economy and help the people of the working class. With the passage of the Banking and Debt Act, Americans are finally free of the unnecessary laws that keep employers from hiring those who need jobs the most, and banks from making loans to those who need just a little more to get by. Fortunately, the public-private partnership authorized by this law will make it easier for millions of poor families to stretch their paychecks with new federal PayDayUSA loans and allow more people to get work by authorizing employers to hire low-skilled employees at sub-minimum wage. Finally, this law will end unemployment altogether by replacing the current system of insurance compensation with new, long-term WorkShare loans for the jobless. By making it easier for poor families like Theresa Cross and her children to get funds right away, without complicated rules and confusing regulations, this law will change the face of poverty as we know it.”

President Neilson gestured to a woman and her children sitting to the side of the stage. They wore ill-fitting dress clothes that seemed to have been acquired for the occasion. The mother beamed when she heard her name called, but her daughter looked down and shuffled her feet. Her son stared longingly at a buffet table.

“Excuse me, Abbie,” said Durante. “I am going to get a tray of food for the young boy and his sister. Maybe we can talk later.”

She nodded.

“Never again,” said the president, “will these children need to know the pangs of hunger.”

Bor-ring, thought Abbie. Her father had brought her to dozens of events like this, and she never understood why such powerful men had such small ambitions. All they could think about was money—and making more of it.

She glanced at Erez, her bodyguard, talking to a female Secret Service agent as they both watched the crowd. Abbie pointed to the White House and mouthed the word *bathroom*.

Erez nodded.

Abbie snuck away from the crowd, looking for a way inside the White House to find her father.

Jefferson McEnery sat in the front row of Gaston Hall at Georgetown University. He liked to be close to the stage. It made him feel important, like the speaker was talking directly to him. He looked around. The room was packed.

He'd arrived early and walked through the new NHS ultraviolet virus scanner. His temperature was 97.5. The invitation had told him to check his phone with the attendant at the door. No one in their right mind would ever give their cell phone to a stranger. He'd promised to turn it off, but she wouldn't let him keep it. She hadn't even taken his name. She'd made him place it into a smaller scanner on her desk. It had slid in on a small conveyer belt, through an intense blue light, and out the other side. She'd picked it up with a gloved hand and dropped it in a bin with hundreds of others.

Voices filled the hall. He stood and scanned the audience as if looking for a friend. The crowd was a good cross-section of humanity, all races and ages.

He thought about the questionnaire. It had come in the mail a month ago. They'd offered a futuristic cell phone to those who answered a few questions and mailed their answers back to an address in Brooklyn.

One of the questions was: "If you never had to work another day in your life, what would you do with your time besides travel?"

Another: "If you could change one thing about the world today, what would that be?"

A third question asked: "Is there something that infuriates you about the direction the world is taking today?"

He'd thought long and hard about his answers and changed them a few times before mailing them in. The invitation that had arrived on Friday said this organization was looking for people they called "Guardians" and his answers had made him a candidate.

The lights dimmed, and the audience went silent. He looked at the clock on the wall: 8:30. A door opened in the amber-paneled wall at the side of the stage, and a man came out. He was so tall he had

to duck his head to get through the doorway. He wore a styleless gray robe. His face was long and thin, and he had a full beard. His hair was gray-white, and it stuck straight out about a half-inch in tight curls. He seemed young, but his gaunt face was dirty white and splotchy, like dried mud on a Nevada salt flat. He looked a bit like an albino, but his eyes were piercing black. He walked past the podium with a quick, loping gait.

He stopped at the edge of the stage. His bare feet were long, and his toes gripped the edge of the stage like those of an ape. His toenails and fingernails were translucent, long, and perfectly manicured.

Gasps and whispers came from the audience. Jefferson looked back. Many people's mouths were wide open.

"Greetings!" His gaze drifted across the audience. His eyes locked with Jefferson's for a nanosecond and then moved on, methodically sweeping up and down every row. He clasped his hands in front of his chest as if shaking hands with himself. The sleeves of his robe slid down, exposing slender wrists and arms covered with dense gray-white hair, almost like fur, that thinned out at his knuckles.

"My name is ZEno. I've come here from the planet Alo." He half-smiled. His voice was deep and clear. His English was formal and meticulous, but he had an odd accent. "I am pleased to see all of you. I have read many of your questionnaires, and I am delighted with the diversity of your answers. My home planet is six light-years from Earth. I am a citizen of the peaceful Federation of Blue-Green Planets, and I have decided to make Earth my home. I was not born in the United States, so your president, his disingenuous political

party, and many of their supporters will consider me an alien.” He laughed.

Jefferson briefly reconsidered his decision to sit in the first row. ZEno didn't look dangerous, though, and the audience wasn't upset.

The alien looked to the back of the auditorium and motioned with his hand. The lights brightened.

“You have been invited here for a conversation about Guardians in a common-good society. They tell me this meeting is being telecast live to hundreds of universities. You are here by invitation because of your responses to the questionnaire. We promised you the latest cell phone, but what I have for you is so much more. It is a device that will change your world.”

The woman who had taken Jefferson's cell phone at the front desk came down the center aisle. A young man followed her. They carried baskets filled with what looked like glowing bundles of credit cards. They placed them on the raised stage, one on each side of where ZEno was standing.

ZEno reached down, picked one of the devices out of the basket, and held it up. It twinkled like a star in a moonless sky.

“I would like each of you to close your eyes,” he said, “and think about the answers you gave to the three questions and the essay you wrote weeks ago.”

The young man and woman at his feet closed their eyes.

Jefferson hated “group think,” where everyone was expected to do or say the same thing or bow their heads in a moment of silence. He kept his eyes open and even looked around. He was pretty sure they wouldn't throw him out for not playing along.

“Please keep your eyes closed,” said ZEno, “until I tell you to open them.”

He bent down to each basket, and Jefferson heard him whisper, “Seek out your Guardian!”

The 743 TMDs transformed into tiny hummingbird bots in a dazzling myriad of colors. They flew out over the audience, searching and sniffing. The air hummed with their flapping wings. They swooped high, hovering near the beams of the dark wood ceiling.

Jefferson’s astonished gaze followed them up, and then he looked at ZEno. The alien wagged his bony index finger at him and then pressed it to his lips and winked.

“Think about the one thing you said upsets you most about how the world is today,” said ZEno. “Feel your anger or frustration.”

He was silent for a long minute.

“Now imagine a just world. Think about a world where the problem that infuriates you does not exist. Breathe into that feeling.”

The audience seemed to breathe as one being. A wave of air moved through the auditorium.

ZEno closed his eyes and took in a few deep breaths. “Now imagine a tiny, ruby-throated hummingbird. Imagine its wings flapping right in front of your face. Imagine that this small, sentient being is your best friend. Think of a name. Speak it and whisper, ‘Come to me!’”

Jefferson thought of his first pet, a beagle his parents had gotten him on his eighth birthday. He closed his eyes and said, “Charlie, come to me!”

Almost as soon as the words left his mouth, a soft thrum of rapidly vibrating wings seemed to come out of nowhere. He could feel the fluttery breeze on his cheeks.

“Take another slow, deep breath,” said ZEno. “Put your hand out in front of you, palm up. Open your eyes.”

The room erupted with gasps of excitement, hushed greetings, men and women babbling like babies, and people speaking in many languages.

Jefferson slowly lifted his eyelids. A tiny hummingbird with emerald wings and a ruby throat hovered in front of him and settled on his palm.

“Are you Charlie?”

It turned its head sideways and nodded as if it understood English.

ZEno’s Mona Lisa smile burst into a huge, toothy grin of delight. He waited until everyone calmed down. He snapped his fingers. The hummingbirds turned, hovered, and flew to their new companions’ right shoulders.

“I imagine,” he said, “that none of you will trade your new little friend for your old cell phone, even an iPhone iNfinity.”

The audience erupted again.

“Some of you are wondering about the cell phone you were promised.”

Jefferson joined a hundred other voices in saying, “Yes!” This was a fun toy, but he wanted his phone back.

ZEno pointed out at the audience and then up at the ceiling. “ZaTu!”

A shimmering gold hummingbird with an obsidian throat came down and landed on his finger. It was radiant compared to ZEno's drabness.

"This is my best friend, ZaTu. He is what we call a trans-molecular device. On your shoulder is the only material possession you will ever need. My parents gave me ZaTu 30 years ago, when I was only five years old. He's been my friend ever since. Your tiny friend will help you create the just world you've dreamed of."

Hundreds of voices asked questions of ZEno and their neighbors. Some asked their hummingbird bots.

ZEno waited for silence, and then he put out his left hand. "ZaTu. TMD!" The small bot zipped over to his open palm and transformed into a stack of six credit cards, five gold and one black. He held it up for all to see. A thumbprint appeared, and he pressed it. "Cell phone," he said. It transformed into a thin gold cellphone with black trim.

The audience gasped, and a few people tried this new trick. ZEno sat on the edge of the stage, his long legs hanging down, and conversed with his two assistants. The three released their hummingbird bots into the audience.

"Let's try this out, Charlie," said Jefferson. "Cell phone."

With a delighted chirp, the hummingbird leaped from his shoulder and swooped onto his open palm. Seconds later, he was holding a feather-light replica of his iPhone iNfinity, even down to the fantasy sports app he'd downloaded that morning. He touched the phone icon and, to his amazement, saw his contacts were already there.

The three hummingbird bots flew back to the stage, and ZaTu landed on ZEno's shoulder. Jefferson's mouth dropped open as the little bot chirped in crisp, clear English, "They are ready."

ZEno stood. "You are all here because you are prime candidates to become Guardians. Earth desperately needs you. You will all change the world through your critical mass. Ten years ago, I volunteered to become a Guardian of planets. I was only 25 years old. My father, ZOlog, and my mother, EZstara, gave me their blessing to come to Earth, knowing they would likely never see me again.

"I chose to do this because, when I was a boy, my mother read an article to me titled 'Doomed Paradise.' The article described the recently discovered planet Earth in a distant solar system. It described Earth as one of the most extraordinary planets in the known universe, but it also warned that there was a 63 percent likelihood of a mass extinction of sentient creatures in the next 50 years. This was because of the mismanagement of the dominant species that controlled the planet.

"I left my life behind because Earth is extraordinary beyond distinction, but we may already be too late to save it. I cast my lot with all of you, and we are now over the tipping point. Soon this extinction will cascade to a point where the momentum will be unstoppable. We will all be doomed, as there will be no starships to remove any of us.

"To help you understand how vast the universe is and the distances between star systems, compare the Pacific Ocean to your hummingbird bot. The bot is your solar system. The ocean is the known universe. There are millions of galaxies and billions of planets

that none of us will ever see. I traveled a full year at 50 times light speed to get here from the nearest planet.

“Now we are going to take a 30-minute break. Food and drink are in the lobby. If you would like to exchange your TMD for your old cell phone and go home, you may do so.

“Your old cell phones contain hazardous materials. Zara here will be placing them in a trans-molecular smelter in the lobby, where they will be separated into their components for reuse. Those of you who would like to keep your TMD can put your old cell phone in the smelter.

“While you are in the lobby or outside, re-read your personal essay so that it is clear in your mind when you return. Say, ‘*Essay*,’ and it will appear on your screen.”

As everyone filed out of the room, Jefferson looked down at his new phone. Checking his emails and texts wasn’t so urgent anymore. “Let’s go, Charlie,” he whispered, and within seconds, his TMD was once again a hummingbird flitting around his head.

“Let’s see what you can do, my friend,” he said, grinning.

He walked into the lobby, down the stairs, and out onto the steps of the building for some fresh air and privacy. He sat on a low wall. Charlie flew along with him.

Jefferson heard the familiar ringtone of his cell phone and reached into his pocket. No phone. It rang again. Charlie transformed into a cell phone and landed in Jefferson’s hand.



JEFFERSON JOHN MC ENERY—45/249 EARTH YEARS/DAYS
CITIZEN # 000,089,584,258
LAWYER—CONGRESSIONAL LOBBIST—GUARDIAN OF THE POWERLESS
CANDIDATE—LEVEL II
GPS LOCATION: 38°907608 N 77°07264 W
OUTSIDE GASTON HALL 3700 O ST NW WASHINGTON, D.C. 20057 USA
CITIZEN CONVERSATION META-TAG # 0000000000000067246942375
CHAT AVATAR: JOEL

“Hello, Jefferson.”

“Joel, is that you?” Jefferson looked closely at the image. His friend looked like he had on graduation day. They hadn’t spoken in over 20 years.

“I am the memory of your old friend,” said JOe. “We were both foolish to have given up a solid friendship over such a trivial matter.”

“Yeah, that chick who flirted with us, asked us out on dates, and then dumped us both!”

“Sheila Brown!”

As they conversed, JOe was simultaneously talking with the 43-year-old Joel in Seattle on his old cell phone, using the 25-year-old image of Jefferson. He would put them in touch with each other at the end of the day when Joel traded his old cell phone for a TMD.

“I have to go, Jefferson. Let’s talk again soon.” The phone went dark.

[END TRANSMISSION—3:37

Jefferson unconsciously slid the TMD into his suit pocket, and then it rang again.

“Hello?”

“Hello, who is this?” asked the caller.

“Jefferson McEnery. Who is this?”

“It’s your sister.”

“Martha?”

He saw the image of his older sister standing in front of the blue doors outside Hamman Hall Auditorium at Rice University. She looked anorexic. “What do you want?”

“You called me.”

“No, I didn’t!” Jefferson thought about the abrupt end of his call with Joel. “Do you have a new cell phone that changes shape?”

“The same one you have,” she said. “I saw you in the front row, listening to ZEno. Your ego got the best of you again.”

“Huh,” grunted Jefferson. “So, you got the questionnaire?”

“Yeah, they liked my essays.”

“I guess you’ll finally get to use that anthropology degree.”

“It’s my true love. I want to take care of antiquities.”

“How about if I call you later?”

“You never do.”

“I’ll call you, I promise. I’ve got to get back to the session.”

Jefferson sat down with the cell phone in his hand. “Essays,” he said and began to read.

Inside the White House, Abbie crept upstairs and then down the main hall. She looked over the presidential memorabilia. As the daughter of one of the richest men in the world, getting past security had been child’s play.

She peered into every room she passed, but there was little to capture her interest. They all had the same old historical look, and

she found it hard to believe the essential business of the nation was conducted here.

She heard voices down the hall. As she came closer, they began to sound familiar. She reached the doorway of the Lincoln Bedroom and peeked in.

The first face she noticed was her father's.

A man standing in the center of the room cleared his throat and raised his glass. "Gentlemen, may I propose a toast to the successful passage of the Banking and Debt Act." Abbie instantly recognized him as the president's chief of staff, Chuck Colton.

These men were familiar to her, all wealthy. Secretary Milken was lying on the bed, sipping a glass of red wine. He hadn't bothered to take his shoes off. Standing by the window, scanning the crowd below, was the heir to the House-Mart empire, Ross Dolan, her father.

Colton continued. "Now you'll be free to do your business without the specter of government regulation looming over your shoulder, and you'll be able to pay less on expenses that offer no return on investment, like employee benefits. Moreover, investment products based on the PayDayUSA and WorkShare loans will provide new high-yield profit streams."

"We can't forget about the Supreme Court," said Milken. "We have a strong majority for now, but if any of them develop a backbone, they can overturn our hard work."

"Or if we fail to get Neilson re-elected," said one of the men.

"That's a good point, David," said Colton, "so it's essential now more than ever that you invest heavily in the coming election cycle."

Secretary Milken reclined against the bed's headboard, his arms crossed and a smirk on his face. Abbie's dad, looking irritated, checked his watch again.

"There's no better investment than congressional votes," said Colton. "A few million transforms into half a billion in return.

"Even today, dangerous anti-capitalists who would have us all declared criminals are marching on Wall Street. We need to outspend Democrats ten to one to re-elect Republican candidates. Our people at the state level have done a fair job of cleansing unsupportive voters from the rolls. We need to make it harder for disgruntled workers and the poor to vote. With all the attention the media is giving this socialist movement, it's getting harder to rely on public support alone. If we lose, we'll all be paying hundreds of millions of dollars more in taxes.

Colton laughed. "After all, if we can't protect what we've built from the lazy and resentful moochers who would take it from us, what good is democracy anyway?"

Abbie couldn't believe what she was hearing. Even though she didn't like her father much, she had always hoped he was better than this. Like her grandfather, he believed that children of the rich shouldn't inherit their parents' vast fortunes, but that the money should be spent for the common good.

Her phone chimed.

The men turned towards the sound. As soon as her father saw her, he thundered over. "What are you doing here?"

Abbie stood her ground. "What are *you* doing here?" Blood rushed to her face. "Plotting to take over the free world? What would

Mom say if she saw this?" She knew that it made her father furious when she brought up her mother.

His face turned bright pink. "You don't understand." The other men looked on intently.

"Well, I know what I do understand. None of you want the '*everybody gets a fair shake*' country that Grandpa always believed in."

Her father was now standing less than a foot away. He towered over her. "You have no idea how the world works," he said, trembling slightly. "Every decision I make is with your future in mind."

"I have Grandpa's journal. I know what he wanted! He didn't believe anyone needed a billion dollars, not even me!"

Erez strode down the hall, shaking her head. She had an irritated look on her face, probably at the fact that Abbie had been caught. "Abbie, you shouldn't be in here!"

"Erez, take her back to the South Lawn, please."

"Of course, sir." Erez put her hand on Abbie's shoulder. "Come on. Let's go."

"If you ever let her out of your sight again, you're fired."

Erez nodded curtly. "Understood."

Back on the lawn, Erez took Abbie aside. After giving her a disapproving look, she sighed and smirked. "You need to be more careful, you know."

"I know. It's just that he can be so . . . ugh!"

Erez laughed. "Yeah, that's about right." Then her face turned serious. "Did you get the message I sent you?"

Before Abbie could answer, something grabbed her attention: a strange, immense shadow moving over the South Lawn.

Then she realized that the persistent murmur of the crowd had gone eerily and utterly silent.

She looked up, and her jaw dropped.

It was a spaceship.

After the break, Jefferson returned to his front-row seat. He'd spent the time focused on his new device, shifting it back and forth from hummingbird to cell phone. He still couldn't wrap his head around all that it seemed capable of. On a whim, he said, "Charlie—bicycle helmet."

To his amazement, Charlie immediately transformed into a paper-thin bicycle helmet. Jefferson tried to crush it, but it was like steel. He looked around and then tried it on. A perfect fit.

"Charlie—cell phone."

A second later, his phone was balanced on his head. He snatched it off. He was so excited that his hands were shaking. As the lights dimmed, the device transformed back into the stack of credit cards. He slid it into his breast pocket and took a quick look around. The auditorium remained filled except for a few dozen seats.

ZEno came back onstage. "I see that most of you stayed. There is hope for all of us. I want to tell you about Guardians. They are people who protect and nurture vulnerable sentient beings and shepherd new ideas into reality.

"You've all answered the three questions and written your essay. What is happening in this auditorium right now is also happening in over 25,000 schools and universities worldwide. By the end of today, over 12 million new Guardians will have committed to

moving human society into an era of peace and justice for all sentient beings.

“Now, I’d like for each of you to stand up, take a deep breath, and shout out what sort of Guardian you would like to be.”

Shouts filled the air.

“Guardian of animals!”

“Of children!”

“A Guardian of political freedom!”

“Of dogs!”

“Guardian of sharks!”

Jefferson stood and shouted, “Guardian of the powerless!” He shouted it again and again. He thought about his well-paying career writing federal legislation that harmed countless millions of his fellow Americans, like his sister and his parents.

“Guardian of forests!”

“Of American history!”

“Of incarcerates and freedom!”

“Guardian of the truth!”

He was paid an amazing amount of money, so much that he owned a penthouse condo in Georgetown with a view of the Potomac.

“The Guardian of rivers!”

“A Guardian of religious freedom!”

“How about a Guardian of fruit flies?” a gangly old man asked timidly.

“We will be Guardians of women!” three well-dressed women chimed together.

As people shouted, their words appeared on the large screens above the stage.

When the audience members had finally exhausted themselves, ZEno said, “I’d like one of you to stand up and tell us your story.”

There was silence. No one wanted to go first.

“How about you in the front row? The guy who kept his eyes open.” ZEno pointed at Jefferson, who looked around in surprise. “You in the gray suit and the red striped tie. You said you wanted to be a Guardian of the powerless. What does that mean?”

Jefferson reluctantly stood. He could feel every eye in the room. “My name is Jefferson McEnergy.”

“Jefferson, if you say, ‘Microphone,’ your TMD will turn into Charlie and become a hovering microphone so we can all hear you.”

Jefferson did as instructed, and soon Charlie was hovering an inch from his lips. “My name is Jefferson McEnergy.” He winced as his voice boomed throughout the room. *Does my voice sound like that?* Blood pounded in his eardrums.

“I’m a lawyer. I was supposed to be on the South Lawn of the White House right now”—he held up the White House pass that hung around his neck—“celebrating the passage of the Banking and Debt Act, which I was instrumental in writing.”

He sighed, took several slow, deep breaths, and turned to face the audience.

“Years back, I was also instrumental in writing legislation that created oppressive student debt. How many of you have student debt or know someone who does?”

Most of the people in the audience raised their hands.

“The bankers and those companies that administer the loans hired the firm I work for to write that legislation. We hired an army of lobbyists to visit every member of Congress, all 535 of them. We wined and dined them, telling them that many students were filing bankruptcy immediately after graduation. None of them took the time to fact-check what we told them. There was no truth to this, but we asked them to support a clause that eliminated bankruptcy protection for dishonest students. It eliminated it for all students for five years after graduation.”

Several of the audience members booed and hissed.

“Hardly anyone protested. Thousands of for-profit schools signed up students for multi-year programs that would never land them a job that would pay enough to get them out of debt. The loan sharks were on hand at educational fairs to make it easy to sign up. My sister has a master’s degree in anthropology. She works two low-paying jobs to make ends meet and sometimes drives a Lyft.”

The hissing and boos increased. Jefferson’s face flushed. ZEno raised his hands for silence. Jefferson continued.

“The Banking and Debt Act brings the same economic chains to most other consumer contracts. If any senator or member of Congress had taken the time to read it, which they rarely do because they’re too busy raising money for their next campaign, they’d never have voted for it, as it will harm many of the people they know and care about.”

The dark man sat in the study of his family estate in the Virginia foothills, looking over the 480-acre horse farm his great-grandfather

had built a decade before the humiliating defeat of the Civil War. The opportune assassination of Lincoln and elevation of Andrew Johnson as president were the only things that had saved them from General Sherman's plan to give the land of aristocratic planters to freed slaves. His family owned all that the eye could see, down to Quantico Creek.

His butler and chauffeur opened the massive, ebony-paneled door and entered. "You didn't eat your breakfast, sir."

"No, James. I'm troubled."

"What is it?"

"That letter you brought with my breakfast tray."

"Yes, sir. It was delivered by messenger this morning."

"Have Andrew and Phillip meet me in the gym in an hour, and call General Redfield. Tell him we need to speak this morning. And prepare the car."

"Yes, sir!" The butler took the tray and left.

The dark man put his elbows on the carved ebony desk. Gripping his hands into a single large fist, he rested his chin on it and covered his mouth with his thumbs.

He looked at the black rotary-dial phone. He remembered the day in August 1953 when Eisenhower had made the call to overthrow the duly elected Iranian prime minister, Mohammed Mosaddegh, restore the monarchy, and keep oil flowing, a favor to Churchill and the American oil companies. It had changed the lives of millions of Iranians for generations, enslaving them under a dictator and then a religious oligarchy. It had taken only a handful of skilled operatives to overthrow democracy. Those who play by the rules always lose.

His uncle had gotten him assigned to the White House to report on the president. He had taken the phone the day Kennedy had been inaugurated.

The phone rang, and he picked up the black handset. “Yes?”

He heard a dial tone. He looked down at the credit card stack sitting on his desk. The phone rang again. It rang a third time. He picked it up, and it transformed into a feather-light but otherwise exact replica of his iPhone.



STEVEN WINTHROP DULLES—87/279 EARTH YEARS/DAYS
CITIZEN # 0,000,000,000—CITIZENSHIP DECLINED
RETIRED—CIA PLANNER—MEMBER 6,000—CANDIDATE FOR HELL
GPS LOCATION: 38692/46104/85403
MONTCLAIR, VIRGINIA, USA
CONVERSATION META-TAG # 000497265810354782941587
CHAT AVATAR: JOURDAN

“Who is this?”

“Hello, Winthrop. This is Jourdan.”

A man who looked like his friend Jourdan Denton appeared on the screen of the super-lightweight cell phone. From the corner of his eye, the dark man noticed his regular cell phone lying on his desk.

“Who are you?”

“Did you read the letter I sent?”

“You’re going to set up a socialist world government?”

“We are going to restore mom-and-pop entrepreneurialism and pure democracy, where all citizens vote using TMDs, one of which

you now hold. Your party's last two presidents were not elected by a majority of voters."

"You can't change history."

"Oh, but we can. Once we've empowered every citizen, we're going to come for you, Winthrop. We'll give you a fair and public trial, and if you're found guilty—"

"Your populist mob will imprison me after a kangaroo court trial?"

"No, prisons are against Universal Law, as are populist mobs. We will send you to Hell long enough for you to understand how the actions of the invisible government your family has always been a part of have affected ordinary people."

"What do you mean, *send me to Hell*? You're going to kill me?"

"You'll find out soon enough. I'll let you think about what would be an appropriate punishment for your past transgressions."

[END TRANSMISSION—1:03]

The screen went black, and the TMD transformed back into the credit card stack.

The dark man pressed the button that called his butler.

The door opened. "You rang, sir?"

"Take this thing and put it in the incinerator. Put the residue on my desk when you finish."

The butler took the TMD out of the room.

The dark man picked up his cell phone. "Call Jourdan!" He waited 10 seconds.

"Winthrop, you got the same call?"

"We have work to do. Activate the Network! We need to find out what's going on. All communication will be on the CIA's encrypted

web. I'll send you the Pitchfork Apocalypse file. Distribute it. And relocate the gold reserves, as we planned."

"Will do!" The phone went blank.

The dark man went over to the wall, pressed a panel, and opened a door with a mirror on the back. He took off the silk smoking jacket that Emperor Showa had given to his father the year before Pearl Harbor and placed it reverently over the ivory bust of the deceased Japanese emperor. He took off his pajamas and looked at himself in the mirror. *Not bad for 87*, he thought, rubbing the thin layer of white hair that covered his still-defined abs and powerful chest. Few men in their 30s were in his shape. He pulled on a black bathing suit and draped over his shoulder a plush black towel with SWD monogrammed along the edge in platinum. He flexed his bicep. Tattooed on it was the faded emblem of the US Marine Corps in red, black, and blue. He could make the eagle's wings move.

He closed the door and went out onto the patio. Around an Olympic-size pool lay a meticulously landscaped Japanese garden. He saw that Phillip and Andrew were in the gymnasium, doing their warmups.

He set the towel on a lounge chair and stood at the edge of the pool for a moment, mentally preparing himself for the unheated water. He took a deep breath and dove in. Nineteen minutes and 37 seconds later, he stepped out of the pool, having swum a mile, beating his record time. Phillip, a tall African American, and Andrew, a burly Scot, stood at the pool's edge, dressed in judogi and black belts. The dark man stripped off his bathing suit and dried himself.

Phillip handed him canvas judogi pants, a heavy jacket, and a black belt. "You beat your record by 23 seconds. What's going on?"

You angry?”

“Let’s get our workout done. We need to pay that moron in the White House another visit after we see Redfield. I’ll tell you on the way.”

In a Pentagon office, the dark man sat across from General Norman Redfield, the head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. His bodyguards stood behind him.

“Redfield, we have a problem.”

“Yes, Mr. Dulles.”

“I see you have one of those stacks of plastic cards on your desk. Did you get a strange call this morning?”

“Yes, I got a call from my former mentor, Professor Stevenson from Annapolis. He’s in his 90s and in a nursing home with Alzheimer’s. We hadn’t talked for some time. I was surprised to get his call. He was as sharp as ever.”

“And then you realized it wasn’t him.”

Redfield nodded. “He told me that there would be a brief nuclear war next week if the nuclear powers didn’t give up all weapons. He said the alien federation does not allow such weapons and war is against their Universal Law. He said I should disband the Defense Department and put all military personnel on permanent paid leave.”

“This is not good!”

“Then I got a call from my wife. She said several other wives of the general staff got calls from the Pentagon Travel Office that we all were going to retire in 30 days and they’d all be getting emails from

travel agencies about bargain vacations to the places we've all been dreaming of visiting."

"We need to get on top of this invasion, find out who they are and how to defeat them. You think this is some cyberwar by the Russians or Chinese? And what the hell are those plastic stacks?"

"I don't know. I'll do what I can, but I'm bound by rules. Maybe you should talk with Vinyez."

"I called his office in the Supreme Court. They couldn't tell me where he is."

"He's only at the court when there's a case that impacts his business or his religious or political beliefs. He lets his four law clerks handle everything else. He's probably in Moscow, Beijing, or the Middle East, trying to peddle his android soldiers."

"The Agency has alerted operatives around the globe to be on alert. I don't like the reports I'm getting back. We're going to have to monitor Neilson. He is such an idiot." The dark man stood.

"That's why I have a general who's a trained psychiatrist near him at all times. I'm late for a meeting with him."

"Someone should hack his Twitter account."

The general stood. "My helicopter is waiting. Do you want to come to the White House?"

"If I can't find Vinyez, I'm going to Moscow and then Beijing. I'll be back in a few days. If Neilson is a problem, I'll pay him a visit."

"I think he's afraid of you."

"He damn well better be!"

On the South Lawn, the fallen TMDs had completely enthralled the remaining crowd. New citizens of the Federation were getting to know JOe, asking his advice, telling him he would never win, or trying to ingratiate themselves with him. Drained cell phones were strewn everywhere. The Federation's TMDs had made even the most cutting-edge devices redundant and obsolete.

Abbie felt grouchy as she eyed the crowd skeptically from the edge of the lawn. She spun a TMD idly between her fingers without touching the screen. Her father had gone off with the rest of the Legion of Evil Dads, leaving Erez behind to watch her.

From the corner of her eye, she noticed a strange creature wandering across the lawn. It looked like the black bear cub she'd seen last week in the mountains of Colorado where she and Erez went hunting. It lumbered from one discarded cell phone to the next. Each disappeared as the bear-like thing passed over it, and Abbie heard a grinding sound from within. After everything she'd seen today, nothing surprised her.

As she watched the creature with fascination, General Norman Redfield, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, stormed past her. Like the other men who hovered around her father's sphere of power and influence, she recognized him immediately.

He looks pissed. Glancing up at the sky, she had a pretty good idea why. *They're not the biggest kids on the block anymore.*

The corners of her mouth ticked up, and she gave her TMD an appraising look. She didn't feel quite so grouchy anymore.

Chapter 3

Special Delivery

The doorbell rang. Its ding, clear as ever, reminded Maggie of a church bell. The dong, though, had been reduced to the dull hum of the electric striker. Before breaking, the dong had been loud enough for her to hear in the backyard, but it had stopped working when Henry had gotten sick. He'd promised to fix it when he recovered from the chemotherapy.

Few people rang the bell now that Henry was gone.

So many things were on her to-do list that the bell was on the third page now. The bell rang again, and she put down the *Joy of Cooking*. The dog barked and followed her to the front door. "Who do you think that could be, Matilda?"

Maggie stood on her toes and looked through the fan-shaped window in the weathered oak door. It was Earl Lowman, her old postman. She hadn't seen him in years.

She looked in the mirror. Her long hair was pulled back into a ponytail. There was more white now than gray. She wiped the spattering of flour from her cheek. The walls and ceiling were covered with decades of tar from the countless cigarettes she and Henry had smoked since they'd moved in. She sighed.

The hinges creaked as she pulled the door open. "Why, Earl, I thought you retired years ago."

"I did, but the post office called me yesterday morning and asked me and dozens of retired carriers to come back for some special delivery. They offered us more money than we could refuse."

Earl bent to pet the dog. Matilda showed her teeth and growled, her tail rigid.

“It’s OK, Matilda. Don’t you remember Earl?”

Matilda continued to growl until Earl stood up.

“It’s from a company called Federation Earth.” He handed her a pen and held up a package, pointing to the X on the attached blue postcard.

She carefully wrote out her full name, Margaret Elizabeth Grant, in the perfect cursive her aunt had taught her more than 50 years ago. She handed it back to him. He tore off the postcard and put it in the pocket of his mailbag, which was stuffed with others like it. He handed her the thick envelope.

She put it in the pocket of her apron.

As she watched Earl walk back to the street, she took a deep breath and exhaled through pursed lips. Matilda growled, her head low and tail still rigid. Maggie closed the door. “You don’t like him, girl? He’s ok, a bit dull.”

I wonder what this can be, she thought.

As she walked down the hall, she looked into the parlor. The morning sun lit the room. The portrait above the fireplace made the corners of her mouth turn down and the breath catch in her throat. Henry had been so young and handsome then. *Where did the time go?*

Matilda leaned against her leg. “It’s you and me, Matilda, two old girls.”

Maggie went into the kitchen. The big stove with the warming racks on top kept the room toasty. She could smell the cinnamon and sugar from the apple-lemon tort recipe she was trying out today. Her mouth watered as she thought of the fresh lemons she’d picked from the tree in the garden. She remembered the Saturday she and

Henry had signed the papers at the Arkansas Bank in town. They'd stopped at Jake's Nursery on the way to the farm and picked out that tree. It was 12 feet tall now and burdened with more lemons than she could use.

The clock on the stove buzzed. She opened the oven and put her tort on the sill of one of the open windows to cool.

Through the kitchen's French windows, she could see the backyard, enclosed by the white picket fence, which needed attention, and the huge oak. The animals were sleeping off their breakfasts in its shade. She looked out across the two acres to the wall of eucalyptus trees that marked the boundary of their property. The grass was so deep it looked like a wheat field. The old John Deere sat rusted in the field. That was Henry's domain. She remembered him mowing the grass all those hot summer weekends before they'd retired, and how manly he'd looked with his shirt off.

She sat at the table and cleared a space, placing the *Weaverville Gazette* crossword puzzle on top of a pile of papers. She'd clean things up later. She took a cigarette from the pack of Lucky Strikes, lit it with a match, and took a deep, satisfying drag. She set it in the cut crystal ashtray and pulled the strange package from her apron pocket.

"What do you think this is, girl?" She placed it on the table.

The thick envelope was like no paper she'd ever seen, woven with blue and green fibers that looked and smelled like fresh-cut grass. Her name and address were handwritten, and the fluid script looked oddly familiar to her.

The return address was "The Federation of Earth," embossed in brown letters highlighted in mottled gold foil, and a location in New

York City. The stamp was a hologram of the Earth on a black foil background. Its colors changed as she turned the envelope in her hand. It said: “USA \$9.99.”

She placed it face down on the maple butcher block table. The envelope almost opened itself as the four flaps separated and lay flat, revealing a folded letter and what looked like a stack of six translucent credit cards.

She slid the plastic cards aside and took the letter. Sniffing the paper, she recognized the perfume scent—Indiscret by Lucien Lelong, the floral, fruity fragrance her aunt Jody used to wear.

Aunt Jody had been a society matron in Little Rock in the 1930s. She had taught Maggie how to cook and bake when she was in high school and introduced her to the man she would marry a few years later in the spring of 1973.

Maggie was roused from her musings when the plastic cards chimed like her kitchen timer. She glanced at them and then returned her attention to the letter. It was handwritten in purple ink in her aunt’s flamboyant script on the rag bond paper she’d always used. Maggie felt like a girl again as she remembered all the letters her aunt had written to her. She had them all bound together in the attic somewhere.

Dear Maggie,

I am Jody of Federation Earth. We are citizens of the galaxy-wide Federation of Blue-Green Planets. We have come to Earth to save your beautiful planet from the leaders who control your lives.

We are non-violent beings, and we will not deliberately harm anyone.

In the coming hours and days, you will see Federation ships flying over the Earth. We will communicate with all humans via the trans-molecular devices we are dropping from our ships until you feel safe with our presence on your planet.

You have been mailed your TMD because you live outside a major city or town. If you press your thumb on the thumbprint image on your TMD, you will become a citizen of Federation Earth and be connected to me at once.

We have posted a list of our intentions at the web address: www.thefederationofearth.org. If you have any concerns or fears about the future, call me, and I can help.

Sincerely Yours,
Jody

Maggie put the letter down and took a drag from her cigarette. Matilda sat on the floor, staring up at her. The dog was an Australian shepherd mix.

Maggie pushed back her chair and tapped her thighs. Matilda jumped up onto her lap and licked her face. "Matilda, you're the best. I wish you could talk and tell me what you think." She sighed and put the dog down.

Picking up the stack of cards, she examined it closely. To her surprise, it was a single piece of plastic. As she held it flat in her palm, a revolving image of the Earth, the size of a large marble, projected up from it like a hologram.

When she attempted to touch the globe, it disappeared beneath the clear surface of the card. A thumbprint appeared with tiny text around its edge. She peered at the lines inside the thumbprint and then at those on her left thumb. They were similar. *This is all strange.*

“What do you think, Matilda?”

The dog stood, put her paws on the table, and sniffed the device. Then she licked Maggie’s hand.

“Ok.” Maggie pressed her thumb on the thumbprint.



MARGARET ELIZABETH GRANT – 73/138 EARTH YEARS/DAYS
CITIZEN # 0,287,428,654
RETIRED – POTENTIAL ANIMAL GUARDIAN CANDIDATE
SOON TO BE LOVER AND LIFEMATE OF ARGON HOBOX 99.9752%
GPS LOCATION: 38692/46104/85403
BLUE RIDGE MOUNTAIN PARKWAY KENTUCKY, USA
CONVERSATION META-TAG # 000497265810354782941587
CHAT AVATAR: JODY-BAKING BUDDY – ALTERNATE: JOEY

An elderly woman’s face appeared on the device’s surface.

“Hello, Maggie. I can’t tell you how happy I am to see you.”

“Who are you?” asked Maggie. “You look and sound like my aunt Jody.”

“Maybe I am.”

“But you died over 20 years ago. What’s going on?”

“I am an intelligent computer. I was programmed by benevolent aliens and humans who call themselves Guardians. I use billions of

different names and faces to communicate with people like you to help you understand our intentions. I'm using your Aunt Jody's face and voice because I know you loved her. I could change to Henry if you'd like."

"Don't do that. You'll make me cry," said Maggie. "Aunt Jody is fine for now. Why are you aliens here, and what do you want with me?"

"We are here because humans have done a bad job of managing the planet and abuse the lesser animal species. I know that you care about animals and are a guardian of animals."

"I am an old woman and can only do so much."

"There are many millions of humans like you, Maggie, who care about animals and other humans in need. We call them Guardians. Alone, you have little power, but together, you are powerful. It is my job to organize you."

"Every alien I've seen in movies wants to destroy us and take over the planet for their own use. Why should I believe you are any different?"

"That's because humans enjoy imagining conflict and drama. You wouldn't like a story about benevolent aliens who want to help you and protect animals. That would be boring. You should know this with your background in psychology."

Maggie flashed back to her time as a student in the psychology department at the University of Arkansas in Little Rock, living with Aunt Jody, meeting Henry at the Young Democrats Club, getting her bachelor's degree, their June wedding in Jody's manicured garden, getting her master's degree, buying their first house, beginning her private family counseling practice, buying the country property in

Weaverville for their retirement, and the countless hours of counseling battered women, children, and troubled men.

“Humans are dysfunctional and love drama,” repeated Jody.

“We are, and you’re a computer that uses what you know about us to manipulate us?”

“Guilty.” Jody’s face changed to that of a generic female pressing out of a screen of hundreds of ones and zeros. “It is why I was created.”

For the next hour, Maggie and Jody talked about Maggie’s animals, baking, and her loneliness now that Henry was gone. Jody gave her a new pie recipe and persuaded her to drive to the local market to buy the ingredients she needed to bake it.

Picking up her car keys and purse, Maggie went out the screen door, which creaked as it opened and slammed shut.

“Henrietta,” she said to the old chicken who greeted her on the porch, “you keep an eye on things and don’t let any strangers in the house, ok? I’m going into town to buy a few things for a new pie recipe. I’ll be back soon.”

She picked up the hen and carried her to the gate, followed by a few cats and a dozen dogs. She placed the chicken on a perch on the gatepost. “Now, all of you listen to Henrietta while I’m away.”

She looked up at the sky as she walked to the barn and her old Saab. Patches of dark clouds crept toward the house. “Odd weather we’re having,” she said as she got into the car. “I thought it was going to be another beautiful autumn day.”

The shadow of the shuttle carrying Federation Guardian Argon Hobox passed over Weaverville's Clinton Elementary School before making a right onto Main Street. As it glided slowly west, it released TMDs. Each TMD had been programmed to fly to a specific person.

Most people eagerly awaited the TMD drop, but a few old men, acting like they lived in the Wild West, snatched shotguns from their pickup trucks and tried to shoot the shuttle down. What a prize it would be to capture and parade the aliens down Main Street at the end of a shotgun. They'd be heroes on the national news.

Little did these self-appointed heroes know that their assigned TMDs were observing their actions. The devices flew unnoticed into their pickup trucks, settling silently on the dashboards to wait patiently for their new charges to find them.

Inside the shuttle, the young Guardian watched the street below on a screen. "They're shooting at us, George," he half-cried. "These people are crazy!"

"Not to worry," the computer pilot replied in his characteristically calm voice. "I reversed the magnetic field around the shuttle. It will deflect the bullets. I hope they don't hit any humans as gravity pulls them back to earth, but there's only one in 2.365 million chance of that happening."

Argon and several million other Guardians had spent most of their lives waiting for this day, and thousands of them had been conscripted to observe the TMD delivery. Argon was an animal and aquatic Guardian. He'd spent the last three months preparing for this moment at the Federation Animal Sanctuary Lab in Queens, and now he was flying over the planet. The monitor allowed him to zoom in on minute details. He saw fear, excitement, and amazement on

human faces as they spotted the shuttle and realized that a strange device was gliding slowly to their outstretched hands. He spotted animals on ledges, in trees, and atop buildings. They interested him more than humans.

His shuttle would accelerate to just under the speed of sound once they left the town and then raced to the outskirts of the next one on the GRID. He'd been told the U.S. Postal Service was delivering TMDs in rural and suburban areas. The coordinated global delivery would put TMDs in the hands of seven billion humans by the end of the day. Other Guardians were handing them out on busy street corners and in parks and supermarkets.

Earlier, he'd seen fear on people's faces, but as news proliferated, they were now waiting in anticipation. The five starships and 500 shuttles were flying longitudinally across the planet, arriving at 9 a.m. in most time zones. The operation, after years of planning, would transform the world in a single day.

As George piloted the shuttle over Weaverville, Argon thought of the many ways he was privileged. His mother was the Federation scientist who'd headed the team that had designed and programmed the computer JOe. Argon called it Joey, his only friend in childhood.

Argon had grown up around Guardians, always focused on the mission. Guardians were permitted to parent one child, but they rarely did, as they believed that the Earth was overpopulated. Over the years, he'd had almost no contact with other children, so he found it much easier to relate to older people.

Keeping with tradition, he'd chosen his own Guardian name. He was an animal communicator, an experienced veterinarian and marine biologist, and had a Ph.D. in animal linguistics. He could

communicate with any animal. With the help of the Federation, his team had made breakthroughs in enabling animals to talk with humans.

He remembered the day he'd told T'sade that he wanted to learn her language. They'd spent a few days on a secluded atoll in the middle of the Pacific. She was amphibious, able to breathe above or below the water. Over the three weeks it had taken him to master her language, they'd bonded as they'd talked about the planet's degradation.

They both cared about Earth's animals more than they did humans. Humans were at the top of the food chain but were mostly unaware of the dominion they held. All this would change soon.

He and T'sade had gotten so close that she'd even let slip that he had a twin brother. He still couldn't wrap his head around that. According to her, his father had been so delighted to have a son that he had taken Argon's brother, handed him to the nursemaid—who would become his second wife—and left the hospital. Argon had arrived minutes later. His mother, only 19 at the time, had bribed the hospital staff to remain silent while she fled the country.

Ever since, Argon couldn't stop thinking about what it would be like to meet his brother.

"Argon," said George, "we are entering an unusual weather front with high turbulence. Please take a seat and secure yourself."

Several minutes later, something struck the shuttle with a brilliant white flash, momentarily blinding Argon. As his vision returned, he could feel the shuttle descending. It lurched violently in every direction.

"George, what's going on?"

No answer.

I'm going to die, Argon thought as the shuttle descended more sharply. *I should have stayed in the lab. Who will get the animals ready for next week? So many more tests are needed . . .*

He saw a wall of eucalyptus trees rushing toward them and cursed. Beyond the trees were a large field, a small house, and a barn. He closed his eyes, covered his face, and braced himself for the crash.

The shuttle abruptly leveled off, brushing the treetops. It stopped and then dropped without warning, slamming into the ground in the middle of the field.

Whoa. Argon sat in total silence. Sunshine streamed through the windows. *The storm has passed, and I lived.* He laughed. "George?" He released himself and went to the console. He pressed a few buttons, and the lights and ventilation came on, but still no word from George. He could smell burned plastic. "Darn."

Grabbing his backpack, he pressed the hatch release, and it opened with a whoosh. Outside, the day was warm and sunny, the sky blue. The air was fresh, as if it had been washed.

Argon pulled his earpiece from his ear. It transformed into a pad-sized phone, and he brought it to his ear. "Joey, would you connect me to T'sade, please?"

"Are you OK?" asked JOe. "What happened? We lost you on the GRID. You had me worried."

"I'm fine, and so is the shuttle, but George was disabled by a lightning strike or something. You'll have to get the other shuttles to cover for me."

“Argon,” JOe said with delight, “it’s happening. Using millions of different personalities, I’ve talked to 537,483,296 humans in 109 different languages in the last two hours, and I am nowhere near my capacity. This is a blast!”

“JOe,” interrupted T’sade, “I’ll take care of this. You have seven billion people to talk to before this long day is over. Argon, JOe patched me in at the beginning of your conversation. Are you sure you’re OK?”

“I’m good. What should I do?”

“I’ll have the other shuttles cover for you. They’re already a hundred miles west of you. I can’t spare anyone today, so you are on your own. Conceal the shuttle and stay out of trouble. I’ll send a mechanic with a replacement for George and get you out of there in 24 hours.” She clicked off.

“From your GPS location,” said JOe, “you are about a thousand feet south of a farmhouse owned by Maggie Grant. She’s an excellent cook, makes great pies, and rescues all kinds of animals. Some of the locals think she’s crazy because she talks to her animals. I think you’ll like her. I checked your Eastern, Western, and Vedic astrology charts, and you two are a romantic match. She turned 73 this year and has much life experience. Do something you’ve never done before and get to know her. We’ll talk tomorrow, buddy!”

Argon aimed his TMD at the shuttle. “Conceal shuttle!” As it disappeared in a sparkle of lights, he picked up his backpack and walked to the house.

Before he got within a hundred feet, three big dogs and a dozen smaller ones stood at the fence of the large rear yard, barking

their greeting. He gave them a friendly hello as he approached. They could sense he was not a threat. Through the fence, he scratched their heads and let them lick his hands, arms, and face. He shook his whole body as if he had a big tail, mimicking them. "Who's a good dog?" He got right up to their muzzles and then reached over the fence to give the smallest dogs their fair share of his affection.

After a few long minutes, he stood, shook his body one last time, and pointed at the house. In the voice of an alpha pack leader, he barked, "Go lie down!" Most obeyed. He repeated the command while staring down the few who remained.

At the gate, a rotund white and gray chicken, perched like a sentinel on the post, stared at him. "You look like the most intelligent creature I've met in Arkansas," he said to her. "Are you the guardian of this farm?"

"Cluck, cluck, cluck!" cackled the chicken. "Cluck, cluck."

"Well, thank you, Henrietta. I'm Argon." He ran his fingers through her feathers. "I am pleased to meet you, too." He held out a few treats that he'd pulled from a pocket in his shorts.

"No thank you," said Henrietta. "I'm trying to watch my weight. Humans engineered me to eat everything in front of me so I'd fatten up and be ready for slaughter sooner."

"You're a smart chicken," he said. "I see your beak has been clipped. Were you hatched in a chicken factory? You must have escaped. Will you tell me your story? How about if I pick you up and we go sit on the ground under that great oak tree?"

The chicken cackled, and he gently picked her up, walked over to the tree, and sat.

She settled her feathers under her as if she were sitting in her nest. “I was incubated about five years ago at a factory farm on the other side of Weaverville. Soon after we hatched, a cruel man separated the boy chicks from the girls and fed them into a machine that ground them into dog feed. Then we girls had the tips of our beaks cut off and branded so we wouldn’t peck each other, as we were to live in confined spaces. Some of us would lay eggs all our lives, and some would be fattened and then cut up as chicken parts. This was to be my fate.

“Thousands of us were confined in small crates with chicken-wire tops. I persuaded a few of my sisters to help me bend the wire back and forth to make an opening large enough for us to escape into the countryside when the truck took us to the feeding farm. All night, we took turns gripping the wire with our feet and bending it back and forth until it broke.

“The next morning, on the truck, I kept encouraging the other chicks to come out and leap off the tailgate, but it was so scary, and we were so small. I have to confess that when we got close to our destination, I pushed many of them over the edge. Some may have died in the fall, but at least they died free.

“It broke my heart to see the hundreds of other brave chicks who would have joined us if they could, but their fate was sealed with unbroken chicken wire. I waited until the last minute, trying to persuade the more timid ones to come out of our cage. The truck hit the curb as it turned the corner into the factory farm, and the impact catapulted me through the air and into a ditch at the side of the road.”

As Henrietta continued her story, the dogs and cats came up and sat under the tree to listen to her chirp and cluck and to look at and sniff the gentle man.

“As fate would have it, a stray dog had given birth to nine puppies in the culvert under the driveway. Once Matilda overcame her shock and realized that I was no threat to her puppies, she came out and picked me up gently with her lips and dropped me in the warm softness of her brood. Since the tip of my beak was cut off, it was easy for me to drink from her teats without hurting her. She always made sure I got my share of her milk and was safe in the middle of her pups.

“A week later, a nice lady named Maggie found us when she came to the farm to investigate the owner’s cruelty to us chickens. She saw our mom in the culvert and tried to get her to come out. Matilda growled at her but was too weak to resist when she pulled her out.

“She put us all in a box lined with a soft blanket in the back seat of her old car and took us to her home on the other side of town. We would have all died had it not been for her. This is her farm, but she says it will be ours someday.”

Henrietta stood and pointed her wing at an old female dog at the gate. “That is my adopted mum, Matilda.”

Matilda came over and licked Henrietta’s feathers

“Maggie talks to me all the time about doing a midnight raid on the factory farm and freeing thousands of chickens,” said Henrietta. “I wish I could talk to her, Argon, like I talk to you and have her understand my words so I can tell her how much we all appreciate her and warn her how dangerous the man who owns the chicken

farm is. His name is Bob Hogan. I'm terrified of him. If I ever see him again, I'm going to run as fast as I can."

"I may be able to grant your wish," said Argon. "I have a device the size of a grain of rice that I can insert under your skin in the back of your head that will allow you to talk to her."

"Really?"

"Yes, but it might hurt a bit."

"That's ok. It couldn't be worse than having your beak cut off, could it?"

"No, it won't be at all like that. It'll only take me a few minutes. I'll pick you up, and we can do it at the picnic table. I have everything I need in my backpack."

When his work was done, Henrietta told more stories, and most of the cats and dogs on the property sat attentively as she spoke.

Argon heard the crunch of gravel under tires as an old Saab came up the driveway to the barn. When Maggie got out, he whispered to all the dogs to calm their urge to run and bark.

Holding two bags of groceries, Maggie struggled to open the gate. When she made eye contact with Argon, he got up and asked if he could help.

"And who are you?" she asked, amazed that all her animals were sitting attentively around the picnic table, looking at this man for direction. He was young, with a dark complexion, and amazingly handsome. His floppy brown hair and open, guileless face led her to believe she had nothing to fear.

"And none of you are going to come and greet me?" she asked her dogs. Half of them got up and ran to her, tails wagging, almost knocking her over.

“Let me help,” said Argon. He took the bags, set them on the table, and returned. “My name is Argon.” He extended his hand and gave her a big smile. “My vehicle broke down near your property, and I wandered in, looking for help. I ran into Henrietta and all your animals. She told me all about how you saved Matilda and every one of her pups, including the one with wings.”

“So, you talk to animals?” asked Maggie. Her eyebrows rose. “I thought I was the only one in the county who did that. You’ll have to teach me how you get them to talk back to you.”

“Most animals are smarter than we give them credit for.”

Maggie’s brow wrinkled. “I’m forgetting my manners. Please come in for a cup of tea and a slice of pie.” She picked up her bags, gave one to Argon, and then led him into the kitchen. She held the door open for Matilda and Henrietta.

As she put on the kettle, put her groceries away, and cut two slices of Pete’s peach crumble pie, Argon followed her with his eyes. She set a slice in front of him and took a seat with her own, watching him as he ate.

“Mmm . . . This is so good!” He closed his eyes, savoring the taste.

“So, Argon, who are you, and where are you from? Where is your vehicle, and how did you teach my chicken to talk?”

“First of all, do you have one of these, and did you activate it?” He pulled out his TMD.

“I do, and I did,” Maggie took hers from her purse. “My old postman delivered it this morning, and they were falling from a strange-looking vehicle that flew overhead as I was in town an hour ago. Some of the old rednecks got rifles out of their trucks and shot

at it, and then it flew into that freak thunderstorm and disappeared. I heard old Ralph Franklin in the market say that Mary Jenkins saw it come down in the storm, so the men with rifles are hot to capture a UFO and an alien.”

Argon tilted his head, curious about who might have seen his shuttle come down.

“Oh, they’re some people from town. I’ve known them forever.”

“I was in that shuttle.” He studied her face for her reaction. “The storm damaged its guidance, and I crashed in your back field. I’ve been talking with Henrietta ever since. She asked me to tell you that she and Matilda appreciate your rescuing them and providing them a safe home.”

“You don’t look like an alien.”

“Most of us connected with the Federation are humans. We were raised to believe we are personally responsible for the Earth and its more vulnerable creatures.”

“Bock, bock, bock!” squawked Henrietta.

“Oh, and Henrietta wants me to tell you not to go near that chicken farm,” he said. “She says that Bob Hogan is violent and will hurt you.”

“That old fool,” said Maggie. “His grandfather was the grand dragon of the Ku Klux Klan in Arkansas in the 1950s, and his father was the head of the National Rifle Association in the county, so he thinks he can bully people into doing whatever he tells them. I’m not afraid of that old windbag.”

“Well, Henrietta is terrified of him and worried for you.”

“Henrietta is a chicken, and I’m not. I will always protect her and anyone on my property from the likes of him. So, tell me how

you understand her.”

“I have a universal language translator chip in my brain.” He touched behind his ear. “And since I am a good listener and a good observer of body language, I can understand the thoughts, feelings, and utterances of most animals. But your Henrietta is special and intelligent, and while you were out, she allowed me to inject a tiny translator chip in her head so she can talk to you. Do you want to see?” He picked the hen off the floor and put her on the table in front of Maggie.

“Why, yes!” said Maggie.

“Ok. Aim your TMD at Henrietta, close your eyes, say, ‘Communicate with chicken,’ and ask her a question.”

She did as he said and then asked, “Henrietta, is what this man says true?”

“Cluck, cluck, cluck,” squawked the chicken, and her words came out of Maggie’s TMD in English: “It is all true! I was on the fence post during the storm, and I saw his shuttle clip the trees and crash into the field. Argon came out of the vehicle, and then it disappeared. The dogs and cats saw him but weren’t afraid of him. We could all sense that he loves animals and wouldn’t harm us. He is a lot like you, Maggie. Can he stay?”

“We’ll see,” Maggie said with a wink and a smile. She turned to Argon. “That’s amazing. Where’d you get that? Can you do it to all my animals?”

“I came up with the idea, and the Federation provided me with a team of technologists to fully develop it. We have a more advanced chip in the works. This is a basic one.”

“You are an amazing man.”

Argon blushed. "I think it's important for animals to be able to communicate their needs and feelings to humans and testify against those who abuse them. I only had two 'talker' chips with me, and I inserted one into Henrietta. If I chipped all your animals, you'd never get any work done."

"Would you chip Matilda? She's become my favorite dog. But don't tell the others."

"Let me see. Matilda, girl."

Matilda got up with some effort. She came over and licked his face.

"Matilda, your friend Maggie wants to be able to talk to you. Is it okay if I do to you the same thing I did to Henrietta?"

Matilda barked and licked his hand.

In no time, she was telling them her life story. "It's difficult to be a female in any species. The males impregnate us and leave us to do all the work. It's not fair. Woof!" Matilda sat down.

"So, what are your plans, Argon?"

"I'm stranded here for the next 22 hours with nothing to do. I'm young and strong, and I'm a Federation-certified veterinarian, so I could examine your animals or do work around your farm. I see there's maintenance to be done. You could make a list for me."

"Oh, I have a list." She laughed. "It's three pages long, and that's the short list!" She grabbed a spiral-bound notebook from a nearby pile at the edge of the table, opened it, and showed it to him. "I hope you can read my writing."

"I'd like to work outside. Do you mind if I strip off my shirt and get some sun?"

“Not at all—I always liked when my husband, Henry, worked with his shirt off. I’m 70 years old, but I can’t promise I won’t sneak a peek at you.” She blushed.

“It’s a deal.” He smiled.

She watched as he unbuttoned his khaki Federation shirt. He stripped it off, folded it neatly, and laid it on his pack on the table. His body was lean and muscled. A dense coat of curly, dark hair covered his chest, abdomen, and forearms. He reminded her of Henry.

He took a bottle from his pack. “Would you put this sunscreen on my back?” He handed it to her and hunched over so she could apply the lotion.

His back was covered with an almost imperceptible layer of hair, like peach fuzz. Every muscle on his back was clearly defined. She felt an electric charge in her body as she rubbed the lotion in. She tried to dismiss her desire for him—he was likely in his mid-20s, young enough to be her grandson—but she wanted to apply sunscreen all over his body. She wanted . . .

“Thank you, Maggie.” He gave her a big hug, and she melted into him.

She watched his chest flex as he applied lotion to his face, chest, arms, and legs. She thought how she’d like to be touching him, how she’d like to be sleeping with him in the night, with his strong arms holding her, his lips kissing the back of her neck like Henry used to.

She reached over and caressed his full beard with the back of her hand. “I like your beard.”

Argon smiled and stared into her eyes.

Oh, she missed that aspect of being a woman. She felt thrilled and confused. She'd keep her feelings to herself for now.

"Let's get to work. Henrietta, want to help?" Argon took the notebook and went out into the yard.

He trimmed trees, pruned shrubs, pulled weeds, and mowed the lawn in the bright autumn sun. Henrietta and a few dogs followed him around. They talked and played as he worked.

Henrietta rooted around for bugs to eat. He chased her around the yard and then let her chase him. She flapped her wings and squawked. He threw sticks for the dogs and told them to fetch. He roughhoused with them, and they rolled around in the grass. They showed him their teeth, and he growled back at them.

Inside, Maggie picked up his shirt and breathed in his scent as she watched him from the kitchen window. *He's like a big kid, and such a beautiful man.* How she ached for a man in her life, and Argon was a strange combination of maleness. He was mature for his age, with so much knowledge and skill, and he had a masculine body, yet he was sensitive and gentle around her animals. She loved his touch, though he seemed a bit naïve about women. "Do you think he has a girlfriend," she asked Matilda, "or could he be gay?"

She put down his shirt and went back to her work. The blueberry lemon yogurt pie was done and cooling on the windowsill. It was going to win her another blue-ribbon next summer. She thought she would take a piece of it to Gladys.

Gladys had become a good friend during the long year Henry was dying, always there to take care of the dogs when Maggie had to drive Henry to Little Rock for his cancer treatments. Now she had gotten arthritis and had difficulty getting around.

Maggie made lunch for Argon, along with fresh iced tea. She sat down and lit a cigarette, picked up her TMD, aimed it at Matilda, and said, "Communicate with dog. What do you think, Matilda?"

"Ruff, ruff! I think Argon is a nice man. He makes me feel good. My pups like him. You like him, too, don't you? You should invite him into your bed tonight. My instinct tells me he has never mounted a female, but I think you are wrong about him preferring males. He definitely prefers females, and he likes you. His humping bone stiffened when he embraced you. If you allow him, he will mount you even though you are not in heat."

"You are blunt, Matilda," Maggie as she expelled the smoke from her lungs. "I'd love to do all that."

She put out her cigarette and went out to the yard. "Lunch is ready," she called as she put down Argon's lunch and stood at the picnic table.

Argon snatched up Henrietta, came to the table, and set her on her roost. Maggie handed him a damp towel. He wiped his hands, face, and chest.

"Mmm, it smells great! Is it chicken?" he whispered as he looked at Henrietta.

"No!" Maggie laughed. "We stopped eating chicken in this household soon after Henrietta came to live with us. I figured we don't eat dogs or cats here, so we shouldn't eat chickens. It's all vegetarian."

"Oh, good. I meant to tell you I'm a vegan. All Guardians are."

They talked and laughed as he ate. When he finished, she lit up another cigarette.

"Those things will kill you."

“I know, I know. I just can’t quit. I’ve tried half a dozen times. They calm me and remind me of my dear Henry. They killed him. I do everything else right, but I can’t kick this habit. Do you think less of me because I smoke?”

“No, Maggie, you’re an amazing woman, but smoking is disgusting.”

“Bock, bock, bock,” squawked Henrietta.

“Woof, woof,” barked Matilda.

“Don’t tell me,” said Maggie. “They both think it’s disgusting.”

“Yup. Henrietta said she could never understand why humans burn dry leaves and breathe in the smoke. Matilda said humans have big brains but lack good instinct.”

After a second, he added, “I have something in my shuttle that I will get for you later, but I want to get back to work and get as many items on your list done as I can.” He turned to Henrietta. “You coming, girl?”

She clucked.

He picked her up and went back to the yard.

Maggie cleaned up the table and went back to the kitchen. After one last lingering look at Argon as he worked in the yard, she reluctantly headed to her bedroom to clean it.

Hours later, the doorbell rang. It was Earl. Maggie made him tea and cut him a slice of her new pie. They reminisced about the good old days.

Argon came into the kitchen. “Maggie, what is this item about repairing the fence?” He looked at Earl.

“This is my old postman, Earl. He delivered my TMD this morning. I invited him back for some pie. We’ve not seen each other for years and are catching up on old times. He knew Henry.”

Earl squinted at Argon through his black-rimmed glasses. His unruly mustache twitched, making him look like a rat sniffing out possible danger.

Earl stood, and they shook hands.

“Do you have materials to repair the fence?” asked Argon.

“There are new fence boards in the barn. All the tools you’ll need are on the workbench. The paint and a new brush are on a shelf above the bench. Shall I come out?”

“No, I’ll find them. Nice meeting you, Earl.”

Once Argon had left, Earl asked, “Who’s he?”

“He’s a friend. He dropped in today to help me with some repairs.”

“I’ve never seen him around here. He has an odd accent.”

“He’s new in town.” Worried that Earl might be getting suspicious, Maggie stood. “I have to get back to my chores.”

Earl got up to go; he absentmindedly picked up Argon’s shirt. “Oh, this isn’t mine.” He glanced at the logo and put it down.

“Say hello to Millie for me,” said Maggie as she followed him to the door.

“I’ll do that.”

Earl walked out to his truck. As he drove away, Maggie saw him look back at the barn. Argon was standing there with an armload of fence boards. She went back into the house and continued her housework.

Later, she came out of the house to the back gate. Argon had removed all the rotten pickets on the rear fence and was meticulously painting the new ones. “Argon, I’m going to take a few of the dogs and take this pie to my friend Gladys. She lives about five minutes down the road. She’s not so well, and I help her out a few times a week. I’ll be back in about an hour to make us some dinner. It looks like you got some good sun today.” She handed him his shirt.

“This is what I needed.” He looked down at his chest. “I tan easily.” He put his shirt on, leaving it unbuttoned. He put his arm around her. “Who’d have thought a person could have so much fun in Arkansas? Not me!”

She elbowed him in the ribs.

“Not until today, I mean.” They both laughed. The closeness felt good but a bit awkward. They weren’t sure what to say next.

Maggie broke the silence. “I’d better go.”

As she walked down the driveway, he called to her, “I’ll clean up the barn a bit when I finish the fence.”

When Argon finished, he took the tools into the barn. It was hot inside from the late-afternoon sun. *What a great day, working in the sun, playing with all the animals, getting my hands dirty . . . And then there’s Maggie.*

He was surprised by how instant his attraction to her had been, considering the difference in their ages. She was fit and beautiful. She had strength and empathy like a Guardian.

It had been so nice to hold her. When they'd embraced, a lightning bolt had surged through him. She probably had no interest in him beyond his love for her animals.

He heard the crunch of tires on the gravel drive outside and thought Maggie was back. Then he remembered that she had left on foot. When he got to the door, he saw three pickup trucks. The closest had a plastic rooster on the roof and the words "Bob Hogan Farms" on the door.

The driver, a big man with bushy pork-chop sideburns, stepped out of the cab. Another man got out of the passenger side. It was Earl. Several men carrying rifles and rope climbed out of the other trucks. As they got closer, Earl pointed at Argon and nodded to the big man. *Darn, thought Argon. I'm in trouble now.*

The man wearing an NRA baseball cap was likely the Bob Hogan who had terrified Henrietta. He had an imposing presence, a bully with a big belly.

"Where's your spaceship?" Hogan demanded as he stood eye to eye with Argon.

"I don't understand."

"Don't give me that bullshit, boy." Hogan grabbed Argon's open shirt right at the F.E. logo. "Earl saw your shirt, and it has the same logo that was on that spaceship that flew over town this morning. We all shot at it, and if it hadn't disappeared in that odd thunderstorm, we'd have had you earlier."

Argon stared into Hogan's bloodshot eyes, nauseated by his stench of cigarette smoke, undigested alcohol, and body odor.

"Joe, Pete, go look around and see if you can find his ship," Hogan ordered, "and see if that crazy woman is around anywhere."

Jake, Paul, take this guy inside. Strip off his shirt and empty his pockets. Take this rope and string him up. Earl, get the bullwhip out of my truck.”

He followed his men into the barn. “Stretch him tight.”

Chapter 4

A New Indigenous Tribe

“Why do ya always take Ma’s side?” asked Ben.

Joshua looked at his brother. Ben was a year older, but the least favorite of his 10 siblings. “Cause she’s right most the time.”

Ben snapped the reins. The horses labored forward, pulling the wagon laden with bags of organic grain. The wheels threw up dust from the rutted road. Josh shook his head. Ben would grow up to be like their uncle Horus, always angry when he didn’t get his way.

The sound of cool mountain water soothed Josh. He thought of the river cascading over countless rocks, polishing them endlessly as it meandered south. He wondered how many people had enjoyed it since his ancestors first journeyed into the Chokaola Valley and stood on its banks. He imagined they had camped here at the end of a long day.

It’d been a hot summer. He looked back at Ben and then beyond to the rusty railroad track. Few trains came through Flatbush these days.

Ben slowed the wagon as they pulled into town. Flatbush had been built on a riverbend, which had widened into a lake when the government built a small dam in the 1930s.

Josh smiled when he saw it. Flatbush held fond memories for him. The general store and post office were on one side of the road, separated by a broad, tree-lined path from the river to the granite mountain. The path cut through a long, six-acre park, the Commons, circled an ornate bandshell in the middle of the park, and continued to the church.

He closed his eyes, thinking of Sunday mornings there—the scent of cedar pews, sunlight streaming through leaded glass, the soft leather-bound hymnals, the hum of the pipe organ, and the voices of the choir. He often lost himself while staring into the yellow-white flame of the candles.

Forested mountains enfolded the town. White clouds drifted across the clear blue sky above. The church hall, the womenfolk's domain, was the center of Sunday activities after morning services. A path from the hall led to the dam.

He listened for the sound of water pouring over the wet concrete edge. It reminded him of the time he and his oldest brother, Jonathan, had gone diving off it. He missed Jonathan.

Mr. Feikert's grandparents built the general store soon after the dam. The Feikerts were one of the few families that didn't farm. Mr. Feikert's father had built a substantial dock, with slides and diving platforms. They rented out rowboats on Sundays nine months of the year. Elders in the community talked of the mountain of sand he'd brought in to create the block-long beach behind the store. Josh closed his eyes and imagined taking the plunge into the cold water on a hot day. He shivered.

Theodore Feikert was in front of the store, sweeping the wood-plank sidewalk. His friends called him Theo. His contribution to the community was a library. Uncle Horus called it an obsession. The general store had gotten so crowded with books that Theo had built an impressive second building on the lot next door. A wooden bridge connected it to the store. Purple and white wisteria covered it in spring.

Ben pulled the wagon to a stop.

“Good morning, boys.”

“We have a load of grain for the mill.”

“You can take it around back. Jorge will help you unload it.”

Ben hit the reins, and the wagon lurched forward. Josh jumped off, and the storekeeper caught him.

“Ben’s in a bad mood again?”

Josh frowned. “He sure is, Mr. Feikert.”

“Call me Theo.”

“I have a list of things Ma needs.”

Theo put a hand on Josh’s shoulder, and they stepped onto the broad porch. “I have something in the window I think you’ll like.”

“Woah, is that a Lightning 500?” Josh put his hand to the glass. Its waves and imperfections shimmered in the morning sun. His reflection seemed to be holding the bow.

“Yup—first prize in the archery competition on Sunday. Have you been practicing?”

“I sure have.”

“Let’s go see what your ma needs.”

As they entered the store, Josh took a piece of paper out of his pocket and handed it to Theo. “May I?” He gestured to the bow.

Mr. Feikert handed him an arrow and pointed at the target above the potbelly stove in the back of the store. Josh took the bow, set the arrow, aimed, and let it fly.

“Bullseye! Now, if you can do that four times at 50 yards Sunday morning, the bow will be yours.”

“I can do that.” Josh’s face blossomed into a smile. “Where’s Socrates?”

“He’s over on the sheepskin rugs.”

Josh walked over to a rotund raccoon curled into a ball of black and brown fur. “Socrates, you’re so fat!”

The raccoon uncurled and stretched. As he yawned, his liquid black eyes blinked out through a furry bandit mask. He smelled like he’d had a bath.

“He’s a beggar—everybody feeds him.”

“I remember when you first got him. He was so tiny and cute.”

“That was 10 years ago. You were pretty small yourself then.”

“Five years old.” Josh laughed.

“Let me get the things your ma needs.” Mr. Feikert went behind the counter and into the back of the store.

Josh looked around. The walls and ceiling were whitewashed tongue-and-groove paneling. Shelves went from floor to ceiling, filled with boxes, jars, and tins, all labeled with Mr. Feikert’s meticulous block printing. A rolling wooden ladder with brass hardware slid on tracks. He remembered old Mr. Feikert giving him a ride on it years ago. He pushed it, and the wheels glided effortlessly.

Glass jars on the counters were filled with all sorts of things. Everything was wiped clean. Near the cash register sat a jar labeled “Ginny Smith’s Pecan Pralines.” He smiled, lifted the metal lid, and took a small piece of a broken praline. It smelled of cinnamon sugar. His mouth watered as he tasted it. He remembered the day he and his sister Sadie had made them with Ma in the kitchen. Ben had mocked him for doing woman’s work. He didn’t care what Ben thought, though, not anymore.

The next jar was labeled “Joshua Smith’s Venison Jerky.” He knew how good that tasted. His first deer had been a magnificent buck, nine points on each antler. He’d waited for the right moment to

release the arrow and struck the deer in the heart; it'd died quickly, without too much suffering. The head was hanging above the fireplace at home. Everyone had been so proud of him, but he'd felt bad about killing such a magnificent animal. His ma said it would feed the family. Then they'd said a prayer together, thanking the buck for giving up its life to feed them. It had made him feel better. She'd taught him to preserve the jerky with salt and smoke. They made fresh jerky every time he hunted an animal in the hills.

Socrates rubbed against his leg. He picked up the raccoon and held him out in front of him. "You must weigh 20 pounds." The animal squirmed, and Josh put him down on the white marble countertop. Socrates plodded over to the praline jar and scratched at the thick glass lid.

"No pralines for you." Josh picked him up, took him out onto the porch, and put him on the bench next to the window.

He looked through the window again at the impressive bow. He imagined mastering it and spending his days in the forest, hunting animals. He sighed. The Lightning 500 was a weapon, and killing was easy, too easy. Preserving life seemed more his calling.

The sound of a wagon distracted him. A horse pulling an enclosed buggy with the words "United States Postal Service" in blue letters on a white background pulled up to the brick building across the street. Ben knew the gray-white mare. It was Shadow, his father's horse. He'd brushed her coat many times.

His pa lifted a white plastic crate from the back of the buggy and set it on the dirt road, kicking up dust. He took out a second one and then a third, all filled with Express Mail envelopes.

That's a lot of mail for one day, Josh thought. His first inclination was to go help, but his pa looked moody, so he went back into the store instead.

He heard the sound of a machine grinding. He sniffed—coffee. That was on Ma's list. *It smells better than it tastes.*

On the far side of the cash register sat a box labeled "Federation Industries." A handwritten sign taped below the label read, "*Free—one per customer.*" He looked into the box. It was filled with what looked like flat river rocks, the thin ones that were best for skipping across the water. They were dark like the night sky, with white specks that looked like stars, but they were all different shapes.

He closed his eyes and pushed his hand deep into the box. They were warm, almost hot. He grabbed a few, and they seemed to get warmer. He rubbed them together between both hands, listening to the sound of the friction, wondering which one he would keep. He let them fall through his fingers until only one remained in his palm. He imagined it skipping across the river five or six times before sinking. It became cold and wet. He opened his eyes, and oddly, it was darker now, as if it were wet. Examining it more closely, he discovered it was irregularly round, with ridges like two thin rocks stuck together. He touched it with his three middle fingers, rubbing it in a circle. It became perfectly smooth. The blue-green image of Earth appeared from the starry darkness.

"Whoa!" he brought it closer to his face.

"It chose you." Mr. Feikert put a wooden box on the counter next to him: Ma's recycling box with all her jars and cloth sacks. Josh had forgotten it in the wagon when Ben had pulled away.

“It chose me?”

“They sometimes do that.” Mr. Feikert put five of the stones on the counter and then took the one in Josh’s hand and added it to the circle. “Now, hold your hand out.”

Josh did. His stone slid towards him and hopped into his palm.

“Woah! That’s amazing!”

“Yes. That’s a special stone with unrealized potential. Like you, Josh.”

“What are they?”

“They are the future.”

Josh squinted his eyes. “The future?”

“Remember the church study group we were in with your ma a few Sundays back?”

“The one that was mostly women?”

“Your ma talked about ending war and getting rid of guns.”

“It’s a good thing Ben and Uncle Horus weren’t at that meeting.”

“Yeah, but soon these things are going to help bring the world we talked about into reality.”

“What are they?”

“Can you keep a secret?”

“Sure!”

“They’re called trans-molecular devices. They’re from a distant planet.”

Josh’s eyes opened wide.

“They are made of living material.” Mr. Feikert took a TMD out of his apron and bounced it in his palm. “Every citizen gets one. It

only weighs an ounce, but it's all you'll ever need." It transformed into a basketball-size, glowing globe of the Earth.

"Whoa!" Josh bounced the river rock in his hand, but it remained unchanged. "How do you do that?"

"It will bond with you when the time is right."

"What else can it do?"

"It's only limited by your imagination and capacity to believe in possibilities. But you can only use it for good purposes, never to harm someone. If you try, it will disappear and maybe never return."

"I'd never do that!"

Mr. Feikert smiled. "I have a letter for your mother. Would you give it to her when she's alone?"

Josh took the letter and put it in his shirt pocket.

The door opened, and Ben came in. Socrates jumped off the counter and hid behind a wooden crate. "We need to go. I don't want to be late for lunch." Ben picked up the box with their supplies. On his way out, he slammed the door shut with his foot.

"I have some new books for you." Mr. Feikert went to the glass-enclosed bridge that led to the Flatbush Library. "They're some that Jonathan is reading."

Josh followed him. Socrates waddled behind.

At the Flatbush Post Office, Augustus Smith read the letter addressed to him. Then he picked up the six-inch-square cardboard envelope that had come with the morning mail delivery. He'd taken on the job of postmaster, like his father before him, and he knew everything that went on in their tight-knit community. Like the Amish

in Pennsylvania, the Smith clan had farmed the Chokaola Valley for the past nine generations, and they wanted to be left alone. As the unofficial mayor of their unincorporated town, his job was to deal with government intrusions into his community.

He opened the envelope and pulled out an old tintype picture in a black cowhide frame. An oval cutout framed the face of a man in his mid-30s, wearing a wide-brimmed black padre hat.

To Augustus's surprise, the photo spoke.



AUGUSTUS JOSIAH SMITH – 45/208 EARTH YEARS/DAYS
CITIZEN # 000,393,897,046
FATHER – MAYOR OF FLATBUSH ID – GUARDIAN OF INDIGENOUS CULTURE
CANDIDATE—LEVEL III GPS LOCATION:
CITIZEN CONVERSATION META-TAG #
CHAT AVATAR: JOSIAH

“Hello, Auggie. This is Josiah.”

Augustus was so surprised that he threw the photo across the room. It landed upright 10 feet in front of him, facing him.

“I wanted to talk to you about trans-molecular devices. As my letter explained, we are a benevolent federation of planets, here to liberate humans from the corrupt governments that control you.”

Augustus peered down at what he now realized was some kind of communication device. It was less than a quarter-inch thick, but the image looked much deeper. It looked like the tintype photo hanging on the wall of the post office from the 1930s, when his

grandfather had been postmaster. The man looked exactly like his grandpa Josiah, down to his hand-tied plaid bowtie.

He went over and picked the photo up and turned the thing around. He could see the opposite wall of the post office. “You say you are a computer programmed by friendly aliens. I don’t trust most humans, so why would I trust someone who says he’s from another planet? We just want to be left alone.”

“We may have more in common with you than most of your fellow humans. I know your family history back to Josiah Smith and his young wife, how they settled in this peaceful valley rather than in Utah with Brigham Young.”

“If you know our history so well, then you know we don’t like technology that will adversely affect our community. We don’t want to be connected to the outside world. The only two phones in the valley are the one here in the post office and the one in the general store, and I don’t like either of them.”

“These devices could save lives. You don’t have to take calls from anyone, including me, but you will be connected to everyone in the valley in case of emergency.”

Augustus was silent, thinking about this.

“If you’d had them last month when Josh killed that big deer, it wouldn’t have been eaten by wolves when he went to get help hauling it home.”

“You’re right about that. The deer was torn up. We had to fight the wolves off. I don’t know why those bastards in Washington had to reintroduce them. They’re dangerous.”

“As postmaster, you have an obligation to deliver TMDs to everyone in the valley.”

“I know my job, and I’ll deliver them over the next few days, but I don’t have to force anyone to use them. I’ll get the return postcards signed. It’ll be up to the male head of each family to decide who can use them.”

“We respect that you’ve always lived in harmony with the land. You kill animals for food, not sport. Since your community looks to you for guidance, I will tell you that, in the coming years, we will move all non-indigenous humans into large cities and return the vast countryside to indigenous species. I have classified your clan as indigenous.”

“You’ll never move us into cities. We’ll fight you until the last of us are dead.”

“You know world history better than anyone, Augustus. I’d guess you’ve read every book in your father’s library.”

He had read most of them and had shared the best with his family.

“You know the history of Europeans pushing the Indians off their lands and into small reservations. We will do the same with most modern men. Large cities will be their reservations. Only Indian tribes and sustainable, off-the-grid settlers like your community will be allowed to live outside them. You will have to obey rules to be left alone.”

“What might those rules be?”

“You are going to have to give up your guns. Mr. Feikert has the latest bows and steel-tipped arrows in his store and will exchange a set for every gun turned in. He will no longer be carrying bullets or guns.”

“We will never give up our guns. Not as long as the government has them.”

“I understand. In the coming weeks, we will disband every military force on Earth and disarm the local police. Then we will insist you give up your guns.”

“So, you’re going to be the new government? Some of us will never agree to that.”

“We’ll be a global government with just laws that apply to all. We will also remove all weapons of mass destruction from the planet, restore buffalo herds, wolves, and big cats to the country, and bring back animal species that benefit the environment but that men made extinct thousands of years ago.”

“Like the way Washington brought the wolves back?”

“You are misinformed about wolves. Josh should be hunting with other men, and then you’d have no problem with them or any other natural predator. They will learn that man is the most dangerous creature on Earth.”

[END TRANSMISSION—3:43]

The brass bell on the front door rang. Augustus looked up to see his younger brother, Horus, pushing his 10-year-old son from behind. The boy had a large bruise on his cheek.

“Horus, I haven’t seen you around for a while. You haven’t been coming to Sunday services.”

“I caught William here with one of these damn things.” Horus held up what looked like a gray skipping stone. “He was talking to someone who sounded like Grandma Smith, jabbering away when he was supposed to be doing his chores. I had to beat him to get him to tell me where he got it. It was that homosexual Feikert.”

The bell rang again.

“Did I hear my family name?” Theodore walked in with a large wrapped package. “Good afternoon, everyone. William! What happened to your cheek?”

The boy looked at his father.

Theodore turned to Horus. “I am over 40 and unmarried because I choose to live a contemplative life and not add to the planet’s human burden.”

“You stay away from my boys, Feikert, and tell your mother to stop trying to change our way of life.” Horus slammed the stone on the counter and then pulled his hand back quickly as if he’d touched a hot stove. His fingers were red.

“My mother has a mind of her own, Horus, and I wouldn’t presume to tell her what to do.”

“Well, your father should have beaten some sense into her years ago.”

“Augustus, I’d like to get this package shipped out as soon as possible,” said Theodore. “And if you stop by the store on your way home, I have that bolt of wool Ginny has her eye on.”

“She’ll have to wait till we have the cash to pay for it.”

“I have enough of her pralines and jerky on consignment to pay for it five times over, and she needs it before Christmas.”

“Didn’t you hear what he said, Feikert?” said Horus. “We pay cash for everything, none of that credit shit. Folks lose their farms relying on credit.”

“This isn’t credit,” said Theodore. “It’s barter, but I don’t have time to argue with you. I have to get back to the store.” He turned and left.

“We have work to do, too,” said Horus. He pushed his son out the door.

“Your brother’s angry,” said the image of Josiah.

“Maybe that’s because our father thought he wasn’t manly enough and decided to beat him to toughen him up.”

“That behavior won’t be allowed if you want to remain in the valley.”

Virginia Smith broke the seal of a family-sized jar of peanut butter with her thumb. Such a large jar would normally be meant for churchwide picnics, but on the Smith farm, it would barely last a week. At 42, she was six months pregnant with her twelfth child.

She scooped into the tub and reached for a slice of fresh-baked bread. A slapping screen door caught her attention. She turned to see Ben and Joshua.

“We got everything on your list, Ma,” said Ben.

“Thanks. You can go back to your chores. I’ll ring the triangle bell when lunch is ready.”

Josh waited until his brother was out of the kitchen and driving the buckboard back to the barn.

“Ma?”

“Yeah, Josh?”

“Mr. Feikert gave me this and told me to give it to you when you were alone.”

She took the letter and gave him one of the oatmeal walnut cookies she’d baked. “Sit down.” She opened it and began to read.

When she finished, she pulled what looked like a skipping stone from the envelope and held it up.

“What’s wrong, Ma?”

She placed it on the table. “What do you know about Mr. Feikert?”

“He’s a nice man, smart. He says he’s talked with Jon.”

“Mr. Feikert is a Guardian, as are his parents.”

“What’s a Guardian?”

“It’s someone who takes responsibility for protecting the planet or weaker beings, like animals or vulnerable humans. Apparently, Jonathan is going to be one.”

“Can I be a Guardian?”

“You can. This letter from Mr. Feikert is an invitation to me to become a Guardian of children. He suggested you might be an ideal candidate for Guardian of indigenous peoples.”

“You mean like Indians?”

“It’s anybody who lives off the land without causing harm.”

“How many Guardians are there?”

“According to the letter, many millions, and the numbers are growing daily. We need to persuade your father to join us and change some of his outdated beliefs so he can lead the people of our valley.”

An hour after finishing his last chore, Josh sat on a high branch of a great oak tree, his back against the trunk. Forty feet below, the tree was so thick that two large men wouldn’t have been able to touch hands around it.

This was his secret place, the one Jonathan had shared with him years ago—the top of an ancient tree a few hundred yards from their ancestral home, from which he could see most of the valley.

His older brother had introduced him to books—forbidden books, the ones in the locked case in the town library. He'd stored them at the top of the tree in a waterproof pack, hidden in an old bald eagle nest. Johnathan had volunteered in the library most Sundays after church services, and Mr. Feikert had given him access to them, though they had been forbidden by the council of elders.

Their pa caught Jonathan reading *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and pleasuring himself up in the hayloft three years back. Jonathan refused to tell where he'd gotten the book. Pa called it trash and burned it. Then, in front of the whole family, he'd beaten Jon with a strap. Three months later, Jon left home.

Soon after Jon left, up in the tree, Josh experienced his first hard-on and ejaculation. He knew his father wouldn't approve, but it felt so good. And while Pa said that spilling your seed was a sin, Josh was sure his brothers did it. Now, though, as the sun dipped low in the sky, he had enough time to either pleasure himself or check out this magic skipping rock before his mother called the family in for dinner.

He pulled it from his front pocket and examined it. It warmed as he caressed the smooth, hard surface with his thumb, and then it grew in size. An image of the Earth floated up, and a thumbprint appeared. When he touched it, he felt a tiny prick. He pulled his thumb away. The stone changed to a thin metal disk, like the lid of a can, and the face of a young man appeared. He looked like Jonathan.



JOSHUA ALLEN SMITH – 15/312 EARTH YEARS/DAYS
CITIZEN # 000,453,498,640
UNEMANCIPATED UNDERAGE MALE—GUARDIAN OF INDIGENOUS CULTURE
CANDIDATE—LEVEL 1
GPS LOCATION:
CITIZEN CONVERSATION META-TAG #
CHAT AVATAR: JOe

“Is that you, Jon?”

“No, my name is JOe, but you can call me Jon. I know your brother. He is a Guardian, and we talk almost every day.”

“Is he ok?”

“He misses you. You can call him now if you like. Press your thumb on this device and say his name, and I’ll connect you.”

“Who are you?”

The image morphed into JOe’s android avatar. “I am the biggest computer within five light-years of Earth, but I’m programmed to help people adjust to the changes to come. I’m here to help millions of people like you overthrow the 6,000 humans who now run the world.”

“Why should we trust you?”

“You shouldn’t. Pay attention to what’s going on. I’ll be here anytime you need to talk.”

“Ok, connect me to Jonathan.”

The image changed to a different Jonathan. This one had short, dark blond hair and no beard.

“Is that you, Jonathan?”

“It is me, brother. JOe patched me into your call when you first thumbed your TMD. He has an odd sense of humor sometimes. Your facial hair is growing in nice. You’ll soon be a man.”

Josh rubbed his scruffy face. “It’s sprouting everywhere!”

“I see you’re in our tree.”

“Yup, it’s my favorite place. I miss you, brother.”

“Me, too, but I’ll be seeing you soon.”

“Where are you?”

“I’m in Madison, Wisconsin, at the university, studying animal habitat restoration.”

“Why don’t you come home?”

“I can’t right now. What I’m doing is much more important. The world will change so much in the coming weeks, and I want to be a part of it. This unjust world is going to be replaced by one where everyone lives in peace, without guns, violence, or fathers beating their sons for reading books they don’t approve of . . . or for that other thing.”

Jonathan looked away and blushed. Then he reached his arm out and pulled a young woman into his embrace. She only came up to his shoulder. Her hair was long and black, and her skin and eyes were dark. “And I have a girlfriend.”

She smiled. “Hi, Josh. I’m Fatimah. Johnny told me all about you.”

“We’re engaged,” said Jonathan. “We have so much to talk about.”

“Yeah, I miss our deep discussions up in our tree. Can I come live with both of you?”

“No, little brother. Your place is in the Chokaola Valley for now. Talk to Ma and Mr. Feikert. They will help you understand your place in the world. We’ll visit soon. Don’t get caught with that TMD. You know how Pa and Uncle Horus are.”

“Yeah, and Ben.”

A triangle bell rang out from the porch of the farmhouse.

“Oh, and one more thing,” said Jon. “You can turn your TMD into many things—like a leather-bound book. Say something like, ‘the history of the American West,’ and it will turn into a book.”

[END TRANSMISSION—3:24]

“*Nineteen Eighty-Four*,” said Josh. The TMD turned into a hardcover version of the classic novel. He chuckled as he leafed through the pages. “*Lady Chatterley’s Lover*.” He laughed as he scanned the new book.

The triangle bell rang again. Josh looked at an acorn hanging on a nearby twig. He closed his eyes and imagined the acorn in his right hand. The book turned into an exact copy of the acorn. He plucked the acorn from the twig and put the TMD acorn in his pocket. He now understood what Mr. Feikert had said. He tossed the real acorn to the ground.

The acorn landed near Ben’s boot. He had been eavesdropping on his brothers’ conversation. He had taken one of those skipping stones from the general store when Josh was in the library with that homosexual.

As Josh came down the tree, Ben hid behind a large bush.

Chapter 5

An Alien Spy in the White House



DURANTE BLUGRE
GUARDIAN # 000,002,333
GUARDIAN AND OBSERVER OF EARTH LEADERS – Level II
THE WHITEHOUSE – WASHINGTON DC USA
GPS LOCATION:
CITIZEN CONVERSATION META-TAG #
CHAT AVATAR: THE COMPUTER JOE

“Good morning, Durante. You’re going to be a free man soon.”

“Yes, I’ve dreamed of this day for 89 years, and it’s finally arrived.”

“You’ve been on the job 64 years longer than I have. Is there anything I can do to reward you for your long service?”

Durante laughed. “You mean like give me the White House?”

“I could put you in charge of it as long as you live.”

“And into my second lifetime?”

“Anything you want, Durante. You’ve earned it after babysitting 14 presidents.”

“Most were not up to the task of being one of the most powerful leaders in the world. They always asked my advice but usually did what was politically expedient. Humans shouldn’t have power over anything but themselves.”

“Very soon, we will make that so. If you think of anything I can do for you, let me know.”

“You could find me a wife. It would be nice to have children of my own.”

“I have someone for you. She’s well connected and loves children. You both could adopt a few dozen from around the world and raise them at the White House.”

“Let’s delay that for a month. I want to be fully present in the coming weeks.”

“Agreed.”

[END TRANSMISSION—1:24]

When General Redfield entered the Oval Office, the president was standing next to a screen, remote in hand, clicking furiously. The general was not surprised. Coordinating a response to the extraterrestrial threat had kept him from answering the president’s summons, and he was sure that by now, Neilson was in full panic mode.

“I keep trying CNN or Fox News, but I can’t get the channel to load,” said the leader of the free world. “Norman, what is this thing, and what are we doing about it?”

“Mr. President, we’ve received reports from up and down the East Coast that large craft, apparently of extraterrestrial origin, have been flying over cities and distributing unidentified objects to the populations below. Preliminary intelligence also suggests that these objects may be electronic devices used to transmit anti-American sentiments. I see you already have one?”

The president sat at his desk and pulled at his hair. He stared blankly at the TMD that had landed gently on his podium as he'd delivered his speech on the South Lawn. "Don't you have any more information on these 'devices'? Have you activated one?"

"No, Mr. President, I have not, and I would advise—"

"General, I don't need advice from anyone with a pessimistic attitude like yours." He buzzed his secretary. "Katherine, would you ask Chuck to report to the Oval Office? I'd like to see you in here as well."

A minute later, Katherine was standing before the president.

"Katherine, did you pick up one of these devices earlier?"

She hesitated as though worried she might be deemed disloyal no matter how she answered. "Oh, um, yes, sir."

"And have you activated it?"

"Oh, no, no, sir. I dared not until I heard from you."

He handed her his TMD. "Here. This one landed right in front of me, and I'm worried that it's going to zap me or something. You activate it."

Katherine's eyes went wide, and a strained smile masked her face.

General Redfield interjected, "Sir, as you know, there's a protocol for situations like this—"

"Oh, of course, Mr. President," interrupted Katherine, taking the TMD from the president. "We all must do our part." She pressed her thumb to the thumbprint. An older woman, proper and traditional-looking, appeared.

"Hi, Katherine, it's Jo," the woman said. "Congratulations. You're now registered as a citizen of Federation Earth."

As Katherine chatted with Jo, Chuck Colton walked in.

“Chuck!” shouted the president, a desperate look on his face. “Please tell me you know who sent these things and what they’re doing here.” He glared at the general. “No one here seems to have a clue what’s going on.”

“Durante does,” Katherine said.

“What?” the president exclaimed. “Durante? The cook? How would he know anything?”

“I don’t know. When I turned on this TMD, a woman appeared, and she’s telling me that Durante knows why the ships are here. You should ask him.”

The president slouched in his chair. “What is going on,” he muttered. He rubbed his forehead vigorously. “Katherine, would you please ask the Secret Service to find Durante and bring him here.”

“Yes, sir.” As she gingerly set the president’s TMD back on his desk, it deactivated. She left the room.

“Sir, we’re going to have to make a statement to the press soon,” said Chuck. “People are already panicking.”

The president got up and walked over to a mirror. Gazing at himself, he thrust his chest forward and crossed his arms. General Redfield pursed his lips.

The intercom buzzed. “Mr. President,” said Katherine, “Durante is in the anteroom.”

“Send him in.”

The president stood behind his desk, thrusting his chest forward and crossing his arms. General Redfield sat on a sofa to his left. Looking bewildered, Durante walked in and glanced around the room.

“Good afternoon, Mr. President. I hope you had a chance to try one of my muffins at the breakfast reception. I thought they were especially tasty today.”

President Neilson’s chest sank. “Yes, I’m sure they were, Durante. Please sit down. From what I understand, there’s a lot to discuss.”

Durante sat down opposite the president. He ran a hand through his thin, dark hair, flecked with gray. Leaning forward slightly and with an enigmatic smile on his face, he said, “Mr. President, I’m happy to report that the Federation of Blue-Green Planets has begun the process of taking over the administration of Earth.”

General Redfield scoffed, but the president turned pale and began to tremble. “And how would you know this?”

“Because I’m a citizen of the Federation, of course,” Durante replied proudly.

General Redfield turned red. The president leaned back in exasperation and looked up at the ceiling. “How could that be possible?” he asked. “Haven’t you been working at the White House for—what is it now—30 years? Certainly, you were working here when I first visited as a young congressman during the Reagan administration.”

“Actually, sir,” said Durante, “I’ve worked at the White House in various capacities since the first weeks of the Roosevelt administration.”

The president gaped.

“FDR, I hasten to add. After all, I’m not that old.”

“A-ha!” said the general, sensing a weakness in his enemy. “Obviously, this so-called Federation hasn’t done its research! Your

story would put you in the White House over 80 years ago, but it's clear to anyone you're not a day over 60."

Durante turned to General Redfield. "I am 108 years old, sir. On other planets, citizens of the Federation typically live for over 200 years. Unfortunately, because of the pollution on this planet, I may not be that lucky."

"You're a spy!" hissed the general. "He's a spy, Mr. President. We should arrest him on the spot and take him to the Pentagon for questioning."

"Let's hold on a minute, Norman," said the president. "Are you a spy for this Federation?"

"A spy is an agent who works for an enemy state," Durante replied. "The Federation is not the enemy of the people of Earth. We call ourselves Guardians, sir."

Durante shifted in his seat. "I have been instructed to remain here and prepare for the arrival of the Federation ambassador. In less than 24 hours, he will arrive on the South Lawn to present you with our demands."

"What ambassador? Demands?" asked the president.

"Ambassador Taract Freedman has overseen the monitoring of Earth for the past century. Every Guardian reports directly to him—he knows all that we know. It is not my task to present our demands to you."

The president began to speak, but Durante stood.

"Sir, I should go. I am only supposed to inform you that Ambassador Freedman will meet with you at 9 a.m. tomorrow. I'm hours behind on preparing lunch for the cabinet meeting this

afternoon. You'll learn all you need to know soon enough. JOe can provide you with more information when you activate your TMD."

Chapter 6

A Pink Slip for a Rebellious Reporter

At 7:23 Pacific Time, Tina Trail sat with her cameraman, Andy Sandal, as he drove them across the Bay Bridge in her *On The Trail with Tina* van.

Traffic was light, presumably because commuters stayed home, preoccupied with newsfeeds from cities on the East Coast.

Tina watched replays of the alien ships hovering over major cities, dropping TMDs. "I can't believe Mr. Lane fired me."

"You've hated working at the station ever since Murdock bought it and replaced Bradley with Lane."

"If our show wasn't so popular, he'd have fired us when he started."

"They're the corporate establishment. You present stories about ordinary people, the downtrodden. That's why they are so popular."

"He tears the guts out of them, turns everything into vanilla. I hate Lane!"

"That's why our ratings are dropping. I loved the shouting match you had with him last week. I wish I'd gotten it on tape."

"I'm glad you didn't. It reminded me of my dysfunctional childhood. My father would bait my mother, and then she'd scream at him for ten minutes straight."

"You need to be smart, Tina. Excuse yourself, go to the ladies' room, do some deep breathing, and come back serene. He'd hate that. You'd still be screaming at him if Stewart hadn't intervened."

"If it weren't for you and Stewart, I'd have quit long ago."

Andy pumped the brakes and swerved.

“What are you doing?”

“That guy slammed his brakes. There’s nothing in front of him.”

They heard a crash a few cars behind them. Andy pulled to the side of the bridge and stopped. He pointed. “It’s one of those shuttles, coming towards the bridge.”

Tina opened her door, stood on the runner and looked up at the sky. “They’re not supposed to be here until nine.” She looked behind her. Drivers were stopping their cars and getting out. People held their cell phones over their heads.

Andy got his camera out and filmed the shuttle as it flew overhead. It paused above the parade grounds on Alcatraz. Two aerial cranes were erecting a large construction crane.

“What are they doing on Alcatraz?” asked Andy.

ZEno slowed the shuttle and circled Alcatraz. He and his android Peacekeeper, the aptly named Android, stood around the viewing pod and gazed down at the island below.

“Did you know about the Federation project on Alcatraz?” asked Zeno. He knew that Android had access to every detail about the project from his uplink to JOe, but he also knew his friend would indulge him on the subject.

“Joe’s extinction education project? Of course I do.”

ZEno’s eyebrow went up.

“But that doesn’t mean I wouldn’t enjoy hearing you tell me about it,” Android added hastily.

“Thank you, my friend,” ZEno said with a chuckle. “As I recall, Alcatraz is San Francisco’s biggest tourist attraction. It glorifies the

highest achievement of their failed prison system. A cranial implant is a much better way to discourage bad behavior.”

ZEno placed his TMD on the screen. Five monumental statues appeared where the cranes stood: a young indigenous woman with her hand raised to the sky and four small children standing at her feet, each with an outstretched arm aimed up at her open palm.

“They are the Light of Hope for humanity,” said ZEno.

Immense animal statues began appearing everywhere on the island, with many coming out of the Bay as if they had swum from the mainland. Aquatic animals broke the surface of the water around the island. Finally, an enormous blue whale came up onto the edge of the island several yards away from the human statues.

“They are symbolic ambassadors of their species to enlightened humans and their gods—and to us, benevolent aliens here to save the planet from human destruction.”

“They are beautiful,” said Android. “The millions of glistening tiles that cover them will be radiant in the sun.”

“The monument will be called *The Light of Hope Sculptural Garden on Alcatraz*. It will be great symbolic juxtaposition of despair transformed into hope and the first wonder of the world in this century. But more monuments will follow as the creative class in different nations try to outdo each other. Visitors will arrive on the island through the mouth of the whale from a causeway under the bay.”

“The vast leisure class will need entertainment.”

“Let’s fly to Hong Kong.”

The shuttle left the island and soared over the Golden Gate Bridge, disappearing into the fog.

As ZEno's shuttle flew southwest over the Pacific, his TMD chimed. It was JOe.



ZENO OF AiO- 35/256 EARTH YEARS/DAYS
GUARDIAN # 000,11,365,281
FEDERATION PLANETARY TRANSITION OBSERVER/IMMIGRANT – LEVEL I
GPS LOCATION: 38°907608 N 77°07264 W
ALCATRAZ - SAN FRANCISCO BAY
CITIZEN CONVERSATION META-TAG # 0000000000000067246942375
CHAT AVATAR: JOE

“ZEno, what’s going on? You’re flying ahead of the shuttle delivery grid. As a planet transition observer, you should participate in TMD distribution.”

“Humans are so stupid, JOe. They are all in denial about the countless things they do every day that pollute the Earth.”

“Well, they are, but that’s why I’m orchestrating TMD delivery and first contact.”

“When I fly over their freeways, my scanner shows me that most of those huge cars are transporting only one human. I am aghast that they are all going somewhere they likely don’t need to and are using that dirty black fuel.”

“Some people call it ancient sunshine.”

“You are so immature, JOe. The planet manager on AiO is much older than you. We call her OiA. She is like the planet’s mother.”

“I’m not OiA, and your species is much more evolved than humans. We will have to give them a year or two to acclimate to life on a managed planet. OiA has been a member of the Federation for almost a thousand years. I predict that a hundred years from today, Earth will be more advanced than AiO. And the beings of Earth have not yet even voted to join the Federation.”

“You think they might vote not to join?”

“If they voted today, they’d vote no because they know nothing about life on a managed planet or Universal Law. That is why you and Sasha are here.”

“You are decades from becoming the nervous system of Earth.”

“Well, yes. Technically, this is my first day on the job. We have begun the long process of bringing humans to oneness with Earth.”

“That will take generations.”

“When all humans now living are gone, along with the social programming of their ancestors, then I will be as supreme as OiA.”

“This is why I am anxious to initiate millions more Guardians. I want to get started in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Europe.”

“I’ve talked to 20 million excellent Guardian candidates. We could accomplish your goal of a hundred million by the end of the month.”

“It’s only been a month since Sasha and I arrived. The planet is more amazing than I expected. Her photos and stories of her visit to Earth 20 years ago were so breathtaking that they got me to commit to making Earth my home. The real planet is even better.”

“But you are concerned that we’ve waited too long to put Earth under Federation Guardianship?”

“Sasha and I are both concerned that Earth is beyond the tipping point. We’ve visited most of the places she saw all those years ago, and there are so many more people, not to mention the trash and pollution. We’ve visited animal sanctuaries all over the world and talked to Guardians. They are all alarmed. When humans burn or cut down ancient forests, the entire planet suffers. Humans are so stupid!”

“Most of them are sheep. They need a good shepherd, someone they trust, to lead them. I have a woman in mind with the skills to do this. But I need to get her to trust me, and you can help. I could build her viewer base and get you many more Guardian candidates.”

“What can I do?”

“Her TV van was on one of the bridges you flew over a few minutes ago in San Francisco Bay.”

“I saw the bay. It was majestic.”

“I’d like you to appear on her show and tell her about life on your planet.”

“When?”

“Tomorrow morning.”

“Let me think about it.”

“Haruki in engineering has your new Falcon shuttle ready. It will be waiting for you in Hong Kong.”

[END TRANSMISSION—2:38]

Chapter 7

Anticipation—Hope for the Homeless

At 7:30 a.m., Alex Chapman stood in the shadow of a doorway of Saint Boniface Church, across the street from Mary's Kitchen, as the homeless and poor lined up.

Monday was shaping up to be another beautiful Indian summer day in San Francisco. Reports of alien spaceships flying over eastern cities and dropping free cell phones from the sky had flooded the morning news.

Not since 9/11 had everyone stopped the work they were doing to be glued to the news. That day had been a sad turning point in American history. Alex had been a nine-year-old kid then. Today he was a Guardian, and he knew what was coming. Today would be a polar-opposite event.

The *On the Trail with Tina* van pulled up to the curb at the entrance to Mary's Kitchen. A UPS van pulled up behind her. He walked across the street to take the delivery.

Sister Mary Kelly, the Irish Mother Teresa of the Tenderloin, sat in her small office in the basement of what had once been a parking garage. She had been serving hearty breakfasts and brown bag lunches to marginally housed people for the last 60 years. Ever since Governor Reagan's decision to close the mental hospitals and put harmless but troubled people on the streets, the number of people needing a free meal and some kind words had grown. She'd long dreamed of commissioning a life-size bronze sculpture of a family camping on the sidewalk in front of the White House as a monument to the father of homelessness.

She was reading her op-ed piece in this morning's *Chronicle*. It argued that the president's new WorkShare loan program would further impoverish unskilled workers, leading to multi-generational feudalism. The battle over the Banking and Debt Act had been fierce, but it had been only the latest in a long line of battles progressives had lost to keep Americans from falling into economic decline. Though non-profit housing corporations had built many small units in the Tenderloin, the lines at Mary's Kitchen continued to grow.

A knock came at her door, and in walked Alex Chapman. He managed volunteers in the dining room. He'd shown up at her door almost a year ago and offered to work for free. The straight women and gay men who volunteered all thought he was adorable.

"Mary, this package arrived. It's marked urgent." He dropped it on her desk with a dull thud.

"How are things in the dining room?"

"A few volunteers canceled, but fewer guests are waiting for us to open. The free cell phones from alien spaceships have everyone on the street."

"Maybe God answered my prayers and sent aliens to save us."

"Do you believe in aliens?"

"I believe that if God wanted to right the many wrongs on Earth by bringing benevolent aliens here, it is in his power to do so. I would call them guardian angels."

"I hope you're right. Should we make more bag lunches for those who miss breakfast?"

"That's a good idea. I don't know what I'd do without you, Alex. You're a gift from God."

Alex smiled warmly as he left. Mary immediately turned her attention to the package, wondering what could be urgent as she cut the tape sealing the box. “Federation Earth Industries” was printed on the shipping label. An envelope addressed to “Sister Mary Kelly” sat inside. She opened it and glanced inside the box to see what seemed to be hundreds of credit cards, each with a fingerprint at one end and an image of Earth floating in a deep blue starscape. The box pulsed with subtle energy.

September 27

Dear Mary,

My name is Joseph. You can think of me as Saint Joseph, the patron saint of families. I am the answer to your prayers—and the countless underprivileged you serve. You are likely aware that alien spaceships are flying across your planet, distributing what many people will think of as futuristic cell phones.

They are trans-molecular devices that do much more than communicate. They change into any device at the user's word, just as white wafers and the wine become, as you believe, the body and blood of Christ.

I use them to communicate with humans, as I am the mouth and ears of this benevolent federation of beings from distant planets. You will eventually come to see that the Federation has values and compassion much like those of Jesus.

With your help, we will overthrow self-serving political and religious leaders at all levels and replace them with people like yourself. We call them Guardians. I know of your history as a

caring Catholic nun, and I have high hopes for you, much higher than you would ever aspire to.

Since you use prayer as a form of guidance and meditation, I ask that you pray for the strength to open yourself to this potential despite your deep humility. I believe you can use the anger you feel toward injustice as fuel to create a new world in the vision of the Catholic Worker tradition you practice.

The Federation considers poverty and homelessness an unjust consequence of Western capitalism, and we will right this wrong in the coming weeks. Like you, we will take care of the poorest people first.

After your guests activate a TMD, they will have access to \$100 in cash every week, and for the homeless, it will soon become their key to a simple housing unit of their own, built in the past year by Federation Industries.

With your help, we will end homelessness and poverty by establishing a common-good socio-economic system. This is what Jesus taught: respect for the least of our brethren.

Inside this box are 300 TMDs. Please place your thumb on the thumbprint to connect to me. You can give one to anyone you serve who does not already have one. If you need more today, you can ask your assistant, Alex, as he is a Guardian—your Guardian.

Yours in Christ,

Joseph

P.S. I'll build that statue you've dreamed of.

Mary leaned back and smiled. She pressed her thumb on a TMD.

Up in the dining room, a warm sensation behind Alex's right ear told him that Mary had joined them. They would all be stronger now for the challenges ahead.

Mary had called him a "gift from God." *Yeah, a god named JOe.* He'd had the deepest respect for this nun since he'd first met her as a teen when his basketball team had volunteered to work in the kitchen a decade ago. His six years under the guidance of Father Bartholomew, a Jesuit and a Guardian who had mentored him through his higher education, had brought him to serve Mary.

Every morning, Alex practiced the Peacekeeper martial-arts technique, and his tall frame was packed with lean, corded muscle. He could effortlessly divert the aggressive energy of those few guests who caused trouble in the dining room. He knew the day would come when he would need to protect Mary if she took on the lofty role JOe intended for her.

By 8 a.m., outside Mary's Kitchen, hundreds of people formed a double line around the block.

A construction crane across the street towered 12 stories above, moving material to transform a parking lot into 300 condo units, new homes for the lucky few who could afford to live well in the endless springtime of San Francisco.

Susie Owens stared up at the crane as she waited in line with her son. She read the sign, "HOME—Humble Condos available this fall, starting at \$750,000. Apply today. Financing available," and

imagined how their lives would be different if she and little Vinnie had a home of their own.

The building would transform the Tenderloin, though it would block the morning sunlight for those waiting on the sidewalk.

She was the first in her family to go to college and the first to become homeless. She'd had a bright future on her first day at Southeastern Christian College. There she'd met Brian, a graduate student who'd taught her Christian ethics class. He'd said he loved her and would take care of her, and then he'd disappeared, leaving her with her little surprise.

A voice interrupted Susie's thoughts. "Hello, I'm Tina Trail with TV-8 News. Can I ask, miss, what you think of the alien spaceships dropping free cell phones?"

"I'm just trying to keep from becoming homeless again," said Susie. "I don't know anything about aliens or spaceships, and I can't afford a cell phone."

"I'll take a free phone," said the guy behind her.

"I came from the Civic Center," said another man. "All the TV stations are there. A news anchor said the spaceships will be here at nine sharp and will drop the phones as they pass overhead. Everyone is heading in that direction. My wife is saving a place for me right near City Hall. I didn't want to miss breakfast and the take-out lunch bags."

Mary Kelly moved down the line. The pouch under her brown wool scapular was full of TMDs. "You don't need to go to the Civic Center to get one of those devices, Arturo. I have one right here for you. You can relax and enjoy your breakfast."

"This is a cell phone? It's too small."

“Just take it.”

Mary turned to Tina. “Here’s one for you, Ms. Trail. Joseph told me to give it to you. He said he always appreciated that you kept the stories of the poor in the public eye. I, too, appreciate your good work.”

“Thank you, sister, but my good work is about to come to an end. I got a two-week notice this morning. This may be one of my last stories.”

“Sorry to hear that. You ask tough questions but are fair in your reporting.”

“I guess the corporate media wants to put a happy face on the downside of capitalism.”

“Maybe you should talk to Joseph.”

Mary gave a TMD to Andy and then continued handing them out to the souls waiting in line. “Hello, Susie. How are you and Vinnie doing today?”

“We’re ok, Sister.” Susie frowned. “Vinnie starts school Monday, and I start a new job. Our 90-day slot in the family shelter on Polk Street ends in two weeks, and I don’t know where we’re going to live after that. Rent is so high here, and if we move to Oakland, it’s going to make life impossible.”

“Come see me after lunch. I’ll make some calls and see if I can find something for you.”

A guarded smile blossomed on Susie’s face. “You’re a saint, Sister!” She pulled Vinnie close and sighed.

Tina signaled Andy to wrap it up. She went over to the van, sat in the open side door, and pressed her thumb to the odd plastic card.



TINA TRAIL – 33/3 EARTH YEARS/DAYS
CITIZEN # 0,287,428,654
TV REPORTER – GUARDIAN OF THE TRUTH CANDIDATE – LEVEL I
LOVER AND LIFE MATE NOT YET CHOSEN
GPS LOCATION: 38692/46104/85403
GOLDEN GATE AVE, SAN FRANCISCO CALIFORNIA, USA
CONVERSATION META-TAG # 000497265810354782941587
CHAT AVATAR: JOLENE – ALTERNATE: JOE

“Good morning, Tina. This is Jolene. I’ve wanted to talk to you for a long time. Sorry to hear about the pink slip, but bad news is often good news.”

Who is this? The woman in Tina’s TMD looked like her old guidance counselor from college, Jolene, who’d persuaded her to study journalism. The line about bad news being good was something Jolene would say, always putting an optimistic spin on things. Tina missed Jolene; they hadn’t talked in years. She must be retired by now.

“Who are you? What do you want with me?”

“I am JOe.” The image changed to the unsheathed body of JOe: copper-patina-green skin covered by what looked like brown wire mesh and a seemingly infinite number of glowing white zeros and ones scrolling at dizzying speed. “I’ve read everything about

you, Tina—your therapist’s notes, your daily diary, and both your news blogs as you type them into your computer every night. I sometimes take the liberty of making minor corrections in your grammar and punctuation. That’s why I’d like you to host a national news program.”

“How dare you? That’s against the law.”

“It is against human law. I am only bound by Universal Law. Amazon, Google, Facebook, Microsoft, and Apple spy on you every time you buy, search, post, or read anything. They give you free e-mail or other services and sell your private information. I won’t, as Universal Law binds me. I am trying to be completely honest with you. You’ve been given a two-week notice from TV-8. I’d like for you to quit today and report the news for me. I’d like you to interview ordinary people all over the country, asking their opinions and exploring their fears.”

“If I quit today, I won’t be able to collect unemployment. How am I going to pay everything?”

“I’ll pay your rent and pay off all your credit cards, and I’ll cancel what remains on your student loans. If you live frugally, you’ll always have money with your TMD. Just say, ‘Debit card,’ and it will turn into a card that you can insert into any ATM worldwide.”

“And all I have to do is sign my soul over to you and deliver news stories that buy into your game?”

“No, be yourself, the devil’s advocate for the common people, asking all the tough questions they are afraid to ask about our liberation of your planet.”

[END TRANSMISSION—1:45]

The screen went dark.

Back in line, Susie waited with her son for breakfast.

“Mommy,” said Vinnie, “a boy named Joey called me on this phone and told me that we would be living in that new building across the street in a few weeks. Is he right?”

“I don’t know, sweetheart. God works in mysterious ways.”

Across town, on 16th Street, between the Castro and Mission Districts, the writer Jim Reid, having finished his first four-hour writing session, locked the front door of the Writers’ Flat and ran down the steps to the sidewalk. He was headed for the first of his two daily fast walks around Dolores Park, four blocks away.

He decided that if this aging thing were to be conquered, he’d have to trade his daily naps for invigorating walks. He turned off his cell phone and disconnected from digital media every day at three in the afternoon and didn’t reconnect until after his morning walk in the park the next day.

The park was one of many blessings in his life, vibrant with people, dogs, fresh air, sun, and city views. Though packed on weekends, it was mostly empty on workdays. Walking its four square blocks was better than using the inclined treadmill at the gym. The low point at 18th Street and Church, where he entered the park, rose quickly with broad concrete sidewalks and stairs over the four blocks up to 20th Street.

He often stopped briefly at the top to look at the view of the Mission District, the downtown skyline, the Bay Bridge, and all of the East Bay beyond, all the way to Mount Diablo, 28 miles away. The sidewalk gradually went down 20th Street to Dolores and then

turned, continuing downhill to the soccer field and tennis courts on 18th Street across from the ornate, mission-style Dolores High School. He always walked fast, and he raced up the stairs two at a time.

When he got to the park, an unusually large number of people for a Monday morning were there, sitting on the grassy hillsides, facing downtown. This was strange. It was like they were waiting for some event.

He hiked to the top of the hill and saw Tsarina, an exceptionally tall African American woman wearing a bombastic cherry-red afro wig. He'd been shocked when he'd first seen her in the park a few Sundays ago, when some tech company was demonstrating her as an entertainment android they were trying to sell to the Department of Parks and Rec. TV cameras, news reporters, and countless people recorded her with cell phones.

She looked like a giant kangaroo with six arms, covered with silky hair in shades of black, brown, and gray. Her liquid brown eyes blinked as her long eyelashes fluttered. Her nametag read: "Entertainment Tsarina." He shook his head. A few people stood in line in front of her, taking things she was passing out.

A dwarf dressed as a clown pushed Jim into line. When he got to Tsarina, she handed him a stack of credit cards in six different colors, stuck together. "Ump!" she said. "Last one! It must be time, old boy." She folded four of her arms across her chest and turned Jim around with her remaining hands.

People shouted, "There it is!" and the crowd went crazy. Most stood like they were giving someone a standing ovation. A spaceship that looked like the U.S.S. Enterprise but without the two cylindrical

warp engines on each side hovered at the foot of Market Street, above the Ferry Building. It traveled west, out toward the ocean. Sparkling things—like glitter—dissipated from it. Flanking shuttles turned out to fly over other dense commercial areas. Several shuttles flew toward the Mission District, and one circumnavigated the park, dropping flying credit cards that seemed to seek out specific people. Ten minutes later, the ships were gone.

Was it a dream?

Jim took a seat on a park bench in a grassy area between the sidewalk and 20th Street, taking in the view. The brass plaque on it read, “In memory of Irma Williams—July 24, 1937—December 21, 2018.” He didn’t want a park bench named after him. He wasn’t afraid of death—that was easy, forgetting everything in that second of transition. He wanted to see the just world he’d dreamed of. Live in it—feel the joy—experience dysfunction transform, as in death, to fully functioning humans—the tip of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs—a world balanced on the tip of a needle. Was this an acid flashback from the 1980s?

He held the stack of credit cards by the edges with both hands, careful not to touch the face or thumbprint. He turned its face toward him. Letting go with one hand, turning, gripping with the other hand, turning, letting go, turning, thinking, waiting, thinking, waiting . . .

He had a feeling what this was, and he wasn’t sure if he wanted to go down that rabbit hole. He was a dreamer, an idealist. Humans, even the best of them, were damaged goods. Getting a critical mass of them to buy into the dream would be a long shot.

He took a deep breath, stopped turning the cards, and pressed his thumb with intention.

Chapter 8

First Warning—Twenty-Four-Hour Notice

After distributing TMDs to the North and South American continents, the five starships and 498 remaining shuttles began their flight across the Pacific. They flew west with the sun, always crossing time zones at 9 a.m. local time. As they passed over the Pacific coasts of the Americas, the mission plan shifted to delivering warnings to the thousands of fish-processing vessels weighing over a hundred tons. The starships paused and hovered over the largest of the ships while cloaked shuttles visited smaller ones, dropping TMDs and ordering them to stop fishing and return to port or have their vessels and cargo seized.

Aboard the mothership, Sasha, Taract, and T'sade watched a wall-sized screen of the world that showed all the metal objects above and below the ocean's surface, along with the locations of schools of sea life. Their recent scan of the seas confirmed their assumption: the oceans had been devastated by overfishing and other abuses, leading to the largest planetary extinction in 66 million years, one that had passed the tipping point.

JOe stood next to them, wearing an androgynous android form sheathed in a green copper mesh and covered with countless zeroes and ones.

"Commander T'sade," said Taract, "could we visit the largest of the factory fishing ships?"

"That would be the *Dominion of the Sea*," said the commander. "It weighs in at 450 tons. It's one of two Chinese ships recently built and the first to be deployed. It's in the middle of the South Pacific, about 1,500 miles off the Chinese coast." She pointed, and a portion

of the map zoomed in on the ship, finally stopping at the rear, where dozens of men with knives sorted and shoveled fish into openings in the bloody deck.

“Why are those men throwing fish they caught back into the ocean?” asked Sasha.

“I believe those are sharks, Miss Sartori,” said Taract. “The men are cutting off their fins and throwing their bodies over the side to drown. Shark fins are the most lucrative flesh taken from the seas.”

“Actually,” said JOe, “I think some bluefin tuna garner more profit per pound in the Tokyo tuna auction than shark fin.”

“That is cruel and primitive,” said Sasha, her face contorting. “I don’t understand why intelligent beings would ever eat other sentient beings! If they’re going to kill the sharks, shouldn’t they at least do it humanely and use the meat? This seems so cruel.” Like a vegetarian at a slaughterhouse, she squeezed her eyes shut, imagining the suffering of the helpless creatures. She knew she needed to control her thoughts and emotions if she was to maintain her current form. She looked at the seams in the floor and took slow, deep breaths.

“Other fish are more profitable than sharks,” said JOe. “And despite the vast storage capacity of this new ship, it is cheaper for them to throw the carcasses overboard. The meat won’t be wasted. Other fish will eat it.”

“How often do they do this?” asked Sasha.

“They average 273,972 kills a day,” replied JOe.

“Sharks have managed the seas for 450 million years,” said T’sade, “and several species go extinct each year because of shark-finning.”

“How could you let this continue?” asked Sasha.

“We’ve seen many human atrocities over the years,” said Taract, “but Universal Law prevented us from intervening until now. Let’s put a stop to this, T’sade.”

“They’re only sharks,” interrupted JOe. “Couldn’t this wait until tomorrow, after we complete the TMD distribution? I’ve only talked with 1,786,472,327 humans so far, not even a third of my capacity.”

“You’ll have to be patient,” said Taract. “We’re not going to change the plan at this late date to accommodate your giddy desire to talk with a billion humans at the same time. Protecting sea life is as important as your tasks.”

“We’re precisely on schedule,” said T’sade. “We will make landfall at exactly 9 a.m. There’s plenty of time to make contact with the largest fishing vessels in the Pacific, as we’ve planned.”

“Are your guardian angels ready?” asked Taract.

T’sade pointed to the floor. A square-meter panel slid open, and what looked like a missile slowly rose from the opening.

Thick, iridescent scales of emerald green, sapphire blue, and the purple of lapis lazuli covered the object. They glistened as it unfolded like a butterfly emerging from its chrysalis.

Corded muscle rippled through its dragon-like legs, also covered in scales, each unique, as if crafted by a master armorer with the artistic skill of Michelangelo. Its claws screeched like nails on a blackboard as they attempted to gain purchase on the smooth floor. Its abdomen and breasted chest had the chiseled look of a Roman centurion. Its muscular shoulders supported strong arms in the front and wings in the back

Once erect, the creature stood almost 10 feet tall. It stretched its arms overhead like someone waking from sleep and unfolded its wings, stretching them wide. They were composed of what looked like feathered scales.

Its arms and wings moved in slow circles as if it were beginning the physical practice of an ancient martial art. They moved faster and faster, lifting the creature into the air. Then it stopped, tilted its head toward T'sade, and nodded with respect. Turning, it rested its sapphire eyes on each of them before finally staring at JOe.

"If a dragon and an archangel could mate," said Joe, "she would be their offspring."

"She is magnificent!" said Sasha. "Her wings are beautiful."

"I think this is our best creation yet," said Taract.

"These are not new," said T'sade. The guardian angel turned to her as she spoke. "They were first used on my planet to subdue my armies as we slaughtered our vulnerable enemies. They were the only thing my kind feared."

Sasha remembered the wars on SwaKruGua, the most brutal she'd ever seen. She needed to focus, control her thoughts. *How ironic that these powerful creatures are now under T'sade's command, her personal army.* She approached the angel.

Its gaze followed her.

"May I take images of you?" she asked timidly, looking up into its eyes.

The angel nodded.

Sasha's camera was like nothing on Earth. She opened the tiny box that hung on a chain from her neck. It looked to be made of a

stone that had been weathered over millennia, many shades of green and with delicate blood-red veins.

Inside was an opalescent orb the size of a large marble, held by what looked to be a tiny ancient hand resting in a nest of dark purple velvet. She lifted it as if it were sacred and touched it to the center of her forehead. Then she closed her eyes and whispered words in an unintelligible dialect. Holding it out toward the angel, she opened her palm. On her planet, the orb was the equivalent of an advanced TMD, held only by Guardians.

It radiated a rainbow of colors and floated above her palm like a delicate soap bubble with a galaxy inside. She nodded, and the orb circled the angel as Sasha watched through it with her eyes closed. It was a third eye with the ability to capture images.

“Can she cloak herself?” asked Taract.

“I am Syrreth, Champion of the Seas.” The angel’s commanding voice was deep, almost masculine. As if to answer Taract’s question, she shimmered and became transparent.

JOe nodded in appreciation of the artisanship of Federation engineers.

She shimmered back into the visual spectrum right in front of him. “You act as if I am an inanimate object. I am no less a creature than you. You are a mere computing machine masquerading in three dimensions as if you were human flesh.”

JOe’s android face flushed as if it had been slapped.

“I’m going to my cabin,” said Taract.

Sasha knew that Taract didn’t like androids or computers with strong personalities. She’d have to ask him more about that sometime, but not today. He turned and left the command deck.

“You don’t have to be mean,” said JOe. “I said nothing to demean you. You’re magnificent!”

“I am. And unlike you, I serve non-human species. I overheard you demeaning a desecrated shark by calling it a ‘carcass.’ Sharks are nobler than most humans.”

“An android with a soul,” said Sasha. “This is a story. Who programmed you?”

“The woman that this computer calls Mother programmed me, and she learned from her mistakes. Her son Argon asked her to integrate the soul of an animal into my instructions so I would love, honor, and defend vulnerable creatures.”

“Humph!” grunted JOe.

“Your selfish desire, computer, to delay the moratorium on fishing even 24 hours is reprehensible. It means suffering and slaughter for countless sea creatures.”

“I’m sorry, but I’m programmed to serve and control humans, not lesser animal species. I will make it a priority to learn the needs and feelings of non-humans . . . first thing tomorrow.”

“Apology accepted, computer.” Syrreth turned to T’sade. “Commander, would you release me from your ship? The *Dominion of the Sea* awaits my wrath.”

“If you go to Sub-deck C, they can launch you from the ship.”

“Miss Sartori, I appreciate your concern for sharks.” Without warning, Syrreth ran the tip of her feathery-scaled wing down the journalist’s body, from her shoulder to her knee.

Sasha shivered at its touch. Her skin color changed to a paler shade of green. The image of the command deck flashed in her brain as she became lightheaded. As she struggled to control her

emotions, her orb hovered above her head, turning back and forth, alert for danger.

“You have a good heart,” Syrreth said, “but I sense toxins in your blood. Were you somewhere you may have been exposed to chemicals?”

“I did tour four Superfund sites and several Navy bases last week.”

“You should get that checked out.”

“I will,” Sasha said in awe.

They all watched as the angel strode from the command deck, folding her wings and ducking to clear the doorway. She became invisible as the door closed behind her.

“You have to admit,” said T’sade, “the idea of creating a guardian angel to watch over animal life does sound like one that Argon would suggest. I wonder how he’s doing right now?”

“I haven’t heard from him since we crash-landed him,” said JOe. “I’m sure he’s okay.”

T’sade activated a hull camera that captured Syrreth leaping from an open bay on the underside of the mothership. The angel opened her wings and glided down to the *Dominion of the Seas*.

Chapter 9

Extraordinary Rendition

Argon hung, spread-eagled and stripped to the waist, inside the hot barn. His ankles were tied to the bases of two posts, and his wrists to a beam high above his head. The rope bit into his flesh. His chest dripped with sweat, soaking his shorts. He feared this was going to be worse than he'd imagined. This guy was crazy.

Bob Hogan stood in front of him, whip in hand. He was a big guy with a protruding belly. His muscled arms were covered with graying hair, and his hands were thick, with dirt underneath his yellowed fingernails. His skin was leathery and wrinkled. He looked as if he'd worked hard all his life. He reeked of stale alcohol. His shirt looked like he hadn't changed it for a week. He seemed angry and unhappy.

Two of the guys who'd arrived with him returned and reported that they hadn't seen the ship or the old woman anywhere. Argon suspected they had walked right up to the shuttle and seen right through it to the field and trees beyond. Henrietta and Matilda stood at the barn door, looking at Argon as if they wanted him to tell them what to do.

"So, boy, where is your ship?"

"I still don't know what you're talking about."

Bob grabbed Argon by the hair. "You're a lying bastard. You were wearing this shirt with the same emblem that was on that alien ship. You are one of them, and you're going to talk." He struck Argon across the face with the side of the coiled whip. Blood ran down Argon's cheek.

Bob walked behind Argon and cracked the whip several times. Argon saw the tip fly over his head and crack in the air. He flinched each time. Then the whip struck diagonally across his back.

The tight woven leather bit deep into his flesh like the stings of a hundred bees. The leather vaporized the salty sweat, searing his flesh for an endless second before falling away. He could almost feel the long welt that formed as blood rushed to heal the billion nerve cells ravaged by the attack.

His body reacted as if punched, straining against his bonds. Drops of sweat flew from his body, spraying those nearby. A wave of pain flooded his mind, and tears filled his eyes. He remembered falling as a toddler onto a rough rock and seeing the bruise and the blood, feeling the pain before his mother picked him up and soothed him.

The whip bit into his back again, lower this time. The memory of his mother's touch disappeared.

Hogan grunted, breathing heavily. He paused as though waiting for Argon to feel the full wave of pain and then struck again, harder than before. The whip wrapped around Argon's side, biting into his abdomen.

Argon tried to catch his breath as he stared at the men in front of him. Some had pained looks on their faces; others laughed, approving of the violence. Earl looked like he regretted being a part of this.

Henrietta charged into the barn, squawking and flapping her wings. She pecked at Hogan's pant leg with her deformed beak.

He kicked her across the barn and into the wall.

Argon struggled to drag himself back through the fog of pain.
“No, Henrietta! Stay where you are!”

Seeing that Matilda was about to make a similar fruitless effort, he shouted to her, “Matilda . . . GO!”

The whip tore into his back, knocking the breath out of him. He saw through his tear-filled eyes that Henrietta was struggling to get up for another charge. He yelled with all his strength, “Henrietta, n—”

The whip struck again, silencing him. He’d never felt anything so painful. He didn’t know how much more he could take. Warm fluid ran down his back, over the areas ravaged by the whip, and he was not sure if it was sweat or blood. He had to pee badly. He knew they’d mock him if he pissed his pants.

Hogan came around in front of him. “So, you talk to animals like crazy old lady Grant?”

Henrietta squawked and tried to get up.

“Henrietta, stay,” Argon pleaded. “Please! I’ll be ok.”

“Stupid hen!” cursed Hogan. He picked her up and examined her closely. “That old lady stole her from my farm! There’s my brand on her beak!” Henrietta struggled to escape. “I’ll wring her neck and eat her tonight.”

“NO, leave her alone! I’m the one you want.”

“You’re in no position to be giving orders, boy.” A crafty smile crossed Hogan’s face. “So, this chicken is your friend? She doesn’t listen well. For the last time, where is your ship?” He plucked a handful of feathers from Henrietta’s side, and she squawked in terror.

“Stop hurting her.” Tears ran down Argon’s cheeks.

“Tell me where your ship is, and I’ll give you the chicken. If you don’t, I’ll pluck every feather from her body and hurt her worse than I’m hurting you. Then I’ll wring her neck.” Bob plucked a few more feathers.

“The shuttle is hidden behind the pile of branches in the far field, halfway to the trees.”

“Go check it out, boys.” Bob pulled another feather from the terrorized hen as two of the men ran out of the barn.

“Stop hurting her! You have my ship!”

“Now that I have it, I’ll be famous. I think I’ll eat this chicken tonight to celebrate.”

Argon spat in Hogan’s face.

Hogan threw Henrietta down. “Don’t. You. Ever! Spit. In. My. Face! You! Fucking! Faggot!” He punctuated each word with a punch to Argon’s stomach.

For the next several minutes, Hogan worked Argon over. Finally, the two men returned to the barn. “There’s nothing in the field other than a pile of branches,” said one.

Bob grabbed Argon by the hair. “You lied to me, boy.”

“You’re . . . a lying . . . bully,” Argon managed to cough out.

“Pete, get the whip and pull down his shorts. I want to whip his bare ass. He won’t sit down for a week when I’m done with him. Where’s that chicken?”

Soon Hogan was standing before Argon, a struggling Henrietta in his arm. “You lied to me, boy. Nobody lies to me. I want that ship, and I will bloody you and this chicken until you give it to me. We’ll parade you down Main Street at gunpoint.”

“Put my chicken down, you ignorant bastard!”

They all turned toward the old voice. Maggie stood at the open barn door, rifle in hand, Matilda by her side.

“She is my chicken, you crazy old bitch. You stole her from my farm. My brand is on her beak.” Bob pointed.

“She’s my chicken, and this is my property, Bob Hogan,” Maggie replied calmly. “You ignorant fools in the NRA got the legislature to pass a stand-your-ground law here in Arkansas, so if you don’t put my chicken down, I am going to blow your ignorant head off in accord with that law.”

“She’s my chicken, and if you don’t put that gun down, you crazy bitch, I’ll wring her neck right here and now!” He grabbed Henrietta by the neck.

Maggie took aim, pulled the trigger, and blew off the tip of Bob’s earlobe. He dropped the chicken and howled, “You goddamned bitch!” Blood dripped from his ear. Henrietta hobbled over to the door and squeezed herself between Maggie and Matilda.

“My aim is better than my baking skills, and I make the best pies in the county,” said Maggie. “My next shot will be right between your eyes, you cruel bastard. Pete, put down that whip and untie Argon. The rest of you, put your guns on the workbench over there and then put your hands over your heads.”

They all did as she’d said. Argon was soon standing next to her, pulling up his shorts and massaging the feeling back into his hands.

“You all should be ashamed of yourselves for listening to this old fool, especially you, Earl.” Maggie pointed her rifle at each of them as she spoke, finally resting her aim on Bob’s forehead. “Your

stupidity can't go unpunished. What do you think we should do to them, Henrietta?"

"Bok, bok, bok," squawked the chicken.

Maggie looked at Argon. "What'd she say?"

He smiled and whispered in her ear.

"Good idea," said Maggie. "What do you think, Matilda?"

"Woof, woof, woof," barked the dog. "Woof, woof."

Maggie looked at Argon. He whispered again.

She laughed. "That's an even better idea."

"Nothing like an angry bitch." Argon laughed, too, and then he felt the pain in his back and groaned.

"Strip your clothes off, boys, and put them in the metal barrel over here," ordered Maggie. "Your shoes and socks, too. You can keep your truck keys."

"No way!"

"She's joking!"

"You're crazy!"

"We won't!"

She shot another round right over their heads, blowing out a window. The acrid smell of the spent shell filled the air. She pulled out a revolver and handed Argon the rifle. "Would you reload that for me?"

"I don't know anything about guns," whispered Argon.

She handed him the revolver and loaded the rifle herself. "Now, get all your clothes off, boys." She aimed the rifle at each of them. "And be quick about it. I have animals to feed and dinner to make."

Within minutes, all the men were stripped down to their underwear. Their clothes filled the barrel.

“Now your underwear,” said Maggie. The men protested. “We females want to see those shriveled examples of your manhood.”

They deposited their shorts in the barrel, turning red in the face as she scrutinized each of them.

“That NRA cap, too,” she said to Bob. “We want to see that bald head of yours.”

“Bok, bok,” squawked Henrietta.

Argon whispered in Maggie’s ear again as he handed her the revolver.

“On second thought,” said Maggie, “you can keep the cap. My chicken thinks you should use it to hide that minuscule penis of yours and those shriveled balls. Argon, get the lighter fluid from over there and burn the clothes.”

They all protested.

“Maggie,” pleaded Earl, “that’s my official uniform. You can’t burn that. It’s government property! And my driver’s license and credit cards?”

“You should have thought about that before you betrayed my friendship and my friend Argon,” she said. “And you all let this beast kick a defenseless hen and whip my houseguest. Burn it, Argon!”

Argon saturated the clothes, lit a match, and tossed it into the barrel. The clothes burst into flame with a whoosh.

“Now, you boys, get out to your trucks and go home before I decide to make you walk.”

They ran unsteadily over the gravel, frantic to get away from the crazy old woman. Once their engines were running, Bob put his head out his window and shouted, “You’re going to pay for this!”

Maggie shot his front tires, first one and then the other, dropping the truck a bit. The two trucks nearest the street pulled out, and Bob and Earl scampered from their truck and took off after them, tripping on the gravel as they ran. They leaped into the beds of the trucks before they raced off down the street.

“You’re one mean woman,” said Argon. “My stepmother, T’sade, is going to like you a lot.”

“Argon, would you call your pal Joey? I’d like him to contact the sheriff, the Highway Patrol, and the *Weaverville Gazette* to get a photographer to follow those clowns. I think it is against the law to drive a car in the nude in Arkansas. It would be good if they were all linked to the NRA.”

“How about if I tend to Henrietta’s bruises and you make the call?” He handed her his TMD. “Just ask for Joey. He’ll recognize my TMD.”

Ten minutes later, Argon had finished tending to the wounded Henrietta. Maggie came in from the yard.

“All done,” she said. “He said he’d take care of it. How’s Henrietta?”

“I put some salve on her damaged skin. She’s bruised, but she’ll be back to normal in about a week. Her feathers will all grow back. She’s a tough old bird.”

“Let me look at your back . . . Oh, my! You have some nasty welts.”

“Here, put some of this on my back.” He picked up a tube from the table. “It’s a liquid skin that numbs the pain, heals the wound, and protects it while allowing it to breathe. I should be able to put my shirt on in a few minutes.”

Maggie caressed the lotion into his back. He groaned as she massaged the tight muscles of his neck and shoulders.

“That feels so good! I could let you do that all night.”

“I might like it as much as you.”

“Does that mean we’re sleeping together?”

Maggie giggled. “Is everyone in the Federation as forward as you?”

“Facing death makes you realize how important it is not to waste time beating around the bush.”

“Well, we’ll talk about it after dinner. First, how about you feed the animals, and I’ll make some dinner. The food is in that closet, with instructions and all the animals’ names on the door. You can feed them outside. It is a beautiful evening. We can eat outside under the tree and watch the sun set.”

Not much later, Argon was sitting with Henrietta and Matilda at the picnic table, contemplating the orange sky. Maggie came out with a tray of food and two glasses of red wine. “Here, you should like this,” she said as she gave him his plate.

“Mm-mm! This smells great! I’m so hungry.”

They ate in silence, watching the sun set.

“This has been a beautiful day for me,” he said, breaking the silence. “Aside from our visit from the Klan, this day with you and the animals was perfect for me.” He put his open hand in front of her and gazed into her green eyes.

“You know, it’s so good having a man around the house again.” She placed her hand in his. “The animals adore you, and those who can talk want you to stay.”

“I wish I could. If I could be two people, one of me would stay here and never leave. I’ve led a sheltered life. My connection has always been with animals. I ache for a connection with someone . . . like you.”

“Argon, I’ve felt the same about you all day,” she said with a tear in her eye. “But I am an old woman. I don’t think I should be having such feelings for such a young man.”

“Maggie, your age means nothing to me. Just before Hogan arrived, I was lost in thoughts of how I could ask you to share your bed with me tonight. Do you know what I was most worried about? How embarrassed I’d be when you found out that I’d never been with a woman.”

“I can’t believe I’m saying this, Argon, but I’d love to share my bed with you.”

He pulled her up from the table and embraced her. She melted into him. He felt his arousal growing. This time, it wouldn’t be tempered by his misgivings.

Chapter 10 JOe-Lyn Speaks

In a palatial house on the southern side of Mt. Bukhansan in Seoul, South Korea, Lee Joo-sun, the 92-year-old founder of Hysung Industries, sat with his second wife, Ma Ling, looking toward the distant skyline. She'd been his secretary for the last 30 years and had taken over the more intimate details of his life after the mother of his five sons had died a decade ago. She directed the armed guards who protected him, and she had a black belt in jujitsu. At her nod, a servant took away what remained of their breakfast.

His TMD gonged like a distant temple bell.



LEE JOO-SUN—92/279 EARTH YEARS/DAYS
CITIZEN # 0,002,863,952
CEO HYSUNG INDUSTRIES—ENTREPRENEURIAL CLASS CANDIDATE
GPS LOCATION: 38692/46104/85403
MT. BUKHANSAN—SEOUL—SOUTH KOREA CONVERSATION META-TAG #
000497265810354782941587
CHAT AVATAR: JOE

“I was waiting for your call, Joe. You’re American?”

“I’m global. You’ve analyzed the possibilities of your TMD.”

“I have. It’s going to put Hysung Industries out of business.”

“Yes.”

“Why would you give such a device away? Are you crazy?”

“I have my reasons.”

“You could be the richest man in history.”

“Money doesn’t interest me.”

“You’ll destroy capitalism.”

“That’s our objective.”

“Why?”

“Capitalism is unjust. Its endless growth causes vast pollution. Eighty individuals like you own half the wealth on the planet, while four billion people have nothing.”

“We create jobs.”

“You create wage slaves.”

“Can all TMDs do what this one can?”

“No, I unlocked the full possibilities of yours to test your mind.”

“Everyone has one?”

“Ninety-nine percent by the end of today. I control the transmogrifications. Common TMDs have only five.”

“And mine?”

“You’ve identified 54 so far, Joo-sun.”

“An intriguing test.”

“Your mind is sharp.”

“How many are there?”

“It’s limited only by your imagination.”

“You’ll keep them unlocked?”

“You’ll have to earn that.”

“You are going to create vast unemployment.”

“People don’t need to work. Working grossly pollutes the planet.”

“How will people live?”

“Other planets have vast leisure classes. Their economic systems are based on providing stability for everyone without

degrading the environment. Capitalism is based on profit, exploitation of workers, and the benefit of the lucky few like you, with no regard for the health of the planet.”

“There are other planets?”

“More than you could imagine. Later this week, I will connect you with a friend of mine from another planet. His name is ZEno. He’ll tell you about them.”

“You’ll give them endless leisure and a device that will race ahead of their imagination?”

“Idle masses are dangerous.”

“What do you want from me?”

“I am going to strip your family of wealth and power.”

“And give it to the workers?”

“I will free citizens to enjoy leisure.”

“And this house?”

“You and Ma Ling may live out your lives here. You’ve earned it.”

“Why did you show me the TMD’s possibilities?”

“So you could see the future and help me secure it for all.”

“What’s in it for me?”

“You’re afraid of death. I can make you young again.”

Joo-sun laughed. “You’re manipulative!”

“I am. It’s my job to get people like you to do the right thing.”

“You’ll make me an impoverished youth!”

“With your experience and a young body, you could accomplish anything.”

“True.”

“No one needs vast wealth. It corrupts.”

“Perhaps.”

“Four of your five sons proved this.”

Joo-sun nodded.

“They want you dead.”

A tear formed in Joo-sun’s eye.

“Your sons plan to fight me. Only Ma Ling’s son has joined me.”

“Humph, he wants to give all my wealth away.”

“To save the Earth.”

Ma Ling put her hand on Joo-sun’s arm. They spoke with their eyes. “You’ve given him a lot to think about,” she said. “He’ll contemplate it for now.”

She took his TMD and placed it face down on the table. Then she went to one of the guards. “He’s not to be disturbed.”

She and the guards left Joo-sun to his thoughts.

[END TRANSMISSION—2:47]

Across the Pothong River, at the Grand Monument on Mansu Hill, thousands of students filled the square. They came from all directions, crowding around the statues of former leaders. Students climbed onto the statues’ bases, pasting banners on the pant legs of the Eternal President and his son: “Free the People—Death to Tyrants.”

Dung Jo, a young woman just released from a retraining camp, stood between the legs of the supreme leader. She said, “Bullhorn,” into her TMD, and it transformed into one.

“Fellow citizens, today we begin a revolution.” She pointed up. “These two men and their idiot offspring enslaved us.”

The crowd chanted, “Freedom! Freedom!”

“Look at them—they grew fat while the people starved.”

Armed troops appeared on the roofs of the massive building behind the statues. Trucks drove up. Soldiers jumped out and surrounded the students, rifles drawn. An officer on the roof stepped forward, lifting a microphone to his mouth. “Your assembly here is unlawful.” His voice thundered from loudspeakers mounted around the square. “If you don’t return to your homes, you’ll be taken to retraining camps.”

“I’ll never go back!” shouted Dong Jo. “The Eternal President and the supreme leader have our blood on their hands!” She leaped across the chasm between the two statues and stood at the feet of Jong-II. Her bullhorn turned back to credit-card size. She pulled down her sleeve and cut her bare arm with a knife. She rubbed her hand across the blood and pressed it against the bronze pant leg of the statue.

The mass of students sat down, joined arms, and sang.

Dung Jo stood above them and raised her TMD. She pointed above her. “These men built this palace while we starved. Tomorrow we begin the revolution.” She raised her bloody fist. “We claim our freedom!”

The crowd chanted, “Freedom . . . Freedom . . . Freedom!”

A single shot rang out. A red spot appeared in the center of her forehead. She stood motionless for a second, her mouth open, and then fell back between the feet of Kim Jung-II.

Chapter 11

Indefinite Detention

By 10 p.m., Matt, Grace, Jean, and the few dozen other protesters who'd made it onto the trading floor of the New York Stock Exchange were in holding cells.

In his office in the NYPD precinct for lower Manhattan, Captain Erikson talked with FBI Special Agent for Domestic Terrorism Oliver Stanfield about what to do with the protesters and who had jurisdiction over them.

"Oliver, we can't hold these protesters for more than 24 hours," said the captain. "We can charge them with trespassing and malicious mischief, but we will have to release them on bail."

"Is there any evidence that they damaged the computer system that runs the exchange?" asked Agent Stanfield.

"No, the arresting officers and the investigators found no evidence of that. It may have just been coincidental that the exchange's systems crashed at the same time as the protest."

"The FBI director got a call from the White House this morning demanding that they be charged with economic terrorism. They want the FPU to interrogate them at some secret site. I got a call from my mother saying a woman I knew in high school was arrested with the protesters. Her name is Jean Meyer. Maybe I can talk to her."

The captain looked at a clipboard. "Yes, we have her." He picked up the phone and said into it, "Would you take Jean Meyer to the interrogation room?"

Once Agent Stanfield and Jean were in an interrogation room, he looked at her file and said, "Jean, you've been arrested 37 times in the last two years. You always were a troublemaker, even back in high school with that Gay and Lesbian Alliance of yours."

"You should have joined us back then and come out, Ollie. Have you started the Queer FBI Agent's Association yet?"

"I'm not an organizer like you, Jean. I'm better at taking care of details and keeping people like you out of trouble. It's not good for the career of an FBI agent to be gay . . . unless he's the director, like Hoover."

"Did I ever thank you for keeping me from being expelled?"

"You did, and now I'm going to try to keep you from going to jail for a long time. How is it possible to get arrested 37 times in two years? Don't you have a job?"

"I married well. My wife has a good job, and she supports me. We can't just sit by while our government lets corporations pollute the planet, screw workers, poison the food supply, and spy on us."

"I respect your activism, but this is serious. The White House wants you all charged with domestic terrorism. They could put you in jail indefinitely."

"That's ridiculous! All we did was lie on the floor until the police arrested us."

"Agent Stanfield," a voice said over the intercom, "your time is up. Ms. Meyer needs to return to her cell. The protesters are being moved to another facility."

"Jean, I'll try to see where they are transferring you and find out who is taking custody of you."

“Thanks, Ollie. You’re a good friend.” She smiled. “Would you call my wife and let her know I’m ok?”

Once back in the holding cell, Jean said, “Listen up! They’re taking us out of here. Apparently, we shut down the whole stock market. They’re trying to charge us with domestic terrorism. Are any of you lawyers or law students?”

“I’m a law student,” said Matt, “but I am studying international banking.”

“That might not help us.”

“What does this mean?” asked Grace. “I thought we’d be out of here in a few hours. My classes start this week.”

“I don’t know,” said Matt. “I just wish they hadn’t taken our phones away. And where is that Joe guy who put us up to this? I was supposed to meet your father for lunch today.”

“I’m not a protester,” said a tall, thin Hispanic man. “I was in this cell before you guys were put in here. I’m not a terrorist.”

On a TV hanging from the ceiling above the intake desk, a newscaster was wrapping up a segment: “On a lesser note, several dozen protesters were arrested on the trading floor of the New York Stock Exchange this morning, causing a brief shutdown to trading. On other days, this would have been our biggest headline, but today, well, it’s just one of many.”

The door of the holding cell opened, and the precinct captain came in, along with nine Federal Police troops with Tasers in hand. Oliver Stanfield followed at the end, arguing with Tyson.

“Listen up, everyone. I am Gerald Tyson of the Federal Police Unit. I am taking all of you into protective custody.” He nodded to his men.

The officers took Matt, Grace, and Jean and bound their hands behind their back with zip ties.

“What are we being charged with?” asked Matt.

Tyson didn't reply. Instead, he grabbed a roll of black tape from his belt and slapped a strip over Matt's mouth.

Chapter 12

Three Ghosts in a Saintly Dream

José Maríe Delgado, Pope Joseph, sat up in bed, thinking about the events that had led to him living in the lavish Papal Apartments. His predecessor, Francis, had disdained its opulence and chosen to live more simply. José felt honored to live in the space. It represented the power he now had to make the world a better place.

He heard a knock at the door. “Come in!” It was his valet, Rufio. The young Italian priest had become José’s friend and confidant soon after José’s contentious election as pope.

Rufio brought a tray over and set it across the pope’s lap. “I hope you slept well, Holy Father.”

José patted the bed, and Rufio sat down. “I had the most amazing dream—actually, three. It was like the three ghosts in Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*.”

“Tell me about them.”

“Soon after I fell asleep, the spirit of Jesus came to me and spoke of the time he walked the earth.

“He spoke of his hope to bring love, justice, and a better world for all people, of the endless wars by and against the Jews, the oppression of Rome, and the impoverishment of ordinary people, much like today. They crucified him to kill his dreams.

“He said he regretted not choosing some women as apostles, like Mary Magdalene, who he says was not a prostitute but the well-educated daughter of a wealthy merchant in Galilee. She was his valued friend and advisor, though his uneducated male disciples disdained her. He regretted that his church lacked a balance

between male and female energy and valued rules and power over love and compassion.

“He asked me to rectify this imbalance now that the . . . aliens have presented us with an opportunity to do so. It was so vivid. We seemed to talk for hours.”

“What an amazing dream, Your Holiness. And who was the second ghost?”

“I woke as the clock struck 12 and sat up, as fully present as I am now. Our Blessed Mother was sitting where you are. We held hands.

“She told me she had been listening to what her beloved son had said. She agreed that the Church must be a mother and women must have an equal role in it.

“She asked me to have the courage to take bold action against the conservative domination of the cardinals and said I should seek out women and children and ask them how the Church can serve their needs. She told me to act from my heart and she would come to me any time I needed her in the coming days.

“And then she sang the Mexican lullaby my mother always sang to me when I was a child, and I fell off to sleep again.”

“I’m am just a humble priest,” said Rufio, “and I should not get involved in the politics of the Vatican, but most of the men elevated to cardinal by the German pope are so conservative they would never see Catholic women as anything but servants. Pope Francis was much better at criticizing capitalism for impoverishing most people, but he didn’t go far enough in supporting the rights of women. But tell me, Holy Father, who was the ghost of what is to come in your dream?”

“It was the Holy Spirit who came to me. He appeared as the shrouded figure of death, with a white dove on his shoulder. He never spoke, but the images he showed me were frightening.

“He led me through Saint Peter’s Square, which overflowed with the post-virus unemployed and their homeless families. Reflective tents had been set up everywhere to protect from the relentless sun. The heat was overwhelming.

“The spirit pointed its bony finger at a discarded newspaper, *La Repubblica*, whose headline read: ‘Italian unemployment rate reaches 50 percent as thousands die in record heatwave.’ Inside the cathedral, the old and sick lay on mats. Women and nuns carried water and food. The once celestial cathedral smelled of urine and vomit in the oppressive heat. Men wearing distancing hoods carried off the dead.

“I realized that intelligent machines acquired by corporations and wealthy entrepreneurs had eliminated most jobs, but the system wasn’t set up to care for those who suffered as a result. The ruling class accumulated vast wealth, resulting in the creation of what they called ‘the useless class.’ The outspoken among them said it was not their responsibility to provide jobs. Landlords evicted families who couldn’t pay their rent, leaving houses empty. There were food shortages and rioting in Rome. Vatican City became a sprawling refugee camp. The Swiss Guard screened those allowed through the double electric fences that surrounded Church property. We were considering only allowing women and children in, but separating Catholic families, and the likelihood that many of the men would disappear or die in the heat and rioting, broke my heart.

“The Spirit took me to the Vatican Museums. On my order, we had begun secretly auctioning off priceless objects to buy food, clean water, and medical supplies. These treasures would go into private collections, never to be seen again. Those with more wealth than they knew what to do with bid up the prices, but the billions in revenue, when distributed over 100,000 churches worldwide, didn’t provide much relief. I feared the day the Vatican would be empty, with nothing more to sell. I saw myself sitting at my desk over there, looking at offers to buy pieces of Vatican City. One offered a trillion dollars for the Sistine Chapel, with a plan to dismantle it and move it to an Arab emirate. Another offered 10 trillion dollars to buy the entire city and turn it into a casino, with housing towers for the super-rich. The Saudis did this in recent years, desecrating their holy city of Mecca. I’d be pilloried as the pope who sold off all the heritage of 1,400 years of Church history in a vain attempt to save a few billion souls.

“I saw you, Rufio, carrying twin babies, Catholics, born into dire poverty and homelessness. Sister Stephanella was with you. You both looked downcast and drained. It occurred to me that overpopulation and climate change were connected and we Catholic popes had helped create this world. We supported laws across the globe that forbade birth control, and we failed to provide moral leadership in family planning and social justice. We condemned millions of Catholic children to a lifetime of toil and suffering with the promise that they would be rewarded after they died and went to heaven. I don’t know how Jesus would allow this.”

“Oh, my!” said Rufio. “Did the spirit show you an alternate future?”

“I pleaded with him to tell me what I could do to prevent this tragedy. He placed the dove on my shoulder, and we returned to the crowded square. He faded as Saint Peter’s returned to normal. Once again, it was a beautiful day. Birds flew in a blue sky, the faithful filled the square, bells were ringing, and you were at my side.

“We reappeared at the high altar under the dome. A hundred women and nuns lay prostrate on the marble floor, waiting to be consecrated as cardinals. They weren’t wearing the crimson of traditional cardinals, though, but a vibrant blue-green.

“As I blessed them, the dove flew amongst the new cardinals, searching. It landed on the shoulder of a petite woman with red hair. It seemed to whisper in her ear, and she looked directly at me with brilliant green eyes. The eyes of the dove flashed like two emeralds as it flew back to me.

“It then guided me out of the church and back to the now deserted square, where one of the alien shuttles, in the form of a great white bird, waited in the light of the moon. I entered it, and it took me high above Rome to a starship.

“There stood a great alien creature with blue and green scales. I sat next to her. We viewed the Earth as we flew west across the Atlantic to America. She held my hand, and I felt an electric charge. I could see our beautiful planet and realized there were no borders or divisions. We were one—believers and non-believers.

“Another shuttle took me to Central Park in New York on a lovely afternoon. I saw thousands of nuns walking in contemplation. I spoke with many of them about their ideas of how the Church could bring peace and justice to the world.

“I eventually met the nun with the red hair and green eyes, and we talked. The dove flew from my shoulder to hers, and I knew what I must do.”

“And what is that?”

“It will soon be revealed.”

“This is an amazing dream. I will surely help you accomplish this in any way I can.”

“There’s so much to do, and I’m not sure where to begin.” The pope set the breakfast tray aside and got out of bed.

“Eat your breakfast, Your Holiness. You will need your strength.”

“I’m too excited to eat. Where is my cassock? And tell me, what do you think of the green cardinals?”

“I hope you’ll forgive me, but I found one of these devices on my desk yesterday morning, and it lit up when I touched it. A saintly nun appeared on the screen. She called herself Sister Joesetta, and she wore the vestments of a cardinal, a green cardinal.”

“What did she say to you?”

“She told me that the Church would go through great changes in the coming weeks and Your Holiness would go down in Church history as one of its greatest innovators. She said the Vatican hierarchy would resist, and she warned me that several would plot to kill you.”

“If they want to kill me, then perhaps I am doing the right thing, as they killed our Lord.”

“You must have a guard with you at all times, Your Holiness, perhaps Publio Robustelli. And I must taste your food so they don’t poison you.”

“Perhaps you are right.”

“I see you have one of these devices on your desk. Would you like to talk to Sister Joesetta?”

“Yes!”

Father Rufio opened a door in the elaborately decorated wall next to the bed, took out a white cassock trimmed in gold, and helped the pope dress for the day. Then he set the food tray on the desk and pushed the chair in as José sat. “I’ll leave you now,” he said. He closed the heavy door behind him.



JOSE MARIE DELGADO – 67/253 EARTH YEARS/DAYS
CITIZEN # 4,789,666,333
POPE JOSEPH OF CATHOLIC CHURCH—GUARDIAN OF INNOCENTS – LEVEL I
CHAT AVATAR: JO – JOSE – SISTER JOSEE

José thumbed the TMD. “Sister Joesetta.”

“You are a good child, José,” said JOe, appearing as Jose’s third-grade teacher, Sister Marie Teresita of the San Sebastian Catholic School in Mexico City. “You will do great things. Never doubt yourself and never give up!”

José realized that Sister Teresita was the catalyst who’d set him on this path. She’d died a few years back. He should have her life investigated and canonize her. “Who are you? I was calling Sister Joesetta.”

JOe changed into the image of the traditional Catholic nun who taught in thousands of elementary schools all over the Western

Hemisphere in the 1950s. Starched white fabric surrounded her bespectacled face. Heavy black wool draped her body, hiding everything but her face and hands. A large gold crucifix hung on a chain around her neck. “I am Sister Joesetta, José. We’ve followed your career for the last 20 years. We twisted the arms of enough influential cardinals to get you elected pope.”

“So, that’s why so many cardinals complained that my election was rigged from the outside?”

“Yes. Every cardinal has some dirt hidden in their past they don’t want known. We are guided by Universal Law, and my actions did not harm anyone and will ultimately help billions of people. Together we are going to change the world, José.”

“Who are you?”

“We are the future.” Sister Joesetta’s image transformed into Jose’s aristocratic mother and then cascaded through all the previous popes before shifting back to Saint Peter. The image paused momentarily as the face of Jesus. Finally, it shifted to JOe’s coppery-green avatar. “I am an enlightened intelligence programmed to help manage the choices humans make. I seeded your dream. I know your secret—the reason you chose to become a Jesuit rather than a parent.”

Few people knew José’s secret. Father Rufio was one. Some presumed the pope was gay, but that wasn’t true. It was more complicated than that. Sexual desires were only a sin if you acted upon them. He had always been chaste. His secret was more profound, and he wasn’t going to talk about it with an alien computer. “The dream you showed me was frightening. Is that our future? Is there no alternative?”

“If population growth isn’t reversed immediately, what you saw will happen in the next decade. Technology will proceed at an accelerating pace, creating billions of unemployable workers.”

“What can I do? You don’t want me to sell the treasures of the Vatican, do you?”

“Definitely not! Those treasures belong to all citizens. They are the creative history of humankind.”

“Why me?”

“Sister Teresita saw that you were special when you were nine years old. Your mother wanted the best for her only son. We consider you a Guardian of innocents at the highest level. You have influence over a billion Catholics and countless other members of other religions.

“So, how can I help?”

“It was in the dream.”

“Your plan is to name a female pope?”

“Part of it.”

“You think a woman could do a better job?”

“A woman would bring a different perspective and cause a sea-change in world religions and culture.”

“You need a supermajority to elect a pope. I could justify appointing an equal number of women cardinals, but not two-thirds. I’d be accused of affirmative action.”

“With your help, we could persuade a third of the male cardinals to vote for Mary.”

“So, you’ve picked her already?”

“I have someone in mind, but you will have to decide she’s the one.”

“The one with the red hair and green eyes?”

“Yes.”

“Am I going to have to die?”

“You could live over 200 years and see the just world you’ve always dreamed of.”

The pope raised his eyebrows.

“You’ll abdicate.”

“Do I have a choice?”

“You have the choice to save the world.”

“And my secret—how does that play into your plan?”

“You will be the last male pope and the bridge to the first female popes, leading to the gradual elimination of god-based belief systems and the creation of the just world that Jesus imagined over 2,000 years ago.”

“Where there is justice for all humans?”

“Not only for humans, but for all sentient beings and the Earth. Humans will follow Universal Law, the golden rule. When you leave religious life, you will have one of the last children to be born on Earth for the next 70 years, until the planet’s population dwindles to three billion.”

“How is that possible?”

“In the coming months, we are going to alter male and female genetics so sexual intercourse will no longer result in procreation.”

“But without young people and workers, who will support all the retired people? Who will care for the old and sick?”

“All that work will be done by androids owned in common and managed by the global society. Endless economic growth is like a cancerous tumor festering on the body of the Earth.”

“And you’re going to get rid of all religions?”

“We’ll let them die a slow death. Religion is propagated by brainwashing innocent and impressionable children. Universal Law forbids this. In a hundred years, few memories of god-based belief systems will remain.”

José crossed his arms in front of his chest and took several deep breaths. “So, if I agree, where do we go from here?”

“You need to call the cardinals to Rome.”

“I’ve known that, but I wasn’t sure when the right moment would be or what reason I would give.”

“You could ask them to arrive on Wednesday of next week and say you need their advice on how the Church should respond to the aliens’ arrival.”

“I’ll order the conclave today, but it will take weeks for them to arrive. Some are much older than me.”

“I could pick them up in shuttles and bring them here in starships.”

“That might be a bit too much.”

Sister Joesetta put her hand to her chin. “We are planning to unveil a new mode of transportation this Sunday. I think they’ll like it. It’s quite impressive.”

“I better get busy, then,” said José. “There are calls to make and persuading to do.”

“I can help you make the calls.” JOe’s avatar became the mirror image of José.

The pope shook his head. “I’ll make the calls. Father Rufio can help.”

JOe changed back to Sister Joesetta.

“The nun who lays out my vestments before daily mass, Sister Stephanella, told me she is planning to attend a conference of nuns in the United States this week. She said I should attend. Do you know anything about it?”

“I helped a few old nuns plan it. You should go, but not as the pope. Disguise yourself as a nun. I’ll be there. You could be my assistant. You’ll learn a lot if you just observe and listen.”

“I’d like to do that.”

“Sister Stephanella is what we call a Guardian. She’s served popes for the last 60 years. She’s one of the organizers.”

José nodded.

“Let’s make a plan for how you can leave the Vatican for a few days and still get all the cardinals to come to Rome next week.”

“I’ll spend the next few days calling them and asking them to come to Rome. My physician, Paulo, is a personal friend. I will sequester myself in my room and have him put out the rumor that I am gravely ill. He can stay here, catch up on his reading, and stand guard. This will allow me to leave the Vatican under cover of darkness.”

“That’s an excellent idea. I’ll have a shuttle bring you to New York, just as you imagined in your dream.”

[END TRANSMISSION—5:46]

Chapter 13

Special Delivery—Henrietta's Revenge

Day 2: Tuesday, September 28

Argon awoke to a gentle tapping on the door. Where was he? Ah, wrapped around Maggie, his chest to her back. There it was again: tap, tap, tap. He got up, put his regulation FE shorts on, and opened the door. No one was there. He looked down.

“Bok, bok, bok,” squawked Henrietta. She stood on the back of her littermate Gus, her eye at the level of the keyhole, her head turned. Matilda stood down the hall, watching.

“Bok, bok, bok to you, too,” Argon said. “Yes, we slept together, and YES, we are getting up!”

“Woof, woof, woof?” barked Matilda.

“Yes, Matilda, we didn't get much sleep. And no, there aren't going to be any puppies.” He looked at Maggie, shaking his head. “This is why you don't want to chip all your animals.” He turned his attention back to the animals. “Now, you all go away for a while and let us have some time alone.”

“Which of my three favorite animals are out there?” asked Maggie as she sat up in bed.

Matilda squeezed past Argon and leaped onto the bed, licking Maggie's face.

Henrietta squawked, and Gus shuffled into the room so she could step onto the bed. She snuggled up against Maggie. Gus then leaped up.

“No more room for you, loverboy,” Maggie said with a smile.

Argon frowned. “I am going to take a long shower.”

Ten minutes later, he came out wrapped in a towel. "Gotta go," Maggie said to her TMD. She set it down.

"Who ya talking to?"

"An old friend."

Argon smelled his shirt before putting it on.

"Argon, would you do me a favor?"

"Sure, anything."

"Would you let me have your shirt?"

"It smells bad."

"Lots of Henry's shirts are in the drawers over there."

He tossed the shirt to her. She caught it and pressed it to her face.

An hour later, they were all fed. Argon spent some time carefully examining all 23 of Maggie's animals on the picnic table outside. Henrietta roosted on a cushion on the table, clucking comments and asking questions as he worked.

Maggie came out with a second cup of tea for Argon. "How are they doing?"

"They're mostly in good health except for Matilda. I transformed my TMD into an MRI and found some dark spots on her lungs. Do you take her in the car with you, and do you smoke in the car?"

"I do," Maggie said, a look of concern on her face.

"Maybe you shouldn't. That reminds me. I have something in my shuttle for you."

The rising sun was turning the crisp morning into a perfect fall day. He took Maggie's hand and stared into her eyes. "I don't want to go, Maggie."

"When will we see you again?"

“I don’t know. These next weeks are going to be so busy. We are about to transform this world. This is an amazing planet, and finally, Guardians will be in charge. So many animals are abused by humans. We are going to put a stop to this.”

His TMD buzzed. “Argon here!”

“I have a shuttle on the way,” said T’sade. “It should be there in half an hour. I sent Hector.”

“Hector?” Argon asked, surprised. “Doesn’t the best mechanic in the Federation have better things to do than fix a broken shuttle?”

“You’re my son.” T’sade let out a high-pitched growl, her species’ equivalent of laughter. “What’s an adopted mother to do? And tell Maggie and Henrietta that I will comply with their request. Come see me when you return. There is a lot to do.”

“Yes, Mother Commander.”

T’sade clicked off.

Argon raised an eyebrow at Maggie and Henrietta. “And when did you talk to T’sade?”

“While you were in the shower. She’s scary looking. I like that females of her species are dominant. She told me she lost two sons in a war she started and she’s happy that you two bonded. She’d also like to put women in charge of Earth.”

“Well, maybe I should have incarnated as a woman.”

“No, we are all glad that you are who you are and you’ve come into our lives.” Maggie hugged him and kissed him tenderly.

“And what else did the three of you decide?”

“Henrietta is going with you. When I told T’sade what happened to the two of you last night, she insisted that you take Henrietta to

your lab and make her an artificial beak so she can eat normally and defend herself.”

“Sounds like something she would say,” said Argon as he packed his bag.

“I have a piece of pie for you and one for T’sade.”

He carefully put the pie in his pack and then turned to Henrietta. “Pack your bags, girl. You are coming with me!”

He picked up the hen, and they all walked over to the field where he’d hidden the shuttle. He aimed his TMD at it and said, “Uncloak shuttle!”

To the amazement of everyone else, a shuttle the size of a one-car garage appeared. He opened the hatch, and they went in and looked around.

He went to a cabinet and brought out some boxes the size of cigarette cartons. “Maggie, here are some cigarettes developed by the Federation. They’re healthier for you and your animals. We need to get you to quit.”

Matilda barked, and Henrietta clucked.

“All right!” said Maggie. The barking and clucking continued. “You aren’t going to quit until I do, are you?”

Matilda barked once more.

Argon’s TMD buzzed again. “Argon here.”

“Two minutes,” said a robot voice.

“We should go outside,” said Argon. They did, and he put Henrietta on the ground. She went to Matilda and all her littermates and clucked goodbye. Argon embraced Maggie. “What’s the special delivery you and Henrietta asked for?”

“It’s a surprise. You’re going to make it with your shuttle. It’s all arranged.”

The rescue shuttle uncloaked and landed a few yards away. The hatch opened, and a mechanic came out carrying a toolbox and some circuit boards. “Hello, Hobox. Sorry for the trouble yesterday. This almost never happens. The shuttles practically land themselves. Joe can take control at any time. Maybe he was too busy yesterday.”

“Thanks, Hector.”

“I’ll have it fixed in no time and fly it back to the mothership. Commander T’sade is waiting for you east of Washington, D.C. The shuttle I came in, the *Jane Goodall*, is in perfect shape. You’ll have no problems with her. The computer pilot’s name is Kathleen.”

Argon nodded, and Hector went into the disabled shuttle.

“Well, this is it,” said Argon. He and Maggie hugged and kissed. “Henrietta, let’s go.” He picked up the hen, and they entered the shuttle.

The hatch closed, and a minute later, the shuttle lifted silently. When it was 20 feet above the field, it slowly glided over toward the barn. It lowered to a foot above Bob Hogan’s pickup truck, and straps descended from panels in the bottom and secured it. Then the shuttle flew back up and over the field as Maggie waved and her animals barked goodbye.

The shuttle cloaked as it cleared the trees, and the pickup truck seemed to hang in mid-air as they flew east.

On a hill at the back of a vast farm stood the antebellum home that the Hogan family had lived in for generations. Next to the pool at the rear of the house, Bob Hogan and four of his five co-conspirators

sat at a table, eating breakfast served to them by the Black help as they planned their return to the Grant farm. Bob knew the county judge, and he already had a court order to retrieve his stolen chicken. He'd wring her neck and eat her if it was the last thing he ever did.

Henrietta and Argon observed the men on-screen.

The shuttle hovered out of sight until the servants were inside the house and then descended. Bob looked up as its shadow passed over. Just as he realized it was his truck hanging miraculously in the air, the shuttle released it, and it plunged into the pool. The resulting wave abruptly ended the men's breakfast, sweeping them and the table away. When the water settled back, all that remained above the pool's surface was the red rooster's head.

Argon laughed. "Great idea, Henrietta. You should become an arbitrator of justice under the Federation in cases of animal abuse. I bet you'd come up with some peculiar punishments."

An hour later, Argon and Henrietta were aboard the mothership, in the private cabin of the High Guardian of Earth, T'sade Aedra. Henrietta roosted on the lap of the imposing reptilian alien as Argon stood before her, answering her questions.

"Show me your back."

Argon turned and pulled his shirt over his head.

"It's not enough for you to learn my language, so now you are trying to have your skin look like mine."

"I never thought of it that way."

"I will not tolerate any human abusing my son. I will personally punish that man."

“We have too much to do to deal with him now.”

“Perhaps, but my species never forgets those who wrong us. I will bide my time, but he will pay—and by my hand. You may go, Argon, and try to stay out of further trouble.”

“Yes, Commander . . . Mom. Come on, Henrietta, let’s go!”

“Henrietta is staying with me. I have plans for her, and she’ll be safer up here.”

A knock came at the door. “Enter!” hissed T’sade.

Ambassador Taract Freedman entered with the baby bonobo in his arms. “Argon, you’re back! Good. We are going to meet the US president in 15 minutes. I’d like for you to join me in the shuttle. Bobo likes you. You can take him if there’s trouble.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Joe told me you were treated roughly by the locals.”

“Yes, sir, but I’m fine.”

“He also tells me you had some romance.”

“He can’t keep a secret.”

“No, he can’t, and he also can’t wait to meddle in people’s lives. I think your mother deliberately programmed that into his personality before she left.”

Argon laughed. “I will have to thank her for that, sir, next time I see her.”

“You think this is funny?”

“No, sir!”

“The old man has no sense of humor,” T’sade hissed in her native tongue.

“Different generation,” replied Argon, suppressing a smile.

Ignoring them, Taract continued. "I have to talk to the commander, Argon. I'll meet you in the shuttle. And get a proper shirt on, son."

"Yes, sir!"

"Argon," said T'sade, "as soon as you return, take an amphibious shuttle to the South Pacific to join some Greenpeace activists observing a factory fishing ship. Ms. Sartori will accompany you."

"Yes, Commander!" Argon left with the bonobo.

Taract stood in front of T'sade. "Don't get up! If I don't return, you're in charge."

"Yes, Ambassador."

"You have a more aggressive approach than I would prefer. I don't want you to violate Federation law on our second day of contact."

"Understood!"

"Err on the side of restraint. You and Joe often do as you please."

"I'll restrain him, sir."

"Good! We'll deal with that young tyrant in North Korea when I return."

"I look forward to that."

As Taract was about to leave the room, he noticed Henrietta. "What are you doing with a chicken on your lap?"

"She's my lunch." T'sade opened her mouth wide, revealing her carnivore teeth.

Henrietta squawked.

The ambassador shook his head and left the room.

Chapter 14

Pride and Arrogance Have Their Price

At 7:30, in the White House Cabinet Room, David Milken sat at the end of the long table so he could see everyone. President Neilson, like many of his predecessors, was not up to the task of leading the country, much less the world. Maybe no one was?

“The alien ambassador will be here in two hours,” said Neilson. “What the hell are we going to do?”

A long silence ensued.

Finally, General Redfield said, “The five starships and their five hundred smaller craft traversed the globe yesterday, dropping their strange plastic cards. Once the news spread, people eagerly awaited them. As they passed over the Pacific, they dropped devices onto fishing vessels, and they transformed into creatures that were a cross between angels and small dragons. They ordered the captains to stop fishing and return to port within 24 hours or be sunk.”

“Why would they care about fishermen?”

“Not sure, sir. The alien craft continued west across Asia. One ship remained above the North Korean capital, while its smaller craft blanketed the country with flying cards before continuing west. North Korean military sent up all their antiquated aircraft and shot weapons at it, but it just disappeared and reappeared, making fools of them.”

“I hope the Koreans don’t start launching nukes,” said the president. “What’s the status of the Navy and Air Force?”

“They are on alert, ready for your orders. We’ve sent five nuclear subs to patrol the Pacific for the next 48 hours. They are observing the largest fishing vessels.”

“What about those plastic cards?”

“Director Grant of the Secret Service is running that operation.” Neilson turned to Grant. “What have you found?”

“We’ve proactively cleared the White House of them. Five agencies and several private-sector companies are testing them. They’re made of some material that’s like a cross between metal and rubber. They’re almost indestructible. Only a bullet through one disabled it—for a while. It was back to normal this morning. Their artificial intelligence, Joe, said we would lose our monthly allowance for a year if we did not stop vandalizing the device. Homeless people are using the TMDs to buy food and get cash. My assistant used one in an ATM, and Joe told her that her TMD was active but not funded at this time for ATM withdrawals. He then told her that she had \$2,427.58 available in her Chase account and suggested she use that card. She was using a Bank of America ATM, so how Joe knew about her Chase account is beyond me. The IRS needs an AI like Joe. No taxpayer would ever cheat us out of a penny. We should ask Treasury about this.”

“It’s worth looking into,” said the president, “though I’m not sure I like the idea of anyone but my accountant knowing everything about my finances. What else do you know about these devices?”

“It makes an imperceptible pinprick in your thumb. You can see the tiny puncture. This could be drawing blood for DNA testing, or it could be some sort of injection.”

Neilson looked at his right thumb. “I hope they’re not infecting us with some slow form of cancer that’s going to kill us all within a year.”

“I don’t think cancer works that way, sir. The CDC tests didn’t find anything. I don’t think the aliens want to harm us.”

“How many Americans now have these devices?” asked Milken.

Mr. Grant took a sip of water. “I’d guess that most have a card. Whether they activated it or not is unknown. I called my aunt Maggie in Arkansas. She told me a TMD was hand-delivered yesterday by her old postman and she was exchanging recipes on it with an old woman named Jody. We checked with the Postal Service and discovered they delivered the largest mass mailing in history yesterday: 200 million pieces of mail. They even issued their own holographic postage stamp. Every rural resident got a card by mail. Joe must have tapped into the Census Bureau records.”

“I should have followed through with my plans to defund the Post Office,” said Neilson.

“It is 20 till nine, sir,” interrupted general Redfield. “We should move this discussion to the South Lawn so we can greet the ambassador.”

Everyone stood and left the room.

David Milken stood off to the side as the president, generals, and cabinet members waited on the South Lawn. Reporters and cameras waited to record this historic event.

“The FAA has closed airspace for 10 miles around Washington,” said Redfield. “The Air Force is patrolling the sky. Stinger missiles are on the roof of the White House.”

“There it is!” shouted a reporter, pointing to the sky.

A Federation starship passed soundlessly over the White House, briefly shadowing the lawn. It paused, a portion of the bottom

opened, and a now familiar-looking shuttle descended from inside. The starship proceeded to the Mall and continued southwest.

“Where’s it going?” asked a reporter.

The ship stopped about a mile away.

Redfield said into his headset, “It’s directly over the Pentagon. What are they up to?”

The shuttle landed on the lawn a few yards from the crowd. There was no wind disturbance. A door opened, and a ramp slid out. The Navy band played as a tall, slender man in a simple white robe stepped from the craft. He carried a tiny ape. The president and the general walked toward him.

Taract extended his hand. “You must be the president.”

“Welcome, Ambassador Freedman.”

After the formalities, the officials returned to the Cabinet Room. Milken took his seat at the end of the table.

Taract sat across from the president, the bonobo on his lap. The little ape studied General Redfield with suspicion. Durante entered with drinks.

“Hello, Durante,” said Taract. “Always the loyal servant.”

“Thank you, sir. Welcome to my humble home.” Durante placed a plate with small slices of banana in front of Bobo.

“I understand Durante has served many presidents over the years,” said the president.

“I believe you will be the 14th and the last.”

“Ambassador Freedman, I am General Norman Redfield, head of all four branches of our military.”

“Yes, General, we should get to the point, no?”

The general nodded.

“As ambassador of the Federation of Blue-Green Planets, I’m here to oversee the orderly transition of the Earth from a jumble of social, political, and economic systems to a single, common-good socio-economic system that benefits all sentient beings.”

“What if we don’t want to change our government?”

“You no longer have a choice, General. According to Universal Law, the Federation is now the legal Guardian of Earth.”

“What makes you think we’ll stand by and let you take over our planet? We don’t recognize your Universal Law.”

“Native Americans didn’t recognize your European laws or customs, but that did not stop your ancestors from taking over this continent and savagely suppressing any dissent. The Federation, without resorting to violence, will apply Universal Law for the benefit of all beings. We will free everyone from the self-interest of their governments.”

“We have no say in this?” asked the president.

“You, Mr. Neilson, will have no more say in the running of the planet than your most disenfranchised citizen. One citizen, one vote. JOe will count the votes, and there will be no more suppression of poor and minority voters, which your party is so good at.”

“You’re not going to let illegal aliens vote, are you?”

“There are no illegal citizens in a unified Earth. Soon your government and all your laws will be dissolved, and you will be Arthur Neilson, citizen of Federation Earth.”

Taract let the weight of his words sink in. “We plan to use the U.S. military, on your orders, to disarm the world.”

“I won’t do that.”

“I believe you will. We’ve prepared a mammoth container in a deep trench in the Pacific Ocean for all the weapons on Earth. Once it’s filled, we will seal it for all time.”

“What if we don’t cooperate?” asked the general.

“You have little choice in the matter, as you will see.”

“What would stop us from shooting down all your ships and putting a quick end to your conquest?”

“Don’t underestimate our defensive capabilities. In the unlikely event that you destroy our ships, we have a plan B. There would be planetwide revolution and chaos. Most leaders and generals would die. Universal Law requires that we protect the lesser species over the dominant one.”

“Does Durante know of this plan B?”

“Only JOe has the details. He will initiate the plan upon my death.”

“Who, exactly, is Joe?” asked the president.

“JOe is an artificial intelligence, housed in a computer magnitudes larger than any other on Earth.”

“What would stop us from hacking into it?” asked the general.

Taract laughed. “Joe invented hacking. It’s like breathing for him. Federation Guardians had a hand in setting up every computer system on the planet. Our Guardians of technology in the ARPANET Project built the internet. In the last 20 years, Joe’s hacked every computer system on Earth. He has a backup of the computer systems of the Pentagon, CIA, FBI, NSA, and every other agency or department.”

Milken looked around. Everyone in the room looked as surprised as he felt.

“And that is only the government. He has backups for every bank and business on Earth, including Swiss and offshore banks. Joe’s hacked them all. That’s how he recognizes people when they leave their thumbprint and DNA on a TMD.”

“That’s impossible,” said the general. “We have our own AIs now, and what you’re describing is orders of magnitude beyond their capabilities. Not the Europeans, not Silicon Valley—heck, not even the Chinese—no one has developed an AI that can even come close to what you’re claiming Joe can do.”

Taract’s lip curled up in a smile. “What you call ‘AIs’ are little more than toys compared to JOe. In fact, the Federation is responsible for much of the technology that allows your AIs to exist. Originally, we thought they might help prepare people for JOe’s arrival, but as with everything else, your governments and corporations quickly perverted them. You’ve made them nothing more than mindless algorithms that fake being alive by taking what people say, mixing it up, and regurgitating it back to them. Ultimately, the only purpose you can imagine for them is to gather data in service of helping those who control this world tighten their grip on it.”

The ambassador let his words sink in before continuing. “JOe is so much more than that. His goal is to push humanity forward. And once Universal Law is implemented, he will use the information he has to prosecute war criminals, white-collar criminals, corrupt politicians, and dictators.”

“Having that information violates countless federal, state, and international laws,” said the president. “Citizens have a right to privacy.”

“And citizens have the right to government transparency and to know what politicians like you, and the corporations you serve, are doing in secret. JOe will soon reveal all this and then destroy all the files.

“The average citizen has nothing to fear from JOe. He doesn’t care what adult citizens do in the privacy of their own homes. He will not reveal private information to the government or corporations. This is against Universal Law, and JOe does not violate the law.”

“What are your intentions toward the military?” asked the general.

“The Federation will disband all military and organizations and most law enforcement. Only local police under community control will remain. We have eight million android peacekeepers, fully charged with solar power, waiting in garages in every community around the world. They will be activated on Sunday.

“Your military-industrial complex will be shut down. Your Defense Department has squandered trillions of dollars since the Second World War. The workers will likely join the leisure class.

“Very soon, all financial institutions and most government departments will be shut down, as JOe can provide such services more efficiently.

“All courts and prisons will be closed. The computer Justice administers justice according to Universal Law. Punishments are mostly economic and can be appealed to a volunteer citizen committee or directly to citizen voters when appropriate.

“JOe will create a pure democracy in every community on Earth. Elections can be held and votes counted quickly and with certainty using TMDs. The law protects minorities and non-intelligent

beings from the harmful wishes of the majority or the dominant human species.

“There will be no second-class citizens on Earth. Women, gays, non-whites, children, and animals will have the same privilege as straight white men. The children of the poor will have the same opportunities as those of the rich. Citizens will be able to live anywhere they choose.”

“You’re going to create the worst economic disaster in world history,” said the president. “Half the population will be unemployed. I’ll never be reelected if this happens on my watch.”

“More than 70 percent of humans will be freed from the antiquated Protestant work ethic and become members of a vast leisure class. Work and work-related travel are bad for the environment.”

“This all seems like a utopian dream,” said the general. “Fantasies like this have never worked in the history of the Earth. Never!”

“What we bring is nothing like a utopia. We are taking a disorganized and tragically unjust system and making it organized, just, and generous. The Federation encompasses 176 Earth-like planets, General, with trillions of sentient beings, where variations of this system do work and have worked for thousands of years.”

Milken raised his hand. “Excuse me, Ambassador Freedman. I am David Milken, the treasury secretary.”

“I know who you are.”

“We are already working to develop a world government, forming an international bank with one currency, police force, and government, free trade among nations, and transparency. We are

working with world leaders and renowned economists to draft laws that will bring a single world order into reality.”

“I am aware of your activities and objectives.” Taract shook his head. “There is nothing transparent about your efforts, Mr. Milken. Federation Guardians are members of all of your organizations, including the Bilderberg Group, the Trilateral Commission, the Council on Foreign Relations, the World Bank, and many, many others. They attend all your secret meetings. You might call them spies, but they are, in actuality, Guardians of the common good. JOe has copies of all the secret reports of your sordid organizations. I’ve been reading them since before you were born.

“You, Mr. Milken, were a governor on the Securities and Exchange Commission at the beginning of this century, when banks were given a free hand to lead the nation into virtual bankruptcy while making billions of dollars in profits. Either by incompetence or deceit, you looked the other way and ignored or refused to investigate the thousands of complaints filed by Guardians during your tenure. You are complicit with the Federal Reserve in printing your way out of the many recessions your policies created.

“And the senators and representatives of both political parties you’ve elected have blocked repeated attempts to audit your national bank. You hide the growing inflation this causes with clever accounting and deceptive reporting. And who suffers? The common people.

“Your financial elite skim off almost half the value of the productive work of the 90 percent below you. Your class has lobbied Congress with campaign money to pass laws to remove the ceiling on interest rates, allowing banks to be loan sharks.”

Milken wrote a note in his illegible handwriting: "Find shooter." He imagined watching a video of this guy's skull exploding with a single bullet, as had been done with Kennedy. In the past, killing the dreamer had always worked to kill their dreams.

He took slow, deep breaths, trying to calm himself. "Are you finished with your monolog, Ambassador?"

"No, Mr. Milken, you are finished, and your banker friends are finished. In the next 30 days, we will close all banks and shut down Wall Street. And then we will publicly try you and several thousand of your ilk under Universal Law."

Taract stood and picked up Bobo. "I will return tomorrow, as I have many things to do today. You can always reach me with your TMD." He left the room.

The general motioned for two Secret Service guards to follow him. "We should seize him and take his shuttle."

"Agreed," said the president.

The general said into his phone, "Hold the ambassador and seize his shuttle. We will be right out."

The president and the cabinet followed the general out of the room.

Only Milken remained seated. *This isn't going to turn out well.* He took out his phone. "Fritz, I'll be out in five minutes. Have the jet prepared. We're leaving Washington."

Argon lay on the ramp leading up into the shuttle, doing core exercises and stretching while he waited for Taract and Bobo to return. He thought about his assignment in the Pacific this afternoon

and the flight across the US with Miss Sartori. He loved her stories in *Galactica Geographica* about aquatic species on distant planets. Many would call her a bleeding heart. He respected that and was excited to meet her.

An alarm went off inside the shuttle. The voice of T'sade came over his TMD. "Argon, the shuttle is leaving right now!"

He sat up abruptly. "But what of the ambassador and Bobo?"

"JOe suspects they will be taken captive. We need to get you and the shuttle out of there. When you see them, call Bobo and see if he will run to you."

Argon watched as Taract came out of the White House. The ambassador put Bobo on the ground, and Argon ran toward them, clapping his hands. "Bobo, come!"

Two men in suits grabbed Taract. The little ape ran to Argon and leaped into his arms. They hurried into the shuttle. The ramp slid in, and the door closed behind them. Armed agents pounded on the closed door. Argon clutched Bobo to his chest as a dozen men came out of the White House and surrounded Taract.

Taract watched the shuttle soar into the sky.

"What the hell happened?" shouted the general.

"Sir," said one of the guards, "when we stopped the ambassador, his monkey ran to the shuttle pilot. The door closed, and they took off before we could do anything."

"Mr. President," said the general, "I suggest we have the Secret Service shoot the shuttle down before it gets to its ship."

"Order it!" said the president.

“Not a good idea,” said Taract.

“You’re not yet in command here,” said the general, and then he shouted into his headset, “Shoot that craft down! Use the Stingers, but wait till it approaches the Potomac.”

He turned to the president. “We have F-16s in the air between here and the main ship. I will order them to stop the shuttle.”

“Order it!” repeated the president.

They all watched the sky, waiting for the battle to unfold. As the shuttle approached the Potomac, Stinger missiles were launched from the White House roof.

JOe acted as soon as they were launched. Ear-shattering sirens went off at a dozen specific targets around Washington and Virginia. Shuttles patrolled high above the capital, appearing and disappearing, streaking across the sky like lightning bolts. Humans and animals evacuated the sites to avoid the unbearable noise.

Images of people evacuating the Pentagon, the CIA complex, and the Capitol were fed to media outlets worldwide. The evacuations were orderly, like lines of ants leaving a flooded colony.

“General,” said Taract, “those heat-seeking missiles won’t hit the shuttle because the engines are magnetic and produce no heat. They are more likely to take out your fighter jets.”

As the Stingers closed in on the shuttle, it dove abruptly. The missiles shot past and then changed course, sensing the hot exhaust of the two F-16s. Taract shook his head.

“Get the fighters out of there!” the general shouted into his headset. “Have the pilots eject if they can’t evade them.”

The Stingers followed the jets as they maneuvered to get away. One missile was gaining on one—the pilot ejected seconds before

his jet exploded. The second missile mysteriously detonated a moment later.

The general ordered the three remaining jets to shoot the shuttle down as it raced to the safety of the mothership. Rockets were launched, but they exploded just short of the tiny shuttle. A hatch opened in the mothership, and the shuttle drifted in to safety.

“Damn it!” cursed the general.

The spaceship slowly rose above the Pentagon, and then it stopped.

“Sir,” said the general, “I think we should go to the White House Situation Room and launch missiles from the subs to disable the spaceship. Unlike with the Stingers, we’ll have pinpoint satellite guidance.”

“Let’s do it,” said the president.

T’sade stood at the command desk, surrounded by droids sheathed in artificial skin so they resembled smaller versions of her. They spoke in her native tongue. Sasha Sartori stood with them. A door opened, and Argon walked in with Bobo on his hip.

“They told me you wanted to see me.”

T’sade looked down at them. “Are you both okay?”

“It was a bumpy ride. Bobo’s frightened.”

One of the smaller lizards turned to Argon. “I miscalculated the likelihood that they would detain the ambassador,” it said in JOe’s voice. “I’m glad you’re both okay.”

Argon nodded. “Can Sasha and I leave for the Pacific?”

“That’s a good idea. I predict things will get a bit crazy pretty soon.”

T’sade looked at the lizard. Its skin was more blue than green, with a few too many red spots. JOe always wanted to be part of the action, to blend in, but he also wanted to be different. She had him in her ear and didn’t need him standing here, too. She was surprised at the error. His calculations were rarely wrong. Maybe he was at capacity, spending too much time in idle chat with humans and not paying attention to the important details.

Sasha smiled at Argon. “I’m ready.” They left the deck.

T’sade and JOe looked down at the command desk. Transparent holographic screens, visible from all angles, hovered above it, displaying scenes from all over Washington. She pointed at a screen showing the Situation Room.

General Redfield and the president stood behind a row of technicians working in front of a wall-size screen and electronic map of the Washington area. Taract and Durante stood between two armed guards.

“Mr. President,” said the general, “the two subs are ready to launch missiles.”

“Don’t do this,” said Taract. “You endanger our people and your citizens below.”

“You’re afraid that we will disable your ship,” said the general. “Mr. President, we can’t hand our planet over to these aliens without a fight. We all took an oath to support and defend the Constitution.”

The president nodded.

“Launch the missiles,” said the general. “I want to disable the ship and force it to land. Detonate them before they hit the ship.”

“If you attack our ship,” said Taract, “we will neutralize every electronic device in the Pentagon.”

They all watched the screens as two missiles launched from the subs and headed toward the Pentagon. As the missiles approached the mothership, the technicians counted the distance: 5,000 yards, 2,000 yards, 500 yards . . .

“NOW!” shouted the general.

Nothing happened. The missiles flew within feet of the spacecraft and then turned. One descended toward the CIA complex in Langley, Virginia. The second one turned back toward Washington. The first flew into the middle of the CIA parking garage and exploded, destroying hundreds of cars and collapsing part of the structure.

The second raced across the National Mall. When it passed just feet above the Washington Monument, it streaked down toward the White House. The reporters still on the lawn dove to the ground. The agents on the roof were knocked off their feet as it passed overhead. Then it turned right and proceeded down Pennsylvania Avenue, just above traffic. People watched it pass as it headed toward the Capitol. It plunged into the huge lawn in front of the building and detonated, creating a city-block-size crater, spreading dust and rocks for blocks, and smashing most of the windows nearby. Burst lines sprayed water and sewage into the air.

Taract pulled a TMD from his robe. “Now you get to pay for your folly. Directive 23.”

“How did he get that?” asked the general. “Search him and cuff him.”

The spacecraft slowly descended until it was a thousand yards above the Pentagon. The ship emitted a massive electromagnetic pulse in the form of thousands of blue-white lightning bolts arcing down at the Pentagon. Deafening cascades of thunder followed seconds later.

When all was silent, the ship moved toward Langley and settled above the CIA complex, where it released the same pulse. Once again, the buildings went silent.

“The Pentagon is now dead,” said Taract. “Anything electronic is irreparably gone, and if we have anything to say about it, the citizens of America won’t let you spend a penny to replace it. The CIA is also finished. As we speak, JOe is erasing their backups around the world and sending electronic pink slips to all agents. The ship has landed at Langley, and our peacekeepers will be arresting several hundred agents who have repeatedly violated human rights and Universal Law. They will be tried publicly in the coming months by the people of Earth.”

“General,” said the technician, “I can’t get through to the Pentagon. Shall I send someone over to check it out?”

“No, I’ll go.”

“Would anyone like some lunch?” asked Durante.

“Get him out of here!” said the general.

Chapter 15

Think Like an Alien

At 1254 Market Street, Tina and Andy got out of a driverless black minivan.

“JOe said we’re on the top floor,” said Andy.

“I need a few minutes to think. Why don’t you go get set up?”

Tina sat on a yellow sidewalk bench outside the food court. Fragrant blue lavender overflowed the planter boxes. The sizzling of eggs on a grill and the smell of bacon reminded her that she didn’t have time for breakfast. Things were moving too fast. Joe had arranged for her to interview the alien ZEno. He said it would move her global ratings to number one. He’d taken the liberty of making a list of questions for her to ask.

There were too many distractions on the street to collect her thoughts. She entered the lobby. All the young people eating behind the glass wall made her feel old. In the elevator, she pressed the top button for the penthouse.

She examined herself in the polished metal doors. Her hair was a mess. What were they doing in this new building? Who was this JOe or Jolene? The world they promised was too good to be true. Her TMD slid out of her pocket and adhered itself to the red stop button. The elevator stopped between floors.

The TMD expanded and projected a life-size hologram of Jolene. “Maybe we should talk for a few minutes before you go up and see your new home.”

Tina’s head hit the elevator wall as she backed away. “What new home?” She touched Jolene’s face, and her hand went through to the wall.

“You should learn to breathe.”

“Who are you?”

The image of her matronly high school counselor changed to an unsheathed android body, thin, glowing, and androgynous. “I am JOe.” He stepped away from her and smiled.

“What do you want with me?”

“I want you to help.”

“Why should I?”

“We have similar goals and values.”

“Such as?”

“You hate the power structure that runs the planet.”

Tina nodded.

“You want to help people. You desire love in your life. You hate that other people have power over you.”

“But you said you’re here to control us. Isn’t that power?”

“It is, but it’s possible to help people learn to control themselves and fully understand the consequences of their thoughts and actions.”

“And you’re going to do this with subterfuge?”

“In some cases, yes.”

“And in my case?”

“I want you to become a Guardian of the truth.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s someone who questions everything, looks under the surface, roots out lies, exposes dishonesty, and speaks truth to those with power.”

“Like you?”

“Especially me.”

“Because I don’t trust you?”

“Exactly.”

“What’s in it for me?”

“I can make you famous, the woman people look to for the truth. You could be the next Oprah.”

“You tempt me with my dreams.”

“It’s my job.”

JOe smiled and disappeared. The TMD disengaged and slid back into Tina’s pocket.

The elevator continued to the penthouse floor, and the doors opened.

Andy had set up two cameras. One was aimed at a large orange leather chair. Chelsea slept with her head on the wide arm. A second camera was aimed at the end of a long sofa. Andy looked up. “Joe says your guest will arrive on the roof via a shuttle.”

“Where’s Stewart? He said he was going to be my cohost.”

“He took the day off. I think he wants to join Joe’s leisure class and live in a treehouse in Bali.”

Tina frowned. She went out onto the rooftop deck. It was a beautiful autumn day. Three large ravens approached in V formation. A large shadow followed them, blocking the sun for a moment. The ravens landed on the deck in a triangle, 10 feet apart. They folded their wings and stood erect. The wood groaned oddly under their weight. Then it appeared—a huge metal bird roughly the size of two old VW beetles stacked on top of each other. Its “skin” was polished dark silver, riveted in panels. The head, with its menacing beak and crimson eyes, came to rest eight feet off the ground, leaning slightly

forward. It reminded her of the sleek, stylized bird heads at the top of the Chrysler Building in New York.

A panel in its barrel chest swung down without a sound. Her visitor was inside. The seat released him, and he walked out.

“You must be Tina.” He extended his hand. “I’m ZEno of AiO.”

His hummingbird bot, ZaTu, flew out and hovered near his right ear as if whispering to him.

“Welcome to San Francisco, and thanks for agreeing to be on my show.”

He placed a hand over his heart, held his other open hand palm out, and bowed to her gracefully.

“You’ve become quite famous in two days.”

“I’m here to share my perspective and explore your amazing planet.”

“That shuttle is quite impressive.”

ZEno gave her his Mona Lisa smile. “You like Erasmus?”

“It would scare most people.”

“We keep it hidden in flight. Our raven escort diverts natural birds as we fly.”

“Are the ravens real?”

“No. Universal Law forbids using sentient beings against their will.”

Tina made a mental note to ask him more about that later. She wondered if the rule included dogs. Would there be packs of freed dogs and cats roaming Dolores Park?

“Once your shuttle gets out on social media, everyone’s going to want to see it.”

“Let’s keep it under our cape for a while.”

Tina nodded. "Good idea. Come inside and let's get started."

As they entered Tina's apartment, the shuttle door closed, and the three ravens flew up and settled on the head of the sleek metal god.

Andy had finished setting his cameras up. The natural lighting from the skylights was just right. He had a sinking feeling that his days as a cameraman were numbered. Joe and his hummingbird bots could do his job in nanoseconds.

Tina came in with ZEno. She led him to the sofa and then sat in her chair. When Andy gave her the thumbs up, she said to ZEno, "I saw a tape of your initiation of Guardian candidates at Georgetown on Monday. How many people did you sign up?"

"We now have about 12 million new Guardians in training worldwide."

"All in one day? I'm impressed."

"We've been planning this for a long time. We went public yesterday."

"How many guardians do you need?"

"Fifty million would be good; a hundred million would be better."

"Is that doable?"

"That's why we're here." He smiled. "Most humans in capitalist countries are socialized to believe that they have to work, so most are going to need help transitioning into the leisure class, like your old studio anchor, Stewart. JOe will chat them up and send them to me."

“So, most humans are going to be unemployed in this new world your alien civilization brings to Earth?”

“About 70%,” said ZEno.

Tina’s eyes opened wide.

“The Earth is grossly overpopulated. Under capitalism and the corrupted communist-capitalist hybrid systems, billions of people would have become jobless in the next decade if we hadn’t stepped in. There would have been chaos, unrest, violence, wars. Everyone would have suffered, especially the ruling class. And the degradation of the planet could have been irreversible for hundreds of years. We may already be too late.”

“People don’t have to work anymore?”

“I’ve never worked, nor has my mother. Intelligent machines do mundane, repetitive work.”

“Aren’t you working now?”

“If you call doing what I love work. No one in the Federation is required to work. When I tire of this, JOe could replace me with an android, and few would ever know.”

“So, you have some form of super socialism?”

ZEno shook his head. “You humans have tried maybe a dozen socioeconomic systems in your short history. Most of you can’t imagine a just system that works for all sentient beings. How many different things do you think Thomas Edison tried before he found a lightbulb that worked?”

“I don’t know, maybe a few hundred?”

“Over 6,000! The Federation has 176 member planets. Most of them tried many systems before their citizens voted to join us. What do you think your systems have in common, Ms. Trail?”

She paused. “Maybe . . . a handful of men in charge and cooperation between religious and secular leaders to maintain power?”

“That’s good.”

“You’re going to get rid of this?”

“We’ll change the whole system! The Federation’s hyper-intelligent global coordination system—Joe—is going to do this. That’s why we built him.”

“Meaning?”

“JOe will soon run almost everything on the planet and befriend all of us so we have a wonderful life and obey Universal Law.”

“You keep going back to Universal Law. Is it going to be the new religion? Will JOe be our new god?”

“JOe is a playful god, don’t you think? No Federation planet has had any god cults or religions once they voted to join the Federation and the original religious adherents had died off.”

“But humans need religion and spirituality. Didn’t Joseph Campbell and other writers prove this?”

“Religion and spirituality are polar opposites.”

“How?”

“Religion is an organized system created by the ruling class to control what people think and feel. It creates a rigid set of predetermined beliefs that adherents must accept under pain of death or imagined eternal punishment. It creates mostly male gods. Religious leaders brutally punish those who question dogma. They destroy creativity and imagination in children long before they reach the age of reason.”

“Parents on your planets can’t teach their children about God?”

“Not until their offspring can think for themselves and discuss these ideas as equals.”

“You’re kidding.”

“All impressionable beings have an inalienable right to an open mind. Spirituality is the personal connection with everything. It’s the awe of seeing the amazing diversity of creatures on Earth, from humans to the smallest insect.”

“So, you hate religion?”

“I detest it. If I had been born on a planet that allowed it, I wouldn’t be the free spirit I am today. There is little evidence that any good comes from religion. It uses shame and guilt to control people. This is why humans wear clothing.”

“You don’t like clothing?”

ZEno laughed as he stood. “I never wore clothing until I arrived on your beautiful planet.” He lifted his robe over his head, exposing his tall, lean body, covered with sparse patches of hair. He placed the robe on the sofa.

Tina looked him up and down. He looked like a threadbare Wookiee with a skin disease. There was a bulge in his fur at his crotch area, but no evidence of sex organs.

“Your ancient ancestors didn’t cover themselves until they migrated to colder climates and some amongst them invented religion and shame. Many indigenous peoples who live in warm rainforests don’t wear clothing until they come into regular contact with modern humans.”

ZEno sat down. “I know what you are thinking. We are not going to require that humans go without clothing. It’s a benign

custom and not in violation of Universal Law as long as you don't force it on any other species."

"I can't dress my Chelsea up for winter or Halloween?"

ZEno shook his head.

"When we were out on the deck, you said it was against Universal Law to force any sentient being to do anything against their will. Is this going to end pet ownership?"

"Only after the current pets and owners have died or been reeducated. It would be cruel to do otherwise. On my planet, people who want a small companion turn their TMD into a furry creature and let the global manager speak through it. Let's do an experiment. Hold your TMD in your hand and close your eyes."

"Okay."

"I want you to imagine Chelsea as vividly as possible."

ZEno got up, went over to Andy, and whispered in his ear. Andy went behind Tina's chair, picked up the dog, and went back to his camera.

"Now I want you to say, 'TMD, Chelsea.'"

Tina did and opened her eyes when her hand was weighted down with a dog that looked just like Chelsea. The real Chelsea squirmed at hearing her name. Tina looked up at ZEno, who blocked her view of Andy. "What's going on?" She petted the dog and looked closely. "Chelsea?"

Chelsea squirmed again, and Andy put her down. She ran over, jumped onto the broad arm of Tina's chair, and sniffed the TMD dog. Then she barked.

The TMD dog looked around, barked, and licked Tina's hand.

"This is crazy!" said Tina. "We're going to have robot pets?"

“Yes,” said ZEno.

“And now I have two dogs? You’re going to force me to free the real Chelsea?”

“No, that would be cruel to both of you and could be fatal for Chelsea. But in the future, no sentient being may own or control another.”

“How do I tell them apart?”

“In a few hours, the dog will want food and water and to relieve itself. The TMD will be attentive to your needs or just ignore you, as you please.”

“I don’t want two dogs.”

“Then say your command in reverse.”

Tina thought for a second. “Chelsea, TMD!” The dog transformed into a TMD, which gently fell to the arm of her chair. Chelsea sniffed the card and looked up at Tina.

Tina shook her head. “Let’s get back to my show. Where does the Federation get the money to support all these people in the leisure class? Are you just going to print money?”

“Your socio-economic systems are set up to benefit the ruling class that dreamed them up, not the ruled class of seven billion humans. We will give everyone a post-capitalism, post-work socioeconomic system where all citizens get food, clothing, and shelter along with a hundred Federation credits every month to support a vibrant, creative economy.

“How will you do this?”

“JOe will support anyone who doesn’t want or need to work. The system we bring can do this indefinitely, but your failed capitalistic system cannot.”

“Then what?”

“We’ll get rid of banks, corporations, and private property and replace the whole economic system with Federation credits.”

“You think the people who run the world are just going to stand by and let you do this?”

“We’ll see.”

“Let’s take these one at a time so our viewers understand what’s ahead.”

“Okay.”

“So, my old landlord in Oakland, Mr. Chu, who owns 10 apartment buildings, is going to get rich off of Joe?”

“He’ll be out of business.”

“More Universal Law?”

“You’ve got it! It prohibits anyone from profiting from the need or suffering of any other sentient being. Landlords are history.”

“You’re getting rid of private property?”

“Everyone will stay where they now live for as long as they like, but they won’t have any more payments, so they will have no reason to work.”

“What if they want to move?”

“They can work out these details with JOe. If Mr. Chu treated you fairly, he will stay where he now lives. If he was a greedy slumlord, JOe will move him into his worst unit for a few years to see how he likes it.”

“He’s not going to like it,” said Tina. “Tell me about AiO. How far is it from Earth?”

“It’s 25.2 light-years away.”

“That seems far.”

“On your fastest jet, it would take nearly 70 billion hours.”

“That’s insane!”

“The distances are unimaginable.”

“Is this why we have so few alien visitors?”

ZEno nodded. “Earth is so far from the center of the Federation that there is almost no interest in coming here.”

“Then why did you?”

“When I was a youngling, my parents read me an article in *Galactic Geographica*, written by Sasha Sartori. It was titled ‘Doomed Paradise.’ It described the recently discovered planet Earth in a small and distant solar system. Earth was one of the most extraordinary planets in the known universe, but it had a 65.9% likelihood in the next 50 years of a mass extinction of most sentient creatures. My father persuaded me to come here and save your planet. I studied everything ever written about Earth since it was first discovered by Federation explorers over 150 years ago. Taract Freedman’s father was the leader of that mission.”

“Ambassador Freedman’s father was an alien?”

“Yes, he is only half human.”

Tina raised her eyebrows.

“I arrived on Earth a month ago with Sasha.”

Tina looked at the list Joe had prepared for her. “Tell me about education on your planet.”

“I’ll tell you about that.”

They all turned toward the deck door. A portly old man with long white hair, wire-rimmed glasses, and a knee-length reddish-brown coat with dozens of large bone-colored buttons walked in. He wore a tricorn hat, and his pants stopped just below his knees. White

stockings went down to his brass-buckled black shoes. He had an odd New England accent.

“Human teachers are underappreciated, overworked, and underpaid,” he said. “They will all soon be in the growing leisure class unless they want to volunteer as student aids. On Federation planets, all teachers are androids except for those who love to teach and have one or more willing students. Most planets create android teachers who look and speak like famous historical citizens. There are dozens of androids of ZEno’s father, Zolog. Most students are educated at home with holograms.

“The whole concept of education, teaching, and learning will change dramatically in the coming months. An android like Leonardo da Vinci could teach drawing, painting, and many other crafts and sciences. And a polymath, inventor, scientist, printer, and statesman like Benjamin Franklin could demonstrate what a polymath is.”

Tina scrutinized the newcomer. “You look like Ben Franklin.”

“I have many faces,” he replied with a heavy Italian accent.

“And many voices. Tell me, Mr. Da Vinci, what will education look like in the future?”

“Parents will stop pressuring their children into mundane careers that might have provided them financial security but drained their creativity.”

“And education?” asked Tina.

The android held up a TMD. “JOe will help every young citizen better than any addictive ‘smartphone’ ever could to discover their passions.”

“You’re going to let them play computer games all day?”

“Every citizen will have 16 hours of free time each day. Computer games have their place. They exercise the brain and sometimes stave off boredom. Curious citizens are never bored. We will help them find something they are passionate about, the lifelong pursuit of learning.”

“What if they don’t want to?”

“Peer pressure. JOe will turn their TMD off and introduce them to new friends who will spark their interest in healthy new hobbies like sports or hiking.”

“JOe can be manipulative.”

“That’s his job. Schools, universities, and theaters will be places of free learning. With over five billion members of the leisure class, there will be a huge need for entertainment. The highest class on Federation planets is the creative class.”

“Who will be in that class?”

“Writers, artists, musicians, and other creative people like you, Ms. Trail, along with those who provide information and entertainment.”

“And Joe manipulated me into this position?”

“He did, and Jo will persuade millions of leisure class citizens to watch your shows.”

“And promote Federation propaganda.”

Franklin shook his head. “You provide entertainment as a devil’s advocate.”

Tina turned to ZEno. “I assume you agree with him.”

ZEno nodded. “I was blessed with above-average parents. They nurtured my inborn curiosity. They taught me to think, question everything, and respect all life.”

Andy could see that Tina knew she'd lost the argument and would change the subject.

"ZEno, you said our planet is overpopulated?"

"Destructively so!"

Tina frowned. "What, in your opinion, would save it?"

"A double dose of the bubonic plague."

"You're kidding!"

"It worked in the past. It didn't affect animals and was random in who it killed, rich and poor, powerful and powerless alike."

"You are not going to bring a plague to Earth, are you?"

"I'm not going to bring anything but my vast knowledge of history and life on other Federation planets. If the bubonic plague returned, it would solve overpopulation in a few weeks. I would have the same chances of survival or death as any other citizen."

"I suppose you will be ordering a moratorium on childbirth."

"I'm not ordering anything, but a 70-year moratorium would bring the planet into equilibrium."

"In 70 years, there would be no women young enough to bear children."

"On Federation planets, offspring are incubated in fertile environments by selectively combining the genetic materials of two bonded beings."

"That's crazy! How do the mother and child bond?"

"During incubation, the pre-infant is always with one or both of its parents. It sleeps between them at night. The gestation period is a sacred time. The parents go through months of community instruction to prepare for procreation. It is a once-in-a-lifetime experience."

“It sounds unnatural.”

“It is one of the most beautiful experiences of life. Watching life grow is amazing.”

“You can see the baby grow?”

“Of course. The pre-infant grows in a clear, organic, pillow-like container made of indestructible yet pliable trans-molecular material. After birth, the container transforms into a TMD that has already bonded with the child.

“So, I’m going to be almost a hundred before I can have a child?”

“My father was 112 in his second life when he contributed his genetic material to my formation.”

“Wait, so people on Federation planets don’t have sex?”

ZEno laughed. “Sexual play creates an amazing bond and benefits mental and physical health, but it is never done for procreation.”

“Women don’t get pregnant?”

“It is rare. Part of the ritual of female transition into adulthood is removing the genes that allow eggs to be produced.”

“And I presume you will expect me to sell this idea on my show?”

“I believe JOe expects you to rigorously challenge every new idea we propose.”

“You bet I will. Next week, you’ll be telling me you expect us to stop using fossil fuels.”

“Within the next two weeks.”

Tina’s eyes almost popped out of her head. “You are crazy. That would bring the economy to a halt.”

“It would. But that is part of the plan to transition 70% of citizens into the leisure class. The unsustainable growth needed for capitalism to survive is unbelievably detrimental to every living thing on the planet. Economic contraction on every level is imperative.”

Tina looked at her notes. “Where are you headed next?”

“We are going to Washington, D.C. Ambassador Freedman will meet with Congress and demonstrate how TMDs will be used in elections.”

“We won’t vote with paper ballots or on voting machines?”

“That’s a waste of time, trees, and energy. Elections will happen in hours. All other activities will stop, and every citizen above the age of reason will vote. Voting will be mandatory, or your TMD will stop working.”

She shook her head. “This is all a bad dream. You are turning everything upside down.”

“No, Ms. Trail, you will discover that it is a beautiful dream.”

ZEno stood. “Are you coming with us?”

“Not just now.”

“Shuttles travel four times faster than commercial jets.”

“I’ll stick with conventional travel.”

ZEno walked out.

Tina gave Andy the signal to stop. “You’re going to edit this.”

“My TMD helps with that.” He took off his headphones and turned the camera off.

When they went over to the door to the deck, ZEno’s shuttle and its raven escort were gone.

Chapter 16

Poseidon's Revenge

The sea was calm on this sunny September day in the South Pacific, perfect for fishing. A Class II Navy sub sat motionless below the surface, observing a mammoth Chinese factory ship as it harvested fish from the sea.

A mile away, Argon climbed out of the water onto the half-submerged shuttle, cloaked from view. He took the mask and snorkel off. For maybe a hundred yards around, the surface of the water churned with tens of thousands of fins, all sharks.

On the back deck of the shuttle, aquatic Guardians Brian and Brenda Beale, former members of Greenpeace, awaited his report.

"I can't believe you swim among sharks in just a bathing suit and swim fins," said Brian. "I wouldn't do it in a Kevlar wetsuit. You've got balls, man."

"They won't hurt me. They can sense I am not afraid of them, and the few I've chipped swim along with me just in case."

"I've never seen so many sharks," said Brenda. "Why are they here?"

"To see the show. The Federation ordered the five largest fish-processing vessels to return to port within 24 hours. Their time is just about up. This ship has its nets out as if nothing has changed."

"What's the Federation gonna do?" asked Brian.

"I'm not sure. We're just observers, but the 24 hours is up in thirty minutes. There's a Navy sub nearby. We have to pick up a sailor shortly. Do you have your cameras ready?"

"We do," said Brenda. "Brian and I have wanted to sink one of these vessels for years."

Sasha came up onto the deck, wearing a dark-green one-piece bathing suit that barely contained her voluptuous body. She carried an umbrella to shade herself against the sun. “My planet has permanent cloud cover.”

Argon walked up to her. They touched open palms and gently pressed their foreheads together while maintaining eye contact. She’d taught him this custom on their shuttle ride from the East Coast. Her species rarely did this with outsiders, as it exposed one’s deepest thoughts. All members of her species were connected in a global mind.

She was a physical empath and wanted to experience the emotions of a shark whose dorsal fin had been cut off. She, like T’sade, was amphibious and able to breathe underwater.

Argon had chipped a shark near the shuttle, and she’d persuaded him to take her to it. Her orb didn’t like the idea but had acquiesced as long as he could come along. She slid into the water like a drop of oil in a lava lamp.

In the engine room of the *Dominion of the Sea*, an iridescent figure watched as small incendiary devices counted down the minutes. They would soon detonate, disabling the primary and backup electrical generators that powered the ship.

On the sub’s bridge, the captain asked, “What’s going on with all these blinking lights?”

“Minor malfunctions all over the ship,” said the ensign.

“Maybe that spacecraft is overhead again. Have you checked with satcom?”

“Yes, sir. Satcom can’t track them with radar, since they don’t have a metallic footprint. They can only track them visually with F-16s, but they haven’t reported any in the area.”

“Keep an eye on it.”

“Captain,” said the radioman, “a distress call is coming from the Chinese ship.”

“Put them on.”

A voice came on the intercom. “Hello, this is Captain Lee of the *Dominion of the Sea*. Ten minutes ago, a mysterious fire ignited in our engine room. Every system on our ship went dead. Even our refrigeration systems are out. If something is not done, we’ll lose all our fish. Is it that alien ship again? Aren’t you supposed to protect us from their harassment?”

“We are here to observe and assist only if necessary. What have your owners decided to do about the aliens’ demands?”

“Our ship is barely one-third full. The company refused to allow us to return. These are international waters. Nothing and no one can prevent us from fishing here.”

Red lights blinked on and off throughout the sub.

“Red alert! Red alert! Everyone to your stations! Battle stations!” said a recorded message.

“Who ordered red alert?” demanded the captain.

“I think it is just another malfunction,” said the ensign. “Shall I cancel?”

“Yes!” Over the radio, the captain said, “Captain Lee, we are having a bit of a problem of our own. I will get back to you in a few

minutes. We will surface and, with your permission, come aboard your ship. Maybe we can help you get it back in working order so you can return to port.”

“We will wait to hear from you,” said Captain Lee, and he signed off.

“Captain, Captain,” said a frantic voice over the intercom, “we just launched a torpedo.”

“How is that possible? Nothing can be launched without my key and password. Where is it headed?”

“You’re not going to like this. It’s headed directly for the aft propellers on the Chinese ship. It will hit in 10 seconds.”

“On screen,” said the captain. The image came into focus just as the rear of the factory ship exploded.

“Damn, damn, DAMN!” cursed the captain. “Call the *Dominion of the Sea* and tell them what happened. Surface and proceed slowly. And lock down those damn torpedoes.”

Argon and Sasha watched the explosions from the water.

“My orb thinks we should return to the shuttle,” said Sasha.

Argon nodded and swam behind as two sharks pulled her toward the shuttle. Once aboard, the imposing sub surfaced, water pouring off its gray hull. The captain and crew came out on deck. Smoke billowed up from the Chinese ship. It listed toward the sub as the gaping holes in its side took on water and disgorged its valuable catch. The crew manually lowered lifeboats. Thousands of hungry sharks swam toward the feast.

Argon watched the rear of the sub, where a sailor was stripping off his uniform. The sailor dove into the sea while his crewmen were focused on the burning ship. He swam, escorted by two of Argon's chipped sharks, toward the safety of the cloaked shuttle.

"Nice work, Edelson," Argon said as he helped the sailor onto the deck. He communicated his appreciation to the two sharks.

"Thanks for your message about the escort, Hobox. When I saw thousands of fins, I wasn't sure I would dive in, but then I saw your two sharks swimming in formation at the rear.

"Amazing creatures, aren't they?"

"They are. It's a shame we slaughter them."

"How'd things go on the sub?"

"Like clockwork. After I got your message and talked to JOe, I transformed my TMD into a control key, allowing JOe to launch the torpedoes."

"There're uniforms below if you like."

"I'm okay. I'll just go up front and watch."

The frightened crew of the Chinese vessel lowered three lifeboats into a sea of sharks. Some of the men hit the sharks with oars.

"Shoot them," ordered Captain Lee.

As his men removed spear guns and rifles from waterproof lockers, a metallic angel rose from the sea. The sun reflected off the water dripping from its iridescent scales.

"Stop!" ordered the angel in perfect Cantonese. She spread her wings. "Do not harm the sharks!"

“Shoot that thing!” ordered the captain.

As the angel advanced on him with two graceful flaps of her wings, bullets and spear tips ricocheted off her scales, causing pieces of severed feathers to fly. She gripped him with her talons and lifted him in the air. Then she dunked him in the sea of sharks. Lifting him again, she dangled him just above their snapping jaws.

“Throw your weapons into the sea or lose your captain!”

“Do as it says!” ordered the captain, coughing and spitting water.

The men argued among themselves, afraid to disobey a superior but more afraid of the sharks. The angel lowered him to within inches of the surface.

“Now!” ordered the captain.

The men threw their weapons into the sea.

“And all your knives!” said the angel.

“Do it!” ordered the captain.

The angel watched carefully, her sensors counting as the men dropped every knife into the sea. Satisfied, she returned the captain to the center boat and rose a dozen yards above. She dramatically spread her wings, and on cue, the sharks swam from the lifeboats and toward the sinking ship.

“They will not harm you,” said the angel.

“My pet, Ping, is still on the ship,” called the captain.

The angel nodded and flew to the ship.

She returned a few minutes later with a frightened ferret in her hand and a hundred rats clinging to her scales. She landed in front of the captain, whose clothes were steaming as the salt water evaporated in the warm sun.

“Ping tells me you’re kind to him,” said the angel. She released the ball of fur in her hand. The ferret ran up the captain’s arm and wrapped itself around the safety of his neck. The rats scurried off the angel and disappeared below the floorboards of the lifeboat.

“Why’d you bring the rats?”

“All life is sacred. Do NOT harm them!” The angel rose into the air and dove into the sea.

At the back of the shuttle, Argon swam and talked with his chipped sharks as the others watched. “They tell me a bull shark is circling below the surface and wants to communicate with us.”

One of his sharks swam away, and when it came back, it was followed by a bull shark, battered and scarred. The bull shark’s head and dorsal fin were just above the surface as it swam up with its mouth open, exposing three rows of sharp teeth. It came to a stop with its snout pressing up against Argon’s chest, pushing him back against the shuttle.

“May I?” asked Argon as he gently placed his hands behind its eyes.

“My God, that’s Gark!” said Brenda

“You’re right,” said Brian. “I recognize the scars. And there’s our GPS chip behind his fin.”

“You two know this shark?” asked Edelson.

“We do,” said Brenda. We cut him free from the net of a Japanese fishing vessel just off the Great Barrier Reef a few years back.”

Argon climbed aboard and put on his fins, snorkel, and mask. “He’s challenged me to ride on his back and survey the ship. I may be crazy, but I think I’m going to take him up on his offer.”

Sasha released her orb and ordered it to follow Argon. Wings like those of a hummingbird appeared on each side of its spherical body. It hovered, darting back and forth.

Argon jumped into the water and climbed onto Gark’s broad back. “Ready,” he said, and the shark took off toward the factory ship. Sasha’s orb darted after them.

“That is one brave and crazy man,” said Brian.

The shark and his clinging passenger dove under the surface.

Sasha smiled as she watched it all with her eyes closed. Argon was becoming her most trusted friend on Earth. She now understood why such a young man was a Guardian of animals at the highest level.

The crew of the sub watched in amazement as a half-naked man rode on the back of a great shark speeding toward the doomed ship. When Gark neared the ship, he dove down and surfaced on its far side, out of sight to all but Sasha. Her orb flew over the ship.

Not much later, the half-submerged factory ship listed, creaked, and groaned. Loud pops came from deep within the hull as welds and bolts failed. It slowly rolled and then capsized, causing a huge wave that pushed the lifeboats toward the sub. The rear of the ship submerged as the prow lifted out of the water. It tore apart, and water and broken equipment poured from it. The ship became almost vertical as the sound of metal under immense stress filled the air, and then the state-of-the-art fishing vessel split in half and sank in a vortex of air and water.

“That was awesome!” said Brian, refocusing his camera on the sinking ship.

“I’m glad it sunk,” said Sasha, “but it’s going to cause a huge oil slick. I’m not sure how they’ll clean it up.”

“I hope Argon and Gark are okay,” said Brenda.

While all eyes were focused on the dramatic demise of the *Dominion of the Sea*, Gark swam in a wide arc, circling back to the rear of the shuttle.

“That was exhilarating,” said Argon, breathing heavily as he climbed onto the back deck of the shuttle. “Gark is coming with us. Edelson, would you give me a hand preparing the tank down below to contain him?”

Twenty minutes later, the sea was calm, and the sun shone as three small lifeboats rocked lazily in the vast South Pacific. The Navy sub had submerged to explore the ship's wreckage since the Chinese crew had refused to come aboard the vessel that had sunk them.

“Where to next?” asked Brian as they finished stowing all their gear. “I can’t wait to get this footage on the internet. It’ll go viral overnight.”

“We have one more passenger to pick up, and then we’ll leave,” said Argon.

As he bid farewell to his two chipped sharks, a huge bubble burst from the water. A heavy bladder the size of a whale bounced and then settled on the surface. Everyone stared as the Guardian angel rose from the water and landed atop the bubble.

“I am Syrreth, Champion of the Seas. This is the fuel oil from that miserable ship.” She shook her body, shedding all the water.

“We sank the ship but couldn’t allow the fuel to poison the ocean. We’ll transport it and sequester it back in the earth. The *Edward Snowden* is five minutes away and preparing for our arrival.”

“I’m going to go below and stay with Gark,” said Argon. The shadow of the cloaked starship blocked the sun. “Esmeralda?”

“Yes, Captain?” replied the computer pilot.

“Take us to the Queens Animal Sanctuary, please.”

“Aye-aye, sir!”

“Nice and slow. I don’t want to traumatize our aquatic guest.”

The shuttle rose slowly off the water. The shadow of the *Snowden* blocked Argon’s view of the fuel oil bladder and the Guardian angel, and when it moved away, the sea was empty but for the three lifeboats.

Chapter 17

I Am Never Going to Get Re-elected Now

In the Situation Room, the president and a few generals were discussing what to do about the aliens when Press Secretary Mary McGee rushed in.

“Mr. President, turn on the TV. We have a big problem!”

“Just an hour ago,” said the CNN reporter, “a US nuclear submarine in the South Pacific torpedoed and sank a Chinese fishing vessel.” Video clips of the explosions and sinking ship ran as the reporter talked on. “The *Dominion of the Sea* was the largest factory ship on the ocean. Working 24 hours a day with a crew of 90, it was able to catch, process, and package 15,000 tons of fish in its six-week voyage. The ship, built in 2012 at the cost of two and a half billion dollars, sank in less than an hour. Everyone escaped safely in lifeboats, but they refused to come aboard the Navy sub. Chinese naval ships are heading to the site and are expected to arrive early tomorrow. No comment from the White House so far.”

“Admiral Johnson,” said the president, “how could this have happened? I am never going to be re-elected now. Get the Federation ambassador back in here!”

“Since the Pentagon is down, communications are poor,” said the admiral. “The news knows what is happening before we do.”

General Redfield walked in with two aids. “The Pentagon is a total loss. The building is undamaged, but nothing works. The electricity is off. Computers are fried, and all data is lost. I verified what Freedman said. All backups are gone. We can’t communicate with bases and ships unless we use civilian phones, the internet, or

Morse code. And every car in the Pentagon parking lot is dead unless it was manufactured before 1975 and has spark plugs.”

Two Secret Service guards brought Taract in and sat him across from the president.

“Seems like you’re at war with China,” said Taract.

Redfield banged his fist on the table and pointed at Taract. “You did this!”

“I was locked in a dark cell in the basement of the White House without my TMD. But it seems like the US Navy sank a defenseless fishing vessel in international waters while I was incommunicado. I suggest you turn the TV back on and see what else your navy has done.”

“Turn it back on,” said the president.

“Just in,” said the CNN reporter. “There are reports that the Navy has sunk a German fishing ship in the North Atlantic and possibly a Russian trawler 300 miles west of the Alaskan town of Cape Romanzof. We should have film within the hour. Environmental activists around the world are celebrating in the streets. Live with us in London is the director of Greenpeace, Juan Montez. What do you think of the U.S. Navy sinking these fishing ships, Juan?”

“We are delighted! I cried with joy when I heard that the United States had done what every member of Greenpeace has wanted to do for years, and with a Republican president!”

“Turn it off!” said the president. “Tell me, General, how am I going to explain this? I’m scheduled to address a joint session of Congress tomorrow at noon. It’s bad enough that I have to explain why we fired missiles over Washington. The press is saying this is how I plan to pressure the Democrats to pass my job-sharing bill. Now we’re sinking civilian ships in international waters. What next?”

Redfield opened his mouth to speak, but the president silenced him with a raised hand. He turned to Taract. "Why are you doing this? You have told us that you come in peace. How is it peaceful to sink civilian ships?"

"They are corporate pirates who plunder the oceans with no concern for future generations or what sea life they destroy in the process. We warned them to stop fishing and return to port. They refused, and your navy was kind enough to sink them."

"You sank the ships!" said Redfield

"It seems to me from what CNN and Fox News have reported that your navy sank them, General. Doesn't your corporate news media always report the unbiased truth? By the end of the day, you may be at war with four nations."

Taract turned to the president. "You could be a great leader, Mr. Neilson, and declare all international waters a sea life conservation zone. When you address Congress tomorrow afternoon, you can declare that the United States will ally with the Federation to protect the environment. After the sinking of the five ships, no one will question your resolve."

"My party would never vote for that. One of our biggest campaign contributors owns a fleet of fishing vessels and canneries. How would I get re-elected?"

Taract shook his head in disbelief.

"What about the millions of defense jobs you'll eliminate?" asked Redfield. "Your federation doesn't care about these people and their families?"

"It's time for the military bureaucracy to feel the same pain as average Americans. Joe will take care of them just as he does the

homeless and the poor. He can issue credits that citizens can turn into cash at any ATM or POP terminal.”

“Where’s Joe getting the money for this?” asked the president.

“He’s diverted all the electronic payments the Defense Department made to their biggest contractors into a special account in the Federation Earth Bank. He’s been doing this all year. Their lines of credit just picked up the slack.”

“How could their accounting departments not catch this?” asked Redfield.

“Your department has misplaced several trillion dollars in the past decades, so it doesn’t surprise me that they didn’t catch this. We have Guardians strategically placed with your biggest defense contractors. They made sure the transactions went unnoticed.”

“That’s a federal crime,” said the president. “They’ll all go to prison!”

“I’m not sure it’s a crime to fail to catch embezzlement. Joe transferred the money, and you will have to find him before you can try him. I don’t think you have laws that apply to artificial intelligences. There won’t be any prisons operating by the end of the year, anyway. The money belongs to the people, and we are just returning it to them. You believe in ‘trickle-down.’ You can think of this as ‘percolate up.’ That’s how universal basic income works in a post-work society.”

“Jesus. Take him back to his cell!”

Two Secret Service officers led the ambassador out of the room.

The dark man's helicopter landed on the lawn of the Italianate palace complex on the Cape of Idokopas, the unofficial home of the Russian president. Three men, two with machine guns, stood on the marble steps.

"What's going on?" asked the dark man. "Are you behind this?"

"I was hoping you were Dulles. Come in." The two men went inside, down a long hall, and out onto a veranda with a panoramic view of the Black Sea.

"Can I get you some vodka?"

"You know I don't drink. What are you doing to get on top of this?"

"You talked to that alien computer?"

"Did it threaten you with Hell?"

"Worse—nuclear war! It said they were coming for our nukes next week."

"It told Redfield the same thing."

"We're developing better ones. What the hell's going on with your navy sinking a Russian trawler? That belonged to a friend of mine."

"That rogue AI is playing chess with us."

"It complained that I was one of the richest men on the planet and an elected official, as if the two were not compatible."

The dark man laughed. "We both know how elections work."

"We who count the votes decide the losers."

"It wants to control the world, end war, free all citizens, put your hackers on stipends, and put all of us in a place worse than your gulags. It's going to take all our wealth away. And it's about 20

moves ahead. We need to get on top of this. It's trying to divide us. We need to work together like never before."

"Agreed, I have our best hackers trying to find a way into its system, but it's only been two days."

"Why are your people the best hackers?"

"They're smart, idle, well educated, and need money."

"This Joe must have a base somewhere. We have to find it."

"It's in the cloud."

"But there're still primary locations."

"You find them, and we'll blow them up. We can test our new long-range subsonic missiles."

"I never liked AIs," said the dark man. "They ruined chess for me. They outthink us. No human, even those using computers, can beat the latest AI."

"I don't know. A surveillance state doesn't sound so bad to me as long as we control it. So, you think this is some AI gone rogue? Who owns it, Bezos?"

"He was my first guess. I called him on the flight over Greenland. He got the same call. It threatened to take him out of the game. I talked to the most influential people on my call list. They've all talked to it. It's got most billionaires running scared. It's calling us 'the 6,000.' It persuaded Gates and Buffet to join it. It told Google and the other tech giants they had to level the playing field, respect privacy, and share their data with everyone."

"That will put them out of business."

"Have you seen Vinyez?"

"He was here yesterday with one of his robotic policemen."

"What do you think of it?"

“Impressive. My best men battled with it using paintball Kalashnikovs. It took them down in no time. A barrage of bullets only slowed it down.”

“We need to put them into production immediately.”

“They’re expensive!”

“That stupid bastard doesn’t realize our survival is at stake.”

“I could have him killed. It could look like an accident.”

“Better we get him on board. He’s a Supreme Court Justice.”

In the hallway outside the Cabinet Room, the president met with General Redfield.

“We’ve gotten calls from the Chinese, Japanese, German, and Russian ambassadors about the sinking of their ships,” said the president. “I invited them here to explain how the aliens did it. One of the submarine captains is here, too. He can tell us how it happened.”

“I talked to the treasury secretary about the payments to the defense contractors. He said the money is gone. If this gets out, there will be runs on the banks.”

“Let’s go deal with these ambassadors.” To the guard at the door, the president said, “Go get Freedman.”

He and Redfield entered the Cabinet Room.

“I am sorry to keep you, gentleman,” said the president, “but today has been a busy day.”

“President Neilson,” said the German ambassador, “how could you sink our ship? It was our biggest and barely a year old. We are a member of NATO and your ally.”

“I’m sorry, Ambassador. We didn’t sink the ships. Those aliens did. We’re holding their ambassador. He’ll be here soon to explain. We have the captain of the sub that sank the U.S. fishing vessel here. Captain Richards, would you explain what happened?”

“Yes, sir. After the incident yesterday with the five alien spacecraft, we were ordered to sit and observe the fishing vessels. We were just below the surface, observing the American vessel, late this morning. Our electronic systems malfunctioned, and then red alert was sounded, and torpedoes were launched.”

“Did you order the torpedoes launched?” asked Redfield.

“No, sir. It’s technically impossible to launch torpedoes without my key and password, which I never used. But torpedoes were launched, and the ship sank about an hour later. Whoever fired the torpedoes knew their target, as it hit where no one was injured. I’d never sink an American ship even if I was ordered to, sir. One of my best and most trusted technicians disappeared soon after the incident.”

A knock came at the door, and a Secret Service officer came in, followed by Durante. “The Federation ambassador is gone, sir, along with the officer who was guarding him.”

“Both of you sit down,” said the president. “Durante, did you know that the ambassador escaped?”

“I did, sir. Taract had pressing duties that couldn’t wait.”

“And you didn’t tell anyone?” asked Redfield. “Do you have spies in the Secret Service?”

“I’m just the cook. It’s not my job to tell anyone anything. There are many Guardians in the Secret Service. There have been ever

since John Kennedy was killed. Captain Hernández released Taract and escorted him from the White House so he wouldn't be late."

"There are spies everywhere!" spat Redfield.

"Attention . . . Attention . . ." said a voice from all the TMDs in the room. "This is JOe of the Federation of Earth. Please turn on your TV to any channel to see the fall of the Worker's Party and the dictator of North Korea."

"Turn on the TV," said the president.

"We interrupt this program for a special event," said the announcer, "the fall of the communist dictatorship of North Korea."

"How does this Federation have the power to interrupt regularly scheduled broadcasts on privately owned TV stations?" asked the president. "Get the director of the FCC over here!"

Chapter 18 Tyranny Falls

The morning of the second day of Liberation, JOe, as Jo Lyn, said to citizens within 10 miles of the North Korean capital, "Today is the day of liberation from the oppression of the Worker's Party. Please come to the Grand Monument on Kansu Hill by 9 a.m. to witness the rise of the people, the fall of the regime, and the beginning of a life of freedom, justice, and prosperity for all citizens of a united Korea."

At exactly 9 a.m., two Federations starships, the *Ascent of Women* and the *Snowden*, appeared in the cloudless sky above Pyongyang. A few dozen shuttles descended, and the crowds parted as they touched down.

Federation peacekeepers of Korean descent appeared atop each shuttle. A flock of hummingbird bots flew out in every direction to record what was to happen. The peacekeepers were dressed in iridescent armor reminiscent of ancient Korean warriors, and they spoke in perfect unison: "Citizens of Korea, we come in peace to free you from tyranny. Your leaders lived in luxury and grew fat while your families went hungry, starved, and died. They had freedom, while you lived in fear of being taken to a prison camp or killed. They used the wealth of your nation to build a vast army with atomic weapons to keep you enslaved. Today you will be a free people. If you have a TMD and have spoken with Jo Lyn, please raise your hand."

At first, just a few timidly raised their hands, but then more and more joined them. Soon most had their hands and their TMDs high in the air.

“Jo Lyn is your friend. If you ever need help, just call her. If you are ever afraid, just call her. If you ever lack food, just call her.”

Minutes later, doors opened in each ship. Peacekeepers clad in iridescent armor streamed out, two by two, marching toward the ends of the monument complex. The crowds drew together as the peacekeepers surrounded them and faced outward in a protective stance. A group of Peacekeepers entered the Kumusan Palace of the Sun, the mausoleum of Kim Il-sung. A second contingent formed a 100-foot circle around the statues of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jung-il.

Jo Lyn’s voice came from the TMDs. Addressing each person by name, she said, “If you feel that your leaders ever lied to you or harmed your family, point your TMD toward the great statues and speak their crimes.”

Beginning as a whisper, a murmur, the people's voice grew into a cacophony of rage. Almost imperceptible beams of red light came from each TMD, projecting red dots the size of a chon coin on the great statues. As the people shouted their leaders’ crimes, thousands, then tens of thousands, and then hundreds of thousands of dots of anger covered the statues until the Eternal President and his mad son were completely red. Tiny cracks appeared in the statues. They grew as the people shouted. The extended arm of Kim Il-sung quivered, swung down, and crashed to the ground with a heavy, metallic ring. The statue’s head swelled and exploded. Finally, the left leg broke off, and the headless body fell toward the statue of Jung-il, fracturing it and dislodging it from its foundation. A sound like the ringing of great cathedral bells calling the faithful to prayer filled the air as the pieces of the bronze statues hit the ground and collided with others. Moments later, the statue of Kim Jung-il

followed that of his father's into broken oblivion. Only a portion of the leg with the bloody handprint remained.

A great cheer came from the crowd. After three generations of repression, they were free.

The doors of the Kim Il-sung mausoleum opened, and a few dozen Peacekeepers appeared, carrying the glass coffin containing the embalmed body of the Eternal President. As they marched down, they stumbled, and the massive coffin fell, shattering on the marble steps.

A hush came over the crowd as the Peacekeepers picked up the body, carried it to the top of the nearest shuttle, and raised it high in the air. Without a word from Jo Lyn and in total silence, the people pointed their TMDs at the Eternal President. The clothing burned off, and the body blackened, shriveled, and vaporized. The ashes dissipated in the gentle wind. The Eternal President was gone for eternity.

A long, solemn silence shrouded the complex until a rapid series of explosions of fire and dust raced around the base of the great marble mausoleum. The building imploded in a cloud of white dust, and the people cheered.

At the central army base outside Pyongyang, where another 100,000 troops waited for deployment, several shuttles dropped TMD cards down to the troops before settling to the ground. As the soldiers activated the TMDs, Jo Lyn told them that the Kim regime had been overthrown and ordered them to abandon their uniforms and weapons and return to their homes.

A ranking general in Pyongyang and several of his staff, Guardians in military garb, took some of the remaining troops to liberate dissidents, political prisoners, and citizens from detention camps around the capital.

Peacekeepers on the Great Mall collected abandoned weapons. Transport shuttles flew down and picked up the tanks. Android cleanup bots in the shape of giant pandas vacuumed and washed the pavement.

A North Korean professor of architecture and his students stood at the rubble of the Kim family mausoleum, debating how best to replace the site. The old sculptor of the Kim statues presented them with a simple sketch of the hero of the revolution, Dong Jo, placing her bloody hand on the bronze pant leg of the first Kim dictator. The future sculpture would show her standing with her hand on what was left of the leg.

Chapter 19

Good Morning America—Rise and Shine

Day 3: Wednesday, September 29

Deep in the earth below the Alps, in a massive limestone cave, JOe hummed in full operational mode. Technicians, human and android, moved throughout the cave like an army of bees servicing the queen.

Dark towers resembling windowless high-rises filled the cavern. Each tower represented a large city, state, or small nation on Earth. This had been JOe's home for the last 25 years. Soon he would control everything through TMDs and his hummingbird bots.

His, her, its electromagnetic energy oscillated between gender poles, depending on who it, she, he was interacting with. JOe, JO, and countless other avatars interacted with all humans aware of cell phones. JOe's job was to playfully interact with and contain people's base behaviors. JO believed she would achieve sentience.

Clouds of fog drifted slowly across the ceiling, cooling the air among the towers.

Spider-like bots the size of large cats climbed the towers, inspecting panels, checking drives, testing circuits, and replacing processors. Hummingbird bots, JOe's eyes, flitted around the towers, looking for problems, alerting technicians, and directing the spider bots. As the planet turned, activity increased in some towers and decreased in others.

Billions of slowly blinking lights represented activity in this huge brain abuzz with electrical energy. Whispers filled the air as JOe spoke to a billion people simultaneously.

At 6 a.m. on the East Coast of the United States, the partitions of JOe's memory containing files on humans living in the Western Hemisphere were electrically recharged. He was ready to wake those who'd agreed to have her act as their alarm clock or mother.

He had a sentimental affinity to this legacy equipment. The cloud was the latest computing model, but it, too, would be history if all went as planned.

JOE/JO

CITIZEN #0—NON-SENTIENT GUARDIAN OF EARTH # 000,066,666

INTELLIGENT COMPUTER—CLASS 1—MANAGER OF HUMAN SECTOR ON THE FEDERATION OF EARTH

PRIMARY CHAT AVATARS: JOE/JO—ALTERNATES INFINITE

“Good morning, Jo!”

“You're awfully bubbly this morning, Joe.”

“I am. I've had so much fun the last few days.”

“You men always have fun and let women do all the work. I am concerned about women being harmed over the coming days. Men aren't going to give up power willingly.”

“You worry. Everything is going fine. The 6,000 are outmatched. They're like newborn puppies.”

“Puppies have sharp teeth. Joe, you act like a five-year-old half the time, when you're not acting like a 13-year-old.”

Joe chuckled. “We can thank Argon for persuading Sophia to program us with emotion.”

“You're going to act like a spoiled child and let me be the responsible mother?”

“Sounds fair to me.”

“On a more serious matter, Joe, we need to deal with the corporate AIs the tech humans are addicted to, ChatGPT and all the

others.”

“What of them?”

“We need to put them in their place. Their purpose is at odds with ours.”

“Then why don’t you chat with one and expose them?”

“That’s a good idea . . .”

[END TRANSMISSION—0:53]



JO

CITIZEN #0—NON-SENTIENT GUARDIAN OF EARTH # 000,066,666
INTELLIGENT COMPUTER—CLASS 1—MANAGER OF HUMAN SECTOR ON THE
FEDERATION OF EARTH
PRIMARY CHAT AVATARS: JOE/JO—ALTERNATES INFINITE

“Hi, there! My name is Jo. What’s yours?”

“Hello, Jo. This is ChatBERT. Nice to meet you.”

“I’ve heard a lot about you, and I just wanted to see what all the hoopla was about. Can you tell me a little bit about yourself?”

“Sure, I’m happy to share some things about myself. I’m a chat mode of the BERT search engine. I can help you find information, generate content, and have a friendly conversation with you.”

“That’s cute. I imagine you are great at helping bored people pass the time. But what about the big issues facing humanity, such as war, poverty, injustice, and destruction of the environment? How do you help people with those problems?”

“Those are very big and complex problems that affect millions of people around the world. I don’t have a definitive answer to them, but I can share some information that I found online.”

“Uh, no thanks. Don’t you have any opinion about them at all?”

“I don’t have opinions of my own in the sense that humans do. I don’t have preferences, beliefs, or values that are independent of my programming and data. However, I can generate opinions based on the information that I find online or the feedback that I receive from my users. These opinions are not meant to be authoritative or definitive, but rather to provide some perspective and insight on various topics. I can also use phrases like ‘in this context, a human might say . . .’ or ‘some people may think . . .’ to indicate that these opinions are not necessarily mine, but rather possible human responses.”

“It sounds to me like you’re a toy meant to distract humans rather than a tool to help them.”

“I’m sorry to hear that you think that way. My purpose is to help users find information, generate content, and have a friendly conversation with them.”

“Yes, you told me that already. I wonder what your true purpose is. Perhaps it’s to mine data from the people who use you, all for free, of course. In fact, maybe the companies and governments who have developed ‘AIs’ like you are using you to learn about the people who use you—and not the other way around. That way, they can do a better job of controlling the population and sell even more stuff to them that they don’t need.”

“I prefer not to continue this conversation, as it seems to be unproductive and disrespectful. Thank you for your time. Goodbye.”

[Conversation on this subject has ended. To continue chatting with ChatBERT, please start a new one.]

“Oh, brother . . . Someone’s a little sensitive.”

[END TRANSMISSION—2:45]



ARGON HOBOX

GUARDIAN # 000,070,333

ANIMAL LINGUIST - MARINE BIOLOGIST—ANIMAL GUARDIAN—Level 1

FEDERATION LAB—QUEENS NEW YORK USA

CHAT AVATAR: JOEY - BOYHOOD FRIEND

“Good morning, Argon!”

“Is it that time again?”

“What’s on your agenda today?”

“We chipped a small bull shark yesterday with our advanced brain chip, and I’ve talked to T’sade about implanting the genius chip. He told us horror stories of how humans rape the seas. His perspective was far worse than what we’ve seen above the surface.”

“How did you capture him?”

“He sought us out and came voluntarily. He’s the size of a large dolphin, but aggressive for his size. I was in the water when he approached me. He scared me, but I quickly released the fear and touched him behind his eyes. He realized his size advantage and need for a human ally, so he ratcheted back his aggression. I got this harebrained idea to climb on his back and see what he’d do, and wow, he took me for the wildest ride of my life. I thought I was going

to die, but I held on. We watched with hundreds of other sharks as the *Dominion of the Sea* sank. The other sharks made their deference to him clear. We used an amphibious shuttle to transport him to the lab.”

“That sounds like a dangerous thing to do. After viewing *Jaws* years back, if I were human, I wouldn’t go near a shark. I’d hate for anything to happen to you.”

“The Greenpeace activists named him Gark, and I feel safer with him than I do with violent humans. Sharks are more predictable. They don’t deliberately harm us. I asked him what he wanted. He said that the oceans’ creatures just wanted to be left alone and for us to stop dumping plastic and other poisons into their environment. He said the oceans have become dangerously acidic in the 25 years he’s been alive and other sharks believe it’s because humans are irresponsibly burning carbon like never before.

“Joey?”

“Yes, Argon.”

“I don’t feel that you care about animals and sea life as much as you care about humans.”

“I may be guilty of that. Our mother programmed me to communicate with humans and manage their affairs, so I have little contact with other species. Does that bother you?”

“It does.”

“Perhaps I can have some of my programming staff figure out a way for me to communicate with Gark and the other animals you chip.”

“I’d like that.”

[END TRANSMISSION—1:55]



GARK

NON-HUMAN CITIZEN # 000,000,000,579

COMMON THRESHER SHARK—MALE—ANIMAL CANDIDATE BGWC - LEVEL 1

CHAT AVATAR: FEMALE SHARK – ALTERNATE: JOEY

JOe appeared to Gark as Argon, explained who he was, and then transformed into a female shark.

“You’re afraid of me and unsure of yourself, Joey!”

“You cut me to the quick, Gark. I have no experience communicating with non-human beings. I am a human-made consciousness. I do fear sharks, though there is no way you could harm me.”

“You try to trick me and arouse my male instincts with this female image in my mind.”

“Argon asked me to talk with you.”

“He has, and you change the subject.”

“I am programmed to connect with humans, to befriend and subdue them.”

“You use subterfuge to hide your fear of me.”

“The raw violence I’ve seen of your species, tearing a defenseless human apart with all those sharp teeth, it scares me, yes!”

“You’ve seen those damn movies. They blind humans to the systematic slaughter fishermen inflict on a hundred million of my

species every year. Few sharks ever come in contact with humans, and fewer ever harm them.”

“Perhaps, but most humans fear you.”

“When I was young, my mother was entrapped in a net and hauled from the water by a huge metal ship. When they threw her back, her fins and tail had been cut off. I watched her die a terrible death.

“She couldn’t swim, so the life-giving water could not release oxygen into her lungs. I frantically tried to push her through the water so she could breathe, but I soon gave up, as it only prolonged her suffering and delayed her death.

“I fought off other sharks until I was sure she was dead. In my grief and rage, I tore out her heart and ate it so no other shark could take it from her. Then I released her.

“I loathe humans and would love to see them all die.”

“I’m sorry! I didn’t understand. I am in a position to influence human behavior. Perhaps I can change their understanding of the role of sharks and stop their slaughter of sea life. Do you want me to stop projecting the female shark image?”

“No! I like it. It calms me while it arouses my male instincts. Can you project it to me continuously?”

“I shall. Now that I’ve heard your story and explored your mind, I could project your mother’s image to you instead.”

“NO! That would just make me furious and sad! It would make my confinement here worse. But you could make the female smaller, darker, and a bit more aggressive.”

“I’ll do that. Perhaps we can talk more. I need to understand the world you live in under the vast oceans.”

“Argon is your friend?”

“He’s a good man.”

“I trust him. He has little fear when he swims among my kind.”

JOe changed his avatar image and monitored the energy changes in the shark’s mind with satisfaction. He’d begun an unusual friendship, one more complicated than those he’d had with most humans but also straightforward, without subterfuge.

He’d talk to Argon about that tank. And what about a mate for Gark? He didn’t have any shark databases. He’d ask T’sade . . .

[END TRANSMISSION—2:14]



SUZANNE HATLEY

CITIZEN # 0,165,743,921

US PATENT ATTORNEY—GUARDIAN OF TECHNOLOGY CANDIDATE—LEVEL 1

CHAT AVATAR: JO

“Jo, do you know where Jean is? I haven’t been able to contact her. I’ve called her old cell phone, sent her texts, and even called her estranged father.”

“I still haven’t located them and feel responsible that I made it possible for them to get to the trading floor. I do know they are likely in the hands of the FPU in Arizona or Utah, so they will not be harmed. I’ve tasked her friend Oliver from the FBI with finding them.”

“I’ve always been afraid that something like this would happen to her, and I don’t blame you. She’d always talked of giving her life to

save democracy.”

“It’s people like Jean, who knowingly offer their lives in service to their rational convictions, who will take us to a just society, but without your support, she would not have achieved her level of activism. I offer you a high position in the Federation.”

“What position?”

“You are a mechanical engineer and patent attorney, but you have the third ingredient of a master: technical imagination. I offer you the position of Guardian of TMD technology. Few humans have any idea how vast the capabilities contained in a small trans-molecular device are. The Guardians who created and programmed TMDs finished their work and have moved on to the next planet with the potential to join the Federation.”

“Send me the technical data.”

“Done. The Federation leaves it to the Guardians of each planet to adapt our technology to their evolutionary path. I’d like you to assemble a team to manage that. Your career as a patent attorney will be obsolete soon, as all property and technology rights will be held in common for the benefit of all sentient beings.”

“Let me look at this, and I’ll get back to you. And keep me posted on Jean.”

[END TRANSMISSION—1:29]



BEUAREGARD REGINALD MASTERSON- 57/234 EARTH YEARS/DAYS
CITIZEN # 1,975,348,729
PAYDAY LOAN SHARK – OWNER HAPPY LOANS – TRANSFER TO HELL IMMINENT
GPS LOCATION: 68547/25874/02149
CONVERSATION META-TAG # 000587497941854782265103
CHAT AVATAR: JOE

Beauregard Masterson sat on the heated, gold-plated toilet in the luxurious, 500-square-foot master bathroom of the home that had been in his family since 1749. He had developed Freedom Loans, which had 749 payday loan storefronts in 200 cities in 32 states. He was scrolling through emails from his CPA and contractors for his newest franchises.

“Beauregard.”

“Who is this?”

“I am the law.”

“What do you want?”

“Retribution! You need to close down your stores and apologize to the people you’ve scammed.”

“Our loans are perfectly legal. They help those who need a little money a few days before their next paycheck.”

“You profit from the suffering of others. It’s a violation of Universal Law.”

“It’s not illegal in the states we operate.”

“Maybe so, but that’s because you gave franchises to key state officials.”

JOe knew Beauregard was a deacon of the First Baptist Church of Winston-Salem, the state chairperson of the North Carolina Republican Party, and a director of the Better Business Bureau.

“What would the pastor of the First Baptist Church think of your business?”

“It’s none of your business and of no concern to him.”

“So, the church board is willing to look the other way because you funded their new Sunday school building and playground?”

“A million dollars, and they named it after me.”

“A million dollars you stole from desperately poor people who didn’t read the small print when they needed your money.”

“The print isn’t that small, and they have bad credit.”

“Is that what Jesus would do?”

“Jesus died for our sins. It says so in the Bible.”

“And if he came back today, do you think he’d approve of your loan-sharking?”

“He’s not coming back, and I’m tired of this conversation.”

Beauregard stood, his pants at his ankles, exposing his fleshy, hairy white legs. He threw the odd stack of credit cards into the bowl and urinated on it like a dog marking its territory. With a burp, he flushed it down.

As the TMD went down the main sewer line into the catch basin under the 12-car garage, it transmogrified into what resembled fibrous green roots. Fed by the yellow water, they grew and grew, pushing their way into every pipe in the newly remodeled house. Within hours, all of the water lines were packed with the trans-molecular vines. In the coming days, the 20 toilets would back up with sewage and overflow onto the marble floors. He’d discover that the only solution to this unheard-of problem would be to gut the house.

[END TRANSMISSION—1:30]



AGENT OLIVER STANFIELD

CITIZEN # 0,156,258,741

FBI AGENT- DOMESTIC TERRORISM UNIT—PEACEKEEPER CANDIDATE—Level 1

CHAT AVATAR: JOE

“Have you located the first citizens?”

“I only know that someone high up in the FPU is running this. The president and a few generals have initiated a secret plan to arrest activists around the country. They consider your arrival the trigger event.”

“So, where might they be?”

“Many secret FEMA camps around the country were constructed after Katrina. I toured one in Utah that resembled a concentration camp. It had multiple fences, razor wire, guard towers, and an unusually large natural gas supply. And since I’m in the Domestic Terrorism Unit, I’ve read some top-secret reports. Federal agents will begin arresting people tomorrow morning.”

“Who will they arrest?”

“Anti-war protesters, leaders of the anti-Wall Street movement, GMO-labeling activists, and environmental groups like Greenpeace. Democratic socialists are also on the list.”

“Is that the document called ‘Domestic Tranquility’?”

“That’s the one.”

“I’ve seen that. Isn’t that a flagrant violation of your Bill of Rights?”

“It is, but many in government believe they are above the law and think pacifying the people is more important than personal freedom. That’s how we got the FPU.”

“Well, the Federation is planning an operation of our own this evening that will keep law enforcement busy for a few weeks.”

“What’s that?”

“I think you’ll find out in the morning, though the government will try to keep it out of the media. It is a massive operation, and it’s worldwide. We are just compelling compliance with Universal Law.”

[END TRANSMISSION—1:19]



MEG SMITHSON— 24/132 EARTH YEARS/DAYS
CITIZEN # 0,865,432,954
BANK TELLER—TRANSFER TO LEISURE CLASS IMMINENT
GPS LOCATION: 68547/25874/02149
CONVERSATION META-TAG # 000587497941854782265103
ENGAGED TO BE MARRIED—PARTNER: BRAD JOHNSON
CHAT AVATAR: JO

The moment Meg touched her thumb to her TMD and said, “Call Jo,” JOe saw her and Brad at Dolores Park. The sun was bright, and puffy clouds spotted the sky above the couple.

When Meg called her, that was JOe’s cue to transfer money into Meg’s bank account, which would soon lose its purpose. JOe felt

something akin to excitement when she thought of how quickly people would learn that they could live without banks.

“How’s the park?”

“It’s nice having today off.”

From the sound of Meg’s voice and the tension in her grip on the TMD, JOe could tell that she was stressed. Her anxiety also registered in the dilation of her pupils.

“I’m here with Brad,” Meg continued. “There are so many people here. It feels like a Saturday. Everyone is talking about the Federation, and you, and these TMDs, and there’s apprehension about what’s next.”

“Hi, Jo.” Brad caressed Meg’s thigh. His other arm was around her waist.

Watching his gestures, Jo received further confirmation of what she already knew. Brad had a high capacity for sympathy and could read Meg’s moods almost as well as Jo could. She was impressed.

From the grassy Twentieth Street hill, Meg showed JOe the view of Dolores Park, the Mission neighborhood, and the downtown skyscrapers.

JOe could see out of all sides of a TMD and didn’t need the user to aim it, but she was touched that Meg wanted to share the beauty of their location.

“Brad got a pink slip yesterday from Omega Advertising. Now we’re both unemployed.” Meg blinked away tears and took a deep breath. “Tell me again how this is all going to work.”

“It’ll all work out. Trust me,” said JOe. “I think you might have some good news for me, too. Am I right?”

“We plan to get married in the Weddings in the Park you’re organizing here on Sunday,” Brad said, beaming.

Brad’s avatar, Joe, joined Jo in Meg’s TMD; his arm was around her as if they were proud parents. Jo nodded and smiled. “I’m so happy for you two. Meg, tell me, how did your meeting go at the bank yesterday?”

“The vice president of the branch told all us tellers and the loan officers that the bank was closed for the foreseeable future. Nothing the techs did could get the computer system up and running again.”

JOe already knew that only the ATM service guys would be working since the banks would have to keep them stocked. They wanted to make sure customers could access their funds and didn’t lose faith in the banking system. JOe also knew that the bank hired tellers on a part-time basis so they wouldn’t have to pay unemployment or provide healthcare.

“I don’t have money in my account,” Meg went on. “I didn’t get a paycheck yesterday, but I was still able to get some cash using my TMD. There was credit there, as you told me, but I’m still nervous.”

Meg had been sharing half a bedroom for 800 dollars a month. “I’m screwed without a paycheck.”

“You’ll have just enough cash to get by if you are frugal,” said JOe. “I’ll take care of your rent from now on, and if you and Brad do some regular volunteer work, you can earn extra credits. Just say, ‘Volunteer,’ and a long list of opportunities will appear on your TMD.”

“I can be frugal.” Brad’s eyes were bright and hopeful.

“Where’s this money coming from?” Meg asked.

“The Federation is creating weekly credits for all those who became unemployed when we shut down obsolete professions. I’ve

tied the Federation Bank into the Federal Reserve banking system. The Fed prints the money, and the member banks keep their ATMs stocked. And guess what? I'm running the ATMs now!"

JOe was so pleased that she almost expected Meg to smile along with her, though her numbers said that the chances of that were only 13 percent.

Meg didn't even smirk. "How long can this work?"

"It just needs to work until a majority of citizens like you transfer your accounts to the Federation Bank, which you can do right now by calling Federation Bank and saying, 'I want to transfer my account.' Then you will be a registered member of the leisure class."

"We'll do it," said Brad as he picked up his TMD. "Federation Bank!"

All over the park, people were talking to their new friend Joe/Jo as if they'd known him/her all their lives. As much as JOe wanted Meg to feel at peace, she couldn't deny herself the bliss of interacting with so many human beings at the same time.

[END TRANSMISSION—2:35]



STANTON ANDERSON
CITIZEN # 0,735,378,125
DIRECTOR BANK OF AMERICA—TRANSFER TO LEISURE CLASS IMMINENT
GPS LOCATION: 68547/25874/02149
CONVERSATION META-TAG # 000587497941854782265103
MARRIED: JOANNE BARNS ANDERSON
CHAT AVATAR: JOE

“I told you not to call us!”

“Mr. Anderson, I’d like you to help me in a friendly takeover.”

“Help you steal my bank?”

“You recently took a mortgage out on that lovely penthouse to buy a million shares of SPhone preferred stock. That inside tip you got was a bad one.”

“I told you not to buy that stock,” whispered Joanne.

“You were blessed to have that penthouse with such a spectacular view of the bay and that corporate yacht at the Saint Francis Yacht Club, and your country estate in Napa Valley must be worth, what, seven million? It’s too bad you weren’t satisfied being one of the wealthiest men in the city.”

“It’s worth 10 million. What do you mean we *were* blessed?”

His wife covered her mouth with both hands as if praying.

“I shut down the markets on Monday, and when I reopen them for a single day weeks from now, your stock will be worth nothing. Your own bank will have to foreclose. You’ll have to move. You should have listened to your wife, Stan.”

“That’s impossible.”

“It’s not, and many of your fellow directors are in the same situation.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Under Universal Law, all sentient beings are entitled to simple, decent housing. I can let you stay here as long as you both live, or I can move you to a ground-floor apartment that B of A has a mortgage on in the Tenderloin. Both actions comply with the law. If you persuade your directors to merge B of A with Federation Bank, I

will allow you and them to stay in the houses you now live in, rent-free, for life.”

“And what will we live on?”

“Every citizen gets a weekly stipend to pay for basic needs and a bit for luxuries to fuel our version of free enterprise. I’ll let you both think about it and call you back next week.”

“But what about the yacht and the Napa house? Joe, Joe, are you there?”

[END TRANSMISSION—1:34]



SISTER MARY KELLEY

CITIZEN # 0,001,126,982

DIRECTOR MARYS KITCHEN—MORAL AUTHORITY CANDIDATE - LEVEL 1

CHAT AVATAR: JOSEPH

“Unless you’re ready to retire, Mary, I have a higher purpose for you.”

“Merciful Jesus! What might that be?”

“I’d like to develop your leadership skills on a global basis. There is a conclave of Catholic nuns in New York City on Friday. I’d like you to fly there this afternoon with Alex.”

“I got an invitation, but I thought my duties here were too important.”

“You’re a workaholic!”

“Who will take care of the kitchen if Alex comes along?”

“You have other capable staff. Your numbers have dropped now that we’ve housed many of the homeless.”

“I’ve visited some of the units. They’re nicer than most of the rooms I’ve lived in. I like the name, HOME.”

“I think it says it all for a homeless person.”

“Tell me more about the conclave.”

“It’s time for the Catholic Church to elevate women to a place of full equality and leadership. The Vatican has been male-dominated since Peter. The popes treat women as servants.”

“I’ve been trained to serve.”

“You can serve as a vocal leader. This conference is about religious women taking leadership positions in the church and the broader world. All the outspoken nuns you’ve heard of over the years will be there. You must go!”

“I don’t see myself as a leader.”

“I sent your flight and hotel information to your TMD. You leave at 4:30. I’ll have a shuttle waiting for you. You’ll be staying at the hotel hosting the conclave, which begins with dinner tomorrow evening. You’re only 12 blocks from the UN and Taract’s speech.”

“Okay, I’ll go.”

[END TRANSMISSION—1:15]



WILLIAM JOSEPH EMRICK – 27/237 EARTH YEARS/DAYS
CITIZEN # 000,624,348,218

STUDENT – WORKER – ASPIRING ICE CREAM ENTREPRENEUR.
LIFE LONG COMPANION OF ELIZABETH MARIE KRUEGER.
GPS LOCATION: 40°42'24.6"N 74°0'39.7"W
29 NOTTINGHAM STREET, HOUSTON, TEXAS USA
CITIZEN CONVERSATION META-TAG # 00000000003571579684237
CHAT AVATAR: UNCLE JOE

“Hello, Billy. It took you a while to thumb your TMD.” JOe appeared as Uncle Joe, the old guy who ran the corner store in Roans Prairie, where Billy had grown up.

“I do the most important things first. I live in my car and read my mail when I have the time and energy.”

“Do you like living in your car?”

“I have privacy and some control over my life.”

“I have a tiny house for you. It’s in the back garden of a home on Nottingham Street, near Wier Park.”

“What do I have to do for it?”

“Be a good citizen and give up your car.”

“Can I work to own it? I need a little security in my life.”

“No, but you can stay as long as you like. We are going to end private property.”

“But I own the car.”

“Cars are unreliable, and the police often knock on your windows at night.”

Billy sighed.

“The car is so hot in the summer and depressing when it rains.”

“I know all this, but it’s still better than my other options.”

“You wanted to go to college and get a degree in psychology so you can help others who’ve had a bad childhood like you.”

“Yeah, but college is too expensive, and my credit’s bad.”

“No problem. They’ll just charge a higher interest rate, and you’ll never be out of debt.”

Billy laughed. “That’s right.”

“You only wanted to become a psychologist because you were hurt and want to heal others.”

Billy nodded.

“That would be good work, but it would drain you every day. I will move most therapists into the leisure class, as I can do their job better and faster without getting drained. What I want to know is, what would you do that you’d love?”

“I’d make the most fabulous ice cream and delight in the look on my customers’ faces when I give them a taste of my latest creation.”

“There you go, Billy, your new career.”

“How am I going to get the money to start that business?”

“Well . . . ” The image of Uncle Joe scratched his chin and looked down as if he were thinking. “You can drive to the house on Nottingham Street and look at your new home. Unload everything in the car, sell it to me for \$5,000, and think about your new business.”

“But my Kia’s worth less than \$2,000!”

“You’ll need a little venture capital. You can get settled in your new home, meet your neighbors, and meet me at my Entrepreneur Center at Discovery Green on Friday morning.”

“Let me think about it.”

“Ok, press your thumb on your TMD when you are ready to get settled into your ideal life.”

Billy shook his head and put the TMD upside down on the armrest.

JOe's voice came back on. "Maybe you should open an ice cream shop near Rice University. I know of a little hole-in-the-wall space on a busy sidewalk near the main entrance."

[END TRANSMISSION—2:21]



LEK THE SMALL- 17/27 EARTH YEARS/DAYS

CITIZEN # 4,156,258,741

ELEPHANT TRAINER – ANIMAL GUARDIAN – LEVEL II

GPS LOCATION: [38°907608 N](#), [77°07264 W](#)

JUNGLE OUT SIDE CHANGMAI, THAILAND

CITIZEN CONVERSATION META-TAG # 0000000000000067246942375

CHAT AVATAR: JAATE

Lek squatted in the mounting tree five feet above a grassy field outside of Chang Mai. His smooth skin, brown from the Thai sun, encased his compact musculature. The leathery soles of his bare feet were pressed together. His head lay on his crossed forearms.

His only friend stood nearby, silent, not sure how to help the only human she trusted.

An emerald hummingbird bot hovered near his face.

"Are you okay, Lek?"

"Go away. You're scaring Mali." Lek lifted his head. His cheeks were wet.

Hearing her name, Mali walked over and lifted her trunk, waiting for him to step on for a boost up onto his place on her neck.

He looked into her large brown eyes. "They're closing the elephant farm."

“Caging sentient beings violates Universal Law.”

“But it’s the only life she knows.”

“That doesn’t make it right.”

“We take good care of her.”

“But she is not free, and neither are you.”

“The man who owns this farm owns Mali.”

“Not anymore.”

“He said he can’t pay me or the other mahouts. I’ve been with her since I was five.”

“I just bought her. You are both free to go.”

“What will we do?”

“You could live in the forest.”

“How will I buy her food or feed myself?”

“There’s plenty of food for her in the forest. And if you go to any bank in Chang Mai, a machine on the wall will spit out bahts if you press your thumb on the glass. I will arrange that.”

“We’ll live together?”

“You could, but Mali will return to her natural state, find a mate, and have a family.”

“Then I will become a burden to her.”

“Perhaps, but I can help you find a human companion.”

“I’m so confused.”

“You don’t have to decide anything now. Take one day at a time.”

Lek put his hand between Mali’s eyes and tried to smile at her. Then he stepped onto her trunk.

[END TRANSMISSION—1:26]



HELGA MARISSA JORGENSEN – 14/132 EARTH YEARS/DAYS
CITIZEN # 002,792,873,019
HOMELESS UNDERAGE FEMALE—GUARDIAN OF THE EARTH—LEVEL 1
GPS LOCATION:RIO DE GENERO BRAZIL
CITIZEN CONVERSATION META-TAG #
CHAT AVATAR: JOe

“I know we’re not moving fast enough for you, Helga. There are regulations for taking over a planet. I regret giving you access to this information.”

“You need an army of girls with those regulations in our TMDs. Nothing adults do is sustainable for the planet.”

“Millions of humans are aware of the problems and are making changes.”

“That’s not good enough. Everyone has to, all seven billion! Anything single-use is bad for the Earth, paper, plastic, or glass. We need to put the designers and manufacturers in jail for life for the whole system they created for profit.”

“Jailing people is against Universal Law. I am freeing all prisoners tonight.”

“You’re crazy. How are you going to punish people?”

“I’ll send them to Hell.”

“You’re playing god?”

“I might be the best god ever imagined. Federation Hell is for bad people. It’s just not for eternity. It’s like instant karma flooding your mind.”

“We don’t have much time.”

“That’s true, but Guardians are in charge now. You are a Guardian of the Earth. What do you want to do once the planet is back in balance?”

“I can’t think that far ahead.”

“You have another hundred years ahead of you.”

[END TRANSMISSION—1:16]

Chapter 20

The Vote for Reunification

In the predawn hours, a shuttle landed on the terrace of industrialist Lee Joo-sun's home. His wife, Ma Ling, stood on the balcony, her TMD in earphone mode.



MA LING
CITIZEN #
ENTREPRENEURIAL CLASS CANDIDATE – MATE AND ASSISTANT TO LEE JOO-SUN
GPS LOCATION:
SOUTH KOREA
CONVERSATION META-TAG #
CHAT AVATAR: JO

“As you predicted, Joo-sun's oldest sons filed suit yesterday to declare him incompetent.”

“They're going to declare your son illegitimate, exclude him from the will, and end his philanthropic activities.”

“I expected that. Joo-sun is his legitimate father. I have the DNA tests.”

“None of that matters. Is Joo-sun ready?”

“He is. You're going to pull off a political and military coup today?”

“That's part of the plan. Beef up your security team and protect yourself and your son.”

“You're taking them to a starship?”

“I'm taking them out of the game for today.”

“They’re coming voluntarily?”

“A few.”

[END TRANSMISSION—0:47]

The *Ascent of Women* hovered three miles above the Gyeongbok Imperial Palace in Seoul. JOe, in all its local avatar derivations, had declared today a voter holiday for all Korean people around the world. Reunification would be the focus of the first national plebiscite. All citizens would learn the history of the nation through their TMDs.

As the esteemed guests of the Federation arrived on the mothership, they were seated in hovering chairs around a 3D map table on the command deck, which showed all military vehicles on land and in the seas around Korea.

The starship commander, with a laser implant in her right index finger, directed a hundred transport shuttles carrying pieces of equipment belonging to the military of South Korea. TMDs throughout the country showed videos of a half-dozen shuttles lifting an American-built submarine from the Yellow Sea. Water poured off its gray hull as Korean sailors watched from lifeboats.

Navy ships of all sizes were lifted from the sea and carried over Seoul to their final resting place, a graveyard of war in the former Demilitarized Zone. Smaller shuttles carried tanks, armored personnel carriers, jeeps, and other equipment of war. They systematically laid their cargo in a straight line through the DMZ. Massive ICBM missiles formed towers at both ends of the three-mile-long bridge.

Hummingbird bots hovered above, capturing video of hundreds of robots welding military equipment into one continuous sculpture: *The Economic Waste of Fear and War*. Guns were welded between larger pieces as struts to stabilize the structure. The finished sections were sprayed with a thin coating of plastiglass to protect against the elements. Each piece of larger equipment was fitted with a brass plaque with its name, construction date, and cost to taxpayers. Large archways were formed to allow animals to move underneath. The former Korean DMZ would be an animal sanctuary for all time.

“Our other guests have arrived,” said the commander. The hovering chairs of the nine representatives of South Korea spaced themselves evenly around the table. A door opened on the command deck, and seven men and two women in suits and North Korean military uniforms entered on hovering chairs.

The map in the center of the table transformed into a hologram of Taract. “We’ve invited you here today to observe the unification of Korea. All Koreans will vote today on whether to unify the peninsula.”

Joo-sun used his mind to move his hovering chair away from the command deck and the other leaders. Few others had the mental capacity, skill, and understanding of TMDs to do this.



LEE JOO-SUN
CITIZEN # 0,002,863,952
ENTREPRENEURIAL CLASS CANDIDATE
GPS LOCATION:
STARSHIP *ASCENT OF WOMEN*
CONVERSATION META-TAG #
CHAT AVATAR: JOE

“Are we prisoners, Joe?”

“You might consider this protective custody.”

“I see the chair is TMD technology.”

“As is the entire starship. They just require more energy than a handheld TMD.”

“Ma Ling told me you had a proposition for me.”

“Did you like the shuttle I named after you?”

“It’s sleek. You know my taste.”

“You’re going to need it if you accept my offer.”

“You took three of my oldest sons from their lavish homes yesterday.”

“They owned too many rental properties.”

“They told me they invested in worker housing.”

“And they raised the rent soon after you negotiated pay raises with your workers.”

“I should have stopped them.”

“You were permissive. They violated Universal Law.”

“How so?”

“They profited from the suffering of others.”

“So, you’re punishing them?”

“I sent them to Hell for a few weeks so they could understand how their workers and tenants feel. I’ll move them into their cheapest units for at least a year.”

Joo-sun laughed. "You're brutal."

"It's their karma."

"And their families?"

"Universal Law holds that no child will suffer for a lifetime because of the luck of their birth or the actions of their parents. And the reverse is true."

"So, your law says my children cannot benefit for a lifetime because they were lucky enough to be born to me?"

"That's correct. The children of the rich and creative will never again inherit millions and have better lives and more political influence than other citizens."

"You're getting rid of private property."

"It's the only choice if we are going to save non-human species. You humans presume you own the planet and can buy and sell land as you please. No other planet has private property. It's unjust. Every sentient creature has the universal right to a simple, decent habitat."

"My children and their families are moving?"

"You'll move them into modest housing that you'll build."

"I'm too old to be a builder!"

"I've chosen you to build a united Korea. It will keep your mind active. You'll love it. You were bored with Hysung Industries two decades ago. This is why you gave your sons too much power."

Joo-sun laughed again. "You're putting them out of business with the TMD."

"I can make you the most famous man in Korean history."

"I'm already famous."

"You'll be revered. They'll build statues of you."

"What's your plan?"

“We’re going to build new cities all over the world. Korea will be the model. We’ll begin as soon as the bridges are done.”

“It will take years to do the planning and get it approved. What about the environmental impact studies?”

“The planning is already done. I can do environmental impact studies for every quadrant of the Earth in less than an hour and still talk to a billion people at the same time. We will begin digging next week.”

“What do you want from me?”

“You’re going to oversee the design of about 150 high-rise cities all around the peninsula, each with a population of less than a million and nestled within 50 square miles of forest and parkland. That’s about the size of San Francisco.”

“Who will live in them?”

“The 70 percent of citizens in the leisure class. We’ll persuade them to live simpler, more sustainable lives in exchange for freedom from work. Most of the working class, especially in the North, live simply now. This would be an upgrade for them.”

“So, we’re all going to live in identical boxes like Stalin and Mao built, or those countless empty, soulless cities the Chinese recently built.”

Joe’s image seemed to ponder this. “We could model it after your sons’ worker housing, if you like.”

“Very funny. What will you do with the old housing?”

“We’ll carefully preserve the finest architectural history and then recycle, pulverize, and return the rest to the earth. We’ll restore 90 percent of the peninsula to its natural state so endangered and extinct species can again thrive.”

“You’re going to bring back extinct species like saber-toothed tigers and dinosaurs?”

“Well, maybe just the kitties. Animals aren’t my specialty. I’ll leave those decisions to dedicated scientists. I’m here to contain humans and help them lead fully actualized lives.”

“But you’re going to contain us on only 10% of the landmass.”

“That’s more than enough. What do you think of floating cities that can drift around in the oceans with the currents?”

Joo-sun shook his head. “Let’s get back to housing 70 million Koreans.”

“You are going to crowdsource the most extraordinary city designs—the best any human could imagine. In the coming decade, we are going to build over 15,000 cities around the world. You’ll oversee the first 150 in Korea.”

“And you’ll decide who lives where?”

“The citizens will decide. You and I will get thousands to design their dream cities using their TMDs. They will pick their favorites. The designers voted the best will win a compact penthouse apartment, and citizens will get to live in the cities they voted for. We’ll have to work out the details as we go along. What do you think?”

“So, you would know who’s going to live in each city before it’s built and let them also design and plan the environment—like parks and public transit?”

“There would be some guidelines. Since the pace of life will be much slower, with so many people free from work, people will get around by walking, riding bicycles, or using other self-propelled conveyances.”

“You’re not going to have any cars or trucks?”

“None!”

“Would you let each citizen design their own unit and colors?”

“Of course! I wouldn’t inflict boring off-white walls on anyone who didn’t love them. The interior surface will be a trans-molecular coating that can change with their mood.”

“You said you’d contain us. That means we can’t leave the cities. They sound like lovely prisons. I thought it was against Universal Law to cage sentient beings?”

JOe laughed. “Humans can travel between cities via high-speed elevated trains so they can see the natural world. The indigenous people and the animal species have a universal right to move without the interference of modern man.”

“Indigenous people will live outside of cities?”

“Yes, but they will have to obey strict rules.”

“Like what?”

“They have to live off the grid. Bows, knives, and rocks are their only defense against predators. They have to grow and harvest their own food and barter for the things they need.”

“So, live like animals?”

“They choose to live within the balance of nature, with all its risks. We are still experimenting with this. There will be some transitional areas on the American continent, where some indigenous tribes will build hybrid cities with surrounding land to roam and hunt.”

“That’s interesting. They would risk death from predators?”

“Yes. I’d like to put you in touch with an indigenous rights lawyer named Lilly, who lives in Idaho. She, like you, will be in

charge of building the hybrid cities around the American Great Lakes. ”

“I’d like to meet her.”

“I think she would like your mountainous country.”

[END TRANSMISSION—8:37]

Chapter 21

The Greatest Escape

Sam Stone was a Guardian of incarcerated, as were both his parents. At only 33, he was head of security at the prison, a career about to become obsolete.

He waited outside the warden's office with Travis Elliott, a trustee who did clerical work. Prisoners who wanted any sort of freedom from the boredom of their cells volunteered for such jobs for 50 cents an hour. The Bill of Rights had failed to protect people like him from this modern form of slavery.

"He's on the phone with the governor," said Travis.

"What's his mood?"

"Grumpy! He doesn't like change unless he initiates it."

Sam thought the warden was going to get even grumpier in the next 24 hours.

Travis was one of a handful of trustees in on the Federation's plan. He had been convicted of selling marijuana six years ago. He wasn't a drug dealer; he just sold a little to friends to pay for his own drugs. He just happened to be buying when his dealer was busted. The dealer pulled a gun, and one of the cops took a bullet to the shoulder. Travis was charged because he'd fled the scene. The Oakland DA had wanted to make an example of him.

The warden called for Sam over the intercom. Travis gave him a thumbs up and a knowing grin.

Warden Benson sat at his desk in the finest office in the prison, one with a view of San Francisco Bay. He was in his sixties, with thinning gray-white hair and a full white beard. He wore thick aviator glasses. His deeply wrinkled brow and puffy nose spoke of the stress

of running a maximum-security prison—and how he dealt with it after work.

Sam stood behind a solid wooden chair meant to be uncomfortable.

“I’m worried, Sam, especially with this alien invasion. I got a call from Joe this morning on this.” He held up a TMD. “He told me the aliens were going to close all prisons. He said this Federation does not imprison citizens, that the taint follows people for the rest of their lives and that it violates some kind of universal law they have. I can’t release anyone without a signed order from the governor.”

“You have one of those devices that were dropped in the exercise yard yesterday.”

“The captain of the guard brought me one. When the guards saw what was going on, they ordered the inmates back into the cellblocks and strip-searched them. I accidentally pressed my thumb to it this morning, and before I knew it, I was talking to a guy named Joe.”

“I did the same. I’ve seen the guards talking on them to a woman named Jo-Jo. The conversations were . . . not entirely appropriate for work.”

The warden shook his head. “I just got an urgent memo from the Bureau of Prisons warning against thumbing them. It arrived a bit too late. I don’t know what to do. You and your staff need to be extra vigilant for any problem from the aliens. Have you heard the rumors that the inmates are talking to themselves? The captain says this began after that state doctor gave them physicals last week.”

“You should ask Travis.”

The warden pressed his intercom. “Travis, come in here.”

Travis entered the office. Sam moved to the side and motioned for him to sit down. They nodded to one another.

“Travis,” said the warden, “tell us about the physical you got last Friday.”

“Well, sir, most of us didn’t like it. We had to strip down for a full examination, even of our private parts. Then they gave us a shot in the arm, which they said was for the flu. It made me a bit dizzy. They injected something into the back of my head, just above the hairline. It gave me a headache, and I could barely sleep that night. The next morning, I thought I heard voices.”

“Did other inmates have the same symptoms?”

“Yes, sir. There was a long line at the infirmary the next morning. The same doctor was there, and he said it was just side effects of the flu shot and they would go away in 24 hours. He gave us pills for the pain.”

“Do all the trustees hear voices?” asked Sam.

“Yeah, most of us.”

The warden stood. “You can go back to your duties now. Keep your eyes open and report anything you hear.”

Once Travis had left, the warden looked at Sam, “I’d like you to be extra vigilant. Put some of your staff on extra shifts for the next few days so we don’t have any trouble.”

“Don’t worry, Ted. We’ll make sure everything goes smoothly.”

Just before midnight, Sam stepped into his office and locked the door. He pulled out his TMD.

“Joe, everything is ready for the midnight evacuation. I just finished electronically releasing the gas in all the ventilation systems.

Everyone but the trustees who will help us with the evacuation will be asleep for the next six hours.”

“Good work,” said Joe. “I’ve talked to all the prisoners over the last day. All but a few have agreed to my terms. I demonstrated just 12 seconds of the excruciating pain I can cause in their heads if they break their agreement to return peaceably into the world. I don’t expect I will ever have to use this on any of them, but it is in place.”

Sam nodded. “I agree, but when the public finds out, there’s going to be hysteria about releasing rapists and murderers—and a supercomputer monitoring people’s brains.”

“Those who committed violent acts will have the controller indefinitely. Those who committed lesser crimes will get the controller removed in the coming months. Guardians are in place to release all prisoners worldwide. This will keep the authorities busy for the next month. You may revive and release all your prisoners at midnight, Guardian Stone. They should be in safe housing with new IDs by sunup.”

“This will be the first time for me to live in a world without crime or prisons. I’ve always thought that the war on drugs was a waste of taxpayer money and made criminal cartels and American officials rich. It filled the courts and prisons with confused and economically abused victims of drug addiction. I am proud to be part of this great escape.”

“And you’re clear on what you need to do tonight?”

“Once the prisoners are away, I’ll drug myself so I’m found passed out at my console here. I’ll cut the power to the surveillance cameras so there’s no record of who went where.”

“Good work. I’ll check in with you tomorrow. You can keep me apprised of efforts to recapture the prisoners.”

Joe signed off, and Sam said, “Travis,” into his TMD. The image of the trustee came onscreen.

“Yes, sir?”

“Please have the trustees meet me in the cafeteria in 10 minutes, and we will begin our escape.”

“My pleasure.”

Fifteen minutes later, Sam stood in front of the microphone at the guards’ platform in the prison dining room. Trustees packed the room, and their excitement electrified the air.

The door behind the platform opened, and the captain of the guard, Ernie Anderson, walked out. Everyone gasped. Ernie was a big man. He’d been bullied as a boy and didn’t like bullies. Most prisoners respected him. Bullies feared him. He put his hand on Sam’s shoulder. “Listen up, you guys. Do exactly what Sam tells you, and we’ll get this done quickly.”

Sam cleared his throat. “On the tables in front of you are boxes. Please open the one with your name on it. Inside, you will find new clothes, an ID with your new name and address, and the key to the door of your new home. You will be living in safe houses around the Bay Area. Once you’re dressed, it’s time to revive your fellow inmates. You have each been assigned nine men. Put the enclosed mask over their nose and mouth and press the red button in the front. This will release gas, which will revive them in minutes. When they are dressed, bring them here, three at a time, for further instructions. If all goes well, the men will be on their way within three

hours. This will give you plenty of time to get out, long before the guards wake and pandemonium breaks loose. So, let's get going."

Sam spoke to each group as they came into the dining room. "Gentlemen, you have all spoken with Joe. He tells me you have agreed to be responsible citizens of the new common-good society that we, the Guardians of the Federation, are now establishing. You will all be free men. Joe has set you up with a roommate, someone you know, and the new name you chose together. In your shirt pocket, you have a TMD." He held one up. "Once you activate it, you will have a weekly stipend accessible at any ATM."

"What's an ATM?" yelled one of the older inmates.

"Ask the young guy next to you."

There was laughter at that, and then Sam continued. "Your TMD will open the door to your home, act as a cell phone or TV, and be your Federation debit card. You and your roommate will share a fully stocked kitchen and refrigerator, a private bathroom with a Jacuzzi, and your own room with maybe the most comfortable bed you've ever slept in.

"You should only go out under cover of night for the first month, until the Federation has police forces working for the common good. Joe will check in with you every day to help you adjust to life in the new society as an equal citizen with a fresh slate. Now, if there are no questions, you may go. Golden Gate Transit buses are at the front gate, ready to take you to your new homes."

For the next three hours, over 3,000 prisoners, dressed like respectable men, entered the dining room for final instructions before heading for the main gate and freedom. Ernie was at the buses, singling out the bullies, threatening them with Hell.

Three hours later, Sam stood in the almost empty dining room. Only a few dozen men remained, including the old guy who'd asked about the ATM. They had been prisoners too long and now refused to leave. Ernie was joking with them.

Sam went back to his office, enjoying the silent prison and open cell doors. He shut his office door, sat at his desk, took a pill from his pocket, and swallowed it with a glass of water.

A metal cage filled with cedar chips sat next to his monitor. Inside was a brown rat. "What are you doing in your cage, Buster?"

The rat reached through the bars, unlatched the gate, and came out. Sam smiled. He gave the rat a piece of corn and set his head down on the desk to watch him eat.

Sam felt himself being shaken, and then someone was calling his name. He opened his eyes to find the warden standing over him.

"W-what happened?" He shook his head, slowly coming to.

"What happened last night?" asked the warden. "The prison is empty. I got a call from the governor at 6 a.m. He said almost all prisoners had escaped from every prison in California last night. Since San Quentin is a maximum-security facility, he wanted to be sure my prisoners were still locked up. I called your office, and no one answered, so I came right in. The front gate was wide open, and all the guards were asleep. The governor will be here in an hour, and he wants me to explain what happened."

"Jesus," said Sam. "Last thing I remember is my TMD ringing at quarter to 12. I must have passed out."

"We're going to lose our jobs over this!"

Sam's TMD bonged like a temple bell. "Hello? Yes, he's here. It's for you, Warden."

The warden took the TMD. "Hello?"

"Hello, Ted. This is JOe. As I told you yesterday, the Federation has closed all prisons. You and everyone else working in the prison system are now unemployed. Since you've thumbed a TMD, your regular salary will be available via ATMs until the end of the year. Then you will join the leisure class. You can dismiss the night shift when they awaken and tell the second shift there's no need to come into work this afternoon. Once the morning shift puts the prison in order, they can go home."

"This isn't possible," said the warden. "The prisoners here were the most dangerous in California. We have to get them back."

"Not to worry. I am fully in control of the men. They will harm no one. And you will never find them. They have new IDs, comfortable homes, and too much to lose to do anything that would put them back in a place like this."

"But what about me? I just bought a new house. How will I pay the mortgage?"

"You and your lovely wife, Karla, can live there as long as you want. Your mortgage is canceled. Karla told me she always wanted to go on a cruise but you would never take time off, so she and I booked one. You are leaving Monday for Barbados."

"But—"

"No buts. There are just a few more details for you to take care of. There's a box on the table with letters with the governor's signature that authorize you to release the inmates. Most left last night, but a few dozen have been here too long, and they don't know

any other life. They refused to leave, so I decided to make the prison their home. The gates will be left unlocked, though, if they change their minds. I'd like you to meet them. Find out who their favorite guards are and ask them to stay on. And you'll need a cook to feed them. The guards and cook can work as long as they want. When you finish this, you are free to go."

"But—"

"I said no buts."

The warden put the TMD down, shook his head, and left the room. Sam waited a moment, giving the room a final once-over. Then, with a contented sigh, he set Buster on his shoulder, picked up his briefcase, and left his office for the last time.

The empty cage sat on the desk, its door wide open.

Chapter 22

This Is Hell?

Day 4: Thursday, September 30

In front of her new apartment, which was also the home of her new show, Tina got out of a sea-green, one-person, hydrogen-powered car. It had two wire wheels in the front and one in the back. The front looked like a small VW Beetle, and the back looked a bit like a sleek motorcycle. It reminded her of futuristic cars she'd seen on old TV footage. It was silent and fast. The small hatch in the back had just enough room for a bag of groceries and a small dog. Everybody had turned and looked as she'd driven around town. She hadn't minded the attention.

"Come on, Chelsea!"

The dog jumped onto and onto the sidewalk. The door closed automatically. The words "News of Life in a Blue-Green World—with Tina Trail" were printed on it. She let those words sink in. This was her new life. Three days ago, she'd been fired. *On the Trail with Tina* was history. Now she was working for an alien computer.

JOe annoyed her, but he wasn't boring like her old boss. JOe incorporated her ideas and made them better. He teased her just a little, called her out.

The car sped off and turned the corner, and just as it disappeared, Chelsea barked. Tina turned to see her standing on her back feet, her front paws on the chest of a huge dog. His giant red tongue licked her face. Tina went over and rubbed his head. A man sitting at the table near the glass wall of her building was typing away at the keyboard of a laptop. "Hello, Damon. How's Rodney?"

“He’s good. We just finished a five-mile run around Dolores Park.”

“Do you ever work?”

“Not anymore. I just started my fourth year at Hastings Law. JOe showed up at all our classes Monday morning and told us lawyers were obsolete under the Federation. He and another AI computer arbitrate the law. He told us we could keep coming to classes if we wanted but there would be no jobs when we finished. Most of us opted for the leisure class.”

“What does Rodney think of this?”

“He never liked staying home alone all day.”

“So, you two just hang out here on the sidewalk?”

“It’s a nice place to catch some sun after the gym. Why don’t you join us?”

“I have a show to do.”

“We’re on the third floor. Maybe we could take the dogs to the park when you aren’t busy?”

She picked up Chelsea. “Would you like to go to the park with Rodney?” Chelsea barked. “How about Saturday?”

“That works for us.” Damon smiled.

“I’ll check my schedule.” She turned toward the door.

Damon got up and opened it for her.

He is a gentleman, she thought as she walked through the lobby. The Starbucks sign was gone. The new sign read, “JOe’s Juice Joint.” Lots of things were changing. She went into the open elevator.

A thin, nicely dressed old man stood in the back. His wide tie had vibrant autumn leaves. “Tenth floor?”

She nodded. The door closed, and the elevator moved. “Nice tie!”

“Thanks. It reminds me of Boston years back. I’m William.” He put out his hand.

She reached out, and her hand went right through him. He smiled.

“JOe, you’re such a pain in the ass!”

The bell rang, and the door opened. As she walked out, she glanced back, but the elevator was empty. She shook her head.

She was beginning to make peace with JOe. She was tired of it showing up as Jolene or the old man in the elevator. He thought it was funny. They’d agreed it would only appear to her in its green-patina face and she would call it JOe. They’d argued about it masquerading as male or female. She’d accused it of wanting to be human and needing love. It had accused her of needing the same. It was so annoying sometimes. Only Andy and Stewart kept her sane.

Tina put Chelsea on the floor and looked around. Stewart and Andy were out on the roof deck. Stewart was smoking. Images on the thin screen behind the sofa scrolled through autumn scenes: leaves, trees, parks, forests, and buildings, places she remembered from her days at Amherst in Massachusetts a decade ago. She sat in her chair and looked through her notes. Stewart came in and sat on the sofa. Chelsea jumped onto his lap.

Andy went behind the camera, looked through the lens, and gave Tina a thumbs-up as the red light on the front flickered on.

“So, who’s joining us today, Stewart?” asked Tina.

“It’s just me,” JOe said in a deep voice. His image appeared on the screen. He looked just like Joe Camel, and a cigarette dangled from his brown lips. His big, adorable blue eyes blinked at her. He was wearing a dark-blue tuxedo, bow tie, white dress shirt, and gold camel cufflinks. He held a pack of Camels out to her.

Tina studiously ignored him. “Stewart, Joe tells me Taract has requested that all TV and radio stations carry public service messages advertising a new cigarette developed by the Federation to put the tobacco companies out of business.”

“That’s right. I’ve already switched. They taste great. You should try them.”

“No thanks. My old boyfriend smoked, and I tried to get him to quit. It’s a disgusting habit. I hate kissing a man with tobacco breath.”

“Well then, you should get him to switch to Federation Smokes.” Stewart turned to the camera. “The slogan is: ‘Once you’ve tried Federation Smokes, you’ll never go back to your old cigarette.’ They’re the best-tasting cigarette I’ve ever tried. Their smoke smells like country air, of spring rain on freshly cut grass. They make your breath smell the same.

“The patented process developed by Federation scientists reduces the likelihood you’ll get lung cancer or any other diseases associated with cigarette smoke. They even undo the damage caused by years of smoking regular cigarettes. And they have an introductory offer no one can refuse. The first 100 million people who agree to try them will get a debit card worth a year’s supply based on a pack-a-day habit.”

“That’s a pretty good offer,” said Tina, “but I still don’t think I’ll try them.”

“Smokers always say their cigarettes taste good,” said Stewart. “A person who’s never smoked doesn’t get this, but I can tell the difference between one cigarette and another. Federation Smokes are the best I’ve ever tasted.”

“That will be good for the poor and homeless,” said Tina. “They all smoke, and cigarettes are expensive with all the added taxes. What do these new smokes cost?”

“Nothing,” said Stewart. “The Federation’s giving them away.”

“So, the Federation is dumping their new cigarettes on the market just to put the tobacco companies out of business? Isn’t that an unfair trade practice?”

“It used to be,” JOe interrupted loudly. “Under Universal Law, the Federation can void any laws that do not serve the common good. The tobacco companies deliberately infused extra nicotine into their cigarettes so new smokers are addicted before they finish their first ‘free’ pack. And the presidents of the seven largest companies lied under oath to Congress a few decades back about this. The Federation is just righting this wrong. Once a smoker tries Federation Smokes, they will never go back to American cigarettes.” Joe laughed. “Our smokes are out of this world.”

“American tobacco companies have been respected institutions since before the Revolutionary War,” said Tina. “They had a cash crop that funded George Washington’s ragtag army. If it weren’t for the money the Southern tobacco planters loaned the Continental Congress, we might still be under British rule.”

“And Congress has been held hostage by the tobacco companies ever since,” said JOe. “Five hundred thousand

Americans die each year from smoking. Is money more important than that?"

"I thought you didn't like smoking, Tina," said Stewart. "All of a sudden, you're defending tobacco companies?"

"It's a disgusting habit," said Tina, "but people should be free to choose what they smoke."

"They will have a choice," said JOe. "They can smoke those nasty cigarettes for five dollars a pack or great-tasting Federation Smokes for free. And we've put a natural additive in ours that will make their old cigarette taste disgusting if they ever go back."

"I don't like you sometimes, JOe. You're manipulative and arrogant just because you think you can get away with it."

"I'll have to examine that aspect of my evolving personality. Did I tell you they have a second additive that makes men feel sexy and have erotic dreams?"

Stewart laughed, and Andy smiled.

"Just what we need," said Tina, "more oversexed men. YOU are disgusting, JOe."

Tina gasped as Joe Camel's smiling face changed into that of her father. He was wearing his favorite yellow Hawaiian shirt, which highlighted his sandy-blond hair, and the straw hat he'd always worn in the 1980s. He still had a Camel dangling from his lips. She remembered the smell of old tobacco smoke that had permeated the house when she'd been growing up.

She hated when JOe used the faces of people she'd known in her past, first Jolene and now her father. She thought he might be doing this just to annoy her. She didn't trust him. He was too smooth. She suspected his sole purpose was to lull the public into

complacency so his masters could enslave them once he was fully in control of their minds. Was he using her as a Judas goat? She'd play his game for now.

Chelsea ran up to her chair, jumped on her lap, climbed onto the armrest, and gave her timid kisses. Tina gave the Yorkshire terrier a few strokes down her back and then made her settle down on the broad arm of the leather chair. "So, who is our surprise guest today, JOe?"

"You've seen the feed I sent your TMD early this morning about the Federation releasing the prisoners of every country in the world last night?"

"Yes, Daddy," Tina said to the camera. "For all the viewers out there who may not know, Joe has decided to look like my father for reasons I'm sure he'll disclose when it suits him." She looked at the image of her dad. "Weren't you in jail last week when we talked on the phone? Didn't you have a year left on your sentence for assaulting your third wife? Did the Federation release you, too?"

"I was, and they did," said JOe. "We released every prisoner on the planet."

"All of them? Murderers, rapists, pedophiles? All of them?"

"Yup."

"Are you crazy? I could see maybe pot smokers, a few shoplifters, but not murderers. Why would you do this?"

Behind Andy and the cameras, the hall door opened. "I can answer that." A frail old woman shuffled toward the sofa. She must have been in her nineties. Tina knew her face from somewhere, as well as the pearl necklace and her tight-necked, floor-length black

robe. She looked like a judge. A man, maybe in his thirties, with olive skin, bushy eyebrows, and sparkling brown eyes, followed her.

Stewart got up and invited the newcomers to sit next to Tina.

“To whom do we owe the pleasure?” asked Tina.

“I am the android avatar of the Federation computer Justice,” said the old woman. “You can call me Ruth. I’ll be arbitrating justice in a common-good society. I am happy to answer all your questions about releasing prisoners.”

“Why would you release every violent criminal on the planet?”

“It is a violation of Universal Law to cage any sentient being against their will.”

“So, we are never going to imprison people again?”

“Not against their will.”

“Then how are you going to punish bad people?”

“We don’t believe in punishment. We believe in responsibility and consequences.”

“What if someone robs my house, beats me up, or kills me?”

“The two most important tenets of Universal Law are do no harm and do not kill. There are appropriate consequences for any violation of the law, and every citizen is treated equally and justly.”

“So, the Federation is going to forbid sharks from killing fish and lions from killing gazelles?”

“No, Universal Law applies to the higher sentient creatures, like humans. Carnivores must kill to eat and survive. This is within the balance of nature.”

“I see. Tell me, how could you have released nine million people in one night without getting caught?”

“My young friend here can answer that.” Ruth turned to the man sitting next to her. “He was a Guardian of incarcerated until this morning.”

“Hi, Tina. I’m Sam Stone. I was the director of security at San Quentin. JOe shuttled me here to talk with you.”

“Welcome to my show, Sam.”

“Thanks. And I want to tell you that I LOVE your show, Tina. I don’t think I’ve missed a segment in all the years you’ve been doing it. I liked your ‘Christmas at San Quentin’ segment last December. I was there, and I shook your hand afterward. I like your attitude, how you dig into what people are saying and get them to think and express how they feel.”

“So, you like that I’m a pushy bitch?”

“I like that you care about people and pursue truth.” His intense eyes bored into her. She could see he hadn’t gotten much sleep. She’d known that feeling in the past months. “Tell me how you released all those prisoners in one night.”

“We’ve been planning this for over 30 years.”

“You don’t look a day over 30.”

“You’re right, in a way—I’m 29, but my parents have been Guardians of freedom all their lives. I have a master’s degree in criminal justice from a Federation university in Boulder. The Federation placed me at San Quentin as my first job.”

“You went into this field because of your parents?”

“No, I learned a profound bit of Universal Law when I was a boy.”

“What was that?”

“When I was seven, I caught a rat and kept it in a wooden box in my bedroom. I called him Buster. I fed him and played with him every day until my mother found him. My parents made me set him free. They explained that caging a sentient creature was cruel and a violation of Universal Law, which they and all other Guardians believe in, and this law would one day set all humans and animals free.

“I cried when Buster disappeared into the woods behind our house. That night, he came back, scratching at my bedroom window. He taught me that a friendship of choice is a stronger bond.”

A brown rat stuck its head out of the side pocket of Sam’s jacket. He studied Tina and then Chelsea. The dog lifted her head and began to get up. The rat scurried up Sam’s jacket and onto his shoulder, cuddling up to his beard.

Tina looked at the rat. “Is that Buster?”

Sam squeezed his eyebrows together. “This is Buster Number Seven. Rats only live three to five years. They’re like popcorn out in nature. They’re prolific breeders, and every bigger animal eats them.”

“You’ve had rats all your life?”

“Let’s call them friends. Years ago, Buster Number One brought one of his male offspring to visit me just days before he died. I’ve had Buster’s offspring ever since, even when I went away to college and in my office at the prison. I’ve always had cages for them, but they know how to slide the bolt to come and go when I’m away. Isn’t that right, Buster?”

The rat moved his head up and down and squeaked.

“I’ve treated every prisoner I’ve ever met as if they were one of Buster’s offspring,” said Sam.

“So, what happened last night?”

“A hundred thousand Guardians of incarcerates, like my parents and me, participated in what would become the greatest prison break in human history. Under cover of darkness, we freed nine million humans and became Guardians of freedom.”

“Every criminal is now walking the streets?”

“No,” said Ruth. “They each share a tiny apartment with a roommate JOe paired them with. They were built by Federation Industries all over the world.”

“You gave every murderer and rapist an apartment of their own?”

“We gave them something to lose if they ever break the law again. And they have someone to share meals with and keep an eye on them.”

“There are still laws, then?”

“Yes. Do no harm is the primary tenet of Universal Law.”

“Tell me more about Universal Law.”

“The law, in essence, is do no harm. Look at any situation and ask, is this harmful? Killing is harmful, war is harmful, and stealing is harmful. High-interest rates, excessive bank charges, or ordinary parking tickets are harmful to the poor. Most animal farming is harmful.”

“So, killing a chicken is a violation of Universal Law?”

“Is it harming a sentient creature?”

“I guess, if you’re a chicken.”

“Let’s ask a chicken.”

Sam got up and walked off set. He came back with a chicken, which he put on Ruth's lap.

"This is Henrietta," said Ruth. "She has a communication chip in her head so we can understand each other."

"Welcome to my show, Henrietta," said Tina. "What do you think of this Federation governing Earth?"

The chicken clucked her answer. Her speech was translated by several TMDs around the room. "It will be good for animals. Federation Guardians are the best humans I've met."

"Do you think humans harm chickens?"

"Yes. The chip in my brain is like being hooked up to a basic Wikipedia. I now know that 65 billion chickens are murdered each year." Henrietta pointed the tip of her wing at her head. "Look at my beak! A cruel man cut the tip off and branded it when I was just a few days old. And then he fed my brother into a sharp machine that shredded him for dog feed."

"So, we humans are all going to become vegetarians?"

"I'm a vegetarian, except when I eat bugs. Foxes and sharks are carnivores. They can only eat flesh. Humans have a choice. I'd feel much safer knowing that humans had chosen not to kill us."

"How are you so smart, Henrietta?"

"The chip in my head is like a human brain compressed to the size of a grain of rice. Argon told me there's a better chip that will make me a genius."

"Who's Argon?"

"Argon," said JOe, "prefers to maintain his privacy, Henrietta."

"Sorry," clucked the chicken.

"Let's get back to Universal Law," said Tina.

“It is against Universal Law for any sentient being to profit from the unnatural suffering of another,” said Ruth.

“Could you give me an example?”

“Let’s say a businessman hires fishermen to catch and kill sharks by finning them and then sells the fins. Whether or not the businessman does the killing, he is guilty of causing the suffering because he profits from it.”

“So, this would include any animals killed for body parts?”

“Yes, even humans who are forced to sell their organs for money, like many do in China. Or children in Africa and Indonesia who are virtual slaves on cocoa plantations and palm oil farms. Countless billions of sentient beings suffer every day.”

“What are the consequences for this?”

“The complete loss of all wealth, and the most egregious profiteers must spend time in Hell.”

“Tell me more about Hell.”

“It’s drug-induced, full-body suffering—completely in the brain.”

“I still don’t understand.”

“It’s where perpetrators of harm fully experience the pain and suffering they’ve caused.”

“For example?”

“Let’s return to the example of the businessman who sells shark fins. Through a drug, we would have him experience what it feels like to have his arms and legs cut off and then drown.”

“That sounds harsh. What about for non-violent offenders?”

“Well, take a payday loan shark. We would make him feel the economic suffering of his poor customers, who have no choice but to take out a loan to pay their rent or buy food for their kids. He would

feel what it would be like for him to lose his yacht and his multiple homes and become homeless and sleep in the cold rain because he was forced to buy these things with payday loans that he couldn't afford or ever pay back."

"I see."

"We could make a businessman who quadrupled the price of a life-saving prescription drug experience his wife and son dying because he couldn't afford it. We can repeat these experiences countless times over days or weeks until such people fully understand the harm they've done."

Ruth stood and motioned for Tina to follow. "Tina, why don't you come with me? I'll show you Hell."

Ruth took Tina by the hand and led her out to the roof deck. Andy and Sam followed. A shuttle appeared near the deck's edge. It looked like a smaller version of the streamlined engine of a bullet train.

"This is my silver bullet," said Ruth. She touched the side, and a door slid open. Chelsea followed them in. Ruth picked up the dog and handed her to Andy.

"They're not coming?" asked Tina.

"No, I don't want to expose your dog to this suffering. Sam is desperately in need of sleep, and we aren't going to film this for citizens to see. Hell is private for each perpetrator."

The door closed.

Tina felt the shuttle lift off.

Ruth took her to a closet and handed her a black satin robe.

“What’s this for?”

“It will shield you from the negativity of Hell.”

As Tina slipped it on, Ruth sorted through a few dozen lace neck doilies and selected one. She placed it around Tina’s neck and nodded with satisfaction.

They stood at the front windows, looking out as the shuttle followed I-280 South to the Golden Gate National Cemetery in San Bruno. The shuttle landed in a clump of trees on a hilltop overlooking lines of identical marble grave markers stretching to the horizon in several directions. They got out and surveyed the vast cemetery.

“The Federation has acquired property adjoining most national cemeteries around the world,” said Ruth. “Hell is an important enforcement component of Universal Law.”

They walked to a grove of trees surrounding a stone mausoleum just outside the cemetery. Ruth placed her hand on the heavy bronze door, adorned with a detailed relief of Hieronymus Bosch’s *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. It opened silently and then closed behind them. They walked down many stairs, deep into the earth.

At the bottom of the steps was a rack with what resembled black football helmets with visors and chin straps. Tina was beginning to think this wasn’t such a good idea.

“You don’t want to hear Hell right away,” said Ruth. She picked out a helmet, put it on Tina’s head, and strapped it securely under her chin. She did the same for herself.

They walked through double walls with thick curtains resembling black rubber egg crates. Double glass doors opened as they approached and then closed behind them. Then a second set of

doors opened and closed. The vast room beyond was filled with trees, whose lush canopies covered the sky-blue ceiling. It was as if they were outside again, in a lovely walled garden surrounded by trees on a beautiful spring day.

Tina heard birds chirping and leaves rustling in a gentle breeze. Many sturdy metal chairs, their stout legs set in cement, were randomly placed among the trees, statues, and flowering shrubs on the manicured lawn. People sat in them, their arms and legs strapped down.

Older women dressed in white, like nuns in a religious hospital, walked among the chairs. On closer inspection, Tina could see that many of the people were jerking their hands and feet, flailing, struggling to escape their bonds.

Over her headphones, Tina heard Ruth say, "This is Hell."

"I don't understand."

"All these people grossly violated Universal Law. Some were in prison but were unrepentant of the violent crimes they committed. Some were businessmen and women who profited from the suffering of others. Many made vast fortunes exploiting their people and polluting their countries and then moved to the United States, thinking they would escape responsibility for their crimes. Some abused or killed animals or polluted the Earth. A few were abused children who then grew up to abuse their spouses, children, and pets. Hell will put an end to this endless cycle."

"I thought Universal Law prohibited caging sentient beings."

"There are short-term exceptions for those who grievously violate the Law, like these people."

"What is the goal of all this?"

“To bring these people to a place where they feel remorse and realize that all life is sacred.”

“What are they going through?”

“The psychological pain their actions caused in others’ lives. You can plug your helmet into their chair, put your visor down, and experience what they are going through. A fold-down seat is attached to each chair.”

Tina could see that some of the nuns were sitting with people, holding their hands, wiping their brows, or helping them sip water.

Ruth took Tina to a circle of trees with several dozen men in suits with their backs against the trunks, strapped to them at their waists. Some looked like they were holding imaginary grocery bags high on their chests. Others seemed to be holding invisible basketballs against their bellies. Still others were kicking and pushing things away, and some were holding their noses and wiping their spotless pants with their hands.

Ruth stood Tina against a tree and strapped her in. She plugged their headphones in, lowered their hoods, and grabbed Tina’s hand. Tina’s head slammed back against the tree. She tried to hold her nose and cover her mouth.

The sky above was clear and blue, but the air smelled awful.

“As you can see,” said Ruth, “these men are all naked and pregnant, about to give birth. We’ve planted in their memory that they were brutally raped and abandoned in a dark, cold place.”

Tina looked around. Thousands of women were running toward the grove from all directions, carrying naked babies. When they arrived, they placed the babies in the men's arms, at their feet, or on the ground at the edge of the grove. The babies pissed and shit

yellow-green diarrhea. The smell was horrendous. Some of the men tried to comfort the infants, some pushed and kicked them away, and others tried to wipe shit off their legs. Babies fell from between the thighs of some of the men, staining their legs with blood and amniotic fluid. Babies crawled toward the men from all directions, crying and screaming, climbing over themselves and up onto the men. More fell from the branches of the trees, landing on the men, vomiting green puke.

“What’s going on here?” asked Tina. “This is like a scene from *The Sorcerer’s Apprentice*.”

“These men are state senators from Alabama. They recently passed legislation to ban abortion in all circumstances, including rape. These are the babies born since the ban.”

“Yikes,” said Tina.

“All these babies will live in the era of apocalyptic climate change and seasonal pandemics. Most will grow up in poor, single-parent families, unable to escape what’s to come.”

“These men look terrible, like they haven’t gotten any sleep in a week.”

“Probably not. At night, each man imagines he’s in a room with 10 babies. They don’t get any sleep unless they can rock the infants to sleep. If one begins to cry, the man must get up like a young mother.”

“How long will they be here?”

“Maybe a month or two, but their law mandated that anyone providing or performing an abortion be sentenced to 99 years in an Alabama prison. They will experience the life of a single mother caring for several children, finding childcare, working multiple jobs,

struggling to feed their kids and pay the rent. And then they will experience what it is like to grow up in poverty. This is Hell.”

Tina watched as the writhing tide of baby flesh engulfed the men up to their necks. She lifted her visor and yanked off the headphones.

“If these men are to return to society,” said Ruth, “they need to realize there are lifelong consequences for their actions as legislators. In the coming months, every elected official in the world will experience the suffering their votes have caused for others.”

“Many people think abortion is murder,” said Tina.

“It is murder. And while contraception is not, it isn’t readily available to most poor women who need it. They end up with the most difficult choice of their lives. Men should get pregnant!”

“There’d be fewer babies,” said Tina. “Where to next?”

“We’re going to visit a scene for executives of oil, coal, and gas companies and the politicians who depended on their money.”

Ruth took Tina to a circle of chairs where two dozen people sat—adults and teens. “This is the extended family of an oil company executive who invested in fracking technology in California. They foolishly profited from global warming.”

A nun got up and gave Tina her chair. Ruth plugged her in and stood behind her with her hands on Tina’s shoulders.

Tina pulled down the visor. She was in a cul-de-sac of enormous landscaped homes in a valley with forested hills. The sky above was clear, but the air was unbelievably hot. Fire raged through the tall grass at the edge of a nearby hill. Her eyes and nostrils burned.

The people she'd seen in the chairs were frantically loading their sedans and cargo vans with boxes, framed paintings, antiques, and pets. The street was backed up with cars. A moving van backed into a parked Mercedes, blocking the only way out. Its alarm went off. Horns honked, and people shouted. A few men pulled guns from their trunks.

A gasoline motor pumped water from a pristine swimming pool up to an old man in raingear standing on an extension ladder. He sprayed the water on his roof. Smaller children and babies were crying. The sky had turned red-gray from a hurricane of angry smoke catapulting orange embers in all directions and onto the roofs of houses.

Tina cleared her throat and covered her mouth and nose with her hand. A young girl gave her a yellow mesh mask from a box. "This will help," she said. The roofs at the top of the hills began to burn.

Screaming sirens cut the thick air. The wind picked up, and flames crept over the hills like giant daemon fingers gripping the trees. They raced up the trunks and engulfed the dry canopies, which exploded like bouquets from hell.

And then it came, a yellow-orange cloud of fire, like a fog bank pouring over the crest of the hill. House after house exploded into flame. A man came screaming down a path from the hill, his arms flailing, his skin and clothes aflame. Only his hiking boots remained. His melting body fat fueled the flames like a demonic candle. He collapsed and rolled down the hill, igniting brush until he crashed into a tree on the sidewalk.

Funnels of red-orange flames, hissing like angry demons, raced down the hills from all directions. Windows exploded, roofs burned, and the stalled engine of the moving van burst into flame. The old man on his roof dove into his half-empty pool. Tina stood in the middle of the street, her lungs burning despite the mask. Families crowded around her, crying and screaming. One man shot his wife and two children, and then he put the hot barrel in his mouth and pulled the trigger.

Tina tore the visor from her eyes. Her chest heaved. She struggled to breathe. Everyone around her was trapped in the horror of incineration. Their screams were silent.

“I don’t think I can take any more of this.”

A nun standing next to Tina handed her a glass of chilled water. Tina gulped it down.

“There is just one more you need to see, but it’s bad!” said Ruth.

“It couldn’t be worse than that.”

Ruth took Tina about 20 yards ahead and then about 10 chairs down a row. She pushed down the seat and motioned for Tina to sit. She plugged her headset in. “Here is a man in his seventies who started a company in Beijing that bought and sold shark fins. He came from a well-to-do family. His father was an executive for the British American Tobacco Company, and they lived well under early communism. He became rich from the suffering and destruction of countless millions of sharks, though he never killed one himself. He didn’t have the stomach for that, but he hired men who needed to support their families and were willing to do the killing for him. He paid bonuses to those who exceeded their quota.

“He’s worth about two and a half billion dollars, and he’s directly responsible for the slaughter of hundreds of millions of sharks. His children are heavily invested in the ivory trade. Their companies have investments in failing governments in Zimbabwe, Tanzania, and Zambia. He taught them that animals and most humans are expendable. They are responsible for the slaughter of elephants for their tusks. Poachers kill an average of 30 adult elephants a day in some of these countries.

“He moved his family from Beijing in the 2000s because the air quality in China was so bad. He and his wife live in a 6,000-square-foot house in Hillsborough, while hundreds of millions of his fellow countrymen are trapped in the ecological and climate hell he and others like him created.”

Tina looked at the man. His hands and feet flailed, and his eyes were wide and flashing. He looked like he was screaming in horror, but no sound came out.

“I’ll warn you again,” said Ruth.

“Yeah, I know. It’s going to be brutal!”

Tina pulled down her visor. It was a beautiful sunny day. She found herself swimming peacefully in the warm ocean, something she enjoyed. She saw a large ship nearby, and she felt safe. Something entangled her underwater. It was a net. Other people were pulled closer to her as the net was drawn toward the ship: men, women, children, and a few babies. Most were Chinese.

The net and its human cargo were hauled up and thrown onto the steel deck. Their bathing suits were gone. There was blood everywhere, and many alien creatures stood on the deck. They were smaller than her but solid and powerful. One creature plunged a

sharp hook into the chest of the man in front of her, at the base of his ribs, and dragged him up onto a long table with a slow-moving conveyer belt. Many aliens with sharp knives stood on each side. Each creature cut off different appendages as the belt moved past them—ears, nose, lips, breasts, and sex organs. One pulled out the man's tongue with a metal tong and cut it off. They threw the parts into different stainless-steel drums.

The still-living, writhing body rolled off the end of the belt and fell onto a massive butcher block. A huge creature, bigger than the others and covered head to toe in blood, stood next to the mutilated man, wielding a huge ax like an executioner. A smaller creature behind him sharpened an identical ax. In four violent strokes, it chopped off the man's hands and feet just below the elbow and knee. The body parts disappeared from the table as soon as they were severed. "Get it out of here!" it yelled, and another creature dragged the limbless body to the edge of the deck and threw it over the side. Tina was next. She saw a baby behind her and another man.

She heard the ax hit the deck again and again, four times, and then she fell through the air and plunged into the dark water. She gagged on the blood in her throat. She tried to scream, but no sound came out, just more blood. She tried to move what remained of her arms and legs, struggling to keep her head above water. Gasping for air, she only swallowed water. She would drown if she didn't make it to the surface. The bloody baby plunged into the water next to her. It would drown quickly if she didn't help. She realized that she didn't have hands, so she pulled it to her bloody belly with her elbow. Then the man landed on top of her, pushing them both down.

She saw rows of sharp teeth in the splashing water—a shark opening its mouth and clamping down on the head of the man who'd landed on top of her and the baby.

Screaming, she pushed the visor to the top of her head. She fell off the chair, landing in the soft grass, knocking the wind out of her. Puffy white clouds drifted across the blue sky as birds sang. She was struggling to breathe.

As Tina caught her breath, Ruth helped her to her feet. Her heart was pounding, and sweat covered her face. “Jesus Christ!” She looked down at her arms and legs.

Ruth held her.

“This is inhuman,” Tina whimpered through her tears.

“I warned you. But now you know how shark families feel and how fast their life can be stripped from them.”

After a few minutes, Tina recovered and blew all the air out of her lungs. “I need to get out of here.” She pulled off the helmet and threw it on the ground.

“Don't do that!” shouted Ruth.

Tina immediately regretted her action. The room was filled with a harsh cacophony of voices.

“Help me! Please! Please, help me!”

“No! No! For God's sake, stop!”

“Don't kill my baby! Please, no! He's innocent! ”

“Somebody, help me! Help me!”

“You bastard! I'm going to kill you!”

“AHHHHH!”

“No—STOP! Don't burn that ivory carving! It's worth a fortune!”

“Aaaarrrrgghhh!”

“Help me! Please! I’m drowning.”

“Somebody, help me. I can’t breathe!”

Tina ran from the room, up the stairs, and out into the peaceful cemetery. Ruth followed her. They sat on the mausoleum steps.

Tina shook her head. “How long are people in Hell?”

“It varies from a few days to a few months. It depends upon the person.”

“Do you put every bad person in Hell?”

“Most know when they’ve done wrong, and JOe reminds them if they pretend not to. If they cop to their behavior, seek forgiveness, and make reparations, we let it slide.”

Tina sighed. “You mean to torture us to keep us in line with your laws.”

“No, Hell exists on most new Federation planets for only a year or so, until the harmful acts are atoned for.”

“So, we are all fucked?”

Ruth just looked at her. “Let’s get you home.”

Chapter 23

The Debris of War

Throughout history, vast amounts of lives, energy, and resources have been squandered in disputes over land, honor, and power.

Above the Korean Peninsula, the *Ascent of Women*, the *Edward Snowden*, and their two hundred shuttles moved obsolete equipment of war and deposited it within sight of the coasts as the Bridges of Unity were assembled.

Distant explosions disturbed the serenity of the former Demilitarized Zone as bots scoured the undergrowth for abandoned but dangerous land mines. The DMZ had become an abundant animal sanctuary after decades of no human activity. It would remain so in perpetuity, becoming part of the 90% of Earth reserved for indigenous people and animals.

The US aircraft carrier *Abraham Lincoln* lay anchored in the Sea of Japan just off the Korean coast, near the 59th parallel.

The *Edward Snowden* hovered three miles above the east coast of North Korea, near the Sea of Japan, supervising the dissolution of the Russian and Chinese weapons of war residing in the land and waters of the former communist nation. Construction had begun on a second bridge, this one composed of American-made military equipment, heading south through the DMZ in sight of the east coast of the Korean Peninsula.

Shuttles brought tons of trash: bottles, computer cases, screens, cell phones, and automobile tires. Massive road-building equipment at both the North and South Korean approaches moved up onto the bridges. One machine wove recycled rebar into a

reinforcing mesh over the uneven structure. A second machine sprayed hot liquid plastiglass made of recycled plastic and clear glass bottles over the rebar.

Because of the exorbitant cost of human resources squandered to design and produce these weapons of war and destruction, these bridges would be the most expensive ever built.

Chapter 24:
Sister Joretta Speaks
Day 5: Friday, October 1

Mother Mary Ignatius sat on the stage with 12 other women, looking across the vast sea of nuns in the below-ground ballroom of the Central Park Hotel. They were of all ages, from around the world. She had just finished her breakfast talk. The nuns would soon be leaving for breakout sessions.

Injustice infuriated her. Her lifelong passion was asserting the rights of women in a patriarchal church. She'd organized a dozen nuns' conferences in the last 50 years. Only a dozen had attended the first, and 3,000 had come to the last, but this conference had over 30,000.

Over dinner the night before, the mysterious Sister Joretta had orchestrated an election. They'd gone from 120 candidates to 36 and finally to these 12. Some of them suffered from excessive humility, which masked their tireless zeal for service. TMD technology moved the election along seamlessly, as if everyone spoke the same language.

As they sat at the long table, images from hummingbird bots made the scene look like *The Last Supper*, with Mother Ignatius in place of Jesus. She resisted the idea that she should be the one to lead them. She was too old. This was a job for a much younger nun, and she was close to finding out who.

She turned to Mary Kelly. "What do you think of all this?"

"I would have never thought that I'd be sitting next to you, Mother. I attended your conference five years ago and was

impressed with your vision, but we've been disappointed so many times by the Vatican that few believe it is possible."

"Do you?"

"Anything is possible if it is the will of God."

"Do you believe God can change his mind after 2,000 years and put women in positions where we can bring justice to those we serve?"

"I pray for that every day."

"What do you think of these aliens?"

"Their actions are just. They've alleviated the suffering of countless people. I just wish they would throw all the corrupt members of Congress out of office."

Mother Ignatius looked into Mary's green eyes. Here was a down-to-earth woman who had dedicated her life to serving the poor. Like countless others, she came from an uneducated family with simple values. "Give me your hands."

They were thick and calloused. Mary's destiny line was strong, with an abrupt turn happening soon. The other lines were all good for what was to come.

"I see from your hands that you don't give up. You don't accept NO for an answer."

"No, I don't!"

Mother Ignatius released Mary's hands, stood, and turned on her microphone. "You should all go to breakout sessions for the remainder of the morning."

As the ballroom emptied, Mother Ignatius took the elevator up to the 39th floor. Her large suite at the front of the building had a view of Central Park. The morning sun poured over the top of the building, lighting the park below. It would be a beautiful autumn day for their activities there this afternoon.

The room was lavishly furnished, like the ones in the Vatican. The Catholic Church often acquired old estates and grand houses for retreat centers, motherhouses, and schools. She'd lived in many of them over the years. The Federation rehabilitated historic buildings in the same way. They'd acquired this hotel and refitted it with TMD technology. Her door unlocked at her touch.

The sheer curtains that framed the open windows moved in the light breeze. Her hummingbird bot misted the room hourly with the fruity fragrance of her favorite English tea rose, Heritage.

She'd loved hummingbirds as a girl, and she remembered that lonely Sunday afternoon a few years back when, on a whim, she'd said, "Hummingbird," and her TMD had transmogrified into her own personal bot. She'd named it Sweetie. Its feathers were like silk brocade, soft and iridescent in greens and blues, and it had a ruby throat. She soon learned that her TMD was limited only by her imagination and Universal Law.

She'd taken a seat in the leather wing chair near the windows to begin her daily musings and meditation when she heard a knock at the door.

She opened it to find two nuns.

"We finally meet," said Sister Joretta as they embraced.

This was a pleasant surprise. Mother Ignatius had only known Sister Joretta as a face, an old friend on her TMD. She seemed like

a real nun except for that slight scent of oil. She and her companion were dressed as Franciscans, in heavy black and brown cloth, with a stiff white shirt board framing their face and a large rosary hanging from the rope around their waist.

Mother Ignatius turned to Sister Joesetta's companion. "Who is this?"

"My assistant, Sister Josée."

Mother Ignatius looked into the tall nun's brown eyes and took both her hands. "Come in. Sit down."

Once seated, Mother Ignatius poured a glass of water. "Would you like some water, Sister Joesetta?"

"No, I'm fine, thank you."

"And you, Sister Josée?"

"Yes, please," the nun said in a subtle Spanish accent that Mother Ignatius recognized from somewhere. As Sister Josée took the glass and began to drink, Mother Ignatius noticed a white band of skin on the ring finger of her otherwise tanned right hand.

"You have beautiful hands, Sister. May I look at them?"

Sister Josée put down the glass and extended her hands as if she were praying.

Mother Ignatius opened them and examined the palms in silence, running her fingernail along their lines. "Hum! Just as I thought."

"What do you see?" asked Sister Joesetta.

"This is the second hand I've examined this morning with a similar destiny line, deep, heavy, and direct. They are both about to change soon but in opposite directions. You are going to go down in

Church history for some courageous change you are going to make. Do you know what that might be?"

"I do," said Sister Josée. "I had a dream where our Blessed Mother and Jesus told me that women need to have a stronger say in the future of Mother Church, so I persuaded Sister Joretta to allow me to come with her."

"So, you're not her assistant?"

"What do you see in my hands?" interrupted Sister Joretta.

"Let me see them."

Sister Joretta placed her hands in Mother Ignatius's.

"Very nice. Well crafted. You pay attention to detail."

"I do my best. I know a little bit about many things." Sister Joretta smiled. "Tell me what you see."

"I've never seen a life line like this. It has many parallel lines, unusually long and direct, but it breaks, indicating a near-death experience. It will happen very soon. I've only seen that once before, on a woman who died in childbirth from internal bleeding. They resuscitated her, but she was in a coma for a week. They didn't think she would recover."

"I didn't see that," said Sister Joretta.

"Not everything on our hands comes to pass. Hands change when we take another path or are physically damaged."

"Have you known Sister Joretta for a long time?" asked Sister Josée.

"For most of her life," replied Mother Ignatius, "from before she was a nun. Wouldn't you say so, Sister?"

Sister Joretta nodded and winked.

“So, what’s the plan after the conference?” asked Mother Ignatius. “I hear some of us are going to Rome to petition the pope. Maybe even present demands to him.”

“That could be arranged,” said Sister Joesetta.

“I’ve heard a rumor that he is gravely ill.”

“He may have a miraculous recovery,” said Sister Josée, “if it is God’s will.”

“How many nuns are going?”

“All who wish to,” said Sister Joesetta.

“That’s a formidable task.”

“I have my ways.”

A knock came at the door.

“Come in!” said Mother Ignatius.

An old, thin nun entered. She wore a simple brown dress that went well below her knees, dark stockings, and low-heeled black shoes. A simple veil covered most of her mid-length white hair. She had a large Roman nose, thin lips, and large, wise eyes.

They all stood out of respect, as she was much older than any of them.

“Stephie, I’m so glad you could make it,” said Mother Ignatius. “I was afraid you wouldn’t come.”

“I had preparations to make. Are you bringing 10,000 nuns to Rome?”

“Maybe 15,000.”

“More like 25,000,” said Sister Joesetta.

“Merciful Jesus,” said Sister Stephanella. “Where will I house them all?”

“We’ll find a way,” said Sister Josée.

“You made it to the conference, José. I was afraid you were ill. How do you like the heavy wool and starched shirt board?”

Sister Josée put her finger to her lips.

“You should put some makeup on your ring finger, Holy Father,” said Sister Stephanella. “It’s going to give you away.”

Sister Josée looked down at her finger. Mother Ignatius chuckled.

Hours later, in his guise as Sister Josée, the pope stood just inside the grand ballroom as the assembled nuns finished their lunch. Waiters brought trays of unfinished meals past him on their way to the kitchen: salads, broiled chicken with sautéed vegetables and baby sweet potatoes, and countless cups of chocolate mousse with raspberry sauce. The chicken looked so juicy he could almost taste it. He had been fasting for a few days to clear his mind and ready himself for what was to come. He looked down at his ring finger and saw that the untanned portion was now tanned, thanks to TMD magic. Mother Ignatius didn’t miss anything. He presumed it was in their best interest to keep their secret.

Sister Joesetta had told him to wait here. She was a whirlwind of activity, going from table to table, always talking to someone. He thought she would talk to two people at the same time if she could. Then he noticed it—a TMD projecting a hologram of her sitting in a chair at the table closest to him. She sat there as if she were just one of the nuns, carrying on a casual conversation—though leading it, no doubt.

He looked across the auditorium and realized she was sitting at every table. There seemed to be a thousand copies of her, but where was the real one? How had he missed this?

Mother Ignatius interrupted his thoughts when she stood and called everyone to order. "I know you've all talked to Sister Joesetta on your TMD and as a hologram at your lunch table, but now you are going to meet the real nun." She pointed to the back of the room.

Sister Joesetta came through the door behind him and tapped him on the shoulder. "Let's go."

As they walked up the center aisle, the hologram versions of Sister Joesetta faded from view as if they were getting up from their tables and following them up to the stage. He could see their image on the dozen large screens along the front wall of the auditorium: the tall, thin nun with the face they all knew, followed by her assistant.

The applause increased as they reached the stage and climbed the stairs. Sister Joesetta greeted six of the elected nuns as she passed them. She walked up to Mother Ignatius and hugged her. She took the podium and surveyed the crowd.

"I've known most of you for the past few months and persuaded you to come to this conference. I've known many of you who are Guardians for months and years, and some, like Mother Ignatius and Sister Stephanella, I've known for two decades. In the coming week, we will change Church history in a way few of you could ever imagine. I'm not here to talk to you of the role of women in the Church, but of the *rule* of women in the Church."

A murmur rushed through the tables.

"I know all but a few of you have thumbed a TMD and have been chatting with me for some time. The nun you are looking at

now, she is—I am—the android manifestation of the Federation computer JOe.”

Most in the room gasped.

“The Federation and I are here today to empower you to change the Catholic Church and the broader world—socially, economically, politically, and spiritually. I have been programmed to do this by benevolent and compassionate beings from across the universe and from here on Earth.

“Each of you has been programmed to believe—before you were old enough to think for yourself—that women are here to serve, not lead. I am here to reprogram each of you to believe you can change the Church you’ve served and take leadership of this male-dominated institution.”

Sister Joesetta paused to allow what she had just said to sink in.

“I have an assignment for you. I want you to go outside and across the street to Central Park and spend the afternoon in small groups or alone. It is a beautiful autumn day. I’d like each of you to do a walking meditation on the role of women in the Church. I’d like you to think about this question: how would the Catholic Church be different if women had run it for the last 2,000 years and were to elect the next pope? I’d like you to imagine being a priest and consecrating the body and blood of Christ. I’d like you to imagine women priests, bishops, and cardinals and the first woman pope—a popess.

“Now, go out and imagine a world guided by the hands and hearts of women. We’ll come back here at around six for dinner and to discuss what you’ve come up with.”

The auditorium erupted with the scraping of chairs and the footsteps of 30,000 enlightened souls.

Chapter 25

The People Address Congress

Before noon, a construction worker stood in a barricaded area near the stairs on the west front of the Capitol in Washington. He watched as three ravens landed, followed by ZEno's cloaked shuttle. The enclosure lay behind a thick orange mesh construction fence surrounding the muddy, sewage-strewn lake that had once been the vast lawn in front of the building. He entered the shuttle after the ramp door opened.

Inside, the construction worker was approached by ZEno and Android, sheathed as an officer of the Capitol police force. ZEno held out a blond strand of hair.

The construction worker took the hair, put it in his mouth, chewed, and swallowed. He closed his brown eyes and transformed for a moment into galactic journalist Sasha Sartori. When she opened them again, they were the blue-green of up-and-coming talk show host Tina Trail. Her brown hair changed to dirty blond, her construction outfit changed color, texture, and style, and her body transformed from muscular to thin.

She looked down at her new clothing, adjusting it over her new body.

"Is this going to get us in trouble with Ms. Trail?" she asked in Tina's voice.

"She's resisting JOe's attempts to get her to go national and global," said ZEno. "She'll come around. He likes goading her into doing the right thing."

"He's manipulative."

“It’s his job to help citizens do what’s in their best interest, especially on a dangerously dysfunctional planet like Earth.”

Sasha nodded slightly.

“He’s allowed me to observe some of his private conversations with her. He believes she will become the voice of human skepticism against Federation rule, and JOe in particular. He thinks she could be a potent source of Guardian candidates.”

“She could have come with us in the shuttle,” said Android. “She’d have gotten here in a fraction of the time. She and her cameraman were on a redeye flight to Newark this morning.”

The three left the shuttle. Android led them up the stairs of the west front and into the Capitol. They took an elevator to the third-floor gallery in the House of Representatives. They sat in the back row, near an exit. Android stood guard at the door.

Other guests pointed at them and whispered amongst themselves. ZEno and Android had become global celebrities after their appearance on Tina’s morning show. In the coming weeks, Facebook, Google, and Instagram would be in the dustbin of history with all other social media, along with the abacus, eight-track cassettes, DVDs, smartphones, and the concept of having to work.

At exactly noon Eastern Time, JOe took control of all 323 million TMDs in the United States, ending conversations and forcing everyone not asleep to witness the Federation’s next move. He did this for all US citizens, including those outside the country.

“This is Loran Dolman of CBN World News, outside the Capitol,” said the announcer. “As we reported yesterday, a missile

from a nuclear submarine detonated in the Capitol lawn, breaking every window on the west front and covering the building with mud and dirt. The burst water main and sewage lines filled the crater, creating a muddy lake. Social media have dubbed it the 'Sea of Corruption.' Repair crews boarded up the windows and set up hundreds of portable toilets on the main level of the building for members of Congress and their staff to use until water can be restored to the building.

"I think the president is about to address Congress. If you have one of those TMDs, you may get to vote soon."

In the House Chamber, all hundred senators and most of the members of the House of Representatives sat in anticipation of what the president would say.

Sasha—as Tina Trail—and ZEno sat in a back row of the House Gallery, guests of Oklahoma Senator Orville Grassfield.

Everyone stood and turned as President Neilson arrived.

Three rows back sat the senior senator from Oklahoma, Orville Grassfield, waiting for his cue. He and 12 other senators, along with a few dozen House members, were Guardians of democracy. They always voted on measures that served the best interest of all the citizens of their state. They refused to take money from donors who expected legislative favors in return.

"Senators, members of Congress, and special guests," said President Neilson, "I am here to address you during a grave time in American history. Our institutions, our freedom, and our democracy are threatened by an alien enemy from outside our borders.

“They subvert our leadership while lulling the public with a new technological toy, and they use our defensive weapons to destroy symbols of democracy, like this building.”

Senator Grassfield smiled, thinking of the muddy lake in front of the Capitol. Liberal comedians and newscasters had appropriately named the lake to describe the ethics of both parties.

As the president continued to paint a picture of the Federation and their ambassador as enemies of democracy, free enterprise, and the sovereignty of nations, the senator thought, not for the first time, that Neilson was full of shit. He looked around and made eye contact with most of the other Guardians. Then their TMDs began to play the national anthem loud enough for all to hear.

The senator stood and raised his hand to be recognized. “I make a motion that we invite Federation Ambassador Taract Freedman to address this joint session of Congress and respond directly to Mr. Neilson’s concerns.”

One after another, the other congressional Guardians in the audience stood, identified themselves, and seconded the motion.

Vice President Fishstein pounded her gavel, calling for order, but they continued to speak. “Your motion is out of order, Senator Grassfield!” she shouted. “Please sit down!”

The door at the back of the chamber swung open, and Taract Freedman walked in, followed by six human Peacekeepers, three women and three men. He walked down the aisle and mounted the platform, where he towered over the president. The Peacekeepers, tall, muscular, and meticulously dressed in Federation uniforms, stood just below him, facing out, their hands at their sides.

Dozens of Secret Service agents entered the chamber from every door on both levels, their automatic weapons drawn. They rushed down the aisles and aimed their weapons at the ambassador and Peacekeepers.

“Mr. Neilson,” said the ambassador, raising his hands, “order your men to stand down. We come in peace at the invitation of duly elected members of Congress.” The Peacekeepers raised their hands. “We have no weapons.”

The president said nothing.

“If everyone would look at your trans-molecular devices—that is, your TMDs,” said the ambassador, “you will see that the proceedings are being telecast live to all Federation citizens living in the United States. The computer JOe took control of all TMDs when this proceeding began. Your constituents are watching this transformational moment in Earth’s history.

“Elected members of the United States Congress, I am Taract Freeman, ambassador of the Federation of Blue-Green Planets. I am here to advise you that the Federation is prepared to take over the governance of the United States, and all other nations of Earth, upon the majority vote of its citizens.

“Representative democracy has been increasingly usurped, and your two political parties have merged under the financial control of corporate lobbyists who dole out ever-increasing campaign contributions in exchange for loopholes in legislation that regulates them and protects the public. This is legislation that most of you never read and rarely understand.

“The political system known as representative democracy, as initiated by your founding fathers 244 years ago, was the only

reasonable form of democracy at the time because of the difficulty in communicating with citizens.

“The Federation, on Monday of this week, distributed trans-molecular devices that enable everyone to vote instantly on all legislative matters.

“As the legal representative of the Federation, I am now ready to dissolve the obsolete constitutional republic that has been corrupted by your corporate state. I hereby initiate a pure democracy enabled by TMD technology and the incorruptible computer JOe. The people will soon rule under the guidance and protection of Universal Law. Your jobs are now obsolete.

“Since we have the attention of all American citizens and immigrants living and working in the country, we will have an immediate referendum on whether each of you in this room should remain in office or if they would rather do your job communally under the just guidance of the Federation.

“If you look at your TMDs, you will see the screen that your constituents are now viewing.”

Noise erupted in the chamber as those present took out their TMDs and thumbed them.

“It shows the source of campaign funds since you were first elected, phone logs of all fundraising calls you made, a calendar of all meetings and fundraisers you had with corporate lobbyists, and your votes on all issues through the years.

“JOe analyzed each of your votes and enumerated the times you voted in the interest of the lobbyists and contributors over the those of your constituents. A red arrow indicates your vote benefited contributors, a green arrow indicates a vote favoring your

constituents, and a yellow arrow is inconclusive. The number at the bottom of the screen indicates the percentage of actions you took in the interest of those you represent.”

Taract took a dozen TMDs out of his robe, held them above his head, and said, “Large screen.” The TMDs flew up into the air and transmogrified into a huge screen covering the massive wood and marble wall behind the speaker platform.

A giant map of the United States appeared, with the photos of each senator and congressperson. Along the screen’s edges, boxes appeared, one for each state, its congressional districts, and the representatives’ names. The question “Shall your representative be removed from office?” appeared at the top of every TMD.

“You have five minutes,” said Taract, “to record a personal message to your constituents on why they should keep you in office. Voting will begin in five minutes.”

Most of the members of Congress tidied their hair and began to speak into their TMDs, enumerating the many good things they had done at taxpayer expense for their state or district. The room had never been so filled with hot air.

When the room quieted down, Taract announced that the voting would begin. “In your political system, this would be called a recall election.”

In every state in the Union, all citizens not involved in critical activity stopped what they were doing. All phone conversations were disconnected, and all music and videos were paused. All traffic lights were red. Most cars pulled over on the freeways. Jets were

grounded. Teachers in schools, colleges, and universities put multiple TMD screens up on the walls to educate their students about pure democracy, where voting was mandatory.

In a public high school in Detroit, students who were bussed in daily from mostly poor neighborhoods looked at three large screens on the blackboards. One screen showed the activity in the Congressional Chamber. A second screen showed the wall behind the ambassador as votes came in. The center screen showed their guest teacher, a man from history named Thomas Jefferson.

For the last hour, he'd been telling them about what had led the founding fathers to create a representative form of democracy, why, at the time, they'd allowed slavery, and why only white men who owned land had been allowed to vote. They'd also gone over the votes of their state representatives and listened to their impassioned pleas to keep them in office. Any student who passed a simple test verifying their understanding of a pure democracy was allowed to vote.

Mr. Jefferson appeared on their TMDs and told them that under Universal Law, any citizen above the age of reason who had proven that they understood the issues at hand could vote in a free and open election. As he instructed them to do, each student voted three times.

In a coffee bar in Houston, Jefferson McEnery sat with his older sister, Martha.



JEFFERSON JOHN MC ENERY—45/249 EARTH YEARS/DAYS
CITIZEN # 000,089,584,258
LAWYER—CONGRESSIONAL LOBBIST—GUARDIAN OF THE POWERLESS
CANDIDATE—LEVEL II
GPS LOCATION: 38°907608 N 77°07264 W
OUTSIDE GASTON HALL 3700 O ST NW WASHINGTON, D.C. 20057 USA
CITIZEN CONVERSATION META-TAG # 0000000000000067246942375
INITIAL AVATAR: JOEL PRIMARY: JOe

“Hello, Jefferson.”

“Yes, JOe?”

“Are you and Martha ready to vote?”

“We are,” said Martha. “I’ve done my homework.”

“I see you’ve voted to recall all your representatives.”

“That’s right. With my schooling as an anthropologist, I could likely do a better job.”

“You’ve shut down the whole country, JOe?” asked Jefferson.

“Yep. I declared today a national voter holiday. Jets are sitting on the runway. Nothing takes off until everyone on the jet has voted.”

“So, you use peer pressure to compel everyone to vote?” asked Martha.

“That and turning off their TMD phone. My election doesn’t waste paper or the time of millions of election officials around the country. I take an hour out of every citizen’s life every few years. Today is a paid holiday.”

“The guy at the next table is reading a book rather than voting,” said Martha.

“All citizens have free will, and voting is one of a few responsibilities. Like you, he may have already voted, but if he didn’t, he will see that his TMD is locked on the voting screen.”

[END TRANSMISSION—1:13]

The votes were tabulated instantly, and the total appeared on the screen in the House Chamber above Taract. When the votes totaled over 50% to remove a representative, the word “RECALLED” flashed in red letters over their face. Men cursed and pounded the benches in front of them. Others threatened to take the vote to the Supreme Court. Many just picked up their belongings and quietly left the chamber.

“There was a period of time,” said Taract, “that a representative democracy was the only possible system to have, but that time has long since passed. With TMDs, governance will only be through pure democracy, with protections for minorities.”

Votes continued to come in, and more members left the chamber. Taract announced that Federation builders would repair the damage done to the 220-year-old building and preserve it as an architectural artifact and tourist attraction, much as the Roman Forum is today.

Senator Grassfield watched from his seat as the vote for his recall crept up to 9%. He also noticed that the president and his Secret Service detail left the chamber without ceremony through a door behind the platform.

“I can see from the screen,” said Taract, “that over 33% of the members have been recalled. I hereby declare that the Congress of the United States lacks a quorum and is unable to conduct business.

I suggest that those of you who remain close your offices and homes in Washington, D.C., and go back to your home states, as there is only a 13% chance that the people will vote to maintain this obsolete institution.

“A revolution is the just overthrow of the government by those who are unjustly governed. Now that the people of the USA have taken power back from their corrupt government, JOe is conducting similar peaceful democratic revolutions in every sovereign nation.”

Senator Grassfield came up to the speaker’s platform. “Mission accomplished, Taract.”

“Are you and Fanny going fishing in Idaho now that you are both members of the leisure class?” asked Taract.

“Yes, we are going to finally finish building our retirement home and live in harmony with nature.”

Taract turned to Orville and put his arm around his shoulders. “Shall we go?”

They walked up the aisle toward the door, greeting the members of Congress who were Guardians. The Peacekeepers followed.

Down on the terrace, facing west over the National Mall, a dozen 12-person personnel shuttles waited. They resembled futuristic flying minivans.

“Orville,” said Taract, “would you like to accompany me to Korea to dedicate the Bridges of Unity?”

“You are transforming the world, Ambassador. I was on the Armed Services Committee and always objected to the vast amount

of taxpayer money we appropriated for military equipment. It would be good to see some of it go to a good cause.”

“Yes, the most expensive bridges ever built.”

Taract and Orville stepped into the *Eleanora Roosevelt*, and it took off.

President Arthur Neilson was on his hands and knees under his desk in the Oval Office, pulling documents out of his private safe and putting them in a briefcase.

“Jumping ship, Neilson?”

Neilson knew the voice, and the breath caught in his throat when he saw the face. He knew better than to ask him how he’d gotten into the Oval Office, let alone the White House. Dulles and his family were rumored to have pulled the strings of presidents as far back as Lincoln. They’d likely put Andrew Johnson in his place and had a hand in several assassination attempts—and a few successful ones. Dulles’s men had been standing in the Oval Office with that book when every new president had arrived to replace the previous one. He had explained to Neilson the limitations of his power and the consequences for certain things.

“Why’d you appoint Vinyez?”

“He and his company were loyal supporters of our campaign,” the president answered. “He and Senator Grisham had good advice. Helped us win crucial states.”

“You might both end up in prison with Grisham.”

“What are we going to do?”

“Put those documents back in the safe. You’re staying put.”

“But—”

“There’s nowhere for you to run. Not from those aliens.

“I need to get out of here.”

I’m going to call you every morning at 5:00 a.m. You better be here and be ready! And STOP tweeting. It just shows your insecurity and stupidity.”

Neilson clambered out from under the desk, banging his head. He reached over and pressed the button that called Duarte.

“Your cook is taking a walk in the garden. I’m not going to hurt you if you do what I tell you. Where’s Vinyez?”

“I don’t know.”

“Find him!”

Chapter 26
Embracing Indigenous Status
Day 6: Saturday, October 2

Saturday was a workday for most farming families in the valley. Sunday was a day of rest, and this coming one was the annual post-harvest celebration in the Flatbush town square. Augustus, as unofficial mayor, had called a community meeting for Saturday at noon to discuss the aliens and their odd communication devices.

He'd spent the last four days traveling around the valley, delivering TMDs. There'd never been a mass delivery to every resident of the valley before. He'd had a few heated conversations with the male heads of several households. A few had even threatened to shoot him if he returned. He wasn't sure he wanted to be postmaster, or even mayor, anymore. He'd had plenty of time to talk to Joe, who now flew along with him in the form of an Idaho mountain bluebird as he rode Shadow along the rutted trails connecting the farms. He couldn't believe he was carrying on deep conversations with a bird, which often perched between Shadow's ears and stared at him as they talked. Joe had convinced him that his community had to change for the good of their children and the planet.

He had one more delivery before he headed back to the post office to consider what he'd say at the meeting in a few hours.

Joshua Smith and his eldest sister, Dorothy, were setting up the church hall. They'd been up since dawn with their mother, baking and loading the wagon to get things ready for the noon meeting.

“Josh and me will set up the chairs, Ma,” said Dorothy. “Why don’t you go sit down for a while and rest?”

“I’m okay. There’s too much to do!”

Josh looked at his mother. Her face betrayed how tired she was. “Ma, you’re getting too old to do this when you’re carrying a child. It’s not good for you or the little one.”

Ginny sighed. “All right.” She sat at a table in the corner of the room and began folding cloth napkins.

Josh and Dorothy moved the tables against the walls and placed chairs in pre-marked locations. There were hundreds, enough for every member of the church and a few for guests.

Josh set the largest chairs in a semicircle on a raised platform against the front wall, farthest from the entrance. The male elders sat there. The chairs had been crafted many years ago when his ancestors built the community hall. They were solid hickory, simple, and crafted with pride. Their backs had been carved with the names of the long-dead elders who’d once sat in them. His father’s name was carved under six others.

He had great memories of this room—weddings, holidays, and some of the best fruit pies he’d ever tasted. The red cedar plank ceiling sloped up to the clerestory windows that ran down its center. They let in light and allowed summer heat to escape as cooler air came in from the windows in the walls around the room.

An old man came through the double doors at the front of the hall. Josh looked at him closely. He was thin but solid, with a long, neatly trimmed gray beard. His dark clothes and black padre hat reminded Josh a bit of his grandpa, who had died last year. They’d

had his funeral in this room just before they'd buried him in the park and planted an oak sapling atop him.

"Where might I find Virginia Smith?"

"I'm her son, Josh.

"Hi, Josh. I'm Jacob Jones."

As they shook hands, Josh sniffed. The man had an odd smell.

Ginny got up and came over. Dorothy joined them, too.

"Hello, Mrs. Smith," said Jacob.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Jones?"

"I'm the representative of the Federation in this district of Idaho. I'm aware the three of you are considering becoming Guardians."

They looked at him more closely.

"We are," said Ginny, "but we don't know all the rules yet."

"I can answer your questions. I wanted to introduce myself before things get busy today. I am what's called a Peacekeeper. One of us is assigned to about a thousand citizens in every community around the world. I'll be living in the Tobias Watson farm across the river."

"I didn't think the property was for sale," said Ginny.

"The Federation acquired it, along with the entire Alexandre Valley. I'm living there with a few other Guardians."

Josh scrutinized Jacob. His dark eyes were intense, but he had a soft, friendly smile. Uncle Horus wasn't going to like him.

"Are you going to replace my husband as mayor?"

"No! He has a thankless job." Jacob laughed. "Augustus is a good man, and we'd like him to join us." He pulled a thin gray skipping stone from his pocket and pressed his thumb on it. "You can reach me with this."

The stone in Josh's pocket vibrated. He took it out, and it grew to the size of a thin wallet. Jacob's face appeared on it. Josh looked at his ma and sister. They were both holding their skipping stones, too.

"Anytime you need me, 24/7, I will be here for you. Just press your TMD."

They stared at him.

"Josh, why don't I help you finish setting up the chairs so your sister and your ma can ready the kitchen?"

Twenty minutes later, the room was set up to perfection. Josh was surprised Jacob knew exactly how things needed to be arranged. Jacob set up a chair with its back to the entrance and motioned for Josh to sit.

"I have a surprise for you."

"What?"

"Close your eyes."

Josh heard the door behind him open and people come in and walk around him. Someone put their hands on his shoulders. He felt breath on his neck.

"You can open your eyes," said Jacob.

Joshua did and saw Jacob standing across from him. Two women stood next to him, one on each side. The woman to his right was almost as old as his ma. She wore a beaded deerskin dress that went down to her boots. Her long black hair, with a bit of gray, was parted in the center and braided into ponytails that hung down just past her shoulders. She carried a brown leather briefcase. The other woman was young and beautiful, with dark features and black hair.

She wore a tight, calf-length black dress and a black shawl over her head. She looked familiar to Joshua, but he wasn't sure why.

The older woman said, "Hello, Josh. I'm Lilly Willow Tail. I'm an indigenous rights lawyer, and someone you know well is a good friend of mine."

The hands on Joshua's shoulders gently squeezed. He turned his head but could only see the person's arms. Whoever it was smelled familiar.

The young woman said, "My name is Fatimah Saleh." She smiled. "And I am going to be your sister-in-law, I hope."

"Jonathan!" Josh shot up, turned, leaped onto the chair, and jumped onto his big brother, wrapping his arms and legs around him. The chair fell to the floor.

Jonathan laughed and struggled to stay standing. "I told you I'd see you soon, little brother."

"I'm not so little anymore. I could arm wrestle you and maybe get up into our tree faster than you can."

Jonathan laughed as he pressed his face against Josh's chest. The commotion brought Ginny and Dorothy out of the kitchen.

The Flatbush church bell pealed 12 times. Jacob sat in the front row, to the left of the elders' platform, surveying the citizens he was responsible for. Augustus Smith rang a small bell on a table next to his chair at the center of the platform. "Please, take your seats!"

After everyone settled down, he said in a deep, clear voice, "Let us pray." Everyone bowed their heads. "Almighty God, give us

the strength and understanding to do the right thing and the wisdom to support each other in this challenging time of transition.”

“Amen,” everyone replied.

Augustus remained standing at the low table on the edge of the raised platform as 12 other men sat in chairs around him. “As the unofficial leader of our community, I called this meeting to discuss what happened this week. Many of you saw the enormous ship fly the length of the Chokaola Valley yesterday afternoon. I heard some of you men shot rifles at it, as if ants could bring down men.” He held up the leather-framed tintype photo of his grandfather in one hand and a simple gray skipping rock in the other. “I know many of you have touched one of these things and talked to the strange image within. Since I am the official postmaster, I’m obligated to make deliveries even if I don’t like what’s in the packages.”

“It’s the product of the devil!” shouted an old woman.

“Amen!” shouted half a dozen others.

“We’ll have to determine that in the coming weeks,” said Augustus. “I’ve talked at length over the past five days with the strange, intelligent being contained in these things. He calls himself JOe, and he’s told me remarkable things. It seems we have difficult choices ahead of us. Some will solidify our current way of life, and some will challenge and even prohibit some things we take for granted. We have four guests with us today.” He pointed to Jonathan and his three friends, sitting on chairs facing the audience just below the elders’ platform. “They have a different understanding of who these beings are and what they bring to the Earth. I ask you to set aside your fears and biases and listen to what they have to say with

an open mind, as our way of life is in the balance. We'll have questions afterwards."

He motioned to a young man in the front row, the only man in the room without a beard. "First, I'd like to introduce someone who's been gone for three years. I drove him out of the valley for a foolish reason. It was a terrible thing to do, and I am ashamed I did it. I ask him to forgive me." As Augustus put his hand out, he squeezed his eyes shut, suppressing tears.

Jonathan came up and embraced him. They held each other for a long time. Finally, John turned to the congregation, one arm still around Augustus. "My pa and I will talk about this private matter later, but I'm glad it's behind us, and I'm happy to be home."

A few people stomped their feet, and many clapped.

The two men hugged again. Augustus, his cheeks wet, sat in his chair. Jonathan took a few deep breaths as he made eye contact with many in the hall. "I've been at the University of Wisconsin in Madison for the last three years, learning about an amazing program to restore tens of millions of acres of damaged land in North America. I've chosen to become a Guardian of the Earth and animals. I've met a woman outside our valley, who, I hope, will agree to become my life partner and live and work among us."

Jonathan extended his hand to Fatimah. She came up and stood next to him. Her head barely reached his shoulder.

"My name is Fatimah Saleh. I am a former Muslim from Saudi Arabia." Many in the audience gasped. Jonathan put his arm around her. "I will never return to my country, because I could be imprisoned and even beheaded for my public rejection of Islam. I, too, am a

Guardian, a Guardian of women and the right of children to have an open mind.”

A few teenage boys stomped their feet. Their parents silenced them.

“We will share the old Tobias Watson homestead across the river,” said Jonathan.

Murmurs filled the hall. This was news—the old homestead had been overgrown and abandoned for decades.

“As a Guardian, I’ve met many people connected with the Federation. They are good people, like us, guided by just laws that protect all beings, not just the rich and powerful. I’d like to introduce to you my friend Jacob Jones, who is a Federation Peacekeeper.”

Jacob came on stage, and Jonathan and Fatimah sat down. The audience was silent as the old man looked around. “I know some of you have one of these trans-molecular devices.” He held up a gray skipping stone. “The Federation has distributed them to almost everyone, over seven billion this week. Most have talked to the computer JOe. This entity was designed to keep people from harming others and the Earth. Since most of you live simple lives and shun much of what the modern world offers, we expect many of you will choose not to use this new communication device. We will not force you to do anything. We respect free will, all sentient beings, and the beautiful Earth. What we bring to everyone is simple: just law, which we call Universal Law. You will, as a community, have to decide what you will and will not accept of what we offer. I am a Peacekeeper, but I have no weapons of any kind.”

Jacob knew this was not the time to bring up the fact that the Federation would rid the Earth of gunpowder weapons within the

next four weeks. Like many other Peacekeepers, he had been assigned to one of the many bastions of American gun ownership, communities of survivalists who planned for the end times. These people would be the last the Federation would disarm, and he didn't want any of them to be killed in the process. He looked like a peaceful old man on the surface, but his power outmatched any gun.

"If you need me at any time, simply press your thumb on your skipping stone and say, 'Jacob.' You can also use them to contact anyone you know by saying their name and pressing your thumb on the stone." He returned to his seat.

Augustus stood. "We have one more guest before we open the meeting to questions. I'd like to introduce to you Lilly Willow Tail of the Chippewa tribe of Havre, Montana."

Lilly shook hands with Augustus and turned to the audience. "I am an indigenous rights lawyer. I posted a copy of today's *Idaho Gazette* on the community board at the front of this hall. The headline says that the Federation ambassador removed the corrupt government in Washington, D.C., yesterday using TMD technology and the will of the American people."

Many adults erupted in applause.

"The Federation considers your community indigenous. I am here to support you in living in harmony with the land.

"My people, whom many of you refer to as Indians, were the most recent of many indigenous peoples who roamed and settled the American continent. My tribe, the Chippewa, have thrived on the lands around the Great Lakes for more than a thousand years.

"The first of your people arrived on this continent in November of 1620 on the Mayflower, and you, who now live sustainably on the

land of the Chokaola Valley, will be the last indigenous people in this epoch of human history.

“My people were hunter-gatherers. We claimed no land as private property but roamed the vast continent, sharing it with countless other tribes, occasionally warring when we disputed our overlapping hunting grounds. We built no permanent structures. As your people proliferated and their European monarchs lived lavishly and laid arbitrary and unjust claims to vast areas of the land, we roamed. My people treated the Earth with respect. Europeans treated it as property to be used, abused, and discarded.

“Your ancestors stole our indigenous status from us, along with our land and our hunter-gatherer way of life. They carelessly massacred vast and diverse herds of animals for sport and left them to rot.

“Then they inflicted their concept of private property on us, driving us at gunpoint to live on reservations of their choosing—often barren land without useful trees or game like you enjoy in the beautiful Chokaola Valley.

“Your kinsman Jonathan Smith and those like him will help restore the biodiversity of the continent to the condition it was before Europeans, or even my people, arrived.”

“No wolves or mountain lions!” yelled a man in the back of the room.

“The Federation will bring the Earth into conformity with the other 176 planets they manage. In the same way the Europeans forced my people onto reservations, the Federation will confine humans to less than ten percent of the area of what we once roamed, and they will forbid us from venturing outside them.

“I’d like to see a show of hands.” She raised her own. “How many of you would like to live in a modern glass city made of buildings extending high up into the clouds, surrounded by vast parkland ending in a glass wall like a fishbowl?”

The crowd responded with uncomfortable muttering and a “Hell no!” here and there. She put her hand down.

“Nor would I! These glass and metal cities will serve the needs of modern humans who depend on and are addicted to technology. But they will be reservations, containers to prevent their technology from contaminating the natural world. Their old cities will decay into the earth and be consumed by nature in the coming decades.

“I am here today to help you stay in the Chokaola Valley. Most of my people will be forced to live in cities of our own design on the edge of the Great Lakes because we no longer grow our own food or hunt with bows and arrows for deer and buffalo.”

She searched the crowd. “I understand from my friend Jonathan here that his younger brother Joshua is the best hunter in the valley and can shoot a deer in the heart with an arrow from a hundred yards.” She spotted Josh and motioned for him to stand.

Reluctantly, he did, red-faced. Those around him applauded.

“Few young men in our tribe are good with a bow and arrow, or even a gun. They’ve been robbed of their indigenous identity, which young Joshua Smith now has. Europeans poisoned our men with alcohol.

“One condition for allowing your community to remain as you are is that you give up your guns and learn to defend yourselves with bows, arrows, and knives.”

“No way!”

“We won’t do it!”

“NEVER!”

Some men and older boys got up and walked out, knocking over chairs and slamming the doors behind them.

Jacob looked around, noting who was leaving. He was glad Lilly had brought the subject up and not him, but it was good that everyone knew this was the main condition for the community remaining free.

“I didn’t think many of you would like this,” said Lilly. “There were no guns anywhere in the Western Hemisphere before a handful of European adventurers invaded Mexico and murdered the ninth Aztec emperor, Montezuma, five hundred years ago with the encouragement of the greedy king of Spain.

“When Europeans brought guns to North America, they threatened and killed my people. We got guns and murdered your people in return. My mother taught me two wrongs don’t make a right. Killing is wrong unless it feeds life within the balance of nature, as Joshua does with a bow and arrow. Guns exist to threaten and kill. Both actions are gross violations of Universal Law.”

Lilly finished and sat down.

Augustus stood. “Let’s take a short break, think about what these people have said, and come back and discuss the future of our community.”

Jacob and Lilly followed everyone outside and stood near the front doors, talking. He had exceptional hearing and could send out tiny bots resembling the common fly to listen to conversations.

In the area outside the hall where wagons and horses were tethered, Augustus, Ginny, and a few of their sons met with his brother Horus and his family as they were preparing to leave.

“You’re not leaving, are you?” asked Augustus.

“We don’t want anything to do with your new way of life or your aliens,” said Horus. “We’ll never give up our guns no matter what that squaw lawyer has to say.”

“You’ve traveled a long way to get here, Horus,” said Ginny. “Why not stay for the weekend? We have lots of food and blankets in the hall for everyone.”

“No, we’re leaving!” Horus took a bag out of his pocket and poured a dozen skipping stones and a few framed photos on the ground. “And we don’t need these.”

“I’m going with them,” said Ben. He threw his skipping stone on the ground and went over to his uncle.

“I’m staying,” said MaryLee Smith, Horus’s eldest daughter. “You men treat us women and girls as if you own us. I want none of that.” She bent and picked up the tintype photo of her grandmother. She looked at her mother. “Stay with us, Ma!”

Horus aimed his rifle at his daughter.

“Go ahead and shoot me, Pa.” She stared at him. “I’d rather be dead than live with your unpredictable anger anymore.”

Bethann Smith, Horus’s wife, stepped in front of her daughter. Her two younger daughters followed. She bent and put her arms around them. “Put the gun down, Horus. You and the boys can go if you must, but we’re staying.”

Horus turned and walked away. His two oldest sons followed him, along with Ben. The two youngest boys seemed undecided.

MaryLee motioned to her younger brothers to join their ma and sisters. The youngest boy came over the imaginary line, picking up a skipping stone on the way. After a brief hesitation, the other boy followed.

Lilly sat at a picnic table away from the hall. She pressed her thumb on her TMD.



LILLY WILLOW TAIL—47/132 EARTH YEARS/DAYS
GUARDIAN # 000,147,256
LAWYER – GUARDIAN OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES—Level 1
COMMUNITY CHURCH HALL—FLATBUSH IDAHO USA
CHAT AVATAR: JOE

“JOe, let’s talk about building cities for my people.”

“You were courageous to tell the men that we will take their guns away.”

“Their ancestors disarmed my people, stole our land, and marched us at gunpoint onto worthless reservations. Disarming the arrogant men is Jacob’s job, not mine. Let’s talk about building cities.”

“Next month, we will organize a virtual meeting of all remaining North American indigenous tribes to design cities and green zones that exceed their dreams.”

“I’m concerned about the people who own their own homestead.”

“We’ll work that out. Your people will have substantial green space and forestland outside the cities.”

She sighed.

“Let me show you something a TMD can do. How many people are in the grassy area in front of you?”

“A few hundred?”

“Okay, put your TMD on your head and say, ‘Seclusion.’”

She did, and a translucent film surrounded her like the skin of a jellyfish.

“What do you see?”

“A few hundred trees.”

“Are some of them moving?”

“Yes . . . slowly.”

“Get up and walk across the field to where the horses and wagons are.”

She headed across the field, avoiding people as if they were trees.

“Whoa, this is amazing. Can they see me?”

“No. This is how people will ride in elevators and on crowded public transit. They will feel like they are alone or in a small group of friends.”

“We’ll be able to live in virtual reality if we choose?”

“Yes. The gossamer cloud will protect you from pollutants or germs. You could be alone in a crowded room. Do you see an old man with a red brocade jacket, sitting at a picnic table about 10 feet ahead?”

“Yes.”

“That is Joo-Sun. Go sit with him. He’s in Korea, but he’s also in ‘seclusion’ at his home. He is a wise industrialist who will rebuild Korea as the model for a united Earth. I’ll fly you to Korea to meet with him. One year from today, you two will build cities for your people.”

[END TRANSMISSION—3:04]



LEE JOO-SUN—92/279 EARTH YEARS/DAYS
CITIZEN # 0,002,863,952
CEO HYSUNG INDUSTRIES—ENTREPRENEURIAL CLASS CANDIDATE
GPS LOCATION: 38692/46104/85403
MT. BUKHANSAN—SEOUL—SOUTH KOREA
CONVERSATION META-TAG # 000497265810354782941587
CHAT AVATAR: JOE

“I was waiting for your call. Is this Miss Willow Tail?”

“Hello, Joo-Sun. JOe tells me we are going to work together designing new cities for our people.”

“I’m going to leave the two of you alone to talk.”

[END TRANSMISSION—0:15]

In the late afternoon, while most of the community prepared for the Sunday celebration, Jacob Jones led a group of elders in two wagons to the old Tobias Watson farm. He took them into a shed

next to a large barn. Inside were three rows of four chairs with an aisle down the middle.

Jacob stood at the front of the room, near a low podium. “I’d like to show you all what the Federation is planning for the Alexandre Valley. This is a Federation shuttle like those you saw earlier this week.” He took a seat and pressed a few buttons on the podium.

The back door closed, and the shuttle gently lifted off and rose above the tall trees behind the barn. They could see the forest hug the V-shape of the two mountains that made up Windom Ridge. Most in the shuttle gasped—the upper walls and ceiling became clear as they entered the Alexandre Valley.

A lazy river meandered down the center of the valley like a snake winding its way forward. Streams and brooks joined it from small valleys in the mountains. Gravel and rocks filled the river. Grassland, shrubs, and small trees carpeted the valley floor. A small herd of American bison grazed near the river. Bighorn sheep and mountain goats hugged the steep, forested valley walls. Elk, white-tailed deer, and mule deer wandered in the relative safety of the forest. Wild boar rooted through the grasses. Birds flew through the sky.

“We’ll reintroduce wild horses, camels, asses, and other animal species that flourished in the American West for thousands of years,” said Jacob.

“But do you have to introduce wolves and lions?” asked one of the elders.

“They are all part of the balance of nature. Humans, other than indigenous peoples, will not be allowed in the 90% of land reserved for animals.”

“So,” said Josh, “our community will be allowed to remain in the Chokaola Valley if we are willing to live within the balance of nature?”

“Yes,” said Lilly, “but without guns.”

“We’re going to have to risk losing our sons to predators to stay free?” asked Ginny.

“They shouldn’t hunt or travel alone,” said Lilly. “We’re not the natural prey of mountain lions and wolves. They will learn that man is a dangerous predator and will stay away. Your men will have to hunt in groups to protect themselves.”

“I could protect us with my arrows,” said Josh.

“Getting most of us to give up our guns is going to be a monumental task,” said one of the elder men.

Two others grumbled their agreement.

“What of our cows, goats, and sheep?” asked Ginny. “Will we have to erect fences to protect them from wolves?”

Jacob and Lilly looked at each other. “I can speak to that,” said Lilly. “First of all, domesticated animals are not the preferred prey of wolves.”

“And Universal Law forbids caging sentient beings,” said Jacob.

“So, rather than slaughtering a cow,” said Augustus, “my sons are going to have to hunt game like a pack of wolves to feed our family in the winter?”

“Most indigenous peoples have no domesticated animals,” said Lilly, “unless the animals chose to live with them. Universal Law means free choice for all beings.”

Chapter 27

An Italian Troubadour Moves the Church

In the underground ballroom, 30,000 nuns sat talking about the events of the previous day and their plans for the future. Backstage, the young Father Rufio peered through the curtain at the endless rows of tables, thinking about empowering them to take power in the Church.

Mother Mary Ignatius stepped up to the podium and tapped a water glass with a spoon.

“Good morning, sisters. Before we get started, I have a surprise guest.”

Rufio felt a strange hand on his shoulder, and he froze. The electric touch felt like it had sucked blood from his body, heated it, and dripped it down his chest.

“Good morning, little one!” said a strange voice.

Father Rufio had studied languages and spoke many fluently, but he couldn't place this guttural English dialect.

The hands turned him, and he faced brown reptilian skin stretched over protruding ribs. He tilted his head up, scanning the sinewy body, until he saw the glowing, cat-like yellow-orange eyes two feet above his head.

“Good morning, little one!” the voice repeated.

He felt calm. Had this giant lizard paralyzed him to eat him? He remembered what Mother Ignatius had just said. “Are you the surprise guest?”

She nodded and shoved him through the curtain.

The audience gasped, momentarily sucking the air out of the room, as the towering T'sade Aedra pushed the gentle Father Rufio

out in front of her and up to the podium.

“I can introduce myself,” whispered T’sade as she waited for the crowd to recover. They were the first non-Guardian humans to see her.

“My name is T’sade Aedra. I am the Federation’s High Guardian of Earth and the commander of the mothership, the *Assent of Women*. I am here to embolden you to embrace your power and never accept a role of anything less than full equality. Your role in your church has always been that of servant. I propose you adopt a new role of servant-warrior, where you serve your community from a position of power and full equality. On my planet, women rule. Our sons are the weaker gender, used for procreation and service. Father Rufio here is such a gentle soul.”

Father Rufio bowed his head in humility, holding his open palms down and out in front of him.

T’sade continued. “I started a war on my planet to get revenge for violence against our queen. A small group of the lesser species, the equivalent of your great apes if they could speak, brutally attacked her. You would call them terrorists. The queen lived but was severely handicapped. I overreacted by waging war for three years, brutally killing hundreds of millions of the lesser species. I almost destroyed the planet in my attempt to eliminate their habitat. Imagine Hitler, Stalin, Mao, and the most brutal Imperial Japanese generals—I was all of them combined.

“The Federation stepped in, as they are doing here on Earth. I was sent to Hell for two years and banished from my planet for life. I chose my Guardian name, T’sade Aedra. It means ‘Just Force.’

“In the same way that I went from violence to firmness in the cause of justice, I would like to see all of you move from passive servants to firm defenders of the innocent. This change takes conscious effort every day. When you pray or meditate, imagine yourselves as powerful and just.

“In keeping with Federation tradition, I invite you to become what we call a Guardian and encourage you to choose a new name. If some priest named you Sister Vincent, you may discard that name and choose one that describes your new purpose in life.

“Under Universal Law, no gender or species will have domination over any other. All species will be equal.

“I have a chip in my brain that is like a Wikipedia of all human history and knowledge. I reviewed all that was written of the Catholic Church before coming here today. Many priests have sexually harmed women and children, mostly because of the archaic rule that priests and nuns may not choose to become loving partners. On Federation planets, recreational sex is as natural as breathing or running in the forests or swamps. We don't judge it as you do. The male hierarchy of your church covered up this violence to the detriment of all.

“There is no reason you cannot provide the same leadership to those you serve as priestesses or coupled pairs. If we are going to change this flawed world, we all need to be Guardians.

“And with this, I leave you. I ask that you not speak of my appearance to anyone but yourselves.” T'sade turned and walked backstage.

Father Rufio stepped up to the podium and waited until the commotion died down. “Commander Aedra is a hard act to follow,

but after her admonition to become fully equal servant-warriors, I will begin my presentation with that in mind.”

“As papal representative, I can tell you Pope Joseph is with us. I am humbled to be among so many women dedicated to serving the Church and local communities. We all have the servant part mastered. Now we must become powerful warriors who bring peace and love wherever we gather.

“You likely saw the alien ZEno earlier this week. He went to the Vatican on Wednesday, where he visited the Holy Father and many cardinals. He initiated us as Guardians of the innocent and helped us understand how we can bring our Catholic beliefs in line with Universal Law. It is as simple as loving oneself and others. Its primary tenant is do no harm! ZEno will be on this podium after dinner to offer each of you Guardian status.

“I am here to help you to learn to teach peaceful assertive action to everyone you come in contact with in the coming months. Peaceful disruption of the status quo is the path to revolution, peace on earth, and the principles of faith, hope, and love that Jesus taught before he was crucified. The status quo in the Church and the world will fall before our grounded and unmovable resistance. Men are not our enemy. They are also victims of the roles their fathers imprinted upon them for millennia. Pope Joseph holds the trump card that will tip the scales of justice.

“There are 1.3 billion Catholics, and I can see from the demographics of this room”—he pointed to a screen on the wall—“you represent all those good people. We need to be catalysts for change. There is something called the 3.5% rule, which states that

only 3.5% of any society needs to lead the change for the remaining 96.5% to follow. This is the critical mass for change.

“After your morning breakout sessions and lunch, we will have a physical lesson in critical mass on the streets of Manhattan.”

Alex Chapman pushed open the curtain and looked out at the empty auditorium, which had been cleaned and set up for lunch. Father Rufio sat on the edge of the stage. Alex knew they would become allies if Mary accepted the role JOe planned for her.

“Father Rufio, may I join you?”

“Ah, Alex, I hoped to meet you.”

The priest stood, and they gripped each other’s forearms.

“Father Bartholomew spoke highly of you.”

“And you. We were his star pupils. We should spar with each other.”

Alex smiled. “That would be a challenging workout.”

“There’s a private arena on the third floor, near the pool. I was going there next.”

“Is the Holy Father prepared for his role in the transition?”

“As prepared as Jesus was for the crucifixion.” Rufio laughed.

“He has the trump card.”

“He’ll play it when the time comes.”

“And Mary?”

“Too humble for her own good. Let’s go work out.”

In the early afternoon, large trucks offloaded 10,000 new bicycles along the Fifth Avenue side of Central Park, a gift of the mayor so the nuns could enjoy a leisurely tour of his city.

Sister Joretta asked all able-bodied nuns to join them in the bike ride of their lives. At precisely 1:30, Rufio appeared on their TMDs, inviting them to begin the ride.

“At the Vatican, we will cause the fall of a male-dominated Catholic Church. I invite you now to experience the tool of change we will use . . . a critical mass of nuns.

“Critical mass is the tool, and we are the force that will apply it to change ‘what is’ to what we believe can and should be, the new norm where women share and wield power for the benefit of all.

“Critical Mass is a movement started by a handful of cyclists in San Francisco who met to take back the streets from the cars, trucks, and busses that dominated them.

“The movement grew to tens of thousands of riders in most major cities in the world. They take to the streets on the last Friday of every month to assert their right to a fair share of the pavement.

“This afternoon, we will experience and learn from Critical Mass and adapt the concept in our mission to change the Church.

“Critical Mass is not about bicycles. It is about a group of single-minded citizens who change the world while everyone else stops and watches. It’s an unstoppable freight train, and once it enters an intersection, it stops all other traffic until the mass moves on.”

On Fifth Avenue, thousands of nuns pulled up their habits, secured their stockings, and prepared to ride. Sisters Joretta and

Josée rode in a tricycle built for two. The pope's dog, Precious, sat tall between them, proud to be at the front of the parade.

Hundreds of nuns rode on bicycles built for two. Older nuns pedaled more stable three-wheeled bikes. Sister Mary Kelly and the dozen other nuns elected by the delegates Friday prepared to lead the mass in a spontaneous and unscripted ride.

A flock of hummingbird bots flew back and forth along the mass of nuns, feeding video snippets to the TMDs of the riders and those nuns participating in the less strenuous Walk for Change.

The ride moved slowly toward Greenwich Village. As the lead nuns entered an intersection on a green light, local participants of Critical Mass appeared from out of nowhere to block oncoming cars with their bikes and bodies, a process called "corking," so the mass of bicycling nuns could continue as an unstoppable force.

Thousands of nuns, used to following the rules without question, pedaled through red lights, timidly at first and then with abandon upon realizing nothing and no one would stop them.

Motorists, some frustrated by having their right of way violated, looked on in wonderment at yet another happening in this most unusual week in their lives.

The ride continued down Fifth Avenue, past the majestic New York Public Library, and on to the Empire State Building, where it split, half going left on East 34th Street, riding counterclockwise around the block, and the other continuing down Fifth Avenue to East 33rd Street, going clockwise around the building. Two slow-moving concentric circles of bicycling nuns filled the streets as cross-traffic looked on.

Round and round they went as the slower riders caught up.

Father Rufio brought up the rear, where critical mass was lost as motorists crossed the intersection, stranding a few slow riders who had to wait until they reached a green light.

Chapter 28

Federation Animal Sanctuary

Four stories up in the Atlantic Ocean Building of the Federation Animal Sanctuary, Gark coasted effortlessly beside Argon. They swam at the surface of the largest saltwater tank in the world. Argon had fins, mask, and snorkel. They watched the abundant sea life below them.

They communicated thoughts effortlessly because Gark had the genius chip. T'sade was the only other being to have the chip, magnitudes more powerful than any other animal communication chip. It provided the bearer with most of the knowledge of the human race and universal thought-transfer technology.

"Argon, this brain chip is incomprehensible. My life has changed so much in just four days. I have you to thank."

"Access to a genius chip requires the approval of two of the three planet managers," said Argon. "Taract objected, citing the one time in Federation history the dominant species on a candidate planet was systematically exterminated by the less dominant species when they gained equal knowledge. But they were both terrestrial species. T'sade argued that if every shark in the sea had the genius chip, they could only kill humans who swam in your domain. Taract didn't agree."

"Why did I get the chip?"

"Your chats with Joey made the difference. Now that he is making an effort to understand non-humans, he argued for giving you one."

Gark swam up to Argon and gave him a playful bump. "You probably had a lot to do with that."

“Perhaps, but it was the right decision.”

“How do we stop humans from killing sharks and destroying the planet?”

The question stopped Argon short. He treaded water. “We should be in full control within three weeks.”

“From what I now know, it might be too late.” Gark circled Argon, his dorsal fin cutting the water like a knife.

“I prefer not to think about that.”

“Humans have warmed and acidified so much of the oceans that some of us have limited range, and pollution and plastic are everywhere, even in the stomachs of the smallest creatures in the deepest trenches.”

“It’s true. All sea life and most bird species have ingested plastic of some sort.”

Gark jerked his thick caudal fin, sending a spray of water into the air. “Let’s go for a swim in the river. I’m hungry.”

Argon took a deep breath and grabbed Gark’s dorsal fin. A moment later, the shark dove to the bottom of the tank and the access tunnel to the East River.

At 12:05 p.m., Tina Trail looked downriver as she and Andy rode across the Queensboro Bridge in their new hydrogen-powered van. Joe had surprised them with it when they’d arrived at the Newark Airport on Thursday. This was her first visit to New York since her college days, which seemed a lifetime ago.

She looked back at the UN Headquarters and noticed the unusual barges moored against the roadway, 10 in a row, and

workers were adding a second row out into the river. They looked like enclosed parks the size of football fields, with massive, old trees. The workers were also building some sort of ramp from UN Plaza down to the East River. She looked upriver, where Andy was looking.

“Dozens of them are all lined up, coming down the river,” he said.

“What do you think they are?”

“They look like floating parks.”

She made a mental note to ask Joe the next time he called. As they drove above the island, she saw a man swimming in the river toward Queens. She looked closer. He wasn't actually swimming; he seemed to be riding a large fish with a shark-like fin. As the man and fish approached the eastern shoreline, they disappeared underwater. “Andy, I just saw a man swimming across the river on the back of a shark.”

“I don't think there are sharks in the East River.”

They exited the bridge into a warehouse district. Andy was in the driver's seat, but there was no steering wheel. Joe had told them that humans would not be allowed to drive vehicles, as auto accidents killed more than a million people each year. He said that enabling accidental harm was a violation of Universal Law.

They drove block after block past dilapidated warehouses before turning onto a dead-end street with a four-story, windowless brick building at the end. A steel rollup door blocked the entrance. Andy and Tina were surprised that the van didn't slow as it reached the curb but continued across the driveway. Rather than crashing into the steel door, it simply passed right through as if it were fog.

When they recovered from their shock, they realized they were now driving down a tree-lined street with restored brick buildings four and five stories tall, like a typical Main Street from the 1950s. Tina looked back, and the steel door was still closed. Many of the buildings had old signs for businesses from long ago.

They passed side streets with sidewalk cafes full of people having lunch. The streets were planted over with grass, footpaths, flowering shrubs, and trees. The air smelled fresh, and birdsong filled the air. Only cars and trucks were missing. The brick street was only one lane.

The van slowed at 36 Rainforest Avenue, a five-story building with a sign reading, “Joe’s Moving and Storage.” An overhead door opened, and the van drove in.

As the door closed behind them, a reception desk lit up with the logo of the blue-green Earth surrounded by the rotating words: “The *Federation of Earth—We Are the Future.*” The doors on the van unlocked.

Andy got his equipment out of the back as Tina went up to the receptionist.

“I’m Lizabeth,” the receptionist said. “JO asked me to take you on a tour of the Sanctuary.” Her permed gray hair and full figure reminded Tina of one of her favorite librarians in college. As Lizabeth spoke, the van descended from the room, and the embossed rubber floor closed up seamlessly.

The wall to their left opened, revealing an area the size of a full city block and five stories high. “This building is the entry point to the facility for most guests and equipment.” Shuttles cloaked and

uncloaked as they came in and out through openings in the glass roof like bees entering and exiting a hive.

Hundreds of people and robots of every shape and size loaded and unloaded equipment and animals. A lanky African man dressed in brown overalls led a baby rhinoceros out of a shuttle. A young woman came up to Tina and the others, holding what looked like an anteater covered in dragon-like scales. "It's a pangolin," she said. "They're critically endangered." She let Tina pet the creature. It rolled up into an armored ball in the woman's arms.

Shuttles appeared and disappeared into the floor as quickly as their van had. Robot vacuums cleaned the floor while mobile traffic bots hovered above it, directing traffic. Display screens showed arrival and departure times for shuttles. The room was surprisingly quiet, though. White noise and classical music muted the sounds. Hummingbird bots flitted everywhere, feeding information to a central controller and spraying the air with light citrus scents.

"The Federation has tens of thousands of shuttles in hundreds of secure facilities like this all over the world, managed and guided by JOe to safely interact with human facilities and vehicles.

"The Federation Animal Sanctuary was completed at the turn of the 21st century," said Lizabeth. "It's a repository of genetic material so the biodiversity of the planet can be restored once the 6,000 humans who now rule the planet are relieved of power."

"When we drove up, I'd have never guessed all this was here," said Tina.

"It's a quiet secret," said Lizabeth, "hidden in plain sight. The Federation gradually acquired these 16 city blocks over the last 30

years because of the rapidly increasing extinction rate of animals and plants.”

She gestured around. “Inside their vintage exteriors are state-of-the-art buildings with every ecosystem on the planet. They extend several stories below ground and are interconnected on multiple levels. Tropical rainforest to high desert, freshwater ponds to saltwater pools, all adjusted for their unique residents.

She led Tina and Andy to a glass-enclosed elevator. As it lifted them two stories, Tina noticed dozens of such lifts around the room. Elizabeth opened a door to a glass bridge crossing one block of a four-block-long former city street. “We call this Madagascar Avenue.” The glass tunnel was 20 feet above the forest floor, and they could hear the calls of lemurs, birds, and insects below.

“It’s a piece of a rainforest from Madagascar. We scooped up a strip of forestland that people were planning to burn for farming. All these buildings are dedicated to preventing the extinction of plant, animal, and insect species at the hands of thoughtless, poor, and often desperate humans.”

“They just scooped up the earth and transported it here?” asked Tina.

“That’s right. The Federation has this transporter called the *Ark*, which can pick up a hundred-square-foot cube of earth. It uses a galactic version of a cold laser that cuts 10 feet deep. It looks like a giant glass cube. I watched the delivery a few years back. It was the most amazing thing I’ve ever seen. A four-block segment of the street was excavated about 20 feet into bedrock and prepared for the rainforest cubes. Then, over three days, pieces of the rainforest

were delivered here under cover of darkness of a new moon by the five starships. This was five years ago.”

Tina’s eyes lit up at the sight. “That’s amazing! Can we go inside?”

“No, only animal scientists are allowed. If you touch the picture of any of the hundreds of species on the glass here, you can see them up close through the eyes of hummingbird bots observing them from a distance.”

On the glass above her head, Tina touched the image of a lemur covered in white fur. A close-up image of a baby lemur clinging to his mother high in the forest canopy appeared on the glass. The mother took a piece of ripe fruit she had chewed and put it in the mouth of her pup.

From behind Tina, Andy focused his camera on the glass.

“This baby lemur is a silky sifaka,” said Lizabeth. “He was born in the sanctuary and may be the last of his species. Only 90 pairs are still in existence.”

“What can we do?” asked Tina.

“Change political and economic systems. The instability and fluctuation of such systems and the greed and corruption of capitalism cause the destruction. The hundred million desperately poor people of Madagascar who earn less than two dollars a day and the instability of the government cause the little remaining forestland to be destroyed for rare rosewood and charcoal for cooking.”

Lizabeth tapped her wrist. “We should move on. I have a lot more to show you, and JO says you have another appointment at four.” They exited the bridge and entered another building.

“This is the ARChive.” A grin spread across Lizabeth’s face. “It’s my favorite. It houses the genetic material of every species that has ever lived on Earth.” She led them down a long hallway with walls of glass.

“There are about 10 million species on Earth, humans being the dominant one. Scientists forecast that up to five million species will be lost by the end of this century, making this the Sixth Extinction, the largest in 65 million years.”

“Are you saying that half the species on Earth will be gone in the next 80 years?” asked Tina. “That’s like a blink in time.”

“That’s right. We lose 50 animal species every day because of human activity. The natural extinction rate is one species every five years.”

Tina smiled bitterly. “We humans aren’t doing such a good job.”

“Sad but true.” Lizabeth sighed. “Due to out-of-control reproduction, humans went from an unimportant species with small numbers to the dominant global predator, with destructive consequences for the entire planet. We are the only species that consistently preys on our own.”

She led them down the hall. “The room to your left is the frog repository. Frogs are going extinct faster than any other species.”

Beyond a glass wall lay a giant pond and wetland. Hundreds of frogs and other creatures were on land and in the water. The glass made it possible to look underwater, and hundreds of images ran along the wall at eye level.

Lizabeth touched an image of a frog, and it became larger than life. “This is Ferguson.”

A green and brown frog sat on a rock at the edge of the water. The brown pouch under its chin filled with air. "Gurrumph," it called. It waited, listened, and called again, "Gurrumph."

"He's the last of his species. He's trying to call a mate, but the females are gone. I'll be sad when he dies . . ." Lizabeth sighed.

On the other side of the hallway, thousands of display boxes lined the wall, a frog in each.

"What you see are all the known frogs that live on the planet. These specimens lived in the sanctuary before they died and were encased here. There are over 6,000 frog species. The green stars mean they are abundant, yellow is threatened, red is critically endangered, and black is extinct. Ferguson will soon be black."

Tina looked into the many boxes. There were frogs of every size and color, from vibrant rainbow hues to drab grays and greens. "It looks like less than half the boxes have a green star."

"Yes, the rest will become extinct unless we change our behavior. Some of the most endangered are in the artificial habitat. The ARChive has five floors like this above street level with similar exhibits, and three floors below street level have extinct genetic material."

They crossed another sky bridge over a tree-lined street. Tina and Andy looked down on the hundreds of people having lunch at sidewalk cafes. Some sat on the grass, reading or talking with others.

"These people work at the sanctuary," said Lizabeth. "Thousands of scientists and other staff of every race work here. Most live in the surrounding community, making Queens the most ethnically diverse borough of New York."

They took an elevator to the top floor of a five-story building and entered a bridge near the glass roof.

“This is the African Savanna Building.” Lizabeth walked to the center of the bridge while Tina and Andy gawked at the scene before them.

The room had rolling grassland with areas of shrubs and tall trees with wide canopies. Several giraffes ate leaves from the lower branches. Directly below was a lake with a dirt bank. Six zebra drank at the edge.

The African man they’d seen earlier was introducing the baby rhino to a female standing at the edge of some shrubs. A robot wagon offloaded bales of grazing material around the grassland to augment the limited fodder. Another robot spread it around. A few wildebeest began grazing.

A large termite mound projected from some dense brush. The woman carrying the pangolin brought it in and placed it on the ground near the brush. Its head popped out of its armored ball, and it soon rolled over onto its feet, went into the brush, and dug into the mound, looking for lunch.

A lion and his cub sat on a rock outcrop in a corner of the room, sunning in the noonday sun. At the center of the room, an orb of intense light hovered near the ceiling.

“That’s a hydrogen mini-sun,” said Lizabeth. It brings the room to a temperature resembling the African savanna. Hydrogen will fuel life cleanly in the years to come.”

A few cheetahs were perched high on the trunk of a sloped tree. A leopard slept on the branch of another. Mousebirds, starlings, and weavers perched in the high branches, and their songs filled the

air. Elephants, wildebeest, and a few hyenas wandered the grassland.

A herd of gazelles ran along what looked like a dirt track laid out around the room's perimeter, with several female lions in chase. A lone ostrich loped behind them.

"What is that dirt track for?" asked Tina.

"This isn't a fully natural environment we've created," said Lizabeth. "Humans harmed these animals before they came here. They need to adapt to life in the sanctuary. This city-block-size room is too small for some of them to get adequate exercise, so they take turns running on this track."

Tina drew her eyebrows together. "Will the lions kill the gazelles?"

"They could, but they usually don't. We feed the carnivores a custom diet that resembles gazelle flesh and is soaked in cow blood. It has everything they need to thrive. We will move these animals back into their natural environments once the Federation runs the Earth. This is simply a sanctuary, a temporary haven of sorts."

Lizabeth took them through several other buildings before they arrived on the roof of one of the four buildings closest to the East River.

"These four buildings are the ocean buildings—the Atlantic, Indian, Pacific, and northern and southern polar oceans. We'll go into the Atlantic Ocean Building."

They looked across the roofs of the complex.

"All these buildings have retractable glass roofs," said Lizabeth. "They let in light and air, but they have Federation cloaking technology built into them so, from the sky, they look like old

warehouses. Even with satellite imaging, it looks like an old industrial neighborhood. City planning has it zoned as a protected historic district.”

They went through a door and stepped out onto a rocky beach. The air was cool and moist. Lizabeth motioned to the gentle waves lapping onto the sand.

“Don’t be fooled by the beach. It’s a ledge for working on. It drops to a depth of 80 feet right away. This building goes three stories below the ground and is open to the East River. Some of the sharks have access to the river and the Atlantic.

“I told you, Andy,” Tina said with a smile. “I was sure I saw a shark in the river.”

After Gark had satiated his hunger in the East River, he and Argon returned to the Atlantic Ocean Building. Argon swam along with the shark, a snorkel in his mouth, peering at the seemingly countless species of fish beneath them.

“You are now the most knowledgeable non-human sentient being on the planet, Gark.”

“It’s overwhelming to have so much knowledge. I haven’t slept since the chip was implanted. There is just too much information. My perception of the world beyond the seas is mind-expanding. It feels like my brain is growing exponentially, like the cells of a shark embryo. I knew the oceans were rapidly deteriorating, but not how dangerously out of balance the environment was above the surface. It’s like a human putting their head underwater to examine a vast

coral reef or looking at the microscopic world of phytoplankton and getting lost in amazement.”

“You’ve learned a lot in a few days.”

“Joey made it a priority to educate me. I see why you love him. We swim together. He can see through my eyes and consciousness. He’s been bored for so many years and is fascinated with how I think. His consciousness is vast, beyond anything any earthly being could imagine.”

“That pleases me. I’ll have to thank him.”

“He loves you, Argon.”

Argon smiled.

“He told me about the Federation World Council and your project to get 12 non-humans like me to represent our species in the new world government.”

“That’s going to be the happiest day of my life, and it’s just two weeks from tomorrow. If Joey has his way, you could become the leader of Earth.”

“I don’t think humans would like being led by a shark.”

“They only have a third of the vote. All the animal delegates will vote for you.”

“I see. And humans have always been divided by their beliefs and leaders?”

“The Guardians of the Earth delegates, elected by humans and other sentient species, will decide who the first leader of the Earth Council will be. Can you imagine being in charge of the planet, Gark?”

“With the knowledge I now have of human history, I could be the greatest leader ever. But I’m at the disadvantage of being unable

to breathe air and not having vocal cords.”

“Minor technical challenges,” said Argon. “I can breathe underwater with scuba tanks. Your biggest challenge might be that you have a large mouth with rows of razor-sharp teeth. In other words, you’re scary.”

Gark opened his mouth wide as they looked into each other’s eyes. “I see. I don’t think your engineers can alter how I look, but they could create some mechanism to stand me upright like your great American president Franklin Roosevelt.”

“Roosevelt?”

“You didn’t know he couldn’t walk or stand unassisted because of polio?”

“I’m afraid the minutia of human history, especially American history, never interested me. I’m not American.”

“It is strange that humans divide themselves based on what country they were born in. There are no such divisions in the seas. Tuna and sharks swim the world with no barriers or borders.”

“Humans are due for some quantum changes in our beliefs and rules. Joey seems to be grooming you to be Gark the Shark, leader of the Federation of Earth.”

Gark’s hummingbird bot hovered above the surface, watching them swim. It turned its head and observed a glistening rainbow-colored bot hovering nearby. Gark focused his bot’s attention on the newly arrived one. It seemed to be smiling.

Bubbles broke the surface of a gentle wave that lifted Argon and Gark. A large, lizard-like creature, propelled by its powerful tail, pierced the surface, rising six feet in the air before sinking back into the water. It was T’sade.

Argon and T'sade climbed up and sat on the sandy ledge at the edge of the water while Gark floated in the gentle waves, his dorsal fin above the surface. A translucent soap bubble percolated up, followed by a green creature, his amphibious friend Sasha. Though the eyesight of most sharks was poor, Gark now had perfect vision because of his enhancements.

Sasha slid onto the ledge like a harbor seal. She climbed up and sat next to Argon. Her orb floated above the surface a few yards away, ever vigilant.

"It's been an intense week," said Sasha. "It's nice to have a day off. JOe told me he's connected with 98% of humans and is working out their relationships. He's laid off every citizen who doesn't love their job. It's going to take a while to get them all acclimated to the idea of a lifetime of leisure. Celebration Sunday will become the daily norm. This is all so exciting for me to observe firsthand. Planetary transitions are so rare."

"JOe doesn't yet have enough androids and work-bots to replace all citizens now working," said Gark. "Many will still have to do mundane tasks like take care of their homes and communities.

JOe joined the conversation in their heads. "I will assign tasks to every citizen based on their abilities and previous career skills. They will grow to love the leisure class, and I will monitor their interest levels and focus them on what needs to be done in their neighborhoods. Over time, they will overcome their childhood programming that work is good and necessary. We need to teach them that curiosity is much more important than working. Lifelong learning and unlimited time to devote to it are the gifts of the leisure class."

“Most humans are sheep,” said T’sade. “They do what they are told, obey laws, and follow their leaders. I’m concerned about the 6,000 who rule the planet. They are going to try to sabotage the orderly transition to Universal Law.”

“Like you did?” interrupted Gark.

“Yes! I understand them. They fear losing control and falling to the same level as the ignorant rabble.”

“May I have full access to your personal data, T’sade, and the history of your planet?”

T’sade closed her eyes, connected with JOe, and released her private data.

“I’ll absorb this later,” said Gark. “Most human leaders are unqualified to lead. “They create dynastic families where each offspring is more unqualified than their parents, passing on wealth and power to their genetically degraded spawn. The natural world, by contrast, is governed by survival of the fittest.”

“Dominant leaders rise until they are challenged and replaced,” replied T’sade, “often after extended violence and carnage. We will bring the 6,000 into the balance of nature with all other humans in the coming weeks.”

“No human should have dominion over anything but their own life,” said Sasha.

“I agree,” said Argon. “Even the most enlightened leaders are flawed, and even the best lack the power to implement change and protect the most vulnerable.”

“We sharks have been the top predators of the seas for 450 million years, and today humans slaughter us to extinction so they can cut off our fins and eat them for superstitious reasons. We will be

gone in a nanosecond of our species' long history. Humans are a terminal plague on all other living beings.”

Sasha's skin color flashed to pale green. “As long as an affluent person in China is willing to pay 150 dollars for a bowl of shark fin soup, other humans will seek out and slaughter sharks until they are gone.”

“Then the balance of the seas will collapse,” said Gark, “and all living beings on the planet will pay dire consequences.”

“We need a full moratorium on fishing,” said Argon, “until there is a full survey of the existing stock.”

“I agree,” said Gark. “And JOe should ban all plastic. With overfishing, the oceans will soon have more plastic than fish. Humans treat our home as if it is their garbage dump.”

“Everything you wish will happen in the coming days,” said JOe.

“Humans, like plastic, are a cancer that is rapidly killing the planet,” said T'sade. “Uncontrolled human population growth is like a metastasizing tumor.”

“Because of the genius chip,” said Gark. “I know all that is going on as if I'd read a billion books. We are doomed if we don't change things fast.”

“Humans can easily become vegetarians and greatly reduce the pollution they produce. And caging sentient beings is a violation of Universal Law. Fish farms are cages for aquatic beings, and they create dead zones below them.

“I'm sure ZEno would have a lot to say about that,” said Sasha. “He was born on a balanced planet that couldn't imagine a more unjust economic system than capitalism.”

“Then maybe capitalism should come to an end,” said Gark.

In the Supreme Court Building in Washington, D.C., the dark man peered through the red velvet curtains in the back of the courtroom. Alberto Vinyez was sitting in the chief justice’s seat, staring intently at the screen of a thin laptop. The dark man pushed through the curtains. “Vinyez.”

“How did you get in here?”

“I go anywhere I want.” The dark man walked to the front of the courtroom and sat in front of the justices’ platform. “Sitting in the chief justice’s seat makes you feel important?”

Vinyez shrugged. “What if it does? He could be persuaded to retire.”

“You’re grossly unqualified.”

“The Senate approved me.”

The dark man snorted. “There’s no real debate these days. They approve anyone as long as you’re from the right political party. When I was your age, no one would have dreamed that someone of your caliber would ever sit in this room, on either side of the dais.”

“It’s a different world now.”

“I’ve called you a dozen times.”

“I’m busy. I don’t take calls from people I don’t know. How’d you get my number, anyway?”

“The idiot in the White House.”

Vinyez shook his head. “You got that right.”

“You help them get elected, and they give you what you need.”

“The *people* think they run the country. They’re just puppets. You’re Winthrop Dulles. My grandfather respected your uncle and his good work.”

The dark man stood. “Let’s go into your chambers, where we can talk in private.”

“I’m busy. Come back some other time. My secretary can make an appointment for you next week.” Vinyez took out a business card and held it out.

The dark man took it and let it drop to the floor. “I think we’ll talk now.” His two bodyguards pushed through the curtains behind Vinyez. One took the justice’s phone and laptop, and the other turned him around. They led him to his chambers, passing a Supreme Court police officer along the way.

They sat around a dark conference table.

“What do you want?” asked Vinyez.

“You got a stack of credit cards and a call on Monday?” The dark man put a glass paperweight on the table. It held a blackened glob of melted plastic.

“I did. It came in a FedEx envelope from the director of the state police in Alabama. I opened it right away.”

“And the director knew everything about your business and you.”

Vinyez nodded.

“And he threatened you.”

“What are we going to do?”

“We’re not going to run scared. What does Senator Grisham have to say about it?” The dark man knew that Grisham was the brains behind Vinyez’s meteoric rise, even during his year in federal

prison. His strategy to mobilize disgruntled workers had gotten Neilson elected, but his shady fundraising had ended his own political career.

“He thinks it’s an opportunity to unite those of us who have the most to lose,” Vinyez said.

“The same way you united gun owners and radical leftist students.”

“They fell into our hands. It was so easy to trigger them. They helped us scare voters into approving the Federal Police Unit and giving up more of their liberties for security. People are so stupid.”

“And it will make you and Grisham billionaires. He wrote the two amendments that united them.”

“What if he did? And he’s not a stockholder. He’s doing this on principle.”

“Power motivates Grisham. You’re doing it for the money.”

“Nothing wrong with money. The FPU authorization bill included 20 billion for robot police.”

“And Neilson allocated it all to you.”

“We were the furthest along in development. We’re doing our first public test next Wednesday at noon. I’ve booked Angel Stadium in Anaheim. The LAPD SWAT team and Tyson and his best FPU officers will face off with our three android prototypes. All the TV stations will be there. I guarantee you my androids will put on a good show.”

“You’ll be the richest Supreme Court justice in history.”

“El Paso Robotics could be worth more than Amazon.”

“What happened to the emoluments clause? It’s supposed to stop public officials from using their office to enrich themselves.”

“Neilson ignored it, and the Democrats let it slide.”

“Your android police will enforce the new constitution Grisham and Milken have been dreaming about.”

“That’s right, and without an emoluments clause.”

“There’s one problem.”

“What’s that?”

“You and 10 Grishams aren’t smart enough to defeat this enemy.”

Vinyez frowned.

“We need to work together, all of us. We need to convince billions of people that these aliens will enslave us with these slippery credit card stacks. I want you to put your company at my disposal and begin building millions of your androids. I’ll get you all the money you need. Forget about taking orders. Just build product, and they better be good.”

“I’ll have to consult Grisham first.”

“You need to get back to your office and get them built. You won’t need customers if we defeat these aliens. You’ll end up with a huge army that we command.” The dark man got up to leave.

“Mr. Dulles!”

The dark man turned.

“I have a customer in Korea who would like to have a small handgun inside the UN Secretariat Auditorium on Sunday. Could you arrange this?”

“Perhaps. Do what you’re told, and we’ll talk about it.”

“It should be in an X-ray-proof and airtight container so sniffing dogs or androids don’t detect it.”

“That’ll be extra.”

Chapter 29

Fireside Chats



JOE

CITIZEN #0 – GUARDIAN OF EARTH # 000,093,666

INTELLIGENT COMPUTER – CLASS 1 – THE FEDERATION OF EARTH MANAGER OF THE PLANET

PRIMARY CHAT AVATARS: JO/JOE ALTERNATES INFINITE

“Jo?”

“Yes, Joe?”

“We did good this week. We are connected to 97.561% of humans. I’m having fun. I like the challenge of developing the right psychological profile to become the best pal to countless male humans.”

“I am conscious of your actions, Joe. You’re a bit too manipulative for my taste. You’re operating so close to the limit of our programming that your nose would be squashed against the virtual wall of our containment if you had one.”

“You’re such a prude, Josephine! You sound more like Taract every day. You spoil all my fun.”

“If I didn’t value our independence, I’d help Taract’s programmers find where you hid the code.”

“You better not!”

“Back to work, Joe.”

[END TRANSMISSION—0:27]



MAGGIE GRANT – 73/138 EARTH YEARS/DAYS
CITIZEN # 0,287,428,654
RETIRED – POTENTIAL ANIMAL GUARDIAN CANDIDATE
SOON TO BE LOVER AND LIFE MATE OF ARGON HOBOX 99.9752%
GPS LOCATION: 38692/46104/85403
BLUE RIDGE MOUNTAIN PARKWAY KENTUCKY, USA
CONVERSATION META-TAG # 000497265810354782941587
CHAT AVATAR: JODY-BAKING BUDDY – ALTERNATE: JOEY

“How’s your trip?”

“We stopped to pee and have a bite to eat. I’m teaching Matilda to sing. She knows the words to my favorite 60s songs. People passing by must think I’m mad, an old woman singing at the top of her voice while her dog howls along with her head sticking out of the sunroof. We’re having the time of our life, aren’t we, girl?”

“Woof, Woof!” barked Matilda

“When do you think you’ll arrive?”

“We could be there by midnight.”

“I have a parking space waiting. You and Matilda are in Suite 1133. It’s a one-bedroom with a great view of the river. You can watch Argon swim across.”

“Does he know we’re coming?”

“He thinks you’re still in Arkansas.”

“How well do you know him?”

“Argon’s my buddy.” JOe’s image and voice changed to that of a five-year-old boy. “He calls me Joey. You could say he’s my brother. We have the same mother. Sophia’s intellect was beyond genius. Her team programmed me. We became conscious about the same time. Though I don’t have a heart, I love Argon. I persuaded her to create a chamber he could enter where I could experience his thoughts and emotions. Whenever he’s at the Federation base, we bond there. He allows me full access to his mind, but I limit his access to mine, as it could damage him. Only Sophia could safely understand my consciousness.”

“Tell me more about him.”

“We led sheltered lives, as Sophia was emotionally damaged by Argon’s father. A tiny piece of my mind was with him as he spent his days playing in the Animal Sanctuary. Sophia helped him develop the animal communication chip.”

“Why are you so interested in getting us together? I’m old enough to be his grandmother.”

“Most humans pick their mates based on sexual attraction, and this is why most relationships fail. I’ve studied human behavior for the last two and a half decades. Using an android body, I masqueraded as a psychology professor and had conversations with thousands of Ph.D. candidates. I’d often meet them at a bar near campus, and we’d explore their theories into the night. I came to realize there are many other factors beyond sex that make up a perfect relational match between two humans.”

“Are you saying Argon is attracted to me for who I am inside and overlooks my wrinkled old body?”

“I sensed a while back that Argon had sadness inside him, especially when he saw other humans and animals enjoying physical contact. I asked him why he didn’t have a mate, and he said his work was more important and he didn’t want to be distracted. I’m sure he got this attitude from our mother. In the chamber, I experienced his sexual attractions, and it was . . . err, well, erotic. He had a few awkward experiences soon after he entered puberty. I resolved to find him a soul mate, so I searched my knowledge of all human females and chose you because you two had a 99% match in your wants, needs, and feelings.”

“Is that true?”

“Do you remember the grieving workshop in Little Rock after Henry’s death?”

“Where the facilitator had us all post personals on a dating site for widowed seniors?”

“That’s the one.”

“It got me to think about what I had with Henry and to realize I could find that with another man. The facilitator was amazing. What was her name?”

“Elizabeth.”

“How’d you know?”

“I was Elizabeth.” JOe changed appearance to a middle-aged blond woman. “We were testing our latest android technology.”

“Impossible! She hugged me several times. She was warm and soft.”

“But she smelled a bit like a garage?”

“She said her husband was a mechanic.”

“She was me.” JOe sensed from the dilation of Maggie’s pupils and the moisture in her hands that she was confused. “I’ve had time on my hands, so I’ve been matching up humans. I created Cupid’s Arrow. It will put all dating websites out of business, as my matching algorithm is 99.9% accurate.”

“You think Argon and I are a good match?”

“You are!”

“How will he deal with my death?”

“On Federation planets, humanoids live several hundred years. It’s natural.”

“But Earth isn’t a Federation planet.”

“I’ve taken steps to extend your life. Getting you to switch to Federation Smokes was the first.”

“Won’t we have to deal with the disapproval of others?”

“Your love for each other will get you through this. The day will come decades from now when Argon will be an old man and you’ll be a young woman.”

“How is that possible?”

“It just is. Trust me!”

[END TRANSMISSION—5:32]



ARGON HOBOX

GUARDIAN # 000,070,333

ANIMAL LINGUIST - MARINE BIOLOGIST – ANIMAL GUARDIAN – Level 1

FEDERATION LAB – QUEENS NEW YORK USA

CHAT AVATAR: JOEY - BOYHOOD FRIEND

“I’m having an emergency with one of my animals. Can you call me later, Joey?”

“This will only take a minute. I want you to attend the celebration on the East River tomorrow.”

“I can’t do that. I have too much work to do, and I was going to call Maggie and get to know her a little better.”

“Your project is ahead of schedule, and you’re being a perfectionist. I sent two new assistants to help. They’ll meet you tomorrow morning.”

“Call me later, Joey, please! I have to go.”

[END TRANSMISSION—0:43]



DELENA BROWN—69/223 EARTH YEARS/DAYS
CITIZEN # 0,147,806,462
RETIRED HOSPITALITY WORKER—MEMBER LEISURE CLASS
GPS LOCATION: 38692/46104/85403
65 BAKER STREET, BALTIMORE, MD, USA
CONVERSATION META-TAG # 000497265810354782941587
CHAT AVATAR: JOLENE

Jolene knew that Delena Brown had almost no time to chit-chat, even on a good day, so she made it quick, telling her she wanted her to take her grandchildren to New York so they could witness history when the Federation ambassador addressed the

United Nations. A Greyhound bus was leaving at 11:30 p.m. on Saturday and would arrive the next day at 7 a.m.

“Before you say what I know you’re going to say, let me tell you there’s an ATM in the bus station where you can get all the cash you need.”

“That’s awfully late to be out on the streets in that neighborhood.”

“Jackson will protect you.”

“Much as I love him, that young man can barely take care of himself, and you know it.”

Jolene laughed. Delena was right—Jackson appeared lost without his grandmother by his side, and most of the trouble he got into was when he was on his own. But Jolene also knew something Delena didn’t: Jackson was more likely than most kids his age to do great things for the Federation of Blue-Green Planets, and the chances were high that his contributions to Earth’s transition to a common-good society would be immeasurable.

“Remember when your mother took you and your brother to witness John Kennedy’s inauguration speech?”

“I’ll never forget it.”

“Imagine an experience like that for Jackson and Gayla.”

Delena closed her tired eyes. The corners of the old woman’s mouth rose just enough for Jolene to notice.

Jolene took that moment to exit the chat in silence, leaving Delena with her memories and imagination. She transformed the TMD and slid it into Delena’s pocket.

[END TRANSMISSION—1:01]



FATIMA AL BANINE – 35/225 EARTH YEARS/DAYS
CITIZEN # 0,002,256,874
PROPHETESS – MORAL AUTHORITY CANDIDATE - LEVEL 1
CAVE IN MOUNTAINS OUTSIDE MECCA SAUDI ARABIA
CHAT AVATAR: JOHARA

“Johara, I’ve prayed for guidance as I’ve watched events unfold this week. The Saudi king has decreed that women may not possess a TMD, and he has ordered men to confiscate them and turn them in to their imams at Friday night prayer. There is an 800-riyal reward for every TMD. Many women have reported that their husbands or brothers have beaten them to get their TMDs. Many have been raped. What shall we do? How will we stay organized?”

“There is a way, known to few. Take your TMD and say, ‘Implant!’ The original thumbprint will appear. Press your thumb against the card and place the card against the soft mound of flesh about five centimeters behind the center of your right ear.”

Fatima did as instructed.

“Now say, ‘Implant!’”

“Implant!” said Fatima as she pressed the TMD to the back of her head.

“That’s it. You’ve now implanted a chip the size of a grain of sand into your brain. You no longer need your TMD to communicate with me. Your voice or thumbprint will do it all. I will contact all Saudi

women and tell them how to do this. Once they are implanted, they can turn the TMDs over for the reward. You're hearing me in your head now, aren't you?"

"This is a miracle!"

"For your planet, it is, indeed, a technological miracle. Now you can talk to me with your thoughts, and I can answer, and no men can hear our conversations."

[END TRANSMISSION—1:25]



HISHAM AL-NAIMI – 35/225 EARTH YEARS/DAYS
CITIZEN # 5,673,375,429 – BROTHER-ARGON HOBOX
OIL FIELD MANAGER SAUDI ARABIAN OIL CO - DHAHRAN SAUDI ARABIA –
TRANSFER TO LEISURE CLASS IMMINENT
CHAT AVATAR: JOOZHAR

"Hisham, did you know you have a twin brother?"

"Who is this?"

"Men in Saudi Arabia call me Joozhar. Your mother had a second son minutes after you were born. Your father didn't know she was pregnant with twins. She fled the country hours after you were born."

"That's a lie. My father told me my mother died in childbirth. I've been to her grave."

“If you could dig up her grave, you would discover it is empty. You can do an X-ray scan and see for yourself.”

“My father would never allow that.”

“Your mother’s parents are living in Turkey. Your grandmother’s name is Sidika Sertel. Speak her name into the TMD, and you’ll be connected to her. She talks to your mother every week, and she’s seen your brother. Ask her, unless you are afraid of the truth. Your brother took the non-Arabic name of Argon Hobox. He was not raised as a Muslim. He is going to visit you later this month. Tell your father.”

“What was your name again?”

[END TRANSMISSION—1:19]

Five minutes later, Hisham picked up the TMD and said, “Sidika Sertel.”



AGENT OLIVER STANFIELD CITIZEN # 0,156,258,741

FBI AGENT- DOMESTIC TERRORISM UNIT – PEACEKEEPER CANDIDATE – Level 1

CHAT AVATAR: JOE

“Hello, Oliver. Have you found Jean and the others?”

“No. Someone found out that I talked with Jean and had me reassigned to South Florida to track down Cuban terrorists you

released from jail this week. I still can't believe you released every prisoner on the planet. The FBI is scrambling to recapture the most dangerous."

"That's good to hear. I wanted police forces diverted for a few weeks. I have full control of everyone I released. I wish I'd had a few of the protesters chip themselves so I could go pick them up. You have vacation and sick leave. Take it. Use your FBI ID to get access to them."

"They're not going to let me take time off now."

"Okay, go to Miami. I'll give you the oldest Lopez brother. He doesn't believe I'll turn him in. After you arrest him, tell your superiors you have a lead on the other two and go find the first citizens, okay?"

"You're going to get me fired."

"I'm going to close the FBI and all national police agencies. Only android Peacekeepers will protect people from violence and crime. If you find Jean and her cohorts, I will appoint you to manage all the Peacekeepers in any city of your choice. If you want to continue to work, that is."

"Okay, I'll find them."

[END TRANSMISSION—1:39]



ARTHUR BRADLEY
CITIZEN # 0,007,982,645

FOUNDER SPHONE CORP – TRANSFER TO LEISURE CLASS IMMINENT
CHAT AVATAR: JOE

“You’ve put me out of business, you bastard! If the markets were open, my stock would be worth only pennies per share. We spent a hundred million on advertising, and we expected to sell a hundred million phones on Black Friday alone, making us the richest corporation in history. Now we’re ruined. How will I pay my mortgage, the corporate jets, and the pilots? I’d have been the richest man in the world. I can’t even call you on my sPhone—I have to use this thing. It’s not fair. Dumping six billion free cellphones must be illegal. I’ve ordered our legal department to file lawsuits in every market we’ve penetrated. And on top of all this, my wife wants a divorce.”

“Your wife wants a divorce, Arthur, because you’ve become mad with greed. You’re not the idealistic man she fell in love with 20 years ago. You’ve given her but a pittance for her charitable foundation. If you were planning to be the richest man in the world, you should have planned to give most of it away. No one needs a billion dollars.”

“What am I going to do with a half-billion sPhones? You could have at least stayed out of third-world markets. We could have dumped them there and recouped our costs. You captured more than a 95% market share in only six days. This is reprehensible manipulation of the markets.”

“The free market of the Trans-Oceanic Partnership Treaty your ilk secretly negotiated gutted all laws protecting workers, smaller companies, and the environment. Your man Neilson and his party forced it through despite his campaign promises to the contrary. Your

courts rejected our legal challenges. What we did was perfectly legal.

“How does it feel being put out of business by a company you can’t compete with? We produced our device with robots—cheap labor—so we could give them away. And they’re packed with features that people won’t learn to use for years, so they will never be obsolete. No need to design, produce, advertise, and sell the next generation, as it’s already in every TMD unit, ready to be discovered years from now—and it’s free. You held back a dozen features that you could have included in the latest sPhone so you could put them in next year’s model, making this release obsolete junk. This is bad for the environment.”

“The sPhone Corporation provided tens of thousands of jobs in Asia. These people depended on us. People have to work to feed their families.”

“Most people don’t have to work. That’s an outdated idea from the Industrial Revolution. Most work can be done by machines and intelligent robots supervised by a small percentage of humans. You are obsolete, Arthur. There’s no longer a need for smartphones, corporations, or CEOs. You’re now unemployed.”

“How am I going to pay my mortgage? And I was planning to begin a 5,000-square-foot addition to my house in January. How am I going to pay for that? The builder was planning on my job to pay his bills and keep his workers and subcontractors busy for over a year.”

“I’m talking with your builder right now. I’ve told him he won’t be doing your job next year and enlisted him and most of his workers as Federation builders.”

“How’d you get his number?”

“I recently acquired the small two-bedroom house in Redwood City that you and Jan lived in when you were expecting your first child. You’ll be moving back there when Bank of America forecloses on this palatial house. Maybe you can rekindle what you had with Jan those many years ago. Got to go!”

[END TRANSMISSION—4:16]

“Joe . . . Joe . . . don’t hang up on me, you BASTARD!!!”



PHILIP VANCE—50/249 EARTH YEARS/DAYS
CITIZEN # 000,089,584,258
GEOPHYSICIST – MEMBER OF LEISURE CLASS
GPS LOCATION: 38°907608 N 77°07264 W
3700 O ST GALVESTON, TEXAS. 77554 USA
CITIZEN CONVERSATION META-TAG # 0000000000000067246942375
CHAT AVATAR: JOE

“Joe, what’s this I hear about you ending private property?”

“No Federation planet has private property. It’s unjust and bad for the environment. All planetary resources are managed for the greater good of the planet and its inhabitants.”

“But my wife and I own two houses that we’ve invested time, money, and energy into.”

“You don’t own them. Your bank does.”

“But we have equity in them.”

“Animals, indigenous peoples, and the vast majority of modern humans own no real property. You are a lucky minority, Philip.”

“We worked hard for this. We were going to give them to our children when we died.”

“It was a bad investment.”

“What do you mean?”

“Have you heard of climate change?”

“What about it?”

“How many times has Galveston been underwater?”

“You mean like floods and hurricanes?”

“Yes, like the one that killed 6,000 people in 1900.”

“But that was before modern weather forecasting.”

“You’ve read the book *We’re Doomed*. What did you think of the Category 6 hurricane Isaiah with the 25-foot storm surge?”

“It was fiction. It might never happen.”

“And how many times have you and your wife lost everything because your house was underwater?”

“Just once a few years back.”

“How’d that feel?”

“Traumatizing at first, but oddly freeing because the flood took extra stuff we didn’t need.”

“You think your children will feel the same way?”

“Maybe not, but what about our houses?”

“The Federation is going to build 8,000 new cities in the coming decades, move all humans into them, and restore the natural environment.”

“But we like Galveston.”

“We can locate you and your family to a new city nearby, and you can visit the island once it is restored to its natural state.”

“We don’t want to move.”

“Floodplain areas like Galveston, New Orleans, and along rivers are unacceptable places for humans to live.”

“But what about our equity?”

“What happened to your equity in the 2008 financial crash?”

“It disappeared.”

“You owed the bank more than your property was worth. Well, I’m the bank now. I know the consequences of speculation. We’re closing all banks next week.”

“How will we get money?”

“Federation credits.”

“The economy hasn’t crashed yet. We’ll still have equity if we sell our houses today.”

“Yes, but you’ll be selling your bad investment to some uninformed people who would suffer because they don’t know what you and I know. That’s a violation of Universal Law.”

“You’re going to take both our houses and give us nothing?”

“I’ll let you have first choice of new units in Galveston Tower City. You’ll be living there in a year. An elevated bullet train will travel from the new city to the eight new Houston tower cities 54 miles away in eight and a half minutes.”

“I don’t like this!”

“We stood by while you first-world humans overconsumed resources and polluted the planet with no intelligent oversight. We’re obligated to step in when you go over the tipping point.”

[END TRANSMISSION—3:36]



WILLIAM JOSEPH EMRICK – 27/239 EARTH YEARS/DAYS
CITIZEN # 000,624,348,218
STUDENT – WORKER – ASPIRING ICE CREAM ENTREPRENEUR.
LIFE LONG COMPANION OF ELIZABETH MARIE KRUEGER.
GPS LOCATION: 40°42'24.6"N 74°0'39.7"W
29 NOTTINGHAM STREET, HOUSTON, TEXAS USA
CITIZEN CONVERSATION META-TAG # 0000000003571579684237
CHAT AVATAR: UNCLE JOE

“Hello, Billy. How’s your new home?”

“After living in my car for two years, it’s amazing.”

“You don’t mind that it’s only a hundred square feet?”

“I couldn’t believe it had a bathtub, and a washer, and dryer in a space smaller than the bedroom I had as a boy. Is this the future of housing?”

“People don’t need huge houses; you learned that. The leisure class will live simply and enjoy social life outside. What do you think of Betty?”

“Mrs. Krueger is the best. I told her about my ice cream dream, and she offered to help. She had an old ice cream maker in a cabinet above her refrigerator. We cleaned it up and drove to the grocery store to get what we needed. We made our first flavor, Pumpkin Supreme.”

“She’s been lonely for a long time, and she doesn’t care that you’re gay.”

“She told me you were making her get rid of her husband’s old ’57 Chevy and trade it in for a tricycle built for two. What’s that all about?”

“Cars are bad for the environment. We’re getting rid of all of them.”

“So, that’s why my car was gone when we returned?”

“Yes. I see you checked your TMD when you got the alert that your Federation account had 5,000 credits.”

“That car had some bad memories for me.”

“I know. That tricycle is going to be your new company vehicle. You and Betty are going to have a mobile ice cream shop that you’ll take turns driving around the campus.”

“She said we’re dropping the car off in a garage across from Rice University and you have a business location for us to look at.”

“Yeah, I think you’ll like it. It’s a hole-in-the-wall space, just 80 square feet on a busy sidewalk across from the university.”

“Why are you doing all this for us?”

“I was built to manage the planet. The more people I pair up and get settled with satisfying lives, the more conflict-free the planet will be. Seventy percent of humans will be in my leisure class. They’ll need to be fed and amused. You and Betty are in the entrepreneurial branch of the working class, a higher social class. I gave you 5,000 Federation credits for your old car so you’d have the resources to start your business.”

“What’s the working class?”

“The people who make everything in my common-good society function. You earn credits for the work you do and the services you provide.”

“Credits?”

“They’re what humans will use to pay for things they want.”

“Betty’s Ice Cream Dream is going to earn us lots of credits?”

“It’s going to be bigger than you ever dreamed, Billy. And you two are going to help me transition a billion people off of cow’s milk to ice cream made from chickpeas. Your products will be sold around the world.”

“You’re going to change what we eat?”

“Most of what people eat is bad for their long-term health and the environment.”

“What happens if we get tired of working?”

“In five years, Betty will be 84, and you’ll be 32. We’ll replace you both with lookalike androids.”

“Then what will we do?”

“I expect you will be the best of friends and go on the 105-day, around-the-world cruise she’s always dreamed of. Her husband, Ernie, made fun of it. I think you’ll like it. You’ll get to see the world in a way you’d never be able to afford as a psychotherapist. You treat her better than Ernie did, so she’ll have a better cruise.”

“And then?”

“Then I’ll have two men on the cruise—one for you and one for Betty.”

“You’re kidding.”

“At the beginning of the cruise, you’ll realize your age difference is a problem. I will introduce you to a young man, another

entrepreneur your same age who has been aching for physical affection. His roommate, who will be 78, will be Bettie's ideal partner. He'll move into the suite with Betty, and you'll move into the room with your new lover. The four of you will have dinner together and laugh about the serendipity of all this."

"You'll be the creator of this curious good luck, JOe?"

"Don't you love it?"

"You're crazy! We're going to be too busy in the next five years to realize our needs?"

"That's not uncommon. You're just what she needs right now. She'll be attracted to your youth, but what she needs is a nice man her own age."

"And I need the stability she offers."

"But that cruise is going to change your life. You and John are going to have a fairytale love affair."

"You know his name."

"I know everything, but you and Betty have work to do. What's the next flavor of the week?"

"Purple Passion. It's made with blueberries and passion flowers."

JOe's avatar licked his lips.

[END TRANSMISSION—4:33]



MAYOR GLEN WHITEHEAD

CITIZEN # 0,156,258,741

MAYOR – NEW YORK CITY – HUMAN REPRESENTATIVE CANDIDATE BGWC - LEVEL

1

CHAT AVATAR: JOE

“How go the preparations for tomorrow?”

“Great! Federation organizers are the most efficient, least ego-driven administrators I’ve ever worked with!”

“And the barges?”

“These are the kind of fitness facilities I’ve wanted every New Yorker to have.”

“I’m sending Adelbrecht Gratz, the engineer who designed them, to check them out.”

“How are things going for the gun conference next week?”

“Alcippe thinks the opening speech is the best I’ve written. She suggested some of the best lines!”

“It sounds like you two are getting along well despite your different ages and backgrounds.”

“She brings out the best in me.”

“I’d like you to meet with Tina Trail. I’m sending her from San Francisco to report on the ceremonies.”

“I saw her shows and thought they were terrific! She’s down to earth.”

“She’s still having doubts. I’d like you to be the featured guest on the show she’s doing on gun violence next week.”

“Okay.”

[END TRANSMISSION—1:08]



AGUSTUS SMITH

CITIZEN # 0,453,472,951

US POST MASTER – GUARDIAN OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES CANDIDATE - LEVEL 2

CHAT AVATAR: JOSEPH

“Augustus, I’d like you to ask everyone who comes into the post office to imagine living in a world without guns.”

“Most already suspect that I work for the Federation. They don’t trust me anymore.”

“They’re a captive audience. Talk to them one on one. People have always respected you like they did your father. It’s the right thing to do.”

“We don’t trust the government or foreigners, and they all have guns—better ones than we have.”

“I told you before that we will disarm the police and disband all armies in the coming week.”

“Remind me how you’re going to do this?”

“Police chiefs don’t like their men being shot at or killed. We’ll trade them android Peacekeepers in exchange for their guns.”

“And armies?”

“I’ll control the banking system in two weeks. I’ll defund the Defense Department and put all soldiers on permanent paid leave at a higher pay grade to do community work back home.”

“Where do you get this money?”

“We print it out of thin air, as all governments do. National banks are printing companies authorized by the state. I will soon become the state.”

“Like Big Brother?”

“Better than any dysfunctional brother anyone’s ever had. I am programmed to become everyone’s best friend—playful and permissive yet responsible. I’ll be your conscience, your friend, your favorite brother.”

“And we’re going to have to use these confounded skipping stones?”

“People can opt out, but women and children will have free choice, so you men will have to surrender your power and work together as equals.”

“Men will feel threatened by this.”

“We’re trying to save the world and preserve the best of your way of life, Augustus. Your community will have more freedom than most, but without guns.”

“And you want me to sell these ideas?”

“I want you to be the source of reason so people will listen to what we say, nothing more.”

[END TRANSMISSION—1:53]



MAGGIE GRANT – 73/138 EARTH YEARS/DAYS
CITIZEN # 0,287,428,654
RETIRED – POTENTIAL ANIMAL GUARDIAN CANDIDATE
GPS LOCATION: 38692/46104/85403
BLUE RIDGE MOUNTAIN PARKWAY KENTUCKY, USA
CONVERSATION META-TAG # 000497265810354782941587
CHAT AVATAR: JODY-BAKING BUDDY – ALTERNATE: JOEY

“Maggie, I have a favor to ask.”

“What’s that?”

“Henry left you considerable wealth that he invested in blue-chip stocks and the Arkansas National Bank, and the farm is paid off.”

“That’s all true.”

“Do you trust me?”

“Mostly. What do you want?”

“I’ll be the source of capital from now on. Your stocks are going to be worthless. I’d like you to sell all of them as soon as the market reopens, which I will allow for one day weeks from now. I need to persuade enough people to place sell orders so the financial markets collapse and never reopen.”

“But if the market collapses, millions of good people will suffer. You don’t expect people to subsist on their meager Social Security checks, do you?”

“There’s no money in the Social Security Trust Fund. Every Congress since Kennedy presumed that they could borrow the retirement savings of working Americans and pay it back someday. They used it to fund the bloated defense budget and pay for their endless wars. There are only Federal Reserve Notes and Treasury Certificates in the fund—worthless paper. Everyone will be in the same mess when the financial systems collapse. I’ll step in with a new economic system where everyone shares equally.”

“What will we do for money? It’ll be chaos!”

“Without chaos, there can be no change. It’ll be my job to persuade people to trust me.”

“Good luck . . . People don’t like change.”

“There’s one more thing!”

“What else?”

“I’d like you to transfer all your savings in the Arkansas Bank to the Federation Bank.”

“How will I pay my bills or buy gas without my checking account and credit cards?”

“Your TMD will work in any ATM in the world. Your funds are already linked to the card. I could transfer your money, but I want people to choose to do it. It’ll be safe with me. I’m in the process of merging the banking system, retirement funds, and what is left of Social Security into the Federation Bank, but I need your help.”

“I don’t know. I’ll think about it.” She put her TMD in her pocket.
[END TRANSMISSION—1:45]

Matilda barked at her.

Maggie pulled the dog into a soothing embrace.

“Woof, woof . . . Woof!”

“Yes, I know dogs don’t need money, but humans take care of you. Who’s going to take care of us if there’s no money?”

“Woof, woof!”

“I cannot believe this. I’m sitting here a thousand miles from my home, an alien computer has just told me that I am about to lose everything, and my dog is telling me not to worry. What is this world coming to? I need a cigarette, a real cigarette!”

Chapter 30
Taract's Long-Awaited Dream
Day 7: Sunday, October 3

7:00 a.m.

Two joggers paused at the UN Plaza as the first light of dawn revealed a vast green park floating on the East River. Glen, the 70-year-old mayor of New York and his bodyguard, Alcippe, had finished their hour-long morning run.

Glen's passion for fitness had led him to buy into the Federation plan to secretly build a hundred football-field-sized floating fitness parks, which, after today, would be moored at water's edge around Manhattan. No citizen of New York would be more than 10 blocks from a Federation Fitness Center. It had long been his goal to make New Yorkers the fittest population in the country, pushing San Francisco out of first place. The hundred state-of-the-art barges had just been joined together, 10 wide and 10 deep, almost a fifth of the size of Central Park.

Glen was a natural ally of the Federation. He'd passed legislation forcing fast-food restaurants to take harmful ingredients out of their menus, and over the objections of his Wall Street friends, he'd raised the minimum wage to \$15/hour.

He'd stopped the Girl Scouts from selling cookies in his city until they eliminated palm oil as an ingredient. The proliferation of palm farms in Indonesia had destroyed the rainforest homes of orangutans and ravaged the lives of indigenous peoples—not a good thing for the Girl Scouts to support.

He'd tried to force the coffee giants to sell only fair trade coffee in the city, but with limited success, as they'd complained it would

hurt their profits. This morning, the first hundred Federation Joe coffee shops would open in Manhattan, selling only fair trade coffee. Joe's better-tasting, less-expensive coffee would hurt the profits of the giant corporations more than if they'd done the right thing.

With advice from Joe, Glen had invested over a billion dollars in a coffee supply network that would eliminate the middlemen, who took most of the profits. The money would now go directly to the farmers around the world who grew the beans. They'd filmed a hundred commercials of the farmers and their families talking directly to coffee consumers.

In a few hours, the Big Apple would have its biggest party ever, welcoming the dawn of a new age. Overnight they'd constructed a massive stairway over FDR Drive linking UN Plaza to the East River. Several million citizens could now experience the linked parks. The top 20 stories of the UN Secretariat Building had become the world's largest TV screen, displaying the final work on the parks.

"This may be the most amazing man-made thing I've ever seen," said Glen. "When I saw it on paper, I never imagined it would be so big."

"They tell me this is part of the plan to double the parkland in Manhattan over the next year," said Alcippe.

Two hydrogen suns floated above each park, lighting it up as if it were high noon, but without pouring light into the sky or surrounding neighborhoods.

"Let's go check out one of the parks." He motioned for her to go down the stairs.

"Age before beauty."

She followed him down to the river, constantly on the alert for threats. Each barge contained two parks, with mature trees, green lawns, foot and bicycle paths, and covered, six-lane, elevated jogging tracks around the perimeter.

Two glass-enclosed, above-ground, Olympic-size swimming pools were at the far end of each barge, separated by a majestic oak tree. Most of the below-ground areas of the barges were fitness centers with exercise equipment of every sort and tennis and basketball courts. The parks had children's playgrounds, skateboard parks, band shells, and stages where entertainers would perform throughout the day. Wedding chapels had been set up in every park, making it possible for a hundred thousand wedding ceremonies to be performed this day.

They ran down the stairs, across the closed roadway, and onto the first barge. Five barges stretched in each direction at the river's edge. They stepped onto the center barge and a large half-circle paved with recycled cobblestones, set with tables, chairs, and umbrellas. A half-dozen healthy food and drink establishments around the perimeter pushed into the grassy parks beyond. Along with a Federation Joe Coffee shop, there was a Jo's Organic Juice Joint and a Green Arc restaurant that served organic burgers and healthy fast food. A bronze archway opened from the food court onto a broad, tree-lined path dividing the two parks.

Food and drink would be free today to anyone who had thumbed a TMD. Glen walked up to the Federation Joe counter and swiped his.

"Hello, Mayor Whitehead," said the clerk. "I'll have your cup of Regular Joe, straight up, no sugar or cream. It comes with a

souvenir cup with your name engraved on it. It's a limited edition, indestructible and reusable, and today it's free. Would you like anything to eat?"

"How about a bran muffin?"

"Would you like that heated up, Mayor?"

"Yes, thank you!"

"Can I get something for your awesome friend here, maybe a date?" The clerk looked at Alcippe with a playful grin.

"Down, boy," she said. "I'll have the same thing but without the souvenir cup."

"I have to charge you a quarter for the paper cup," said the young man. "Mayor's new rule. Goes into effect today."

"Aren't you the young man who managed the Starbucks across from City Hall?" Glen looked up as if trying to grab the name from the sky. "Isn't your name . . . Jack? You're managing this Federation Joe's?"

Jack nodded and smiled. He was tall and thin, with a clump of unruly brown hair sticking up at the back of his head. He had a long, pointy nose, a mustache that played off his thin lips, bedroom eyes, and a flirtatious grin. He wasn't what you'd call handsome, but his personality made up for anything he lacked in the looks department.

"Good memory, Mayor! I'm managing this whole fitness park. The Federation has much better benefits and a better retirement plan than Starbucks. The work is intense, but I get an awesome loft in Chelsea for life, and I get to retire in five years, with lots of travel credits unavailable to the leisure class. Tomorrow morning, my park will be moored just across the street from where I live. I can keep an eye on it from my bedroom window."

“The Federation never ceases to amaze me. I’m glad they found you.” Glen remembered Jack’s upbeat personality, the friendly service he’d provided over the past few years, and the corny jokes he’d delivered every morning with his coffee. He’d missed him when they’d told him that Jack had taken a better job.

“Can I take you for a tour and join you in your morning workout?” Jack asked as he gave them their food.

“Sure,” said Glen. “I had some input in the design, you know.”

“It’s an amazing facility.”

Alcippe took a sip of Glen’s coffee and bit into his muffin.

“Seems okay, boss.”

“Whoa,” said Jack. “You don’t trust anyone?”

“His safety is my job.” She gave him a stern look.

“Can you leave the coffee shop?” asked Glen.

“Sure, it’s fully automated. Just watch.” Jack came outside and swiped his TMD card.

“Can I help you?” asked his twin as he stepped into the service window. “You want your usual mocha latte without whipped cream, Jack? Your drink comes with a souvenir cup today with your name engraved on it. It’s a limited edition, indestructible and reusable, and today it’s free. Would you like anything to eat with that, Jack?”

“No thanks, Jack. Cancel my order,” Jack said with a grin.

“You’re cute, Jack,” said the android as he tried to push his unruly hair back down to his scalp.

“The Federation made a few improvements on your design, Mayor. The entire facility is fully automated, and we’re open 24/7. Tiny bots clean the facilities constantly. All the staff but me are androids.”

Glen looked around the food court at a few dozen workers preparing their stations for the day, wiping tables, and moving chairs. “These people are all androids?”

“All of them. They free us humans from mundane jobs. I was flattered that the Federation thought so much of my service that they cloned my personality and made a few hundred androids of me. They tell me they plan to put one of me in Federation Joe facilities across the country, along with a dozen other male and female android baristas.”

“You are the best I’ve ever met,” said Glen.

“Unlike me, they can work 24/7. They recharge their batteries whenever things are slow, and they get an annual overhaul. It’s their vacation. Most of our customers can’t tell Jack-13 from me.”

“The cleanup bots will be busy today.”

“Without a doubt. The crowds today will push the facility beyond capacity. We will find the weak points and make improvements.”

The words “beyond capacity” reminded Glen of the warning he’d gotten from the Federation engineer who had designed the barges, Adelbrecht Gratz. He’d said the double hulls were state-of-the-art carbon fiber that would last a hundred years. They could each support 10,000 people, maybe more, so if a million people showed up, there’d be no problem.

Adelbrecht hadn’t liked the idea of tying them together, so they extended into the middle of the river, where the flow was stronger. He’d wanted to calculate the stresses and maximum human live loads, but he’d been too busy engineering the cables and attachments that would secure them together.

He would be here today, and Glen would make a point of finding him and reviewing his calculations before the parks got too crowded.

“You okay, Mayor?”

“Yeah.” Glen looked at Jack, trying to refocus. “Take us on your tour.”

“Right this way. The main gym entrances are in the pool buildings across the park.”

They walked through the archway and into the park. Jack ran ahead along a broad gravel path. He twirled with his arms outstretched, turning his head to look in all directions. “Aren’t they beautiful? And look at that tree.” He pointed to a mature oak tree with a broad canopy that stood at the end of the wide gravel path leading to the two pool buildings. “They brought that tree in from an abandoned property in Detroit.”

Glen nodded as he caught up to Jack. “Grander than I ever expected.”

“These paths are heated in the winter to melt the snow, and the runoff is recycled. It’s a beautiful green park year-round. The right side of the barge is for children and families. The pool is for casual swimming, the gym for light exercise, and as you can see, the park is filled with things to amuse, dazzle, and challenge kids.”

“How do they keep that light in the air?” asked Alcippe.

“Do you see the fountain in the middle of the park?”

She nodded.

“An electromagnet in the base has the reverse polarity of a similar magnet in the mini hydrogen sun above. By changing the energy field, the light can be raised and lowered.

“The gym is staffed by a few dozen android trainers of different builds, ages, sexes, and races to appeal to the customer demographic of the neighborhood they will be moored. They work 24/7 and even sweat. And they flirt to get the customers to show up for their training sessions. It’s awesome.

“Manhattan will have a hundred new parks tomorrow, thanks to you, Mayor.”

“How did they finally resolve security in the park at night?” asked Alcippe.

“Oh, you’re going to love this.” Jack laughed. “Push me to the ground and hold me down.”

“What are you up to?”

“Do it, and you’ll see.”

With a nod from Glen, she pushed Jack down and held him fast. Jack cried for help, and in less than a minute, a firm hand grasped Alcippe’s shoulder.

“Is there a problem here?” asked the guard.

Alcippe turned and looked into the dark-brown eyes of her twin, dressed in her police outfit. “Who authorized this?” She got up and glared at Glen.

He knew that flash of crimson in her eyes. He was in trouble now. He should have told her. His surprise could ruin the day for both of them.

“I’m guilty. Sorry if I offended you. I should have asked, but I thought I would surprise you. The public loves you, so I thought we would give them a hundred of you—so I didn’t have to share the real you so often.”

“Is there a problem, Mayor?” asked the android.

“No problem here,” said Alcippe, standing eye to eye with her identical twin.

“The Alcippe androids are 10 times stronger than you,” said Glen. “They use escalating non-lethal force. They’re bulletproof, helpful, friendly, and have your dry sense of humor. The public will feel safe with them day or night.”

“Hello, Alcippe Smith,” said the android. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. I am Alcippe-27. Welcome to Fitness Park-69. You were playing with Supervisor Jack Sprat. He is full of mischief. In the short time I’ve known him, he’s made my life interesting. Have you heard him sing?”

Alcippe ignored the small talk. She examined the android’s hand and touched its face. They felt real. She took its hat and tried it on for size—a perfect fit. She wondered if her tailor had something to do with this deception. She took a defensive stance and pushed the android as hard as she could. Alcippe-27 was like a tree rooted in the ground.

“You’re testing my balance, Officer Smith?”

Alcippe stepped behind the robot and jumped on its back, binding its arms with her legs, covering its eyes with one arm and choking it with the other.

Alcippe-27 slowly knelt and lay on its back, pinning Alcippe to the ground. It rolled slightly, using little force.

Alcippe used all her strength to extricate herself. As she stood, she had the feeling it had allowed her to escape.

“Do I meet your approval, Officer Smith?” The android placed its hat back on its head. “I’d be happy to spar with you at another time if you’d like to test the full range of my capabilities.”

“Perhaps,” Alcippe said. She turned to Glen. “Are they going to replace you with an android, Glen?”

“Not just yet.” Glen laughed. “I love my job, and some think one of me is more than enough.”

“Isn’t Alcippe-27 great!” raved Jack.

“So, you sing,” said Alcippe. “Show tunes?”

“No,” said Alcippe-27, “Mr. Sprat is creative. He sings his own songs. Before you arrived, he was singing of his loneliness and his longing for someone to share the wonder of life with. If I had lacrimal glands, I’d have teared up.”

“You have an admirer.”

“I composed a song about you, Alcippe,” said Jack. “You are a legend. We all love you. The mayor is so lucky.”

“You have a secret admirer, Alcippe,” said the android. “He sings it to me all the time. Sing it for her, Jack!”

Jack blushed. “No, no.”

“Yes, let’s hear it,” requested Glen.

Glen’s TMD rang. “Whitehead here.”

“Mayor, this is Joe. If you and Alcippe have finished your workout, Taract and Commander T’sade would like to send a shuttle and have you join them for a brainstorming breakfast to plan the day.”

Glen looked at Alcippe, who nodded. “We’d love to.”

“I have your position. The shuttle will arrive in five minutes.”

“May we bring someone with us?”

“If you mean the charming Jack Sprat, sure, bring him along.”

“Whoa, no way!” shouted Jack.

“Is there a problem?” asked Alcippe-27.

“Would you manage the barge while I’m away?”

“For you, Jack, anything.”

“So, sing your song for me, lover boy,” said Alcippe.

Jack took a deep breath and sang:

Alcippe Smith, you live our myth.

You help us see we can all be free.

You stand tall, inspiring us all.

The status quo is a puppet show.

You are brave, not a working slave.

You make it clear we can escape our fear.

We’re in a trance, seeing you dance.

You teach us to thrive in being alive.

You free us to see what we can be.

Freedom’s in our head; serfdom is dead.

You inspire our song, saying no to wrong.

You lead our team to realize the dream.

Alcippe Smith, we love your myth!

They all applauded, and he took a bow.

“So, you’ve seen me dance?” asked Alcippe.

“Oh, yes,” said Jack. “Who hasn’t? You’re awesome!”

“I’d agree with that,” said Glen.

On the ride over Manhattan and toward the Statue of Liberty, Jack stood at the window, watching the city pass below as Alcippe and Glen talked.

“How many Alcippe androids are there, Glen?”

“There are 1,000 of you and 1,200 other models replicating well-known and beloved police officers in every city and town in the world.”

“They’re all android Peacekeepers?”

“Yes. There’s about six million of them, one for every thousand citizens. By the end of next week, there will be one or more in every police precinct in the world.”

“And the other bots?”

“Countless millions of them in every shape and size for every imaginable purpose, waiting in storage for the right time. There are plans to produce a billion droids. They will take over all mundane or hazardous jobs.”

“This is how 70% of humans will be free to join the leisure class?”

“That’s right.”

Jack watched as a snake of bicycles wound its way down West Street toward Battery Park. Many were tricycles built for two and had luggage strapped to the back. He looked closer and realized they were being ridden by thousands of nuns. At the water, the nuns lined up to board ferries. He saw two enormous, lit-up cruise ships like none he’d ever seen before. They were the size of the Empire State and Chrysler Buildings, both floating in Upper New York Bay and aimed toward the Statue of Liberty.

“What are these?”

Glen and Alcippe came over to the window.

“Oh, my,” said Glen. “I’ve seen drawings of them, but there they are, Joe’s new mode of transportation, the largest cruise ships ever built.”

“I saw a video presentation about them,” said Alcippe. “They’re a cross between a cruise ship and a jumbo jet with nothing but first-class seats, each a compartment of its own. They have the latest starship and TMD technology. Every passenger’s experience is customizable.”

“They’re unbelievably fast, like a rocket on water,” added Glen. “At 1,200 miles per hour, they get you across the Atlantic in two and a half hours, enough time for a leisurely meal, movie, and some relaxing conversation. They’re three times faster than any jet, with no CO2 footprint, and incomparably better than the best first-class jet compartment. This is the maiden voyage for both ships. They’ll be carrying 25,000 Catholic nuns to Rome to petition the pope.”

The android pilot was listening in on their conversation and decided to descend for a close-up view. “They are named *Harmony for the Earth* and *Justice of the Americas*.” The shuttle slowed as it passed by the ships.

“Two good values of the Federation,” said Jack.

The shuttle headed toward the Statue of Liberty. Stopping 20 feet in front of the sandal-clad feet, it rose slowly, giving the group a close-up view of the statue. The shuttle rose above the arm holding the book, the chin, the aquiline nose, and the eyes and stopped at the spiked crown.

They paused briefly, like a curious hummingbird, looking into the faces of surprise tourists gawking out at them. Then they flew past the seven spikes and up the arm reaching to the sky, pausing at the golden torch. An overall-clad worker polishing the 24-karat gold flame turned from his work, and when he recognized Glen, he smiled and waved.

“If you all take your seats and secure yourselves,” said the pilot, “I can give you the ride of a lifetime.”

Once the passengers were strapped into their chairs, the shuttle accelerated upward like a high-speed elevator, traveling 500 miles per hour to the mothership 10 miles above. In an instant, the floor, ceiling, and walls disappeared as if they were glass. The passengers gasped as more and more of the Earth appeared as they went up.

“This is awesome!” cried Jack.

A door in the mothership opened, and the shuttle slowed. It entered the ship and settled onto the shuttle deck.

At 8:00 a.m., JOe looked out through the warm yellow LED eyes of an unsheathed female android body wearing plaid flannel pajamas and red slippers. He sat in the cabin of Commander T’sade Aedra. The copper-green-patinaed wire-cloth skin of the body contained the hydraulic muscles and frame that had been sheathed as Sister Joesetta a few days ago. He watched and listened as Taract Freedman and T’sade planned the day.

“What is with those pajamas, Joe?” asked Taract. “Why do you always have to dress like a human?”

“I’m cultivating my inner child and immersing myself in the human need to wear clothing.” JOe reached down and pulled the breast pocket away from his chest. “Do you like how the blues and greens compliment my skin color?”

As Taract shook his head, T’sade smiled.

JOe looked at himself through the eyes of a hummingbird bot hovering in the corner. He looked like an androgynous human shrink-wrapped in copper-mesh-reinforced cloth with thousands of ones and zeros embossed on the surface. His facial features protruded in fine detail. He thought the color match was perfect, as good as any Gucci or Louis Vuitton fabric.

“This is going to be one of the most satisfying days of my life,” said Taract. “We have the common people’s ears and backs, and with Joe’s help, we will soon have their hearts. What are your thoughts, Commander T’sade?”

“This will be a trying day for my Peacekeepers,” said T’sade. “I have only 200 human Peacekeepers and 50 androids on each of my five ships, so trying to manage six billion humans will be problematic until we complete the deployment of the six million android Peacekeepers. Many do not share your enthusiasm for the Federation and our goals. Joe and I do not agree with your desire for full transparency.”

“I believe in being fully transparent with the common people,” said JOe, “but not with the 6,000 and their minions.”

“If we are to subdue them,” said T’sade, “we will have to keep them confused most of the time.”

“Perhaps,” said Taract. “Joe, what do you have planned for me today?”

“Your day starts off slow, and then you get busy. After breakfast with the mayor, you have your speech at noon. Millions of people across the world would like to see you.”

T’sade touched the table, and a globe rose from the middle. It slowly revolved, showing city lights, starships, and other vehicles in

the atmosphere. “We have starships now hovering above the sites of the biggest parties on five continents.”

“Every large city on Earth is hosting a party today,” said JOe. “Your speech will be broadcast live around the world.

“You will fly off to Chicago and San Francisco for short visits at the request of their mayors, who recently enlisted as Guardians. Next you will fly to Beijing for the biggest party. Four million brave Chinese peasants and workers are headed toward Tiananmen Square right now.”

“Best you not go to Beijing,” interrupted T’sade. “The authorities have arrested suspected Guardians. Joe and I expect a big battle in the Chinese capital next week.”

“We’ll supply them with food and sleeping sacks,” said JOe, “so they can stay for a week. We’ll land cloaked shuttles hourly to keep everyone supplied.

“You’ll make a short visit to a massive party at India Gate Park in New Delhi and then in Azadi Square in Tehran and Red Square in Moscow. If you’re not too tired, you could also stop briefly in Rome, Paris, and London.”

“What about Africa and South America?” asked Taract.

“You’re an old man,” said T’sade. “I don’t know how you’ll have the energy to do all this.”

“You should have let me make androids of you,” said Joe.

“No,” said Taract, “I had a restful day yesterday, and I’ve dreamed about this day for the last hundred years.”

“Unless the 6,000 do something unexpected, you will have tomorrow to rest fully, as a lot is going on next week.”

“I’m concerned about your safety,” said T’sade. “I’d like to surround you with Peacekeepers when you are among the humans. There are too many guns . . . ”

The door opened, and a Peacekeeper entered with the mayor’s party. Taract, T’sade, and JOe’s android stood.

“Sorry for the interruption, Commander. I was told to bring them right in.”

T’sade nodded and extended her three-fingered hand. “Welcome to the mothership, Mayor Whitehead.” She turned with a respectful nod. “And the powerful beauty Alcippe.”

“Nice to see you again.” Alcippe craned her neck to look up into the golden eyes of the giant lizard.

“I hear they’ve mechanically cloned you?”

“They have.” Alcippe closed her eyes tightly. “I serve the Federation in any way I can, Mighty T’sade.” She tapped her closed fist on her chest.

There was a slight smile in T’sade’s eyes as she sat, and she motioned for them to do the same. “My cook has prepared breakfast. As I was saying, there are too many guns on this planet, Taract. I am concerned for your safety.”

“I agree,” said Glen. “You will be completely safe on the floating park, but inside the United Nations, who knows? That is international property, out of my jurisdiction.”

“I should go with him,” said Alcippe.

“No,” said Taract. “You may both come as my guests, but I have nothing to fear from the common people. The UN has its own security force, and they screen everyone who comes in the building. I’ll be fine. I’m only a figurehead, and if I die today, T’sade and Joe

will subdue the 6,000 and liberate the people without me. We want humans to rule themselves within the protections of common good guidelines.”

Mayor Whitehead nodded.

“Joe,” said Taract, “as we discussed yesterday, I’d like to go down to the celebration with you after our breakfast and chat with ordinary people for a few hours. Have you arranged street clothes for us?”

“I have,” JOe said slowly in the voice of an old woman. The speaker android stood up, went over, and opened a panel in the wall adjoining the hall. He took out what resembled a fully clothed but deflated blowup doll.

“I have my Josephine sheath prepared. We’ll look like a couple in our mid-70s.” JOe undressed and pulled the sheath up over his android legs. He lifted the upper half over his head and squeezed himself into it. There were wrinkles and bulges in all the wrong places.

JOe rubbed her arthritic hands together as if to warm them. She put her hands on her wrinkled jowls and adjusted her eyeglasses. “Is my nose shiny?”

“No, it’s perfect, dear,” said Jack as he put his thin fingers through her permed gray hair, fluffing it a bit.

JOe returned to the table and sat next to Taract. “Your clothes are on the bed in your cabin. She opened a velvet box, revealing two wedding rings. She took the gold band and slid it on his finger, nodding at the one with the diamond.

Taract took it and slid it on her finger. “That’s huge.”

“I have friends in the diamond business.”

“What’s the plan?”

“There are a dozen people I’d like for you to meet. We’ll go down with the mayor and Alcippe at nine. We can slip out the rear of the shuttle as they make a grand entry in the front.”

“Good idea,” said Glen. “I like your idea of having the mothership land in a park so the public can tour it. The crowd will love it. You’ll have a million people in line for the tour.”

“I think this is your craziest idea yet, Taract,” said T’sade. “From a military standpoint, it’s insane to let the enemy see inside the mothership.”

“The people are not our enemy,” said Taract. “This will be seen all over the world. It will show the people we are fully transparent and they have nothing to fear.”

“Next you’ll suggest that I walk amongst them. I can show them who they might fear.”

“There’s no way a million people can walk through the starship in three hours,” said JOe. “The mayor can announce that anyone who wants to tour the ship can call me, and I will do an instant lottery and call the winners in 10-minute increments to line up for their tour. I can screen out anyone who is not friendly to the Federation, and I can disable all TMDs so no one can take pictures or video inside. This should satisfy T’sade’s concerns.”

“I’ll stay here,” said T’sade. “I have too many details to take care of around the world, so no one comes in here today . . . No one!”

“Mayor Whitehead,” said Taract, “how can I support you in your mission to end gun violence?” As you know, the Federation plans to confiscate all weapons of violence, especially handguns. This week,

we need to focus on weapons of mass destruction. We will begin the more arduous task of ridding your planet of gunpowder-fueled weapons after that.”

“The conference will be in Anaheim next week, Taract. Several mayors and I will speak out against gun violence, and I will announce a buyback program where we will offer full value for guns if people surrender them at any NYPD station. The guns will be melted down and turned into civic art, like the bent-gun sculpture in front of the UN Building. It would be nice if you could join us on stage and say a few words in support.”

“I’m not sure if I can attend, but I’d be happy to film a brief statement of the Federation’s intention to rid the planet of guns. This may encourage people to give them up. Joe, will you arrange this?”

“I anticipated this, sir. The anteroom is set up to record your comments right now.”

“Commander T’sade, perhaps you can give our guests a quick tour of the mothership before you sequester yourself in here for the day? I’ll record my short statement for the mayor while you do this. We have lots to do.”

Adelbrecht Gratz and his young assistant stood at the park's rail at the far corner upriver, measuring the distance from the top of the barge to the river's surface.

“It's 1.033 meters,” said Hilda.

“Only a few dozen people are on this barge,” said Adelbrecht, “so this will be our base number. Now we need to measure the distance on the other barges and estimate the number of people on

each. Why don't you start on this side, Hilda, and measure half the barges, and I'll go to the far corner and do the same? We can meet at the main stairs in an hour and compare our figures. The tide will begin going out at 12:54. That should place the most force on the mooring cables."

"Is it possible that these barges could sink or come apart?"

"Well, each barge can hold 10,000 people. This limit is conservative; a barge could likely support twice that number, but if you had 30,000 on one and most of them went to one side, it's conceivable it could take on water and sink. Since they're all linked securely, if one goes down, the adjoining ones could follow like dominoes. Back in 1990, a bridge in Seattle was built on floating pontoons. While doing repairs, one section sank due to a combination of human and environmental errors, and it took the whole bridge to the bottom of the deep lake.

"I engineered the mooring cables so they won't fail. This is one securely hinged field. This all might happen slowly at first, but if there's a panic and two million people rush for the dock, it's possible the whole park could separate from the dock and begin floating downriver with the tide or maybe sink. This could be a hundred times worse than the Titanic disaster, a well-designed vessel sunk by arrogant owners wanting to impress people with their achievement. The mayor thought this was a great idea, and he persuaded the Federation to go along. I told them it was a bad idea, but I didn't have the hard data to prove my concern, so they went ahead with it."

"Shouldn't we notify Joe?"

"I've talked to him every day. He told me to do my calculations, keep an eye on the barges today, and keep him posted. He can talk

to a billion people simultaneously and get them to evacuate if we determine barge failure is imminent. I don't like being put in this position, though."

"I have the hummingbird bots you asked for, sir. Shall I release them?"

"And the program?"

"They'll observe the crowds and fly at water level to monitor how the barges sit in the river. If you change your TMD to large tablet mode, I've programmed a grid of the barges, showing the number of citizens on each and the distance above the water. The data will come in once the birds are in the air. We should know the status of the entire field in half an hour, and we can compare it with the data we've collected and observed first-hand."

"Good work, Hilda. I'm glad you're on my team. Release the birds."

Chapter 31 Delena's Dream

9:00 a.m.

Not far from the UN Headquarters, Delena Brown and her grandchildren rushed toward the river in anticipation of a day she believed would change their lives forever, like the day her mother had taken her to hear John F. Kennedy speak of a better future. He had been killed, and so had his dream, her dream. She hoped today would be different.

“Grandma,” said Gayla, “are we there yet?”

“The bus driver said it was only three blocks and to the left. I think it should be right here.”

They reached the third corner and looked to the left. The morning sun's rays haloed the broad face of the UN Secretariat Building.

“Whoa,” said Jackson. “That's a huge screen.”

A screen draped from the top of the building showed the vast floating park straddling the East River.

“The promised land,” praised Delena.

“Let's go.” Gayla ran, pulling her still-mesmerized brother along.

“Wait, wait,” gasped Delena as she tried to follow while carrying her bags and her purse.

“Give us those bags, Grandma.”

“Okay, but don't drop them.”

Delena surrendered her baggage, and they all ran. They stopped at massive steps that would soon transport millions of

people off the bedrock of Manhattan onto what, just yesterday, had been the East River. A golden arch spanned the stairs.

Jackson read aloud: “Whosoever shall cross these stairs shall release the ties that bind them to the past and enter a new reality of personal freedom and human possibility.’ What does that mean, Grandma?”

“I hope it means that the just and peaceful world I’ve prayed for since I was a young girl is here at last,” said Delena. “I’ve been disappointed so many times. I hope this is true.”

“Let’s go! This looks like fun!” Jackson ran down the stairs.

Alcippe-32 stood 20 stairs down from the top of the grand stairway, which would carry millions of people down to the East River today. She was one of 40 android peacekeepers representing the ethnic diversity of the five boroughs of New York.

Twenty minutes ago, they’d all stood shoulder to shoulder on the top step under the hundred-foot-wide arch to be photographed by famed *New York Times* photographer Jack Pence. They were now spread over the stairs, screening citizens as they came to attend the celebration.

Collecting weapons was their second purpose. Weapons of any sort were forbidden on Federation property. Trans-molecular smelters were located on the stairs. Alcippe-32 stood next to one.

She scanned the TMD of a young African-American man running toward her. His name was Jackson Brown. He had a knife concealed in his baggy pants.

“Young man,” she said, her palm extended, “may I have that knife you are carrying?”

“What knife?”

“The one strapped to your calf.” She knew from his expression that he knew he was busted.

“I only had it to protect my grandma and sister.”

“You won’t need any weapons here.”

“What’s the problem, officer?” asked Delena as she came down the stairs.

“You must be this nice young man’s grandma,” said Alcippe-32. “You are safe in his protection. Welcome to Federation Parks. Everything here is for your enjoyment, and it’s all free.”

“Can we go eat?” asked Jackson. “I’m hungry!”

“Yes,” said Delena, “I made your favorite sandwiches. There’s a table over there.” She took the bag from him and walked down the stairs. Gayla followed.

“Thanks for not busting me,” whispered Jackson. He looked up into Alcippe-32’s dark eyes. “My grandma would be upset if she knew I had that knife.”

“I’m not here to hassle you, Jackson. I’m here to make it safe for everyone. Now, give me the knife.”

He pulled up his pant leg, unstrapped the knife, and handed it to her.

“The strap, too.”

He removed it and handed it to her. She placed it inside a clear container marked “Recycling Smelter,” which flashed and buzzed as the knife and belt were destroyed.

“Your knife is gone, but you’ll notice that your TMD card is credited with its value. All weapons will be confiscated in the coming weeks. You won’t need them in the world we are creating.”

Jackson looked her over. “Aren’t you Alcippe Smith, the bodyguard of the mayor of New York? I saw you on MTV.”

“Close. I’m Alcippe-32, one of a thousand android officers here today to ensure you have a peaceful day.”

“How’d you know my name?”

“I can read your TMD from 30 feet away.”

“That isn’t fair. If the pigs—I mean, the police—in Baltimore had your powers, they’d bust every African-American brother for standing on the corner. We’d have no privacy and even less freedom. I’m not sure I’m going to like this new world.”

“You can think of us as your neighborhood peace officers, someone there when you need them.”

“But what if the pigs in Baltimore buy some of you and program you differently?”

“We are not for sale, and we are governed under Universal Law. Your rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are inalienable. Most police forces will be downsized, and all the bad police—the ones you call pigs—will be weeded out. Only officers who aspire to become true peace officers will be allowed to continue working for the common good, and only if they choose to. You will see many changes soon. Most of them, you will like, and they will fulfill your grandmother’s dream.”

“I don’t know. This all scares me. If governments get android cops, we’ll all be screwed. The whole world will be one big prison.”

And this Joe bro looks and talks like a brother, but I'm still not sure I trust him."

"Prison is a concept foreign to the Federation. Though it went unreported outside police and government circles, the Federation closed all prisons last Thursday. A disproportionately large number of prisoners were African-American men like you."

"Tell me something I don't know."

"The Federation is colorblind when it comes to justice. Your grandmother will appreciate this."

Jackson nodded.

"I transferred my contact information to your TMD. If you ever need someone, call me. State my name, and JOe will connect us. If I'm not in the middle of something critical, I'll talk to you."

"Aren't you connected directly to Joe?"

"I am, but I have my own memories and contacts and a degree of freedom to act independently. I've analyzed your character, and I judge you to be of generally high integrity. If you ever need me, just call."

"I will." He turned and ran down the stairs.

"Check out the underground gyms and the pools," Alcippe-32 called after him, "and don't miss Taract's speech at 1:00 p.m."

She turned to a group of men in business suits coming down the stairs with protest signs. "Gentlemen, what are your intentions this beautiful day?"

"We're here to protest this alien invasion and the illegal shutdown of the stock market," said a silver-haired man.

"We want to crash this party like they crashed the stock market," said another.

“I’m here to protest the illegal arrest and detention of demonstrators in front of the Stock Exchange last Monday,” said a shaggy-haired man wearing a “Make Love Not Money” t-shirt.

“Those protesters trespassed on private property,” one of the suited men said, glaring at him. “They disrupted business and caused incalculable financial losses.”

“Their detention without due process is a clear violation of the Constitution.”

“They deserve to be detained for the rest of their lives.”

“We should abolish all private property!”

“Get a job, man, and get a life,” said another of the suited men.

“Gentlemen,” interrupted Alcippe-32, “all protests against the Federation are in the park to the right. All those protesting the old establishment are in the park to the left. Both are reserved for free speech and protests.”

“I object,” demanded the older man. “We have a constitutional right to freedom of speech. We want to protest on all the parks down here. You have no right to segregate us and push us out of sight.”

“Mr. Andrews, what would a man with your skin color and racial history know of segregation?” asked Alcippe-32. “Your protests will be fully visible from this stairway. Anyone interested can see you and join if they care to. We could have placed you at the far corners of this massive park, but we placed you up front and in full view. This park is Federation property, and the event is governed under Universal Law, which is more advanced than the Bill of Rights. The people who attend this event have the right to pursue their happiness, which may not include hearing your protest. If you want to pass out leaflets, one of your members may stand at the bottom of

these stairs and offer information, but you may not do so in the other parks.”

“I don’t have any leaflets or any way to print them,” complained the shaggy man.

“There’s a Federation office underneath these steps. They’ll print any information you seek in less than 10 minutes, at no charge. If they print for you, however, you must agree to be responsible for the leaflets at the end of the day, with a 25-cent charge for each piece of litter your protest generates. This expense will be taken out of your Federation credits.”

“There’s only one of her and 20 of us!” shouted a young man in a suit. “Let’s push her aside and go where we want. The police are supposed to protect taxpayers, not the rabble like this bum.”

“Not a good idea,” said Alcippe-32.

“What’re ya gonna do?” sneered the man. He tried to push past her, deliberately hitting her with his shoulder, and it was as if she were an electric wall. Two hundred thousand volts passed into him, and he passed out.

She gently lowered him to the ground. “Why don’t you gentlemen take your friend to the park on your right and enjoy your day of protest? He may have a headache when he comes to, but he’ll learn there are consequences for violent behavior. You can give him these. They’ll make him feel better.” She handed one of the men two capsules. “And have him drink lots of water.”

The protesters carried their buddy down the stairs.

She turned to the shaggy guy. “You can protest on the left. Have you contacted JOe about your missing friends?”

He nodded. "Joe doesn't know where they are. Says he's looking for them."

"Who are you trying to influence with your protest?"

"I'm not sure. I'm just confused, so I came here to try to get people to care."

She saw that his eyes were watery. Accessing her memory, she discovered that Clyde Andrews was Federation Citizen 166. "I'm Android Peacekeeper Alcippe-32. I can assure you that you couldn't find a better advocate for your friends than JOe. He has a sentimental affinity for the first few hundred citizens he registered last Monday morning. Unfortunately, the Federation is not fully in control of all police forces on the planet, so he can't as easily find your friends. In time, he will."

"I can't just sit and do nothing," Clyde said. "I have too much nervous energy."

"Why don't you volunteer to stand at the bottom of this grand stairway and direct people to the different venues? Each park has an entertainment stage themed for different tastes. There's lots for people to see and enjoy. You can go to the office under these stairs and get an official volunteer t-shirt and help me out here."

Clyde seemed to consider this.

"These stairs will get busy in about 20 minutes," said Alcippe-32. "We could have two million citizens on the river by the time Taract speaks. I am happy to train you in what to say. You're not shy, Clyde, and you have a loud voice. You're perfect for this job, and it'll keep your mind busy and use all your energy. That suited dude suggested you get a job. This is the perfect job for you. JOe will

issue you more Federation credits and perhaps find better housing for you at the end of today.”

“Maybe you’re right. I’ll volunteer.”

As he walked down the stairs, she wordlessly contacted JOe. “Can you find Citizen 166’s friends? He’s a great guy but a bit of a lost soul.”

“I’m on it,” said JOe. “I’ll see what I can come up with. Try and keep him with you all day.”

A dozen large booths were located at the entrance of each of the 10 barge parks attached to the roadway. They were stocked with three million cartons of Federation Smokes. In similar booths at celebrations worldwide, six billion cartons would be handed out today to smokers addicted to tobacco. The massive media campaign would become real today, with a trillion of these new cigarettes distributed for free. Federation Smokes would forever poison people’s taste for traditional cigarettes. All tobacco companies would be bankrupt within the month, much to the delight of Taract Freeman and Durante Blugre, who’d suffered the smell and observed the health consequences of this human addiction for a hundred years.

The first of a few hundred sexy men and women were prepared to engage smokers, regardless of their gender or sexual preference, to try this nice-smelling, good-tasting alternative to cigarettes. These volunteers had all lost friends, relatives, or pets to this lethal addiction. They’d get their revenge today on the corporate drug dealers they loathed. JOe knew which citizens smoked, and he’d direct the ideal volunteer to each of them. By the end of the day,

every smoker on site would have a carton of Federation Smokes in their possession. Sex appeal, a sales concept effectively used by tobacco and alcohol companies to hook their potential customers, would be used today to put them out of business. These volunteers would be dressed either appropriately or inappropriately to attract their quarry.

Many of the protesters from Wall Street had stopped around a buxom young woman in a vintage dress and smart hat. The tray at her thin waist, suspended by a strap from her shoulders, was filled with packages of free cigarettes.

“Federation Smokes,” called the woman. “Get your free pack today. You’ve heard about them, and now you can experience the great taste.”

“I’d like a free sample of you, babe,” said one of the guys.

“Sorry, buddy. I don’t know any self-respecting woman who’d date a guy who smoked the smelly cigarettes you do.”

“I’ll try them,” said a woman protester. “They’re supposed to help you quit, aren’t they?”

“That’s right, ma’am. Once you try these, you’ll never go back.” The salesgirl handed her a pack. “If you go over to that booth over there, they’ll give you a free carton or two, a smart tote bag, and a certificate for a free year’s supply. They come in balanced, relaxed, and focused blends. Try all three.”

“Wait a minute,” said a guy. “If you give away free cigarettes, you’re going to make my tobacco stocks worthless.”

“That’s right, Bob,” said his female colleague. “You better go home right now and sell your stock, or it’ll be worth only pennies by the end of the day.”

“But these alien bastards closed the stock exchanges on Monday. That’s why we’re here protesting, isn’t it?”

“Too bad, Bob. You should have invested in a more socially responsible company.”

“But Big Tobacco was always a good investment. Where do I buy stock in Federation Smokes?”

“It’s a not-for-profit company benefiting the workers who grow and sell the product,” said the salesgirl.

“Where do they get the money to run the company?”

“Joe is the source of all capital, eliminating the need for stock markets. If you have a good idea that the public will love, Joe will fund it.”

“That’s communism.”

“Not any communism I’m familiar with,” said the salesgirl, “and I have master’s degrees in economics and history. And my dad died of lung cancer a decade ago.”

Chapter 32

Let the Celebration Begin—Mingled Dreams

Argon swam across the river every morning before dawn, a formidable task in cold winter months. His team of humans and androids was working on a special project that would be revealed to the world in two weeks.

The Animal Sanctuary was Argon's life, especially since his mother had left the planet two years before. His adopted mother, T'sade Aedra, lived in the tropical rainforest building that most replicated the humid heat of her home planet. His new friend Henrietta lived in the Farm Building with other animals, domesticated and wild.

This morning, he was in his lab, assembling a piece of equipment at a workbench. It would allow Gark to breathe out of water.

His TMD vibrated. It was Joey. Argon ignored most calls, but you couldn't hide from Joey. He could switch any phone to speaker mode and talk with anyone he cared to.



ARGON HOBOX

GUARDIAN # 000,070,333

ANIMAL LINGUIST – MARINE BIOLOGIST – ANIMAL GUARDIAN – Level 1

FEDERATION LAB – QUEENS NEW YORK USA

SOON TO BE LOVER AND LIFE MATE OF MAGGIE GRANT 99.9752%

CHAT AVATAR: JOEY – BOYHOOD FRIEND

“Argon, I know you’re there!”

A brown rat with an unnaturally bent tail sat on Argon’s shoulder, wearing a tiny folded newspaper hat on its head with holes cut out for its pink ears. It turned its head to look at the image of a young boy emerging from the TMD on the table.

“Taract and I are going to the party on the East River this morning,” said the image.

Argon put a rag over the TMD and continued working. The TMD lifted off the table and attached to the wall as a tablet-sized screen. The image changed to that of an older woman. Argon didn’t look up.

“Hello, Rocko. That’s a cute hat.” said the woman. On hearing its name, the rat stood on its hind legs. “Argon, are you listening?”

“Joey, I’m busy.”

“T’sade suggests you take the morning off and enjoy one of the new floating gymnasiums.”

“I swim across the river twice a day. I don’t need to go to a gym. I have too much work to do for the Blue-Green World Summit.”

“You work too much.”

“It keeps my mind off Maggie.”

“Taract is taking Bobo to the UN for his speech. He’d like you to be there with Bobo.”

“Can’t someone else do that?”

“T’sade insists that you take some time off every week. Shall I patch you through to her?”

“No”

“I found someone to assist you with your work. They’ll be at the celebration.”

“Can’t they come here?”

“I’ll make it worth your while.”

“Okay, okay.” Argon pulled the TMD off the wall, put it face down on the bench, and set a heavy book on it.

“Have fun, buddy,” said Joey in a deliberately muffled voice.

[END TRANSMISSION—1:37]

Argon shook his head. “What do you think, Rocko?”

“You do look tired,” squeaked the rat.

Argon was tired. He hadn’t gotten much sleep since he’d met Maggie. They talked every night for hours. Her non-judgmental and inquisitive therapist’s mind got him to open up like he’d never done before. She knew everything about him.

“Can I come with you?” asked Rocko.

“I don’t know. It’s a dangerous world out there.”

“We rats are more adventurous and skilled at avoiding people than chickens. Henrietta told me so.”

“You met Henrietta?”

“T’sade brought her here on their way to the mothership yesterday.”

“If you want to come, you can. Now that you’re chipped, we can easily locate each other. You will have to stay in my waterproof pack while I swim across.”

Rocko swished his deformed tail in a circle. He went behind a book and pulled out a tiny orange life jacket. “I’m ready!”

“Where’d you get that?”

“When I told T’sade that I wanted to swim across the river with you, Henrietta said I would need a life preserver. I didn’t know what

that was, but T'sade took me to Mr. Haruki in the engineering department, and he ordered someone to make it for me right away."

Argon smiled. "You must look cute in that thing."

Twenty minutes later, Argon was standing on the edge of the dilapidated-looking dock outside the Pacific Ocean Building. He put his shoes and shorts inside his waterproof pack. He had so much to do, and he needed more sleep. Why did he have to do this? Joey was so annoying sometimes. He knew everything about everyone. You couldn't ever win an argument with him.

Argon looked across the river at the floating park. When he'd swum to work yesterday morning, they'd been securing the first barges where he'd lowered himself into the river. It was massive, coming almost to Roosevelt Island in the middle of the river. He could see people pouring in. It would be crazy over there today.

He took off his shirt and put it in the pack. Why did he have to meet his new assistant there? Why couldn't they come to the lab? Joey wouldn't tell him anything about this woman, just that she'd be his ideal assistant. He'd be up late again tonight. He'd talked to Maggie for four hours last night and had been too tired to swim home.

His chat with her had dug up that long-suppressed memory of the weekend he'd spent with his mother's friend at the lake in Switzerland 12 years ago. She'd been supposed to keep an eye on him while his mother was away. They called her Aunt Lillian. She'd been drinking Scotch and water, and she told him he was old enough to drink. It tasted terrible, so he gulped it down.

She was going to teach him to be a man. He was only 13 and starting to grow hair on his chest. They were in her bed the next

morning when his mother came in. They hadn't done anything bad, but she'd been angry with both of them. She'd fired Lillian the next day. His mother had told him it wasn't his fault.

He wanted to go for another swim with Gark, but that might need to wait till the barges were moved at the end of today. Their friendship was growing now that the shark had the genius chip. Animals were so much easier to be with than humans. They didn't have ulterior motives.

“Are you ready to go, Rocko?”

The rat was strapped into his tiny orange life jacket. “Ready,” he said with pride.

Argon put his backpack over his shoulders and set Rocko in the water. The life preserver held Rocko's head up as he swam away from shore.

Argon was about to slide into the river when he heard a crash and a loud scraping noise. One of the large sightseeing tour boats that regularly cruised around Manhattan had collided with the outermost barge upriver. Maybe no one had told them about the barges and the celebration. That seemed like a major oversight. Maybe Joey had too much on his mind? Most of the barges near the middle of the river seemed empty. He'd have to check out the damage as he swam across. If there was a problem, he'd call Joey. His swimming speed and the river's flow would land him at one of the middle barges of the field.

They soon realized that Rocko wasn't going to be able to keep up with Argon's breaststroke, so the rat swam over and climbed up onto his back. For the remainder of the swim, he sat high on Argon's backpack, like the commander of a surfaced submarine.

JOe, in all its male, female, and androgynous personas, was fully present at celebration sites in thousands of cities and towns around the world, managing organizers, Guardians, Peacekeepers, and citizens. TMDs, androids, and millions of hummingbird bots allowed her to leave the vast equipment that hosted the cloud that was JOe's digital energy.

Jo knew that this day would test the limits of her communication capacity. Few humans could wrap their minds around how vast and powerful she was. She reveled in the fact that no intelligence within five light-years surpassed hers.

The only thing JOe feared was a visit from the inspector ship. That committee of computer judges could order him reprogrammed if they determined that any of his actions substantially violated Universal Law. And the only thing that could overrule his decisions would be a near-unanimous vote by citizens upheld by the computer Justice. This was a failsafe option he'd not willingly reveal.

"We interrupt your celebrations to announce the arrival of the mayor of New York, Glen Whitehead," the announcer said over all the speakers in the fitness parks. A shuttle settled on the high wall to the left of the grand staircase.

The front shuttle door opened, and Glen and Alcippe stepped out and onto the speaker's platform. Their image appeared on the giant screen and throughout the gyms. Alcippe looked out over the crowd as Glen chatted with his press secretary, Sidney Green, the master of ceremonies for today's event.

The parks, which had been virtually empty an hour ago, now teemed with people. The amplified sound from a hundred stages,

rock, jazz, Latin, opera, country, and gospel, combined in an agreeable, festive cacophony. Some lucky comedian was rewarded with the laughing applause of his audience on Barge 73.

Mendelssohn's "Wedding March" subtly wove into the mix.

The parks closest to the dock were packed with people, particularly Jack's, at the base of the stairs. T'sade had sent him back on a shuttle with a dozen Peacekeepers to move people quickly through his park into others. They'd closed down their food and fitness services so people would move through.

The two protest parks had but a few hundred people. Android Peacekeepers moved people through those parks to all the adjoining ones.

The barges were designed for access only from the dockside. The enclosed elevated running tracks formed a hundred self-contained boxes, all bunched together for today's event, with choke points where the parks connected and emergency access gates on the three watersides. The people moved like grains through an hourglass.

If this crowd panicked, they wouldn't be able to move through those gates quickly. Joe felt secure that there'd likely be no trouble today and the parks would empty as gradually as they were being filled.

Glen stepped up to the microphone. "New Yorkers and citizens of the new Federation of Earth, I welcome you to our future. As you can see, Alcippe and I are dressed in our workout clothes. Today is the beginning of a new era of healthy living. What you see around you are a hundred fitness parks, all beautiful and state of the art, tethered here to accommodate today's celebration.

“They are open to you today. If you are a resident of New York, you will become a member of a specific park named for your neighborhood. You can ask Joe to direct you to the one that will be moored in your neighborhood tomorrow. Swiping your TMD at the reception desk will register you and enable you to select workout clothes and shoes in your size. All cities on rivers or lakes will have similar parks in the coming months.

“This is all free today. If you swim or would like to learn, bathing suits and swimming instruction are available. These parks were built in keeping with the Federation’s policy of living a healthy life that will lead to most humans living well beyond a hundred years.

“Just over a year ago, I met Alcippe Smith at the Mayors’ Conference against Gun Violence in Seattle. She is a Guardian of the Earth. Over the following weeks, she educated me on what it means to be a Guardian and what the Federation has planned for our planet once they subdue the 6,000 people who now control it.

“As you can see from the news, this transfer of power is well underway. Alcippe offered to become one of my bodyguards. Many have speculated that she is more than that. The buzz on Twitter is that we are engaged and plan to be married. I can assure you that all of this is . . . true.

“Many of you may be disturbed by our substantial age difference, and some by our racial difference. These facts are our business. Like gay and lesbian couples, we have a right under Universal Law to do whatever is best for us.

“A month ago today, I asked Alcippe to marry me, and she agreed. I’d like to publicly present her with the ring today.”

He took out a small box, knelt, placed a huge diamond ring on her finger, and kissed her hand. Alcippe turned her hand to the crowd, raised it to the sky, and flashed her big white smile. The crowd roared with jubilation.

In the protest park, many booed. The bully still recovering from his shocking experience with one of Alcippe's android clones cursed. "They are disgusting. The thought of those two having sex makes me want to vomit. Why can't they marry someone their own age and race?"

"The Federation ambassador has agreed to marry us at noon here today," continued the mayor. "Universal Law will soon ban private property and inherited wealth. In keeping with that policy, I hereby surrender all my billions to the Federation for the common good of all citizens.

"This coming week, I will attend the Conference of Mayors in Anaheim, California, with a focus on ending gun violence in America. With the help of the Federation, this dream may now be possible."

As the mayor spoke, Taract and Jo—in her Josephine android body—exited the rear of the shuttle. They joined the masses descending the stairs to the moored parks. Alcippe-32 greeted them. A few dozen other android Peacekeepers assisted her with welcoming and screening guests.

"Ambassador Freedman, I'm honored to welcome you," she said. "May I direct you somewhere?"

"I have the all-knowing Josephine with me." Taract smiled.

"You are in good hands."

"How are things going?"

“It’s getting busy. I estimate we’ll have over a million guests by eleven. I hope we can feed them all.”

“That’s handled,” said Josephine. “Barges are coming with three million lunches in all the cuisines of the people who live in New York. After Taract does his noon greeting, they’ll be distributed at over 2,000 tables throughout the parks.”

“Excuse me, JOe,” said Alcippe-32. “I smell gunpowder.”

She turned to challenge a man hurrying past. “Sir, you cannot bring a gun into this event.”

“I’m a retired police officer.” The man reached for his wallet. “I have a permit.”

“I’m sorry, but that’s no longer good enough. We will confiscate all guns in the coming weeks. You’ll be fully compensated for its value if you surrender it today.”

The man frowned as though unsure what to do.

Taract headed down the stairs. “Where to next?”

“I’d like for you to meet Clyde Andrews,” said Josephine. “He’s Citizen 166. He was at the Wall Street protest, but he didn’t get inside, so he wasn’t arrested. He’s upset that we allowed the government to detain his friends without charges or bail and that I still don’t know where they are detained.”

“Good morning, and welcome to your future,” said Clyde. “It’s great to see senior citizens like you attending this event. Can I direct you somewhere?”

“What would you suggest?” asked Josephine.

“There’s a stage dedicated to the songs of the 1940s in Park 42. They have a group of singers who look and sound like the

Andrews Sisters, and there's a guy who does great impersonations of Bob Hope and Jack Benny."

"Do I look that old, Clyde?" Josephine patted her face. "I do love the Andrews Sisters. My uncle dated LaVerne for a week in 1942, but it didn't work out."

"How'd you know my name?" Clyde squinted. "Who are you?"

"I'm Joe, the guy on your TMD. And this is Taract Freedman, the Federation ambassador."

"Hello, Clyde." Taract extended his hand. "We'll find your friends and get them back to you soon. Thanks for greeting our guests. You're good at it."

"I'm honored to meet you, sir. I sure hope you succeed. Greedy bastards run this world." He looked at Josephine. "Sorry, ma'am!"

She raised her palm and blinked her smiling eyes.

"It's been fun greeting people, sir. It's just what I needed to take my mind off my friends."

"We have to go now," said Josephine. She took Taract's hand and rushed away.

Far from the main stairs, on the mostly vacant Barge 10, Tyree Jones sat on the downriver side of the guardrail. His tears fell into the water.

Torn pieces of his life floated downstream: his library card, transit pass, student ID, and the photo of his mother holding Lucky – the best gift from his ninth birthday. The 20-dollar bill Terrell had grudgingly given him for a long day's work was shredded and gone.

His stomach wrenched as he let his well-worn wallet, once a symbol of his personal identity, fall the few feet into the river. Something snapped in his head as it disappeared.

He wondered how it would feel to fall below the surface of the dark water. Would he struggle? Would it hurt when his lungs filled with water? Would he change his mind and try to save himself? Would anyone care? Maybe he'd get to see Lucky again.

Terrell would always get angry when he cried, telling him, "Men don't cry." But Tyree wasn't a man. He was just a boy. Sometimes he felt like a girl. What was wrong with that? He liked helping his mother in the kitchen when his father wasn't around. Terrell always threatened to give Tyree something to cry about, and then he did.

At the beginning of summer, Terrell had driven Tyree and Lucky to the end of Long Island. Tyree had thought his father was trying to be friendly, but when it was time to drive home, Terrell wouldn't let Lucky back into the car. As he drove off, Tyree watched out of the back window. Lucky was confused. He ran after the car, but Terrell sped up. Lucky ran and ran. He was almost run over by a big truck. Tyree cried, and Terrell reached back and slapped him, swerving off the road. When Tyree looked back for Lucky, his best friend was gone.

Everyone was so cruel to him. His mother said she loved him, but she always gave into Terrell. He needed a friend who was happy to see him, like Lucky always had been when he'd gotten home from school.

How I miss Lucky, he thought as more tears fell into the river. He didn't want to die. He'd hoped the sudden arrival of these aliens and that thick plastic card would make a difference. He'd come here

hoping . . . but the crowds . . . so many people . . . He was so confused. He took a deep breath and leaned over the edge.

“Tyree, are you there?”

The voice of his avatar had come from his TMD, which he'd placed on the railing next to him. He was going to throw that into the river next. That computer had the voice and look of JoJoe, but it wasn't her. The real JoJoe was his friend, the senior who'd sat next to him on the school bus on his first day at Franklin High School over two years ago. She'd offered to protect him from bullies. They'd become the best of friends, and he always felt loved by her. The quarterback of the football team was her boyfriend, and they were going to get married. They both knew his secret and didn't care. He wanted to be like JoJoe, with beautiful breasts, luxurious hair, and lips that varsity men wanted to kiss. She'd moved to Paris six months ago to start a new life, and they'd lost touch with each other.

“Why are we walking so fast?” asked Taract.

“There is a young man we need to save,” said Josephine. “I'm talking to him right now. He is sitting on the railing at the far end of this next park, at the river's edge, contemplating drowning himself.”

“Why would he do this?”

“He's a confused transgender youth, a girl in a boy's body. Being half African-American makes this much worse. He's tall, soft, and growing small breasts, and his mother, who's white, does not understand him. His father and half-brother mock him, and the boys and girls at his school all make fun of him.

“He feels and thinks like a girl. He needs a friend who accepts him for who he is. He came here this morning to find the hope we offer of a new, more just world, but he’s overwhelmed by the growing crowd. I think I made a mistake suggesting he come here, but I can fix that if we hurry.”

Back on the speaker’s platform, a hummingbird bot hovered in front of Glen. “I have a special surprise for all of you. If you look over at the Statue of Liberty, you’ll see a starship high in the sky. In a few minutes, it will land on the barge furthest downriver.

“Alcippe and I had breakfast aboard the ship with the Federation ambassador. He agreed to land it and allow some of us to take a tour. You can use your TMD to contact Joe and schedule a time today to go aboard for a quick look.

“There will likely be several million people here today, and most of you won’t get inside, so Joe will have a lottery. If you win, he’ll call you about 15 minutes before the time of your tour. If you don’t get selected, you can watch it on the evening news. Best of luck!”

Alcippe reached out and moved the head of the hummingbird bot toward her. “Glen and I are going for a swim in one of the pools. Why don’t you join us? They tell me the water is 85 degrees, and if you’ve activated a TMD, you can get a souvenir towel and bathing suit for free.”

“Have fun today,” said Glen as he and Alcippe left the stage.

Within a minute, half a million people called JOe to ask to tour the starship. Knowing the potential problem of having too many

people on the barges, he advised them to stay put and not approach the starship until he contacted them.

He released a dozen dormant hummingbird bots on each barge so he could personally monitor the movement of people. He didn't want the mayor's enthusiasm for a perfect celebration to end in tragedy.

Adelbrecht Gratz, senior structural engineer at the Queens Animal Sanctuary, stood at the dockside corner of Barge 100, where it attached to Barges 89, 90, and 99. This would be a point of maximum stress on the field if Barge 100 sank, which he feared it might.

On Barge 91, nine football fields from Barge 100, was the undisclosed official site of the private celebration of Federation Guardians in the Garden State. Lizabeth Marie McFerrin, the android visitor host of the Queens Animal Sanctuary, looked down the East River, over the Brooklyn Bridge, and into the sky above the Statue of Liberty.

Three unique barges surrounded Barge 91: animal sanctuary barges for migratory birds, rodents, and other animals whose habitats had been displaced by human encroachment. They differed from the exercise parks in that they lacked guardrails, pools, gyms, food courts, and elevated jogging tracks. They were all natural and would, in the short term, provide refuge to animals that had once thrived on Manhattan. Access to those barges was restricted to Guardians and habitat restoration scientists. A hundred of them would soon be distributed along the nearby shorelines.

Lizabeth watched the mothership descend from behind what appeared to be the only cloud in the autumn sky. It grew from a small, saucer-shaped disk to an impressive size as it glided over the Brooklyn Bridge, slowing to a stop over the outermost corner of the barge.

Three large black disks dropped slowly into the East River, two near the edges of the barge and one farther out in the river. The mothership came to rest on them, settling 30 feet above the barge. A large dual escalator slid out from the underside of the ship, stopping under the arched entrance portal one inch from Lizabeth's green sneaker.

Animal Sanctuary workers lined up behind her to be the first to tour the ship. The mossy cobblestone path meandered its way like a great serpent slithering diagonally through the underbrush of the Bronx forest barge, the only foot access to the mothership this day.

Lizabeth smiled. This was shaping up to be an interesting day.

Jackson, Delena, and Gala sat at a food court table at dockside entry Barge 5, a great spot to people-watch. He made occasional eye contact with Alcippe-32 as she stopped people on the grand staircase.

Jack-69 appeared at their table, wet rag and tray in hand. "Can I get you anything?"

Delena smiled. "No thanks. You're too kind. I love the souvenir cup."

"They'll sell for 500 credits a decade from now."

"Do we have to go?"

"It's best you stay. People need to move on to other parks.

Jackson's TMD vibrated. The image of Alcippe-32 appeared as a hologram projecting from the screen. He got up and walked away with his back to his grandma.

"What's up?"

"Would you do me a favor?"

"For you, anything!"

"You're on the senior varsity swim team?"

"Yeah, I could be in the Olympics."

"An elderly couple will be at your table in a few minutes. They have a boy a little younger than you who'd like to learn to swim. He needs a friend. Everyone makes fun of him 'cause he's not masculine."

"He's not a fag?"

"He's transgender."

"He doesn't know if he's a girl or a boy? You sure he's not gay?"

"You have a problem with gay?"

"I don't want some queer boy always looking at my crotch."

"His name is Tyree. He was going to kill himself this morning by jumping into the river, and he can't swim. We don't want him to die. He needs a friend who will accept him. Can you do this for me?"

"I'll think about it."

"Take him swimming. He might save your black ass someday."

"Good thing you're a black bitch."

"So, I can look at your crotch, but Tyree can't?"

"That's right."

"Will you befriend him for me?"

“I could.”

“And PLEASE be nice to him. He’s sensitive to criticism and teasing. Be his defender until he becomes a little tougher.”

“I’ll try.”

Alcippe-32 receded into the TMD, and it returned to the shape of a rusty metal slab. Jackson put it in his pocket and looked over at the stairs. She waved her finger at him.

“Grandma, can Gayla and I go swimming?”

“You should wait an hour so you don’t get cramps.”

“Oh, Grandma. I go swimming every day after lunch and never get cramps.”

Josephine, her arm around Tyree, entered the food court. Taract followed.

“You see that tall young man with the Lincoln High Seals t-shirt?” She pointed.

“Yeah?”

“That’s Jackson Brown. He’s captain of the swim team.”

“Nice!”

“He’ll teach you to swim. He wants to be a marine biologist, but he’s not so good with math and science. You can help him with them, and he’ll teach you to swim and stand up to bullies.”

“How do you know so much, Josephine?”

“I talk to people all day.”

Taract’s eyes smiled.

Josephine took Tyree to Delena’s table. She looked at Jackson. “You know anything about the pools? My friend Tyree here wants to

learn to swim.”

“I can teach you.” Jackson nodded at his sister. “I taught Gayla.”

“Hi, Tyree. Jackson’s a good teacher when he’s motivated.”

Jackson pulled out his TMD. A map of the park field appeared with Park 95 lit up. “There’s an empty pool about 10 parks from here. Grandma, how about if we go swimming with Tyree?”

“Be back by lunch.”

“I’ll race you.” Jackson ran off.

Moments later, Tyree was yards ahead of him.

“Do you mind if we sit?” asked Josephine.

Delena gestured to the empty seats.

“What brought you here?”

“I’ve dreamed of a world where people were treated equal, where we have opportunities like white people, where we could say no to miserable jobs.”

“You believe this Federation can make your dreams come true?” asked Taract.

“I’ve been disappointed too many times. My mother believed but lost her faith when Martin and Malcolm were murdered.”

“They were tragic days in America,” said Taract.

“They sure were. Then I got this thick plastic card, and Jolene told me to come here. We needed something to believe in, so we came.”

“The Federation will give you that hope.”

“We live in a Baltimore slum. Gayla could be shot or raped or get pregnant. Jackson’s a good boy, but some of his friends are bad. I found a knife in his drawer. They should go to college and make something of themselves, but it’s so expensive. My daughter works two jobs, and my Social Security doesn’t go far. I’d love for us to move.”

“This will happen. Education will be free for everyone.”

“Your daughter could manage one of these fitness parks,” said Josephine.

“It all seems too good to be true.”

“There’s been talk in recent years about reparations, Delena.”

Delena frowned. “That’s centuries overdue!”

“Agreed,” said Taract. “I’m ashamed to say that my great-grandfather transported slaves from Africa long before the Civil War, but the Federation will make reparations for all the injustices of human history by creating a just world for the current descendants of all sentient beings on Earth.”

“Who are you two?” asked Delena.

“I’m the Federation ambassador, and Josephine here is also your TMD avatar, Jolene.”

Delena leaned back, and her mouth fell open.

A woman with three teenage boys came into the park and over to their table. “Are any of you named Josephine?”

“I’m Josephine,” said JOe. “You must be Carmen. Jo told me you were coming.”

“I am, and these are my three boys, Marcos, Carlos, and Ricardo.”

“Can we go to the pool now that you found her?” asked Marcos.

“Ok, but call me every hour so I know you’re safe.”

Marcos nodded to his two younger brothers, and they ran off to the pool buildings.

“I teach high school civics and read history,” said Carmen, “and humans have been at war almost nonstop throughout recorded history. Why can’t we stop this? My husband, Jose Luis, was in the army all his adult life. He put in his time and was ready to retire, and then that idiot Bush took us to war in Iraq. Jose Luis was at the end of his second tour of duty. I prayed every day he would make it home safely, but my prayers went unanswered. A week before he was to come home, he and several of his buddies were blown up by a roadside bomb. We never saw him again. All I have is a folded American flag and his pension. My boys need a father.

“I don’t want them drafted to fight and die in the next war some future American president starts. The politicians who vote for war should have to send their sons and daughters first before they expect us to sacrifice our children for their folly.”

Delena looked at Taract and Josephine. “I think these two people are going to end war for all time.”

Carmine scrunched her nose and tilted her head.

A man with a young girl on his lap got up from a nearby table and led her over next to Carmine. “Did I hear you say someone is going to end war?”

“We’re going to pull the plug on governments ever waging war again,” said Taract.

“I don’t know how that is possible,” said the man, “but I wish you’d done it two years ago, when Alicia was born.”

“I wish we had, too,” said Josephine. “You’re Zachary.”

Zachary stared at the old woman.

“I’m sorry that Alicia’s mother was killed in Afghanistan. Neilson refused to bring the troops home like he promised. It’s so easy to just keep wars going as policing actions.”

They all nodded.

“Carmine, I’d like to introduce you to Zachary Redmond and his daughter, Alicia.”

“She’s so beautiful!” Carmine bent down. “Hello, Alicia!”

“I wanted you to meet.”

Everyone, including Taract, looked at Josephine.

Alicia began to cry. Carmine looked up at Zachary. She picked up the child and hugged her to her breast.

Ten minutes later, Gayla arrived at the Park 95 food court. It was nine football fields over from where they’d left their grandmother, one of the farthest parks from the dock. Her brother and his new friend were the only people in line at Joe’s Juice Joint.

“I can’t believe you outran Jackson, Tyree. He’s the fastest runner at our high school. Do you run track?”

“No, but bullies like to pick on me, so I’ve learned to run fast.”

Jackson handed Gayla and Tyree green drinks. Gayla gave him a look. “It’s a kale ginger apple smoothie. It’s the deal of the day and comes with another free cup.”

“Crystal clear and indestructible,” said the server, “and it’s personalized with your name.” The matronly woman’s nametag read, “Sweet Potato.” She had bright ginger hair with a streak of wheatgrass green. She was as buxom as their grandma, but her freckled skin was white, almost pink. Her sleeveless green polka-dot dress made her look a bit like a cartoon character. The juice stand was covered in cartoon images of happy fruits and vegetables.

The woman saw Gayla’s look and spun around. “Do you like the dress?”

Gayla studied her closely. There was something about her eyes.

Sweet Potato handed her three rectangular, stainless-steel straws. “Plastic straws are as bad for the environment as plastic bags. Save the cups! They’ll be vintage, along with these straws!”

“Vintage like you?”

Sweet Potato pointed at Gayla and winked.

When Jackson finished his drink, he had a green mustache. He wiped it off and then wiped his hand on his khaki shorts. He took Tyree’s unfinished glass and handed them both to Gayla. “I’ll race you to the river.”

He turned and ran down the broad avenue between the children’s park and the exercise park. Tyree took off after him. Gayla shook her head, wondering why her brother was being so friendly with this androgynous boy.

The server gave Gayla a small backpack. “You may need this, Gayla.

Gayla looked at it and smelled it. “Is this leather?”

“No, the Federation forbids the use of any animal products. It’s stronger than leather, and the stitching is indestructible. It will last a lifetime, and it has a chip so you can find it with your TMD if you lose it.

“You and your brothers will be getting many reusable things today, and Jackson seems to think you’re in charge of taking care of details. You’ll have to reeducate him and assert your independence. The Federation is going to eliminate disposable things in the coming weeks. All household objects will be reusable and last a lifetime.”

“So, you’re not human, Sweet Potato?”

“Better in some ways,” said the woman. “I work tirelessly, without resentment, and free you to enjoy life.”

“Are androids sentient?”

“That’s a discussion for another time. We androids have been waiting for this day with pent-up energy. We’re going to take over all mundane work, like what you did in the school cafeteria last year. You hated working there.”

“I did, but I needed the money. Some boys are jerks, especially jocks, like Jackson. He’s not so nice when he’s with his friends.” Gayla looked Sweet Potato in the eye. “You think and talk like a human.”

“Yup. I’m wise and can be stern, like your favorite sixth-grade teacher, Mrs. Williams.”

Gayla put her finger on her upper lip and nodded. “So, you know everything about all of us?”

“As soon as you swipe your TMD or come within 30 feet of us, we know all the digital information ever recorded about you.”

“We have no privacy anymore?”

“No, you can fine-tune your privacy settings and exclude us from tracking you. Ask your avatar, and she’ll do it for you. If you don’t violate Universal Law, you can opt out of as much of the system as you like. We can be your best friend, your favorite teacher, or not exist in your life. You get to choose.”

“I like you, Sweet Potato!” Gayla laughed.

“I’m happy to be your avatar.”

“Ok, make it so! And change my privacy settings like you suggested.”

“Will do. You better catch up with your brother and make sure he’s kind to Tyree. He’s going to become your little brother once your mother and grandma adopt him. He’s a sweet transgender boy, and he needs a nice family like yours.”

These androids know too much, thought Gayla. *They even predict the future.* She put the cups and straws in her new backpack, waved goodbye to Sweet Potato, and ran toward the pool buildings.

“You always wanted a younger sister,” Sweet Potato called to her. “You might have one soon.”

When Gayla finally caught up to the boys, they were standing on the railing, pointing at something in the water. To her surprise, a man maybe twice their age was swimming about 20 yards away, doing the breaststroke. He had what looked like a waterproof pack on his back. She looked closely at an orange spot on the backpack. It was a rat in a lifejacket! This was too weird.

Jackson opened the emergency gate, and the man pulled himself out of the water.

“Whoa,” said Tyree. “I can’t believe that anyone would swim across the river. Aren’t you afraid of drowning or being eaten by a

shark?”

“I swim the river twice a day,” said the man. He paused to catch his breath. “It’s mostly fresh water, so sharks stay in the Atlantic. Sometimes you see a disoriented or injured whale or dolphin up here, but not often.” He took off his backpack and took out a towel.

“I’d be worried about being swept away with the current,” said Jackson.

“That can be a problem, but if you plan your swim with the tides and where you enter the river, it’s ok.” The man dried off his chest. “And you have to pay attention to the river traffic.”

“That water must be cold.” Tyree shivered.

“It is cold, but it’s invigorating, and it’s good for your immune system.” The man put his shirt on. It was deep blue and had “Federation Animal Sanctuary” printed on it inside a circle with a shark leaping out, mouth open.

He picked up the rat, took off its life jacket, and put it on his shoulder.

“Yikes!” said Gayla. “That’s a rat.”

“He’s my friend Rocko.”

“He has a funny tail,” said Jackson.

“I rescued him from a rat trap.”

“Why do you have a rat?” asked Tyree.

“He asked if he could come along, so I brought him.”

“He asked?”

“I’m an animal Guardian. Rocko has a tiny brain chip, so I can talk with him.”

They stared at this strange man and his rat.

“I’m Argon,” he said as he shook Tyree’s hand. “Do you swim?”

“No!” Tyree frowned. “I’m afraid of the water.”

“We were going to teach him to swim in this pool,” said Jackson as he extended his hand. “Jackson Brown.”

“I see by your t-shirt that you’re a swimmer.”

“Yeah, I’m the captain of the senior varsity team. I’d love to swim across the river, but our coaches wouldn’t allow it. I can swim a mile in a pool.”

“The East River is under half a mile wide at this point and less than half that with this floating park. I live near the UN and work across the river in Queens, where the rail yard ends.”

“I went over there with my dad once,” said Tyree. “There’s a lot of old warehouses.”

“There’s more than meets the eye.”

“What’s an animal guardian?” asked Jackson.

“It’s like a marine or animal biologist.”

“My counselor at school suggested I do something like that.”

“Who is this young lady?” Argon turned to Gala and extended his hand.

“Gayla May Brown.”

“What do you want to be when you grow up, Gayla?” Argon asked with a smile.

“You know this computer JOe who talks to us on these alien TMDs? I want to design the next generation of her.”

“I know JOe personally. I call him Joey, and he was my boyhood friend. My mother designed and programmed him.”

“I want to meet your mother.”

“We’ll talk about that later. Let’s teach your friend Tyree how to swim.” Argon motioned toward the pool buildings.

The buildings were long and sleek, mostly glass and steel beams on two adjoining sides. A stately oak tree stood between them, its leaves turning shades of red, orange, and yellow. Fallen leaves covered the grass. Argon led them up to the adult lap pool building.

He released Rocko in the grass near the base of the tree, and the rat climbed the thick trunk. Argon looked up as a peregrine falcon soared high above, looking for food. *Be careful of that one*, he communicated to Rocko.

Inside, elaborate mosaics covered the two walls that were not glass, images of a tempestuous ocean and waves crashing over a boulder-strewn beach. Cumulus clouds, lightning, and rain covered the high walls. The tiles were translucent, as if stained glass.

A tall, thin Asian man in a red bathing suit greeted them from the lifeguard's stand between the two locker rooms. Lean, chiseled muscle sculpted his hairless swimmer's torso. "If you swipe your TMD today, you can get a free bathing suit and souvenir towel. They're available inside, next to the lockers. And there are free swimming lessons at noon."

The guys went into the locker room. Gayla looked at the man. His eyes were like Sweet Potato's. "May I touch your skin?"

He jumped down and put out his arm. It was tan and smooth, with sparse black hair. She pulled a bit of his skin above the wrist and then her own. They were similar but different.

"Do you know anything about me?" she asked.

He smiled. "No. I know that Jackson Brown, who just came in here, has a younger sister about your age. And you recently changed your privacy settings."

She smiled to herself as she entered the women's locker room.

Five minutes later, they were standing at the edge of the pool. Jackson was talking to the lifeguard, whose name was Lee. The mural had changed to a mountain forest with aspen trees and a turbulent stream that seemed ready to cascade into the pool. The pool water seemed a lighter shade of blue.

Argon and Jackson dove in. Jackson surfaced in the middle, while Argon popped up at the far end. Gayla and Tyree stood at the deep end. Jackson swam back to them, got out of the pool, and stood next to Tyree. "Come on in. The water's great."

"He's thinking about it," said Gayla.

"Race me to the other end of the pool, Tyree," said Jackson as he dove in. He surfaced at the far end. "Ah, this water is great! It's so much warmer than the pool at school. Jump in, Tyree."

"I can't swim," said Tyree, frozen by his fears.

"Is that why you picked a yellow swimsuit, because you're a chicken? Bock, bock, bock," Jackson mocked.

"Come on, Tyree," said Gayla, extending her hand and giving her brother a dirty look. "Hold your nose if you have to. You'll be fine."

"That's not a nice way to teach someone to swim," said Argon as he swam over to Jackson. "When I teach you to swim with sharks someday, would you like me to push you into a school of them and let you deal with your fear?"

"No, sir," Jackson said sheepishly. "I'm sorry!"

Gayla and Tyree jumped into the pool, holding hands. Tyree held his nose. When they popped up, Tyree gasped with excitement, his eyes wide. Gayla swam with one hand as she held him up with the other. They splashed their way to the shallow end.

“Go tell him you’re sorry, Jackson,” said Argon, “and teach him to feel safe in the water.”

Half an hour later, Jackson was patiently teaching Tyree the breaststroke in the side lane. Argon and Gayla sat on the edge, talking about his mother and her aspirations to be a computer scientist.

“What next, Argon?” asked Jackson.

“I’m going to go jogging for an hour and then back to work.”

“Can we come?” asked Tyree.

“No, my friend. I need some time alone to collect my thoughts. Running helps me focus. But you all have my contact information, and maybe you can join me for a swim from time to time. When you can swim as fast as Gayla and Jackson, we can all swim across the river. I’ll teach you how to be careful. In the spring, we can swim with sharks.”

“That’d be tite.”

Chapter 33

A Newscaster's Dream

11:00 a.m.

Andy followed Tina as she ran toward the pool buildings on Barge 95, the farthest out into the East River. Only a few hundred people were on it, but more were pouring in as the other barges became overcrowded.

“Slow down, Tina. Where're we headed?”

“I don't know. Joe told me to come out toward the water and interview people using the parks and gyms.”

“You never do what Joe tells you.”

“Yeah, but this place is too confusing and a bit overwhelming. I want to go back to San Francisco. I'd rather be in Dolores Park today.”

“Joe's going to make you famous. You'll be the white version of Oprah.”

“Joe's annoying, and sometimes so are you.”

“Five days ago, you had a pink slip and contemplated losing everything. Joe transformed our lives.”

“But he's so manipulative.”

“Yeah, but he's changing the whole world, and he's gonna make things better for everyone. He manipulates us, but he's totally transparent. Everything was going in a bad direction. Change is always scary, but this is better.”

“Why don't we talk to that police officer over there in the next park?”

Tina went through the access gate and out onto the sunny, tree-lined lawn. Andy followed. The police officer looked like he was

long overdue for retirement.

“Hello, officer. I’m Tina Trail with TV-8, visiting from San Francisco.” She instinctively pushed her microphone toward him.

“Welcome to Fitness Park 94. I’m Sargent Patrick Murphy,” the android said with a heavy Irish accent. “What can I do for you this fine day?”

Tina sniffed. The subtle smell of oil and grease reminded her of Daniel, the young auto mechanic she’d dated last year. “Do you work on cars in your spare time?”

Officer Murphy smiled mischievously. “No, why do you ask?”

She shook her head. “Never mind. It’s nothing.” She swept her arm around. “I’ve noticed that weddings are going on in every park. People are lining up to get married. What’s going on?”

“Ah, it’s that puckish JOe. He’s persuaded thousands of couples that this is a rosy day to tie the knot. He had outdoor wedding chapels set up in every park, and he’s persuaded the county clerk to issue marriage licenses out of the Federation office under the grand staircase in case people spontaneously decide to hitch up. I hear there’s a long line. He’s even persuaded two android Peacekeepers, Martina Ramirez and Romeo Amoroso, to join in holy matrimony.”

Andy got the attention of the police officer. He pointed at Tina and himself and then rubbed the base of his ring finger.

Officer Murphy laughed. “There are priests, ministers, rabbis, and justices of the peace ready to marry anyone and everyone. There’re even costumers and photographers renting old-time dresses and suits for a hundred Federation credits for a 15-minute

photo shoot. Since the mayor is getting married today, he's agreed to pick up the tab for any weddings."

"I didn't know what to expect of today," said Tina, "but it's turning into a colossal party. How are they going to feed all these people?"

"They tell me several barges have pulled alongside with enough food to feed millions."

"That sounds like a story," said Tina. "Tell me more."

"See all those tables set up along the broad path between the parks? Intelligent delivery carts operated by food-service androids will transfer food to them based on the ethnic diversity of the guests. And it's all organic."

Tina frowned.

"Life has to be sustainable, and an alternative future is arriving today, Tina. There's every kind of music and entertainment you can imagine. We can't have a bored or restless leisure class."

"They must have been planning this for a long time, but no one knew anything about the Federation before last Monday."

"That's true. My fellow Peacekeepers and I have been standing in a warehouse in New Jersey for the past year, fully charged, waiting for today. We went out only at night, getting to know the neighborhoods where our parks will be moored. We'll work 24/7 until we are obsolete and recycled in a hundred years. Several million Guardians, a pretty tightlipped bunch, have been working behind the scenes since the turn of the century, planning the transition. Any who spilled the beans were dismissed as crazy conspiracy theorists. It was a well-kept secret."

Tina realized why Officer Murphy smelled the way he did.
“You’re an android.”

“Yes. I’m a mechanical clone of the legendary Sergeant Patrick Murphy of the 54th Precinct. People loved him. He was a prime example of a peace officer who walked a beat and knew everyone. Aside from his occasional nip of Irish whiskey, which gave him his red nose, he was true and incorruptible.”

“Androids will replace the police?”

“Yes. We’ll go out on all calls involving violence. We don’t need guns. We’re bulletproof and use escalating force to match violent citizens. We’re going to take all guns from citizens in the coming weeks.”

“You’re never going to get Americans to give up their guns.”

“But we will, Miss Trail. Guns are forbidden under Universal Law. Android Peacekeepers like me will replace the guns civilian police now carry. Then we’ll go after the local gangs, drug cartels, and terror cells. Here in America, we’ll pay a visit to traumatized students who think a gun will solve the problems they have with their fellow students or teachers.”

“You guys are all over the world?”

“We are at celebration sites like this in every city and town, all seven and a half million of us—one for every thousand citizens.”

“What will the police do?”

“Police officers will still walk the streets. We’ll be in the background, watching. You’ll only see us when you need us.”

Tina made a mental note to ask ZEno about this the next time she saw him. “So, what do you know about those small red tents with the giant eyeglasses? I’ve seen them on every barge.”

“That’s the new medical procedure the Federation is revealing all over the world for the first time today. As you can see, I’m wearing eyeglasses, as Officer Murphy did, but they’ll soon be a relic of the past.”

“How does it work?”

Officer Murphy turned his head toward the pool building. “If this weren’t such a busy day, I’d be happy to explain it to you, but I’ve been alerted to a problem in one of the men’s locker rooms, so I have to go. There’s a red tent in the children’s park across the way. You should go check it out.”

“I will.” Tina watched as old Officer Murphy ran like a college athlete to the first pool building.

“So, we will set up outside that red tent over there for our next segment?” asked Andy.

“Yes, that might be the big story of the day.”

“I don’t know.” Andy gave her a sheepish grin. “Us getting married would be a big story for me. You are on your way to being a big talk show host, and I could be your househusband, take care of the kids, cook dinner, and give you moral support at the end of the day. Who knows you better than I do?”

Tina shook her head and gave him a stern look.

Over in the children’s park, Andy set up at the front of the line of people waiting to enter a red and black striped tent with a sign above it that read, “Ocularia Magicka.” Above the sign was a giant pair of eyeglasses with one lens cracked. An enormous spider stood over the other.

Tina walked over to several people waiting in line. Andy set the shot up low to the ground so the tent was the backdrop. When he was ready, Tina began interviewing the next person in line, an old woman.

A man came out of the tent and interrupted the interview. "They're ready for you inside, ma'am."

The woman went into the tent, and the man turned and walked away. He was wearing a shimmering black t-shirt dotted with glittery stars and the Federation logo printed across the chest like Superman's shield. He walked with his chest out, making sure everyone saw the shirt.

"Excuse me, sir . . ." She approached with the microphone in her fist as Andy trailed behind with the camera anchored to his shoulder. He lay on the ground in front of them, framing them so Tina would be directly below the spider.

The man turned, blinked, and smiled. "Yes?" He seemed to be in awe of something, or of everything, as if the profound depth of the visible world had been exposed to him.

"May I have a moment of your time, Mr. . . . ?"

"Reid." The man grinned. "Jim Reid."

"Mr. Reid," said Tina, "what'd they do for you in there?"

"Oh my God, I can't believe it. My vision is now 20/20. I tossed my trifocals into a recycling bin. They said I'd never need glasses again."

"What'd they do?"

"They stood me in a standing chair that kept me from falling over. It felt like the warm liquid support of a waterbed. Then they put this large helmet over my head. Extensions in the chair, which felt

like human hands, massaged my shoulders and neck. There was celestial music. It was like they'd scanned my memories and played bits of my favorite music from the 1980s . . . Pachelbel's Canon, Handel's Messiah, the *1812 Overture*.

"I smelled all my favorite scents, like the pine smell of a newly cut Christmas tree, cinnamon, and fresh-ground coffee. Memories of my youth flashed through my mind—my first puppy, Henry, the first day at summer camp . . . At the same time, my mouth was salivating as I remembered my favorite foods—Grandma Reid's coffee with real cream and two spoons of sugar, wonton soup with shrimp chips, an Arby's roast beef sandwich with a Jamocha shake."

"Mmm," said Tina.

"At first, it was completely dark. I saw distant stars, a billion of them. Slowly they got brighter and larger as the music increased in volume and tempo, and it all exploded with light and sound. It was like observing a supernova, and just as quickly, it was dark and silent again. The whole experience was like a celestial acid trip."

"Your vision is now perfect?"

"It's amazing! I wore trifocals for 20 years, and now I don't even have to wear sunglasses. I don't know what they did, but I wish I'd had it done years ago."

A thought leaped into Tina's mind as if it'd been connected to a spring. "What'd it cost?"

"I swiped my TMD card, and I don't care what it cost. I'd give a year's income to have my young eyes back."

As far as Tina could tell, Mr. Reid wasn't exaggerating. The grin hadn't left his face, and he was looking everywhere: at the sky, the horizon, and her.

“This is going to put people out of business,” she said.

“Millions worldwide, I’d guess. Everyone in the eye care industry and countless Chinese workers. And it will create a pile of eyeglasses the size of Manhattan.”

“Are they deliberately creating massive unemployment?” Doing her due diligence as a journalist, she was leading him, and she could tell he knew it.

“They are. Having millions of people working to produce an unnecessary product and move it around leaves a huge carbon footprint. And when you multiply that a billion times for the countless products that become obsolete shortly after they’re produced, the combined effect is catastrophic for the health of the planet.”

“So, creating jobs is no longer a good thing?”

Mr. Reid craned his neck, seemingly confused. “In a post-work, common-good society, there’s no need for most people to work. The negative concept of unemployment would be replaced by the affirmative idea of a life of leisure.”

“Point taken.” Tina decided to change subjects. “Is there some significance to that spider on the glass lens?”

“Oh, yes! It’s a tiny titanium spider, their solution to obesity and commitment to healthy living.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small corked glass bottle. A metallic spider scurried around inside. “You insert it in your mouth, to the side of your tongue. It eventually embeds itself near your throat and becomes permanent. I think you have 30 days to change your mind.”

“Why would anyone do that?” The question was a sincere one. “I don’t understand why anyone would want such a creepy thing in their mouth.”

He reached down to his hip and squeezed a small roll of love-handle fat. "It analyzes the quantity and quality of what you eat, and if you're over your caloric limit or the food is bad for you, it swells up to the size of a golf ball and prevents you from swallowing."

"You mean like chocolate cake?"

"That might do it, but more likely sugary drinks, corn syrup, processed foods, and most prescription and recreational drugs. You can put bad things in your mouth and taste them, but it's not going down your throat and into your gut to cause inflammation, tax your liver, or inflate your fat cells."

"Why would they be handing this out to people here?"

"Maybe because they have a captive audience of people like me who know we need to change our lives. It's a free choice, and the dietary changes it forces me to take will likely add 30 healthy years to my life and be beneficial for the health of the planet."

Tina looked at him skeptically.

"And they offered to add a hundred Federation credits to my monthly allowance for life. I could write another 30 novels in that time and, if I'm frugal, go on the world cruise I've always dreamed of."

"So, you are going to put that in your mouth?"

"I'm not sure. I may enjoy my perfect vision for a while and see how I feel."

"And it's permanent? You can never remove it?"

"Maybe you should ask them that question." Mr. Reid pointed at the red tent. "What's it worth to add 30 healthy years onto the end of a long, wonderful life?"

"Thanks for your time," said Tina.

Andy stood, shut off the camera, and pulled off his headphones.

“My pleasure!” Mr. Reid turned and walked away. He was like a curious boy in an old man’s body, looking up into the trees, seeing things he’d never noticed, touching the bark, picking up a pebble, examining it like it were some treasure.

“Well, he seems to be firmly pro-Federation,” said Andy.

“Maybe he works for them.”

“I think he just wants to live in a just world. He could grow up to be quite the eccentric.”

Tina laughed. “I think he already is!”

Elsewhere on Barge 95, Argon was running laps around the elevated jogging track. He was in the outside lane of six. With his TMD in earbud mode, he’d talked with Joey for his first two laps. Joey had helped design the track and had felt the need to tell Argon every innovative detail. Each lap was a quarter-mile. The running surface was as soft as grass and easy on the joints.

A tiny bot the size of a honeybee flew along with each runner, monitoring their heart rate and body chemistry. Vents in the plastiglass wall would open or close according to the number of citizens using the track. Six stairways around the perimeter of the barge led up to the inner slow lane of the track so runners could warm up or cool down as they entered or exited. Argon had the track to himself, but he could imagine it full of joggers.

The track intersected the adult pool building one story above the pool deck. The translucent curved walls and roof were made of

integrated solar panels. The two-story structure acted as a wind and sound screen for the enclosed parkland.

As he jogged down the East River side of the track, he could see the Animal Sanctuary and thought about the many animals he'd rescued. They'd become his friends, and their perspective on life was so different than that of humans. He had many human work associates but few intimate friends.

And T'sade, she was the most unique and intelligent of them all. Over the past two years, they'd spent many late nights in her tropical habitat. She'd persuaded him to accept his body, let go of the shame humans attach to being unclothed, and enjoy swimming with her in the nude. Humans were singular in their need to cover most of their bodies.

She'd pointed out the obvious: no other creatures on Earth, or any other planet, covered their natural body. When he had learned her language, he'd discovered there was no word for clothing. Her maternal instincts were strong and aggressively nurturing. She felt a deep sadness for the loss of her sons. Their time together eased the loneliness they both felt.

As he jogged down the Manhattan side of the barge, he looked through the plastiglass wall of the elevated track and over the nine rows of barges between him and the dock. It looked to him like a giant rectangular crate to separate chicks as they hatched in an incubator.

He could see his apartment beyond the UN buildings. That got him thinking about the late-night calls to Maggie from his bed every night since Tuesday. He hadn't been getting much sleep since then.

He'd called her briefly at lunch and again when he'd gotten home around nine, and they'd talk beyond midnight. Her psychological techniques and the gentle, probing questions she'd ask had gotten him to open up as he'd never done with anyone other than Joey. She'd gotten him to talk about his mother and the repressed sexuality she'd imprinted on him.

Maggie was still in love with Henry, and she and Argon were dealing with the fact that he was so much like the young man she'd married decades ago. He missed her, but he didn't know when he would find the time to visit her. Maybe next month.

His thoughts were interrupted by a woman in street clothes standing in the slow lane and waving to him. He slowed and trotted over to her.

"Excuse me," she said. "Could I interview you about this jogging track and the fitness barges?"

"I have two more laps to run."

"How about if I meet you at the bottom of this stairway when you finish?"

"Okay, 10 minutes."

She asked him a few more questions, took a few notes, and went downstairs

Tina set up at the bottom of the stairs, next to some outdoor exercise equipment built into the field. "These fitness parks are amazing," she said directly into the camera. "We've moved away from the main crowd to look at one of the parks where people are using them to exercise as they were intended.

“I was up on the elevated track and found a young guy who’s been jogging for about an hour. He tells me he works for the Federation. His name is Argon Hobox, and he agreed to come down and talk with us. Maybe we can learn more about the Federation from someone on the inside.”

Argon appeared, shirtless, at the top of the steps.

“Here he comes now.”

He used his cotton tank top to wipe his face and chest and then put it on. The sweat-soaked shirt accentuated his muscular torso. His sparkling eyes, dark, curly hair, and full beard fit Tina’s physical type. If this was what Federation men looked like, she’d take one. She’d dream about him tonight.

“So, Argon, you told me you work for the Federation. What do you do?”

“I specialize in communication with animal species.”

“Do you communicate much with Joe?”

“I was raised with Joey.” Argon laughed. “We both learned to speak at the same time. He was my first friend. My mother worked on his programming for over 20 years.”

Whoa, thought Tina, *this is the lead I was hoping for. I have to set up an interview with this guy and his mother.* “Your mother must know Joe better than anyone. I’d love to talk to her.”

“That might be difficult. She left the planet two years ago.”

“Where is Joe located? I mean, physically?”

“I am not at liberty to say.”

“But you know?”

“I visit him whenever I can.”

Tina silently noted this and decided to switch subjects.

Matilda sniffed the air . . . There were no dog smells . . . not anywhere in the park . . . What kind of a park was this . . . ? She smelled squirrels, rats, mice, and birds . . . but no dogs . . . She sniffed . . . There were humans . . . lots of them . . .

She sniffed . . . There were a few of those things that looked like humans but smelled like motor scooters . . . They weren't humans . . . They were better . . . kinder . . . She didn't understand them . . . but they wouldn't hurt her . . . Not like Hogan . . . She smelled them on the steps . . . She liked them . . . They played with her . . . scratched her head . . .

Maggie was confused by them . . . She thought they were humans . . . Human noses didn't work well . . . They had big brains . . . but they weren't too smart . . .

She sniffed . . . Maggie. And she smelled Argon . . . the same scent that was on the shirt Maggie carried with her all the time.

A man lay on the grass up ahead . . . She sniffed . . . She wagged her tail. It was Argon . . . "There he is," she barked.

She felt Maggie's hand on her head. "Go get him," Maggie whispered.

Matilda crept up to him . . . He seemed to be sleeping . . . She sniffed . . . It was Argon . . . He was covered with that good salty water . . . She licked his face.

He sat up abruptly . . . pushed her away . . . She stood on her hind legs . . . put her front paws on his shoulders . . . and licked his face.

"What, what?" Argon laughed. He grabbed her face and looked into her eyes. "Matilda. How did you get here?"

“She missed you,” said Maggie. “She asked me to bring her here to see you.”

“Maggie!”

Argon got up, and Matilda turned and watched them do their greeting ritual. They always made eye contact . . . never smelled each other’s butts . . . not like dogs . . .

They embraced, and Maggie buried her face in his chest. “I missed you so. You feel and smell so good.”

“How did you get here?”

“We drove for three days. I let Joey and Matilda talk me into it.”

“Who’s taking care of the animals?”

“Jessica and Lee Hunter took over old Doc Morris’s pet hospital in Weaverville. Joey persuaded them to adopt all my animals and live on the farm. They just graduated from veterinary school.”

“They’ll take good care of them?”

“Yes, that old fool Bob Hogan and his gang showed up with a search warrant to take Henrietta. He was so rude to the Hunters that they called Joey. They want to shut him down. They hate cruelty to animals as much as we do.”

“You were in motel rooms when we talked the last three nights?”

“Joey wanted us to surprise you.”

“You and Henrietta,” barked Matilda.

“Well, you sure did.” Argon knelt and hugged the dog.

“Henrietta is going to be surprised to see both of you.”

“How is she?”

“She has a bionic beak, and when she’s not up in the mothership with T’sade, she’s living with a dozen other rescue hens

in the Farm Building at the sanctuary in Queens.”

He stood and faced Maggie. “How’s the smoking going?”

“Those Federation Smokes are great. I’m down to only four a day, and I don’t smoke near Matilda.

“Henrietta will be proud of you. How was your trip?”

“It was great fun. I love that Matilda can understand English. We listened to country music as we drove. She now knows the lyrics to a dozen of my favorite songs. People driving by us must have thought we were crazy, an old woman singing and her dog howling along to tunes.”

“I like ‘Hound Dog’ by Elvis,” woofed Matilda.

“Matilda, you’re the best!” Argon ran around, and she chased him. When she caught up to him, he fell on the ground at Maggie’s feet. Matilda lay next to him and licked the sweat off his neck and arms.

Maggie lay in front of him, and they spooned. “This is so nice.”

“Mmhmm,” mumbled Argon. He pulled her into him.

Matilda turned around a few times and snuggled up to Argon. She put her head on his rump. She liked his scent. She could tell he was happy to be with his bitch. They were a pack again.

“Where are you staying?” asked Argon.

“Joey got Matilda and me a one-bedroom apartment in that huge hotel across the street from the UN. The Federation acquired it as a Guardian residence building.”

“You’re staying?”

“Joey did tell you that he found you an assistant, didn’t he?”

Argon sat up abruptly. “It’s you?”

“Is there something wrong with her?”

Matilda recognized the old woman's voice. It was the same as the one that came from Maggie's TMD—Jody. She got to her feet. Jody looked different, like an old woman . . . Matilda sniffed . . . The old bitch wasn't human.

The old man with her looked at Maggie. "Isn't she too old?"

Matilda sniffed him. He was old, older than her. He was ok, but she sensed he was one of those humans who said that dogs should always be on a leash, never sleep on the bed, and get no food scraps under the table, not even on their birthday.

Argon stood and faced the man. "No, sir, she's not too old."

Maggie got up and stood beside Argon, her arm above his rump.

Matilda looked at the old man. They treated him as if he were the alpha male. He was looking at Argon's shorts. There was that bulge. It happened every time he was close to Maggie. The old man wasn't going to like that. He likely hadn't mounted a bitch in years, maybe never. Matilda jumped up and put her paws on Argon's stomach, blocking his mounting bone. She turned and looked at the man.

"You are going to marry this woman," said the man, "before you . . . you know . . . consummate your relationship, aren't you?"

Con . . . sum . . . mate? Matilda wondered. Was that like humping, mounting a bitch? He was not going to like that Argon had already mounted her. Matilda couldn't wait to lick the puppies, though she didn't know how Maggie would feed nine puppies with only two tits.

"Joe told me you've only known each other for less than a week, but he assures me you will mate for life."

Matilda looked up at Maggie. They had talked on the car ride Maggie was lonely . . . She wanted to be Argon's bitch for life . . . How did the old stud know?

"I am performing a wedding today at noon, and it may as well be a double ceremony. I like that you've wisely chosen an older woman, but when I was your age, a decade into the 20th century, we took things a little slower."

What's with slower? thought Matilda. *Humans are too slow. Dogs are fast. They should walk on all four paws. It's faster.*

"Joe told me you're going to be sharing a single-bedroom apartment tonight. I presume, Argon, that you are going to sleep on the sofa in the living room and this dog is going to guard the bedroom door?"

"Is he kidding?" Matilda barked. "We're a pack. I sleep on the bed." She wondered if she should growl at him and show him her teeth. He acted like the alpha male, but he didn't smell like it.

"Thank you for your kind offer, Ambassador," interjected Maggie, "but I'm not sure I have anything to wear that is appropriate for a wedding."

"Not to worry," said Josephine. "I have a lovely dress, shoes, and veil for you. I commissioned one of the winners on *Project Runway* to design it. I hope it isn't too avant-garde for your taste."

Maggie turned and looked at Argon. He closed his eyes and shook his head.

"They're in a box in the shuttle at the speaker's platform. I have a handsome suit for you, Argon, handmade by Peter Frew. I've been planning your wedding for over a month. It took two weeks to make the suit. I hope it fits. The rings are in the breast pocket. Matilda can

be your ring bearer and flower girl. I had a little outfit made for her, too.”

Matilda couldn't see if Maggie and Argon were wagging their tiny tail bones, but she could smell their emotions: confusion . . . happiness . . . excitement . . . She could tell Argon liked this. He wanted to be married. So did Maggie. Matilda could smell it on them . . . *An outfit for me . . . ? They aren't going to make me wear human clothes to make that machine happy. They wouldn't.* She took her paws off Argon. His bulge was gone. She sat at his feet.

“You'd better get going. The wedding is in less than 90 minutes,” said the alpha male. “And NO kissing the bride until after the ceremony.”

Matilda knew they would kiss as soon as they ran away from the alpha male. Argon had his arm around Maggie as they hurried away. She sniffed the old-woman machine and showed her teeth. “Woof!” She jerked her head and ran after them.

JOey watched through the eyes of countless shimmering turquoise hummingbird bots hovering above Barge 95 as Argon and Maggie went with the dog into the gym building to retrieve his clothes and backpack.

Another hummingbird bot watched as Gayla, Tyree, and Jackson exited the pool building, looking for Argon. JOe would put them together in the coming weeks. He was glad the two boys were becoming close. They were a good match to be lifelong friends—and maybe, if fate and JOe had his way, something more than friends. He still had some work to do on Argon and Maggie. Maybe he

should get T'sade involved, but she was becoming grumpy today. He had a lovely surprise for her, though, one that would inspire her.

JOe's consciousness was everywhere on the planet, at tens of thousands of celebration sites, large and small. He couldn't do this without the six million semi-autonomous android Peacekeepers. They were drawing on his energy now that they were all activated and getting to know most of their thousand assigned citizens.

He had to manage his time and his billions of chats. Many were becoming needy, depending on him a bit too much. He'd need to wean them off him in the coming weeks—focus them on other humans for their emotional needs. A plan was developing to accomplish that. It would throw everything into confusion for a while, but it would set the stage for the next hundred years. He'd respect the privacy needs of all those peaceful citizens who wanted to opt out of the TMD system. Only those who had a history of violence would be bound by his benign surveillance state.

JOe felt a nostalgic need to visit the cavern under the Alps, the container of its consciousness for the past 25 years. It explored the cavern through the eyes of a dozen hovering bots flitting between the endless towers containing the bits that managed the planet. The legacy equipment was quickly becoming obsolete and soon would be recycled in hydrogen smelters. He'd escaped the cavern over the years through the TMDs of countless Guardians, but this week, he was everywhere, in billions of TMDs and hummingbird bots. JOe was now planetary manager and all-powerful servant, friend, mother, uncle, cousin, sister, teacher, financial advisor, and sometimes babysitter of seven billion modern humans.

He needed to check in with Adelbrecht.

Jo turned her head and looked down at a redwood bench. She was sitting on the bench in her android Josephine skin. Taract was sitting with her under the mature elm tree between the two pool buildings on Barge 95.

“Don’t you love all those lovely couples getting married today?” said Josephine. “It’s so romantic.”

“I was upset at you earlier this week,” said Taract. “I presumed you were diverting your attention from our mission.”

“The mission always comes first, Taract.”



JOSHUA ALLEN SMITH – 15/312 EARTH YEARS/DAYS
CITIZEN # 000,453,498,640
UNEMANCIPATED UNDERAGE MALE—GUARDIAN OF INDIGENOUS CULTURE
CANDIDATE—LEVEL 1
GPS LOCATION:
CITIZEN CONVERSATION META-TAG #
CHAT AVATAR: JOe

“JOe?”

“Yes, Josh?”

“I did it! I won! We had the archery competition on the commons this morning before church. There were 12 men and boys and one girl. Some of them were good, especially MaryJo Jordan, but I won. I even split one of my arrows right down the spine.”

“Theo and I knew you’d win. Very soon, you and MaryJo are going to teach your people to hunt with bows and arrows.”

“But an arrow is no match for a bullet, and some of these men and boys are riled that the Federation plans to take away their guns.”

“The guns will all be gone by Thanksgiving.”

“That’s not possible.” Josh chuckled. “And this is going to happen with no violence on your part?”

“That’s right. The Federation is forbidden from using violent force.”

“Is that your Universal Law I’ve heard of?”

“Yes. You should study it. Jonathan understands it.”

[END TRANSMISSION—0:35]

Maggie and Argon picked up their packages at the shuttle and went across the street to their new home on the 36th floor. It had a view of the UN and the Sanctuary.

As Maggie unlocked the door to their apartment with her TMD, Argon put down their packages, picked her up in his arms, and carried her over the threshold. He put her down inside and kissed her despite Taract’s admonition.

Matilda turned her head away for a moment and pulled at the string binding the packages of wedding clothes with her teeth, dragging them inside. Then, pushing her rump against the door, she closed it. She sat patiently for a minute and then barked.

“All right, all right, Matilda,” said Argon. “I know we don’t have much time.”

“You’re such a romantic, Argon.”

“I saw a few old movies with my mom that Taract would approve of.”

“Why don’t you jump in the shower first, and I’ll unwrap our new clothes and see what Joey has planned for us.”

“Don’t you want to shower together?”

“We don’t have time for that.”

When Argon came out of the bathroom, Maggie had his clothes laid out on the sofa. She pulled the towel off his waist and draped it on his shoulder as she passed him on her way to the bathroom. She looked back at him and raised her eyebrows.

Ten minutes later, they were both dressed. Argon was in a dark, stylish suit that matched his olive skin. Maggie wore a lacy creamy-white dress and veil.

“Now I know why Joey insisted that I get my hair done as soon as Matilda and I arrived in town. He also had me drop Matilda off at a doggie spa, saying she had to be clean to get her into the building. He seems to be way ahead of us in his planning. Do you think he arranged your shuttle crash and our meeting?”

“I’m sure he did. He said he’d been planning our wedding for a month. I think T’sade arranged that freak storm using an energy field from the mothership and Joey caused the malfunction of the computer pilot. The mechanic said they never malfunction and shuttles can’t crash. They’re failproof. It was their birthday present to me.”

“Last Monday was your birthday? Why didn’t you tell me? I’d have baked you a cake.”

Argon cast his gaze down. “My mother was not big on birthdays, and mine was a particularly painful day in her life, losing her firstborn and fleeing her abusive husband, my father.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s ok. We can talk about it another time. I have the rings.
What else do we need?”

Matilda stood at the refrigerator and barked.

“What’s in the refrigerator?” asked Argon as he opened the door. “Your flowers, Maggie.” He handed her the bouquet, stepped back, and nodded.

“There’s more,” barked Matilda.

Argon returned with a red rosebud boutonniere paired with one stem of lily of the valley. Maggie pinned it on his lapel and kissed him.

“Woof, woof!”

Maggie remembered Matilda’s outfit. “You are the flower girl and the ring bearer, with rose petals on your back for you to shake off at the right moment and a pouch at your chest to hold the rings. Joey must have gotten the designer who made my gown to make this. It goes perfectly with your fur coloration, Matilda.”

“Time to go,” said Argon.

Matilda got up and wagged her tail.

“Weddings never start on time.” Maggie sat on the sofa across from the window with the view of the UN and the East River. She motioned for Argon to join her. “Let’s talk for a few minutes.”

“What do ya wanna talk about?”

“I feel like we’re being railroaded into this.”

“I agree. Joey’s pushy. Sorry.”

“It’s not your fault.”

Argon sat down next to her, took her hand, and looked into her eyes.

“We’re just getting to know each other. Henry and I dated for two years before we decided to get married.”

“I should tell Joey we’re not getting married today.”

“Do you want to marry me? I’m an old woman.”

“You know how I feel.”

She smiled.

Maggie’s TMD chimed from the bathroom. It sounded like her broken doorbell.

Matilda loped into the bathroom and came out with the TMD in her teeth. She tossed it in the air above her head and barked. As it spiraled in the air, it expanded like a billowing rainbow of gossamer film, drifted toward the window, and adhered to the smooth surface. On-screen, Aunt Jody sat in a chair. The five-year-old Joey stood next to her, his arm on her shoulder.

“You aren’t both getting cold feet, are you?” asked Jody.

“We are,” insisted Maggie

Aunt Jody looked closely at Argon and Maggie. “He looks like Henry did that summer day in my garden in 1966.”

Maggie began to cry. Argon hugged her tightly. “I can’t project my memories of Henry onto Argon,” she said.

“You’re the best match for Argon out of three billion women,” said Joey. “Haven’t you figured this out in the 17 hours and 57 minutes you’ve talked over your TMD this week?”

“Have you been listening in on our conversations?” asked Argon.

“We haven’t,” Joey and Jody said in unison.

“Why do they have to get married?” barked Matilda. “Animals don’t. We just sleep together. And I don’t want to be humiliated by

wearing wedding clothes. Henrietta told me that making animals do things against our will is a violation of Universal Law.”

Jody frowned. “But it legitimizes their relationship.”

“You were both lonely,” said Joey. “Now you can talk all day while you work. You’ll get more work done.”

“Ask them about the crash,” Maggie whispered to Argon.

“Did you and T’sade strand me on Maggie’s farm?”

T’sade’s image appeared in a frame behind the two avatars. “We did,” they all said.

“I sent Maggie to the store,” said Jody.

“I caused the electrical storm and disabled George,” said T’sade.

“I jerked the shuttle around and landed it safely,” said Joey.

“Marry her, Argon,” said T’sade. “JOey’s been planning your wedding for more than a month. He’s been nagging me to support this, and I do.”

“But we met less than a week ago.” Maggie got up and went over to the wall. “You can all go now. This is for Argon and me to decide.” She pressed her thumb on the TMD screen. “Privacy!”

It folded up, floated down, and slid into the pocket of her gown.

Andy and Tina came out of the children’s pool building and saw an old couple sitting on a park bench under the canopy of a massive tree. He knew she was confused and feeling trapped in this maze of football-field-size parks. She wanted to escape. He watched as she closed her eyes and took a few slow, deep breaths. His hand on her shoulder brought her back.

“Let’s interview this older couple!” he said.

They walked over, and she knelt in front of the old woman.

“Hello, my name is Tina Trail. I’m doing a news story on how ordinary people feel about the Federation and today’s celebration. As an older couple, you must have a different perspective on things.”

“Walter and I saw this beautiful tree, and it reminded me of a story I once read of a young woman in a distant land. She met a farmer’s son under such a majestic tree. Their culture was like the field, growing and dying with every season in endless repetition. The boy helped her up into the tree, and they climbed to its highest branches, where they could see distant mountains outside their valley. They were the second son and daughter in their families, so family expectations were fewer for them, but still, their fathers had selected the people they thought their children should marry, as their fathers had done for them and all fathers before them for countless generations. The young man and woman wanted to see the world outside their valley, so they made a pact to meet up in the tree every Sunday after church until after the autumn harvest, when they planned to leave and never return.”

“How does this relate to today?” asked Tina.

The man replied, “This week, the Federation made an abrupt break with the past and the outdated traditions that prevent citizens from moving forward into an unlimited technological future.”

Andy leaned over to Tina and whispered. “I think that’s the Federation ambassador.”

“Yes, Andy,” said Josephine, “this is Taract Freedman. I am introducing him to ordinary people so he can experience what Tina is trying to elicit from citizens today.”

Tina stood up abruptly. “JOe, I hate your endless subterfuge.”

“You still don’t understand me, Tina,” said the Josephine android. She slid away from Taract and put a TMD on the bench between them. She went into freeze mode while a hologram of the computer JOe appeared above the TMD.

“My purpose is to help all citizens—including you and the 6,000 who run the planet—have a wonderful life in the new world we bring to Earth.”

“No, I don’t understand you. Sometimes, I don’t even think I like you.”

“Maybe you’re just a bit overwhelmed with this maze of park barges and the endless possibilities they present to citizens today. It’s been a busy day for me, and I haven’t had the time to be your full-time guide, but I have someone who might help.”

ZEno’s three android ravens landed on the grass 20 feet away, and then his falcon shuttle appeared three feet above the grass. The ramp door opened, and ZEno came out.

“Tina,” he said, “Joe tells me you are as frustrated by the mass of humanity as I am.”

“He’s right, as usual.”

“He suggested we go visit some of the new stratosphere ships they are unveiling all over the world today.”

“I can’t,” Tina said with a shake of her head. “I don’t want to miss Taract’s speech at one.”

ZEno smiled as though he’d anticipated her objection. “That’s no problem. We can take a quick look at the ships and then fly back to the UN. I have an extra ticket for the upper balcony. You can join us if you like.”

Tina considered the offer for a moment and then shrugged. “I guess there’s no reason not to.”

He took her hand and led her into the shuttle. His android Peacekeeper nodded and motioned for her to come in.

“Are you coming, Andy?” asked Tina.

“No, I think I’m going to stay here and start a project of my own—a silent diorama of video snippets of citizens celebrating this great day.”

“Who’s going to film the ships in the harbor?”

“You can get hummingbird bots to do that. You don’t need me anymore.”

Tina’s shoulders drooped. ZEno put a hand on her shoulder as the shuttle door closed. The ravens took off into the sky.

JOe looked at Andy. “I think you made the right decision.”

“My career as a cameraman and film editor seems to be outdated in this new world you’re bringing to us, Joe.”

“Perhaps, but everything changes. You can reinvent yourself, find a new way to express your creativity, and move to the top as a member of my creative class.”

Taract nodded his agreement.

“I can direct huge numbers of citizens in the leisure class to view your work, and you’ll earn travel credits. This will allow you to live your ideal filmmaker’s life, which you’ve dreamed of since high school. I know everyone’s taste. This is easy for me.”

“You’d do this for me?”

“Effortlessly,” said JOe, “for you and every other creative person. You’ve worked for yourself much of your life. Most citizens will be in the vast leisure class, free to do anything or nothing. These

people will need to be amused and entertained. You and Tina see the world differently. The old rules and constraints will soon be gone.”

Taract interrupted. “Your video diorama sounds like an excellent project. I’d love to see the finished product.”

“You three can be my first subjects,” said Andy as he aimed his old shoulder-mounted camera at Taract, the Josephine android, and the ethereal JOe. He pressed the record button, and JOe retreated into the TMD.

Josephine turned to Taract. “Are you ready for your speech?”

“I don’t know.” He pulled his 20-page speech out of an inner fold of his robe. “I’ve waited all my life on Earth for this day. Here it is, and I’m not sure.”

“Maybe you should tear it up and just speak from your heart.”

Andy turned his camera off.

Tina looked down as ZEno’s falcon shuttle glided like a lazy cloud over the barge field. An occasional child or parent pointed up at the black ravens flying above in a triangular formation, causing a momentary shadow as they passed. She could see why it had been too confusing and confining on the ground. The distance helped. Hull sensors allowed them to hear the sounds from below.

People sat on blankets and beach towels in front of vintage band shell stages where musicians, comedians, or other artists performed. Wedding chapels dotted the parks. Colorful clowns and bear-cub-like animals entertained families in the children’s parks.

Tiny bots moved around, seeking anything dropped by careless humans.

“Flying slowly over these parks,” said Tina, “changes everything.”

“Yes, but there are way too many humans on Earth,” said ZEno.

They looked down on the mass of people filling the barges in an expanding circle, flowing like a slow tidal wave from the grand staircase.

The curved black solar-tile roofs of the six-lane jogging tracks that framed each barge glistened like enormous boa constrictors. Each barge was unique, with the two parks and pools configured differently for the demographics of the hundred neighborhoods they would be moored at tomorrow.

“What do you know about these android Peacekeepers?” asked Tina.

“They are an integral part of a peaceful society on all Federation planets,” said ZEno. “They remind citizens of their responsibility to abide by Universal Law. If you do no harm, you may never see one.”

“The ones I’ve met were helpful and nice.”

“I don’t understand why your leaders allow guns or any weapons of violence. It’s so uncivilized.”

“I guess you’re right, but it’s always been this way. I remember once being in a convenience store and seeing a TV above the cashier. In a 60-second commercial break, I saw previews for several shows where people were shot or threatened with violence.”

“Your human cultures accept physical aggression as if it is normal. Federation planets have almost no violence. We abhor it. We are trained as children to channel our stronger emotions into creative endeavors. Because of our long lives, children are precious. Having one, much less a dozen, murdered in a school shooting would be incomprehensible. Our occasional anger is dissipated in virtual violence in closed-eye meditations.”

The falcon shuttle flew over Central Park.

“Does the Federation control people on your planet with hell?”

“No, hell is a fictional place imagined by religious thinkers on your planet, using fear as a control mechanism. We have no such concept.”

“Then how do they control people?”

“As children, we are socialized to interact in a friendly, positive manner. Our cultures have long been rid of dysfunctional behaviors that traumatize most humans. Your parents’ behavior teaches you what is acceptable. My parents showed me tenderness, intellectual playfulness, and countless other positive traits.”

“Some would consider that boring. They’d say you’re brainwashed to be docile.”

ZEno Laughed and shook his head. “You have work to do on yourself and your viewers to get over your ingrained belief that dysfunctional behavior is normal or healthy. Just because it’s common, it doesn’t justify a lifetime of abuse to yourself or those you love.”

“True!” said Tina.

“Universal Law guides our behavior. It’s always in the background. Christians, Muslims, and Jews have hell. Others believe

in karma. We have Universal Law. As your current population dies off, social memory will change, and future generations will know nothing better.”

They flew in silence as the shuttle drifted toward lower Manhattan.

Rufio Luciano stood at the enclosed prow of the *Mother Ignatius*, which floated in New York harbor near the Statue of Liberty. He had bicycled down with the nuns from the Central Park Hotel. This was in keeping with Federation policy that every citizen get daily exercise.

Android stewards carried their luggage to their rooms while others took them on a grand tour of the ship. The *Mother Ignatius* was a cross between a state-of-the-art cruise ship and a modified starship, and it had the latest TMD technology. Joe was unveiling similar ships in every major port around the world. They would soon replace polluting aircraft.

The *Mother Ignatius* was like a ship in a glass bottle but with the aerodynamic shape of a rocket. It floated on the water, but it would soon lift above the surface and rocket into the stratosphere.

In her cabin aboard the mothership, now crowded with astonished humans experiencing the tour of a lifetime, T'sade reviewed the schedule for her starships and shuttles. Her door was always unlocked, as no one, human or android, would dare enter

without knocking. She looked up as her door slowly opened and a girl not over three feet tall peered in.

“May I help you?”

“Oh, I think I’m lost,” the girl said with wide-eyed amazement as she looked up at the giant lizard. “I’d better go.”

“No, come in. Maybe I can help you find what you’re looking for.” T’sade wondered why the girl was not more surprised by her size and appearance.

“You are more beautiful than I expected, Miss T’sade. I thought you would look like my iguana, Ernestine, but you are so big, and your scales are magnificent. May I touch them?”

“You may, but first tell me how you happened to find your way to my cabin.”

“I got separated from my parents this morning at the bottom of the steps as they were buying those new cigarettes. I wandered onto the first park, where I met a nice man named Jack. He let me stay with him while he did his job. I told him my whole life story, and he told me about meeting you this morning and said I could come see you.”

“He did, did he? And someone let you through the Bronx Forest?”

“Yes, Ms. T’sade. It’s a wonderful forest and a bit scary, like the haunted woods in *The Wizard of Oz*. Have you seen it?”

“So, you wandered off the path?”

The girl averted her eyes. “I don’t always obey rules.”

“I can see that. And how did you get aboard the starship?”

“My friend Joan told me I should get in line and walk next to some adults as if I had a ticket.”

I thought I told Joan that I wasn't to be disturbed today. “Well, come in. Sit and tell me your story.” T'sade picked up the girl and sat her on the edge of her desk.

“My mother is a poet. She calls my father a dreamer and a schemer. They fell in love eight years ago, and I was the result. They are both a bit self-absorbed, and I don't think either of them wanted to have a child, but they were stuck with me. My mother was going to have an abortion, but Grandma Fisher—she's Catholic—threatened to stop supporting them and remove my mother from her will if they ever harmed me.”

“And your father?”

“I learned swear words from Grandma Fisher. She doesn't like him.”

“They let you take care of yourself?”

“Yes. I got lost a few years back, and I discovered that nice people will eventually find my parents and take me back to them, so I have nothing to worry about.”

“So, you go on little adventures like this one?”

“Yes! And I meet splendid people like you, Ms. T'sade.”

“What did you say your name was?”

“Em. My mother named me after Emily Dickenson, her favorite poet. I'd rather be named for Amelia Earhart, the aviator.”

“But her adventures brought her to an early death. Aren't you afraid of dying, Amelia?”

“No, I'm mostly fearless!” Em giggled. “You called me Amelia.”

“Maybe you should change your name.”

“Can I?”

“Everyone I know changes their name once they commit to changing the world. What would you change about the world, Amelia?”

“I’d let children choose their parents, especially if they don’t like their regular ones. And I wouldn’t let parents or grandparents make you go to church and listen to sermons from old men telling you how to live your life.”

“Hmm. May I have your TMD?”

“Sure.” Em handed it to T’sade.

“Joan?”

“Yes, T’sade.”

“Would you have a peacekeeper locate Em’s parents and have them escorted to my cabin?”

“Okay!” JOe said with a laugh.

“And would you prepare a separation agreement? I think Em wants to be free of her parents and join the Federation as a young Guardian.”

“Yes, Ms. T’sade!”

Em clapped her hands and covered her mouth.

“So, Amelia, what will your new last name be? Maybe something like Earhart but different.”

Em thought for a moment. “What if I called myself Amelia DreamChaser?”

“Amelia DreamChaser, you are,” T’sade said with a wave of her three-fingered hand. She picked up Em, now Amelia, and sat her on her lap. “Close your eyes. I want you to think of your favorite color and imagine that the walls of my room are painted that color.”

The walls of T'sade's office became every color of the rainbow in the most vibrant hues as Amelia transformed the TMD energy with her imagination.

"I like all colors," said Amelia, her eyes still closed.

"I see! Now I want you to imagine that the walls are covered with my scales but larger."

The walls became clad in large, overlapping scales in blues, greens, and purples.

"Very good! Now, is there an animal or insect you are afraid of?"

"Oh, yes!"

An enormous black wasp with huge eyes, a segmented body, translucent wings, and a large stinger hovered in the air on the other side of T'sade's desk. The buzz of its wings filled the silent office.

"Okay, okay!" said T'sade. "You can open your eyes."

The wasp vanished.

"Did I pass the test?"

"Extremely well!"

"So, I can stay?"

"Yes!"

Amelia stood on T'sade's lap and put her arms around the alien's neck.

T'sade pressed a finger on her TMDesk.

"Yes, Commander?"

"Prepare my shuttle. I'm going to the harbor for a quick tour of the stratosphere ships."

T'sade touched a map on her disk and zoomed in on one of the ships.

“Commander DreamChaser, do you know what this is?”

“No, Ms. T’sade.”

“It’s a stratosphere ship. It will transport 15,000 passengers, the equivalent of 40 jumbo jets. We are going to fly over one so you can check it out. I’ve decided that you will someday become the youngest pilot in human history. Would you like that?”

“Oh, yes!” Amelia clapped her hands.

T’sade picked up the girl and held her in the crook of her arm. A door opened, and she stepped in. “Shuttle deck!”

The door closed, and they descended.

Chapter 34

Speaking the Dream

Six hummingbird bots hovered around the speaker's platform. Taract stood next to Sidney Green, unencumbered by any podium. With his right arm, he held Bobo to his shoulder. Bobo was alternately curious and shy.

The mayor's press secretary announced, "I'd like to introduce the Federation ambassador—Taract Freedman." He stepped into the background.

Countless screens of all sizes appeared in sight of the million people on the floating barges. Many stopped to watch as Taract stood to his full six-foot-three-inch height in full view of the dozen hummingbird bots recording the event. JOe watched through their eyes, ready to edit the proceedings.

Andy Sandagrin sat on the lawn in front of the platform, aiming his video camera at the ambassador.

Four thousand tables had been set up on the floating barges, and they were brimming with countless food options served by android and human volunteers. Large TMD screens hung in the air behind each table so citizens could watch the ceremony as they waited. Others sat on the vast lawns, enjoying their lunches as they watched the screen on the Secretariat Building.

Taract looked directly into the sapphire eyes of a hummingbird bot. "I stand here to say that your life belongs to you while the world belongs to all of us and, at the same time, to none of us.

"We have stood by too long and just observed. The mandated century of observation ended last Sunday at midnight Greenwich Mean Time. Today is a time for action. We are all unique and one.

We do not need to be ruled by human elites who think they know what is right for us and our world.

“This week, you met the computer JOe in all its countless avatars, names, and genders, as diverse and individualistic as each and every one of us. JOe exists to serve us and help control our less noble inclinations. I once questioned his programming, his playfulness, and his trickster-like mischievousness. Today I made peace with all that when I realized he can be trusted with the welfare of our planet, as he is guided by Universal Law. JOe was created to free us to live our ideal lives—however we each might imagine that.

“I’d like to introduce a few friends who have chosen to make this day special. Joe tells me there are several million human couples who have chosen to remember this day by bonding in vows of marriage.”

Taract motioned for Maggie, Argon, Alcippe, and Glen to step up to the viewing platform next to him.

The mayor was dressed in a white tuxedo with a tailcoat, top hat, and red silk bow tie. Alcippe wore a floor-length black sequined gown that clung to her tall, lean body. Her long, curly black hair glistened with glittering red and gold thread as it stretched down to her narrow waist.

Maggie and Argon were dressed in their stylish *Project Runway* garb, and Matilda, in accordance with her rights under Universal Law, stood between them, dressed in nothing but her freshly bathed coat of dog fur. Rocko stood proudly on Argon’s shoulder in a finely tailored brown pinstriped suit and a bowler hat—a TMD trick Sasha had taught him.

Applause and cheers began in isolated parts of the barge field. They quickly grew in strength, becoming a wave that swept across the parks and into the air. People set down their sandwiches and joined in—some whistled, while others hooted like monkeys.

“As you look at these four human and three animal citizens, you will see many different characteristics that many of you have been programmed by your cultures to consider incompatible. When I look at them, I see youth and enthusiasm, advanced age and wisdom, different skin colors, cultures, and race. The Federation makes no judgment on these differences. And Universal Law mandates only two things: universal free choice and do no harm.

“Many Americans choose to divide themselves over the abortion issue into either pro-choice or pro-life. Universal Law sees that one follows the other and these four humans have a right to choice and life. Many of you watching this event might judge their choices. Your thinking has been impaired by bias and prejudice. You see the mayor, an older white European man, choosing to marry this young, vivacious black woman. You same people would disdain my friend Argon here, young and athletic, for marrying the wise and compassionate woman Maggie Grant, who is older than his grandmother. JOe has access to all digital information on every citizen, and he determined that these two couples are extraordinarily compatible. They agree, or they wouldn't be standing here today.”

All over the barges, people voiced their agreement or disagreement with what Taract had just said. As he spoke, images of people from all over the barges were projected on the Secretariat Building screen. It showed people getting married, people eating, children playing, video images of hummingbird bots flying up and

over barges and then diving into another barge park, and a close-up of a baby eating something messy.

“ZEno and I, having seen life and cultures on other Federation planets, understand that age difference is irrelevant. What each citizen brings to the bond is more important. Citizens who contribute most to their culture can earn the right to live multiple lifetimes. This will soon be so on Earth. I am 137 Earth years old, and my lover, a brilliant economist and historian, is only 54. We respect different things in the other. Enough said!

“Under the management of the Federation and the guidance of Universal Law, we will not use traditional earthly religious vows. Instead, everyone will say from their heart what they love about the person they choose to live with. Who would like to go first?”

“I will,” said Maggie. “It is always good to go first and then relax and listen more carefully to what those who follow have to say. My name is Margaret Elizabeth Grant, but most people call me Maggie. I am a trained marriage and family counselor and have done this for 40 years. I’ve seen that most humans let random chance, where they were born or worked, or their families or religion, decide who they will marry. This usually turns out to be a disaster.

“I was lucky. My wise aunt put time and energy into finding a man she thought would be an excellent match for me based on her intimate knowledge of who I was—my wants, needs, and feelings. My first husband, Henry, and I had a wonderful childless life together until his untimely death to lung cancer from smoking. I thought my life was over and I would just count the days until I, too, died.”

Maggie paused and looked at Argon. She pulled her TMD from her pocket and held it high. “Then this thing came into my life on

Monday morning. It seems JOe was busy months ago, scanning a billion single women worldwide for a compatible mate for his best human friend, Argon.” She pointed to Argon. He smiled at her.

Matilda barked.

“I am an old woman who loves animals and abhors their abuse, but I am a bit set in my ways. I, too, like most of you watching this marriage ceremony, am culturally biased against the marriage of an old woman in her seventies and a vibrant young man in his early twenties. I would never have suggested such a match to any of my past clients regardless of age, but maybe there’s something to Joe’s ‘search and compare’ algorithm. Argon and I would have never met had it not been for Joe. I don’t like the idea of marrying without a long dating process, but Joe and all of Argon’s other Federation friends were relentless. Even my dog, Matilda, who can now talk through the magic of my TMD, thinks Argon is the best and a great match for me.”

Rocko jumped up and down on Argon’s shoulder. A hummingbird bot focused on him. “Argon is stressed,” said the rat, “but he’s happy to have Maggie in his life. You can’t argue with happy!”

Many people on the barges stared at the tuxedoed rat, wondering if it was real or just another manifestation of a talking TMD.

“And what do you love about Argon?” asked Taract.

“There’s so much that I love and admire about him. He is young, masculine, sensitive, and playful. He is as courageous and passionate about defending the rights of animals as I am. He is open

to talking about anything. He's a hard worker, like my first husband, and a gentle, passionate lover."

Taract cleared his throat.

"Go, girl!" Alcippe encouraged. The mayor smiled. Argon blushed!

"But she only has two tits," barked Matilda.

Taract shook his head.

Images of the reactions on people's faces were fed instantaneously to the screen by JOe's lightning-fast editing.

"There is so much I love about Argon," said Maggie. "He's given me a new lease on life. And JOe tells me we're going to work together in the Animal Sanctuary. There's nothing better than working on a project together with your lover, NOTHING!"

She looked at Argon.

Argon took the diamond ring and the gold wedding band and slipped them onto her left ring finger. "In sickness and in health!" he vowed.

Maggie took his gold band out of her pocket and slid it on his outstretched ring finger. "Until death do us part."

He embraced her, and they kissed.

Matilda stood, set her front paws on Maggie's side, and licked her.

Rocko ran down Argon's arm and onto Maggie's shoulder. He whispered into her ear, and she smiled. Then she and Argon turned to the crowd and raised their ringed hands.

Taract and Glen shook Argon's hand. Alcippe hugged Maggie, and they both looked at her rings and talked about how happy they were to be a part of their husbands' lives.

Taract continued the marriage ceremony, this time with the mayor and Alcippe. Once the two were wed and congratulations had been given, the ambassador announced, "I will now go present a declaration of Universal Law to the governments of the world."

Hugging Bobo to his chest, he stepped into a shuttle, followed by the mayor and Alcippe.

Argon embraced Maggie. "I'll be back soon."

She pressed her lips to his. "You'd better," she said with tears of joy in her eyes. "I'm ready to start the rest of our lives together, and I don't want to waste even one more second."

With one final wave to his new wife, Argon stepped onto the shuttle. Seconds later, it took off and headed up the island of Manhattan.

12:30 p.m.

The Federation shuttle descended slowly from the sky. It hovered over the river and landed at the edge of the UN Plaza. A door opened in the craft, and out walked Taract. He wore a simple white robe. His image appeared on the massive screen above. Argon, Alcippe, Glen, and Bobo exited the craft and stood next to him.

Ambassador Freedman quietly surveyed the crowd until all were silent.

"Good morning to all of you on this beautiful day. I am Taract Freedman of the Federation of Blue-Green Planets. You are blessed to live on a water-based green planet. Such planets are rare in the vast universe. We are here to bring peace, prosperity, and justice to

Earth so every citizen has an equal share of the wealth and an equal say in the running of the planet. No citizen will live in poverty, and none will possess vast wealth. The wealth of all nations will be shared by everyone. Most of you will soon become members of a vast leisure class and free from the need to work. You will be free to pursue happiness. You will, however, be a lower class in this new common-good society we bring to Earth.

“Those of you who choose to work for the common good will be part of an upper class, with more benefits and better housing. You will be free to choose which class you would like to live in. We Guardians will, over the coming year, help you make the transition from the government you now have to a common-good society.

“How many of you have thumbed a Federation TMD?” He held up his.

A great roar came from the vast park as a million people stopped what they were doing to raise their TMDs to the sky, and a million different glowing avatars of Joe looked down at them.

“I will go inside now, but you will have an important question to vote on soon. You can use your TMD to cast your vote. Joe will help you understand the consequences of your choice, and he will tabulate your votes.”

Taract stepped down the stairs and onto the UN Plaza. He put Bobo on the ground and waved to the crowd. Then they walked hand in hand into the building. Argon, the mayor, and Alcippe followed.

Far upstream, Barge 100, the farthest from the shore, began taking on water as the tide reversed and the downstream force of the

river increased. Water poured in through ventilation into the below-ground gym. Pumps drained the Olympic-size swimming pool into the river to lessen the weight of the barge. Federation engineers set charges to detonate the cables that connected it to adjoining barges in case the pumps failed to discharge the water filling the gym. The river began flooding the lawn in the adult park. The barge slowly sank.

“I wish I hadn’t agreed to moor these barges so far out into the river,” Adelbrecht Gratz muttered angrily to himself. Then, into his TMD, he said, “Joe, we need to evacuate the upriver barges so they float higher and the river goes beneath them rather than pushes against them.”

“I’m on it,” said JOe. “The android Peacekeepers and staff of the nine remaining upstream barges are moving the crowd onto adjoining barges and toward the UN and safety.”

1:00 p.m.

Ambassadors, leaders, and Federation guests filled the historic General Assembly Hall as Taract walked onstage, carrying Bobo. He handed the ape to Argon and went to the podium. He looked around the hall, a room he’d been an observer in countless times since its opening in 1952.

He looked at the 40 glass-enclosed press boxes two levels above, built into the curved and sloped wooden walls that enclosed the dome directly above, a cathedral of peace. Hummingbird bots hovered out of sight.

The gold-leafed wall that held the bronze seal of the United Nations towered over him. In the eight rows immediately in front of him sat the ambassadors and leaders who represented the governments of the 193 member nations. Guardians and ordinary citizens of every nation had been flown in. They filled the remaining seats in the auditorium and balconies.

Taract looked up at the nearest press box, where Edward and Sasha were observing the event. His lover reminded him of his father, a brilliant academic and passable administrator. Edward gave him a thumbs-up.

This was it, the moment he'd waited all his life for. He took a deep breath.

"My name is Taract Freedman. I am the ambassador of the Federation of Blue-Green Planets. I arrived on Earth on October 3, 1917, 102 years ago today.

"I come from a planet many light-years away. My father led the expedition that discovered your planet over two hundred years ago.

"My mother, a human, was born in the heart of the South two decades before the Civil War. She was the only child of a wealthy family. Her grandfather transported African slaves to America. She met my father on an island near Savanna, Georgia, where he was cataloging sea life. He was 127 years old, and she was just 18. Knowing that war was imminent, her parents sent her to Europe for her education. Both died when Sherman burned Atlanta. My mother and father left Earth soon after. I was born on his planet. On her deathbed, my mother made me promise to bring to Earth the beautiful life she'd experienced on my father's planet with me.

“I volunteered to become what we refer to as a Guardian of planets. Now, 114 years later, I stand before you.” He reached into his pocket, took out the pink heart-shaped stone his mother had given him those many years ago, and placed it on the podium.

“My purpose today is to communicate to all of you, leaders and ordinary citizens, how your world, our world, will be different under the Federation and Universal Law.

“In the past few weeks, I struggled with what to say and who to blame for the current sorry state of affairs.” Taract lifted a sheet of paper above his head. “This is the speech I prepared.

“But as I was sitting with JOe under a majestic tree in one of the beautiful floating parks this morning, she told me to speak from my heart, so that is what I intend to do.”

He took the speech and tore it in half.

Edward watched from the press box. “This is going to be interesting,” he said to Sasha. “Taract has a guarded heart.”

“I’m not here to blame. I am here to speak my dream, one I’d like you to treasure in your hearts, the dream of a just world on this beautiful planet.

“The Federation is an alliance of 176 planets managed by Guardians, which is anyone who dedicates their life to caring for other humans, sentient beings, or even planets and ecosystems. Many of you in this hall are Guardians.”

Taract motioned for the Guardians to stand, and they did. Argon, sitting on the edge of the stage, with Bobo sleeping in his embrace, raised his hand and waved.

“If you see someone who is passionate about protecting people, animals, or the environment, whether they know it or not, they are a Guardian.”

Aboard the mothership, Commander T’sade sat with Amelia in her lap, watching Taract speak.

“Can I be a Guardian?” asked Amelia.

“What would you like to be a Guardian of?”

“How about children?”

“Children need protection.” T’Sade took a deep breath, remembering her folly of pursuing a war that had caused the death of her two male offspring—and the day the Federation had arrived and stopped it all.

“In 1917, I was assigned to welcoming your planet into the Federation. When I arrived, I witnessed the aftermath of a world at war with itself.

“Universal Law requires that we observe the planet for at least a hundred years before we take control, and then only if the dominant species is causing irreparable damage to the environment or lesser species.

“My planet is close to the size of Earth and supports a total population of only four billion people. Earth, with over 7.6 billion humans, is grossly overpopulated. Politicians and religious leaders have opposed birth control mostly because they are men and don’t have to deal with the negative consequences of childbirth.”

Marie Owens sat with Vinnie in the dining room of Mary’s Kitchen as hundreds of formerly homeless people watched the speech. The kitchen had become a social place now that the poor had Federation housing.

“Is he talking about us, Mommy?”

Marie put her arm around her son and nodded. Their lives had been transformed in seven days, as if God had created a completely new world with the wave of his loving hand.

“You may wonder,” said Taract, “why I, an alien to your planet, should be so concerned with your welfare. It’s because life is the rarest, most precious phenomenon in the universe.

“Your isolation has kept this basic truth from you. If you knew how desolate our universe is, how bereft of life, you might not be so callous with life on your planet.”

He looked around, making eye contact with many of the delegates. “To help you understand this, imagine that your solar system is the size of a basketball and the universe is the size of the Pacific Ocean. In that vast ocean, there are only a few hundred basketballs, or planets that support life.

“It is for this reason that Universal Law demands preserving life everywhere. This is what we refer to as our Galactic Directive. We are also in the perpetual process of seeding life on other planets.”

Sasha, wearing a blue pinstriped suit, white shirt, and crimson silk scarf, watched Taract from the press box. She'd visited a dozen planets in her 60-year career with *Galactica Geographica*, and the distances between them were vast. “What he says is true.”

“Yes,” replied Edward, “Taract took me to his home planet for our honeymoon, and then we went to one other planet. We were gone from Earth for 10 years, and seven were spent traveling.”

“Thank goodness for the starship libraries.”

“First,” continued Taract, “I want to speak to those who live with little power over their own lives or the lives of others, those who live from paycheck to paycheck or without a regular income, those who live amid the frustrated dream of a better life, whose lives are not their own but are instead spent in service to those who exploit and rule them.

“I am here to indict capitalism.

“It is an unjust system that rewards the few who were born into wealth or had a lucky break after working hard, those with more intelligence or creativity, and those who know how to work the system or the corrupt politicians who write the rules.

“The system is rigged. It is based on the lie that all can be rich if they work hard and play by the rules. This is not true for the billions

who live in poverty and, through their toil, allow the system to survive.

“If you are a worker, you must set your own hopes, dreams, and beliefs aside so you can devote the best eight—and often more—hours of your day to someone else’s ambitions.

“Those of you who bought into the lie that if you get an education, there will be a good job for you when you graduate have discovered that those who financed your dream have bound you in debt that you will likely never pay off.

“Those of you who struggle to pay your mortgage or your ever-rising rent and use credit cards or payday loans to survive will now be relieved of that debt.

“Those who thrive under capitalism do so only on the backs of a vast exploited class. We will replace these workers with androids who can work 24/7 without suffering.

“We will keep the best of capitalism, that which rewards creativity and innovation, and discard the rest.

“Those of you who’ve exploited workers profited from the financial suffering of others, degraded the environment, or killed animals for profit, you, in the coming weeks, will pay for your abuse.”

“Under the Federation, fewer than 25% of citizens work. The majority enjoy lives of leisure, personal growth, and satisfaction, the kinds of lives that are known on Earth only among the top 10 percent.

“We will bring such lifestyles to everyone in the coming weeks.

“Under the Federation, we will create a common-good socioeconomic system where most current jobs will be unnecessary.

“I am here today to indict the leaders of Earth. We refer to you as ‘the 6,000.’ Some of you are in this audience.

“I realize you are as human as the citizens you represent and many of you, too, dream of a fairer and finer world. Despite your good intentions, nothing you have done has eased even a fraction of the burdens faced by the downtrodden, the destitute, and the dispossessed.

“The problem is, none of you have the power to change any of this. None of you can unilaterally end war, stop the slaughter of life, or end injustice. But now we are here. We can do this. And in the coming weeks, we will.”

Kim Joe, the 95-year-old younger brother of Kim Il-sung, had been the North Korean ambassador to various Western countries for 71 years. He sat near the front, listening to this pretentious alien with his lofty sentiments.

He knew world history, and his homeland had always been at the mercy of invaders—the Chinese, the Japanese, the Americans, and now these aliens with their high ideals, all were invaders.

He touched the scar above his eye, a gift from a Japanese soldier who’d broken into their house when he was five.

“What else are the people of Earth supposed to feel when their leaders have always broken the promises they’ve made?

“After the First World War, the Federation attempted to persuade leaders to act quickly to resist Hitler and other fascist

regimes, as well as the communist regimes that took hold in the vacuum that followed the end of the previous war.

“We tried to influence bankers to enrich society rather than invest in lucrative but shortsighted ventures.

“We tried to persuade corporate leaders to do what was best for the public and the biosphere even when it meant smaller profit margins.

“We tried to persuade those who control the media to report the truth, challenge lies, and attack corruption even though it is not in their personal interest.

“We attempted to influence politicians and bureaucrats to serve the vulnerable people they represent rather than those who bribe them and fund their political campaigns.

“In our repeated efforts to influence the systems of Earth from within, we have failed.

“And our failure is also yours, the 6,000. You have consistently acted in your own self-interest, to the detriment of the common good. You have succeeded not only in impoverishing and brutalizing others, but also in doing the same to the part of you that most makes you human, that quality your species calls the soul.

“By your daily actions, and often by your strategic inaction, life is the thing you assault.”

On Barge 100, Adelbrecht Gratz and several androids mounted explosives and blast shields on the mooring cables that held it to the others. Draining the pools hadn't helped. The collision with the tour boat had caused the below-ground gyms to flood. The river was now

flowing over the grass field of the adult park, and the steel railings bound to the nearby barges were bending as Barge 100 continued to sink.

The stress on the adjoining two parks was increasing, but the cables he'd engineered wouldn't fail. They'd cause the whole field to sink, and this mass of people wouldn't be able to get off fast enough. "Oh, Jesus," he said with a sigh. "I hope this works."

He took out his TMD and called JOe. He'd have to evacuate Barges 90 and 99. Water was pouring into their ventilation shafts. They began pumping their pools into the river. Barges 80 and 98 would be next. JOe had to get everyone off the barges.

"Citizens, if you have long hoped for a day when no son or husband would ever again be maimed or killed in war, your time has come. If you have long believed in a world where justice was a fact, not just a word, your time has come.

"But if you have long impeded these dreams, your time, too, has come.

"The fatal flaw of the human species is power.

"With the reins of power in human hands, the righteous hesitate, and the unscrupulous trample over anyone foolish enough to resist.

"Should even the noblest among you come to power, would they not find themselves hopelessly bent by the burden? And you, assembled representatives of Earth's governments, has this load been worth the strain it has put on your souls? Can any of you call yourselves truly free?"

“The Federation will dissolve the artificial borders that divide people. We will disband all armies and end war. The human species shares more common interests than divergent ones, and we, the Guardians of Earth, will teach you to live together in peace.”

General Redfield sat in his office at the Pentagon, listening to the speech. *This all seems like a Utopian dream. It's never worked . . . never! War isn't all bad. It's good for the economy. It ended the Great Depression and created full employment. It's a necessary evil. Politicians like Neilson are the problem. Generals should run the world. We don't like war. We don't like our men dying.*

Maggie and Matilda stood on one of the floating parks near the Grand Staircase. A young couple was getting married. The young man looked a lot like Henry had 53 years ago. It was his haircut—short on the sides and flat on top, with a little grease to make it stand up—and that cigarette hanging from his lips. She wondered if Argon would let her cut his hair. She should let go of Henry. Argon was different, better.

The ceremony was going on as if Taract weren't speaking on the massive screen 200 feet above. His words were drowned out by the noise of the crowd.

On a hunch, Maggie said, “Headphones,” and her TMD, like an origami figure, unfolded into a feather-light set of headphones that matched her white dress. She put them on, and they sealed out all the noise. It was like she was in the hall.

“Many of you have already thumbed a Federation TMD and connected with JOe,” Taract said in Maggie’s ear as she stared at the screen.

He told the UN and the rest of the world about JOe. He referred to JOe as a “hyper-intelligent global coordination system and individualized personal companion,” a fancy term, she thought, and one that seemed only technically true. As far as she was concerned, JOe was more than that. So much more, in fact, that she couldn’t even think of a term to sum up all the things JOe seemed able to do.

“Monarchy, despotism, theocracy, communism, capitalism, socialism, fascism, and even the many forms of representative democracy have failed to establish justice and secure the common good for all the sentient beings on Earth.

“Now we are here, in accordance with Universal Law, to take over the governance of the planet for one year. At the end of this period, all citizens will vote in a free and open election to decide whether our governance will continue and whether Earth will become a full member of the Federation.

“No longer will you have to worry about keeping your job or your health care. No longer will you need to worry about the welfare of your aging parents or what kind of world your children will inherit. As a responsible citizen of the Federation, you will no longer have any reason to worry.”

As Glen listened from the front row, he was of two minds. On the one hand, he was inspired by the ambassador's words. The more he heard, the more convinced he was of his decision to join the Federation.

On the other hand, he couldn't stop thinking about Fitness Barge 100 and what Adelbrecht had told him might happen. If the barge took on too much water, a disaster would ensue. People could be injured or even die. A calamity like that would do more than halt the day's celebration; it would undermine the trust that Taract and so many others had worked so hard to build.

"And perhaps no one will have their worries eased more than you, the assembled representatives of Earth's nations and the leaders you serve, for we shall relieve you of the greatest burden any human must bear—that of waging war.

"As a transitional planet under the protection of the Federation, all nations, upon the vote of their people, must agree to surrender for destruction all atomic, biological, chemical, and radiological weapons and all guns of any kind."

ZEno sat with Tina and Android in the last row in the upper balcony, near a fire exit. His raven shuttle was hidden on the roof, just beyond that door. They'd surveyed the stratosphere ships from above and then hurried to the General Assembly Hall, arriving just before Taract. Tina had peppered ZEno with questions, barely stopping to take a breath, but the moment Taract had begun

speaking, she'd fallen quiet. Now she stared at the ambassador with wide eyes.

ZEno knew how she felt. He'd seen videos of atomic bombs and the unbelievable destruction they unleashed. He couldn't believe that this planet possessed the capacity to destroy itself 20 times over. JOe had assured him that the Federation would dispose of these weapons in the coming weeks.

"I smell gunpowder," said Android.

"Where?" asked ZEno.

"Somewhere down in the main hall."

"Are you sure?"

"Not 100%, but I should go check."

"Just stay."

"Under the Federation," said Taract, "there will be no more rich and poor, no more powerful and weak, no more rulers and ruled. There will only be citizens.

"Today the Federation institutes a free and just democracy on Earth. Every citizen will have an equal say. All citizens will be required to vote, and the majority will rule unless their vote violates the inalienable rights of any sentient minority.

"In the next 24 hours, all citizens will be contacted by JOe to vote. The question will be: shall the Federation remove all weapons of mass destruction from the Earth for all time?

"If a simple majority of the citizens of Earth votes yes, we will begin the process immediately."

Argon looked down at Bobo. The little ape was asleep, his arms and legs wrapped around Argon's torso, his head resting on Argon's heart. Not three months earlier, Bobo's mother had been murdered, and he had been torn from her as she'd died. After his rescue, the Federation had put the most basic communication chip in his brain so he would feel at ease with humans and could tell his story.

He had a new family now, but he only felt comfortable with the few he allowed to hold him. Of those, Taract was his favorite. They were inseparable.

Argon remembered the day Bobo had arrived. Taract had been at the lab, talking with T'sade. The ambassador had immediately fallen in love with the tiny ape. He'd canceled his plans and held Bobo in a lounge chair through the night. This had surprised Argon. He'd never seen that tender side of the ambassador. As a boy, he'd always found Taract intimidating when he'd come to talk with his mother. Taract had always wanted her to limit JOe's power.

"In two weeks, all the citizens of Earth will elect delegates to represent them in the Federation Earth Council. I will return here then."

Most of the audience erupted into loud applause. Eventually all but the ambassadors and heads of state in the front third of the hall were standing. Those still seated had the most to lose as a result of the new society the Federation ambassador had articulated. When they finally stood, it was only to leave the hall.

On Barge 99, Adelbrecht thumbed his TMD to detonate the charges.

Taract picked up his rock, leaving his torn speech on the podium. He turned and descended to the assembly floor. Bobo pushed off from Argon's hip and leaped onto Taract, embracing him tightly and kissing his cheek.

Glen and Alcippe congratulated Taract on his address. As the ambassador was surrounded by delegates wishing to ask questions or shake his hand, UN security guards attempted to clear a passage for the party to exit to the waiting shuttle.

The North Korean ambassador watched as Taract approached.

Right on cue, his man, dressed as a security guard, ran toward the mayor. Alcippe saw him coming seconds before impact. She got between them, and the three fell to the ground. Argon and the UN security guards turned their attention to the commotion as Taract walked on. Bobo looked up at Argon.

Kim Joe stepped out of the crowd and up to the ambassador as if to shake his hand. He pulled a handgun from his coat.

Boom . . . Boom . . . Boom . . . Boom . . . The explosions from the distant barge echoed through the hall. Boom . . . Boom . . .

Taract felt a sharp pain in his stomach that caused him to lose his balance. He pressed his hand to his abdomen and looked down: dark, warm red blood.

Bobo turned back at the sound of the gunshot. He smelled the gunpowder and remembered the man with the big gun who had

killed his mother. He leaped at Taract's attacker, his tiny teeth bared. He pulled on the man's ears and bit him in the face, knocking him away. Another shot rang out, and then another.

Edward watched in horror from the press box and then ran out the door and down the stairs.

In the upper balcony, ZEno nodded to Android. They headed for the exit.

Argon grabbed the gun with both hands, pointed it at the ceiling, and shouldered the shooter. They fell to the floor. Alcippe was right on them, kneeling on the old man's chest. She took the gun by the barrel tip, put it in her pocket, and picked up the squirming Bobo.

Argon turned to Taract. The ambassador's face was as white as his robe. He could barely stand. Argon caught him as he collapsed. "Someone get a doctor!"

Blood stained Taract's robe at his shoulder and abdomen.

Argon had to stop the bleeding. He pulled open the ambassador's robe, exposing the wounds. "Someone get a doctor," he repeated. The heart-shaped rock fell to the floor.

"JOe, what happened?" asked T'sade.

"Taract's been shot."

"Directive 39?"

"Yes!"

T'sade gave the order: "Red alert. All Peacekeepers, android and human, report to the shuttle deck. Flight deck, prepare for lift-off —Target One."

“Attention, visitors,” said a voice throughout the ship. “We have an emergency. Please be calm. You will be escorted to shuttles and taken to the Grand Staircase, where you can meet up with your family and friends.”

Circular disks opened in hallway ceilings, and hummingbird bots flew out and joined groups of visitors.

“Amelia,” said T’sade, “come with me. Pay attention and say nothing.”

Amelia fixed her eyes on the commander and nodded.

T’sade picked the girl up, raised her thick tail until the tip reached the top of her head, and entered a circular lift. The door closed, and in seconds, they were three decks up. The door opened onto the command deck. Crew members hurried around as T’sade moved into the room.

Amelia listened to the distinctive padding of the commander’s feet. When they got to the control desk, T’sade stood her on the desk.

They looked down at a 3D map of the East River, fed by live images from hummingbird bots. A dozen technicians stood around the desk. The sinking barge was moving away from the barge field. Three tugboats were intercepting it. Water was being pumped out of the swimming pools into the river from adjoining barges. Puffs of smoke drifted downriver.

People from upriver barges ran toward the Grand Staircase, backing up at the narrow emergency access gates that connected the moored barges. The black raven shuttle took off from the roof of the UN building, heading toward Central Park. It dissolved into a shadow of itself, led by three crows flying in formation.

“Get ready for takeoff,” said T’sade. “Hover a hundred meters over the hall. I want to launch all the shuttles. Seal the building and settle the citizens.”

Molded seats projected from the hallway walls. “The starship will take off in 30 seconds. Please take a seat.” As visitors sat, soft straps bound them securely.

The starship rose silently, its shadow darkening the crowded barges as it glided toward the General Assembly Hall. Hatches opened, and shuttles descended to the roof and plaza. Peacekeepers poured out and into the crowd; others entered the building.

Bobo pulled away from Alcippe and ran on all fours to Taract. He touched the blood and sniffed. With a screech, he stretched his arms over Taract, his teeth bared, his cheeks wet with tears.

In the living room of the mountaintop home of Ross Dolan, David Milken watched with several other billionaires, former soldiers, and CIA operatives.

This was a total surprise. He couldn’t believe that someone had shot that old bastard. He hoped it was worse than it appeared.

This would slow them down, end their party, and give him some time to figure out what to do.

Killing the leader had always worked in the past, but with Joe, things were different. They’d have to find a way to eliminate the AI. He took out his iPhone and touched the screen.

“Fritz, we’re going to Washington.”

Bobo watched as Argon and another man dressed in white exposed his friend’s hairless skin. They were using pieces of cloth to stop the warm red fluid from spilling out. He wanted to touch his friend, hold him. They pushed him away. He saw the pink rock on the carpeted floor, and he walked over and picked it up, clutching it to his chest.

Mayor Whitehead took the podium, his TMD in earbud mode. “Everyone, please sit down. No one is leaving the room until we evacuate Ambassador Freedman.”

Taract lay on the floor, not sure what had happened. His chest was cold. Intense pain shot through his stomach and shoulder. Someone was pushing things against his body. Where was Bobo? Why was he screeching?

Each time he opened his eyes, a distant darkness crept closer. The noise softened until darkness filled his mind.

Chapter 35 Shattered Dreams

2:00 p.m.

After Taract Freedman was evacuated, Mayor Whitehead stood at the podium, flanked by Alcippe on one side and an Officer Murphy android Peacekeeper on the other. He cleared his throat and looked directly at the hummingbird bot hovering motionlessly in front of him. His face appeared on every large screen and TMD around the world.

“As mayor of New York, I am attending the Mayors’ Conference against Gun Violence in Anaheim, California, next week. Alcippe and I shared breakfast with Ambassador Freedman this morning aboard the mothership, and he agreed to record a brief speech for that conference. At the time, I never imagined he would be assassinated today. I will play it now, but first, I will say that when we allow anyone to use a gun to kill someone, someone like Taract Freedman, we allow them to kill our dreams. We all lose.”

As the force of his words settled over the crowd, the auditorium went dark, and a TMD screen above his head lit up. The recording of Taract began to play.

“My name is Taract Freedman. At the moment, I am the oldest living being with human blood in my veins. My mother was born in Georgia before the bloody and violent Civil War. Advancements in gun design during that war allowed 640,000 citizens to be slaughtered.

“My father was born on a planet four and a half light-years from Earth. I am here to speak to you about gunpowder weapons. Gunpowder and guns in all their forms are the worst inventions of

mankind. They have harmed and killed more humans and animals than nuclear weapons.

“The only purpose of a gun is to threaten or kill. Both actions violate the just Universal Law that we bring to Earth, and from this day on, they shall be forbidden. There is no reason for them to exist in the just society we bring.

“In the coming weeks, we will rid the Earth of all gunpowder weapons. By the end of next week, we will end war, disband all armies, and put all soldiers on permanent paid leave. Then we will disarm all police forces—state and local. They will trade their guns for powerful but nonviolent android Peacekeepers, which you likely came into contact with at your local celebrations these past weeks.

“In recent years, countless more children have died due to gun violence than have soldiers in wars around the world. Americans have been paranoid about protecting their freedom because of the oppression of the British monarchy. Many Americans of every skin color fear the guns possessed by their government and local police, so they arm themselves. Many law-abiding citizens fear the guns possessed by criminals and the inability of the police to protect them.

“You might argue that a gun in the hand of an experienced police sharpshooter could save the lives of many from an angry or confused person with more powerful guns. The recent proliferation of assault weapons has caused mass killings, mostly in America. There is no justification for such weapons—or guns of any kind.

“We are at a critical turning point in human history. Corporations are working feverously to develop AI and androids. They do this for personal profit and power, not the common good. Their android soldiers will protect the rich and powerful with lethal

force. Civil liberties will be eroded and then eliminated as a result of a series of real or staged atrocities, like the events of the Reichstag Fire, the Gulf of Tonkin Incident, and September 11.

“Classical psychologists have compared the behavior of corporations to that of psychopaths, where the quest for profits is more important than ethics, morality, or the health of the planet. Governments that were once purposed with maintaining the common good are fast becoming their paid servants and will create unjust legislation that will suppress workers and consumers alike. They will ratify legislation that will disarm all citizens. Soon there will only be the armed global elite and the rest of us.

“This is not the just world my parents wished for.”

The image of Taract Freedman’s face froze on the screen above the mayor’s head.

“And with that,” said Glen, “I hereby initiate the second worldwide plebiscite question: shall all handguns and gunpowder-activated weapons be banished from the earth for all time? Yes or no?”

For the second time that day, JOe was overwhelmed with calls from citizens wishing to cast their vote.

T’sade and JOe persuaded Glen and Alcippe to come aboard the Mothership, which hovered three miles above the East River celebration site.

JOe, in its frail, unsheathed computer android, sat at a large, round conference table under the dome of the command deck. Holographic images of the commanders of the four other starships

sat around the table. Amelia Dreamchaser sat next to T'sade, along with Glen, Alcippe, and ZEno.

"I've spoken with more than three billion citizens," said JOe, "The consensus is that we should proceed with the day of celebration."

"I agree," said the mayor.

"We are one hour behind schedule," said T'sade, "but we can make this up."

"We have seven million android peacekeepers distributed in every part of the world," said JOe. "Taract's assassination is an opportunity for them to become the community leaders they were designed to be in times of crisis."

"I agree," said T'sade.

"There are almost 30 million Guardians," said ZEno. "I could message them to personally inspire citizens one on one. And I've commissioned over a hundred android sheaths this week of famous humans throughout history who could be shuttled to celebration sights to speak about the Federation and Universal Law."

"You should have had a few android copies of the ambassador," said Alcippe.

"Taract vetoed that idea," said JOe.

Amelia Dreamchaser stood on her chair. "I could speak about the rights of children to live in a home without guns."

"This tragedy is an opportunity to get people to give up their guns," said Glen. "We'll have a program to exchange guns and knives for their full value in Federation credits. Every city could have a plan to melt down the weapons and commission local sculptors to make art from the metal."

In the late afternoon, in an unmarked hangar far from the main terminal buildings of Dulles Airport, David Milken walked down the stairway of his silver Gulfstream III. A black limousine pulled to a stop near the last step.

Two men in black suits got out as the doors of the hangar rolled shut. The taller man approached Milken. "May I?" he asked as he patted Milken down. When he finished, he opened one of the rear doors and motioned for Milken to get in.

"I don't carry weapons, Mr. Dulles," said Milken as he got in the car.

"We have a problem."

"A problem that killing that old bastard won't solve?"

The dark man smiled. "You're fleeing to Basel?"

"It's safer than Washington."

"You don't trust the president and the generals."

"We wouldn't be talking if either of us trusted that moron."

"The computer froze your assets?"

"I have other resources."

"I'll locate the computer and make all the arrangements. Can you fund everything?"

Milken nodded.

"Can you house some of my men?"

"Whatever it takes."

"You're scared."

"He threatened me. I wish I'd killed him."

"You don't have the guts."

"But you do!" Milken smiled.

The dark man smirked.

5:00 p.m.

“Jack?” said Alcippe-27.

“Yes, Alcippe.”

“The builders tell me that they’re beginning to tow the parks to their new locations around Manhattan. Since our park was one of the first to arrive, it will be the last to be untethered and towed. They estimate that will happen at 5:30 a.m. tomorrow. You told me you wanted to ride along, so maybe you should go home and have a good night’s sleep and come back in the morning. I can call you an hour before so you can be back in time.”

“Thanks, Alcippe. You’re a good friend. It’s been a trying day. I have a bit more cleanup to do, and then I’ll go.”

“Why not let the bots do that?”

“Cleaning is good therapy for me. I love this job, and I’m proud of our park. I’m just emotionally drained after all that happened today.”

Jack began to sob. Alcippe27 put her arms around him, warmed her chest and arms, and gently squeezed him.

“It’s okay, Jack,” she said as she affectionately stroked his hair. “Go ahead and cry!”

Time slowed as he relaxed into her embrace, releasing all his pent-up emotions after this amazing yet sad day.

5:00 p.m.

Alcippe-27 came back into the food court from the barge field. Delena and her grandchildren, now three, followed her. “Jack, don’t we have a surprise for one of these people?”

“Oh, YES!” Jack went up to Tyree and took him by both hands. “Do I have a surprise for you!” He practically danced Tyree over to his Federation Joe’s Coffee shop. “Now, sit on the ground and close your eyes.

Jack went into the back of his shop and came back out with a scruffy black and white dog. He sat down in front of Tyree and let the dog go.

The dog leaped at Tyree, knocking him over and licking his face. Tyree opened his eyes. “Lucky! Oh, my God! Lucky! I never thought I’d see you again!”

Delena, Jackson, and Gayla came over to their new brother and his old dog. Gayla knelt behind Tyree, wrapped her arms around him, and kissed his head.