

# A Conspiracy of Light

By Joseph Selbie

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A note from the author:

*A Conspiracy of Light* is a story with page-turning action; magical moments of moving inspiration; dark and cold-hearted plans to exploit humanity; heroic self-sacrifice; a natural force greater than nuclear energy; transcendent knowledge; a world-crushing cyber-weapon; colossal powers used with restraint; modern threats made by ancient enemies; laughter and joy; spiritual mastery, reincarnation, and immortality.

It has suspense, action, chases, pursuits, mystery, shocks, surprise, cliff-hangers, and more. Shining through the action, like shafts of light, are profound spiritual experiences, humor, healing, loyalty, and great love.

The main characters in *Conspiracy* are asked to head off potential world-wide catastrophes without their influence ever being discovered by their adversaries—or the world. They have long been part of a conspiracy of light to safeguarded mankind. Their unknown influence has shaped the course of history, often intertwined with world-shaping figures such as Einstein, Galileo, Gandhi, Newton, and Michelangelo.

*A Conspiracy of Light* draws you along page after page.

Why then give it away for free?

I wouldn't be surprised if you assume that—if I'm giving it away for free—*Conspiracy* can't be very good. What I've learned, however, is that enthusiastic early readers loved it—but publishers don't think there is a market for it. A score of publishers—after politely, even reluctantly declining to publish *Conspiracy*—have said more or less the same thing: "It's a good, well-written book—but spiritual fantasy doesn't sell."

So be it. If spiritual fantasy doesn't sell I hope that at least it will be read. Enjoy.

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## Awakening

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## Chapter 1

I could barely hear her over the rush of the wind and the scream of the motorcycle's engine.

I think she said, "Hang on. I'm going to try to lose them..."

The rush of air whipped her words away. The motorcycle was at peak revs as we raced along the narrow winding road before hitting a tight curve fast – way too fast; in fact, impossibly fast, too fast for the wheels to maintain their grip on the road, too fast for us to not simply fly off the road – yet we made it through the curve, then another, and another. As I hung on to her as if my life depended on it, I squinted into the blast of air over her shoulder, her hair whipping against my cheek, and I saw that the speedometer read over ninety. Just then a yellow twenty-five mile an hour warning-sign came and went almost before my mind could register it.

No need to tell me to hang on...

I *was* glad to hear that she thought we could lose them though. They'd been shooting at us.

At the thought, I drew a breath. This was the first moment I had had the presence of mind to do anything other than react since she showed up at my door. I was stunned to realize that only minutes had gone by since I had been considering what I was going to fix for dinner at the end of a normal Sunday afternoon. Only fifteen minutes ago I had been home and in my familiar world – a familiar world that was slipping away as fast as we sped into the autumn twilight.

But, to my surprise, I felt great. Not just great, I realized wonderingly, I felt fantastic.

I should be confused, terrified, angry. My life – a really good life, mind you – had just been violently turned upside down. Moments ago I was nearly killed, and a lot of things are happening that I simply have no explanation for.

But I feel profoundly good. I feel good in a way that I didn't even know one could feel.

Fifteen minutes ago I would have told you I was already as happy as a person could be. As UC Berkeley's youngest tenured professor of physics at twenty-four, I am on a roll. My career as a physicist is assured. Even at my young age I am considered to be one of the brightest minds in physics.

I love being a physicist. It has been my passion for as long as I can remember. When other kids were watching TV or dating or playing sports, I was studying science and physics. I can't get enough of it. And it comes easy. I graduated from high school when I was fourteen. I had my bachelor's and master's degrees in physics from MIT by twenty, and my doctorate from UC Berkeley at twenty-two. I study physics the way a thirsty man drinks water. When I'm not absorbed in physics, I'm at the dojo with my sensei. I'm a third degree black belt in Tae Kwon Do. Just this afternoon I worked out and left feeling particularly energized.

I liked everything about my life.

Then the doorbell rang.

I had only just arrived back at my Berkeley home this evening when I heard the bell. Opening the door, I found a bright and beautiful young woman looking at me with a pleased smile. It was the kind of smile you give someone you haven't seen for a long time, when you know the person is going to be glad to see you.

But I didn't recognize her at all.

She was slim and fit. She stood poised and erect like a dancer or a martial artist. About five feet eight, dark hair, dressed in denim pants, running shoes, tank top and denim jacket. Her hair was stylish and short. She had the air of a European about her, and I caught the scent of sandalwood perfume. She could be twenty-five or thirty-five, with the classic features and clear light skin that will keep her looking elegant and young for decades.

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While I was taking all this in, she was appraising me with a curiously unreadable smile on her lips. I'm six feet tall, also slim and fit, light brown hair, blue eyes, in a face pale from spending way too much time indoors, wearing chinos, polo shirt and running shoes – standard Berkeley professor garb. Passable, but not head turning, I'm told.

When we finished our momentary but mutual appraisal, our eyes met. I felt a shock of recognition as I looked into her clear, blue-gray eyes. I was thrown. I had never met this woman before, yet I felt an instant attraction to her – and a distinct feeling of *déjà vu*.

Mentally trying to shake off the confusing feeling that I both knew and didn't know this woman I stammered out, "Ah, can I help you?"

Still smiling her unreadable smile, and with a brief flicker of a grin at my discomfiture thrown in, as if she knew things I didn't, she asked, "Are you Professor Michael Dinsmore?"

"Yes."

"My name is Elle Champlain, and I have a very important invitation for you. May I come in?"

I gave my head a quick shake, as if I could somehow shake the odd reactions I was having to her out of my head. I quickly stepped back and gestured her into my living room. "Please come in."

Elle looked around briefly as she came in and surveyed my small bachelor home. It was, as usual, neat, tidy and uninspired. I have lived here for over two years but have done almost nothing to make it a home. I live at the University and at the dojo. I come here to eat, sleep and change clothes. For no obvious reason, it had always felt temporary to me, although I didn't have any plans to move. The only real item that reveals anything personal about me is the picture of my parents hanging on the wall. When Elle's glance fell on their picture she again flashed her unreadable smile.

I asked her if she would like anything to drink – water, coffee, juice – the usual politeness, which I expected she would decline. She surprised me – not by accepting – but by saying, "No, thank you. I don't think we will have time." I thought, "*We won't have time?*"

Again, trying to ignore the sense that she knew something I didn't, I gestured for her to sit on one of my living room easy chairs, and as I took a seat I asked, "What invitation do you have for me?"

She began, "Professor Dinsmore..."

"Please," I broke in, "call me Michael. I don't even let my students call me Professor Dinsmore."

"O.K. Michael it is then", she said as if she was enjoying a private joke, but she took away any rudeness I might have felt with a warm and friendly smile.

"I am here to invite you to meet with Jonathon Devas."

"Jonathon *Devas*?" I blurted out. I could not have been any more surprised if she had said the President of the United States. She was obviously enjoying my surprise – enjoying it because multi-billionaire Jonathon Devas is quite possibly the most reclusive man on earth. Very little is known about Jonathon Devas. He's the Howard Hughes of our time. He almost never appears in public, yet his Devas Foundation supports charitable and scientific work in research centers all over the world.

"Yes. Mr. Devas would like you to come to his home near Aspen for a very important meeting tomorrow – perhaps the most important meeting you will ever attend."

I stared at Elle, trying to fathom her calm sensibleness combined with the outlandishness of her invitation.

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“I don’t know Jonathon Devas. Why would he want me to come to meet him?” Rising star or not, I was hardly in his league. I knew some people whose work was made possible by grants from the Devas Foundation, but I wasn’t one of them. To my knowledge, I had no connection to Jonathon Devas, or to the Devas Foundation.

“Jonathon said he would explain everything to you when you met. We have a private jet standing by to fly you there this evening.”

“But,” I protested, “tomorrow is a Monday. I have classes to teach, things I need to do. I can’t possibly go on such short notice.”

“Jonathon anticipated that you would find his invitation inconvenient, even inconsiderate. He asked me to offer his apologies for the very short notice. He also said that I should give you the following message.”

She paused, and then said very carefully, “He wants you to know that you will, in fact, discover the fifth force.”

I could scarcely believe what I had just heard. I could barely breathe. As long as I can remember, even as a child of two or three, I have believed that I was going to discover the fifth force. Most of the time, I have been as clear and certain about it as I am that apples fall to the ground. But I have never told this to anyone, not even my parents. How on earth could Jonathon Devas know?

The constant lure drawing me forward in my pursuit of physics has been my secret conviction that there is a fifth force to be discovered. Though speculated on in freewheeling, often humorous, conversations among physicists, almost all physicists are extremely doubtful that there is a force other than the four we already know: gravity, electromagnetism and the strong and weak nuclear forces. People who maintain that there is a fifth force are generally relegated to the lunatic fringe of physics, which is the main reason I have never shared my conviction with anyone else.

The other reason I had never shared my conviction with anyone else is that from time to time I have thought perhaps I was delusional, and if I just stayed with accepted science and waited it out, the delusion would simply go away. Most of the time, the conviction simply has sat in the back of my mind keeping me ever alert to new avenues of research opening up in physics.

When I heard Jonathon Devas’ message from Elle, it was as if the moment froze. Somewhere within myself, I realized, I had simply been waiting for this moment, for my search for the fifth force to begin. I was thrilled. Elle gazed steadily and calmly at me, as if she understood the significance of this moment for me.

“How...” I began, and then faltered. Where do I even begin?

“I can’t tell you everything you want to know right now, but I can tell you that when you meet Jonathon tomorrow...”

I cut her off as my normal reality reasserted itself. “Tomorrow? Surely you understand that I can’t just take off with you tonight...”

Before I could finish my thought, Elle, hearing a car door opening, jumped up and looked out my front window. Still looking out the window, she spoke. “I’m sorry, but you may not have much choice but to come with me right now. There are two men getting ready to come up to your house, and I’m pretty sure they are going ask you to go with them on some pretext. They’ll probably claim to be federal agents of some kind. That’s what I would do”, she said the last almost too quietly for me to hear.

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Turning back to me she said, "I was afraid of this, but I had hoped it wouldn't happen before I could persuade you to come with me."

My thrill over Jonathon Devas' message about the fifth force was rapidly replaced with alarm. What was she saying? That I would be abducted? I jumped up and looked out the window and saw a dark non-descript sedan parked at the curb. Two men were coming up my walk.

"When they identify themselves, just ask for an ID," she said. "I'm guessing their ID's will have bullets."

"What..." I stammered out, almost unable to take in what she was saying.

At that moment the door bell rang. I went to the door and opened it to reveal two men in dark suits, white shirts and conservative ties.

"Professor Dinsmore," said one of the men politely, "may we come in?"

"Who are you?" I barely had the presence of mind to ask.

"We are with the FBI and we need to ask you some questions," answered the second man.

Overwhelmed with too many things happening too fast, I opened the door all the way and they walked in, closing the door behind them. Elle was standing next to me, but they paid no attention to her.

"Professor Dinsmore, I'm afraid we need you to come with us," said the first man.

"What is this about?" I asked, trying, and failing, to sound as if I was in control of the situation.

"We can't talk about it here," he said, glancing at Elle.

Just barely remembering Elle's last words of advice I said, "I will need to see some identification."

The two men glanced at each other and both reached into their suit jackets. Sure enough their ID's did have bullets. They both began pulling automatics out of underarm holsters.

Before I could even begin to say anything, Elle's right leg swept across in front of me in a blur, knocking the men's hands away from their guns in one motion. She whirled full circle and kicked the nearest man in the head with her right foot. As the man began falling senseless to the floor, she hit the second man in the side of the head with an open palm strike so hard that his head snapped back and hit the door jam with an audible thunk. He, too, fell to the floor like a marionette whose strings had been cut.

It was all over in less than a second. Her kicks and strike were all part of one flowing motion. I have never seen anyone move so fast. Not even my sensei. Not even in competition. And now she stood calmly and matter-of-factly before me with an everyday air about her as she looked down at the two men. Then she bent down to check their pulses.

"Both alive," she said as if with satisfaction at a job well done.

Then looking at me with a grin, she said, "Idiots. They never watch the girl!"

Any semblance of normal thought had abandoned me and I could only stare at her, her attempt at humor falling flat.

Sensing my shock and anxiety she came closer and said, "Michael, I'm sorry all this had to happen so fast. But I'm afraid it isn't over. These two are unlikely to be alone. When they don't come out soon, others are going to come in after them. I can't tell you why yet, but you are very important to them. We need to get you away from here right now. The situation has become very dangerous. If they can't capture you, they may try to kill you. Is there a back way out?"

I shook my head again, as if I could return to normality by shaking out what I had just seen and heard. Capture me? Kill me? Numbly I nodded toward the kitchen. Seeing that I was still

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dazed and unwilling to move, Elle came over to me and said, “Michael, you are very important to them, but you are far more important to me.”

Staring deeply into my eyes, as if to will her reassurance past my confusion, she said, “We’ll get out of this okay.”

Then she said with a laugh, “Besides, these guys have no idea what they’re up against. We’ve been in much worse situations.”

“We?” I thought again.

“Come on - we have to go,” she said with greater urgency, and tugged my arm toward the kitchen. Finally, like a sleep walker, I followed Elle into the kitchen, out the back door, down the kitchen porch steps and into my fenced back yard.

At that moment, we heard noises coming from inside the house. Elle looked around quickly and saw that the only way out of my back yard was a gate that led back toward the front the house.

“We can’t go that way. We’ll have to go over the fence,” she said, gesturing to the fence at the rear of the yard.

“Now!” she almost shouted, which woke me up enough to start clambering over the fence into my neighbor’s back yard. Elle had merely grabbed the top edge of the six foot fence, and with one lithe motion vaulted over the fence, landing lightly on her feet on the other side.

My journey over the fence was far less graceful, and I landed heavily, and with a grunting thud on the other side. I was so mentally stunned that even my martial arts training did not come to my aid. My thoughts were a confused jumble, and part of me thought that this must all be some mistake, that there was no need to run from these men. At that moment, the back door of my house was kicked open with a crash so violent that the panes of glass in the door shattered. Looking over the fence, I saw a man on my porch raise his gun and aim at me.

Elle slammed into me from the side and pushed me down. Bullets came through the thin wooden fence exactly where I had been standing, but there was no sound of gunshots.

“Silencer,” I thought.

“Silencer?” I thought again, this time in shock.

Suddenly my foggy mind began to focus. No FBI agent is going to be shooting at me with a silenced pistol. Even if there *is* some mistake, these men were obviously not planning on discussing it with me. A burst of fear and energy shot through me. My mind cleared completely and I was ready to run.

We leapt up to a crouch and quickly moved along the inside of the fence until we saw a path leading to a gate on the street side of my back neighbor’s yard. We sprinted for the gate. Elle crashed through it without even trying to open it. Pieces of the gate flew forward as if it had exploded.

A question began to rise in my mind, but events were moving too fast for the question to form, because as I ran through the now open gate, splinters hit the side of my face as another bullet hit the wooden gate post. My skin crawled; I expected the next bullet to hit me in the back, but I made it out to the front the house unscathed, running as fast as I could. Elle was already running to the left along the side walk, and I quickly followed, gratefully putting a house between us and the gunman on my back porch.

Suddenly she stopped and said, “Perfect.”

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Following her gaze I saw her looking at a motorcycle parked on the street. It was one of those motorcycles that look like they are going fast even when they are standing still, their lines swept forward and downward, handle bars low, forcing the driver to lean way forward like a racer.

My glance was drawn away from the motorcycle by the sound of a car's tires squealing around the corner at one end of our block. It was the dark sedan that the men had arrived in at my house. The next thing I knew, the motorcycle roared to life and Elle was shouting at me to get on. I leapt on the back, grabbed Elle in a bear hug, as she spun us in a tire-smoking half-circle and tore away from the car coming toward us. My mind was trying to form another question, but it too was blown away before it could take shape by the fact that a black SUV had screeched around the corner ahead of us, and was coming toward us from the opposite direction. We were trapped between the two vehicles.

Without hesitation, Elle turned the motorcycle and raced up one of the many open stairs that cut through the blocks in my neighborhood. The north Berkeley Hills are very steep and series of steps, at irregular intervals like a chutes and ladders game, can take one all the way to the top of the Berkeley Hills as far as Tilden Park, which runs along the ridgeline above Berkeley.

We flew up the stairs. The bumpy ride threatened to throw me off the back, but Elle didn't make any attempt to slow down. In fact, when we got to the top of the stairs, we were going so fast that we shot into the air before landing in the street. Elle landed, already turning the motorcycle, so that we hit the pavement, squealing, tires smoking, already at full throttle and heading down the street.

Again my mind wanted to ask a question, but my question was once again obliterated by the sight of the dark sedan again careening around the corner at the end of the block. To my stomach-clenching surprise, this time Elle accelerated right at the oncoming car, but at the last moment braked hard and turned uphill once again into another set of steps that she had seen ahead of us. This set of steps was covered by a wooden roof and had sides like a tunnel. As we entered the stairs, I heard the rapid sound of an automatic weapon and saw splinters flying. I ducked instinctively and turned my head away.

Again we flew up the stairs, and shot out of our wooden tunnel at the top, soaring out over the street. This time, however, the street was much narrower and there were cars parked on the far side of the street. Somehow Elle managed to turn the motorcycle in midair so that we landed almost sideways, once again landing in a squealing, tire-smoking, engine-screaming turn that rocketed us along the street.

Yet again a question tried to form in my mind. This time it surfaced.

"How was that possible?"

"It isn't", I thought.

No amount of driving skill would make it possible to turn like that in midair. We should be piled up in a broken heap after colliding with the parked car on the other side of the street. Instead, we were speeding along, about to turn up yet another set of stairs. Then the other questions my mind had been trying to form also surfaced. I quickly glanced down over her shoulder and saw that there were no keys in the ignition.

"How had she started the motorcycle?" I wondered.

"How had she smashed through that gate without even slowing down?"

"How had she turned in midair?"

All I knew was that Elle apparently had her own laws of physics, because we had just violated several of the ones I knew.

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We raced up two more sets of stairs and found ourselves on the last stretch of road before Tilden Park. Tilden Park is a long, thin park running along the ridge top with a golf course at one end. Beyond Tilden Park, there was only undeveloped park and national forest land. I would often come here for a run or just to stroll along the many trails and enjoy the views. It was familiar territory for me and it gave me an idea.

I shouted to Elle over the noise of the motorcycle. “There’s a park service road on the other side of the golf course.”

“Which way”, she shouted back.

I pointed toward the golf course club house and she accelerated toward it with alarming speed. Just as we entered the parking area, the black SUV swerved into the parking lot right behind us having arrived by another route.

I shouted, “We have to get over there...” pointing across the golf course.

Elle didn’t even slow down. She took us through a tiny gap between two parked cars at full speed and continued right onto a fairway, across a cart path, up a short rise and, to the anger and astonishment of two men lining up their putts, right across the green. I can only imagine what their expressions were when the SUV followed across, because when I craned my head around, I could see the SUV was not far behind.

Elle turned her head slightly to shout, “How much farther is the road? We’re putting other people at risk. We’ve got to get out of here fast before someone gets hurt.”

“We need to go down there”, I shouted, pointing toward a gate in the ten-foot tall boundary fence that surrounds the golf course. There were several groups of golfers staring our way as we looked toward our escape route.

She looked back briefly and saw that the SUV was still behind us.

“Too far,” she shouted, “and too many people.” To my alarm, she turned sharply instead and headed directly toward the boundary fence while accelerating, scything a scimitar shape into the fairway and sending up a rooster tail of grass and dirt. She seemed to be heading for a grassy mound near the fence. When I realized what she wanted to do, I think I stopped breathing. We rode up the mound and flew in a graceful arc over the boundary fence, landing in the knee- high golden grass of an open, untended field outside the manicured green of the golf course.

But we should have been lying in a tangled mess in the fence. We didn’t hit the mound with near enough speed to fly over the fence, and even if we had had enough speed, the mound wasn’t steep enough to have launched us over the fence. It was as if we had been carried over the fence by a giant invisible hand.

I was definitely not in Kansas anymore.

The SUV did not fare as well. They made the same sharp turn as we had and as we soared through the air they were shooting at us. Then they crashed into the fence without slowing down. But rather than smashing through, the chain link fencing and metal posts wrapped around the car and caused it to flip on its side.

Apparently they were still in Kansas.

Now outside the boundary fence, Elle headed for the road I had been trying to get us to. Just as we reached it, we saw the dark sedan coming toward us – so much for my bright idea of a secret escape route – the guys in the other car had found us already. Elle spun us onto the road, and began running through the gears at top RPM. That’s when Elle shouted to me, “Hang on. I’m going to try to lose them...” and proceeded to break any of Newton’s remaining laws of motion she had overlooked.

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As we hurtled along the road, I thought, “I should be terrified.” At the speeds we were going, we will, without question, die horribly if Elle can’t keep us on the road.

Instead, I felt great. Exhilarated is the better description. Dimly aware that my rational self wanted to know about the fifth force, Jonathon Devas, the chaos left behind us in Berkeley, and who those men are that were bent on capturing or killing me, I instead find myself giving in to the experience of the moment. I felt as if I was fusing with Elle and the motorcycle. I began to anticipate Elle’s lightening fast adjustments of weight, steering and braking. I even began to anticipate when she was going to break another of gravity’s unbreakable laws, and I moved my body infinitesimally in response. Sensing my changed awareness, Elle glanced back over her shoulder and flashed me a quick and delighted grin.

We continued racing along, making random turns whenever we encountered another road, making sure we lost the guys who were chasing us. After about fifteen minutes, Elle pulled off the road and stopped.

The motorcycle stopped running—somehow—and we both sat upright and listened. I couldn’t hear anything except a breeze hissing through the knee-high golden grass all around us, almost luminous in the last rays of the autumn evening. The quiet was almost startling, after the continuous scream of the motorcycle’s engine.

We heard no sound from our pursuers. No surprise. If they had tried to maintain the speeds we had been going, they would have long since ended up in a ditch or have flown off the road, down one of the many steep hillsides we flew past in a blur. They were probably still searching for us, but Elle had made so many turns, it would be next to impossible for them to find us.

Seemingly satisfied that we were safe for the moment, Elle put down the motorcycle’s kick stand and slipped off the seat sideways. I got off as well.

Then Elle turned to look at me. Her eyes were shining. Energy seemed to radiate from her like a beacon. I had never seen anyone more completely alive. A warm and companionable smile lit up her face.

As I returned her smile, I thought I must look to her as she does to me. Energy was coursing through my body. I felt light on my feet and exceptionally aware of everything. I felt deeply calm, and my mind was clear and present – a feeling I usually only experience when I am in a particularly intense session of Tae Kwon Do. I knew I was feeling *chi*, my life force, but I had never felt it so deeply before.

Even though I knew it was cool, even cold, in the fading minutes of this autumn evening, I felt a warm glow radiating outward from the core of my body. I felt as if the boundaries of my body had blurred. I couldn’t tell exactly where my body began and where it ended.

I carefully moved my hand, like a small child enjoying the sensation of moving his hand slowly through water. I realized that I was moving my hand through a sea of life force, the *chi* surrounding me.

I look at Elle with a feeling of elation and wonder.

“What is happening to me?”

“You are beginning to awaken,” she said simply.

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## Chapter 2

After we had gotten away from our pursuers, we quickly, and without further incident, made our way to a private airport in Concord on the east side of the Berkeley Hills. On the way, Elle made a brief call on her mobile, shouting over the wind to be heard. “We’re coming in hot. Fifteen minutes. Stay alert and get ready to go,” was all she said. When we pulled up to the airport entry gate, Elle spoke to the guards, and we were immediately waved through as if they expected us. We sped along the airport service road and soon arrived at a small open hanger. Three people were waiting for us, standing beside a sleek and gleaming Gulfstream. The jet’s door was open, stairs down, waiting for us to board. The engines were already running. Elle put down the motorcycle’s kick stand and got off.

Without hesitation, Elle spoke to a member of our welcoming party—a round-faced and serious looking young woman. “Maggie, let’s go. We’ve gotten away for now, but they’ll start looking for him at the airports.” With a brief flicker of alarm and surprise, Maggie turned without comment and dashed up the stairs into the plane. Moments later we heard the sounds of the engines revving up to a higher pitch.

Turning to a tall, broadly-smiling African-American man, Elle quickly spoke, “Booker, I’m sorry, but I am leaving you quite a mess to clean up. I had to steal this motorcycle and things got very noisy and very visible.”

Booker’s smile dimmed but didn’t go out. “No problem. I’ll make sure you aren’t involved. Did anyone see anything that, ah, they shouldn’t?” he asked with a slight twinkle in his eye.

“I don’t think so. I tried to make everything look natural. I just hope no bystanders got hurt.” A pained look crossed Elle’s face, and she said with exasperation, “Those idiots were shooting at us in the middle of a city like a bunch of gang members.” At her words, Booker’s smile vanished. Elle hastily added, “There was nothing else I could do. It was clear that if they couldn’t capture Michael, they would kill him.”

There was collective intake of breath, and everyone glanced my way, but before anyone else could speak, Elle said, “Mira, please make Michael comfortable.” At that she vanished into the plane, leaving me standing with Mira and Booker.

Booker began pulling an iPhone out of his pocket and turned away – but not before he flashed me a last smile. Finally, Mira, a slender young woman with the dark hair and liquid dark eyes of India, made a graceful gesture for me to board the plane.

By the time I was seated and had begun fastening my seatbelt, Mira had the stairs up and the door closed. The plane began to taxi immediately. Looking out the window, I could see that all other activity was being stopped to let us pass. With barely a pause, we made the beginning of the runway and I felt a surge of speed and power as we shot down the runway and into the air. I’m not sure if even two minutes had passed since we arrived.

“Where’s Elle,” I had asked Mira after a few moments of flight.

“She’s flying the plane,” answered Mira matter-of-factly. “Is there anything I can get for you?”

I didn’t see Elle again until we landed at a private airport near Aspen and were ushered into a waiting limousine. Maggie and Mira waved goodbye as we moved off. I tried to ask Elle questions as we rode smoothly along, but she deflected my questions by saying they would all be answered tomorrow. Finally, I sensed it was awkward for her to not be able to answer and I relented. During the remainder of the limousine ride we were both quiet.

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We arrived at the Devas Estate sometime after ten o'clock. It was dark and the moon wasn't up yet, so I didn't see much on the way. We arrived at the main gate of the estate in about twenty minutes. But it took almost another ten minutes on a slow and winding road to finally arrive at the house.

When we pulled up to the front entry way, I was surprised to be greeted by Jonathon Devas himself. Expecting the stereotypical man of commerce, steely-eyed and commanding, I was taken aback by the man who stood welcomingly before me. He was of average height, with dark hair, slightly dark skin, and deep brown eyes. His features and coloring could have originated in any number of locales from South America to India. He was more youthful than I would have guessed, although fine lines around his eyes and mouth suggested much greater age.

He was dressed very casually and comfortably in soft cotton pants and a deep violet-colored raw-silk shirt. His whole manner was so unassuming that had I not recognized him from the few pictures that show up in the newspapers, I might have thought this man was merely going to take me to meet the far more important Mr. Devas. Instead he had stood patiently while I gathered my wits enough to reach out and shake his outstretched hand.

Then with great warmth he had said, "Welcome to *Milliefiore*." He spoke with a slight trace of an accent, but I couldn't tell where it originated. His English, even if not his first language, was very clear, leaning toward the British enunciation so common with well-educated non-English speakers.

As he spoke, his eyes locked with mine and I felt the same shock of recognition that I had felt when I first met Elle, yet I knew I had never met Jonathon Devas before.

"I know you must be brimming with questions. I'm afraid you must wait a bit longer for your answers. There is a ceremony planned for you which will take place late morning tomorrow when everyone has had a chance to get here," he concluded.

"A ceremony?" I blurted out, disconcerted. I had expected to be invited to a meeting of some kind where I could ask questions and get answers.

Seeing my obvious discomfort at the idea of attending a ceremony I knew nothing about, he continued, "My apology. The ceremony is to help you fully awaken. Elle called me from the plane and told me that you have already begun to experience the first stages of awakening. I'm very sorry you have not had time to learn about it before now. Most people have years to understand and prepare for it. But there is a purpose to the timing of your awakening which you will soon learn."

His words, meant to reassure, only made me feel more apprehensive. "What will happen to me?" I wanted to know.

"Even if we had plenty of time to talk about your awakening, some things cannot be understood by explanations alone. I could talk with you the rest of the night and you would have yet a hundred more questions. The real answers to your questions lie within you. The ceremony will unlock them."

Sensing that I was about to ask another question, he held up his left hand to forestall me and then extended his right arm toward me, drawing my eyes to his hand. As I looked at his hand, there was a brief shimmer, and then a perfectly formed white rose appeared, the stem held delicately between his fingers.

He gestured for me to take it. As I held it, feeling its solidity between my fingers, gently touching the petals, and raising it to my nose to take in a delicate scent, Jonathon said, "Can you explain that?"

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I could think of no reply. I had just witnessed what anyone would call a miracle. It was no conjuror's trick. No sleight-of-hand. Jonathon had not been moving his hands or distracting me. He had been standing perfectly still. From a distance of inches, I had seen the rose form in his hand.

Seeing that he had achieved his desired effect, he spoke, "Only when you have awakened will you be able to understand it. You do not have to attend the ceremony tomorrow. Your awakening will continue even if you don't attend. You will fully awaken regardless of whether you decide to attend tomorrow's ceremony or not. The ceremony will merely quicken the process already unfolding. You are not who or what you have thought yourself to be."

Seeing that I was still reluctant, he added, "You need not decide now. The ceremony is planned for late morning tomorrow. Until then you are my guest here at *Milliefiore*—Thousand Flowers—as I like to call this beautiful haven. Andrew will make sure you have anything you need," he said as he gestured at a pleased and smiling young man who had been standing patiently at his side.

"But now you must be tired. Andrew will show you to your rooms, and I will see you tomorrow." With that he held up a hand in what could have been a farewell or a blessing and left us.

Elle was still there after Jonathon had left. I could tell that she didn't want to just say good night and leave me with Andrew. The brief intensity of our escape and the amazing experience of connectedness we had had held us together still.

After a silent moment or two, with neither of us quite certain what to do or say, she impulsively gave me a quick but fierce hug, saying, "I'll see you tomorrow," and her gaze had lingered on mine just a bit longer than expected, as if she were weighing whether to say something more. Then, after a final moment of indecision she added, like an older sister exasperatedly straightening out a younger brother, "Don't make a fuss. Just go to the ceremony."

As I watched her walk away, I felt a wrench, as if I had been forcibly disconnected from her. I wanted to call her back, but I realized I had no idea what I would say.

Andrew escorted me to my room and quickly got me settled and left. I was tired, as Jonathon suggested, but I expected to lie awake, going over the events of the day. To my surprise I quickly fell asleep and slept without waking all night. The next morning when I woke, the first thing I saw was the white rose which Jonathon had produced out of thin air, now in a vase on my bedside table. Seeing the rose immediately brought back last night's conversation with Jonathon—and the awareness that I still had no explanation.

But I was aware that I felt fantastic. I was relaxed, yet humming with energy. Whatever awakening is, I had to admit I liked it so far, even if I had no idea what it was. I decided to set my questions aside for the moment.

Lying comfortably in my luxurious bed, I looked around the room. At the end of my high-ceilinged and spacious room was a pair of curtained French doors. Above them, the clear early-morning sunlight was slanting into the room through a half-circle window. The window was an exquisite stained glass creation of purple and lavender irises rising from green bladed leaves against a blue sky and white clouds. It cast lovely shapes and hues on the wall near my bed.

The walls were a delicate shade of lavender. Above me, in the pure white ceiling, there was a recessed oval, bordered by molding in the European style. In the center was a single iris, painted with gold and silver metallic highlights glinting even in the subdued morning light. On the bureau there was a glass sculpture of a vase full of irises matching exactly the purple and

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lavender iris colors in the stained glass. Across the room, on a high table against the wall, was a real vase full of real irises, also of the same matching shades. The two arrangements, one real, one a sculpture, were identical in size and the number of irises. All the furniture was made from beautiful, warm, cherry wood—simple in line, delicate and glowing with the care that only time and careful polishing can impart.

As I drank it in, I thought that my mother would love it. She is a floral painter and an avid gardener. My modest childhood home was always beautiful, full of flowers, both real and painted. There were times when I thought I might like to be an artist, but the desire couldn't compete with my love of science and physics—actively encouraged by my mathematician father. I was discussing the fine points of black holes at the dinner table by the time I was eight. But from my mother I gained a lasting appreciation for the joys and subtleties of beauty.

Time to get out of bed. I stretched and sat up. Throwing off the covers, I put my legs over the side, my feet landing on a wool rug sitting atop a lustrous wooden floor. My first impulse was to go out the French doors and see where I was. We had arrived from the airport too late to see anything. Remembering that I was told there would be clothes for me, having brought nothing with me when I escaped from Berkeley, I opened a magnificent wardrobe in search of a robe. Hanging neatly were a number of shirts in vibrant colors, my usual style of chino pants, and a plum-colored soft cashmere wool robe. Folded neatly in a drawer were some white draw-string cotton pants and a pair of open-heeled slippers. I gratefully put on the cotton pants, slippers and robe, since the morning air was chilly.

Opening the French doors, I walked out onto a generous balcony and headed for the balustrade, inhaling fresh mountain air and with it, some elusive scents of flowers. Along the balustrade were standing pots of blooming irises—in September. Looking down, I saw a series of terraces, dressed in native stone, dropping lower and lower until they met the green grass of an extensive lawn. At the edge of each terrace were low stone walls capped with flower boxes. There were flowers in bloom everywhere.

The low stone walls were pierced here and there with stairs leading down to the next terrace, never more than about six steps. The terraces were laid out in overlapping curves, rather like surf flowing off the beach and back into the ocean. Scattered here and there were chairs and tables, their umbrellas furred to welcome the autumn sun. I could feel warmth rising from the terraces, as they gave off some of the heat they had already captured this early in the morning. Mingled with the warmth was the fragrance of many flowers, a rich and varied bouquet coming from hundreds of out of season blooms.

Looking out to the horizon, I saw that the estate was surrounded by low pine and fir-clad hills, sheltering a large meadow in which the house stood. In the distance I could glimpse the serrated, snowy-white peaks of the starkly beautiful Maroon Bells. Through the meadow, a sun-sparkling stream meandered, flashes of light from its quicksilver surface winking through stands of aspen. The stream's scintillating silvery waters and the white trunks of the aspen trees provided a dramatic counterpoint for the luminous yellow, orange and scarlet autumn leaves of grove after grove of aspens in their fall splendor. Half way between the house and the aspens, in the midst of a sprawling green lawn, sat a white painted gazebo with an iridescent blue tile roof.

When Andrew had escorted me to my room last night he told me that he would be happy to take care of anything I needed. All I needed to do was call his extension. I decided to put his offer to the test. I reluctantly tore my gaze away from the splendid view, found a phone in my

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room, and called Andrew on the proper extension. I asked if breakfast was available and he offered to bring it to my room in twenty minutes.

By the time Andrew arrived with my breakfast, I had showered, selected clothes from the wardrobe and dressed. One thing was certain. Jonathon Devas had a very efficient organization. All the clothes were in the style I liked. Everything fit. Even though I had my choice of loafers, street shoes, even dress shoes, I stuck with the running shoes I had arrived in, since I planned on exploring the grounds as soon as breakfast was over.

Andrew set out breakfast on a wrought iron table on the balcony. The food was as fabulous as the view: Eggs Benedict, fresh fruit and rich coffee. The place setting and china, to my astonishment, matched my room. Tasteful irises adorned the outside of my eggshell thin cup, and were repeated on the edge of my plate. Even the salt and pepper shakers had the same iris pattern, and my table cloth and napkin were the exact same shade of lavender as the walls of my room.

As I ate my breakfast and drank in the view, I marveled once again at how good I felt. Yesterday men were shooting at me. Elle broke the laws of physics with nonchalance and Jonathon casually created a rose right before my astonished eyes. I should be totally freaked out, as they say. Yet I was content and in the moment. I had never felt better.

I was beginning to accept, even if nothing further happened, that my life was forever changed. That should be bothering me. A lot. I had always been in control. Sometimes I had wondered if I was too much in control. Other people thought I was driven. Becoming a tenured professor by twenty-four had left no room for anything else in my life for a very long time. Yet here I was, completely out of control of my life and it felt oddly liberating to have no idea what was coming next.

I was taking a final swallow of excellent coffee when Andrew returned, as pre-arranged, to take me on a tour of the house. As he led me around, it became obvious that he loved *Milliefiore*, and he mentioned that he had had a part in designing and furnishing some of the rooms.

“Jonathon had the inspiration for *Milliefiore* many years ago.” began Andrew, “He wanted every area of the house to be devoted to a different flower. You are in the Iris Suite. Other guest rooms are devoted to the morning glory, lily, frangipani, and peace rose. I just recently completed doing a mountain columbine room.”

As we walked, Andrew pointed out items of interest, not saying too much, just letting me drink it in. It was as if we were walking through a work of art. Every room, every corridor, every window, wall, and ceiling was carefully, lovingly and precisely designed and decorated. Yet I was amazed to realize that it didn’t feel impersonal or cold. I could easily live in this house. There were comfortable nooks to sit in and read, sitting rooms to relax in with others, and window seats calling one to lounge and admire the views in cozy comfort. I immediately felt at home.

There were flowers everywhere. In paintings, sculptures, art glass, light fixtures, curtains, carpets and chairs – as well as real flowers arranged in vases and growing in pots and in cleverly placed green house nooks, whose extra warmth allowed plants to flourish in the high Rocky Mountains even in the chill fall weather.

All of the art was original, yet it wasn’t famous. Nowhere did I see the usual wealthy pretension of displaying valuable art simply because it was valuable. Though there was art everywhere, it blended into a harmonious arrangement, no one piece calling special attention to itself.

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The last room we entered was a large high-ceilinged oval room, just off the main entry where I had first arrived. It was designed for large groups to have casual gatherings. The room's flower theme was white orchid. On the interior wall of the room were three half columns resembling tree trunks. Winding gracefully up each tree trunk were liana ropes of white orchids. I approached one of the columns and extended my hand toward a cluster of orchids. As I did so my hand passed through a curtain of air, and I immediately felt the area around the tree trunk was more humid and warmer than the rest of the room.

Seeing my surprise, Andrew remarked, "I don't know how they do it either. It has something to do with maintaining slightly higher and lower pressures inside and outside the display."

The opposite exterior wall was filled with high windows looking out onto the grounds. In the foreground were hundreds of white flowers—lilies, Japanese white irises, white roses and Daphne—looking as if an over-abundance of flowers had simply spilled out of the room onto the grounds.

The décor of the rest of the room was in white and delicate shades of gray—occasionally accented with pink or scarlet orchids—as well as sculptures, art glass and paintings matching the contrasting shades of pink and scarlet of the orchids. White and dark gray couches and easy chairs were placed around the room with the occasional pink or scarlet throw pillow, while the floor was covered in a muted gray carpet soft enough to lie on. The overall effect was comfortable elegance and floral splendor.

Thanking Andrew, I ventured out into the grounds on my own. I always loved to get a feel for any area I visit. I have attended physics conferences all over the world, and the first thing I like to do when I get the chance is explore.

I walked away from the house, far enough to see it from end to end. My first surprise was that it didn't look large. The house was cleverly designed to blend into an outcrop of rocks in the midst of the meadow. The house was made of the same stone as the native rock, making it appear as if the house was simply an extension of nature's handiwork.

The house was not built along the usual straight lines and right angles. It blended into the natural contours of the land. The house had several stories, which were constructed like tiers on an unusual wedding cake. The resulting floors created roof-top gardens and terraces from which greenery and flowers cascaded, softening and hiding the building's lines even more. At the highest point of the house there was a large glassed-in gazebo sparkling in the sunlight, commanding a panoramic view, and crowned with a golden ornament.

As I walked around the house, I discovered there were garages and other out buildings some distance from the main house, carefully screened by trees. I noted absently that there were a large number of limousines parked near the garages with their drivers standing around talking with each other. I saw, too, that there were extensive greenhouses, also artfully hidden from the house by trees and the natural contours of the land, explaining the out of season plants and flowers I encountered nearly everywhere.

I slowly made my way around the house toward the side that my bedroom overlooked. I walked along an inviting path that followed the stream. Eventually I entered one of the groves of brilliantly colored aspens. The sunlight filtered through the leaves with an amber-orange cast, like sunlight coming through stained glass, lending the white trunks and branches of the aspens an exotic glow. The stream made a pleasant gurgling and rushing sound that was strangely muted in the close confines of the grove.

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I ended my walk at the iridescent blue-roofed gazebo I had spied from the balcony of my room. I walked up a short stair and sat on a bench along one side. I was now looking back toward the house and could see that it was much taller on this side. While the entry side of the house was perhaps three or four stories high, this side revealed five or six stories, the unique architecture of the house making it difficult to tell where one story ends and the next begins. The house curved around the terraces I had seen from my room, protecting them from the wind, holding in the sun's warmth.

I reflected that here at *Milliefiore*, wealth served beauty; beauty did not serve wealth. There was no sense of self-importance or pretension. Though large, *Milliefiore* wasn't vast. One didn't immediately think of it as a mansion. It was a home.

As I sat contentedly, lazily gazing in various directions, enjoying the many gifts of *Milliefiore*, I noticed Elle walk down from the terraces and begin to practice her *katas* in the midst of the sprawling lawn. She was wearing a simple workout suit over her lean and supple form. Her feet were bare and she moved lightly on the grass. Her first movements seemed more graceful than martial. More Tai Chi than Tai Kwan Do, but then she went into a whirling, blindingly-fast series of strikes and kicks. It did not seem possible that anyone could move that fast nor with such grace. Then, just as suddenly, she moved once again into slow movements from which she appeared to draw deep strength, centering herself, only to once again launch into a blur of speed.

After nearly half an hour she appeared to be breathing as if she had merely been out for a walk. Finally, she came to rest in the full lotus, in which she remained for more than an hour—motionless, serene, with a quiet smile on her face.

I found it easy to meditate myself, sitting comfortably on the bench in the gazebo, the autumn sun warming my back. I slipped easily into stillness. At last I let myself consider my decision. Should I attend the ceremony planned for me? Reason suggested that I should find out more about it before I decided anything. My heart said otherwise. My heart said that a door was open for me to walk through and that no amount of explanation would ever fully prepare me for what I would experience—so I might as well walk through the door now.

Reason said I was being rash. I had responsibilities, a career I had worked so hard to achieve, a bright future of accomplishment. But my heart leapt at the chance to experience more. That was when I realized that in my heart I already knew I would go to the ceremony. This was what I had been waiting for all my life. My feeling of apprehension lifted and was replaced with delightful anticipation.

A short while later I was made aware of Andrew's presence by a quite clearing of his throat. Andrew spoke softly, "Michael, it's time for the ceremony. Do you wish to come?" I nodded.

Andrew led me into the house and we took an elevator which opened up on the topmost roof. As the doors opened, I saw the glassed-in gazebo ahead of me that I had seen from the grounds, its golden ornament gleaming in the clear sunlight. Standing in front was a group of about twenty people, wearing brightly-colored flowing robes, each in a different single rainbow-bright hue. They were looking expectantly in my direction. As I came closer, what I first noticed were many broad smiles and beaming faces.

What I noticed next almost made me stop walking.

Some of the most famous people in the world were standing, collectedly and unselfconsciously, like members of an iridescent chorus, waiting for me to arrive.

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After I assured myself I was actually seeing who I thought was seeing, I exchanged a glance with one of the richest men in the world. The next face I saw was smiling at me in kindred sympathy and wry amusement, the famous face that has graced the television screens of millions of adoring fans every weekday afternoon for many years. Then my eyes fell on Tibet's most famous man and he flashed me his quick smile.

I doubt if my eyes could have opened any wider, nor could my astonished face have looked more comical. There were more than a few good natured chuckles emerging from the group. But their greeting was so warm and their smiles so wide that I couldn't help but smile as broadly in return.

There were many others in the group I didn't recognize, but Elle, too, in a deep fuchsia-colored robe, stood among them as if she belonged. Her grin was perhaps a bit broader than the others, with a slight hint of mischief in her eyes. She could have at least warned me what to expect!

Before I could do more than simply stare at them in amazement, Jonathon, in a deep azure blue robe, stepped forward from the group and turned to address them. "We should get started," he said briskly, standing in front of the group. "Thank you all for coming on such short notice. I know that many of you had to make very unusual excuses in order to be here. Something we all try to avoid. Appearing normal has served us well for a very, very long time. Please accept my apologies, but our purpose, as you will soon learn, is unusually important – and unusually urgent."

Jonathon then turned to me and spoke with a hint of formality, "Michael, I have asked everyone here to attend your Awakening. I know that you have not been adequately prepared for this, to say the least. You should have been preparing for this ceremony for some time, but news has reached us which has forced us to move earlier than we anticipated."

I stood quietly gazing at Jonathon. I felt a thrill of expectancy and a tremor of unease. Jonathon continued, "The Awakening ceremony can only be performed for you if you give your full consent. Without explanation and preparation it will require you to make a leap of faith."

After a moment and in his most formal tone yet, Jonathon asked, "Michael, do you consent to be Awakened?"

I looked at the people facing me and gathered strength and reassurance from their calm and serious gazes. I finally looked at Elle. Then I remembered her final words of the night before, "Don't make a fuss. Just go to the ceremony." I almost chuckled at the memory. Her eyes flashed as though she knew what I was thinking and she allowed herself a small smile in the midst of the serious moment.

Taking a deep breath I said, "Yes. I consent." I felt elated and awed at the same moment.

Without speaking, Jonathon gestured for me to enter the glass walled gazebo. The group parted to let me through and then followed me inside. The view from inside, as I had guessed, was a spectacular panorama. Jonathon pointed to a chair in the middle of the space and I sat. The others took seats arranged in a circle around me. Standing in front of me, Jonathon began to speak, "Michael..."

At that moment a shaft of supernal light descended beside him. Within the softly glowing white light, two figures began to take shape as though gradually coming into focus. With a final brilliant flash, the figures clarified into a young man and a young woman wearing simple white robes. Both tall and slender, with lustrous dark eyes, and long dark hair, they seemed to be twins.

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Their bodies were youthful, but their eyes were ageless. They stood serenely with warm smiles on their faces.

“Greetings, Michael,” they said in musical unison, their eyes holding mine.

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## Chapter 3

After a moment of surprise, Jonathon's face lit up. Hands together in supplication, he bowed deeply, first to the young man and then to the young woman. "Atri. Atria. This is an unexpected blessing. We are deeply honored."

Atri acknowledged Jonathon's bow with one of his own, as did Atria. Then Atri's and Atria's gazes moved among everyone seated, as one-by-one they acknowledged each person with a smile or a gentle inclination of the head, their gazes finally coming to rest on me once more. I was too stunned to think. I could barely meet their gazes, but their eyes held such warmth and joy that my feeling of astonishment was quickly replaced with trust. I felt completely safe, and though my mind was overwhelmed, my heart was open.

Atri spoke, "Michael, with your permission, we have come to give you the Awakening touch." I nodded mutely without really understanding to what I was nodding my acceptance, but I was utterly comfortable with...with this man?, this being?, this angel? I realized I didn't need to know what he was. Once again, my heart knew what my mind did not.

"Before your Awakening," continued Atri, "we must give you a message."

He paused briefly before continuing. "Events are moving swiftly. Once again mankind is faced with the emergence of perilous knowledge. The discovery of the fifth force is imminent. The pieces are even now falling into place. The fifth force is even more powerful than the forces locked within the atom." Looking piercingly at me, Atri continued, "Your mission is to discover it first and to help channel its discovery into benign paths. In the wrong hands, for the wrong purposes, knowledge of the fifth force presents great risk to mankind. It could threaten the precarious balance of power in the world today, and it could trigger wars and more wars, more devastating than ever before."

If I had been capable of being even more stunned I would have been. I felt as if I had been given a great responsibility for which I was utterly unprepared.

As though divining my thoughts, Atria spoke for the first time, her voice similar to Atri's, but more liltingly musical, "More will become clear in the days to come. Fear not. You will be able to fulfill your mission. You accepted this mission in your last lifetime. This is Elle's mission, too. She will be your support and your guide as you regain your full awareness."

At that, Atri and Atria both stepped forward, placing their right palms on the top of my head. Together they simply said, "Awaken."

My body instantly became immobile, my breathing simply stopped. But my spirit soared. I felt as if I was flying, light and free of gravity's constraints. This new awareness was stunningly different, yet instantly familiar. I felt absolutely safe. Like a man who had wandered far from home and then returned, I knew I was returning to my real self, to an awareness I had had before.

My physical surroundings, only moments before visible and solid, began as if to dissolve, leaving me surrounded by pure luminosity. I felt a profound release in the center of my heart. Wave after wave of bliss radiated into my heart and then out again, as if I were breathing in and breathing out waves of pure joy.

Suddenly memories came flooding back. I remembered that I had known Atri and Atria in many lifetimes. In this lifetime they had remained hidden until now, but they were my Teachers. Memories from many previous lives flooded my mind. I saw my life as a Templar Knight, a Tibetan adept, a Samurai poet. I had been a famous military leader, even a king. I had often been an inventor or scientist. I realized that I had been Michael Faraday, the discoverer of the laws of

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electromagnetism. I had designed the Great Pyramid. I helped Galileo through his discoveries and his trials. I had been a college confidant to Einstein, helping him work out his world-changing theories.

Unbidden, the clear understanding came to me—I am a Protector. Again and again I had guided and protected others for their benefit and the benefit of mankind, serving always as an instrument of the Light. I had committed myself to being a Protector long, long ago.

I had lived as men of power and I had been humble and obscure. I saw with simple clarity that I had moved through all those lives as if playing parts, in order to mask my true purpose. But I was always a Protector. I was sometimes alone, but often with my fellow Protectors. Then I understood, with a joyful burst of feeling, that all the people who had come for my Awakening were also Protectors. I could now see them in my mind's eye not only as their present selves, but I could also see their faces as I had known them in many different lifetimes, as if superimposed and blended together.

I drifted among the memories of my past selves in timeless serenity. No longer bound by the thoughts and memories of my current life as Michael Dinsmore, no longer bound by the limits of mortality, I melted into Eternity. But finally, and reluctantly, as though from a distant shore, I returned to more normal, but still blissful, awareness. It came as no surprise, as I could see from the angle of the sun, that many hours had passed since Atri and Atria had awakened me. But I felt as if I had been gone much longer—lifetimes longer—not just a few hours. I slowly turned my head to look around and saw that everyone was gone except Andrew, who was now looking at me in anticipation.

“Welcome back,” he said.

I understood he wasn't just a welcoming me back to the moment. He was welcoming me back to my true awareness, to my true family, to my true role as a Protector.

“It is good to be back,” I said, looking at Andrew with shared understanding.

“Everyone is waiting for you on the terrace. Would you like to join them?” asked Andrew.

With a nod, I slowly rose and followed Andrew out of the roof-top temple, for I now understood that it was indeed a temple. I also realized with wonder that I could remember participating in other ceremonies in this sacred place when other Protectors had been awakened.

We made our way slowly through the house to the terrace. Even while walking, I could still feel the enormous expansion of awareness that my awakening had once again given me. My senses were clear and sharp. My mind poised. My body was humming with energy. I felt as if weightless. My heart was filled to the brim with joy.

As we walked out onto the terrace, those who had greeted me on the roof top, now in casual clothes, arose from various chairs. This time it was I who directed a beaming smile at them. Now I understood. Now, I too, smiled at old, dear friends. My heightened awareness was still allowing me to perceive them in their present and past guises at the same time.

My fellow Protectors approached me and greeted me one by one. Memories of past lives spent with them continued to flood my mind and heart as I looked at each person in turn. Never before had I felt such acceptance or such love. Never before had I felt so clearly that I *belonged*.

Having lived an ordinary life thus far, I was unprepared for the deep respect they paid me. The famous and powerful greeted me as an equal, sometime more than an equal. Their eyes sought mine to receive love and strength as much as to offer theirs. My reawakened memories of past lives revealed that I had often been a leader to them.

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The last to greet me was Elle. The reunion with Elle was almost overwhelming. In my inner eye I saw a kaleidoscopic montage of many lives spent together. We had been friends, brothers, sisters, fathers, mothers, lovers, and in our most recent lives, husband and wife. Our gazes locked for a long time in mutual regard and understanding. We had found each other once more.

Seeing our unwavering gaze, Jonathon and the others chose that moment to gather around us. Jonathon, speaking for everyone, said, “We were waiting for you to connect...” and then all of them proceeded to break out in merry laughter, concluding with many variations on, “and good luck this time.” There was obviously more to this than I yet remembered! Elle gave me another mischievous grin in what was to be, I suspected, a long line of mischievous grins.

But our mood was suddenly and abruptly broken as Andrew came running out of the house and stood before Jonathon and spoke urgently, “A man named Rockshaw has come with three cars and a dozen men. He pulled up at the main gate and demanded to see you. When he was told you were unavailable he threatened the guards with a gun and then the vehicles smashed through the main gate. They are heading toward the house and will be here in minutes.”

After a slight pause, as though consulting an inner voice, Jonathon spoke, “Tell everyone to let them pass without resistance. Let’s try to avoid anyone getting killed. Tell our people to choose their moment well. Andrew, meet him at the front entrance and escort Mr. Rockshaw out here to us.” At Andrew’s startled expression, he said, “It will be all right. Now go.” Andrew hastily ran back into the house.

Right away he spoke to Elle and me, “Quickly, the gazebo. Rockshaw must not find you here.”

Elle grabbed my hand and we ran down the steps of the terraces, across the lawn and went behind the gazebo. Thinking this was a pretty exposed place to hide, I was surprised when I heard a click and saw that Elle had opened a panel in the side of the gazebo. The panel swung inward to reveal a short flight of steps down into darkness.

Elle entered first and I quickly followed. Once inside, Elle closed the panel and lights came on automatically. I looked around in surprise. I was expecting a gardener’s shed, I suppose. Instead, running around the walls was one long curving desk, on which sat several computers. Banks of monitors were attached to the walls above the desk. Without explanation, Elle went over to one of the computer stations and began tapping keys. Several monitors came to life. With a few more taps of the keys, Elle apparently found what she wanted. Then, carefully using a control stick, she moved the image on the screen until we were seeing the terrace we had just left moments ago through the lens of a surveillance camera.

“Let’s see if we can get sound too,” Elle muttered. Moments later I could hear, as well as see, our fellow Protectors now seated calmly on the terrace.

As I watched, a man walked purposefully and commandingly onto the terrace, Andrew following a few paces behind. The man was dressed in an expensively-cut dark suit, white shirt and dark tie. He radiated tense power and menace. His eyes glared and his lips were set in a hard compressed line.

With a visceral shock, I felt a powerful connection to him. There was no joyful anticipation, however, as I had felt on meeting my fellow Protectors. Instead I felt a complex mixture of emotions, but the clearest was an unmistakable feeling of dread.

“I know him,” I said.

“Yes,” said Elle in a flat even tone. “He tortured and killed us both in our last lifetime.”

As I peered at Rockshaw, a sense of unreality stole over me but I knew it was true.

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“Mr. Rockshaw, what an unpleasant surprise.” Jonathon spoke without raising his voice, his words coming to us clearly through the speakers in our surveillance hide-away. “I would have much preferred that you had made an appointment.”

“Don’t waste my time,” spat out Rockshaw. “My sources told me you were having this meeting of your do-good ‘Foundation’,” he pronounced ‘Foundation’ with sneering contempt, “and I have come to tell you to stay out of my affairs.”

“The fifth force is mine,” he said icily.

“The fifth force is no one’s,” Jonathon replied evenly.

“Enough,” Rockshaw gloated, “I know all about your attempt to discover it.”

“I will warn you only this once; if anyone, or any group,” he said, looking meaningfully at the people on the terrace, “tries to get the fifth force before me, I will do whatever I need to do to stop them.”

“Whatever I need to do,” he repeated with unmistakable emphasis.

“Now, you will turn Professor Dinsmore over to me,” he concluded.

“Why, Mr. Rockshaw, you surprise me,” said Jonathon, with a hint of steel in his voice. “You clearly know nothing about us. Do you think we will give in to threats?”

“Look at the people gathered here. Do you think they travel without security? Did you think you and a dozen men could just take over my home and make demands? By now your men have been overpowered and disarmed.”

Rockshaw looked uncertain for the first time. Pulling a small device from his coat pocket he spoke into it too quietly for us to hear, but his expression told all. No one responded.

“Mr. Rockshaw, you are in over your head,” said Jonathon quietly. “Did Asher send you?”

Seeing the look of alarm that passed over Rockshaw’s face, Jonathon added, “No, I didn’t think so. I hope for your sake that you are in his good graces.”

Unnerved, and in thwarted rage, Rockshaw said through clenched teeth, “You stay out of my business. I’m telling you, the fifth force is mine. If I find you interfering...” and with that he turned and strode angrily back the way he had come.

Jonathan spoke calmly to Andrew, “Tell them to let them go, but keep their guns.” Andrew sped back into the house. In a few moments, even in the gazebo, we could hear racing engines and squealing tires as Rockshaw and his men tore away.

We returned to the terrace in time to hear Jonathon saying to everyone, “Rockshaw acted impulsively and without a plan. I doubt he will make that mistake again. Nor, I think, will he underestimate us again. He is not a man who likes to be humiliated.”

Turning to us he said, “I’m afraid this means you will have to leave tonight. Michael, I had hoped that you could stay with us for a while as you regain your memories and abilities. But you should leave tonight before Rockshaw can regroup and try to take you by force. Needs must, I’m afraid.”

“But we can’t deny you your reunion dinner,” he said in a much happier tone.

The rent that had been ripped in our mood by the appearance of Rockshaw was soon mended. It would take much more than the presence of someone like Rockshaw to dispel the deep and abiding joy that pervaded our gathering. The jangling dissonance made by Rockshaw and his men, like the aftermath of a childish tantrum, was soon forgotten, and we retired indoors for a celebratory dinner.

I sat, as the guest of honor, at the foot of a long table and Jonathon sat at the head. The dining room was softly lit by subtle tulip-shaped glass wall sconces, and by numerous tulip-shaped

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candles in various colors placed on side tables and in the midst of the main table. Great masses of cut tulips were everywhere, adding a delicate aroma to the bouquet of pleasing smells that arrived with every savory dish we were served. Conversation was free and relaxed. It became apparent that many of the gathered Protectors had not seen each other in many years, even lifetimes.

As the meal wound to its end, Jonathon stood, raised his glass and said, “I propose a toast. To the return of a great leader among the Protectors. To his success in this vital mission. To the return of a dear friend. To his awakening. Welcome back, Michael.” As Jonathon ended, the others raised their glasses in salute and drank.

Afterwards they began leaving one by one—back into their limos and back into the parts they currently play—keeping hidden their real roles as Protectors.

Throughout the dinner, the joy of awakening was still very much with me. But I began to be aware that the memories I had experienced after the Awakening ceremony, so strong and clear, were becoming hazy. As I bade my fellow Protectors goodbye, my previous feelings of unreality settled on me once again. As I received handshakes and hugs from my fellow Protectors, the certainty that I belonged among them faded.

Thinking I was fully awakened had given me confidence that I could complete the mission set for me. Now I realized that the process of awakening was not complete. Misgivings assailed me. How much more of my new-found awareness would fade? Just how capable would I be of leading this mission? How will I know what to do to find the fifth force before Rockshaw can find it?

As the last of the Protectors left, I turned to Jonathon and Elle and said, “My memories are fading.” My worry was obvious to them both.

Jonathon let out a deep sigh and said, “We knew this would happen. Awakening doesn’t happen all at once. It can’t be helped.” Including both Elle and me he said, “Come to my study in thirty minutes. Meanwhile, get ready to leave. Michael, Andrew will help you.” He then strode away as if urgent matters called.

Andrew brought me to Jonathon’s study at the appointed time. When I arrived I found Elle already there and in deep conversation with Jonathon. They both looked up, serious expressions fading as they greeted me. Nonetheless, I sensed a lingering tension in the room.

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

Jonathon hesitated for a brief moment and then answered, “We don’t know how Rockshaw found out about you and your mission to discover the fifth force.”

He continued gravely, “Only a very small number of people knew of your mission to discover the fifth force. We have never had information of this importance get out of the Devas Foundation before.”

“Someone must have gotten careless,” Elle said flatly. “They must have let slip an indiscrete word in the wrong ear.”

“I can’t believe that. It is inconceivable that a Protector could make such a mistake,” Jonathon continued with a sigh.

“Whatever the explanation, I will discover who and how. We must keep Rockshaw from learning more than he already seems to know. Meanwhile, you need to be very careful about communicating with the Foundation. Forget landlines, use cell phones carefully, and make use of encryption on the net. He could have been eavesdropping on us electronically and just gotten

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lucky. Though that still doesn't explain why he would think there was something to learn in the first place," finished Jonathon with a touch of frustration.

"But enough. Rockshaw's visit forces us to move much more quickly than we had planned."

"Who is Rockshaw, anyway?" I blurted out, unable to hold back my questions any longer.

Both Elle and Jonathon looked at me in surprise, then Jonathon quickly spoke, "Forgive us. We are forgetting ourselves. Of course you don't remember yet."

Gesturing for Elle and me to sit, Jonathon eased back in his seat and took up my question. "Mr. Rockshaw is, on the surface at least, a man who has made his wealth as an arm's dealer. But Rockshaw is much more than that. His goals are the complete opposite of the Protectors. Where the Protectors seek to aid in the peaceful development of mankind, Rockshaw desires to keep mankind in a perpetual state of strife and war."

"He has become a man of unusual power – though not through awakening. He has achieved a small measure of the abilities Protectors gain when we have awakened, but through other, darker means. One thing he has learned to do is extend his life. He has already lived long past an ordinary lifetime; over two hundred years."

The incredulous look on my face led Jonathon to comment, "Oh yes. All men are inherently powerful. The Protector's powers aren't unnatural. Man's native abilities merely become more accessible when he awakens into greater awareness. Men like Rockshaw, still bound by their personal desires and egotism, ignore the higher possibilities of their nature and are drawn to preserving their bodies for as long as they can."

"Ironically, it makes people like Rockshaw fear death even more. It is rare that they will ever put their lives at risk. Rockshaw must have thought he was in no danger coming here today, but I am surprised that he would take such a risk. Our enemies, like Rockshaw, normally hide behind well-guarded walls, indulging their whims and appetites on lavish estates. Yet they are constantly on the alert for threats."

"And who is Asher? And why did Rockshaw look so alarmed when you mentioned his name?" I wanted to know.

"Asher is the leader of our enemies, if you can call coercion by fear, leadership. He is brilliant and ruthless; a tactician of great cunning. Compared to him, Rockshaw is clumsy and impetuous. Asher plans far, far ahead. Asher inspired Bin Laden. Suicide bombers, hijacking, selling nuclear secrets to fanatical regimes like North Korea and Iran, are but a few of his tactics. Anything that will inflame hatred, instill fear, create instability, turn people and nations against each other, and further line his pockets, regardless of the misery it causes, is grist for Asher's mill."

"I don't know why Rockshaw looked so alarmed when I mentioned Asher's name. It was just a shot in the dark. I wanted to unsettle him, and it hit home. Asher is one of the few men that could have Rockshaw killed, and therefore he lives in utter fear of him. To even hint that he might be displeased with him coming here so shocked him that he left soon after."

"Elle said Rockshaw tortured and killed us..." I trailed off.

"Rockshaw has been your adversary many times, and you have thwarted his plans more than once. In your last encounter, you and Elle did not survive. There isn't time now to explain how or why, and I think it is best left to Elle to tell you what she thinks you should know. He doesn't know you and Elle in your present lives – he believes you are dead. Let's hope you can remain unknown to him until you can discover the fifth force."

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“But no one knows what the fifth force is, or even what line of research to pursue. How am I going to discover the fifth force in just a matter of days?” I said, perhaps over-forcefully, since I had been brooding on this subject for most of the last half-hour.

Jonathon looked at me with friendly amusement and replied, “I have no idea. Protectors are given missions uniquely suited to them. This mission had already been given to you by Atri and Atria in your last life. In fact, you requested it. The timing of your awakening and its purpose were settled long ago...”

“Settled by Atri and Atria?” I asked.

“No,” said Jonathon with care, “settled by you.”

Elle caught my eye and said simply, “This whole thing is your plan.”

“My plan?” I blurted out. “How can I follow a plan I can’t remember?”

“I told you,” as if reminding me of a conversation we had already had.

At my blank look she said, “I told you it was a crazy idea when you came up with it just before we were killed.”

“So you know the plan?” I asked.

“Oh yes. You explained it to me in detail.”

“Well, what should we do then?”

“I can’t tell you.”

“What!” I said incredulously.

“You told me not to.”

“But that’s crazy!” I said before I could think.

“I told you,” she said once more.

“So let me get this straight,” I began. “I chose this mission in our last life and I arranged to be awakened just before the mission began so that I wouldn’t remember my plan. Not only that, I arranged it so that I won’t have the full awareness and abilities of a Protector to help me carry out the plan I don’t remember.”

“You got it,” said Elle, with what I thought was unseemly glee, but she continued in a softer and more serious tone. “I have been caught up in many of your plans, none as odd as this one perhaps, but your plans rarely fail.”

Jonathon added, “It’s your gift. There are no Protectors better able to see how events can be made to unfold to serve the Light—sometimes over the span of many lives.”

Elle shifted the conversation. “Your memories will return. Your awareness and your abilities will come back. I will help you,” she said simply and reassuringly. “Now that you are awake once more, your memories and abilities are accessible to you, even if you won’t be sure how to access them. Don’t be surprised when you suddenly know things or suddenly can do things. That’s how it happens.”

“Normally when a Protector is awakened, we can help them through the transition in a slow and methodical way. But I’m afraid your transition is going to be neither slow nor methodical. I will help all I can, but it’s not going to be easy for you. Meanwhile we need to focus on our mission,” she concluded.

“How do I start then, if I have no idea how to discover the fifth force?” I asked plaintively.

I asked Elle, “What should we do first?”

Elle looked at me with great seriousness. “There is no exact plan. At least not as you mean. There is only the intention and the commitment we both made to the mission. As Protectors, we cannot separate ourselves from our missions. Nor do our missions truly begin or end, even

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though they may appear to do so. We are part of our missions. We cannot accomplish our missions without giving ourselves to them completely, without reservation, trusting that every encounter is as it should be, every challenge as it should be, every outcome as it should be. Too rigid a plan would only get in the way...”

Somewhere deep within me I felt something shift. The truth of her words both thrilled and relaxed me. I suddenly understood that what I needed to know was not going to come to me from the past, nor was anyone else going to be able to tell me what I needed to know in the present. This was my mission. I understood that I could trust that what I needed to know would come to me—I just needed to let it come. I let out a long sigh of pent up anxiety.

Jonathon and Elle made no comment as I closed my eyes and let myself drift in the moment, mentally and emotionally surrendering to the mission, already begun, I had just learned, so many years before. To my surprise, I found myself thinking as Rockshaw might think. He wouldn’t really expect that his threats deter us, so what would he do? The answer slowly came in thoughts and images—and I understood what he would try to do.

Gaining confidence, I simply asked myself what I should I do to discover the fifth force. Again the answer came in thoughts and images—and again I understood how to proceed. Finally rousing myself from my contemplation, I opened my eyes and smiled at the expectant faces of Elle and Jonathon. “I think I know how to begin.”

Elle looked very pleased, and at my look she said, “This is how you have always worked. No Protector is better at it.”

Jonathon broke in and said, “What will you do?”

Assembling my thoughts, I dove in. “Rockshaw doesn’t know what the fifth force is any more than we do. He just believes that it will be discovered soon and, therefore, he wants it. It could be his biggest triumph. He will be watching us closely in order to steal the discovery from us. So we should distract him by giving him something to steal, or at least to try to steal, while we do the real exploration in the shadows.”

“What do you have in mind?” asked Jonathon. I told him, and he laughed. “I think Warren can help with that, and the Foundation can play a role. What else?”

“I think we need to disappear for awhile, but without attracting any attention,” I replied.

“We’re way ahead of you there,” Jonathon said. “We’ve already prepared to have one of the Devas Foundation’s research centers offer you a study grant to explain your sudden absence from Berkeley. In fact, that will fit in nicely with your idea to distract Rockshaw. We’re also ready to inform UC Berkeley of your sudden decision to work for the center, and we have a very qualified applicant waiting for the right moment to ask to fill your vacancy at UC Berkeley for the rest of the semester.”

I thought for a moment and ended feeling satisfied that their ideas could all work. Then I had another thought. “I will need to let my parents know more than that. They know me too well to think I would just walk away from my career at Berkeley,” I said.

Both Jonathon and Elle laughed. “We’re way, way ahead of you there, as in a lifetime ahead of you.” Elle smiled as she said, “Your parents are Protectors.”

My astonished look just amused them even more. “Your mother and father were honored to play the role of your parents,” Jonathon said. “They have known you in many lives, and are in fact returning a favor. You and Elle have been parents to your mother.” They both chuckled as I sat there trying to take in the ease with which they spoke of relationships across many lives.

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“Protectors make the best parents for other Protectors,” Elle took up the explanation, so Atri and Atria guide the rebirths of Protectors to be with other Protectors. “Protectors have special gifts and abilities. Even as children, they frequently begin to know things, and are able to do things, that ordinary children can’t. Parents who are Protectors can aid in their children’s development without attracting unwanted attention. In your case, your parents were told to steer you away from any unusual abilities and instead to channel your interests into physics—which, given your knowledge from past lives, was not difficult to do.”

Jonathon broke in, “Your parents longed to be able to tell you, but they knew it was not for them to do so. Their tasks in this life do not intersect with yours. It was convenient for them to take care of you, though. They send their love, and wished they could have been at your awakening. They already know to take care of your house and provide your cover story to anyone who inquires. You will see them again when the time is right.”

After barely taking all this in I said, “If I’m to disappear, I will need a new identity.”

“Easily provided. Not everything the Foundation does is, shall we say, strictly legal,” Jonathon said and chuckled. “Protectors often need to disappear. For Protectors, changing identities is a well practiced art. We anticipated you would need new identification. I’ve already given Elle three extra sets of identities for each of you—passports, driver’s licenses, and credit cards—everything you need. Andrew doesn’t just decorate rooms,” he added with a twinkle.

“Where do you want to go?” asked Jonathon. I told him what I thought we needed to do, and in the end, he and Elle exchanged glances and said almost at the same time—“Dyson Center.”

A very short time later, Elle and I stole through the night. Elle was dressed in what I was beginning to think of as her work clothes – running shoes, jeans, jean jacket and cotton top. I had never had a chance to change all day, and was still wearing my running shoes, and the chinos and shirt I found in the wardrobe. Andrew had given me a dark green padded corduroy jacket to keep me warm. We both carried small backpacks with the bare essentials and three sets of forged identities—just what every experienced traveler needs.

We passed my old friend the gazebo, took a bridge over the stream and hiked a mile or so to what appeared to be an old tumble-down shack. Opening a pair of swinging doors revealed a shiny new SUV. Elle produced the keys from some hidden spot and we were away in moments. The moon was at the half, so Elle decided to drive without lights to further reduce the chance that we might be seen. We drove in the opposite direction from the main entry to *Milliefiore*, on a bumpy dirt road just barely discernable in the pale moon light.

A comfortable silence settled on us as we gently bumped along. The clear, bright memories of my awakening had almost completely faded, which, I thought, should feed my apprehension. Yet I realized I still felt an undercurrent of joy almost as deeply as I had at my awakening. I began to appreciate that my memories were, in a way, incidental to being awakened. The abiding joy I felt was the essence. I also began to trust that, come what may, this experience of joy would now always be with me. I felt happy, safe, and energized—even though we were heading into a perilous unknown. It was exhilarating and simultaneously calming. A combination I hadn’t known was even possible.

After a while, I turned my head slightly and gazed at Elle. She sat relaxed and composed, poised and competent. I was struck again by how strongly I was attracted to her. As if divining my thoughts, she turned her head and looking directly at me said, “Just because we were husband and wife in our last life together doesn’t mean we will be this time.” Seeing the mixture of

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surprise and discomfiture that crossed my face, she ginned and added, “It doesn’t mean that we won’t be, either.”

Going slowly so as to get the words out just right, I asked tentatively, “Do Protectors have, ah, *normal* relationships with each other?”

She laughed a heartfelt laugh, beginning deep in her chest and rising up the scale to a merry peal. “There is *nothing* normal about relationships between Protectors.” On seeing my startled look she added with genuine warmth, “Protector’s relationships are *way better* than normal.”

I suddenly realized that while for me this seemed like a new relationship, for her our relationship had never ended. The only question for her was how we would go from here, not whether we would go from here.

Sensing my thoughts, she said softly, “It will all come back to you. It always does. But it comes back like any memory does. Your experiences will trigger your memories and they will come back as if they had only happened yesterday. The only difference between the memories of your past lives and those you experienced as Michael Dinsmore is that there are so many more of them.”

Moments later we began to slow down as if coming to a stop. “There’s a gate ahead,” said Elle. “You’ll need to jump out and get it open.”

As we eased to a stop, her expression changed, and she said quickly, “Just follow my lead.”

My momentary confusion evaporated when I saw a man at her window with a gun pointing at her head. I looked around quickly and there was another man on my side of the car pointing a gun at me. Elle raised her hands and I did the same. The men yanked the car doors open and shouted at us to get out.

When I stepped out of the car the man kicked the door shut and gestured for me to turn around and face the hood of the car. Once I stood where he wanted, he slammed me forward onto the hood and told me to put my hands behind my back. As soon as I complied, he put a band around my wrists and I heard the zip of a plastic tie being tightened painfully into my flesh.

The same thing was happening to Elle on the other side. She flicked a glance at me but I couldn’t read it in the semi-darkness. Once we were bound, the man who had Elle said, “Bobbie, bring him around here. Let’s see what we’ve got.” Bobbie pushed me over by Elle and I felt the prod of his gun in my back. The second man shone a flashlight in our faces.

He pulled a picture from his pocket and compared it to my face. “Well, if it isn’t Professor Dinsmore.” A pleased grin spread across his face as if he’d just won a jackpot. “And you must be the Ninja chick we heard about. Alan told me that if I ever found you, he wanted me to pass on a message.” Without warning, he kneed Elle in the stomach. She fell to the ground and began retching.

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## Chapter 4

I felt helpless anger and began searching my awareness for any fantastic powers I might have suddenly acquired. Nothing came. Nor was my Tae Kwon Do training up to overcoming two armed men with my hands secured behind my back.

“Hey, Frank, Rockshaw said we’re supposed to bring ‘em back whole,” Bobbie said anxiously.

“He said we was to bring the professor back whole. He didn’t say nuthin’ about her.” At his words, Elle began to sob.

“Oh, hell, I mighta known. She ain’t no psycho Ninja. Alan was coverin’ his ass. He musta made up the story so that Rockshaw wouldn’t have him for breakfast. On your feet,” Frank said as he reached down and roughly pulled Elle to a standing position, though Elle bent forward from the pain in her stomach.

“Start walkin’,” said Frank. We were both shoved forward toward the unopened gate and Bobbie and Frank began walking behind us. Elle doubled over, then stopped and turned to look at them, her face etched in pain. I turned and felt a pang when I saw her face. Then her eyes widened as she looked behind the two men. “It’s about time,” she said with relief.

At that moment, there was a loud crack of a branch breaking behind the two men and they whirled around, guns pointing into the dark. At almost the same instant, their heads flew together with a muffled clunk. They fell together in a heap, guns falling from their hands.

Elle immediately straightened up and her arms came forward, one hand holding the zip tie. She turned and tugged at the zip tie around my wrists and it came off as if it hadn’t been fastened. Happily bringing my arms forward I massaged my wrists and stared at Elle in the dim light.

“How did you do that?”

She immediately leapt into the air, landing in a goofy Hollywood attack pose. “Ha! I am Ninja chick,” she said, and laughed a deep belly laugh. Leaping into a different position, she said, “I am psycho Ninja,” and laughed even more. I began to laugh as well, a mixture of relief and amazement that Elle could take this so cavalierly.

“Aren’t you hurt,” I asked.

“No. I saw it coming and took most of the blow with my *chi*. The rest was just acting so he wouldn’t kick me again.”

“Why did you let him kick you in the first place if you could whack their heads together like that any time you wanted?”

She had bent down to check the two men and picked up their weapons. Holding up one of the guns she said, “Several reasons. This was in your back and the other one was pointing at me. I’m not able to make sure that they wouldn’t pull the triggers by reflex when I, ah, as you say, whack ‘em. Protectors can die from a gunshot just like anyone else. I needed to wait until I was sure I could get them to point their guns away from us before doing anything.”

Bending down again, she checked their pulses. “Good, still alive. Help me drag them out of the way so we can get through the gate,” she said, with the same workman-like tone she had used when examining the two men she knocked out at my house.

We dragged the men over to the side of the road and Elle threw their guns into the dark. She handed me a key to open the lock on the gate but I discovered that the men had already cut it. I opened then closed the gate as Elle drove through and we were on our way once more, now with

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lights on and a paved road in front of us. We passed what must have been Frank and Bobbie's car a short way along the road.

Elle flipped open her cell phone and pushed a button. After a brief moment she said into the phone, "Jonathon. We had a welcoming party at the back gate. Rockshaw is better informed than we thought. We're fine but there are two men who will wake up with headaches. By the way, the gate's lock is cut." She listened for a moment longer and then closed her phone.

We drove in silence for a bit and then I remembered, "You said there were several reasons."

"What?" said Elle.

"You said there were several reasons you didn't just take those guys out right away."

"Oh, right. I also needed to make sure they woke up thinking that they had been ambushed from behind or something they would think is normal. It's best if people don't see anything that can't be explained. Psycho Ninja is fine, but mysteriously having your heads whacked together by someone ten feet away is not. Protectors always hide their powers. We've remained hidden for thousands of years."

"No one has ever seen a Protector do any of these...these amazing things?"

"Well..." she began, "luckily for us, because people don't believe that anything we do is possible, they tend to talk themselves out of anything they do see. The few people who do speak up about something they saw a Protector do open themselves up to ridicule and no one believes them. But, believe me, keeping our powers hidden is best."

"Why", I asked, even though I thought I knew the answer.

"It calls too much attention to us. If people believed that there was a mysterious group of people running around with the kind of powers we have, they would fear us. Their fear would compel them to try to control us or even eliminate us. It would be hard for the average person not to think that we would conspire to control the world, to use our abilities for our own dark and self-interested ends. Until one is awakened, it is hard for anyone to believe that there is such a thing as pure altruism—but ours is a conspiracy of Light, not darkness. We remain hidden, make as little impact as possible, and never take a life."

"And is there another reason why you waited?" I asked.

"The most important reason of them all. As you will soon remember, our powers are not truly our own. We are instruments of a greater purpose. Our powers are sacred and we never use them lightly. I waited until I was sure there was no other way to escape from those men before I used my powers."

"Are we special?"

"Hmmm, no. All men and women will eventually awaken, and once they awaken they will be able to do all the things that Protectors can do—if they want to. But I suppose yes, Protectors are different, if not special, because the Twins, Atri and Atria, only ask those who have awakened to be Protectors if they show particular compassion for their fellow man."

"Is there any limit to what we can do?"

"Theoretically, no."

"Theoretically..." I let the question hang in the air.

"Once we awaken, we feel life force just as undeniably as we can feel something with our hands or see something with our eyes—like you did at the end of our escape on the motorcycle. But being able to feel something with your hands doesn't immediately make you able to play the piano. You have to work at it."

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“Controlling and directing life force requires practice and focus. But unlike our lives before we were awakened, where everything you learn is forgotten in the next life, once we have awakened, we remember what we have learned in all our lives, and we get better and better at what we choose to do.”

“Then what?”

Elle glance at me, “What do mean, ‘then what’?”

“Well, you said there was theoretically no limit?”

“Ah. Eventually you become a Master.”

“And Atri and Atria are Masters,” I said, putting it together.

“Yes. There is nothing they can’t do. They can move from plane to plane, even from time to time. They have mastery over all the elements, life force, thought—even life and death.”

“Why do they need us then? Why can’t they just do all the things they have the Protectors do?”

“The one thing they won’t do is impose on anyone’s free will. They won’t, for example, simply make Rockshaw uninterested in getting the fifth force.”

“But wait. Isn’t the fact that Atri told me the fifth force is imminent kind of cheating, then?”

“No, because you still have to choose to do something about it.”

“That seems like a, what do you call it, a sophistry, a clever argument. Atri is still influencing me.”

Elle sighed a theatrical sigh, “You never could just take the easy answer.”

“Masters have been influencing people, as you put it, for millennia. Jesus, Buddha, Krishna, Zoroaster, Rama are all Masters who have returned to earth to influence people. They have all openly encouraged people to awaken—using different languages and metaphors to communicate the idea. Often, to get people’s attention, they will use their powers to perform what people consider to be miracles. But they never impose on anyone’s free will. All people have to make their own choice whether to listen and strive to awaken, or ignore what they hear and remain asleep a while longer.”

“Well,” I said, still trying to get my mind around the idea of free will, “if I’m open to their influence and I asked Atri and Atria to put the knowledge of the fifth force directly in my mind, wouldn’t that still be by my free will?”

“Yes, I suppose. But you wouldn’t grow from it. You and I, and all the Protectors, are still learning to be masters. If Atri and Atria did everything for us, we would never become masters ourselves. You need to find the fifth force on your own to expand your knowledge and abilities.”

I pondered this as mile after mile of mountain road flowed beneath the car. I had the odd sensation that the road was coming to us and we were standing still. No doubt this perspective was a result of the many new perspectives on life that were changing and expanding the way I thought.

Curiously enough, even though radically new and different from the way I saw life before, what I was learning felt very satisfying, even comfortable. Rather than feeling like Alice down the rabbit hole, bewildered and off balance, I felt as if huge blocks of understanding were sliding smoothly and solidly into place.

But my new found understanding only increased my curiosity.

I finally broke the silence and asked, “What have you been doing while I was growing up as Michael Dinsmore?”

“Here they come. More questions, and more questions,” Elle said in mock resignation.

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She continued as if giving a report.

“I was awakened at *Milliefiore*, when I was only three,” said Elle. “Jonathon is my father,” she added with a fond smile of recollection, and an amused glance at me. “It was convenient that I was reborn there, but we decided it was important that I not be identified with Jonathon or the Foundation. This was my first visit back to *Milliefiore* in a long time.”

“My mother’s name is Audrey Champlain. Shortly after my awakening it was decided that my mother and I should move away. We went to Italy, and she became the Protector for Padre Pio. Mother played the public role of the proprietor of a small hotel, a pension, and the private role of Protector, keeping madmen or fanatics from prematurely ending Padre Pio’s life.”

“He was an inspiration to thousands of people,” she added with genuine feeling.

“While I grew up with my mother in San Giovanni Rotondo, the small town near Padre Pio’s monastery, I was secretly taught martial arts until my own abilities reawakened, and my sensei had nothing more to teach me. About ten years later, I became a Sister of Charity in Mother Theresa’s Order, so that I could travel with her and protect her. Although she was much loved, those who shine the Light in the world often infuriate twisted souls full of fanaticism and hate. Only a few people know it, but Mother’s life was saved several times before she died of natural causes.”

“Those were beautiful days,” Elle smiled with remembrance. “I’ll always remember the laughter of the nuns. They were like happy children. The simplicity of their lives was very appealing.”

“There. That’s what I was doing while you were being Michael Dinsmore.”

I digested this for a moment or two. “Wait, didn’t Padre Pio die in the sixties?” I asked. “How could you have been there while he was alive?”

Smiling, she said, “I hope you don’t have any issues about older women. I just turned sixty last month.” My amazement must have been acceptable because her look was pleased. “Once you have awakened you can extend the body’s lifespan—as well as many other things.”

Wait,” I said. “If we died together, and you’re sixty, then I’m missing more than a few years...I’m only twenty-four,” I said questioningly, as I looked at her in the semi-darkness.

“There are many planes of existence. You were in an astral life preparing for this new mission and waiting for the right time to be reborn. You were probably studying physics. You may have been spending your time with Galileo and Newton. At least that’s what you told me last time,” she ended playfully.

“What do you mean ‘last time’?”

“We’ve died and been reborn many, many times. Your skills as a leader do not exactly promote longevity,” she added. “Your last lifetime was about 150 years—and I think that was a record. You’re kind of hard on your fellow Protectors.”

Seeing the concerned look on my face, she said, “Don’t worry. Death holds no fear for a Protector. For us it’s all in a life’s work.” She laughed at her own joke.

Her laughter was heartfelt and infectious, and I began to laugh as well. It felt good to laugh. I realized that I had laughed often since coming to *Milliefiore*. Even amidst the serious purpose of our mission everyone laughed with genuine enjoyment.

In the silence after we stopped Elle said, as if quoting someone, “‘Joy is what distinguishes us from our enemies.’ Or at least that’s what you always used to say.” When she finished she began laughing once more.

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“You are enjoying this, aren’t you,” I said with sudden insight. “You like knowing everything and me knowing nothing.”

She looked over at me, trying to put on a serious face, and then grinned hugely instead. “Believe me, I had no idea how much fun this part of your plan was going to be!”

“You know you will pay for this when I get my memories back,” I said, giving her my best squinty-eyed look.

Again we laughed long and fully. For Elle it was natural, for me it was a catharsis. I felt tensions drop away that I hadn’t even known were there. For years I had done nothing but single-mindedly pursue my career in physics, always trying to be smarter, better, faster, with, I realized, an unrelenting intensity and joyless seriousness. The release of tension I felt in our laughter left me feeling happier than I had felt in a very long time.

“You should get some sleep while you can,” said Elle after a long, easy silence. “We’ll be driving all night.”

“What about you?” I asked.

“I can go many, many days without sleep. You will too, once we get you back in shape. In fact, we need to get you back in shape as soon as possible. I may not always be around to save you,” she tossed in with a glint of mischief. “We should have some time once we get to the Dyson Center.” I thought I detected a gleam in her eye as she said it.

Elle woke me in the dim early dawn. Even in the moving car I had been able to sleep, and I woke feeling refreshed, having only been vaguely aware that Elle had stopped for gas somewhere in the night. We had traveled south from *Milliefiore*. Elle had told me that our destination was near Taos, New Mexico. In the vague dawn light I could see that we had left the high mountains behind and were now in flatter country, low hills seen only dimly in the distance.

“Do Protectors need to eat?” I wondered out loud.

“I happen to know where the best food in New Mexico can be found. It’s just ahead.”

At that we turned off the highway, still many miles shy of the city of Taos, and after a quarter of a mile or so, went through the entryway of the “Dyson Research Center for the Physical Sciences”.

“This is where we find the best food in Taos?” I said, raising an eyebrow.

“Oh, you have so much to learn,” she said with mock exasperation.

“By the way, you started this center,” she said, pleased at getting to surprise me again. “You were Michael Dyson.”

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## Chapter 5

Elle's words brought forth a flash of memory—but only a flash—and I looked more closely at the building as we approached.

My experience of research centers was that they were typically drab, dull and made of concrete. Not so the Dyson Center. The building looked deceptively smaller than it really was. It seemed to hug the ground—but it was at least four stories tall. The effect was achieved by long, thin flagstones running along the base of the building, as well as above and below the windows, capping the front wall at the top, creating long unbroken horizontal lines. The effect was further accentuated by long horizontal rows of windows. The rest of the façade was faced with adobe. Even in the dawn light, the building gave off a pleasing rosy glow.

We drove through a small visitors' parking area in front of the center and down a long, curving drive that descended at least two stories. That brought us into an underground parking area that ran the length of the building. It was almost empty—not surprising, since the sun hadn't risen yet. We drove through the pillared concrete cavern and at the far end came to a closed metal service door. Elle reached out the window, entering a code on a key pad; the door immediately began to rise, closing after us as we drove through. We parked in a small, enclosed area containing four other cars and Elle gestured for me to get out.

We both grabbed our day packs and walked over to an elevator. Elle once again intoned the magic words via the keypad next to the elevator controls and, open sesame, the doors slid open. We got on and I noted there were only two choices—up or down. Elle pressed the “up” button and we began to rise.

As the doors opened at the top, a beaming young man stood waiting to greet us. “Xu,” said Elle, with obvious warmth, “It has been too long since I've seen you.” She gave him a long hug.

Xu had Chinese features, was only about five feet tall and extremely slight. He appeared to be a teenager. The impression was accentuated by the fact that he was barefoot, wearing baggy shorts, a T-shirt and had earbud cords dangling over his shoulders. Then I noticed that his T-shirt had a faux wanted poster on it that said, “Wanted Dead or Alive—Schrodinger's Cat.” This was a joke you only run into in college physics departments. I also noticed his eyes. They were definitely not the eyes of a teenager.

Xu stepped back from his hug with Elle and looked at me expectantly. I felt a sudden thrill. I realized I knew Xu. It was more than the shock of recognition I had initially felt with Elle and Jonathon. I remembered, as impossible as it seemed, that this beaming young man was with us in our last lifetime just as he was now and that he must be far older than Elle.

“Xu!” I exclaimed with joy and reached out to embrace him.

“Michael, it is great to have you back,” he said happily, slapping me vigorously on the back.

We stepped back from one another, and as I looked at him, memories came in flashes and went before I could fully grasp them. But I grasped enough to remember that Xu and I had been together on many, many missions and I felt an instant bond with him as I would imagine old war buddies must feel.

We stood grinning at each other until Xu said, with what I began to remember was his characteristic enthusiasm, “Did you hear the announcement yet? You are going to drive Rockshaw crazy!”

Seeing my surprise he said, “I'm up to speed. Jonathon sent me a long message last night.”

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Without waiting for a reply, he continued, “I recorded it for you. It was on CNN first thing this morning.” And he quickly led us into an elegant sitting room, picked up a remote and began playing a brief news clip for us on a wide screen TV.

A serious young woman, surrounded by moving stock quotes and a news ticker, was speaking, “This morning Warren Buffet and the Devas Foundation jointly announced that they will be providing funding for the largest startup in American business history. Initial funding of 750 million dollars will be provided, with commitments for at least one billion more.”

“The new venture, which is coming together at unprecedented speed, will be moving into the ten-story Matco building in San Jose, and will be called ‘Fifth Force Dynamics’. The startup will be spearheaded by Arjun Ghosh, who was a key member of the team that brought together the funding and the expertise that made the Large Hadron Collider possible.”

“Only four forces are known to exist today – gravity, electromagnetism, and the strong and weak nuclear forces. But the fledgling Fifth Force Dynamics released an impressive list of scientists and researchers who have apparently already been collaborating on an exciting breakthrough in identifying and harnessing a fifth force.”

“When asked why Fifth Force Dynamics had been so quickly formed, here was Mr. Ghosh’s reply.”

The serious young woman’s picture was replaced by a clip of a business-suited Indian speaking while a dozen microphones were being thrust toward him.

“For several years now the Devas Foundation has been funding research in private labs around the world. In the last few months it has been very difficult to maintain secrecy. We believe we have not only discovered the fifth force, but have developed a practical way to harness it that will change the energy map of the world, and we need to move rapidly to consolidate our hold on the discovery...”

Xu put the clip on pause and smiled. “Rockshaw will have to investigate every ‘private lab’ that has been getting grants from the Devas Foundation for the last five years. Believe me when I tell you it is a long list. He will have to try to hack into *thousands* of computers to exhaust all the possible places where ‘the break-through discovery’ could be hidden, not to mention focusing his industrial spies on trying to find the secret in San Jose.”

“This may be your best misdirection ever, Michael,” said Xu with obvious enjoyment.

“It may have been my idea, but Jonathon and Warren pulled all of this off in one night. I can’t believe they got it done so fast.”

“Well, enough of the misdirection, Michael,” said Xu, “what is the real direction?”

“Who knows, maybe Fifth Force Dynamics really will discover it! Although that would be a miracle, since they have absolutely no idea what they are looking for...” at which we all began to laugh.

“Seriously, I have some ideas. That’s why we came here.” I said. “But first, Elle promised me the best food in New Mexico.”

“Ah! It will be my pleasure to cook for you, then. I took it up as a hobby a few years ago—actually about, oh, three hundred years ago, I think.” He got an appreciative chuckle.

“I can safely say that I have become a fair cook. And,” he added happily, “I have watched every episode of Iron Chef! Why don’t you guys give me about 20 minutes and I’ll put something together for you.” Xu bustled off immediately, leaving us still standing.

“Do you want to look around?” asked Elle.

“Sure. I don’t think I’ve ever seen a research center with a penthouse apartment before.”

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I examined the sitting room more closely. Like *Milliefiore*, it was beautiful but comfortable. The cushioned couch and matching chairs were upholstered in a mostly white rough-silk with a pattern of tiny purple flowers across the seats and backs. The floor was blond wood with a deep purple rug in the center of the room. The wide screen TV we had just been watching sat atop a glass-fronted cabinet containing numerous electronic components, their red and green LED's winking behind the glass.

As I looked around, Elle went over to the wall and pressed a button. Concealed blinds began to rise into the ceiling, finally exposing floor to ceiling windows the complete width of the room.

They provided a stunning view. We were looking to the south, the land dropping away steeply below us. The newly risen sun's light slanted across a wide flat valley, lighting up a distant escarpment seamed with rose, white and purple layers of sandstone. The morning light made the cliffs seem to glow, as well as bringing out the subtle silvery-gray of the sage brush and the greens of the sparse grasses that covered the orange sand of the valley floor.

"I remember this," I said slowly.

"You always liked it best at sunrise," Elle said softly at my side. "Do you remember what this is yet?"

"Just flashes. Nothing solid."

As if giving me a hint, Elle said, "This was our base of operations in our last life. You founded this facility in the 1920s and we maintained the entire top floor for our own uses. After we were killed at the end of the war, Jonathon asked Xu if I he would stay here as caretaker until you returned."

Still nothing came to me. After drinking in the view for a while longer, I began to wander, Elle just following along as I explored. The top floor was extensive. Oddly, it contained enough living quarters for what must have been fifty people. There were single rooms, kitchens, and suites with private living rooms. The rooms were furnished beautifully and tastefully, but they felt long unused. As we explored, I got more flashes—people's faces mostly—but I had no idea who they were or why they had been here; that is, until we passed through a doorway and found ourselves in a medical treatment room, a padded and paper-covered exam bench sitting in the middle of the floor.

Memories came faster and more completely as I stood looking at the stainless steel counters and the now empty glass-fronted cabinets. I remembered that there was an operating room farther back. I also began to remember something else, and I glanced at Elle.

At my look, Elle broke her silence, "Our last mission together involved smuggling people out of Nazi-controlled Germany during the war. Not everyone was in good shape. Some were wounded while we rescued them. Some had been tortured. We converted most of this floor to housing and caring for them, before moving them on to more permanent locations."

Elle's word's awakened even more memories and I had a moment of dawning understanding. "We weren't rescuing just anyone though, were we?" I said.

"No, not just anyone. We rescued and smuggled out the cream of German scientists who together would have been able to provide Hitler the information he needed to create an atomic bomb," Elle stated with quiet satisfaction. "The world would have suffered immensely if Hitler had been able to develop the bomb first. We may never have been able to defeat him."

I let out a long sigh of satisfaction. I still didn't remember all of what she described, but I felt as if a job had been well done.

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After a few more minutes of reverie, I wanted to explore the rest of top floor. I walked slowly, ‘feeling’ my way until I found myself standing in front of a door like many I had already seen. But I knew this one was different. As I reached to open the door, a strong memory flooded into my mind, and before I even got the door open, I had seen the room in my mind’s eye. It was a simple room with no furniture, just cushions stacked neatly against one wall, with a large rose-colored wool carpet covering most of the floor. Along the opposite wall was an altar. On it were two beautiful flower arrangements on either side of a large painting of Atri and Atria.

“Xu told me he had kept this up for us. We meditated many joyful hours here. Sometimes even days together,” said Elle, her face lit. “Atri and Atria appeared to us here many times.”

The urge was strong to sit and let myself flow into the river of joy, which I still felt palpably present within me. Seeing my look and seeming to read my mind Elle said, “There’s no time now. We need to stay focused on our mission.” Then she added, “Besides, we have breakfast waiting!”

Elle led the way back to the kitchen where Xu announced that we’d timed our arrival perfectly. Xu showed us to a small dining room that had the same magnificent view as the sitting room. The dining table was made of richly-figured, dark-red and rose colored wood. “Mesquite,” I thought, the name just drifting into my mind.

The table was set for three on elegant fabric placemats in robin’s egg blue on which sat silverware and white damask napkins inserted into brilliant blue and gold flower-patterned Kashmiri paper-mache rings. In the center of the table there was a floral arrangement of rosy-pink and white lilies. In front of each place setting there was a white porcelain tea pot with matching cup and saucer. A wisp of steam and an aroma of cinnamon wafted upwards from each pot.

After seating us, Xu disappeared into the kitchen and quickly returned with our breakfasts: an omelet with a garnish of rosemary; strawberries and blueberries in a small cup with cream; and a golden brown muffin, still steaming from the oven. The omelet melted in my mouth, a savory combination of sautéed onions and chanterelles with melted Jarlsberg cheese. It had to be the best food in Taos, if not the entire Southwest.

“That’s the way you used to like it, Michael,” said Xu, with the look a mother might give her son if he had been away a very long time. “I think the truffle oil is the magic.” I ate my breakfast with relish, as Xu told us about his efforts to perfect his cooking, a goal he obviously pursued with success.

A short time later found us in the sitting room we had first entered, ensconced in the comfortable chairs, as steam rose from fresh cups of the fragrant cinnamon and hibiscus tea we’d had with breakfast. We sat in companionable silence, gazing out over the now sundrenched landscape.

I thought none of us wanted to break the moment, but finally I said, “I think math is going to be the answer.”

Xu smiled as if he had already been thinking the same thing, but Elle looked blankly at me.

Answering her unspoken question I began, “Nothing in physics is useful if it can’t be represented mathematically. Quantum theory was just that, theory, until quantum mechanics was established by applying the mathematics of probability to the behavior of quantum states.”

“Our fifth force can only present an imminent threat to the balance of power in the world if it is on the verge of being proven out mathematically, because only then could it be understood

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sufficiently to be practically applied. I believe those are the pieces Atri said are about to fall into place—equations.”

“How can math come in pieces?” asked Elle.

“You’d be surprised. A little known professor of mathematics at Princeton solved Fermat’s Theorem, one of math’s enduring puzzles, by combining mathematical formulae that came from several different disciplines. Some of the formulae were from the mathematics for calculating the surface area of a doughnut.” The doughnut earned me an appreciative chuckle.

“The math that represents our physical world has become so complex that it is considered impossible for one person to understand more than a small part of it, and some math appears to have no relationship to physical reality at all—pure math, one sometimes hears it called—only later to provide a breakthrough in elucidating a new wrinkle in the physical world that no one saw coming. The development of some of the math that addressed ‘imaginary numbers’, for example, proved to be essential to working out quantum mechanics.”

“But don’t we need to have an idea of what the fifth force is before we start looking for math?” Elle asked.

“Well, up until yesterday, when Atri confirmed that a fifth force will be discovered, I hadn’t really been sure it even existed. The four known forces—gravitation, electromagnetism, and the strong and weak nuclear forces—appear to explain every phenomenon. Most physicists don’t think a fifth force will ever be necessary to explain the nature of the universe. The inside money, like the money that went to build LHC at CERN, is still on the big four. A fifth force is only talked about by crack pots, or as purely speculative conjectures among physicists. But Atri’s revelation that there *is* a fifth force suggests that at least one of the conjectures about the fifth force must be true.”

Elle looked lost.

“Look,” I continued, “none of the major discoveries of the other forces came out of the blue, as if no one had even suggested that they exist. Newton is apocryphally believed to have “discovered” gravity when the apple fell on his head. Even if there had been a falling apple in there somewhere, Newton didn’t discover gravity; it was well known that it existed, but he was the first to formulate the mathematical equations that describe its behavior.”

“In our case, we don’t need to be Newton. We don’t even need to formulate the mathematics of the fifth force. We just need to find the math which already exists.”

“Why?” asked Elle, clearly not following.

“Not because I know about any mathematical breakthroughs already, but simply because Atri told us that the discovery was *imminent*. If that is true, and because it takes so long to develop the math to support new theories, then the mathematics *must already exist*. The discovery of the fifth force, in a sense, has already been made, but it hasn’t been recognized for what it is, or it hasn’t been combined with other math from other fields which will reveal the potential.”

“But don’t you have *some* idea what it might be?” Elle asked.

“That would probably help,” I joked, earning another chuckle.

“Before being awakened and told that I would be able to find proof of the fifth force, I didn’t give my speculations much hope. I never told anyone, not even my parents, about my dreams and visions of discovering the fifth force because, quite frankly, they worried me. Perhaps they were true, but perhaps they were a vivid, wish-fulfilling fantasy, or worse, some kind of delusion. Since yesterday, I’ve been reassessing what they might mean, now that I can let myself believe they are true.”

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Xu sat up at this. “Did your dreams or visions show you anything specific?”

“No  $E=MC^2$  floating before me, if that’s what you mean...” My quip got a full laugh this time.

“What I did gather in my dreams is that the general focus of physics—on matter—is not where the fifth force will be found.”

“Where, then?” asked Elle.

“In space,” and to her bemused expression, I amended, “or rather, in the structure of space.”

“Isn’t space, well, nothing?” she said with surprise.

Xu weighed in at this point by saying, “Space is not emptiness. Space only exists where there is matter and matter can only exist where there is space. The two are inextricably linked.”

And I jumped in with, “And space isn’t inert. Space is expanding.”

Elle surprised us both by saying, “Isn’t that being caused by dark energy?” At our looks she said, “I’ve been keeping up,” with quiet satisfaction.

“You’ve been leading us along by the nose,” I said in a tone of mock accusation.

“Not really,” said Elle with merriment in her eyes, “I really don’t understand what you are talking about with the math. But if you think dark energy might be the fifth force, doesn’t that give us a direction?”

“Not really. Dark energy is just an idea astrophysicists came up with to explain a phenomenon they don’t understand. Space is expanding too rapidly to be explained by the known laws of gravitation, and so they have basically said to one another, ‘What if there was an as yet undetected force that pushed the stars away from each other?’ And they answered themselves. ‘Yeah, that would explain a lot.’”

This time I got a big laugh. I was doing physics stand-up.

“But that brings us full circle to math. Dark energy is so speculative that physicists don’t even know where to begin to develop any math for it—at least not that we know of, and that’s why we’re here,” I said turning to Xu. “We need to research all the recent papers in mathematics and physics that provide new formulations or new ideas for anything having to do with the expansion of space, like loop quantum gravity or inflation theory.”

“Well, you definitely came to the right place,” Xu said with enthusiasm. “The Dyson Center is now the foremost repository of scientific literature in the world. And if I don’t have it here, I have access to the digitized libraries of thousands of other scientific organizations. I’ve been preparing ever since Elle told me you wanted it done.”

“Since I what?” I asked quickly.

Elle jumped in immediately to say, “Xu has a role in your plan. Once I was reborn and then awakened, I was to tell Xu what you had in mind.”

“So *both* of you know what’s going on and I don’t?” I said with a hint of exasperation.

“Yes,” said Elle with a determined look.

I was just opening my mouth to complain when Elle said, “Don’t even think about it.”

“Uh, I think it’s a good time to go start looking for math papers,” said Xu, and hastily left the room.

After an awkward pause I said, “I should go help Xu.”

“Oh, I don’t think Xu needs any help and we need to get you back into shape”, she said brightly, as if she had been waiting for just such an opening. Her enthusiasm, and a certain look in her eye, made me groan inwardly, but I agreed. She led us down a long hallway, took us up a stairway, and we came out onto the roof of the Dyson Center.

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The entire roof of the Center was flat, surrounded by a high wall on three sides. The open side had a half-height wall of glass, allowing us to see the magnificent southern view. In front of us was a swimming pool, now empty, surrounded by outdoor furniture. Along the wall opposite the view was a series of changing rooms. At the far end, toward which Elle was leading us with resolute strides, there was a large, slightly-raised, square platform, covered by a waterproof tarp.

“Help me get this off,” said Elle, grabbing an edge of the tarp. Once we removed the cover, it revealed a roomy martial arts practice mat.

“You had this made for me, so I could practice outdoors,” she said in a delighted tone of reminiscence. “It was a surprise back in the ‘30s, if I remember right. There is an indoor practice room as well, but I love to be outside if possible.”

I did some stretches and then began my Tae Kwan Do warm up. Even though it was still early morning in September, the high wall around us kept the wind out and the sun’s warmth in. It felt good to be moving my body after two days of inactivity.

It felt good, that is, until I heard Elle say, “Your sensei has a lot to answer for.”

I turned toward her voice and found her looking at me with a critical eye, “What?”

“You’re moving your body, not your *chi*! You’re going to need to let go of practically everything you think you know about martial arts. Let’s see if we can’t shake some of your conviction that you are your body.”

After that enigmatic comment, Elle instructed me to stand relaxed but erect, arms at my sides, to close my eyes and breathe deeply.

“Now I want you to breathe in slowly, gradually raising your arms and stretching them above your head. As you do so, fill your body with energy as if you are drawing it up from the earth with your arms.”

I did as she instructed and felt a powerful surge rising in my body.

“Now exhale and let your arms slowly relax down to your sides. Feel that you are inviting the power of the sky into your body as you exhale.” Once again I felt a surge of energy flowing through my body—this time downwards—as if I were standing in a waterfall. “Now do it again three more times,” she finished.

I did as she instructed, and felt more and more energy course through my body until I was more aware of the energy than I was of my body. My body felt insubstantial, yet paradoxically I was more aware of every cell, every nerve, and every muscle than I can ever remember.

Then Elle’s voice came softly to me, “Now, keep your eyes shut, and with great slowness, so you don’t lose your awareness of the energy flowing through you, perform the first move in your kata.”

The first move in my kata was a simple step forward with my left leg followed by a forward strike with my right arm. As I performed the strike with exquisite slowness, I felt as if I was willing energy forward and that my arm was merely moving along with it. As I became more aware of the sensation, the amount of energy I moved increased. I became caught up in a surge of great power. In response, I moved my right arm forward more rapidly, with a forceful shout of ‘*kihai*’, as I had been taught by my sensei.

Two things happened simultaneously. I lost the connection to the immensity of life force I had been feeling and I heard a splintering crack. Just as I opened my eyes I saw a wooden chair literally explode in front of me.

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As I looked from the mass of splinters, which just moments before been a perfectly innocent wooden chair, to Elle, and back to the splinters, I began to laugh, almost giddily, and was barely able to splutter out, “That never happened at the dojo!”

Elle just sighed, and said, “This is going to be a lot harder than I thought.”

After two hours we decided to stop, but before we stopped, I had begun to be able to summon the incredible power I initially experienced without having to go through the initial breathing exercise. I could summon the energy just by extending my natural feeling into it. I learned how to consciously connect to my life force once again. Once connected, I felt that as I moved, I moved energy, not my body. Nor was the life force confined to my body. Every movement I made felt as if the great currents of energy surrounding me were moving with me. I also felt completely and deeply refreshed. My body sang with energy and vitality. I appreciated now why Elle always looks so vibrant. I also caught a glimpse of how Protectors can go without sleep, without food—or how they can sustain a body beyond its normal span.

I was far less successful at controlling it, however. No more chairs died at my hands, but many other items now occupied new positions on the rooftop.

“Enough for today; you made great progress, even if you did lack a certain, shall we say, finesse,” she said, staring pointedly at the splintered remains of the deck chair. “We’d better neaten up before we go.”

I was just about to step off the mat and begin putting items back in place, when a table I had knocked out of position moved gently back into place. I quickly turned and looked at Elle and saw her hands move almost imperceptibly, her eyes intent.

In moments it was over. Everything, except the shattered chair, was back in position, as neat and as orderly as when we arrived. Elle exhaled a quiet sigh of satisfaction and then, turning to look at me, she said with heart-felt enthusiasm, “I love doing that...”

“Was I ever as good at this as you are?”

“Very close,” she said modestly. “Well, not that close,” she laughed. “Controlling life force is my particular gift. Everyone is unique and we remain unique even when we have awakened. I can do things that no other Protectors can do.”

At that she turned, centered herself, and exhaling a long relaxed breath, concentrated on the splintered and shattered chair. I watched in awe as thousands of pieces, some as tiny as grains of sand, rose into the air and began to come together. A look of pure joy lit Elle’s face and then with an almost invisible shimmer, the chair was whole again.

I was standing there—probably with my mouth open—when Xu burst up the stairs. “I think I might have something,” he shouted excitedly and waved us over to him.

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## Chapter 6

Xu led us to a room we hadn't seen before. I had been in rooms like this before, but it was still a surprise to see one here. It was a control room for a supercomputer. Three walls were completely taken up with huge flat-panel monitors. The rest of the room was filled by a U-shaped table. On it were about a dozen computer work stations, side-by-side, with rolling chairs at each station.

The screens on the walls were filled with live graphs, their columns and trend lines dancing to the rhythm of unseen banks of processors. I saw graphs for node distribution, CPU usage, floating point speed, energy consumption, and run-time. There were other displays as well that I didn't recognize.

Seeing me look around, Xu deadpanned, "I, ah, made a few modifications since you were last here."

Then his eyes lit with boyish enthusiasm for a new toy. "The Dyson Center has one of the largest computer arrays in the world. The two lower floors above the garage are filled with racks of computers, and we have some of the world's best minds in parallel-processing working here. We have petabytes of RAM, exabytes of storage space and we were one of the first supercomputers to achieve teraflop speed."

Seeing Elle's blank expression, he said with dancing eyes, "It's really big and really fast, and I can use it whenever I want!"

"And you needed all this to Google a math paper?" asked Elle, *her* eyes dancing this time.

"Well, no" Xu responded with a laugh, "but if we find what we're looking for, we can use it to run simulations for utilizing the fifth force. Right now it's running a weather simulation. The Dyson Center is now a world leader in analyzing the effects of global warming."

I nodded in appreciation. Modern science, and especially physics, is almost completely dependent on computers. The number of calculations required to run complex simulations is staggering. To simulate what might happen in the first second of a nuclear explosion, for example, physicists may need to calculate the simulated effects in trillionth-of-a-second increments in order to approximate reality. Calculating the results of the simulation for the first trillionth-of-a-second, if it were done with hand-held calculators, would require many hours, if not days. Then, after factoring in the changes which took place in the first trillionth-of-a-second, calculating the next trillionth-of-a-second would require the same amount of time again, and so on. Calculating every trillionth-of-a-second increment using hand-held calculators—even if you had thousands of people working together—would require centuries, if not millennia, to complete. Supercomputers, on the other hand, can calculate the entire simulation in hours to days.

Xu and I looked at one another in complete understanding.

"So what did you find?" I asked finally, tearing my appreciative gaze away from the banks of monitors in the command center.

Xu settled into one of the office chairs and gestured at Elle and me to grab a couple of the other chairs available. I pushed one over to Elle who quickly sat in it and glided over to Xu without it slowing down. I sat in another chair and pushed backwards with my feet and sailed over to the other side of Xu. A 9.5 and a 9.6, respectively, in office chair Olympics.

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“I decided to concentrate my search,” Xu began, “on the work of lesser known scientists, in lesser known institutions, thinking that between us we probably already know about any significant new papers from the big guns. So far I’ve found six papers that have promise.”

He moved aside so that I could look at his monitor. I grabbed the mouse and clicked through the list, quickly reading the summaries. “What about this one? It doesn’t have a summary,” I said, as I gestured at the screen.

“Yeah. It’s a bit odd. It hasn’t come through the usual channels. As you know, quite a bit of math has been developed around inflation theory. Guth’s team did a lot of ground breaking work in the ‘80s, and now there is a lot of supporting math. But most of it is a refinement of the original direction. This one caught my eye, though. It takes inflation theory in an entirely different direction.”

“Here, let me show you.” Xu grabbed the mouse, made a click or two, and then pointed to one of his other screens.

I began to read. After a few minutes I looked at Xu with a feeling of excitement. “Does it check out?”

“Oh yeah, the math is good. There are two catches, though.” I raised an eyebrow. “First, it’s not complete. We need the rest of it for it to be of any use to us.”

“And the other catch?” I asked.

“The paper you’re looking at had to be smuggled out to the West,” said Xu. “The man who wrote this paper is Ho Lee, and he is a professor of physics at Kim Il-sung University, in Pyongyang, North Korea, the most paranoid and security-conscious country in the world. The rest of the paper is probably still there.”

After a pause while he let that sink in, he continued, “And if I’m right, Professor Lee held back the rest of the paper as a bargaining chip.”

Comprehension dawned.

“He wants out,” Elle and I said at the same instant.

I was suddenly and completely sure we needed the rest of Professor Lee’s paper. I was just as suddenly and completely surprised that I was so sure. My rational mind immediately began to come up with objections: we should study the paper more deeply before making a decision, we should look for other papers first, we should assess how hard it will be to get into North Korea, we should formulate a plan for getting Professor Lee out.

But I realized with astonishment that not even my own objections were going to sway me from the remarkable degree of certainty I felt. As I thought about the obvious reasons for not making a decision based only on my feelings, the feeling of certainty only increased. It welled up in my heart like a burst of happiness. I began slowly shaking my head in denial and smiling at the same time.

I was shaking my head in denial because I was about to put us, and maybe others, into extreme danger. Yet I was smiling because I knew it was the right move.

I let out a long breath I didn’t know I had been holding and said, “Well, let’s go get him.”

Elle and Xu had been watching me, and at my air of decision they glanced at each other.

“Just like old times,” said Xu with satisfaction.

“And just as crazy,” added Elle, with equal satisfaction, and the familiar light of mischief in her eyes.

“That’s it?” I exclaimed. I was a bit alarmed at the thought that they would just go along with my decision so unquestioningly.

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They both looked startled at my outburst, but then Elle seemed to understand. In tones less cavalier she said, “I told you before at *Milliefiore*, you are the best among us at making intuitive decisions. Xu and I are far more likely to go along with a snap decision from you than a thoroughly reasoned argument from someone else.”

“But how can I be so sure I’m right?” I asked, and then had to laugh at the oddity of my question.

“Don’t worry. It will come back to you. For now it will have to be enough for you to know that we have no doubts about the wisdom of your decisions.”

“Even when they seem crazy,” she couldn’t help but add.

Great. Not only was I blind while on this journey, I was the one giving directions. It was hard to imagine that starting a mission without my memories could ever have seemed like a good idea to anyone, let alone me.

Elle, however, proving her lack of doubts, moved on rapidly. Turning to Xu she said, “We need to talk with Jonathon right away. But we need to be careful how we contact him. We have security issues.”

Xu looked shocked. Elle filled him in on Jonathon’s suspicions and her own fears.

“Give me a minute. I can set up a secure teleconference connection with *Milliefiore*. I’ve wrapped the encryption in an encryption. Some of my own special sauce. It is what Jonathon used last night to contact me. No one is going to hack this protocol without a supercomputer of their own, and even then they’d have to be really good.” As Xu spoke, his fingers flew over the keyboard and with a final click he said, “Here we go. Let’s hope they are monitoring.”

Seconds later we saw the face of Andrew, my host at *Milliefiore*, and part-time forger. After quick hellos all around, Elle said, “Andrew, we need to speak with Jonathon right away.” Less than a minute later Jonathon’s face appeared.

We filled Jonathon in on our progress and our need to get into North Korea.

Without hesitation he said, “You guys get yourself to Seoul as soon as possible. We’ll work on how to get you into the North while you are in the air. Time is of the essence. Rockshaw is battering at the door—well, the electronic door anyway.”

At our questioning glances, Jonathan continued, “Rockshaw has moved quickly. I am surprised at how determined he is to find the fifth force—and how convinced he is that we have it. We’ve already received hundreds of reports of attempts to hack into the networks at Devas Foundation-funded research centers.”

“Some of them have beefed up their firewalls, but almost none of the centers have the systems in place to keep out determined hackers. Their research simply isn’t that valuable. It’s just a matter of time before Rockshaw’s people get in.”

“Rockshaw appears to have his best people trying to get into our systems here at *Milliefiore*. So far our systems have held up. We have several people monitoring for intrusions—that’s why Andrew responded to you so quickly.”

I broke in. “It sounds bad, but I think my diversion is working. It isn’t going to stop Rockshaw, but it should at least strain his resources, and keep him guessing. Plus, once his people get in and start stealing data, they will chew up even more time going through it all.”

Then a dismaying thought just hit me. “My plan hasn’t put information about the Protectors at risk, has it?”

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Jonathon smiled reassuringly. “We don’t need to keep information about the Protectors on computers. The Protectors have been managing their affairs for a very, very long time without any need for technology.”

Just then a phone rang and Xu went off to answer it.

“By the way, is the Dyson Center on the list of Devas Foundation-funded research centers?” I asked.

“No. We always thought that we should keep the two entirely separate for just such occasions as this,” said Jonathon in response. “There is no financial or organizational tie between the two.”

Just at that moment, Xu sat down and rejoined us, saying, “Then we have another leak. The call I just took was from the head of network security here in the building. We have a hacker trying to get in. A pretty good one, too. But whoever it is will have a very hard time getting by my security protocols. Even if he does, he won’t find Professor Lee’s paper. I’ve pulled it out of the network and isolated it on a non-networked computer.”

“That’s disturbing,” said Jonathon. “How did Rockshaw know to try to hack the Dyson Center?”

“And there’s more bad news,” continued Xu. “There are two men sitting in a car out on the highway watching everyone come and go from the Dyson Center.”

“Wait a sec. I think we can get a look at them on a security camera feed. There!” said Xu after a blur of key strokes.

Elle and I saw a grainy black and white version of two men sitting in a car. One had a pair of binoculars held up to his eyes making it hard to see his face. But I was pretty sure I knew what he looked like, because I recognized the car and the other man. I think we were looking at our old friends Frank and Bobbie who had waylaid us at the back gate of *Milliefiore*.

“How the...” began Elle.

“...hell did they find us?” I finished for both of us.

Jonathon looked stricken.

“Someone must be giving information to Rockshaw. Someone who knows the inner workings of the Devas Foundation,” Jonathon said with deep sadness.

Elle looked equally saddened and concerned.

“The thought that a Protector would betray us is too painful to contemplate,” said Jonathon. “It has simply never happened.”

Elle spoke quickly, “We still don’t know that it has to be a Protector. Not everyone in the Foundation is a Protector. Surely we must start by looking at who among them could have had access to this information.”

Jonathon drew a deep breath. “You’re right. But I will have to ask a lot of painful questions of people whom I love and trust.” Visibly straightening, Jonathon continued, “Beginning now, I will limit all communications about what you are doing and where you are going to a very small group. Communicate only with me. I will manage who else knows.”

Xu broke in. “Don’t overlook the possibility that your communications are compromised. Be very careful. Use encryption for everything.”

We ended our call with Jonathon and held a brief council. We decided that Xu should stay at the Dyson Center and keep up his research. Elle wanted me to stay as well but I assured her that I needed to go. I had no idea why but I knew with disconcerting intensity that I had to go.

“At least let me take the lead,” she cautioned. “There is so much you still don’t remember.”

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“You don’t need to convince me of that,” I said, meaning it whole-heartedly. If it weren’t for Elle, right now I would be somewhere very unpleasant at the mercy of Rockshaw.

Xu volunteered to charter us a jet to South Korea. He thought it would be relatively easy to get one flying out of Santa Fe.

“Who should I book it for?” Xu asked.

We grabbed our packs and found our bundles of fake ID’s.

“I’ll be Susan Sinclair,” announced Elle.

“I’ll be Robert Anderson,” I added.

“How are we going to get to the airport without Rockshaw’s men seeing us?” I said, moving on.

“Leave that to me,” said Elle. “Xu, do you have an extra car we can use?”

“Sure.”

“Good. Michael, I’m afraid you’ll have to get in the trunk for a few miles.”

“OK. But won’t they recognize you at the wheel just as easily as they would recognize me?”

“Let me handle that. I’ll be in disguise,” she said with a touch of mystery and a return of the mischievous glint in her eye. “We should get going. Xu can charter the jet while we’re on our way.”

After saying a quick farewell to Xu, who handed Elle a set of keys, we grabbed our daypacks and rode the elevator down to the garage level, where we found the non-descript sedan Xu said we could use.

“Where’s your disguise,” I asked doubtfully.

“Just get in the trunk and give me a second,” she said.

I opened the trunk and began rearranging a few items, then glanced in Elle’s direction. Elle was gone and another woman stood in her place. She was short, with a round face, brown eyes, and long brown hair, wearing a basic woman’s business suit.

At my thoroughly stunned look, the woman smiled broadly, and in a voice completely unlike Elle’s she said, “I guess it worked. Get in the trunk. We’ve got a plane to catch.”

I spent ten uncomfortable minutes in the trunk before the car stopped. When the trunk opened, there stood the Elle I knew. Without comment, she offered me a hand to get out, then walked back to the driver’s side, got in, and shut the door.

Deciding to play along, I got in the passenger’s seat without saying a word either.

After a few minutes of silence, Elle began to giggle and finally laughed outright. “This is so much more fun than I ever imagined!”

I just gave her my squinty-eyed look again and tried not to laugh.

Just minutes later we arrived at a small private airport on the outskirts of Santa Fe. Elle called Xu and he told us a jet was already waiting for us.

The pilot met us at the entry stair, “Ms. Sinclair, Mr. Anderson?”

We nodded.

“I’ll need to have your passports to give to the passport control rep in Honolulu. We’ll be stopping there to refuel.”

We handed over our passports and boarded. The pilot informed us that there had been no time to find an attendant for the cabin but that the galley was available to us any time. Minutes later we were airborne.

Elle and I had the entire passenger compartment to ourselves. It was roomy and luxurious. There were wide and comfortable seats for a dozen people and even beds near the back. Elle was

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sitting on a couch in the mid-plane lounge area and I was on a couch opposite. She was half turned, looking out one of the windows, wearing an expression of feigned innocence.

“OK, OK,” I said deciding to play along. “How did you do that?”

“Whatever do you mean,” she said with exaggerated surprise.

I rolled my eyes and let her have her fun, at the same time wondering how much more fun there was for her to have.

“Out with it!” I said finally. “How did you look like someone else?”

“Oh, that.”

She was milking this for all it was worth.

“Yeah, yeah. That!”

“It’s easy. You just have to be able to visualize, with crystal clarity, exactly the form you want to assume and then direct your life force to assume that new form,” she said with affected indifference.

“Can everyone who has awakened change their appearance?” I asked, fascinated, despite Elle’s fun at my expense.

“Not everyone who has awakened even tries, but Protectors, for obvious reasons, try to learn how to do it. Not all Protectors can do it though. Protectors are as unique as everyone else. Not all of them have the same gifts,” Elle answered becoming more serious.

“Can you look like anyone you want?” I asked, even more intrigued.

“Some of us can, but not all. Some Protectors can only take on the appearance of someone they have already been in a previous life. It’s something like putting on a familiar set of old clothes.”

“Was I able to look like anyone?”

“Oh yes, you are really quite clever at it. You even tried once or twice to fool me, but it didn’t work. One can always tell. It’s the eyes that give it away. I had no doubt when I first saw you in Berkeley that you were my Michael.”

The memory seemed to soften her, and she smiled at me, as if repenting for her fun. “I’m so glad you are back, Michael. It’s never the same when we’re apart.” She spoke with such depth of feeling, that I couldn’t resist going over to sit beside her. Tentatively, I reached out and took her hand, looking directly into her eyes.

Gazing happily into my eyes, she said, “We’ve always been able to complete each other. That’s why we always find each other.” As she finished speaking she grew very still. Her face gradually changed to that of a blond-haired young woman with startlingly blue eyes and thin face. “This is how I looked when I was Ellie Dyson in our last life together.” And with another change she became dark-haired, dusky-skinned, with coal-black eyes. “This is how I looked when I was Sumitra, your sister.”

She continued to change from form to form, and gradually I realized that she also remained unchanging. Her eyes locked with mine, though blue, green, brown or black revealed the same essence within every guise. I knew now that I would recognize her no matter what form she took.

She finally resumed the appearance of Elle, and said softly, “Once we are awake, our bodies become of less importance to us. They are necessary as we perform our tasks, because unlike Atri, Atria and other great Masters, we cannot do our tasks without being born into a body. But our real task is to perfect ourselves. Then we, too, like the Masters, will be able to simply materialize a body whenever and wherever we need.”

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I don't know how long we sat, motionless, eyes locked in silent communion, but the spell was finally broken when the co-pilot came back to ask us if we needed anything. Elle thanked him and said she would make some tea for us. Our co-pilot declined the offer of a cup and headed back to the cockpit.

Elle returned shortly with two steaming cups of tea and we sat in easy silence. Even though we were racing toward danger, our mood was calm, even peaceful. I felt nothing of the usual need to make conversation, to fill the time with chatter. I was perfectly content. I marveled once again that since my awakening ceremony, my feelings had undergone such a profound, and welcome, change.

As I sat quietly, I noticed that there were fragments of unfamiliar memories floating through my mind, but if I concentrated on them, they slipped away before they meant anything to me. This finally prompted me to ask Elle, "Is there any way I can make my memories come to me more quickly? I think I should know about my past run-ins with Rockshaw, but I can't get the memories to come."

I added quickly, "Please, don't tell me that I told you to keep me from remembering!"

Elle chuckled at my exasperation and my humor, and then said somewhat mysteriously, "No, in fact it would probably make your plan go better if you did remember."

Elle considered, "A Protector's memories are the same as an ordinary person's memories. If you focus on something you partially remember, then you will gradually recall it more fully and clearly. Your problem with Rockshaw is that right now you don't have even dim recollections to focus on."

She sat quietly for a moment and then continued, "Protectors, when reawakened as children, are usually just left to remember their past lives as they come naturally. But there is a method sometimes used to help them. I suppose we could try it and see if that will work for you."

"I'm game," I replied eagerly. "How do I do it?"

"I will have to guide you into a trance state. Then I will describe to you an experience I know you had, and we'll see if your actual memory comes to the surface. I think it will be easiest for you to do this if you lie down."

After a few minutes I was lying down comfortably on one of the couch beds at the rear of the plane.

"Okay, now what?"

Elle hesitated before beginning, "I've been told that during these experiences you can sometimes become aware of more than just your own memories. Sometimes you can become aware of the thoughts and feelings of other people in your memory. You may find it disorienting, even disturbing."

"That's okay," I assured her. "Something tells me it's really important that I remember my history with Rockshaw."

"Okay then, close your eyes and begin taking slow, deep, even breaths..."

Elle took me through a process of deep relaxation, helping me to release my awareness of my body, one part at a time, until I felt as though I had merged into the narrow bed on which I lay. Then she guided me into a deep mental state in which I felt completely calm and safe. I felt bodiless yet acutely aware.

Then she began to describe a scene. "The year is 1633. You are in Rome with Galileo. You are his servant, friend, confidant and Protector. You are at his trial..."

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Suddenly I was there. It wasn't an ordinary memory. It was vividly real, more like I was reliving it than remembering it. I was aware of sounds, sights, smells, even the feel of my clothing on my body. I remained aware that I was reliving it, not experiencing it for the first time, but as Elle suggested, it was a bit disorienting.

Behind a long table sat ten Cardinals, dressed in resplendent red clothes, looking at Galileo as he stood before them, on trial for heresy. My hyper-awareness allowed me to know instantly that Galileo was an old man of seventy years, tired and dispirited, because he knew that he was about to 'renounce' as heresy the idea that the earth rotated around the sun—indeed, that the earth moved at all. Though he knew it was true, he was about to deny it. He had been persecuted for many years and had long lived in fear of his life. Now he was about to put a lie to his entire life's work. He was heartsick and broken.

I was standing at his side, my features typically Italian, his loyal servant of many years. I was allowed to be present because of his frailty. I held his arm to support him. I could feel him trembling before his inquisitors. I, too, felt heartsick. The trial was the triumph of ignorance. Galileo was being destroyed for daring to reason. I had been his Protector for decades, had even foiled an assassin's attempt on his life, but I could not protect him from this. I felt painfully resigned that there was nothing I could do—except support him as a friend.

I whispered in his ear, "Master, this is but an earthly court, whatever they say. In the court of heaven you are already exonerated. In truth, the earth moves." Taking some heart from my words, Galileo stood taller, ready to make his "confession" of error.

My awareness was gradually drawn to one of the cardinals who stared at Galileo with particular intensity. In my heightened awareness I knew he was Cardinal Inchofer, a Hungarian Jesuit, and a man of great influence in the Church. Instantly I knew his thoughts and feelings. He was seething with anger. He had wanted to mete out the worst possible punishment for Galileo—torture, then death—to cleanse the world of the heresy he had dared to spread. But he knew that his fellow Cardinals, and indeed the Pope, had already decided on leniency for Galileo—mere house arrest. The knowledge churned sourly in his heart.

His thoughts, however, were not simply the thoughts of a fanatic. Inchofer's thoughts revealed that he was deeply divided. He was himself a learned man. He had examined Galileo's arguments and he knew that Galileo was right. This made him both hate and fear Galileo. He hated him because he had dared to stand up for truth when he himself would not, making him feel the coward; feared him because the truth was a threat to the Church, to the source of his power, power that meant more to him than truth. His hate and fear, too, churned sourly in his heart.

As if sensing my attention he looked my way and our eyes met. I was still gazing at his eyes when the scene faded to be replaced by another. I found myself still gazing into the same eyes, yet the eyes looked out from a different body. I understood that Inchofer had died many years ago and had been reborn as this man. I knew he was Sir John Wellington, an English aristocrat, and an eager scientist. I also knew that he was barely able to contain his excitement—he thought that he was about to witness the transmutation of lead into gold.

I stood next to another man on the other side of a laboratory table from Inchofer/Wellington. The room was very hot and smelt of acrid chemicals and smoke. Near one wall was a furnace stoked to high heat. Yet another man stood before it using a long pair of tongs to remove a crucible filled with molten metal from its fiery interior.

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As the man with the tongs turned toward the table, preparing to pour the contents of the crucible into a waiting receptacle, I realized he was Sir Isaac Newton. In the same instant of knowing, I realized that standing next to me was Xu, though he appeared to be an Englishman, as did I. We were both masquerading as Newton's assistants.

I remembered now that our role as Protectors was not so much to safeguard Sir Isaac from outside harm, but to keep him from harming himself. Besides his mathematical, optical and gravitational studies, Sir Isaac's great passion was alchemy. He had already made himself seriously ill several times, exposing himself to dangerous chemicals during his experiments. He had no fear for himself and no limit to his curiosity. He nearly blinded himself by putting a needle behind his eyeball to see how far it would reach.

He was an emotionally fragile man, but gifted to a staggering degree. Xu's gentle nudges were barely required to move him to genius. The laws of gravitation and the mathematical system of differential and integral calculus emerged from his mind fully formed, requiring but a few months to perfect. The rest of his time Sir Isaac devoted to alchemy—trying to convert 'base' metals into gold or silver—not because he was driven by greed, but because his insatiable curiosity drove him to try to understand how everything in the universe worked.

My attention was once again drawn to Inchofer/Wellington. He was here as an observer, having fawned over Sir Isaac by letter often enough to get an invitation. As I tuned in to his thoughts and feelings, I encountered the same powerful mind I experienced when he was Inchofer, but this time his interest in science was stronger. He was fascinated by science and by Newton's scientific methods in particular. But, not far below the surface, I sensed avarice also. He could barely conceal his desire to possess the secret of how to convert lead into gold.

We all watched intently as Newton poured the molten lead into a carefully prepared liquid, which included cow urine, chicken blood, potash, lime and mercury. A cloud of noxious steam instantly filled the room. Xu half pushed, half carried Newton out of the room. I shouted for Inchofer/Wellington to get out and we followed on their heels.

Once outside, Sir Isaac gravely thanked Xu, whom he called John, for his quick thinking. Unseen by Newton or Wellington, Xu caught my eye and made a slow wink. I turned to look at Inchofer/Wellington. His eyes were bright with happy anticipation. He could barely wait for the smoke and steam to clear from the laboratory before going in to see if the molten lead had been transformed to gold.

As I looked at him the scene faded yet again and reformed. I found myself looking at the same eyes looking out of a different body—but this time I felt a visceral shock—I had just seen this body at *Milliefiore*—it was Rockshaw. I realized that I was experiencing the beginning of Rockshaw's long and unnatural life.

My next shock came when I realized we were smiling idiotically at each other and laughing.

We were in a more modern laboratory than Newton's. I was Michael Faraday and Rockshaw-to-be was now called Sir Humphrey Davy. I was his laboratory assistant, but more than an assistant; I was his friend. In this life he had fully embraced his scientific tendencies and our mutual fascination for scientific discovery had created a genuine bond between us.

At that moment, we were clapping each other on the back in kindred excitement over a breakthrough we had just made. We had created a flow of electrons along a wire! We were on the brink of discovering that magnetism and electricity were two sides of the same phenomenon. We looked at each other and grinned like school boys. His eyes shone with happiness.

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But the scene faded abruptly. We were again in the same laboratory, but I knew that this was many years later. The eyes that stared at me were still Sir Humphrey's, but the look was no longer one of friendship. He was staring at me in cold fury. His face was set and I understood that he was jealous of me, and entertained a burning anger at an affront he thought I had committed. He felt that I, a mere laboratory assistant, had upstaged him the day before in a discussion with other colleagues, who had agreed with my opinion, not his. His rage was barely concealed.

Suddenly I was jolted into normal awareness—or at least as normal as my awareness was ever going to be again. The plane was being buffeted about and I had to use my hands to grab the back of the couch bed to keep from being tossed out into the aisle. After we passed through the turbulence, I lay there for a while longer, trying to take in what I had just experienced. I finally stirred and sat up.

"Did it work?" came Elle's voice, as she walked back to my bed from farther up the plane and sat on the bed opposite mine.

"Definitely. But it feels like I only got started. The last memory got interrupted by the turbulence." I paused, gathering my thoughts before continuing, "Something important happened when I was Michael Faraday and Rockshaw was Sir Humphrey Davy, didn't it? All I learned was that his feelings of friendship toward me turned to hatred. What happened?"

Elle became very serious. "You're not going to like what I have to tell you. Those were the events that set Sir Humphrey Davy on the path to becoming Rockshaw."

I nodded my head slowly as if I already knew this. Perhaps I did.

"Your mission at that time was to insure the discovery of the laws of electromagnetism. The importance of your discoveries is incalculable. The use of electricity is the foundation of the modern world. Posing as a commoner, Michael Faraday, you began your mission working as a humble laboratory assistant for Sir Humphrey Davy. He thought of you as no more than a servant. For several years you were even his valet."

"After a while, though, you developed a genuine friendship—at least in the laboratory—where your brilliant minds worked well together. But eventually you began to outshine Sir Humphrey, and he became jealous. Previously, he had claimed many of your discoveries as his own. You didn't care as long as the discoveries were being made. But your reputation grew, and after a while he could no longer take credit for your brilliance."

"Eventually your mission required you to have your own laboratory. Sir Humphrey's pride was stung that you, a commoner, had the effrontery to set yourself up as the equal of an aristocrat. He became your bitter enemy. He schemed to have you barred from becoming a member of the Royal Society, at that time the highest recognition of a scientist's success. He failed to keep you out of the Society and your reputation as a scientist soon eclipsed his. Sir Humphrey never got over it. His jealousy of your success eventually became an all consuming rage."

"At some point, we don't know exactly when, he met Asher. At the time, Asher had already long been a ruthlessly powerful man; a merchant of death, a fomenter of war, an unseen force in the shadows behind the thrones of Europe. He immediately appreciated the potential value to him of Sir Humphrey's scientific mind, and he soon saw a way he could seduce him into becoming the man we know today as Rockshaw—by fanning the flames of his hatred of you."

"You've blamed yourself for Sir Humphrey's transformation into Rockshaw ever since—though no one else thinks it is your fault. Rockshaw made his choices of his own free will. But

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you've become almost obsessive about Rockshaw, and you have taken on any mission, no matter how dangerous, to limit the extent of the death and destruction that Rockshaw can cause. You have ruined his plans many, many times."

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## Chapter 7

“Doctors Westin and Hardin, welcome to the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea.” These words were addressed to us by a briskly efficient man of about thirty, wearing a dark suit, striped tie, and immaculately polished black shoes. It may not have been a military uniform, but it was definitely a uniform.

We were standing in Sunan International Airport just beyond passport control after disembarking from our Koryo Airlines flight from Seoul. We were part of a large “goodwill” delegation arriving from South Korea.

“I am Jon Hye Yong, and it is my honor to escort you during your stay with us,” continued our host in very precise English. “If you follow me, we have a car waiting for you. Your luggage will be taken to the hotel.”

As we pulled away from the airport, part of a long caravan of cars, I marveled once again at what Jonathon had accomplished so quickly. In the twelve hours of our flight from Santa Fe to Seoul, Jonathon had pulled strings, called in favors, and put into motion elaborate means to get us into North Korea.

Getting in was accomplished. Getting out with Professor Lee was going to be another matter—but one thing at a time.

We had landed in Seoul at about 9:00 p.m. local time the night before. Once on the ground our plane had taxied to an open area far from the main terminal. As soon as we stopped, a young Korean woman in a dark blue business suit and white blouse had boarded the plane.

Wasting no time she pitched her voice so that only Elle and I could hear, “Grab your stuff. We need to hurry. There is a lot we need to do and not much time to do it.” She then turned around and headed for the open door.

Elle and I followed her with our daypacks. Once on the tarmac, an icy wind assaulted us. We were quickly ushered into a waiting and warm limousine. She sat in the rear-facing seat closest to the driver and Elle and I took the forward-facing rear seat. With universal gestures, a discrete finger to her lips and a brief cast her of eyes and movement of her head toward the driver, she indicated that we shouldn’t talk. Without a word we moved smoothly away from the plane.

We made a brief stop at a security gate. She handed her ID to the driver, who showed it to the guard, and we were waved through without questions. Five minutes later we arrived at a hotel on the outskirts of the airport. We were given adjoining room numbers and two plastic key cards along with the words, “I’ll give you twenty minutes to clean up.”

In twenty minutes almost exactly, showered and shaved, I was standing in a hotel robe eyeing my two-day old clothes with suspicion, when there was a knock on the door. I peered through the security peephole and saw our shepherdess. I opened the door and not only she, but a short parade of Korean men pushing heavily laden luggage carts, came into the room.

Once the parade had left, leaving the carts behind, she handed me a passport and wallet. Without preamble she said, “You are now Dr. Daniel Westin, from San Jose, California, and we need to make sure you are travelling with everything you would be expected to have and nothing you wouldn’t.”

As if on cue, the connecting door to the next room opened and Elle walked in, also wearing a robe, dark hair still wet from her shower. Also without preamble she received a passport and woman’s wallet.

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“You are now Dr. Samantha Hardin, also from San Jose, California, and we have until six a.m. tomorrow morning to make sure you both can act like American doctors on a goodwill mission to the Kim Il-sung University Medical Research Center.”

“Piece of cake,” said Elle, and both of them burst out laughing. “It is so good to see you again, Grace.” The two women exchanged hugs.

Grace turned expectantly to me. I knew now that she must be a Protector and should be well known to me, but no memories came to rescue me from the awkward moment.

Elle broke in quickly, “Michael was only awakened two days ago. Not all of his memories have returned yet.”

Grace’s expression changed from bewilderment to shock. “You can’t seriously be planning on taking him to Pyongyang like this?” she addressed Elle, incredulous.

“He says he has to go in,” said Elle in a serious tone. “At least that part of him is fully awake,” she added with a grin and a side-long look in my direction.

I decided to take my ribbing like a man and didn’t say anything, but I gave her squinty-eyes just for form’s sake.

Grace looked back and forth between us and decided not to get in the middle. “Well then, I guess we’ll need to do it the old-fashioned way. Jonathon told me to be prepared for anything. But this is going to make things a lot more difficult.”

After a short beat she added, “And what’s with the secrecy? Jonathon contacted me via encrypted teleconference and asked me to set this up. He told me not to involve any other Protectors!” She ended, incredulous.

We filled her in—as much as we could—mindful of our own need to maintain as much secrecy as possible.

“There’s a leak in the Foundation? I *never* thought I would hear that.” Grace shook her head with the same stricken sadness as Jonathon. Elle looked equally depressed.

After a brief pause, Grace seemed to give herself a mental shake and got to work. “OK. Let’s get your luggage sorted out first. Then I’ll fill you in on the rest of what we have planned.”

After trying on clothing and choosing from the travel gear brought in by the parade of porters, we packed our suitcases. Grace finally pronounced herself satisfied that our clothes and cases would make it through a routine customs inspection without raising any eyebrows.

Next she explained our cover. “Your timing is extremely lucky. You are going in as part of a large goodwill delegation sponsored by South Korea to improve relations with North Korea. It has been planned for over a year. You are being substituted for two doctors from Stanford.”

“You two will be paying a goodwill visit to Pyongyang’s premier facility for the treatment of arthritis. You are both supposed to be specialists in the treatment of arthritis, and by six tomorrow morning you are going to know enough to pass yourselves off as ones.”

“But we can’t possibly learn enough in a few hours to fool another doctor,” Elle said.

“You won’t have to fool another doctor. That’s actually what makes this a workable cover. Even though North Korea wants to get good PR out of your visit, they don’t actually want to share any information. We have it on good authority that they are only looking for a photo op and a general quote from you about how innovative their treatments are.”

“What if they check out our stories while we’re there?” I asked.

“They’ll check out,” she said reassuringly, “there really are a Dr. Westin and a Dr. Hardin. They agreed to be part of the delegation last year and they landed in Seoul just before you did. They were met by some very persuasive colleagues of mine and are even now enjoying

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sumptuous rooms in an exclusive hotel. After you get back, they will be briefed on everything ‘they’ did in Pyongyang before being sent back to Stanford, believing they performed a patriotic, but very secret duty for their country. All courtesy of the CIA.”

At my confused look, Elle broke in, “Grace is a senior-level field agent for the CIA. It often comes in handy,” she finished with a chuckle.

“Because Jonathon didn’t want to involve other Protectors, we decided that everything should be done as if it were a CIA operation,” Grace went on. “Jonathon called in some favors and got the extraction of Professor Lee laid on as an official operation. That means I can use any resources available. By the way, all of the official translators who are traveling with the twenty-two official delegates, and you’ll each have one, are actually CIA agents. I’ve briefed them all that they are to give you any assistance you ask for.”

Another question occurred to me. “If there really are a Dr. Westin and a Dr. Hardin, how are we going to pass for them?”

“Well, we don’t have to worry about one of them,” said a new voice.

When I turned to look, another woman was standing where Elle had been.

Grinning, the other woman said, “Hi, I’m Samantha Hardin.” The woman was unrecognizable, but the grin was very familiar.

Even though I had already seen Elle change her appearance multiple times on the airplane coming here, I was still astonished. She had taken on the features of Samantha Hardin in a mere second. She was Elle’s height, weight and body type but otherwise she looked completely different. Her face was broad. She had brown eyes and looked about sixty-years old with blond hair going gray.

“You could at least warn me when you are going to do that,” I said in mock resignation.

Ignoring my jibe, Elle/Samantha turned to Grace and said, “But Michael can’t change his appearance yet. Do you know if the North Koreans already have pictures of the real Dr. Westin?”

“We checked,” said Grace. “No photographs were sent to the organizers. But there’s always the possibility that someone in North Korea did a search for pictures on the web. There’s just no way to know. Michael does generally resemble Dr. Westin. Similar height and weight, blue eyes and light brown hair. We can restyle his hair to match Dr. Westin’s appearance, and luckily, Dr. Westin wears glasses.”

“Luckily...?” I left the question hanging.

“Yes,” answered Grace, “glasses are very prominent, so they hide many features like the shape of the eyes, forehead and cheekbones. We have several pairs here in our regular kit. One of them should be a close match to the type Dr. Westin currently wears.”

Grace handed me a picture, “We took this when Dr. Westin arrived. Take a look and find some glasses that match.”

I tried some on until I found a pair that fit comfortably and looked like Dr. Westin’s. Next she grabbed some scissors and comb from the assembled gear and gestured for me to sit. She was surprisingly adept and efficient. Minutes later she handed me a mirror. I was amazed. Just a new haircut and glasses made my face seem unfamiliar even to me.

Grace held up the picture of the real Dr. Westin and looked back and forth from it to me. “You’ll pass casual scrutiny on entry—after all, they have no reason to be suspicious. But if they do become suspicious and can get a hold of a picture like this, your identity will not hold up for long. This is the weakest link in your cover.”

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Stepping back and looking me over from head to foot she said, “Well, I think we’ve done what we can for your appearance. Stand over there against that wall.” She picked up a digital camera and took several pictures of me. “Give me your passport and wallet. I’ve got an identity guy set up in a room down the hall. He’ll put your new photo in Dr. Westin’s passport and all the other ID’s.”

Grace returned in less than a minute. I was adjusting my glasses when she came in and immediately she said, “Don’t fiddle with your glasses once you are on your way. People who wear glasses rarely touch them. If you keep touching them and adjusting them, an experienced minder will spot that right away.”

“Minder...?”

“Every foreign group that visits North Korea is surrounded by minders. They are usually Army, but they also use secret police, and they are constantly on the lookout for contact being made between foreign visitors and North Koreans. Some of the minders will be obvious to you. Others you will never notice. It is important that you always remain very reserved. Never assume you are not being watched or can’t be overheard—they have parabolic mikes and use lip-readers just like we do. Do not underestimate them.”

“Oh, and by the way, I wouldn’t let on that you speak Korean,” Grace said casually, “It’s likely to make them feel suspicious rather than disarmed.”

“We speak Korean?” I said with rueful wonder.

Elle/Samantha turned to me, and said, “Protectors can speak pretty much any language. Once we are awakened, we can recall any language we ever learned in any past life. Your Korean is a couple centuries out of date but as they say, it will all come back to you.”

Next Grace brought in a CIA vetted specialist and we spent hours and hours learning the basics of the treatment of arthritis, even venturing into the areas of Dr. Westin’s and Dr. Hardin’s specialization—just to err on the safe side. Afterwards Grace also took us through the life histories of Dr. Westin and Dr. Hardin in case we were asked basic questions. We kept at it until we had to leave for the airport for our flight. Like all late night crammers I hoped I remembered it all until the exam.

Now, only a few hours later, we were being escorted into Pyongyang by the efficient Mr. Yong.

Once in Pyongyang we made numerous official stops, and each time we went through the same carefully choreographed ritual. We, along with the rest of the goodwill delegation, were escorted over to a group of politely smiling Koreans who were standing stiffly, ready to greet us, as if already posed and waiting for a long time. Our group started at one end of the line of our greeters, shook hands and smiled at each one. The interpreters, all secret CIA agents, walked discretely behind each of the official delegates translating anything that was said, and anything that was answered in reply. Once we reached the end of the line, we were herded into the right positions for photographs.

After our third stop, I was beginning to wonder if this was going to go on forever. It was already nearing lunch time so I asked Mr. Yong, “When will we be going to the University?”

“Yes, yes, of course, I should have informed you of your schedule already,” he said over-apologetically. “Soon we will take you to lunch at our most famous restaurant. Kim Jong-Il himself dines there,” he said with perceptible awe. “After lunch we will go to the University. When you have met with your colleagues at the University, we will take you to your hotel, where you will dine at our excellent international restaurant on the forty-eighth floor.”

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“After dinner...” he began. When he said this, I began to groan inwardly at the thought of anything more happening after dinner. “...we have a very special treat for you. Ri Pun Hui, of the Mansudae Art Troupe, will be performing in “Flower Girl”, our most famous opera.”

I groaned inwardly even more at the thought of an evening spent at the opera, and I began to wonder how we were ever going to be able to do anything to further our real purpose here, if every minute was to be spent in the company of Mr. Yong.

But Mr. Yong was only a small part of the problem. Not only did we have our own host, but we appeared to have our own minders. A car containing three men and one woman wearing the uniforms of the North Korean army followed us everywhere. At each stop they got out of their car and spread themselves around us very carefully, so as to be able to observe every interchange between us and any of the Koreans whom we met. The other members of the delegation had their own minders too. I noticed at least fifty of them—that I could see—whose presence turned the already stiff formality of each stop into rigid pantomime.

Our personal group of four minders included a granite-faced older man. I succeeded in not staring at our minders too much, but I decided that some interest would be natural, and once I even locked eyes with the older man. I smiled politely as Americans usually do. His gaze was hard and flat and just on the right side of polite, although after a moment he did try to force onto his features something resembling a smile. I felt a chill go up my spine. But we did nothing that could possibly have made our minders suspicious. We had no opportunity to do anything at all except play our parts in the elaborately staged events of the day.

After lunch we broke away from the main delegation for our “goodwill visit” to the Kim Il-sung University Medical Research Center. Our car was followed by a second car carrying our interpreters, followed by a third car carrying our ever-vigilant minders. The visit went just as Grace had predicted. It was purely a photo-op. The doctors and staff spoke as if reading a script. Occasionally I caught a flash of near apology for the charade in the eyes of some of the doctors, but it was fleeting. Their natural human desire to talk with us was obviously overridden by their fear.

Afterwards we were taken to our hotel. It was a gleaming tower built on an island in the midst of the river that flows through central Pyongyang. We were shown to our rooms and given a few minutes to freshen up. We then gathered for dinner in the forty-eighth floor revolving restaurant, where we were served a pretentious, tasteless, Western-style meal.

The last event of the day finally arrived. We were taken to the Moranbong Theater, Pyongyang’s show-place concert hall and we were, as always, briskly and efficiently escorted to our seats by the seemingly inexhaustible Mr. Yong. He briefly explained to us, once we reached our seats, that we were lucky to catch this last performance by Ri Pun Hui, as she would be leaving tomorrow to perform some pieces from North Korea’s stirring patriotic opera in Seoul, a major concession in diplomatic relations with South Korea and part of the goodwill exchange between the two countries. I was struck by the fact that Mr. Yong noticeably softened whenever he spoke of Ri Pun Hui, showing genuine personal feelings for the first time all day.

As the opera progressed, I noticed that I was able to understand everything that was being sung. All day I had been hearing bits and snatches of Korean and, though I remembered not to react to anything I heard, I gradually found that I understood almost everything.

The opera was predictably patriotic, but just as I began to lose interest, the mood of the entire hall suddenly changed. The star attraction, Ri Pun Hui, came on stage for the first time.

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Ri Pun Hui was dressed in a beautiful traditional Korean robe, exquisitely embroidered in green, scarlet, silver, and gold, over a simple white tunic. Her robe was eye-catching, but she easily outshone it. Her face was delicately beautiful; more than beautiful, it was radiant. Her eyes were lustrous and alight, and as she glided on stage, her smile seemed as if it were meant for each one of us alone. The effect on the audience was electric. When she finished her brief walk to center stage, the audience members collectively drew their breath and held it. The silence in the hall was absolute.

Without accompaniment, Ri Pun Hui began to sing. Her voice was clear, pure and perfectly modulated. She sang with such poignancy, that each note, each word, each subtle movement, carried her feeling to the audience. Later in the opera, her character having been transformed by the glory of the revolution, she stirred the audience with her dedication, and when her character died heroically at the end, people openly wept.

The briskly efficient Mr. Yong sat with tears coursing down his cheeks, eyes filled with admiration. Even our head minder was still and absorbed, his face almost unrecognizable. The stiff mask he reserved for us had given way to the face of an ordinary man—perhaps someone loved by a wife and children.

I was astonished at her effect. I had no interest in the glorious revolution of North Korea, but I, too, had been deeply moved. I glanced at Elle/Samantha and saw that her eyes shone and her face was lit. When the curtain closed, the audience rose as one and began applauding. Ri Pun Hui and the rest of the cast returned to bow a dozen times before the audience reluctantly let them go.

Afterwards we were, predictably, ushered along by Mr. Yong to go meet the cast and Ri Pun Hui. This time however, my enthusiasm did not need to be manufactured. Once backstage, Elle/Samantha and I found ourselves moving slowly along the inevitable receiving line of people, shaking hands and smiling, eventually coming to stand in front of Ri Pun Hui.

It was hard to believe that this tiny young woman, now smiling shyly at me, could have moved an entire concert hall to joy and tears. Then I noticed how perfectly poised and calm she was, even in the bustle of back stage. It was as if she were surrounded by an aura of grace from which she gazed serenely onto the world. In her quick glance at me I saw nothing but purity and innocence.

We told her through our translators how much we had enjoyed her performance, but the line was moving inexorably along, and all we got from her was a gracious nod of acceptance of our appreciation.

I next found myself shaking hands with a patrician-looking Korean man of about seventy to whom Mr. Yong introduced us. His name was Mr. Hyun, and he was the Director of the Mansudae Art Troupe. Mr. Hyun surprised me by addressing us in English. “Did you enjoy the performance, Dr. Weston, Dr. Hardin?” he spoke as he looked to each of us in turn.

“Oh, yes,” we both chorused with genuine sincerity.

“She is the rarest of the rare,” he said simply.

Before we could say more, we had to move along and finish the receiving line. On the way back to the hotel, the indefatigable Mr. Yong seemed to need to talk. His uncharacteristic silence on the way to the performance was now replaced with an uncharacteristic and unabashed enthusiasm for Miss Ri Pun Hui. It was hard not to like this new Mr. Yong, and to appreciate what a cause for happiness Ri Pun Hui must be in the stultifyingly regimented life of North Korea.

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Once we arrived, Mr. Yong escorted us into the lobby of the hotel and told us he would see us at 7:00 a.m. for breakfast and the closing ceremonies, before taking us to the airport for our return flight. We thanked him sincerely for taking us to the opera and proceeded to our rooms.

As we were walking along the hall on the thirty-sixth floor, Elle/Samantha whispered almost inaudibly, “Stay in your room. Pretend to sleep, but be ready to go. I am going out.” After a heartbeat she added, “We got lucky.”

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## Chapter 8

I lay on my bed in the dark, fully clothed, and ready to go—but to go and do what, I wondered. What could Elle have possibly meant when she said we got lucky? We appeared to be no further along in our mission than we were when we first arrived. And how exactly was Elle going to ‘go out’? The hotel was like a prison. We were on an island in a river with only one bridge connecting us to the city. On the bridge was a checkpoint with guards. We were told not to leave the hotel without an escort—so we wouldn’t get lost. Right. There were military guards in the lobby and I saw security cameras everywhere. We couldn’t do anything, let alone ‘go out’ without being seen.

It all made me wonder why had I been so sure I that I had to come on this mission? So far I had contributed nothing—except perhaps adding more risk to an already very risky mission. We hadn’t come within sniffing distance of Professor Lee, let alone have a chance to speak with him. I was trapped here in the hotel and I didn’t see how I was going to do anything at all before our breakfast with Mr. Yong at 7:00 a.m.

As I lay there with my thoughts going in unproductive circles, I must have fallen into a kind of half-sleep, vaguely aware that I was dozing and drifting in and out of dreams. Suddenly I experienced an exceptionally vivid dream, more like a vision really. I began to see an outdoor scene. In the midst of a beautiful garden sat a lovely young woman with graceful oriental features. She was surrounded by roses blooming in profusion all around her, as she held a single white rose. The woman lifted her face and looked directly at me. She smiled, like a child on seeing a parent, open and trusting, simply holding my gaze, then carefully offered me the rose.

Just as I was reaching out to accept the rose, I was abruptly disturbed by the sound of the door to my room opening. Quickly opening my eyes and fighting through the disorientation I was feeling from having so abruptly returned to ordinary awareness, I saw a peaked cap and the shoulder epaulets of an Army officer silhouetted by the light from the hall.

I stiffened, mind beginning to race, and then heard a whisper, “It’s me, Elle,” in an unfamiliar voice.

She came closer, and in the dim light I was surprised, and not surprised, to see a middle-aged Korean woman in an Army uniform. “I’m Major Yi for the moment. We have to move quickly. We have very little time left. It’s already after 3:00.”

“Where are we going?” I asked quietly, sitting up.

“First I need you to change your appearance.”

I was tempted to say “right” with a goodish bit of sarcasm, but Elle/Major Yi’s serious tone gave me pause.

Instead, with a calm that surprised me, I asked, “Do you think I can do that?”

“You’ve done it a thousand times,” she said matter-of-factly.

“Who should I look like?” I said, trying to match her matter-of-fact tone and confidence.

“You should look like an American man,” she quickly responded. “Just picture how you want to look clearly in your mind, and then...well, it’s too complicated to explain and it may just confuse you. I think you’ll remember how if you just try.”

Trusting Elle, I sank back on the bed and began to search my mind for a face. One came to me surprising quickly and clearly, and it seemed familiar, although I had no idea why. Hoping I was making a good choice, I simply imagined that I was the image that I saw, tentatively at first, and

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then with greater and greater concentration. Finally, I felt as if my entire body was tingling and electrically alive, and then it passed. The intensity of concentration also passed and I sat up.

Elle/Major Yi looked at me in the room's dim light with surprise, and then pleased surprise.

"Did it work?" I asked.

"Oh, yes," she said. "Was this a face you knew from somewhere?" she asked with particular interest.

"No, but it came to me very clearly and strongly. Why?" I was curious about her reaction.

"You look like Michael Dyson again," she said and then smiled happily, "It just caught me by surprise, that's all."

"But come on, we have to go quickly. Bundle up. It's incredibly cold. Bring your Dr. Westin glasses, but don't wear them. I see your bag is packed. Good. We may not make it back to the rooms before we have to meet for breakfast. I'll explain everything once we are in the car."

"Don't say a word until we are away. I can move about freely because I appear to be a Major in the Army, but you need to act like you are under my authority. You might look a little worried, as would any tourist taken out of the hotel at 3:00 in the morning."

"That will be easy," I said in the understatement of the day.

Less than a minute later we entered the almost deserted lobby from the elevator and walked across without challenge. Elle/Major Yi nodded at the man at the desk as if she had already spoken with him before. Once outside, two armed guards looked us over. Elle/Major Yi barked an order at them and they stood stiffly to attention. We got into a car, which, as I was beginning to get used to, Elle started without any key, and we drove across the bridge, pausing only briefly at the checkpoint to show the guards her ID, then we drove into the city.

After we passed the checkpoint, Elle began talking immediately. "Do you remember the man we met after the performance, Mr. Hyun?"

I nodded.

"He's a Protector!"

"When we looked into each other's eyes we knew. He knew you were a Protector too, but since you didn't respond he played along."

"Didn't respond?" I asked, not understanding.

"He sent you a mental flash, as he did me, but you didn't respond," she continued. "He prolonged the moment by asking us if we enjoyed the performance, which gave us enough time to exchange some thoughts."

We can exchange thoughts?

Once again I marveled at how much I didn't know. What else could I do?

"I conveyed to him that we needed help, and he responded by sending me an image of where I could meet him. That was enough," she finished.

"Did you already know he was here?"

"No. I know what a lot of Protectors are up to, but none of us know where all of them are except Atri and Atria."

"What is he doing here?" I asked.

Elle's borrowed face lit with a smile. "He's Ri Pun Hui's Protector."

"But he's at least seventy and she can't be more than twenty," I exclaimed.

"Protectors sometimes take on tasks that will require an entire lifetime to complete," Elle said simply. "A lifetime seems long to most people, but not to a Protector. Mr. Hyun allowed himself to be born here knowing it would be fifty years before his task even began. He took on the task

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happily, because in former lifetimes it was he who had tutored and encouraged Ri Pun Hui, and he knew that in this life she would finally awaken.”

“Is she already awake?” I asked.

“Yes! Just recently. It’s why she can hold an audience spellbound. When she sings, she radiates her feelings so intensely that people experience them as if they were their own.”

“Seventy years,” I marveled.

“Seventy years of service is a price any Protector will pay to help a person reach the point of awakening. That’s what most Protectors do. You’ve done it yourself many times,” she ended with obvious satisfaction.

“But I’ve got to tell you the rest; we’ll be at the Lee’s soon,” she raced on, “I met Mr. Hyun in back of his home after changing my appearance and stealing this car. I told him what we needed to do, and he helped me with directions to find Professor Lee. He’s also going to provide some crucial help to get the Lee’s out—but I’ll have to tell you about it all later.”

“Right now we have a problem. A big problem. Professor Lee is afraid to go. He thinks I am trying to trick him into betraying himself as a defector.”

“After I left Mr. Hyun, I made my way to Professor Lee’s apartment. It’s in one of those concrete monstrosities we saw all over the place today. He was already badly frightened before I got there and then when I showed up, looking like a North Korean Army Major, he freaked. I talked and talked but nothing I said could get him to trust me. I told him I knew about his physics paper and that we wanted to get him out to the West. I told him I was with South Korean intelligence and could get him out safely. But nothing I said could reach him. He thinks I’m testing his loyalty to the regime and that everything I said was meant to trick him into confessing.”

“Why was he already badly frightened?”

“Because, today at the University, all access to the computers in the physics department was revoked. Apparently agents for the State Security Department were searching for unpublished physics papers. When I told him I knew he had gotten half his paper out to the West he denied it a bit too much. Later he brought up the search at the University as if I already knew about it.”

“Why would anyone suddenly start looking...” I trailed off, and then it dawned on me. “Rockshaw must have somehow found out we were going into North Korea and guessed we would be looking for physics papers.”

After a pause I asked, “Could Rockshaw really get the North Korean secret service to do that?”

“Oh yes. North Korea’s only significant exports are weapons like the SCUD missile. Most legitimate traders won’t deal with them. But Rockshaw is made to order for them. He brokers deals for them all over the world. They would do a lot to keep him happy.”

“Then they must be looking for us as well...”

“Yes. But I don’t think they know yet who we are or how we got in, or we’d already have been arrested. I don’t think they have Professor Lee’s name either, or they would have paid him a visit. We should assume, though, that Rockshaw will feed the North Koreans anything he learns. If he found out we were going to North Korea, he may be able to find out how we got in,” Elle finished.

After a moment I said, “Why did you come get me? What can I do to convince Professor Lee to leave the country that you couldn’t do?”

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“I didn’t know what else to do, so I told him I would bring my American contact to meet him. He’s terrified but he couldn’t say no to a Major in case that was a trick as well. I’m afraid Professor Lee is not having a relaxing night.”

Before I could think any further, we pulled up outside a massive concrete block of apartments. We entered, and startled the building’s guard into wakefulness. Elle/Major Yi shouted at him. Her rapid and commanding Korean was a bit shocking, but I understood that she had just warned the hapless guard that if she ever found him asleep again, he would find himself patrolling the Chinese border in snow up to his ass. We swept past him and around a corner to the stairs.

As we climbed the stairs, Elle/Major Yi grinned and said, “The trick is to always act as if you belong in the situation. People see what they expect to see, so you have to behave as they expect you to behave.”

A fearful Professor Lee opened the door to our knock and stiffly gestured us in. He had the stocky build of many Korean men, and coarse black hair, rather mussed at the moment as if he had been haphazardly running his hands through it. His eyes were worried but intelligent. The apartment was tiny. The room we entered included a small kitchen along one wall, a table and four chairs. There was an additional door opposite where we stood that must lead to a bedroom and bathroom. The room seemed airless and was stale with cooking smells.

Professor Lee looked long and consideringly at me, before finally speaking, “Major Yi told me you would come, but I will not betray my country to an American any more than I would to her.” He spoke as if he had been rehearsing a speech, saying exactly what he thought would clear him of suspicion if this were all a trap.

I finally ventured to speak Korean, “Professor Lee. I’m afraid we have put you in danger and we need to get you out of your country to the safety of the U.S.”

When I finished speaking, a tiny Korean woman quickly entered the kitchen area from the bedroom with a look of surprise and wonder on her face. She looked at me with great intensity, as if wanting to be very sure, and then a radiant smile lit her face. Her smile triggered a feeling of recognition, and then I remembered where I had seen her; I had seen her in my vision not thirty minutes ago, reaching out to offer me a white rose.

In quiet but definite tones she said, “My husband,” still looking directly at me, “this is the man I have seen in my dreams. I dreamed of him again tonight. He is my Teacher.”

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## Chapter 9

I don't know who was more stunned at her words, Professor Lee, or me.

"Husband, you are a very smart man," she spoke as if this was a conversation they had often had. "You know about the atoms and the far away stars, but there are many things you do not understand. My husband, do not fear. I have always told you this will happen."

She smiled at me with the same child-like trust in her eyes that I had beheld in my vision. "I have seen you many times in my meditations and in my dreams. I know you have come to help us," she said with simple conviction, as if describing the fact that the sun will rise in the morning.

"What is your name," I asked her in Korean.

"Jang Mi," she said softly. I realized her name meant "rose" in Korean.

"Jang Mi," I said carefully, "You and your husband are in danger. You must let us get you out of North Korea."

Professor Lee let out something between a gasp and a sigh. His terror was battling with his hope. He looked at us beseechingly, knowing that if we were still trying to trick him then his next words could be his own death sentence.

"You really can get us out?"

"Yes," said Elle and I at the same moment.

Professor Lee and Jang Mi gazed silently but poignantly into each other's eyes. Professor Lee was just daring to believe but Jang Mi was already certain. She waited patiently for him to take it in.

Elle/Major Lee gestured at me to go into the bedroom and let them have a few minutes to themselves in the kitchen. I sat on the bed and stared wordlessly at Elle. She was as calm and understanding as Jang Mi, and let me sit to take it in. All she said was, "When your memories return in full, you will remember Jang Mi in her past lives—and you will remember how to be her Teacher."

We sat saying no more for quite a while. Finally Elle broke the silence. "Kind of a different life from being a Berkeley professor, huh?" Merriment was shining from her eyes.

Then she went to the bedroom door, knocked discretely, and opened the door, asking Professor Lee and Jang Mi if we could join them in the kitchen. She apologized for intruding, but explained that she needed to tell them what they would have to do to get out of North Korea and that we didn't have much time left.

A now much calmer Professor Lee and serene Jang Mi were sitting at their kitchen table when we came in. When Jang Mi saw me, she immediately stood and offered me a chair and then one for Elle/Major Yi, but her eyes never left my face.

Once we were settled, Elle/Major Yi went over what the Lees' part was in the plan she had worked out with Mr. Hyun, and then she went over it again and again until she was satisfied that they understood what they needed to do. Jang Mi's serenity never wavered, but I could tell the enormity of what he was about to do was hitting Professor Lee hard.

As we got ready to leave, since the Lees would never again see us in the guises we wore, I had the presence of mind to say to Professor Lee, "After you are in South Korea, a lot of people are going to be talking to you. Don't tell anyone about your paper except a woman named Elle or a man named Michael. You'll know they are the right people because they will be able to tell you what happened here tonight. Don't give the information to anyone else."

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Then turning to address Jang Mi, I said, "It may be many days before I am able to see you again. Don't worry. I will find you." She gave me the same trusting look she had in my vision and simply nodded her acceptance of my words.

Going out the door with a final wave to the Lees, a feeling of urgency hit us both—time was running out. We raced down the stairs and Elle/Major Yi strode past the now rigidly awake guard, ushering me out the front door with a stern look and a nod of the head for the guard's benefit. Once in the car, we glanced at our watches. It was already after six a.m. "We still have to return this car to where I found it and walk to the hotel," said Elle. "It's going to be very close..."

Driving cautiously, so as not to attract attention, Elle headed back to where she had stolen the car. As she drove, she rapidly filled me in on the rest of the plan she and Mr. Hyun had come up with to get the Lees out of North Korea. The Lees' part in it was simple. The rest of the plan left me gaping.

"And you say *my* plans are crazy. We're going to get all this done in the next hour?"

It was Elle's turn to give *me* the squinty-eye treatment, but we both laughed, and I felt my intensity level drop a notch or two. But before we could go over the plan any more, Elle began to slow down and parked the car. As we began walking away, she once again amazed me by locking the doors with a quick gesture of one hand.

At my bemused glance she waggled her fingers and said, "Who needs keys."

We walked as fast as we dared back toward the hotel. Dawn had arrived, so it was already light enough to see clearly. I glanced at my watch and it read 6:47. We were supposed to meet Mr. Yong for breakfast at 7:00. If we were late, it would not take him long to call our rooms to find out where we were...

We turned a corner and right ahead of us was the checkpoint on the bridge to the hotel. I must have tensed involuntarily because without missing a stride, Elle quickly said, "Remember, people see what they expect to see. Leave this to me."

As we walked up to the barrier, Elle/Major Yi called out to one of the guards in Korean, "I found this man walking around on his own blocks away from the hotel. How was an American able to walk out of the hotel without an escort? Someone is going to have a lot of explaining to do!" As the import of her words sank in the guards stiffened into fearful attention.

"I will take him to security," Elle/Major Yi finished with a snarl of anger. She pulled me forward by the arm and headed for the entrance of the hotel. Out of the side of her mouth she whispered, "Just follow my lead. We need to cover our tracks."

We made it to the hotel without challenge and entered the lobby. Even this early there was a lot of activity. Without looking either left or right Elle/Major Yi strode across the lobby with me by the arm. We were half way across the lobby when we came face to face with our head minder, Major Hwa.

I came within a nanosecond of blowing our cover. My first impulse was to greet him and try to bluff my way out of having been outside. At the last instant I remembered that he wouldn't recognize me in the guise of Michael Dyson and I bit back my words. He must have noticed something in my face, however, because he gave me an appraising look. Elle/Major Yi merely gave him a cool nod of the head and we never slowed down.

We crossed the lobby, going down a hallway that was marked, "Hotel Staff Only". To my surprise, we entered a door with a sign on it that read "Security".

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“Who is in charge here?” Elle/Major Yi almost shouted as soon as we were inside.

Two younger men in uniform came out of an inner room, hastily came to attention and saluted smartly. “I am. Corporal Yun, ma’am,” one of the men said with the wavering confidence any young corporal would feel when he faces a clearly angry officer.

“I found this man,” she said gesturing at me, “a foreign guest, walking alone several blocks from here. How did he get out without an escort?” Her tone was icy fury.

Before the clearly terrified soldiers could answer, Elle/Major Yi continued as if she were dealing with colossal incompetence, “Show me the security tapes for the front entrance for the last hour. We’ll see who let this happen.”

We followed the two shaken corporals into the inner room. On one wall were half a dozen monitors showing the video feeds from various surveillance cameras. Two other walls held shelves of video tapes. While the two corporals flipped switches and inserted video tapes into machines, Elle/Major Yi was looking around. I noticed a brief look of satisfaction when her eyes fell on a small electronic device sitting on a counter.

It was a magnetic tape “eraser”—essentially an electromagnet just strong enough to scramble the magnetic coding on any tape run across the top of it, but not so strong that it would erase tapes farther away. Like most surveillance setups, the tapes were erased and reused on a regular cycle.

While the two corporals were nervously fumbling with tapes and machines, Elle/Major Yi grew very still. Moments later an increasingly loud hum began to fill the room and the images on all the monitors began to go fuzzy. The corporals looked up from their machines in confusion in time to see the magnetic tape eraser begin to shoot out sparks. Moments later, the video screens all went dead, light bulbs grew extra-bright and then began exploding. The tinkling sound of broken glass was coming from all directions. Finally we were left completely in the dark.

I smiled to myself. Elle had, somehow, drawn more amps through the electromagnet in the eraser than it was designed to handle in order to create a magnetic field large enough to destroy all the tapes in the room. In the process, the increased amperage had fried the eraser, monitors, probably their recorders as well, and blown out all the bulbs. All evidence of our comings and goings that had been recorded by their surveillance system had just been reduced to unintelligible static. Our electronic tracks, at least, were covered.

Elle/Major Yi shouted, “You idiots! What have you done?” The two corporals began talking over one another in their haste to try to explain that it wasn’t their fault and that there had been some kind of electrical surge.

While they were stammering confused explanations, she grabbed my elbow in the dark and whispered in my ear, “Let’s go.”

We got out of the security office and walked rapidly down the hall deeper into hotel staff territory. We turned right at the next hallway then left at the next. Glancing over her shoulder to make sure we were not observed, she turned the handle of a nearby door and, preceded by a faint click, it opened. I guessed that Elle had unlocked it as she opened it.

We found ourselves in a small, darkened office, faint light coming through a frosted-glass panel in the door. Leaving the lights off, Elle said, “You need to become Doctor Westin again.” A spasm of panic passed through me. Last night when I changed my appearance I had been lying down and relaxed, having just been in a very deep state. Now I was disoriented and nervous from the intensity of the last few minutes. I wasn’t sure I would be able to do it.

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Sensing my panic, she said, “You can do it. You’ve done it a thousand times. Just sit and relax for bit. But I can’t stay and help you. I need as much time as possible to deal with the agents and their passports. If I can’t do it, this whole plan will come apart. I’ll see you in the banquet hall. Don’t forget that you should be shaved and looking morning fresh, and don’t forget to put your Dr. Westin glasses back on!” And with that she was gone.

I locked the door after her, found a chair in the dark, and sat down to try to calm myself. After a brief minute to gather my wits, I tried to visualize myself as Michael Dinsmore but in my agitated state I found it disconcertingly difficult to call up a clear image of my own familiar face. My feeling of panic returned.

I took some deep breaths and tried again. This time, just as I was beginning to feel calm and focused, the door handle rattled. My eyes flew open and I almost jumped out of my chair. I heard an exchange of Korean outside in the hallway and gathered that they were checking rooms for something. I realized with a pang of alarm that they were probably looking for me. I looked at my watch and it read 7:23. I was very late in a country where lateness was not an option.

The seriousness of my predicament gave me new-found focus. I closed my eyes and quickly visualized a bright-eyed, freshly-shaven Michael Dinsmore, and, at last, felt the deepening of concentration I had experienced just hours before when I had done it in my room. Once started, the process seemed familiar and easy, and the tingling electrical feeling throughout my body came and went more quickly than before.

Lacking a mirror, I couldn’t help running my hands over my face and head to make sure I had a full complement of features. I breathed out an enormous sigh of relief when I found the right number of eyes, ears, lips and whatnot all in the right places—no ear on the top of my head or baldness on one side. I thought with fervor that I would welcome the day when it all became as easy as Elle made it look.

I stood up, removed my coat, folding it over my arm as if I hadn’t yet been outside, put on my Dr. Westin glasses, and opened the door a crack. I saw no one and stepped into the hallway. I hadn’t gone far, however, when I heard a voice from behind me. I didn’t react since he was speaking Korean and kept walking although I knew he had asked me to stop.

I heard rapid footsteps coming up behind and felt a hand on my shoulder. I stopped, turned and looked politely at a young soldier. “Dr. Westin?” he asked, pronouncing the W as an R so it sounded like Restin.

“Yes, I am Dr. Westin.”

“Come now,” was all he could manage to say in English and gestured for me to continue in the direction I was already going. As we made our way along I noticed there were a lot of people in Army uniforms racing around. Elle’s little trick had certainly stirred up the anthill. Several people in uniform asked my young soldier who I was and where he was taking me. He told them that he was taking me to Major Hwa in the banquet room.

They also asked him if anyone had found a Major Yi yet, their tone implying that she had a lot to answer for. I pretended that I didn’t understand a word they were saying and waited patiently each time for the young soldier to finish talking with them.

When we eventually entered the banquet hall, my escort led us to a very nervous-looking Mr. Yong, who was talking with a very angry-looking Major Hwa. As I was escorted over to them, Mr. Yong saw me first and said in an overly-hearty and relieved tone of voice, “Ah! Here you are, Dr. Westin; we’ve been looking for you. I called your room and you didn’t answer, so we sent some people to look for you.”

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“Oh, I’m sorry. I lost track of the time. I’ve been wandering around the hotel, then I got lost until this nice young soldier found me and showed me the way here. Did you know there is a two-lane bowling alley downstairs?” I asked with what I hoped would sound like genuine appreciation. “And the swimming pool and other facilities look great. I wish we’d had more time to try some of these things out.” I hoped I sounded convincing, since I had only read about these things in the hotel services book in my room.

As I was speaking to Mr. Yong, the young soldier was speaking softly to Major Hwa. I could feel Major Hwa’s eyes boring holes in the side of my head. When I looked at him, he gave me the same hard flat stare as when we had locked eyes yesterday, but this time he made no attempt to smile. He was radiating hostility.

“Dr. Westin,” began Major Hwa in English, “where have you been? An American was reported to have been walking outside the hotel without an escort and my corporal tells me he found you in a restricted area of the hotel.”

Do what is expected, I thought. How would a falsely-accused American react?

He’d get mad!

“Hey,” I almost shouted, and other members of the delegations looked our way, “what are you saying? I’ve just been wandering around your hotel! I haven’t been outside. I didn’t know I was in a restricted area of the hotel. I just got lost. What is this? In my country it isn’t a crime to get lost in a hotel!”

I hoped I wasn’t overdoing it.

Major Hwa kept staring at me. I stared back trying to maintain an aura of outraged innocence. Finally he nodded curtly and looked away. Conscious of the delicate position he was in, he said, “My apologies, Dr. Westin. I did not mean to accuse you of having committed a crime. Please know that we are only trying to understand how these things occurred.”

I nodded reluctantly, and let him off the hook. “Well, I haven’t been outside since we arrived back from the opera, but I understand that you needed to ask.”

He nodded to me equally reluctantly and began to move off, but I could tell this wasn’t over. All Major Hwa’s instincts must have been telling him that Americans can’t wander around a Korean hotel for thirty minutes and not be seen, and that security systems don’t get destroyed by a freak accident. If I weren’t a goodwill delegate, I was pretty sure Major Hwa would even now be taking me to a small interrogation room somewhere for a nice cozy chat.

“Well, that unpleasantness is over,” said Mr. Yong briskly. He was striving for a semblance of normality, though he was obviously deeply relieved that he had not lost one of his charges, something that would probably have cost him his position, if not outright ruined him. “And you still have time for some breakfast before the closing ceremony.”

Pretending to be oblivious of any tensions my lateness had caused, I obligingly went over to the breakfast buffet and returned with a full plate. I had no appetite but attempted to eat for appearance’s sake. While making polite small talk with Mr. Yong and our two interpreters, I noticed that Elle/Samantha and a number of the other delegates were circulating casually throughout the banquet hall, greeting other delegates – sometimes chatting through their interpreters. The mood of the room seemed much more relaxed than last night’s dinner. No doubt the delegation was looking forward to going back home—away from the nightmarish farce of North Korea.

In a few minutes the closing ceremonies were to begin and many of the delegates made trips to the bathrooms—including Elle/Samantha—who returned shortly and spoke again briefly with

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some of the interpreters. If I hadn't known it was going to happen, I would have thought nothing of her final shake of the hands and exchange of hugs with the interpreters, during which Elle/Samantha made an unseen handoff. Then she returned to our table for the closing ceremonies.

A dais had been set up along one wall of the banquet hall, and when the closing ceremonies began, several officials from North Korea made speeches about the glories of North Korea, then several officials in our delegation made speeches praising North Korea, expressing hope for more cooperation between North Korea and the rest of the world. Although we all dutifully applauded, I'm not sure anyone believed anything that was being said. We all knew we were actors in a carefully staged event.

Afterwards, we drove to the airport, and, brisk and efficient to the last, Mr. Yong escorted us all the way to the security area to bid us farewell. We, of course, thanked him profusely for taking excellent care of us and wished him well.

We were about to enter the line for going through security when we heard a commotion. We turned to see Ri Pun Hui coming our way at the front of what could only be described as a fawning mass. Walking by her side was Mr. Hyun.

Uniformed guards, who had given us non-committal stares when we came in, were now beaming at Ri Pun Hui, and unnecessarily clearing the way for her through what was a perfectly clear hall. Unnoticed, we hoped, by the minders, Professor Lee and Jang Mi had entered the airport in the midst of the commotion as if they were a part of her entourage.

Ri Pun Hui came to a halt just before entering the security area, and turned to face the large crowd of North Korean journalists who had followed her in. At her side, Mr. Hyun announced that she would answer some questions. Ri Pun Hui was dazzling. She answered their questions with grace, sometimes managing to elicit a laugh.

After a few minutes of questions and answers, she offered to sing. The crowd applauded her offer and she began to sing the final aria of the "Flower Girl". She truly did have extraordinary charisma. It held everyone's undivided attention for a full five minutes. I hoped it was undivided, at any rate.

Moments after Ri Pun Hui had begun singing, Professor Lee and Jang Mi had unobtrusively headed for the bathrooms. Moments later, two of the CIA agent interpreters, one man and one woman, had also slipped away to the bathrooms. Elle had told the CIA agent interpreters what to do when she was circulating in the banquet hall during breakfast. As quickly as possible, they were to switch their clothes and passports with Professor Lee and Jang Mi while in the bathrooms.

Elle had chosen the two CIA agent interpreters who most resembled the Lees. But Elle had told me she would be able to 'doctor' their passport pictures to look like the Lees, thus her trip to the bathroom after breakfast and her handoff when she returned. The CIA agent/interpreters now had passports with the Lees' pictures in them.

Mr. Hyun's part of the plan was to provide us with the best moment for the switch. He had told Elle that he would arrange for Ri Pun Hui to sing the aria and that it would take five minutes. I hoped it was long enough.

When the song ended, way too soon for comfort, the crowd erupted into applause. Ri Pun Hui bowed graciously several times, making a slow half-circle as she did so. Moments later she and Mr. Hyun were escorted past the security line and passed out of sight. The North Korean press departed in a mob. The rest of us queued up to go through security.

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In the midst of this coming and going, the Lees returned, now dressed in the interpreter's clothes and carrying their shoulder bags. They quietly entered the security line a half-dozen people behind us. The two CIA agent interpreters, now wearing the Lees' clothes, were leaving the airport with the crowd of North Korean press.

Our minders continued to do their job to the last, however. Our delegation was still being watched carefully. In fact, they were joined by even more minders who were going with Ri Pun Hui's entourage to South Korea. Only Ri Pun Hui and Mr. Hyun got the VIP treatment and were escorted through security. The rest of her entourage needed to go through security just as we did, along with all their minders.

We were banking on it.

Our delegation and Ri Pun Hui's entourage were strangers to each other. Elle was counting on both sets of minders assuming the Lees belonged to the other group and in a mixed crowd of over a hundred people I began to think they would.

I glanced back casually and noticed that Professor Lee looked very tense. If he continued looking like a deer caught in the headlights, Elle's intricate plan could end in disaster. Just then he turned to look at Jang Mi and his eyes softened and some of the tension left his face. Jang Mi was, in contrast to Professor Lee, calm and relaxed. I hoped she could keep him from giving himself away.

I was beginning to think this elaborate clockwork of a plan was going to work when I suddenly realized there was a crucial gear missing. The minders assigned to the real interpreters would be waiting for them to come through security! They had been minding the real interpreters all day yesterday and most of this morning and would hardly mistake Professor Lee and Jang Mi for their charges. If the minders don't see the real interpreters go through security, our plan was going to come unraveled.

Just as my mind began to race, I noticed one, then two, then several of the minders put their hands to their mouths, and walk hastily off in the direction of the bathrooms. They showed the unmistakably signs of being in danger of not making it to the toilets before they threw up. I very slowly glanced at Elle/Samantha at my side, and noticed the faintest crinkle of amusement in the corners of eyes. I had no doubt Elle had picked the appropriate minders for whatever it was she had done to make them abandon their posts.

Moments later we reached the head of the line, showed our passports, and were passed through. We strolled along with other delegation members to the waiting area for our flight where we took seats. After only a minute or two I was immensely relieved to see the Lees arrive and take seats not far from us.

I took a cautious breath. I could see the plane waiting outside on the taxi way. We would be boarding in just a few minutes. But when I turned back to look at our fellow passengers in the waiting area, instead I saw Major Hwa plant himself firmly in front of us. In his hand was a clipboard and on it I could see a picture of the real Samantha Hardin wearing a stethoscope and wearing scrubs.

Major Hwa had been doing some snooping and his eyes had a determined look.

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## Chapter 10

Major Hwa was determined—but I could tell he was also nervous. He was in a delicate situation. We were official goodwill ambassadors and a wrong move on his part would go hard for him. But he also didn't want to have been made a fool and my unexplained behavior before breakfast must have made him highly suspicious.

"Dr. Westin and Dr. Hardin I need to see your passports," he announced heavily.

"Why, of course," Elle/Samantha said with a faint trace of amusement, as if it was going to be a good story she could tell her friends. She quickly stood up and fished her passport out of her purse and held it out for him to take.

Mr. Hwa looked uncertain for a moment at her relaxed and open response. He may have hoped that she would show some signs of nervousness or guilt. Instead she stood waiting calmly and smiled at him in restrained amusement.

I could tell that his confidence was shaken, but nevertheless, Major Hwa soldiered on. He took Elle/Samantha's passport and began comparing it to the picture he had on his clipboard. Then he compared the picture on the clipboard to Elle/Samantha herself. Finding no difference, I could see him faltering. But I knew he would hit the jackpot if he had a picture of the real Dr. Westin and he compared it to my passport photo or to me.

He reluctantly handed back Elle/Samantha's passport and with dogged determination he was holding out his hand for my passport when a voice came from nearby.

"Dr. Westin and Dr. Hardin, isn't it?"

When Major Hwa turned to look at who was interrupting him, he saw Mr. Hyun—and at his side, Ri Pun Hui.

"Apparently we are traveling on the same flight to Seoul," Mr. Hyun continued. And then, with seamless courtesy and calm, he turned to our interrogator and said in Korean, "Major Hwa, isn't it? We met when you were escorting the South Korean attaché to one of our performances. Please, allow me to introduce you to Ri Pun Hui."

The surprised, then stunned, Major Hwa seemed unable to decide what to do, but after a few moments he turned, bowed and smiled politely at Ri Pun Hui. She in turn gave the major a full-wattage smile.

We watched with secret relief as a transformation took place. The stern and hardened Major Hwa seemed to melt under her gaze. He proceeded to tell her with increasing enthusiasm that he found her performances moving and exquisite. The more they talked, the more Major Hwa's features softened. Ri Pun Hui's full and appreciative attention seemed to mesmerize him.

After a few minutes of conversation between Ri Pun Hui and Major Hwa, our flight was called, and Mr. Hyun smoothly said, "Ah, our flight is boarding. Dr. Westin, Dr. Hardin, would you like to accompany us on board," and with smiles all around, we proceeded out the door, across the tarmac, and up the stairs into the plane. It took all my self control not to turn and look back at Major Hwa, but just as I entered the plane I was able to glance back and there he stood, smiling wistfully at Ri Pun Hui's retreating back. As I glanced back I noticed also, and with equal relief, that the Lees were climbing the stairs to the plane. After we took our seats, they passed by us to find their own. A short time later we landed in Seoul, out of reach of the North Koreans.

I finally exhaled.

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We were met by Grace before we could enter passport control and customs. We quickly but discretely pointed the Lees out to her and she got on her cell phone immediately. Moments later several uniformed officials approached the Lees and escorted them away.

I spoke quickly to Grace, "Please tell them to reassure the Lees. They are probably terrified. Tell them that Elle and Michael will see them soon."

Elle added in a low but intense voice, "Put extra guards on them. People you can trust. Rockshaw found out we went into the North and he nearly got us captured. He probably has people here as well."

With a look of alarm and without pause, Grace got on her cell phone again, this time barking orders in rapid Korean, warning whoever it was to take extreme caution and to take no orders from anyone but her. Then she made two other calls to bring in reinforcements with the same instructions.

"Come with me," she said.

Grace escorted us to a waiting room through a maze of bland airport corridors and then told us she was going off to make sure everything was being done to protect the Lees.

We settled on a vinyl-covered divan that made a faint crinkling sound as we sat. As I let my weight settle and stretched out my legs, I realized that this was the first moment I had felt safe in over twenty-four hours.

"So, we do this all the time huh?" I asked as if mildly curious.

"Well, it's not always like this. Sometimes it's dangerous," she answered with deadpan seriousness.

Then we both laughed. I laughed long and hard, longer than the joke was worth, the pent up intensity of the last twenty-four hours sort of bubbling off, until with a deep breath I managed to stop.

"Whew," was all I could manage to say.

"You did great," Elle said with genuine warmth. "And it will get easier. Right now you are mostly flying blind. Next chance we get I'll see if we can't do more to speed up your awakening process."

"I wish we had had a chance to thank Mr. Hyun and Ri Pun Hui," I said after a moment.

"They know. I sent them a quick mental flash when we were getting off the plane."

There she goes again with the mental flash thing. What else will I be able to do that I don't know about?

After a moment I said, "Should we try to get them out of North Korea?"

"When I saw him last night, I asked him if they wanted out. He said they had already considered it many times. Actually, with his Protector's abilities, Mr. Hyun could have gotten them out long ago. But he said they both feel that staying in the North does the most good. It helps keep human feeling and hope alive—and the North Koreans desperately need both."

A few minutes later, Grace came to collect us. After assuring us that the Lees were extremely well guarded and that she had personally reassured them that they were safe, she whisked us off. With her usual efficiency she took us to a secure area, where our daypacks and the clothes we arrived in from Santa Fe, freshly laundered, were waiting for us.

Pointing to two doors she said, "Use those rooms to change back into your old clothes and leave everything you took with you to North Korea. We already reclaimed your luggage."

A short while later, we came back to into the main room where Grace awaited us. Not only had Elle changed back into denim pants and jacket, tank top and running shoes but she had

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resumed Elle's now familiar features as well. Once again, Dr. Samantha Hardin had her identity all to herself.

"Can you get rid of these for us," asked Elle, handing Grace a passport and wallet. "This is the Susan Sinclair passport and ID I used for the trip from Santa Fe to Seoul. Michael, you should give her your Robert Anderson stuff. We won't want to use those names again."

I rummaged around in my day pack until I found them and then handed them over to Grace.

"One last bit of housekeeping," announced Grace. She turned on a recorder and told us to describe everything we did publically, everything we said to anyone, and any impressions we had of our visit so the real Drs. Westin and Hardin would know what "they" did while in North Korea. Once we were done, Grace bustled out to make arrangements for the tape to be transcribed and sent, along with their passports, to the real doctors, and then bustled back in.

Housekeeping done, we brought Grace up to speed on what we had actually done. Her eyes lit up when we told her about Ri Pun Hui and Mr. Hyun. But the light died when we told her how close we had come to being caught.

Elle summed up, "Not only did Rockshaw reach out a long arm and have the university's physics department computers searched, I'm willing to bet that he managed to get a tip to the State Department of Security which made its way to Major Hwa. Why else would Major Hwa have become suspicious of our particular passports? If the tip had reached the major any earlier, I don't think we would have made it out."

Turning to Grace Elle said, "I'm sure you already realize that Rockshaw must have sources in the CIA." Grace acknowledged her point with a worried nod.

Elle continued with a note of exasperation, "We need to get out on our own as soon as we can. We can't maintain secrecy unless we disappear completely. No more CIA, no more Foundation. Rockshaw has been too close for comfort."

"So what do you want to do?" asked Grace.

"I still need time alone with Professor Lee," I said quickly. "And we need to make sure that the Lees are absolutely safe from Rockshaw."

"I can set it up so that you can fly with the Lees as far as San Francisco. We have a private jet fueled and waiting. I assumed you were going to be successful in getting Professor Lee out, so I've already arranged a safe house in the States."

"Can you trust the agents who are meeting them in S.F.?" asked Elle. It was an alarming question for all of us.

Grace considered the question for a minute. "No. Not everyone." After another pause she said, "I'd better come with you, and we'd be wise to have some backup plans."

Elle breathed a sigh of relief and looked gratefully at Grace. "I hoped you would say that. I can't tell you why, but it's crucial that Professor Lee and his wife stay out of Rockshaw's hands."

Grace looked serious for a moment and then grinned. "It's never dull around you guys."

We discussed the situation a bit longer and came up with a plan. Grace made several cell phone calls to make arrangements. In the end, we thought we had covered all possibilities. Elle ended the discussion by saying, "Grace, no matter what happens, don't worry about us. Just get the Lees away safely."

Grace nodded and asked us if there was anything else we needed. "As a matter of fact, there is," said Elle. "We need to have an encrypted teleconference with Xu. Do you have Xu's encryption protocols?"

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Grace said to give her a sec. She shot out of the room and was back with a laptop computer almost before she left. “This is my mine. It’s all set up and ready to go.”

“Fantastic,” said Elle, even as she was tapping keys to make the connection to Xu. Xu came on instantly, almost as if he had been waiting for us. He was holding one ear bud and was reaching to remove the other one, his head cocked to one side.

Before he could even get as far as hello, Elle said, “Meet us at your usual S.F. place. We leave in thirty minutes. Be extra careful.” Then she broke the connection.

“Was that some kind of code?” I asked.

“No. I just happen to know that Xu always rents cars from Avis.”

At my look she said, “Hey. Protectors have quirks just like anyone else. He’ll meet us at the Avis rental center outside the S.F. airport. Speaking of which, if we get separated, that’s where we’ll rendezvous.”

“And ‘be extra careful’?”

“He probably would have been extra careful anyway since it was obvious we were afraid that even our encrypted connection was compromised. But I was telling him to change his appearance and to bring extra sets of identities.”

Less than fifteen minutes later, Grace drove the Lees and us out to a heavily-guarded private jet. We had cars full of CIA agents ahead and behind us. We had considered whether Rockshaw might make a move here in Seoul and we had a backup plan just in case. But nothing happened. We boarded the plane and took off without incident.

After we reached cruising altitude, Elle and I unbuckled and invited the Lees to join us around a table with facing seats. We introduced ourselves as Elle and Michael. When he heard our names, it seemed as if Professor Lee suddenly woke up and looked at us directly for the first time. Jang Mi, however, had already been eying us with great interest—especially me.

Elle spoke softly, “Friends of ours told us that you had a memorable experience last night. Jang Mi found her Teacher.”

At her words Professor Lee relaxed somewhat. But I suspected that he still thought this might all be an elaborate trick and that at any moment they would both be arrested. I imagine it will be some time before Professor Lee really believes in his bones that he is safe from the North Koreans. The effects of a lifetime of wariness and fear would not simply melt away in a few days. Jang Mi, on the other hand, seemed to have accepted her rescue without reservation. Oddly, her eyes remained fixed on me, even though it was Elle who had spoken.

Moments later, Grace arrived with a tray on which there was a bottle of Korean Soju wine and several cups. She filled enough cups for all of us and then proposed a toast to a new life for the Lees. Professor Lee joined in tentatively and Jang Mi with enthusiasm. Korean food followed the toast. Bless Grace’s efficient planning. The wine and food’s influence eventually combined to coax a small smile out of Professor Lee.

Finally, after more food and a few more cups of Soju, their growing happiness at their escape seemed to be giving way to fatigue. I decided I needed to speak with Professor Lee about his paper before he fell asleep.

I left Elle and Grace to entertain Jang Mi and asked Professor Lee to accompany me to the rear of the plane. Once we were reseated, I brought up the subject of his paper. He told me he had hidden the second half of the paper in an MP3 file that he had uploaded to a music-sharing site. The MP3 file contained the paper, but it was encrypted. If anyone tried to play the MP3 file, he would find it didn’t work. But since it is an obscure North Korean folk song to begin with, it

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is likely no one has ever downloaded it. I got him to tell me the IP address of the server on which he had hidden the fake MP3 file and how to decrypt it.

Then we began to discuss the second half of his paper. He said that he had come across the work of Guth and his team, and became fascinated by Inflation Theory—the theory that there had been a rapid expansion of space, faster even than the speed of light, which had occurred at the initial moments of the Big Bang.

Professor Lee, however, saw something in the equations that no one else seemed to have seen. He saw that according to equations, the rapid expansion of space was proportional to the amount of energy contained in the big bang. Pretty straightforward so far. But then he began to wonder what would happen if he arbitrarily reduced the amount of spatial expansion in the equations? He found that, counter-intuitively, there would be an increase in the total amount of energy contained within normal space.

He saw that by restricting spatial expansion and therefore causing the total amount of energy to increase, it meant that the reduction in the amount of *space itself* must be adding new energy to the total. He confessed to having no idea how that was possible, but he refined his equations to the point where they could predict the actual amount of energy that would be derived by even minute reductions to the expansion rate of space.

Professor Lee had no way to take his findings any further than he had. He was a junior professor of physics at the university and he wasn't even supposed to be pursuing the idea. So he kept it to himself and worked on it when he had time to spare. It finally dawned on him that it could be his ticket out of Pyongyang.

Even though his access to the internet was severely restricted, he managed to get the second half of his paper hidden away in the MP3 upload. Then he bided his time until just the right opportunity presented itself and gave the first half of his paper to a sympathetic visiting Chinese professor and waited. And waited. It had been almost two years since he smuggled out his paper. He had almost given up hope.

We talked for several hours until I thought I understood Professor Lee's discovery. Xu and I would still need the actual equations before we could figure out how to make use of it, but I was sure now that it was the key to the fifth force. I felt a faint stirring of excitement.

Next I told him what was going to happen to him and Jang Mi.

"The CIA is handling your relocation. You will need to be hidden away for a while before it will be safe to give you a new identity and allow you and Jang Mi to live somewhere in the U.S. I'm afraid you are going to feel like you are in prison for a while," I said apologetically, "but it is for your own safety."

After a long pause he said thoughtfully, "I have been in a kind of prison all my life. But with no hope of escape. Knowing that I will one day be free, even if I have to go into a new prison for a while, makes me very happy. Please thank the two people who came to our aid. They risked their lives to get us out."

Trying hard to maintain the proper expression, I said, "I will make sure they know."

After that, Professor Lee rejoined Jang Mi. They took seats side-by-side and soon fell asleep.

When I noticed that they had fallen asleep, it reminded me that I had only had a couple hours of sleep in the last two days myself. Following their example might be a good idea. Who knew when I would have another opportunity. I headed for an unoccupied couch near the back of the plane and promptly fell asleep.

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I awoke many hours later. When I got up to get a drink of water and use the bathroom, I saw that Elle had fallen asleep on the couch opposite mine. The Lees were still out. The only person awake was Grace, who gave me a brief nod and a smile when I looked her way.

I lay down again but almost immediately knew I wasn't going to be able to sleep. Rather than lie there with my thoughts spinning uselessly, I realized there was something I could do. I could try to use the technique Elle had taught me to experience more of my memories of Rockshaw.

This time I went through the process by myself. I consciously relaxed each part of my body, one part after another, until I felt as if I had disappeared into the couch on which I lay. Then I simply watched my breath coming in and going out, becoming slower and slower as I went deeper. Eventually I reached the heightened awareness that Elle had guided me to before.

I recalled the last scene I had experienced with Sir Humphrey Davy when I was Michael Faraday. I thought of his eyes burning with anger and injured pride. As before, a scene began to come into focus.

In the new scene, I was still staring into the eyes of Sir Humphrey Davy—but I experienced an immediate shock. My hyper-awareness told me that this scene was taking place many decades later than when I was an assistant to Sir Humphrey. Yet he looked the same—he showed no sign of aging at all. This many years later, Sir Humphrey should be dead.

But he wasn't. Asher, I thought. Asher had taught him to extend his life, just as Jonathon had said.

While his body was the same, his identity wasn't. He must have somehow contrived for Sir Humphrey Davy to disappear and had now taken on the identity of Basil Zaharoff, an arms dealer of international repute—and infamy. Zaharoff's Vickers-Maxim machine guns were among the most feared weapons in the world. The First World War's trenches had been filled with the dead and wounded who had had to face the terrifying efficiency of the Vickers-Maxim machine gun.

In the scene I was reliving, I was standing in the front ranks of a large crowd, shoulder to shoulder with hundreds of others in solidarity and protest. I could feel people pressed against my sides. I smelled horses, dust and sweat in the air. It was eerily quiet, however. There was just the jingle of the horses' tack as they moved restively beneath their riders, reins gathered tightly in their hands, ready to charge.

It was a moment of extreme tension.

The crowd had marched as far forward as it could go. Lined up in front of us were mounted police carrying wooden staffs at the ready. Behind the mounted police were soldiers with rifles and, mounted on wagons, three of Zaharoff's Vickers-Maxim machine guns aimed directly at the heart of the crowd.

Then I realized, with a tingle of inspiration, that my arm was linked through the arm of Gandhi standing at my side. I remembered that I had been one of his Protectors—and Gandhi had needed a lot of protecting. We were in South Africa and it was near the end of World War I. This was the largest non-violent protest he had organized so far. No one knew what to expect. Gandhi waited calmly to see if the soldiers would part and let us through, or if they would attack.

I continued to look at Zaharoff. He sat in an open motor car with three military officers. At first I thought his angry eyes were focused on me. But I didn't look like Michael Faraday any longer. I had taken on Indian features for my role as Gandhi's Protector and he would have no particular interest in me. Instead he was staring at Gandhi with intense and sneering contempt, considering him a colossal fool to march against armed men.

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As I watched, Zaharoff leaned toward the officer who sat next to him. My heightened awareness allowed me to know what he was saying. He calmly suggested that the entire crowd could be neutralized in less than five minutes if the officer gave the order for the machine guns to open fire. He assessed the situation as if it were a math problem. He gave the officer his estimate of the number of people in the crowd, the number of rounds the guns could fire per second, and complemented the officer on the fact that the crowd had been bottled up between buildings and would thus be unable to flee.

Even the hardened military officer he spoke with was appalled at the callousness of his words, although Zaharoff was oblivious to his reaction. Thinking he had persuaded the officer, Zaharoff turned his gaze on Gandhi once again, finally noticing my stare. Our eyes locked. His eyes shone with fevered excitement that he might get to see his machine guns in action—slaughtering people before his eyes. I felt sick. The Sir Humphrey I knew no longer existed.

Our gazes remained locked as the scene faded and a new one took its place. I was looking into the same eyes, still in the same body—but not perceptibly older than before, even though I was instantly aware that almost two more decades had passed.

It was just a few years before the beginning of the Second World War and we were in Germany. I knew that Zaharoff had now assumed the identity of Alfried Krupp. His scientific mind and utter ruthlessness had made Krupp the largest arms and munitions business in the world. As the world would soon learn to its horror, Krupp was using his considerable scientific knowledge to develop for Hitler the most advanced weapons the world had ever seen. The German military's superior weapons would allow it to sweep aside the rest of Europe's outmoded military in a matter of months.

We were standing in a circle of students and professors at a University of Berlin social gathering—I was masquerading as a graduate student in physics. Alfried Krupp stood with us—and, I realized with another tingle of inspiration, so did Albert Einstein. As I looked at Krupp I saw the same fevered excitement in his eyes that I had seen in South Africa—only this time it was not at the prospect of seeing his machine guns slaughter peaceful protestors, but at the prospect of being able to develop an unimaginably powerful weapon—the atomic bomb.

Alfried Krupp had the scientific brilliance of Sir Humphrey Davy and a hundred years more knowledge to go with it. He knew enough to believe that it was only a matter of time before the atom's vast power was unleashed.

In the moment I was reliving, Krupp was quietly elated. He had managed to steer the discussion toward the potential of atomic energy. There was a lively discussion in progress. Most present felt that there would never be a way to access the energy locked up in the atom, while a few pointed out new advances in research by Meitner and Planck that might lead somewhere. The discussion was exactly what Krupp wanted and the reason why he had come to the university. He was trying to figure out who he needed to recruit; whose were the minds that could come together and create the prize he wanted to hand to Hitler. Beneath his urbane exterior, his desire for such a weapon burned like a fever.

I was there for the opposite reason. I wanted to learn whose minds could come together to create an atomic weapon so that I could get them out of Germany. The very next day I would be smuggling Einstein out of Germany through Albania, on his way to America.

Krupp turned to Einstein and asked, "Herr Professor, what do you think? Will there be a way to tap into the virtually unlimited power of the atom to benefit mankind?" His tone implied that he would be honored to serve his fellow man in such an endeavor.

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Einstein paused and weighed his words carefully. “I think we would be better off leaving Pandora’s Box closed. There may be benefit to man in unlocking the atom, but there could also be much peril.” As he said this, he looked around at our circle of students and professors, his look imploring them to caution.

Krupp nodded with pretended agreement and was about to speak when one of the other students asked him a question. I was taken by surprise and then the full memory returned. It was Elle. She spoke with, I knew, feigned enthusiasm, “Herr Krupp, is it true that your father-in-law was a personal friend of Kaiser Wilhelm and that many of your weapons were designed to his personal specifications?”

Krupp nodded but looked at her with barely concealed malice. The question had, as intended, reminded all those present that this smooth and affable man was, in fact, dedicated to war, destruction, death and profit, and that he, too, served another master—Hitler—already a subject of considerable concern. The thought was not lost on them.

Then the scene began to fade. My last thought before the scene faded altogether was now that Elle had clearly revealed her opposition to Krupp, it was time we went completely underground...

I came out of my memories gradually this time. I lay there for a while looking at the ceiling of the plane until I sensed Elle’s presence across the aisle. I turned my head and found she was sitting up and looking at me.

“More Rockshaw?” she asked.

“Yes.” After a lengthy pause as I examined my memories, I said with sad finality, “He became a monster.”

Elle looked at me with concern. “Everyone makes his own choices. There was nothing you could have done.”

I nodded as if agreeing with her words, but the matter weighed heavily on my heart.

“Enough of the past,” said Elle briskly. “We will be landing soon. It’s time to deal with the future.”

Elle stood and went to wake the Lees. Grace went to the back of the plane and I soon smelled coffee. An hour later we landed at the San Francisco airport at 9:45 a.m. local time.

We taxied right into a private hanger. I could see out the window that there was a large greeting party. There were four huge, black SUVs with tinted windows. At least a dozen men and women were standing in various positions. Half of them formed a perimeter to keep watch, while the rest were facing our plane as it arrived and came to a stop. And I swear—it’s the honest truth—they all wore dark suits and aviator sunglasses. Is there a dress code?

While our flight crew went through the routine of opening the doors and lowering the stairs, we gathered our stuff and got ready to get off. Grace was standing in the aisle where she could be the first off the plane, Elle behind her, and the Lees next, with me bringing up the rear.

While we waited for the stairs to be readied, I leaned forward and spoke softly to the Lees, “Grace is going to take you to a safe location. We will not be going with you. If anything happens, just stay with Grace.”

Professor Lee’s head swiveled around nervously when I said, “...if anything happens.” His eyes sought mine for reassurance. Jang Mi also looked at me but her gaze was unworried and she said for both of us to hear, “My husband. Don’t worry. If my Teacher told us we would be safe, then we will be safe.” I’m not sure Professor Lee was reassured.

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Jang Mi concluded softly just for me, “I will wait for you to find me.” When I looked startled she said, “I saw your eyes in my dreams for too many years not recognize them now.”

Holding up a hand for us to wait, Grace headed down the stairs.

A man stepped forward when she reached the ground. “Tippett?” asked Grace.

“Yes,” he responded holding out his ID.

“Choi,” answered Grace holding out her own ID for inspection.

“Which one is armored,” Grace asked.

Elle, the Lees, and I were now standing in the door of the plane and we saw agent Tippett gesture at the SUV near the foot of the stairs, its doors open and waiting. Grace signaled for us to come down. The Lees went down the stairs slowly and then at our encouragement, got in the back seat of the armored SUV.

As soon as they were inside, Grace closed the rear door and climbed into the driver’s seat. She started up the engine, rolled down the window and gave a nod to Tippett. Another agent pointed to one of the other SUVs for us to get into and the other agents began to head for the remaining vehicles.

We hadn’t even taken a step when we saw Grace’s arm emerge from the front window with a gun in her hand. She promptly shot out the tires of two of the other SUVs. It took only seconds. Job done, her window rolled back up and the armored SUV squealed out of the hanger, two confused looking agents diving out of her way.

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## Chapter 11

In the enclosed space of the hanger, the sound of the shots was startlingly loud. The agents were caught flat-footed. Some took cover, others spun around looking for attackers. Guns came out. Orders were shouted.

Two agents fired at the rapidly receding SUV without effect, but all the agents could have shot at it and not even slowed it down. Grace had told us it would take an anti-tank rocket to take out a fully armored car. She had insisted on one being there for the Lees just in case our plan got messy.

But things were going according to plan. At least according to our plan. Tippet looked pissed. Grace had decided not to tell anyone in the CIA what we were planning to do.

Part one of Plan A completed, we began backing away toward the rear of the hanger. We hoped it would look perfectly natural; just two civilians trying to get out of the line of fire.

Several agents had already run to the SUVs to pursue Grace and then stopped in disgust when they saw the tires had been shot out. Two other agents were heading for the only SUV still operational, when Elle became intensely still at my side. An agent leapt into the front seat and tried to start the engine. He just got the click, click, click of a dead battery. He swore and angrily banged the steering wheel.

Part two of Plan A completed. Grace and the Lees were away without pursuit.

Several agents had already pulled out cell phones, and some were talking into their cuffs, but we weren't worried about them alerting others to catch Grace and the Lees. In less than a minute they were going to rendezvous with a friend of Grace's who would smuggle them out of the airport in the back of a food services van. Shortly after that, they would be dropped off at a nearby private house where they would change clothes, put on some hats and sunglasses, and then drive away in yet a third car, heading for a safe house in Oregon—a safe house that only Grace knew about and which would never be associated with her.

Now it was time for part three of Plan A—get the hell out of there. We resumed backing slowly toward the rear of the hanger. Quickly glancing around, we both noticed a back door to the hanger and altered our course toward it. Neither of us took our eyes off the agents for long. For us, this was the crucial moment. If Rockshaw had managed to bribe or coerce CIA agents, or substitute some of his own men to help him capture the Lees, they were going to be after us as well.

I kept my eye on the two agents who had fired at the SUV. While the rest of the agents were conferring with one another, they were scanning the hanger. The moment they saw us, they began running in our direction, guns in their hands.

We bolted for the rear door, threw it open and slammed it behind us. Elle put her hand on the knob for an instant and I heard a screech of metal. Jammed. But for how long? The answer came moments later when we heard the boom of two guns blasting at the door lock.

The sounds of the shots were receding because we were running flat out toward the nearest building. If we could reach it before the two men got through the door, we'd be hard to find. We weren't so lucky. Just as we were about to reach cover we heard one of the men shout, "Over there!"

Elle hit a side door on the run and it flew open with a bang. Several overall-clad men looked up from a jet engine on a cart, wrenches in hand. We were in a repair shop. To our left was an open set of garage doors with two pickups parked just inside the shop. Elle slowed down just

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enough to change course toward one of the pickups. She went to the driver's side and I yanked open the passenger door. I practically dove in, expecting a bullet in the back at any moment.

Elle's magic fingers quickly started the truck and she immediately began to back up with a screech of tires. "Get down," she shouted. I slid down into the area beneath the dashboard. With a quick adjustment of the rear view mirror, she slouched down in the driver's seat and steered by what she could see in the rear view mirror. A moment later we heard gunshots, and a bullet came through the windshield and left through the back window. I heard several more hit the front of the truck.

Elle kept the accelerator to the floor. Looking up through the side window I could see that we were racing along the side of a long building with corrugated metal siding. Suddenly Elle put the truck in neutral, braked and spun the wheel, slewing us around 180 degrees. She sat up, putting the truck in drive in one fluid motion and we shot forward, wheels smoking, having lost hardly any speed. By the time I got up from my position on the floor, we were already hurtling along.

"We've got to get inside the terminal," she said. "This is going to trigger a full terrorist alert. In minutes there are going to be police everywhere."

Our speed steadily built as she headed for the one of the main terminals.

"There," she said pointing. "We'll get in through that unoccupied jet way."

Elle weaved her way at high speed through the maze of planes and baggage cars, passing right under the wing of a moving jumbo. We crossed the taxi way and headed straight for the jet way at full speed. At the last instant, Elle hit the brakes and we slid sideways to a stop. We jumped out of the truck and flew up the jet way's outside stairs three at a time. She swiped her hand over the security card reader and the door popped open. In the distance we could hear sirens. A lot of sirens. I glanced out the gaping opening that usually snugs up to the side of a plane and I could see flashing lights coming from everywhere.

We took off up the jet way to the door to the terminal. Once more Elle performed her magic hand swipe and we entered, trying to look as though we belonged there. There were only a few people in the waiting area. They gave us only cursory glances—airport personnel were always going in and out of secure doors—their real attention was on all the sirens and flashing lights that they could see and hear outside the windows.

Elle began to walk slowly, looking for all the world like a tired airport employee. It was everything I could do not to run, but I understood that if I did, it would attract a lot of attention. We walked slowly along the concourse for about a hundred yards and then Elle turned to me and said, "Let's split up. Head for a bathroom. It's the only place they don't have security cameras. Change your appearance and then get yourself to the Avis rental yard." Without another word she headed away from me.

I could hear the sirens getting louder. A lot of armed police were going to be swarming up the jet way and into the terminal at any moment. I looked around for a bathroom and saw one not far ahead. I walked in casually and found an empty stall. Sitting down I realized I was shaking and my thoughts were pretty scattered. My body's fight or flight response had released a copious amount of adrenalin into my system. While this would help me outrun a charging rhino, it was not going to help me concentrate. I thought of doing some deep breaths but I didn't want to be overheard.

Just as I was wondering how to proceed, I heard shouts out in the concourse and I knew I had very little time. I wanted to look completely different from the way I did now. I suddenly thought of Professor Gunderson. He's an African-American professor in the physics department at

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Berkeley. He used to play linebacker at Stanford and he now weighs about 350 pounds. I think that qualified as completely different.

With an intensity that surprised me, I focused on his image and very quickly began to experience the electrical tingling throughout my body; less than a second later the transformation was complete. I felt immense. My daypack was straining against my back and was threatening to rip. I quickly shrugged it off. I looked down and saw that I was wearing Professor Gunderson's typical clothes: white dress shirt, striped suspenders, blue serge pants, and enormous black wingtips. Someday I would understand how I did that—but not today. At this moment I was just glad it happened.

I flushed the toilet for appearances sake and opened the door to the stall. I had to turn sideways to get out. I tried to remember how Mr. Gunderson walked. It was a kind of slow-rolling amble. I began to head for the bathroom exit when two policemen in bullet-proof vests burst in. I had no problem looking startled because their guns were pointed right at me.

"Have you seen a white man about six feet tall wearing a blue polo shirt?" one of them almost shouted at me.

When I answered, a deep bass voice rumbled out of me. It was so startling that I stopped speaking. I covered my surprise by clearing my throat and beginning again, "Officer, I haven't seen anyone for a while. I've been using the toilet. I didn't see anyone like that when I came in."

The two policemen quickly checked all the stalls, in the process scaring the wits out of an old man who only spoke Russian, but absolutely making the day of a twelve-year-old boy. He was pulling out his cell phone to call a friend, eyes shining with excitement, before the police even finished checking the last stall. Afterwards, the two policemen said "all clear" into their shoulder mics and headed out to the concourse.

I had new respect for Professor Gunderson. Keeping three hundred and fifty pounds moving forward took a lot of doing. I made my slow way along the concourse. I showed the same kind of interest as everyone else as the police raced around. I saw that the people unlucky enough to have been sitting in the gate where we came up the jet way were now surrounded by police.

I made my way to the end of the concourse. There were a number of extra police stationed at the exit to the concourse. They already had pictures in their hands that must have come from some security camera and were comparing them to people as they came off the concourse. They paid absolutely no attention to me. I continued my rolling amble to the rental car shuttle area and duly boarded one for Avis.

When I got off, I realized I had no idea what Elle or Xu looked like at the moment. Just as I was beginning to wonder how I was going to find them, two elderly women got up off a bench outside the Avis rental office and came over to me.

"Professor?" one of them asked.

I was wary, but when I looked into her eyes I realized it was Elle. The other "woman" must be Xu!

We all sized each other up, trying to hide the smiles you give people at Halloween.

Elderly woman Xu spoke, "We have the car already. It's just over there." We all began walking in the direction she/he pointed.

Elderly Elle said, "It's good to see you again, Professor," with obvious relief.

But she couldn't help herself, and with dead-pan humor, she looked me up and down and with a slight frown said, "You look different somehow. Didn't you used to have a mustache?"

I assured her gravely that I had never had a mustache, doing my best to keep from laughing.

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Elle got in the driver's seat and Xu took the back. When I got in the passenger seat the entire car creaked and groaned, settling several inches lower on my side.

"Where to?" asked Elle, economically.

"We need to get somewhere where we can download the second half of Professor Lee's paper," I said in my deep bass rumble. "Until we get a look at the rest of the paper, we won't know what to do next."

Elderly woman Xu said succinctly, "Airport Hyatt."

Without discussion, Elle drove us out of the rental car maze onto the freeway, then quickly off again at the exit for the Hyatt. While she drove, I told Xu how to retrieve Professor Lee's paper and then how to decrypt it. We made it to the Hyatt quickly and Elle parked in an empty corner of the parking lot, well away from the main entrance.

Xu had gotten out his laptop on the way and already had it booted up. As soon as we had entered the parking lot he said, "Good. I have a Wi-Fi signal. Let me log on."

"Don't you need a password?" I asked.

Xu held up a plastic card and said simply, "Lifetime Hyatt Platinum Membership. I have my own user name and password for all Hyatts."

Elderly Elle winked in my direction and said, "Xu loves rewards programs. Too bad he had to rent this car under another name. Think of all the wasted points!"

"Laugh now, but wait 'till I get upgraded and you don't," Xu said with mock triumph.

"There's no one near us," said Elle after a moment of looking around. "While Xu is downloading, I'm going to doctor the license plates. While I'm doing that you should change into some other look. Your, ah, current physique is rather memorable. Xu and I will change as well, just to be on the safe side."

I sat quietly for a moment and once again found myself visualizing the appearance I had had when I was Michael Dyson. I soon made the transition to my former self and my side of the car rose several inches. It was getting easier.

Elderly Elle had gotten out of the car and was pretending to be talking on her cell phone as she walked around the car and altered our license plates with a gesture or two. When she got back in, she glanced at me with a smile and in a rapid blur she took on the shoulder length blond hair, bright blue eyes and thin face of Ellie Dyson that she had revealed to me on the plane while we flew to Korea.

"Once more for old time's sake," she said, "but this is the last time we should use these identities on this mission. It's best to be extra careful."

Before I could reply, Xu spoke up from the back, "Got it and decrypted it. It looks like it's all there. Let's go."

Once more Elle asked, "Where to?"

"Just drive and we'll figure it out as we go," I said. Elle went south on Highway 101, and by luck it eventually turned out to be the direction we needed to go.

I glanced back at Xu. Instead of elderly woman Xu, I was now looking at an old Chinese man. "My father," he said by way of explanation when he saw me looking, but he never really took his eyes off his laptop. We all lapsed into silence while he concentrated on Professor Lee's equations. After about half an hour, Xu handed me the laptop between the front seats and I took a look.

After my half an hour I said, "This seems solid. What do you think? You've had more time to think about this than I have. Now that we know that Professor Lee's equations can predict the

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amount of energy that results from restricting of the expansion of space, where does that leave us?”

Xu spoke carefully, “Let’s assume that these equations are valid—and they look good to me. What we need to do to make use of them is to find a way that we can artificially restrict the natural expansion of space.”

“Wait a minute,” interjected Elle, “space is expanding? I thought that only happened right after the big bang. Wasn’t that proved by the inflation theory you guys were talking about?”

I slipped into my professor persona without thinking, “Most people, when they hear that the distant stars are getting farther away from us make the common sense assumption that those distant stars are moving *through* space. In fact, contrary to common sense, the distant stars are steadily becoming farther away from us because the *space between the stars* is expanding.”

“We see it especially when we look at distant stars and galaxies. The total amount of spatial expansion gets greater and greater the farther away we look. The most distant galaxies appear to be racing away from us. But even nearby stars and galaxies are moving away from us as space expands. Space is expanding at a constant rate throughout the universe. ”

“What we got from Professor Lee’s equations is a way to predict exactly how much energy we can expect to harvest from the restriction of the current rate of the expansion of space. We just need to figure out a way to restrict it.” I sounded as if that was the simplest of things to do, but I knew it wasn’t. No one has done anything like it.

“Any ideas?” I asked, turning to look at Xu.

“I’ve been thinking about this while you were in Korea. If we continue with your assumption that Atri wouldn’t have said the discovery of the fifth force was imminent unless all the pieces to make the discovery already existed, then my guess is that we should be looking at adapting magnetic containment science to fit our needs.”

“Of course! Magnetic bottles are theoretically strong enough to alter space,” I said with enthusiasm.

“Hold on, guys,” said Elle, “Magnetic bottles?”

“Sorry, a figure of speech,” I said. “A ton of time and money has been put into finding a way to achieve nuclear fusion. It occurs naturally in the core of the sun. But all the nuclear reactors man has so far been able to build are fission based, not fusion based, and they produce lots of radioactive waste as a result. Nuclear fusion produces only tiny amounts of helium as a by-product of reaction, and so holds out the promise of being a better, pollution-free way to generate power.”

“The problem is that no one has yet figured out a way to reproduce the crushing pressure found in the center of the sun that causes the fusion reaction. The most promising direction continues to be surrounding hydrogen atoms with magnetic fields so intense that they literally crush the atoms together.”

After a few moments, Elle tentatively ventured, “So how would crushing space in a magnetic bottle create energy? There would be nothing to crush.”

“Go to the head of the class,” said Xu, picking up the discussion. “It wouldn’t. Or at least, that’s not what Professor Lee’s insight into the expansion of space seems to point to. We’re interested in the magnetic bottle work, and the equations that go with it, because we think we may be able to turn the idea around. We may be able to use intense magnetic fields, not to create crushing pressure, but to create the ultimate vacuum.”

“You’ve completely lost me,” said Elle.

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“Go to the back of the class,” Xu said with a laugh, “Think of it this way. We need to create a vacuum so intense that it “sucks” space into it—not only restricting the natural expansion of space, but even contracting it. If we can do that, according to these calculations, it should yield tremendous amounts of energy.”

I turned around to Xu and asked, “Where’s the best work on magnetic containment being done?”

“I don’t know. But I know someone who would know. Professor Arendia. He’s at Cal Tech,” Xu finished.

“Well, we’re heading the right direction,” said Elle. “We can be in LA in five hours.”

Xu rummaged around in his computer bag and pulled out a cell phone. “New pre-paid,” he said, as if explaining something.

While Xu searched his computer for the number he needed, Elle explained, “New pre-paid cell phones are virtually untraceable. If the person you are calling is bug-free then it is about as secure a way to communicate as possible.”

Xu had found the number he needed and punched it up. Moments later he was talking animatedly with someone who was obviously an old friend. A few minutes later he ended the call and announced, “All set. Professor Arendia will be waiting for me.”

“How long will you need?” Elle asked Xu.

Xu thought for a moment and then said, “He wants to go out to dinner, then go back to his office. Once we get back to his office it could take hours to sort through all the possibilities.”

“Good,” Elle said quickly, “I wanted some time to continue Michael’s awakening process. This works perfectly. We can go to Mirabai’s. Why don’t we go there first and then you can take the car to meet Professor Arendia.”

“Sounds good,” said Xu.

“Who is Mirabai?” I asked.

Elle looked startled for a moment and then replied, “I still forget you don’t remember things. You’ve known Mirabai for a few thousand years. If Jonathon is the Father of the Protectors, then Mirabai is the Mother.”

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## Chapter 12

Hours later, Xu dropped us off at a locked gate high up in Topanga Canyon, north of LA, and drove off.

I looked doubtfully at the gate. The lock, the chain, the gate were rusty and there were weeds growing up through the bars of the gate. There was no mailbox, no indication of an address. It looked abandoned.

“Are you sure there’s someone here?” I asked.

“Oh yes,” Elle said as she vaulted effortlessly over the gate. I followed her over with more grace than when escaping my Berkeley home, but my performance didn’t come close to the almost weightless look Elle achieved. I began walking at her side along a rutted dirt road. The road, like the gate, hadn’t been used in a very long time.

Answering my unspoken question, Elle continued, “Mirabai sometimes doesn’t leave here for years at a time. She and her nuns have almost no need to go anywhere. They don’t have electricity or running water. They heat and cook using wood gathered on the property. They grow their own vegetables and fruits. They have one old pickup truck that they use to go get supplies, but sometimes it’s half a year between trips. It is hard to live more simply than they do.”

As Elle spoke, we walked along the narrow road following the contours of the hillside. We went in and out of groves of oaks, in many places their sheltering canopies meeting over the road. Even late in the day it was warm and the intermittent shade was welcome. The evening sun slanted into the space beneath the trees, imparting a golden glow to the dry grasses and sparse brush beneath. To our left we caught glimpses of the ocean far below, and to our right we could see golden hills climb above us.

We walked for what must have been a half a mile and I still hadn’t seen any signs of people. It was profoundly quiet. I didn’t hear a sound except for a few distant bird calls and our shoes scuffing along the hard dirt road.

“This must be a huge property.”

“It’s enormous. All kinds of developers have tried to buy it over the years. It is probably worth tens of millions by now. Jonathon got the property for Mirabai a long time ago and put safe guards in place to keep it private. When people try to find out about the property, they are routed to a firm of attorneys who discourage any interest.”

After another ten minutes of steady walking, we emerged from a dense cluster of oaks just as we crested a slight ridge. Below us, in a very large, treeless meadow, we could see about a dozen small structures forming a rough half-circle around a larger building. All of the buildings were built facing west, and sitting as they were in the treeless meadow, they must have had magnificent views out over the Pacific.

Behind the structures was a large garden. As we got closer we could see that the autumn bounty included tomatoes, squash, peppers, beans, melons, apples, pears, and avocados. A tiny stream ran through the middle of the garden, past the larger building and then down the hill to the ocean. We could see flashes of water winking among the plants, as small ditches channeled the stream’s water to all parts of the garden. On the far side of the garden, I could just see the rear bed of an old step-side pick-up truck.

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There wasn't a person to be seen or a sound to be heard. It wasn't just quiet. It felt as if it were permeated with a profound stillness and that if I were to say something, even shout, my words would just be swallowed up and go unheard.

"Where is everyone?"

"They are probably all meditating," answered Elle. "Let's go sit somewhere and wait."

"Shouldn't we let someone know we are here?"

"Oh, they know," said Elle.

We wandered around to the ocean-side of what I could now see were tiny little cabins. The larger structure appeared to be a kitchen and dining room. There were wooden tables and chairs on a porch running around two sides and I thought I saw bowls of fruit on some of the tables.

We walked along an earthen path kept free of native grasses only by constant use. Outside of the garden, there was no landscaping beyond what nature provided—except for a riotously beautiful flower garden where the small stream ran by the kitchen/dining room. A profusion of blooms filled the tiny area and clematis vines ran up a trellis, their deep purple blossoms still abundant even in September.

We followed the well-worn path and found a crude bench, which was in a perfect position to look down over the hills as they made their way to the ocean. Their pleated green and golden skirt of oaks and grasses eventually ended in the azure blue and sun-lit Pacific, stretching to the far distance where sky and water merged.

We sat in pleased silence and drank in the majesty of mountains and sea. I noticed another building some way below us. It had the unmistakable lines of a temple—but a temple from another land. It had the flowing curves of India and the simplicity of St. Francis.

Seeing me examine the little temple Elle said, "Jonathon had that built for Mirabai when he bought the property for her."

Before Elle could say more we heard a musical voice behind us. We both rose and turned to see an Indian woman in a plain white sari approaching us in a graceful glide.

We stood as she approached. "Mirabai," said Elle, placing her hands together and bowing in the traditional Indian pranam.

Mirabai was wrapped in the same stillness that permeated her retreat. She stood with relaxed poise. Her white sari, draped over her head like a shawl, set off her dark skin. Despite the evidence of grey hair, her complexion was smooth and unlined, making her appear ageless. Her expression was welcoming and warm. Her dark eyes were calm and bright with intelligence.

Mirabai returned the pranam but then pulled Elle to her and embraced her. Finally she turned to me and regarded me with interest. I pranamed as Elle had done.

"Atri and Atria have sent you on another mission," she said looking back and forth between us. She looked more closely at me and said, "You are not yet fully awake."

It seemed to be a question more than a statement, so I answered "Apparently it is all according to a plan I made before I died as Michael Dyson," I said, gesturing incongruously at my body which still looked like Michael Dyson.

Unfazed by the oddity of my statement, she tilted her head slightly to one side, looking inward for a moment before saying, "Your plan is a good one. Knowledge of your past will not help you succeed. Trust who you are—not what you know."

I was reassured but awestruck. In only a moment of intuition, Mirabai divined my plan, drawing the knowledge from some hidden realm as easily as I might read a newspaper.

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Apparently done with the subject, Mirabai smiled at me sweetly and turned her attention to Elle again. “Can you do something for us?”

“Of course,” said Elle, “anything.”

“Our lovely temple was damaged in big storm a few months ago. We could get someone to come and fix it but you know what a disruption it is to have people here. Could you fix it? We have been afraid to use it for months. We miss it.”

“Let’s go look,” Elle said as she began walking down the short path to the temple, Mirabai and I following in her footsteps. Mirabai showed her where several large pieces of the foundation had broken off and fallen away, leaving one corner of the temple hanging out over nothing. The lack of support had stressed the temple walls above it and they were showing numerous fractures. Pieces of stucco had fallen off, leaving the wire mesh beneath exposed. As we looked, I realized the entire temple tilted slightly.

I was about to say how sorry I was but that this was a job which would require a construction crew, when Elle said, “Give me a few minutes, ” in a slightly distracted tone.

Mirabai and I stood back from the temple and watched Elle examine it very thoroughly, running her hands over surfaces and measuring everything with her eyes. I had no idea what she was doing. She looked as if she was taking a good look so that she could get a bid on repair. She slid under the temple to get a better look and came out later dusting herself off and nodding.

While Elle was doing whatever it was she was doing, Mirabai spoke to me quietly. “You haven’t remembered who Elle is, have you? She was one the greatest warriors who ever lived. Thousands of years ago she learned from Drona and he taught only the most advanced—those who could master and project their life force.”

“She awakened in that lifetime, and Atri and Atria asked her to teach her arts to all the Protectors. Later, with the fall of the great ancient civilizations, the art of the warrior died out. Atri and Atria asked her to resurrect it. She spent half a lifetime in China as the abbot of the Shaolin Monastery, where she created a new expression of the martial arts. Since then the ancient knowledge has spread once again throughout the world.”

Elle, I thought, one of the greatest warriors that ever lived? I suddenly regretted all our friendly banter, feeling as if I had presumed too much.

As if reading my thoughts, Mirabai said, “You, too, are much greater than you know. You are well matched.”

I had not taken my eyes off Elle as Mirabai told me of her past. Elle had continued her meticulous examination of the temple and with a final glance, she stood up, dusted off her hands, and grew still. She appeared perfectly relaxed but distracted, as if her thoughts had taken her far away. I almost jumped when the entire temple began to move. Seconds later it stopped. It had moved precisely to its original level position. Next, the large pieces of the concrete foundation that had broken away rose uphill and back into position like a three-dimensional puzzle being put together. With the faintest of shimmers, the cracks between the blocks disappeared. Lastly, hundreds of fragments of stucco rose into the air and found their places in the wall, and with a final flash, the damaged outside wall was as smooth and unblemished as everywhere else.

With a quiet sigh and a pleased smile, Elle leaned forward to pat the corner of the temple. “As good as new,” said Elle, “Better in fact. I fixed the original weakness in the foundation.”

“Thank you,” said Mirabai, as if Elle had just peeled potatoes for dinner, “You saved us a lot of bother.”

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I stood speechless and stared at Elle. She returned my look with her usual pleasure at surprising me, and said, “I had to get under there to make sure nothing else was broken,” as if that explained what she had just done.

“Now we can meditate in the temple again,” said Mirabai, obviously pleased. “You must come and meditate with us. Can you stay?”

“We’re here until Xu returns for us. Will you chant for us?” Elle asked with obvious anticipation.

With an almost imperceptible waggle of her head she said, “But of course. The temple is an old friend. It resonates like a musical instrument. It has been a long time since we have sung together.”

Mirabai left us and went to share the news with her nuns. A few minutes later they appeared on the path. They were all of different ages and types—but like Mirabai, they all wore simple cotton saris and the same light shone in their eyes. They smiled shyly at us but didn’t say a word as they eagerly went to see the newly repaired temple. They gestured with the practiced ease of those who remain completely silent.

We watched as Mirabai and her nuns eagerly cleaned the temple, then brought back the altar, statues and pictures that had been in a cabin temporarily pressed into service as their temple. We offered to help, but Mirabai would have none of it, and she suggested we go to the kitchen and enjoy some of the fruit that had been freshly picked that day.

In a little while, one of the nuns beckoned to us to come and join them. We came into a small entry way and added our shoes to a neat row. We entered to find Mirabai and her nuns seated in lotus position, eyes closed and still. Elle slipped easily into the lotus posture and I found a cushion to kneel on Zen-style.

Mirabai leaned forward and began to play a harmonium. She played a simple melody softly several times and then began to sing. I was entranced. Mirabai’s voice had the purity of Ri Pun Hui’s, but she didn’t sing patriotic Korean opera. She sang of Joy, of Bliss, of Love, her sweet voice effortlessly conveying her feeling and carrying us along with her. The temple resonated in sympathy, lending each note a vibrant, lingering life of its own. I became lost in the sound, drawn inward by her fervent devotion. Almost caressingly Mirabai brought her chanting to an end. The ensuing silence seemed oddly full of its own sound. I slipped easily into stillness.

Sometime later, Elle tapped me lightly on the shoulder and then gestured for us to leave. It was now dark. I was surprised to realize that a sunset had taken place that I was too inwardly entranced to even notice. I took one last glance before going out. Mirabai and her nuns were still as statues. The only motion was the gentle waving of candle flames as a soft night breeze came through the open windows.

We made our way back to the bench above the temple and sat in the velvet night, a yellow three-quarter moon rising behind us. Elle spoke softly at my side, “They will probably meditate all night and into the morning. I got you out of the temple because this is the perfect time and place for you to take another step in your awakening.”

Elle continued cautiously, “What I have in mind could leave you feeling off balance for a while.”

I thought about it. “Probably better to get it over with here where it’s safe than to have it happen somewhere unplanned. Whatever “it” is,” I added wryly.

“OK,” said Elle, satisfied. “Just sit and listen to the night sounds for a little while,” said Elle.

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I sat in the still warm night and listened carefully. I began to become aware of more and more sounds. I heard a slight gurgle of water moving somewhere nearby. I heard faint noises of insects, tiny rustles of small animals, and the gentlest of whispers as a faint breeze played through the grass around us. The more I listened, the more I felt that I was surrounded by sound.

After a while Elle spoke softly and carefully, “At the Dyson Center you rediscovered your life force; tonight I want you to rediscover your oneness.”

“Stand up slowly and then do the exercise I taught you at the Dyson Center.”

I did as she said. I stood and closed my eyes. I drew in the energy of the earth and the sky until I felt as if nothing but energy coursed through me just as I had experienced on the roof of the Dyson Center. My awareness became acute and my body became absolutely still.

Now standing at my side and speaking almost in a whisper, Elle began again, “Now I want you to expand your awareness. Not through the senses, but through your sense of *being*. Focus on your heart. Breathe naturally, but with each inhalation, feel as if your heart is expanding with your breath. Relax on the exhalation and then expand your heart’s feeling yet farther with the next inhalation. Allow your sense of being to expand beyond your body to include the plants, the trees, the air, the very earth. Open yourself to the reality around you.”

The technique was profoundly effective. After a few minutes I felt as if my body had expanded beyond my ability to tell where it ended. Eventually I felt as if I *was* the earth, the sky, the distant ocean and all living things. I was immensity. I was stillness. I was peace. I. Was. Everything.

I don’t know how long I stood there. It could have been minutes or hours. I had no urge to move, no desire to withdraw from the sense of oneness I felt. I think I could have remained like that forever.

After a time, Elle’s quiet voice reached me again, “Now slowly open your eyes and see the world as it really is...”

When I opened my eyes I was awestruck. I no longer saw plants, trees, sky and earth. I saw a vision of Light. Everything I beheld was luminous. Everything shone with its own inner Light. The distant trees were now revealed as shimmering fountains of Life. I could “see” insects everywhere, displaying their presence as tiny dots of light, some making luminous contrails as they flew. I could see small animals glowing in underground burrows. Even the earth beneath my feet had a gentle glow. The moon’s radiance seemed to almost fill the sky. The ocean’s distant immensity stretched out before me, iridescent waves of light dancing into infinity. It was so beautiful. I could barely contain my feelings. I thought my heart would burst with Joy.

Very slowly I turned toward Elle. She stood before me, a radiant form. Layers of light seemed to flow around her and through her. Colors of exquisite beauty radiated from her and shimmered with rainbow-like intensity all around her. I looked into her eyes and our gazes locked. I was deeply moved by the whole experience, but the connection I felt with Elle as I gazed into her eyes was indescribable. Tears began to course down my cheeks but it didn’t matter. I simply could no longer contain the feelings welling up from my depths. I understood finally what Elle had said on our way to Pyongyang. “We have always been able to complete each other.”

Eventually we sat down, silent and contented. I was still enjoying the luminous play of Light everywhere. Below me I could see the glowing form of a coyote making its way through a thicket of shimmering brush, above me the stars pulsed and danced to the music of the spheres. It was unimaginably beautiful.

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As I sat in awed silence, an image of Elle appeared in my mind's eye. She was smiling and greeting me. I felt as if I were getting a warm hug. I suddenly understood she was mentally saying, "Hello."

I turned to look at her beside me on the bench and experimentally I sent, "Hello" back to her. She smiled, looking very pleased.

"I hoped your telepathic abilities would awaken," she said out loud.

Then we began to converse through the mind alone. I say the mind alone, but I found it impossible to disassociate her feelings from the meaning of what she conveyed. Along with information, I received her experience, her impressions, and her feelings. This was communication on steroids.

We continued until it felt as natural as talking. Sometime later I thought, "Thank you," to Elle. She knew it meant thank you for everything—her guidance, her protection, the experience of oneness and light—without me having to explain.

"You're welcome," floated clearly into my mind like a caress. I reached out and took her hand. Elle eventually broke the silence by asking me a question out loud, "Do you remember when you asked me why I waited so long to knock out those guys who waylaid us at the back entrance to *Milliefiore*?"

I nodded slowly, curious as to why she would bring that up now.

"One of the things I told you was that we never use our abilities lightly. We hold them as sacred. Now I think you will be able to understand what I meant."

At my questioning look she said, "Do you see that branch over there lying on the ground?" At my nod she continued, "Try to use your abilities to lift it up."

I extended my arm toward the branch and focused my life force on moving it. In my heightened awareness, it felt easy. When the branch began to move, I saw the patterns of light around it become disturbed. I could see the agitated trails of insects racing away from the branch. I saw a lizard's luminous form glow red as it frantically tried to burrow into the earth when the protection of the branch was removed. Rings of light radiated from the branch like a stone thrown into a pond. I stopped abruptly and gently lowered the branch to the ground.

"Every action affects the whole," said Elle quietly. "Everything is connected."

"Protectors never use their ability to control life force without first feeling an inner sense of rightness. You held back from moving the branch because you immediately felt the wrongness of disturbing even a small thing like a broken branch."

I felt the truth of what she was saying but after some reflection I had to ask, "Isn't it impossible to do anything, even breathe, without causing some disturbance?"

"Yes. It's impossible to have no effect at all," said Elle. "But you can act in harmony or out of harmony."

"How do we know if what we want to do is in harmony?"

"We don't know, we feel. The awakened live from the heart. The mind is secondary. Harmonious actions will feel right. But inharmonious actions will leave you feeling unsettled, disturbed and unhappy. We can't separate ourselves from the whole."

"The actions of men like Rockshaw leave them deeply out of harmony. On the rare occasions when they look into their own hearts they are appalled by what they feel. So they bury their feelings as deeply as possible, keeping themselves distracted by living in their senses."

"As Protectors we are called upon to do things, like whack Frank in the head," she added with a smile, "that might seem, on the surface, inharmonious. But if I hadn't felt the rightness of it, I

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would have let Frank and Bobbie capture us—even kill us—rather than go against what my feeling told me was the right thing to do.”

I must have looked confused because she added, “Sorting it out with reason alone is impossible. But when you are fully awakened again it will be second nature to you.”

Her mention of Rockshaw brought me back to the present, to our mission, and I remembered that I hadn’t had time to tell her about the memories of Rockshaw I had experienced on the plane. I told her what I had remembered.

“Those memories fit with everything I know,” said Elle.

“Tell me more about Sir Humphrey after Asher got to him.”

“Sir Humphrey eventually disappeared. He has assumed many identities since then. He sold weapons to both sides in many European wars and in the process become a very rich man. He was always at the forefront of development. He was instrumental in the development of the tank during World War I and he was the ‘inspiration’ behind mustard gas, which left so many men dead in the trenches, blind or breathing painfully for the rest of their lives.”

“While he was Basil Zarahoff, Rockshaw became completely unscrupulous. He sabotaged competitors’ demonstrations and stole ideas and patents whenever he could. He created distrust among the European powers by putting out clever announcements about the number and type of arms he had sold to which countries, creating arms races even in peace time.”

“Later Zarahoff disappeared. With Asher’s help and his ability to prolong his life, he resurfaced, married into the Krupp family, and took the name Alfried Krupp. He quickly made the Krupp armaments business the world’s largest.”

“His main customer being Hitler...”

Yes,” continued Elle, “he and Hitler were perfect for each other. Before the war started, Atri told us the atomic bomb was coming and that we must make sure it did not fall into Hitler’s hands. An unprecedented number of Protectors were involved in the task of keeping the atomic bomb away from him. Both of us spent most of the years from 1928 until well into the war doing whatever we could to get key physicists and their families out of Germany and Europe and away from Hitler.”

“In the beginning, our main work was simply to persuade scientists to leave. Einstein was easy. He didn’t need much urging from us. He sensed what was coming fairly early. We convinced Szilard to go to London in 1933, and he eventually helped start the Manhattan Project in 1938. Enrico Fermi left Italy in 1938. Bohr remained safe in Stockholm.”

“That all changed by the start of the war. Many of the best scientists were Jews and conditions became more and more intolerable. We had to smuggle out Lise Meitner and many others like her. As the persecution of the Jews intensified, it became agonizing for us to only be able to get out so few.”

I knew all of these names from my study of physics, but as Elle spoke about them, I saw them from memory as real people.

“Krupp eventually became aware that an organized group was working against his plan to recruit the top scientists. It became harder and harder for Protectors to pass themselves off as students and assistants. We decided to go completely underground. Even though we disappeared, as only Protectors can, Krupp knew who we were after and began to anticipate our attempts. He was unable to capture us, until...”

“Until what...” I both did and did not want to know.

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“Until we got a tip where one of the scientists was being held. We decided to try to get him out, but Krupp had set us up and we walked right into a trap.”

Elle stopped, seemingly unwilling to go on. She took a deep breath, steeling herself to continue, “We were taken to a secret prison; I don’t know where. We were tortured for hours each day for nearly a week. Our abilities as Protectors allowed us to rise above the worst of the pain, but it was still unspeakably horrible. I hope your memories of it never return. Finally, Krupp himself savagely killed us in a frustrated rage when we wouldn’t tell him anything.”

Her description hung in the air like a malevolent entity. Even if I couldn’t yet remember, I could feel it. It pressed hard on my heart.

Before I could think what to say, we both became aware that Xu had arrived and we turned to greet him. He must have walked in from the road because we hadn’t heard the car. Sensing that he had interrupted an important conversation, Xu held up one hand palm outward and said, “Sorry. I’ll let you finish.”

“We’re done,” I said, “and you are a welcome change from what we were just discussing.”

“I may be a welcome change, but what I’ve come to tell you may not be as welcome. I couldn’t help but hear the last part of what you were talking about.”

Before I could say anything, Elle suggested that we begin walking back to the car.

“Don’t we need to say goodbye to Mirabai?” I asked.

“She knows,” said Elle. “And we’d only disturb them all if we said goodbye.”

So we left just as unnoticed as we had arrived. Our presence was like putting a hand in water: once withdrawn, it left no trace.

We walked back along the narrow dirt road, guided easily enough by the moon’s light. My experience had not entirely worn off. I still saw a soft glow within and around everything. Elle and Xu were like faint comets, coruscating tails of light flowing along behind them as they walked.

After a few minutes, I tried an experiment. “Xu,” I sent mentally, “what did you find out?” Xu smiled at me and sent back not so much the thought but the feeling of being pleased.

Xu answered my mental question out loud and his tone was very serious, “I think I found where we can get the equations we need to adapt magnetic containment to our needs.”

“I hear a ‘but’ coming,” muttered Elle.

Xu gave her a half-hearted smile and said, “...but getting them will be even more dangerous than going into North Korea.”

“Why can’t we need something that someone just wants to give us,” I said only half-jokingly.

“Professor Arendia and I went through every possibility,” continued Xu, as if reassuring me that he had tried hard as possible to find another alternative. “But once he understood what I was looking for, he said he knew of only one discovery that could be adapted to work for us. Then he told me it was too bad because the equations were out of our reach.”

“When I asked him why, he said he couldn’t tell me about it. When I pressed him, he finally agreed to tell me if it went no further than us. Dr. Arendia proceeded to tell me a disturbing story.”

“About a year ago a Professor Wilson, then at the University of Chicago, made a breakthrough discovery in magnetic containment—the breakthrough that Dr. Arendia thinks we need. No more than a week later, Dr. Wilson destroyed all his work, left the university without explanation, and refused to see or talk to anyone.”

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“Six months ago, Arendia was in Chicago and decided to try to see Wilson. They had co-authored a paper on magnetic containment and had enjoyed a friendship, but Professor Wilson had not answered any of Arendia’s calls or emails. He drove to Wilson’s house and was shocked when he opened the door to his knock. He was looking at a shattered man.”

“At first Dr. Wilson didn’t even want to let him in, but after a few minutes of earnest persuasion he did let him in. Wilson was clearly terrified, but also plainly yearning to talk to a friend. Finally the dam broke and Dr. Wilson’s story poured out.”

“Four days after Dr. Wilson made his breakthrough, he received a visitor at the university. It was Rockshaw.”

In some distant recess of my being I was expecting Xu to say that. Passing in and out of moonlight and shadow as we walked among the oaks, I felt the inevitability of it, as if it all made sense in the half seen, half hidden mystery of the night. I felt as if Rockshaw and I were somehow bound together in the quest to discover the fifth force—yet I couldn’t understand why.

After a brief silence broken only by the quiet scuff of our shoes on the hard packed earth, Xu continued, “At first Rockshaw offered to buy Dr. Wilson’s discovery. When Dr. Wilson told him he wasn’t interested in selling it, Rockshaw demanded that Professor Wilson give it to him or else his wife would be hurt. Shaken and angry, but still unwilling to give in to Rockshaw’s threat, Professor Wilson raced home only to find his wife bound to a chair, two men with guns having met him at his own door. They held him at gun point until Rockshaw arrived. Once Rockshaw entered he gave a signal to one of the other men and without warning he slashed the face of Professor Wilson’s wife from forehead to jaw.”

“Professor Wilson instantly caved to Rockshaw’s demands. Later he sent Rockshaw his discovery and destroyed any record of it at the university. That same day he resigned his professorship and now almost never leaves his house. His wife has never been seen in public since.”

None of us could say anything after that for several minutes. I felt as if Rockshaw’s menacing presence was hovering over us.

Finally I broke the silence, “We know Rockshaw has it, but do we know where Professor Wilson’s discovery ended up?”

Xu replied with deliberate lack of emphasis, “He sent it to the Hocktief Gruppe research facility in Essen, Germany.”

I could tell that this was more than just a location. I stopped walking without conscious decision, Elle and Xu stopping with me. I looked at Elle, her face bathed in the silvery light of the moon. She spoke uneasily, “Essen is the heart of Rockshaw’s empire. He has his main estate just outside the city. Half the politicians and most of the police in Essen are thought to be in his pocket. He can summon a small army if he needs to.”

A second later she added in a grim tone, “And Essen is also where we were captured, tortured and killed.”

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## Chapter 13

I was physically pained at the idea of going to Essen. Whatever submerged memory I had of our torture and death at Rockshaw's hands was visceral and powerful.

Even as I felt personally repelled at the notion, I knew with the same inner certainty I had felt about going to North Korea that Dr. Wilson's breakthrough was what we needed to complete the discovery of the fifth force.

Even in the moon's dim light, Elle and Xu could see it in my eyes. As if to apologize I said, "Perhaps we can provide some poetic justice for Dr. Wilson and his wife by stealing back his research from Rockshaw."

"If we are going to go after Dr. Wilson's work in Essen, we need to make sure that the Wilsons are protected," Elle spoke up. "If we steal it, Rockshaw's first thought is probably going to be that Dr. Wilson had told someone about it."

Xu chimed in, "How about Miss O? She's in Chicago. I'm sure the Wilsons are going to take some persuading to go into hiding. Who better to reassure the Wilsons that they'll be safe?"

We all had to smile at that.

"We need to get the timing right," I thought out loud. "If she gets them away before we make our move, Rockshaw will be on the alert for someone going after Dr. Wilson's discovery. If she waits too long, Rockshaw could get to the Wilsons before she does."

"Leave it to me," said Xu. "I'll work out the timing with her."

"Should we be worried about contacting her?" I asked them. "Are we going to end up giving away our plans if her communications are compromised? It's no secret that she's on the Board of the Devas Foundation and Rockshaw saw her at *Milliefiore*. Rockshaw may have her phones tapped."

After a brief pause Xu responded, "I'll just ask her to be ready to rescue some people. I won't tell her who until the last minute. Even if Rockshaw has people listening in, he won't know who it is until it's too late."

"We go then?" I asked looking at them both. After a brief moment, they nodded.

"Let's just hope it turns out better than last time," Elle finished for all of us.

We began walking again. Before we got to the gate we came upon our rental car. "I thought I had better get the car off the road in case the police came by and saw an abandoned car and came looking," said Xu, "but I didn't want to drive all the way in and make noise at Mirabai's, so I left it here."

We sat in the car and had a brief discussion before we headed off. We decided to be extra cautious and to each make our way to Essen on different flights, just in case Rockshaw had people looking for three people together, or if the police had somehow managed to connect our new identities with our escape at the airport. We changed our appearances, and then Elle worked her magic on the photos in the passports and IDs we carried to match our new appearances.

After a moment, Elle looked up from the IDs she was doctoring by the inside light of the car and said, "Now that we are going to fly commercial, we can't carry our extra passports and IDs with us. There's too much risk that they'll be found in our carryon bags when we go through security."

An idea popped into my head, "Let's FedEx them to ourselves in Essen so we can use a different identity to leave. Do we have someplace to send them?"

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“Tillie’s,” said Elle without hesitation. “I was thinking we would meet there anyway.” She recited an address in Essen until I’d memorized it, finally adding, “Ask for Dr. Meisner when you get there. Tell reception that you are with Dyson Pharmaceuticals. I’ll FedEx the IDs there when I get to the airport.”

We got the car through the gate, with a little magic from Xu this time, and got back on the road. While Elle drove, Xu got on yet another pre-paid cell phone and booked us three separate flights. Traveling without any luggage raises eyebrows, so we made a stop at a Walmart to get carryon-sized roller-bags and some clothes. We also got rid of our daypacks in a convenient dumpster since we’d been wearing them when the security cameras recorded us at the S.F. airport.

We arrived early in the morning at LAX, but not so early that the airport wasn’t already busy. Cars streamed in. We saw the sign for my airline first and Elle pulled over to let me out.

I grabbed my roller-bag and got out. I put my head back inside before closing the door to say goodbye and I noticed Elle was looking at me with an expression I couldn’t quite read.

“Are you feeling all right?” she asked.

I nodded. In fact I felt great. Last night’s experience had left me feeling profoundly relaxed and full of feeling. “OK. But don’t be surprised if you pick up on people’s thoughts. Most people don’t control their thoughts like Xu and me. They just broadcast everything.”

I said again that I was fine but she continued to look at me like an anxious mother dropping her child off for his first day of school. I said goodbye, closed the car door, and headed through the entrance to the terminal, still not sure why Elle showed so much concern.

When I got inside I understood. It was like hitting a wall.

I felt as if I was being physically assaulted. My first impulse was to turn around and run out the door. Then I got it. I was hearing the thoughts broadcast by thousands of people. More confusing yet, I was getting their feelings along with their thoughts. I felt battered and disoriented, even dizzy. Pretending to need to look for something in my roller-bag, I quickly sat down on the nearest seat and tried to cope with the barrage that was coming at me. It was like being in a crowded and noisy cocktail party where you have to shout to be heard.

I think I could have coped with that, but at the same time my heart felt as if it were being pulled in a dozen different directions at once. I felt bereaved, elated, bored, anxious, angry, weary, cheerful, compassionate, sad, exhilarated, tense, enraged, and happy nearly simultaneously. It was overwhelming. I wanted to curl up into a ball and cry.

I tried to block out all the thoughts and feelings I was receiving, but after various attempts I realized I didn’t know how. By luck, I tried a different approach. Instead of passively receiving the avalanche of impressions I instead focused on just one person’s thoughts and feelings.

I concentrated on a business man who passed in front of me. I immediately discovered that he was really pissed at a business colleague and was determined to make his colleague’s life a living hell. He was angry and vindictive. I felt awful. But it did accomplish one thing—the overall assault on my thoughts and feelings diminished.

Encouraged, I removed my focus from the business man and turned instead to a smiling young woman. The experience felt much better—at least for the first instant—but I couldn’t get away from her thoughts quickly enough. She was reliving her last night with her lover. I imagine I blushed.

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Next I tried a child. I tuned into the thoughts of a young boy. Bad choice again. It was his Dad's turn to have him and he hated going to Dad's. He was sad, angry and afraid. I wanted to hold him.

Desperate, I spied a sleeping baby. Relief at last. I sat and enjoyed an innocent dream and immersed myself in her simple feelings of being safe and loved. It felt wonderful.

I was finally able to relax and breathe normally again. But it was only a temporary reprieve. I could hardly sit there and share the dreams of a baby for much longer. I had a plane to catch.

Steeling myself, I withdrew my concentration from the baby's sweet innocence. The assault on my mind and feelings resumed—but it was less overwhelming. Without knowing how, I had succeeded in gaining some ability to protect myself from the chaos. I still felt like a ship in a storm, but I thought I could make my way to check in and get to my gate.

As I walked through the airport, I had a hard time distinguishing between what people were saying and what they were thinking. People's bland expressions certainly hide a lot. I hoped that they weren't saying out loud most of the things I was picking up. Afraid I might respond to someone's thoughts, instead of their voice, I just looked straight ahead and engaged no one.

Even so, I found myself walking next to an older woman and seemingly just by noticing her, I found myself aware of her thoughts and feelings. None of her children wanted her to live with them and after the death of her husband she had been left with no money. Such aching sadness. I almost put my arm around her just to give her comfort but caught myself just in time. Imagine her reaction if a perfectly strange man had embraced her. Despite trying to ignore everyone I was frequently, and literally, staggered by what I felt. People must have thought me drunk.

How was I ever going to live with this awareness?

Eventually, walking like a blind man and staring straight ahead, I got to my gate and onto the plane. A short time later we were airborne. Even though there were far fewer people on the plane than in the airport, I still heard a babble of thoughts and was assailed on all sides by conflicting feelings.

I concentrated on several people to see if I couldn't find another oasis of thought and feeling, as I did with the sleeping baby in the terminal, but I had no luck. I also found the whole experience disturbing. I knew that I was invading the private sanctuary of people's thoughts—even if they didn't—and I decided to stop.

I desperately wanted relief. The experience was intense and draining. I finally shut my eyes and, mercifully, fell asleep. My dreams weren't exactly restful—but at least I experienced only one set of thoughts and feelings.

I slept fitfully until we arrived at JFK. I realized with a sigh of relief that I was not as inundated by the thoughts and feelings of my fellow passengers as before. Instead of an overwhelming onslaught of thoughts, I experienced them as if they were the distant roar of a crowd. Perhaps my ability to hear only the thoughts I wanted to hear was reasserting itself after lying dormant. However, although less intensely than before, my feelings were still being pulled this way and that, and I experienced the emotional equivalent of sea sickness.

Fortunately for me, the plane I was on would continue to Dusseldorf, so I didn't need to go back into the terminal and endure the assault. Only a few passengers stayed on board with me and even the distant roaring sound of the crowd subsided to a manageable murmur. For the first time in my life, I considered how nice it would be to live in a cave.

The next leg of the journey, from JFK to Dusseldorf, was better. I kept my mind away from the thoughts and feelings of my fellow passengers by watching movie after movie on the tiny

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screen in the back of the seat in front of me. But I still had to be careful. The slightest lapse of concentration and I would find myself caught up in someone else's thoughts and sometimes, deep feelings—there were several people onboard who were on their way to funerals.

We landed in Dusseldorf before dawn. Once again I had to brave the crowds inside the terminal. I tried a new tactic this time. I visualized my experience of awakening at *Milliefiore* with as much concentration as I could muster while wending my way through Dusseldorf airport. Gradually, I was able to surround myself with a protective bubble of peace—like a calm, quiet, corner in a noisy house—but only as long as I stayed focused.

I was barely conscious of the airport. I couldn't have described any of it afterwards. I eventually made it through the terminal and followed the signs to a taxi rank. I got in a taxi and gave him the address Elle had made me memorize. In a few minutes we were away from the crowded airport, and to my immense relief, the constant din of thoughts and pummeling of feelings nearly stopped. I sank back into my seat, utterly exhausted.

How was I going to be able to do what we needed to do to discover the fifth force if it was going to require such an intense focus of concentration just to cope? Elle had warned me that the aftermath of my experience might be rough and disorienting. But it was almost totally incapacitating. The strain of concentration had left me completely drained.

I watched disinterestedly as an endless German cityscape passed by. Essen was in the heart of one of the most urbanized areas of Germany. Our route from the Dusseldorf Airport was almost entirely built up—only rarely did I see open fields. The sense of people being everywhere only heightened my sense of oppression and concern. I longed for some kind of escape.

After traveling on the autobahn for about thirty minutes, the driver took an exit and began driving through suburban streets. Each turning took us down less traveled roads. I assumed we must be getting close to the address Elle had given me. Just then I saw a church. It seemed familiar and I immediately knew I had come here many times before. On impulse I decided to stop. I had a strong feeling the church would give me sanctuary.

"Please stop for a moment," I said. Like most Germans, the driver had no difficulty understanding my English.

The driver obligingly pulled over. "How much farther is the address I gave you?"

"Not far," answered the cabbie, "maybe three or four hundred meters."

"I'll get out here then. I'd like to walk a bit." I paid with a credit card and off he went.

I turned to study the church. It was made in the German Gothic style—a tall spire in front and at the rear. The once white stone was now gray and pitted with age, black lichen growing wherever it stayed damp. It must be quite old—and fortunate to have survived the bombings that leveled almost all of Essen during the war.

I walked toward the arched entrance. A sign informed me the church had been built in honor of Matilda of Hildesheim, a catholic saint who died in 1034 AD. I made my way inside, left my bag in the entry way, and began to wander. I immediately felt a welcome and almost tangible aura of peace descend upon me.

The interior of the church was airy and light. Two rows of multicolored stone pillars held up a pure white ceiling veined with Gothic curves. At the far end, above the high altar, was a roseate stained glass window through which the early morning sun was slanting. Rows of dark brown and richly polished pews contrasted with the white marble floor. It was a lovely church: large enough to express the majesty of the Gothic style, yet small enough to have the feel of a well-loved neighborhood church. I was soothed just by looking at it.

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I slowly made my way down the right aisle and came to a side chapel dedicated to the church's patron saint, Matilda of Hildesheim. Although it was early morning, there were already many candles lit. Several women were kneeling in the first pew, rosaries dangling from their fingers as they recited their prayers.

I gratefully lowered myself into the back pew. My mind was telling me that I should be on my way. The mission was running. I needed to find Elle and Xu and get things going. But I simply couldn't bring myself to move. The effort of warding off the onslaught of people's thoughts and feelings had left me exhausted.

Instead, I looked almost irresistibly at a marble bust of Matilda of Hildesheim that sat on a plinth near the altar. Her skillfully rendered face showed compassion and ecstasy in equal measure. I was surprised at how much her image affected me. It was as if she were present. I felt a gentle stirring within me. Like a warm drink, it spread soothingly throughout my body. My weary heart relaxed, like a tight fist unclenching. I took my first deep breath since arriving at LAX. My mental exhaustion fell away. I felt renewed and refreshed.

I had just been healed.

After a moment's reflection, I realized something else. I no longer heard the babble of other's thoughts. I could no longer hear the thoughts of the women in the front pew and my feelings were my own again. I tentatively focused on one of the women and I could pick up her thoughts. But when I withdrew my focus I heard—nothing.

Matilda had given me a great gift.

With a light heart and renewed energy I decided to leave. I headed back along the aisle, grabbed my bag and went out the main door and down the steps to a small plaza in front of the church. I inhaled a bracing lungful of cold autumn air and noticed, as if seeing them for the first time, that the trees were nearly bare, only a few brown leaves were left.

I noticed, too, a few people walking on the opposite side of the street. They wore woolen hats and heavy coats. As if waking up, I realized that it was quite cold and that my exhalation was a white plume of condensed vapor. I dug into my bag, found a jacket, and put it on gratefully. Alas, no hat, but the cab driver had said my destination was not far.

It was in fact quite close to the church. I walked to it in just a minute or two. The building was two stories of white stucco with a welcoming double door in the center, over which there was a sign reading, "Meisner Clinic." There was a small parking area in front of the building, and to either side were grounds bound by tall hedges running out of sight behind.

The overall feeling was clean, neat and pleasant. As instructed, I entered and presented myself at the reception area and asked to see Dr. Meisner, adding to the smiling young receptionist that I was with Dyson Pharmaceuticals.

"Ah yes, she is expecting you." He led me down a wide central corridor, my bag's wheels clicking over every seam in the marble floor, until we arrived at a door marked "Private." He knocked softly.

Xu answered the door. Or at least a dark-haired brown-eyed German-looking man in a leather jacket going by the name of Horst answered the door. Right behind Xu stood an Italian woman with long dark hair held back with a clasp, dusky skin, heavy eye-brows, full lips and a smiling mouth full of white teeth. She wore fashionable eyeglasses with smoked lenses and a woman's version of business wear—Elle.

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I had sent a mental apology to the physics department at Berkeley before having assumed the guise of yet another professor I knew there—a black haired Irishman named Blair. I hoped I didn't manage to get the entire department arrested before I was through.

I stepped in, thanked my guide and closed the door behind me.

We exchanged the usual how-was-your-trip-when-did-you-get-here's. They had arrived only a short while ago. I decided not to tell them about my ordeal yet. For the moment, I was glad to have it behind me.

"Come see Tillie," Elle said. "She's fixing breakfast."

I followed Elle through several rooms that were obviously Tillie's living space. High ceilings, white plaster walls, and dark wooden floors provided a dramatic space for a gorgeous display of fabrics and woven art. One wall of her sitting room was almost entirely covered by a rough-wool weaving in a flowing pattern of blues, pinks, fuchsia and purple, shot through with brilliant copper wire. The floors were covered in similarly hand woven carpets, and woolen blankets were draped across most of the furniture.

As we made our way down a short corridor, I glanced into a room with a fully prepped loom, brilliant red yarn crossing gold, and walls of shelves overflowing with skeins of yarn in jewel-like shades. In a few more steps, we arrived at an airy, open kitchen that smelled enticingly of coffee. One side of the kitchen was a solarium full of plants presently drinking in the pale morning sunshine and surrounding a small table and chairs—already set for four. A kettle was burbling quietly on the stove against the opposite wall and the steamy warmth of the kitchen was welcome after the chill outdoors.

A woman, who surely must be Tillie, turned from the counter where she was slicing rich, dark bread. She was short and rounded and radiated instant warmth. Tillie made her way over to me and engulfed me in a hug. Pulling away, she looked at me fondly and took both of my hands in hers. I felt as if she were pouring a soothing balm into me. I realized that I recognized the feeling and I looked very closely at her. Then it clicked.

"Hello, Tillie," I said, "or would you prefer it if I called you Matilda." Tillie was the flesh and blood model for the marble bust I had so recently been looking at.

"How clever of you to discover my secret so quickly," she said. "You just visited my chapel, didn't you." Reaching up to touch my cheek, she said soothingly, "You had a difficult trip."

"Yes. But I'm fine now. You healed me."

"I may have had a hand in it, but the power doesn't come from me. You know that," she said enigmatically.

Italian Elle looked from one to the other of us but asked no question.

Minutes later we sat down for breakfast in the solarium. The rich, dark bread Tillie had been slicing was accompanied by a platter of cheeses, sliced pears, a pot of coffee and a jug of yellowish cream.

"It is good to see you again," said Tillie, after we had gotten through the preliminaries of slicing cheese and making appreciative sounds about the food. "I missed you terribly after you were... well, taken by Krupp."

"What happened to you after we died?" Elle asked matter-of-factly—and in German. With pleased surprise I understood her immediately. By the end of breakfast I spoke German as easily as I understood it. It came far more quickly than Korean had. I suppose it made sense since I had been living in Germany for many years just before we were killed, but it still felt odd to suddenly be able to do such things.

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“After you were captured, Xu came and told me what happened,” Tillie continued in German, placing a hand on Xu’s forearm as if thanking him. “The bombings had already begun and everyone who could was fleeing Essen. Krupp’s factories were the main target, but the Allies bombed nearly everything. I was so glad they spared my church.”

“I decided to leave and take advantage of the chaos. I was already long overdue for a change of identity. People were already wondering how I could remain looking so young. I went away and came back after the war and pretended that I owned this land. It was easy to forge a few documents and get away with it. There were almost no records left after the war.”

“Even before the war, I could see that people were turning to modern science and away from the church. So I went to school and got degrees in psychology, medicine and psychiatry and then opened this clinic in 1955 for the psychological treatment of children and adolescents.”

“I knew it would attract too much attention to use my abilities for physical healings, but unusual healings of the mind and heart are still accepted without question. My clinic now specializes in cases of autism and Asperger’s Syndrome. We have twenty-five children in residence and hundreds of outpatients.”

“Can you heal them?” I asked, my German sounding natural to my ears.

“Some. But, as with all ills, the patient must want to be cured before any form of healing can help. We give the children here the most timeless medicine of all—unconditional love—and pray that they will feel safe enough to venture out of their minds.”

“The most wonderful thing is finding the diamonds.”

We looked at Tillie questioningly.

“I hadn’t known it when I started up my clinic, but many children are considered by their parents to be psychologically ill, when in fact, they are nearing their awakening! Children who have telepathic or telekinetic abilities will often hide them after seeing the fearful reactions of their parents. They are also so sensitive to others that they retreat into their own shells for survival.”

I nodded emphatically, drawing another look from Italian Elle.

“I can’t tell you what a joy it is to be able to liberate these sensitive children from their fears. They blossom—as they should—when their abilities are explained to them and when they realize that there are others like them.”

“Do they stay here?” asked Xu.

“No. I convince their parents that they need special care and get them to where they can learn who they really are. Often it is to one of the Protector havens like Mirabai’s or *Milliefiore*, but I send them to some ashrams and monasteries I know as well.”

After a bit, Tillie announced that she needed to do her morning rounds. We said good-bye and settled into the living area surrounded by Tillie’s weavings. German Xu opened up his laptop and sank into the couch, I took a broad wicker chair with a giant crimson pillow and Italian Elle sat cross-legged on the floor, giving the hand-woven rug an appreciative caress like stroking a silky cat.

“So now that we’re here, what are we going to do?” I asked, looking to them both. “We need to get information out of a high security facility. I’m guessing there will be guards at the entrance. Employees will have magnetic badges with their photographs. And visitors will be escorted everywhere—assuming they allow visitors. Do we even know where it is?”

Xu spoke up and pointed at his laptop, “While I was between flights in DC, I had time to do some more research online. Hocktief Gruppe is a massive company and it appears to be spread

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over about half of Essen. I figured out where the fusion research is being done, though. It is in an old area of central Essen that was heavily damaged during the war. There are mostly new buildings now.”

“Alright,” I said, “we know where to go, but how do we get in?”

An hour later, after mashing together a very loose plan—one which would require a great deal of luck to succeed—Italian Elle and I got out of a taxi about three blocks from the main entrance to the Hocktief Gruppe’s fusion research labs. Using the magic of the internet, we had determined that there was a café across from the main entrance. We assumed that even top secret researchers got hungry.

We split up and entered the café separately. It was a large café and the lunch rush was just beginning. I immediately headed for the bathroom. I nodded to myself in satisfaction. The men’s bathroom would work for our plan. In addition to the usual stalls there was a cleaning closet.

Our first bit of luck.

When I returned, I gave Italian Elle a mental flash of what I saw. I tried hard not to grin when I got a mental image back that she had understood. We sat at widely separated tables sipping coffees. Lots of men and women from the Hocktief Gruppe entered the café wearing their badges on lanyards around their necks. Some just grabbed coffee and headed back across the street. Many sat down and had lunch. After about twenty-five minutes, the lunch rush was in full swing and we saw what we wanted. Two men wearing Hocktief Gruppe badges paid for their lunches and then headed for the bathroom.

Our second bit of luck.

Italian Elle was right on their heels. I stayed for a few moments longer to see if she had attracted attention, then I made my way to the bathroom. Elle opened the door to my knock, quickly closing and locking it behind me. The two men she had followed now lay unconscious on the floor. I didn’t know if they were going to wake up with headaches, or just how Elle managed to get them unconscious, but they were both neatly laid out on the floor looking as if they were asleep.

Staring intently at one of the men, Elle instantly took on his appearance, then reached down and removed his lanyard and badge and put it around her neck. I was next. I stared hard at the second man. Pausing to relax and take a breath, I focused on his face; to my pleasant surprise, I changed my appearance very quickly. Practice must pay off. I removed his lanyard and badge and put it on.

Elle had already opened the locked cleaning closet in the bathroom. “This stuff is everywhere,” she said, grinning and holding up a roll of silvery tape she had found amongst the toilet paper and cleaning supplies. Elle quickly taped the wrists, ankles and mouths of the two men, making sure they would have no problem breathing, and then dragged them into the closet. She had to put one on top of the other and then put the mop bucket in the lap of the one on top in order to fit them in the tiny space.

Elle closed the door to the cleaning closet and gave the door handle a little tap. The screech it made sounded like it was going to be pretty hard to open again. We listened at the door to make sure no one was outside, then exited the bathroom. We were now dressed almost identically in blue blazers, white shirts and ties, khaki pants and Oxfords. I was now Hans Riker and Elle was Werner Kohl. We walked nonchalantly back through the café and out onto the street.

We crossed over the street, following a couple of real Hocktief Gruppe employees. The entrance was in a modern, three-story steel and glass building, although it appeared to be part of

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an older brick building that must have survived the bombings during the war. On the right, we saw a wall of tinted windows divided by gleaming stainless steel, presenting the modern, open face of Germany. On the left, we saw a wall of old brick, pitted, stained and weathered, blank bricked-up windows presenting the closed face of Germany's past. It was an odd combination and I wondered why the builders hadn't simply torn the old building down and started over.

We followed our unwitting guides into the lobby through the main entrance. The two guards on duty gave us more, I thought, than normal scrutiny. They didn't stop us but their inspection set off some internal alarms. Was I being unreasonably paranoid or was there something amiss? I guess we'd find out soon enough.

We swiped our badges through the door reader, emulating the same practiced flick that those ahead of us performed. We entered the main building and walked straight ahead.

Now we needed our third bit of luck. An unattended computer.

Elle and I looked as if we were walking purposefully, but we were actually wandering around randomly, on the lookout for someone leaving their desk and going away long enough that I could slip in and use his computer.

Unfortunately, our good luck was wavering. Riker and Kohl must be about the most popular men in Germany and we got nods and waves everywhere we went. The central areas of the first and second floors were open, filled with computer-covered desks and scores of people. Heads swiveled our way almost constantly. We nodded and walked briskly, trying to appear too busy to stop and talk with anyone.

So much for easily slipping into an office unseen.

We headed up to the third floor. It was quieter and was divided up into laboratories. The ones we glanced into were full of the usual jerry-rigged equipment you find in most experimental labs, looking as if they were made from spare parts, old pipes, and endless wires, all resting on small sandbags and cement blocks—no glowing lights or pulsing laser beams. Raw science often looks like someone forgot to clean up the garage.

We were almost to the end of the third floor when we saw our chance. A man came out of his office along the outer wall. We watched until we saw him push open a bathroom door. I slipped into his office and, as hoped, he hadn't logged off his computer. With Elle keeping watch, I quickly opened a browser and downloaded a PDF that Xu had prepared. All I had to do was open it. No sooner did it open than it disappeared. The whole thing took seconds. I was out of his office before the man emerged from the bathroom.

Our third bit of luck.

As Elle and I walked away, Xu's Trojan horse and virus went quietly to work. First the virus. Instantly after I opened the PDF, the virus began sending itself to every computer in the network. As soon as the virus established itself in another computer it would begin sending random files through the network. In just a few minutes the network security people were going to notice that an extraordinary amount of data was being moved around. They would immediately look for a virus. That's what we wanted. The virus was just a distraction. While they were hunting for a virus, Xu's Trojan horse would be creating a hole in the firewall.

While Elle and I had made our way to Hochtief Gruppe, Xu had made his way to the Duisberg-Essen University. Xu went to the university because it, like Hochtief Gruppe, had high-speed fiber-optic cable. As soon as Xu's Trojan horse opened up a hole in the security firewall, Xu was going to pull massive amounts of data out of their data storage system at gigabyte speeds.

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Elle's and my job was done. The rest was up to Xu. We just needed to get away.

We took the stairs down to the first floor and were heading for the main entrance when we heard sirens. We looked at each other and shared the same thought—they found the real Riker and Kohl in the bathroom closet. One of them must have woken up and started banging against the door or something.

Our luck had officially run out. One thing was clear. We were not going to get out the way we came in.

Elle whispered to me, "We need to hide somewhere and change our appearance. They are going to be looking for imposters."

No sooner did Elle finish whispering than an announcement came over the loud-speaker system asking for Hans Riker and Werner Kohl to report to security. Immediately heads turned our way. Feigning nonchalance we headed away from the main entry and started looking for another way out.

Just then we spotted some security guards talking to a bunch of the office workers. Seemingly hundreds of people were standing at their desks and pointing our way. Why did we pick the two most recognizable people in the entire company? When they saw us, the guards stopped and began speaking into their hand-held radios.

We moved farther away from the guards and spotted an old door leading into the older brick half of the building. It looked as if it hadn't been used in a very long time and had an enormous old padlock securing a thick deadbolt. We weren't going to get through that door without revealing Elle's special talents. We continued to look around for another way out when we saw a half-a-dozen fully-suited SWAT team members carrying automatic weapons hurrying our way. They were definitely not your everyday security detail.

This was a trap.

It explained the uneasiness I felt when we passed by the entry guards. The security team must have been on high alert expecting some kind of intrusion. But how did they know we were coming here? No time to figure that out now.

"Run," shouted Elle/Kohl succinctly. I hoped my Riker body could put on some speed. We sprinted for the old oak door. Just before we got to it, the door shattered into splinters, as if it had been blown with explosives—no doubt what Elle wanted to convey.

We ran through the door hearing a chorus of "Stoppens" in our wake. We flew down a set of stairs that were right in front of us. At the bottom we could go left or right. Elle went right. We ran down a nearly dark hall and through the door at the end of it, slamming it closed behind us.

We found ourselves in the dark. Searching around I found a switch and a line of old-style bulbs feebly came to life, only dimly lighting a long corridor, as many of the bulbs had long since burned out. The corridor's cracked and yellowing plaster walls were broken by dark wooden door after dark wooden door. Elle turned back to the door we had just come through and, as in the bathroom of the café, tapped her finger on the door handle. I heard an audible grating of metal.

"That won't hold them for long," she said, and began running down the corridor. I needed no encouragement to follow. I ran close on her heels, our office-wear Oxfords slapping against the floor. I just caught glimpses of abandoned rooms as we ran by the occasional open door. In one I saw an old wooden desk, in another a stack of wooden crates. It smelled musty and it was cold and damp. It had been years since these rooms had been used.

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We came to an intersection. We could keep going or go left or right. With almost a single mind, we turned switches to light up both directions and then went right. Whoever pursued us would have to check both directions. I thought I distantly heard the door Elle had disabled crashing open.

We came to another intersection and after again putting on the lights in both directions we went left. We did this several more times, turning randomly left or right down corridors lined with endless doors. I hadn't appreciated how large the building was from the outside. I was beginning to feel like we were in a maze—a maze with no way out.

We were looking with no luck for a stairway going up to ground level. Instead we made another turn and were presented with a view of stone steps going down. Our only other option was going back the way we came and, either real or imagined, I thought I heard the pounding of footsteps behind us. Down we went. We were now two stories below ground and farther than ever from a way out.

At the bottom of the stair was an iron door in a very old stone wall. It could have been built hundreds of years ago. The mortar was black with age. We were so far below ground that the wall was damp and dripping in places, and the stone-flagged floor had actual puddles of stagnant water. It must have been used in the relatively recent past, however, because there were electric lights even down this far.

Further evidence of recent use was the presence of a shiny new padlock on the door. Elle/Kohl popped it open with a casual twist and tossed it on the floor. The heavy iron door opened easily and soundlessly—apparently it had been recently oiled. It was pitch black inside but we didn't hesitate to enter. Once inside we pushed the heavy door closed again and feeling around in the dark we gratefully discovered that there were four heavy iron bolts we could use to secure the door from the inside. We pushed them into place accompanied by a metallic scraping sound. We took a deep breath. Even a SWAT team wasn't going to get through that door quickly.

Our feeling of security was short-lived, however. We both fumbled around until Elle found a light switch and a chilling tableau was dimly lit for us.

We were in a dungeon.

Heavy iron cell doors stretched down the passage in which we stood. It was clearly unoccupied. But as I stood there in the semi-dark, it felt anything but empty. I staggered slightly as I was struck by a wave of hopelessness and pain, as if it emanated from the very walls. Now I knew why this building had not been torn down. It hid one of Rockshaw's darkest secrets.

We looked at each other in mute recognition. "This is where we were held by Rockshaw, isn't it?" I rasped out, feeling an almost unbearable pressure of despair weighing down on me.

"Yes," she said simply and clearly, seemingly unfazed by what I was feeling. "I was wondering if you would recognize it."

I was drawn down the corridor, passing a dozen cells, their doors closed ominously. I pulled one open and thought I could feel despair roll out with a wave of cold air. Finally I came to a single iron door at the end. It had no lock and pulled open easily. What I saw brought me to a sudden chilling stop. This was where we had been tortured. This is where Rockshaw had stood over us gloating and dreadful. I saw it clearly in my mind's eye. The tables to which we had been shackled still stood in the middle of the room. Around the walls were the unspeakable implements that were used on us. On the walls I could see sprays of dried blood and I thought I could smell the stench of vomit and decay.

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I felt a wave of revulsion wash through me, followed immediately by white hot anger. My anger was not only for myself and Elle, but for all the people who had been brought here. Many people had died in agony in this room, their intense feelings still vibrating in the air. It was too much to bear. I turned as if to go but then my fury took me.

I turned back around to face the room, took a deep breath, and summoned my life force. I felt it course through me with surging and alarming power. Heedless, I spread my arms wide apart, as if embracing the room, and then drew my arms together powerfully, ignoring Elle's sudden cry to wait.

Everything in the room hurtled violently toward the center of the room. Tables, cabinets, chairs, shelves, vile machines—everything—collided in the center of the room, and when my hands came together in a clap it all exploded with the sound of thunder.

Just as I brought my hands together, Elle/Kohl arrived at my side and quickly held her palm toward the ensuing explosion. Pieces of stone, brick, metal fragments and wooden splinters came flying at us. But the debris fell to the ground after hitting an invisible wall. The shock wave from the explosion was so intense, however, that Elle was pushed backward, her feet sliding on the floor.

If Elle hadn't been there, I would have been shredded by the very explosion my anger caused.

The main force of the explosion went upwards through the ceiling. Moments later an avalanche of stone, brick and splintered wood crashed into the room creating a growing mound. As we watched, a shaft of pale sunlight penetrated the cloud of dust. The explosion must have ripped up through many floors and out the roof.

When I realized the extent of the damage I had a sick feeling that I might have killed people—then felt a wave of relief that the building above us was empty. Belatedly and sheepishly I also realized that I could have killed us both. I looked at Elle and let out a shaky breath.

Nodding, as if accepting an apology, Elle/Kohl said with a brisk German accent, “*Ve haf got to get you into training soon.*”

Before I could respond, we heard shouts and thuds from the opposite end of the hall. The SWAT team had arrived and was battering at the door.

“Well, I guess they figured out where to find us. Maybe it was the thunderclap,” she deadpanned. But she added more sympathetically, “If you hadn't done it I probably would have.” But she couldn't help adding, “I wouldn't have been so bloody noisy though!”

“Come on. While you were busy trying to bring the roof down on us, I remembered a way out of here. We need to hurry, though. They'll probably use explosives to get through the door.”

Without explanation, she led me into one of the prisoner's cells. Like moving the hand on a clock up to the 12 o'clock position, and with only the faintest of screeches, she lifted the metal bar that locked the cell. She opened the door very slowly to keep any sound to a minimum and in we went. Elle carefully closed the door behind us and with a slow movement of her hand I heard the locking bar move back into the locked position.

Now we were not only two stories underground, but we were locked in a pitch black cell. I was obviously not grasping the “I remembered a way out” part of her plan.

“This was my cell when we were, ah, guests here,” she said, trying to sound light, but I could tell that she too was feeling some strain. “Sometimes I could hear water running on the other side of that wall,” pointing to the wall opposite the cell door. I could just barely make out where she

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was pointing by the faint light that was coming into the cell from the cracks around the door. “I think it must be a storm drain.”

Before she could say anything more, there was muffled “whump” followed by the sound of the iron door to the prison slamming open with a ringing clang that made my ears hurt. We heard shouted orders and then silence. Finally someone in charge spoke into the silence, “We know you are in there. There is no way out. You must come out or we will be forced to shoot.”

Elle whispered in my ear, “Tune into their thoughts. I want to know what they are going to do before they do it. Just give me a running commentary.”

I let my mind pick up the thoughts of the men until I found the leader. He had just radioed in for instructions. He was told to wait. “They’re waiting for someone,” I whispered in Elle’s ear.

She nodded and then stretched out her hand. A circle about a yard in diameter began to form on the wall opposite the door. The only reason I could see it in the nearly dark cell was because it shimmered with a soft glow.

I let my awareness drift back to the leader. He was suddenly tense and fearful. I couldn’t understand why until I sensed that another, stronger mind—a mind full of anger and menace—had just arrived. I tuned in to the newcomer and then recoiled.

It was Rockshaw.

His anger was barely contained. Someone had penetrated far into his domain. His anger was fueled by his fear. His prison was revealed. Apparently even he feared public exposure of the atrocities he had committed here.

“It’s Rockshaw,” I whispered. Elle/Kohl froze, arm still extended. “He’s undecided. He doesn’t want to bring the SWAT team into the prison.”

Again Elle nodded but kept her concentration on the back wall of the cell. My eyes were beginning to adjust to the darkness and as I watched, a perfectly circular disk-shaped piece of the wall slowly and soundlessly emerged, like a cork being pulled from a bottle. After a few seconds it hung suspended in midair, the round hole it left behind revealing a dark void.

I reluctantly focused my awareness on Rockshaw once more. His thoughts and feelings were repellent. Staying with his mind was the equivalent of slipping into a hot, slimy, noisome pool. I stayed with his thoughts long enough to learn that he thought we had already escaped. Another SWAT team had radioed that we must have escaped by climbing up the pile of rubble left behind—or were buried under it. Rockshaw said he would check.

“He’s going to check the rubble pile to see if we got out that way,” I whispered. Meanwhile, still holding her hand toward the suspended disk, Elle walked around it and peered through the hole she had created. She beckoned for me to come over to her but held her fingers to her lips.

As noiselessly as possible I climbed through the waist-high hole left by the disk, almost falling backwards when I put my hands in icy water. Once in, I couldn’t stand up all the way. I was hunched over, in ankle-deep water that quickly filled my Hans Riker Oxfords. I moved cautiously aside in the darkness and watched Elle climb in backwards, with one hand still stretched out toward the suspended circle of wall. Then she slowly drew the suspended disk back into the hole she had created, blotting out even the faint light from the cell. The disk of wall grated only slightly as it returned to its place. Then there was a brief shimmer of light around the circle, bright in the complete darkness, eliminating any trace of what Elle had done. Elle let out a long pent-up breath.

Reluctantly I made one last effort to tune into Rockshaw’s mind. Rockshaw was now standing at the entrance to his torture chamber. He was relieved that the worst of his secret was destroyed.

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But he was instinctively uneasy that someone would have destroyed this room of all rooms. And he knew that whoever had destroyed it had seen his secret.

In fury, and in a voice so loud we could even hear it through the stone wall, Rockshaw shouted, “They’ve escaped. Find them! Now! Put every man you can on it. Get the police on the streets.”

Elle whispered, “We need to be moving. We need to get clear of the area as quickly as we can.” Then I heard a faint splash as Elle began walking.

Slipping along in an icy cold and pitch black storm drain with water over your ankles hardly seems like it would be cause for joy, but as I got farther and farther away from those wretched cells my spirits lifted perceptibly. After ten minutes of careful going we pretty much fell into a larger tunnel. We noticed that this tunnel was slightly less dark and after a whispered conference, we went in the direction that seemed the lightest. After a few minutes, we found ourselves looking up at a pencil thin beam of light coming from a tiny hole in a manhole cover high above us.

Elle/Kohl scrambled up a set of iron rungs and listened at the manhole cover. She came back down and whispered, “I heard traffic. We need to find a way out where no one can see us.”

So we continued along until we saw another manhole cover high above us. Elle repeated her scramble up and her return down the iron rungs and shook her head. After two more unsuccessful tries, Elle finally nodded to me from the top of the rungs.

Still cautious, she pushed the manhole cover up enough that she could look around. After checking out every direction, she slid the cover to the side, and gestured for me to come up. Once I got out, blinking in the sunshine, I could see that we were in a warren of empty warehouses. It was nice to be out of sight but I hardly felt safe. Now that we were above ground, I could hear sirens in all directions, evidence of a major manhunt in progress.

We changed our appearances yet again and Elle took our Hocktief Gruppe badges, dropping them down the manhole before putting the cover back on. Cautiously we looked for a way out of the warren. After wandering around for a bit, we found a gate in a high wooden fence. It was closed with a chain and a padlock but Elle made short work of it.

Elle, now looking like a blond Amazon, slowly pushed the gate open and looked out. Our luck had not returned.

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## Chapter 14

The gate was yanked open from the other side and we faced an armed policeman.

“Come forward. Keep your hands where I can see them,” he almost shouted.

Elle stepped forward and appeared to trip on the sill of the gate. She stretched out her hands as anyone does when they are falling—but instead of falling she grabbed the policeman’s gun and twisted his arm up behind his back. It was obviously painful. He looked like he was afraid to move.

“Sorry,” she said in German, “I know this is painful, but I don’t want you to struggle and make me do something to really hurt you.” His expression was now both pained and surprised. She ejected the magazine of his gun with one hand and tossed his gun over the fence. Next, she reached for his equipment belt, found his hand cuffs and quickly cuffed him to the gate post. She also reached into his pocket and tossed the keys she found there far enough away from him that he couldn’t reach them and undo his handcuffs.

Our actions had not gone unnoticed. A small crowd had gathered across the street and I could see several mobile phones already pressed to several ears, while a few more were pointed our way, their cameras recording the scene. Taking in the situation with a quick glance, Elle unclipped the policeman’s radio from his belt and without a word began to run. It wasn’t going to take long for reinforcements to arrive.

I ran after her, glad that I was wearing running shoes again and not Hans Riker’s water-logged Oxfords. Elle had suggested that I choose to become someone young and athletic—just in case. I chose one of my fitter students. Elle looked like an Olympic sprinter, lean and hard muscled. We ducked around the first corner we came to. Elle was probably looking for a place to hide, but there were people everywhere. Instead she stopped and put her hand on the handle of an Audi sedan and the door locks popped open.

“You drive,” she said, and I got into the driver’s seat. The car started even before my feet found the pedals.

Elle gave me a meaningful glance and said, “I’d put on your seatbelt if I were you.” I didn’t argue.

“Just do exactly what I say. Don’t ask what I’m doing. I’m going to need to concentrate. Head down this street at normal speed.”

I did as she said. I glanced at Elle and saw that she was holding the police radio to her ear. “They found our policeman.”

“Turn right at the light, stay at normal speed.”

Still with the radio to her ear she said, “They have a description, plate number and our general heading. It probably won’t take long for them to find us.”

Almost before she finished speaking we heard several sirens start up not far from us. The closest one was coming from our right. We were both heading for the same intersection. Our light was red and there were a few cars already stopped in our lane.

“Speed up,” said Elle. “When I tell you to, swerve around the cars stopped at the light.”

I stepped on the gas and the Audi accelerated smoothly. I was not looking forward to swerving around the cars ahead because the traffic on the cross-street was heavy. As far as I could tell, we were going to smash right into them.

Suddenly the light for the cross-street changed. It went straight from green to red and the lights in all four directions were red. The cross-street traffic screeched to a stop, leaving the

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police car behind them in a snarl of traffic. I swerved around the cars in front of me as instructed, threaded a needle through the intersection, got back into the correct lane and put my foot down on the accelerator

I exhaled with feeling.

“It’s going to get harder from here on,” Elle said almost distantly as she concentrated on the radio.

Now there were even more sirens heading our way. I heard the thump, thump of a helicopter. Hearing the sirens, cars all around us were pulling over to the side leaving us exposed and easy to spot. We were now in a suburban area filled with two- and three- story homes. Pedestrians watched us speed by. I could see some of them begin to pull out mobile phones. We were definitely not going to be able to just disappear. I hoped Elle had a plan.

“They’re blocking all the roads into this area,” said Elle. “That’s good. The fewer people around, the better. I’ll let us get caught rather than let a bystander get hurt.”

A few moments later she continued, “They’re going to go for a block up ahead,” she said listening intently to the radio.

“I want you to go as fast as you can straight up this road.”

With more faith than conviction, I trod on the accelerator and quickly reached 100KPH. In the distance ahead I could see four yellow-striped police cars, blue lights flashing, turned sideways and blocking the intersection.

“Aim for the point where the center two cars are touching and don’t slow down.”

I stepped on the gas. When it became apparent that we weren’t going to slow down, policemen began running. Just when we were about to hit the seam between the two cars in the center, I stiffened my arms and braced for impact. I needn’t have bothered. There was a crash, the sound of twisting metal and breaking glass, and a protesting screech of tires, but we never slowed down. As if they were swinging doors, Elle had thrown the police cars aside at the last possible instant, crumpling their fenders and shattering windows to make it appear we had hit them. Even after we had made it through, I heard our own fenders screeching and complaining as Elle added some impact dents to our own car. An artist at work.

“They just authorized the use of deadly force,” said Elle calmly, radio pressed to her ear. “Make a right turn at the next intersection.”

I made the turn and sped forward, leaving some of the sirens behind. I still heard the helicopter overhead, obviously keeping the men on the ground aware of where we were. One lone siren, however, was coming right at us. About one hundred meters ahead of us he braked hard and slewed his car sideways, blocking the road. His window came down and he extended his arm, gun in hand. As we flew toward him I could see that he was moving his head down into position to aim his gun. I glanced at Elle, hoping she was going to tell me to do something.

Just then his airbags went off and knocked him backward in his seat. His gun dropped to the ground. I glanced again at Elle and saw the slightest hint of a smile. We had to go up on the sidewalk to get around his car, but we were soon speeding along once again.

“It’s not far now, but it’s going to be very close.”

I’d had no idea where we were as we raced along the streets of Essen, but suddenly I saw off to our right the spires of the church near Tillie’s clinic. Catching my look, Elle nodded. “That’s where we’re going.”

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Another police car was heading directly toward us, blue lights flashing and siren warbling in the slightly demented way of European sirens. “Faster,” said Elle. I put it to the floor. We were going 160KPH.

“You are going to make a right turn in front of the police car. Don’t slow down.”

It felt like a game of chicken. The police car was heading at us at top speed and I was going flat out. Our closing speed must be over 300KPH. We were rapidly approaching both the street corner and the police car. I wasn’t sure which we were going to reach first.

I’ll give him credit. He didn’t flinch. I think he must have hoped he could reach the intersection first and block us off. We made it first by a hair. I yanked the wheel to the right, and breaking all laws of momentum, we went around the corner, tires creating a cloud of black smoke. I slammed into the inside of the door and my head whacked into the window, making me see stars for an instant. We should have been flipping through the air or at the very least slamming into the cars parked along the side of the road. Instead, we made our turn as if a powerful magnet held us to the road.

The police car had put on his brakes as soon as he saw us turn the corner, but he was going so fast that he was half a block past the intersection before he could stop. Meanwhile, we sped down the road toward the church, now only a block away. I heard more sirens than ever and they seemed to be coming from everywhere.

“Drive into the little plaza in front of the church. It’ll save us some running distance. Don’t slow down. I’ll do the stopping.”

I hit the curb in front of the church with my foot to the floor and heard all four tires blow out. The car bounced forward onto the front grille, sparks flying as we skidded along, but Elle managed to get us back on the ground and stop our momentum right at the front steps.

We jumped out of the car and ran into the church. As we ran down the aisle, I could hear the screech of tires as police car after police car came to a rapid stop outside the church, their sirens coming to sudden halts.

Elle ran full tilt toward the high altar. She vaulted the communion rail and ducked behind the altar. I followed her, once again feeling my skin crawl at the thought of a bullet in the back as I heard shouts and footsteps at the entry to the church.

I vaulted the communion rail and ducked around the altar just as Elle had done and found myself almost falling down a short set of stairs. I saw a blur of Elle disappearing around a corner at the bottom and followed her into what must be the vestry.

Elle threw open a rear door to the vestry, but instead of going out the back of the church she turned instead to the rear wall of the vestry and began to push. My every instinct was to run out the back door of the vestry and try to hide somewhere, but suddenly a huge block of granite that Elle was pushing began to move rapidly backwards, accompanied by the grating sound an enormous block of stone makes when dragged. Moments later a narrow opening was revealed. Elle ducked through and I followed. Once I was through, Elle began pushing the stone back into position. Even though I could see and hear that the enormous block of stone was moving quickly, it felt agonizingly slow.

The moment the grating stopped, I heard muffled voices shouting inside the vestry. We stood in absolute darkness, our breath heaving. There were more shouts and the thud of boots. But no one was pounding on our block of stone that only seconds before had been moving back into place

Finally Elle whispered, “Even for us, that was close.”

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After we got our breath back, Elle twisted a switch, and a string of light bulbs revealed a long flight of stone stairs heading downward. I followed her down and then along a level passage, which eventually came to a wooden door. Elle pushed it open and we entered a long room, its vaulted ceiling curving up at least twenty feet above us. It was like being in a giant stone barrel lying on its side. It must have been made around the same time as the church. The stone was the same color and texture as the church, and the quality of the workmanship was the same.

“Do you recognize it?” Elle asked, clearly expecting that I would.

I looked around slowly. I noticed that there was a long row of cots down one side, thin bare mattresses rolled up revealing the springs. The other side had tables, chairs and a small kitchen. At the far end there were two doors, one partially open. I could just see a toilet inside. At the end nearest to us was a wall of cabinets. I walked over and opened a few cabinet doors. In one there were stacks of blankets, sheets, and pillows. In another I found medical supplies.

Then it clicked. This was a stop on our “underground railroad” during the war. Memories came flooding back. I saw us bringing terrified refugees, some wounded, down the secret stairs from the vestry. I saw Tillie tending to the wounded in both body and heart. I saw myself helping Tillie with the wounded. I had a clear memory of our heads almost touching as we leaned over a badly wounded man, our hands resting on him lightly, giving him human comfort as his life ebbed away. I felt, as much as saw, the shelter full of unfortunates, badly shaken, too stunned to think beyond their own narrow escapes, or mourning those who hadn’t made it. Hope would come later. This stop on their journey provided only a brief respite from fear.

Seeing my expression as I examined my memories, Elle said, “There are very few happy memories here. It was pretty grim.”

I noticed that the room was clean and free of dust and the medical supplies I had looked at were new. “Does Tillie still use it?”

“No, but she keeps it ready. When she came back after the war she had the clinic built over the other entrance. Before the war, there was a convent where the clinic is now and this was its wine cellar—conveniently accessible from the convent or the vestry. If you go through that other door by the toilet you’ll come to another stair like the one from the vestry. It comes out in Tillie’s storage room.”

“It was Tillie who saw its potential. She had been the Mother Superior of the convent long before the war. She had the old entrances blocked up with stones only Protectors can move and she always keeps it ready for use.”

Just then, the door that led to Tillie’s clinic opened and in came Xu. He looked the way he did when I first saw him at the Dyson Center, his slight and boyish figure clothed in jeans and turtle-neck. In one hand, he was awkwardly carrying the two roller-bags Elle and I had left in Tillie’s sitting room. In his other hand he had his own bag and, over his shoulder, the strap to his computer bag. He set them down inside the door and then he pulled a FedEx envelope out from under his arm and waggled it at us. Our last set of IDs had arrived. He put the FedEx envelope down on top of one of the rollers and walked over to us.

Xu smiled a broad grin and said, “I see that you were able to get away from Hocktief with your usual stealth and finesse. Your signature work reminds me of old times.” Xu’s grin robbed his words of any sting.

Xu looked searchingly at us and said, “You guys all right? Anybody hurt?”

Elle answered for us, “We’re fine. And as far as we know no one else got hurt. The police are going to be wondering about a few things, though; such as why a set of airbags went off in a

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vehicle that wasn't even moving. But, as usual, they'll conclude it's a mystery without an explanation."

"How did it go for you? Did you get the info?" I asked with some impatience.

"I got a ton of data," said Xu, "We won't know if we got what we need until we can go through it all. But I'm guessing we got it. I grabbed nearly a hundred terabytes."

"Any problems?"

"No. Everything went as planned. I went to the University's IT Lab and hacked into their network. I was ready and waiting when my Trojan horse pinged me when it had opened a hole in Hocktief's firewall. I poked around in their data storage archive for a minute or two and flagged all the files and folders I thought we should transfer and then starting moving data."

"It's all on your laptop?" Elle asked.

"Oh no. That would have taken way too long, even if I had a hard drive that large. No, I sent the files from Hocktief to another server sitting on OC."

At Elle's blank look Xu explained, "OC, optical cable, superfast. Hocktief's server was set up to move data through OC. So I moved it to another server set up for OC. I transferred all one hundred terabytes in less than a minute. If I'd tried to download it onto my laptop through the university's network it would have taken hours."

My turn to interrupt, "Will they be able to trace where you sent the data?"

"I'd anticipated that," Xu said with a pleased look, "I set up a chain of servers, each one passing the data on to the next and then erasing its tracks. I sent it through ten different servers and left three copies here and there so we have backups in the remote chance they find any one of them. It won't be easy for them to trace—especially with the little present I left them."

I raised a questioning eyebrow.

"As soon as I got all the data onto the first server, I sent the trigger for my secret weapon. The virus you uploaded was now practically on every computer in their network. I sent a final command for the virus to find and erase any server system logs, so there is no longer any record of my download. Unless some sharp-eyed system admin saw it in progress they won't even know it happened. After the virus erased any server system logs it found, it was programmed to erase itself, and as far as Hocktief is concerned, their network returned to normal."

"I'm glad you are on our side," I said.

Xu and I couldn't resist a high-five. Elle rolled her eyes and muttered, "Guys."

"They may even write it off as a harmless hacker prank," finished Xu.

"I doubt it," I said, "They may not have known you were in their network but they definitely know we were in their building."

"Did you have any trouble getting back to Tillie's?" Elle asked.

"It was smooth sailing at first. No one took any notice of me when I left the university. I got a cab and gave him an address a few blocks from Tillie's, but by the time I got there the police were coming from all over."

"We, ah, attracted some attention," said Elle.

"Well I didn't want to attract any attention to Tillie," continued Xu, "so after the cab dropped me off, I found a hidden spot and changed my appearance to look like a policeman. I headed for Tillie's and joined a group of policemen who were about to search the clinic. When I got the chance, I pushed open the other entrance. Tillie had already put your daypacks and the FedEx inside the passage."

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“Then I came down here after changing back to my usual appearance—I figured you wouldn’t have wanted to see a policeman come through the door.”

We nodded with feeling.

“So what happened?” Xu asked.

“We walked right into a trap,” said Elle.

“If we hadn’t been, well, who we are, we’d never have gotten out,” I finished.

We filled him in on our exploits and escape.

“Rockshaw was actually there and a trap was set?” Xu asked. “How can he have known?”

“What happened with Miss O and the rescue of the Wilson’s?” I asked a question of my own.

“I got a confirmation that the Wilsons had been gotten out safely just minutes before I got the ping from my Trojan. She and her team couldn’t have arrived more than half an hour before I got the confirmation. Even if Rockshaw had been alerted the moment she arrived at the Wilson’s, it hardly seems possible that he would have been able to get a team to Hocktief in time to try to catch you guys—maybe just barely enough time,” he finished doubtfully.

We all looked worried. If it wasn’t the rescue of the Wilsons that gave us away, then we had another unknown leak. Elle shook her head in frustration.

“Well, let’s decide what we are going to do next,” I said.

“We’ve got plenty of time,” Elle tossed in, “We may need to wait all night before we leave. Even with new identities and solid IDs, it would be risky to try to get out of this area for a bit.”

“I don’t think there is much question what we need to do next,” I mused. “We need to start running simulations with the information we have and to do that we need a supercomputer. How are we going to do that?”

Xu nodded and said, “There’s only one supercomputer I know we can get access to and that’s at the Dyson Center.”

“We can’t go back there,” I said quickly, “Rockshaw’s people already followed us there and he’ll be keeping a watch on the place.”

“Believe me, I’ve thought of that,” answered Xu, “but unless we have access to a supercomputer we aren’t going to be able to get any closer to determining if we have found the fifth force or not, and there just aren’t that many supercomputers in the entire world. Scientists and researchers sign up months in advance for time on a supercomputer. Even if we managed to fake our way into getting access on another supercomputer, it would be weeks to months before we could use it.”

“Don’t we have the same problem with the supercomputer in the Dyson Center? Isn’t it booked for months also?” I objected.

“Yes and no,” said Xu. “The Dyson Center, as a weather research center, could never have afforded to build and operate a supercomputer without outside funding. The researchers at the Dyson Center think that the outside funding comes from some semi-secret government department that does nuclear research. They’ve been told that the price they have to pay for the use of one of the best supercomputers in the world is that periodically, the semi-secret government department gets to hijack the computer without having to wait in line, so to speak.”

“There is actually no semi-secret government department funding the Dyson Center. Jonathan secretly funneled money into Dyson. So, whenever I need to use the computer, I masquerade as the semi-secret government department and commandeer the computer for as long as I need.”

“Can’t you access it remotely,” I asked.

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“Sure, but I could only get the process started. The simulations we need to run would generate so much data that we’d be unable to deal with it unless we were somewhere with massive storage capacity and high-speed pipes—and that brings us full circle to our problem—the only place that would have the massive memory storage and high-speed pipes we need would be another supercomputer facility.”

After a beat or two Xu said, “Trust me. We can get into the Dyson Center without being seen. Once inside I can make security think the semi-secret guys are using the computer.”

Elle looked at me and nodded. I paused and tried to find the certainty I’d felt about going to North Korea and coming here, but I didn’t feel it. Instead I felt a tremor of anxiety. But I didn’t have any better ideas. With some reluctance, I nodded too.

“Dyson it is then,” I said at last.

Elle went and retrieved the FedEx from the table where Xu had left it and pulled out its contents. “Last set of IDs,” she announced, “If we need more we’ll have to find a source outside the Devas Foundation.”

I nodded but I couldn’t help but ask, “Couldn’t you just, well, make some more?”

“Maybe, but it would be risky. I can alter the picture or change a few letters on a genuine passport, but creating one from nothing isn’t wise. Passports are made to be difficult to forge. They have all kinds of hidden telltales that I don’t know about. If I can’t visualize it, I can’t create it.”

As she explained, she was looking at our remaining passports. “The last one left for you is a White American male, age fifty-three, 6’1” and 185 pounds, brown eyes and brown hair. Do you want to try to look like that or do you want to change first and then let me match the description to your new look?”

“Let me try to match the description.”

While I tried to visualize a new guise that matched the description, Elle casually changed her appearance to look like an Indian woman around thirty, and after being handed his passport, Xu transformed into a handsome African-American with liquid black eyes, a gleaming bald head, and a smile that dazzled.

Still the slowpoke, I completed my transformation last. Elle looked critically at me and then said, “Your eyes are blue, not brown. I can change the eye color in your passport if you want.”

“No, let me see if I can change them myself.” I closed my eyes, visualized brown eyes, and then seconds later opened them. Elle nodded and went back to the passports as if I had just changed from loafers to running shoes.

“OK, I’ll alter the pictures to match our new appearances. I’m going to have to put German entry stamps in all our passports,” Elle muttered almost to herself as she wandered away.

A wave of unreality washed over me. Here I was, able to change my appearance at will, able to read the thoughts of other people, apparently able to cause massive destruction with a clap of my hands, if my angry act in Rockshaw’s dungeon was any indication, and I had just been pursued across half of Essen by an army of police.

Not even a week has passed since Elle had shown up on my doorstep in Berkeley. I was no longer Professor Dinsmore, yet at the same time I still didn’t fully know who I was or what I could do. I didn’t understand my mysterious plan or why I would arrange it so that I couldn’t remember what I had planned. What possible advantage could there be to not knowing what was going on?

As usual I had no answer. I decided I needed a dose of something familiar.

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“Xu,” I called to him, “since we’ve got the time, let’s start planning our simulations.” At least physics was a known quantity, and even though we hadn’t yet analyzed the data we had liberated from Hocktief, we could formulate a basic plan. We went over to a table and sat down, Xu bringing his ever-present laptop.

“Was the data formatted in Mathmatica,” I asked, referring to an almost universal program used by scientists.

“Yes. That was almost the first thing I noticed. The file names I flagged were all in the Mathmatica format.”

“Great. Not having to convert their files into Mathmatica is going to speed up our process considerably.”

Elle listened in for a while but was either bored or unable to follow us and made her way to a cot, unrolled the mattress, and appeared to take a nap—though I wasn’t sure whether Protectors slept like everyone else.

As Xu and I talked, my excitement at the prospect of uncovering the fifth force returned. Hours flew by. In the rush of the last week, I had forgotten how much I simply enjoyed physics. Xu dug out a pad of paper and we passed it back and forth, sketching out testable equations. We started to list out all the variables we would need to test and in what order. At some point Xu began to enter data into his laptop and started the basic programming parameters we were going to use on the Dyson supercomputer.

We were still at it at midnight when the door opened and Tillie came in. She gave us a broad smile and searching looks. Her entry awakened Elle and she came over and gave Tillie a hug.

“How is it up there?” Elle asked.

“I’ve made coffee for a lot of very nice, but very baffled, policemen. They have been searching all the buildings in the area. They went through the entire clinic room-by-room. We’ve only just gotten the children quieted down again. Any break in routine is very disturbing. It will be days before they really settle down.”

“I’m sorry we brought all this down on you,” I said, feeling bad for all those children.

Tillie looked at me with an expression of surprise, “I know you wouldn’t have done it if you didn’t have to.” She touched my cheek as she had when we met this morning, “There’s no Protector I know more sensitive to others.”

She smiled at her memories and then continued, “The police stopped searching for you a while ago, but they still have roadblocks around the area. I don’t think it will be safe to leave until tomorrow morning when other people start going out. Best not to go out the front door. My staff will wonder. You can slip out the back door of my apartments when you need to leave. I need to get back up to the clinic in case one of the staff comes looking for me.” And with a final hug and affectionate look for each of us she headed off.

The next day, due to the peculiar compression of time that happens when traveling by air from east to west, it was eight o’clock at night in Atlanta when I arrived from Germany, and it would be the middle of the night when I arrived in Albuquerque, the nearest city to the Dyson Center we could get to easily.

I strolled along among people rushing for flights and smiled. I had been enormously relieved to learn, while I waiting for my flight in Dusseldorf, that I was no longer inundated with the thoughts and feelings of the crowds. Feeling as normal as I could while looking like someone else, I made my way to an appealingly familiar Starbucks and ordered a latte like I had had for years.

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My feeling of normality was brief, however. My thoughts soon returned to my anything-but-normal reality. Since we still didn't know how Rockshaw knew about what we were doing, we decided to continue to be ultra-safe and travel separately. If—somehow—Rockshaw could find us, at least he would find only one of us at a time.

As I sipped my latte, I thought about how Rockshaw could have known to be prepared for us at Hocktief. I wanted to believe that it was the rescue of the Wilsons that had alerted him—but my gut was telling me that wasn't it. But the only other explanation was too painful to contemplate. Would a Protector ever betray other Protectors? It seemed inconceivable, knowing what I knew so far, but Rockshaw seemed to always be on our heels. I wondered if Jonathon had discovered anything. I thought about contacting him but immediately changed my mind. If the leak had started at *Milliefiore* then it would still be compromised. My thoughts left me feeling anxious. Whatever intuitive ability I had was telling me something was going wrong.

I found out what it was after I arrived in Albuquerque.

When I got off the plane in the middle of the night, I matched my pace to the weary passengers heading along the concourse, pulling my roller along behind me. When I got out of the secure concourse I headed for the rental car shuttles as planned. I was surprised to see handsome African-American Xu walking toward me. I was supposed to take the shuttle and meet him and Elle at the rental car site.

When he came abreast of me he sent me a mental message. Elle had not arrived on her flight.

Both of us stood not far from each other, staring at signs as if we were trying figure out where to go, and had a mental conversation. The flight Elle missed from Dallas was the last one until 11:00 a.m.—almost another eight hours from now. Xu thought we shouldn't wait for her. If she was in trouble, then we might end up in the same trouble if we hung around the airport. If she wasn't in trouble, then we were just wasting time.

I agreed we should go without her, but I knew in my bones she was in trouble.

We wandered off as if we didn't know each other. I made my way outside and waited. Xu had let me know that he already had a rental car. In just a few minutes he drove up in an SUV and I got in. As we pulled away from the airport, heading north for the Dyson Center, my feelings turned to dread. I knew I was leaving Elle in danger—but I knew there was nothing I could do about it.

Bald-headed Xu said, "There's no one I know better able to take care of herself. She'll join us at Dyson before the day is out."

His words brought small comfort. I knew he was right to be positive, but I couldn't shake the feeling that Elle was in extreme circumstances, that my plan, whatever it was, was coming unraveled.

We drove in silence for a while until I realized I wasn't going to accomplish anything by brooding. Instead I decided to pick up our discussion of the simulations where we had left off. After Tillie left us last night, Xu and I had continued to work until dawn, and we had succeeded in creating our first software model. Xu had spent the time on his flights refining the variables and the model, and now shared some new ideas with me. As before, the time flew by and I became absorbed in the hunt for the fifth force. We drove steadily for almost three hours.

The sun peeked over the horizon just as we passed through Santa Fe. We were only a few miles from the Dyson Center when Xu turned off the main highway onto a dirt road and we slowly wended our way between red cliffs almost glowing in the first rays of sunrise. I gradually lost my bearings. The road curved around many cliffs and outcroppings and we made two turns

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onto even more primitive roads. We drove for about thirty minutes, the last ten of which were on a dirt road so rough we had to crawl along at just a few miles an hour, our wheels bumping up and crashing down over rocks and ruts, throwing us around inside.

Finally, we reached a dead-end at an old tumble-down mine. There was lots of ruined and rusting equipment, massive rivets still holding it together, though the rust had eaten through in many places. Old cable snaked crazily everywhere. Many of the strands ended in a massive block of concrete, which stood leaning haphazardly to one side, as if dragged there long ago. Nearly everywhere there were mounds of fractured rock. As we threaded our way between the mounds, I saw that we were making our way toward a building protruding from the mountain-side, its rusty corrugated roof looking as if it had almost been covered by a landslide.

Xu pulled to a stop in front and turned off the car. I looked at him and raised my eyebrows. Xu grinned and said, “Welcome to the Dyson Center’s back door.”

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## Chapter 15

We got out and Xu unlocked a massive lock with a touch of his hand. The lock was inserted into a chain, which was holding a pair of shed doors closed. When Xu removed the lock, the chain slid to the ground with a clatter. I looked around involuntarily to see if anyone noticed but then I remembered we were miles from any sign of people.

Xu opened the shed doors to reveal a large, rock-floored space about twice the size of a big suburban garage. Its sidewalls were marked with pegs and empty shelves whose contents had long ago been removed or stolen. At the base of the right-hand wall there was another rusting hulk of an unrecognizable machine, its fittings and attachments also gone long ago. It might have been an engine or generator of some kind, but now it sat ransacked and abandoned. Probably only its size and the fact that it was bolted to a concrete pad had kept it from being carried off.

Xu got back in the SUV and drove it in. When he got out he was carrying his roller bag and had his computer bag over his shoulder. I took my cue and got my bag out as well. I helped Xu close the shed doors and lock them again.

“Remember anything yet?” Xu asked.

I shook my head.

Opposite the shed doors a rough vertical wall had been chipped out of solid rock. In the middle was the opening to a tunnel. Coming out the tunnel were rails for ore carts. I should say rail, not rails, since one side of the track was missing, but I could see that at one time the rails had continued out the shed doors to some unknown destination.

The tunnel entrance was closed by a metal gate and secured with yet another lock and chain. Once again Xu opened the lock with a touch and then noisily dragged the chain through the bars. Chain removed, he pulled the gate open with a wrenching screech. He gestured me to come through into the tunnel and then closed and locked the gate once more.

“We have to walk in the dark for a ways. Watch your step.”

I followed Xu into the tunnel. I tried, unsuccessfully, to watch my step, and tripped over rusting ore cart rails and piles of rock. Carrying my bag in one hand did not help, but thankfully, we only went a short way before Xu told me to stop. I heard him moving some rocks, which clattered and rolled. Then I heard a click and the faintest of hums. Suddenly cracks of light appeared in the solid rock wall next to us. I saw that a huge piece of the wall was moving backwards, as if being pushed into the side of the mountain. Then it stopped and began moving sideways. Finally it opened all the way to reveal a well-lit tunnel running perpendicular to the one we were standing in. Ready and waiting, sitting on new-looking rails, was an ore cart converted for passengers.

“Determined mine freaks can spend the day here but never find this tunnel. The mine is dangerous though. That’s why we try to keep it locked up.”

We entered the side tunnel; Xu turned another switch and the rock wall moved slowly back into place. We hopped onboard the cart. Xu pressed a button on a console in front of the seat and an electric motor sent us zooming soundlessly along the tunnel.

“This tunnel was part of the original mine, but you had it re-timbered and improved when you built the Center in the ‘20s. The miners you hired thought you were crazy, since the mine was played out. After they were done, you and Elle made the secret door.

We reached the end of the tunnel almost ten minutes later. I guessed we had gone over two miles. We rolled to a stop right behind another cart just like the one we had been riding in. When

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we got out, Xu pushed the button again and our cart started heading back to where we had entered.

“The Center is right above us. This was originally another entrance to the mine. The presence of the old mine tunnel was one of the main reasons you built the Center where you did. Protectors like to have a back way out,” he ended, as if stating a hard-won and well-shared conviction.

He led the way to a set of concrete steps with metal handrails. We went up about two flights and came to a blank wall. On the wall to the right was a keypad.

Before punching in the combination, Xu said, “We have to be quiet from here on until we get to the top floor.”

Xu keyed in a combination and the blank wall in front of us moved slowly sideways. We were plunged into darkness as the lights in the tunnel behind us went out. I heard the wall stop moving and Xu touched my shoulder to indicate I should step forward. Xu did something and the wall moved soundlessly back into place. Xu found a switch and fluorescent lights came on, revealing an electrical utility room about the size of an elevator.

Xu whispered to me, “Sit tight for a few minutes. I’ll check the security logs.” Xu got his laptop out of his shoulder bag and opened it up. He rooted around in his bag and came up with a short Ethernet cable, which he connected to his laptop and a wall jack. “I added a few things over the years,” he said with the same grin he used when telling us about the supercomputer.

He sank effortlessly into a cross-legged position, and began clicking keys and peering at his laptop screen, only to click again and peer some more, click again and peer yet more. I stood waiting patiently.

Finally Xu stood and whispered, “It looks like we’re clear. I’ve tapped into the Center’s security systems. The first thing I did was have my electronic scanners check to make sure that no bugs had been installed on the top floor while I was away. My scanners didn’t detect any. Then I looked at all the security camera feeds to see if anyone was on the top floor. There’s no one there, but once we get up there, I think we should take a look at the logs and see if anyone has been up there since I’ve been gone.”

Xu closed up his laptop, disconnected the cable and put them both back into his shoulder bag. Still using caution, Xu cracked open a metal utility door opposite the secret wall panel and peeked out. After a moment, he opened the door all the way and gestured for me to come out.

I was startled to find myself in the private garage area on the bottom floor of the Dyson Center. The car Elle and I had driven from *Milliefiore* was still parked where we had left it. I turned around and there was the elevator. Xu punched in the proper code on the key pad and the elevator doors slide aside without a sound. Seconds later we got out on the top floor.

Immediately I felt my anxiety return. Something felt wrong.

I think Xu felt it too. He said he would go look through the security camera logs to see if anyone had been up here. Xu headed for the control room. Feeling slightly foolish, I told him I would take a look around.

“Stay away from the windows,” was all he said, but he made no attempt to talk me out of it.

After almost an hour spent looking in every nook and cranny, I was satisfied that there wasn’t anyone hiding on the top floor. I even went up on the roof, being sure to stay close to the protective walls. There was no one there, either. But I couldn’t shake the feeling that something wasn’t right.

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I made my way back to the control room, where Xu was clicking through security tapes. He looked over his shoulder when I came in and immediately said, "Take a look."

I pulled a chair up beside him and he pointed to the monitor, "This was recorded just after I left to join you in San Francisco." And there, frozen on the screen, was Rockshaw, staring balefully into the camera lens.

Further examination of the tapes showed that Rockshaw had been with some local police, under what pretext we could only guess. The police had searched the premises thoroughly, but not, apparently, finding anything, they left.

"How could they have gotten up here?"

"My head of building security has the codes to the elevator in case there's a fire or something while I'm gone. If he was presented with a search warrant, he would have to have brought them up here. But he doesn't have access to security cameras on this floor, so he can't see that we're here."

"Why would Rockshaw come here," I wondered out loud.

"Maybe he was looking for the first half of Professor Lee's paper. By then he must have learned about it through whatever informant he had in the Foundation."

"Could he have found it?"

"He wouldn't have been able to find the paper because I hid it so deep and with so much encryption that only I can retrieve it. But I might be able to find traces of a search for it," answered Xu. And with that comment his fingers began flying.

"Well," Xu said after a few minutes, "someone did try to access the system from here but they didn't get far. Seems like Rockshaw or one of the police tried. Rockshaw's hacker has also continued to try to get in remotely, but he hasn't had any luck either."

It was a shock to know that Rockshaw had been here, even if he had failed to find what he came for. I felt exposed. But was this all there was to my feeling that something was wrong? Was there no longer any danger? I wasn't so sure. My feelings told me something was very wrong.

"Should we rethink this?" I asked. "If Rockshaw got in here once, maybe he'll try again. Now that he knows about the supercomputer, he might assume we'll come back here."

After a long pause, Xu began slowly, "I'm still not sure we have any choice. We could go into hiding for a while, but that would just give Rockshaw more time to figure out what we've been doing. He might put two and two together and find his own solution to harnessing the fifth force, while we sit on our hands. For better or worse, we set the clock ticking when we called attention to Professor Lee's paper. Now it's a race."

I let out a long sigh, "You're right, of course. I just can't shake a feeling that something is really wrong. First Elle is missing and now we find Rockshaw has been here. I feel like I'm missing something."

I sat still for a while and tried to figure out what to do, but in the end there really was no choice. The sooner we worked out the simulations for the fifth force, the sooner we could get out of the danger we were in.

Taking a deep breath I said, "OK, let's get at it."

Xu had already told me that during his layover in Chicago he had initiated the procedures that allowed the fictitious "semi-secret defense department" to take over the supercomputer. New security procedures and log-in were now in place and no one on the lower floors could get into the network or the supercomputer at all. It was basically a holiday for the Dyson staff. Most of

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them wouldn't even come in for work until they got word that the supercomputer was available again.

Before settling in to work, I changed my appearance back to Professor Michael Dyson. It felt more natural somehow, like putting on work clothes. I felt a stirring of excitement about what we were about to attempt. Once I was back to my old appearance I was tempted to say, "Locked and loaded," to Xu.

Xu apparently felt the same way, because when I turned around to say something to him, I saw that Xu had also changed back into a familiar guise – baggy shorts, T-shirt and the look of a sixteen-year old as he had when I first saw him. He had even gotten his iPod from somewhere and looked like he was about ready to put the ear buds in and listen to music. What would an ancient teenager listen to, I wondered?

Looking back and forth between us I gave in to temptation and said, "Locked and loaded." He grinned. We bumped fists and started in.

I had one more thing I wanted to do before starting on our simulations. I tapped into all the security camera feeds. With a little help from Xu, I was able to create a continuous display of all the feeds on one of the massive wall monitors. When I was done, I could see at a glance any activity that was taking place in the underground parking garage, at every entrance to the building, and everywhere on the top floor.

While I was creating a security setup that even a paranoid would approve of, Xu had downloaded the information we had, ah, liberated from Hocktief. I volunteered to start going through the Hocktief material and Xu began to put the software model we had worked out in Essen into the supercomputer.

Schooling myself to glance often at the security screen, I nonetheless soon became absorbed in the Hocktief material. We did get what we needed. I isolated the basic model they had been using to run their simulations and began to adapt it.

I quickly began to appreciate Professor Wilson's breakthrough. His work made it possible to convert Hocktief's crushing force model into an ultimate vacuum model instead. His equations gave us the flexibility to change polarities, increase field intensities, and manipulate the size of the containment field with a very fine degree of control.

My familiarity with Mathematica allowed me to work rapidly. But even on my best day I had never worked like I did now. I realized that not only had my awakening given me new abilities, but it had also enhanced abilities I already had. Concentrating on the complex magnetic-containment model was effortless. I entered a creative flow unlike anything I had ever experienced before.

I sat still as a statue—except for my fingers and hands—which moved like a blur over the keyboard. I was in a "zone" like top athletes describe. I was relaxed and not even aware that I was typing at extraordinary speed. I was simply inputting my thoughts as fast as they came. And they came fast.

At irregular intervals I looked at my security screen, saw no one, and turned my attention back to work.

I finished reworking the magnetic model and then looked at my watch. I was astonished to see that I had been working without break, without saying a word, without really even moving, for four and a half hours. It wasn't that it seemed like less time had passed. Rather, I had become so absorbed that I had had no sense of time whatsoever.

It was exhilarating.

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Then, in almost a double take, I looked at my watch again and my exhilaration turned to anxiety. Elle should have been here by now if she had caught the later flight from Dallas to Albuquerque. Breaking the hours-long silence, I said, “Elle should be here by now,” my concern obvious in the tone of my voice.

“Yes,” acknowledged Xu, after a brief pause to check his own watch.

“Something has definitely gone wrong. She hasn’t even tried to contact us.”

Xu thought about it and said, “Perhaps she’s being followed and is afraid she might give our location away if she tries to reach us—or she could have been caught and simply can’t do anything.”

“But Elle could get out of any situation,” I said quickly.

“Only if she could do it without being seen. She’d allow herself to be caught, even killed, before she would reveal her abilities.”

He was right of course. She’d told me the same thing several times herself. I sat quietly for a minute and tried to think what to do.

“Can I contact her mind to mind?” I asked Xu.

“You can try. Distance is no limit to thought. But Elle would have to be paying attention to pick up your thoughts. If she’s distracted or focused on something else, you may not have any luck. She could even have been trying to reach us, but since we have been so focused, we wouldn’t have picked up her thoughts.”

I took a deep breath and stilled my mind. I sent the thoughts to her that we were concerned and wanting to know where she was and tried to feel her response. I don’t know how long I remained focused. It could have been seconds or minutes, but suddenly I felt Elle’s response.

My first feeling was of immense relief. I hadn’t said anything to Xu and I had barely let myself even think it, but knowing Elle’s abilities as I did, I had thought that the only thing that could possibly have kept Elle from being here was that she had been killed. I breathed out a huge sigh when I felt that she was alive. I stayed focused on the feeling of her presence and gradually I got the message that she was unharmed—but not safe. She was distressed and in danger. I got the image that she was surrounded by dark minds.

Only one thought came to me clearly, “Hurry, I’ll keep them away as long as I can,” and then I knew she was gone.

I told Xu what I had experienced and I could tell he was relieved as well. The same unspoken thought that Elle might be dead must have been in the back of his mind as well. But his relief was tempered by the implications of what I had learned.

“Alive, but captured or on the run,” Xu said summing up. “I’m afraid all we can do is wait for Elle to extricate herself from whatever situation she’s in. She’ll find a way. She always does,” he added in a tone of complete confidence that I couldn’t muster at the moment.

“Meanwhile,” I said looking at Xu, “I guess we should do as she asks. Let’s hurry.”

Thus began the most productive collaboration I have ever experienced. After merging the two models we had developed—one modulating magnetic fields, the other modulating space itself, we decided to run a series of rapid, high-level simulations. We needed to run thousands of them. Each was minutely, but perhaps crucially, different from all the others—we wouldn’t know until we ran them. Xu configured the supercomputer to run hundreds of simulations simultaneously. As the simulations ended, we weeded out the obvious failures and saved the promising ones.

We monitored all the simulations by using all fourteen workstations in the command center. We moved all the unnecessary chairs against one wall and moved back and forth between

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workstations on the two remaining chairs. We were sometimes both in motion, gliding past each other as if performing a piece of choreography.

I checked the security screen frequently. But now I added another routine. Every hour or so, I took a minute or two to see if I could mentally communicate with Elle. Each time I got nothing. Each time I told Xu I got nothing, he nodded and said, with many variations, that he was confident Elle would find a way. I envied his positive calmness. I was see-sawing between my anxiety for Elle, and the exhilaration I felt when I became absorbed in our work.

Midnight of our first workday had come and gone by the time we finished running several thousand simulations. We accomplished in eight hours what would normally have required two people a week or more. Instead, by moving from workstation to workstation with the single-minded focus our abilities gave us, we had done the work of a team of twelve.

Almost all the simulations had failed, but we chose the ten most promising. Even though the ten simulations we chose had failed, they had shown glimmers of success. We tweaked them all and then added a level of detail to them that would more accurately mirror the real world. Unlike the thousands of permutations we had just gone through, each taking from a few seconds to a few minutes, these more complex simulations would require more time to run.

Six hours later, we had run all ten simulations and all ten simulations had failed. In nearly all of them, our theoretical device had theoretically exploded into atomic fragments and would have killed anyone within a hundred yards. Another simulation told us, well, nothing, the results complete gibberish, not unusual with simulations. Yet another showed a spike in energy so high that at first we couldn't believe the results. After careful checking, we were satisfied that such an energy yield was possible. None of the simulations would have lasted even a nanosecond in the real world. Our failures were spectacular and nearly instantaneous.

Despite this, we were elated. Several of the simulations showed us what we wanted to see most—an increase in the net amount of energy. This confirmed in simulation the potential we saw in Professor Lee's equations. Restricting the natural inflation of space, even a tiny bit, resulted in a new energy entering into normal space.

The fifth force was real.

We contained our growing excitement, but we could both feel it. We knew we were onto something. I could see a gleam in Xu's eyes as he must have seen one in mine. It didn't seem possible, but we became even more focused.

We immediately set about creating simulations from the three most promising of our failed simulations, but we added some new parameters that we hadn't used before.

Once again, all the simulations failed. We didn't fail to draw the fifth force out of space—all the simulations resulted in net increases of energy that could only come from the fifth force. But we did fail to contain the energy. As soon as we drew the fifth force into normal space, its force was so tremendous that our magnetic field couldn't contain it and were there really a physical device, it would have disintegrated dramatically. We ran hundreds of variations on how much energy we drew in and on the strength of the field to contain it—but it was always the same—the fifth force overwhelmed our theoretical device.

We were beginning to wonder if the fifth force could be harnessed at all.

Time for a break.

We had been working for 36 hours straight. Even with my newly awakened ability to go without sleep and to maintain a very high-level of concentration for long periods of time, a short break for fresh ideas was in order. I decided to go to the meditation room. I wandered down the

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hallway and opened the meditation room door a tiny crack to make sure that I couldn't be seen from any of the room's windows and then slipped inside.

I grabbed a cushion from a stack and knelt on it. I sat quietly for a few minutes, just enjoying the incredible peace of the room. The pictures of Atri and Atria on the altar recalled for me very deep experiences I had had in this room. It was like visiting old dear friends and I immediately felt a welcoming blessing.

I tried once again to mentally contact Elle. Still no response. But this time I did get the impression that she was alive—it was as if I felt her presence but couldn't tune in her thoughts. I clung to the small reassurance that she was alive and for the five hundredth time told myself that there was nothing I could do.

With an effort I turned my mind away from my worried thoughts about Elle and began to meditate. The peace of the room seeped into me gently and I found myself relaxing. My breath slowed and my body became as still as a stone. I felt the joy and wellbeing I had rediscovered ever since my awakening. Even through all I had experienced in the last week, I never completely lost touch with the feeling.

Now I sank into it gratefully and just let the feeling wash over me. It was like sinking into a refreshing spring. I wanted to give my mind a break so I just let my thoughts drift. After a bit, I found myself remembering scenes from my life as Michael Faraday. One scene in particular played over and over again in my mind's eye. It was the day that I had discovered that by revolving a magnet around a wire I could cause electrons to flow along the wire.

I replayed the memory again and again. I watched as I turned the handle of my contraption that moved the magnet around the wire. Again and again I felt the moment of discovery when I realized it was creating a flow of electrons.

It had been in that moment that I understood that magnetism and electricity are but two sides of the same coin. It was my greatest discovery. The scientific world began to call it electromagnetism and from that simple discovery the generation of electricity for practical use became possible. Even today, spinning magnets remains the fundamental way in which all electricity is generated.

Then it hit me. I laughed out loud. It was so simple. I knew what we needed to do to make the fifth force usable. I ran down the hall to the control room and burst in on a surprised Xu.

"I know what we need to do!"

Without asking unnecessary questions Xu focused on me completely. He nodded for me to continue.

"So far, what we've seen in our simulations is that as soon as the fifth force is drawn out of the structure of space and into our magnetic containment field, it quickly overwhelms the device."

Again Xu nodded, eyes fixed on my face.

"Without realizing it, I think we have been trying to work with the fifth force the same way science has learned to work with nuclear energy. Nuclear power plants control the amount of fission that takes place—they increase or decrease the fission rate by moving the uranium rods in closer or pulling them farther out. They are able to maintain a steady rate of fission—a kind of sustainable equilibrium."

Again Xu nodded, giving me time to get to my idea without interrupting me.

"We've been trying to do the same thing. We've been trying to find a sustainable equilibrium between the strength of the magnetic fields and the amount of the fifth force being pulled in. But

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unlike nuclear fission, we can't find a point of equilibrium. We can't find a sustainable flow of energy. Our simulations tell us that as soon as the fifth force enters normal space, it pushes out in every direction with such power that we can't contain it."

This time, Xu didn't even nod. His attention was total.

"What if, instead of trying to contain it, we immediately put the fifth force to work? If we can instantaneously convert the fifth force energy to another form of energy, then perhaps it won't destroy our device."

I paused one last time and then continued. "The fifth force's natural effect is to push or repel. Can we create a device that would receive that push and immediately start spinning? If we can contrive something that will spin, then we can convert the fifth force to electricity."

Xu's face lit up.

"It would immediately become a self-sustaining system. The electricity generated by the spin can power the magnetic field that is drawing the fifth force into normal space and all the excess electricity can be sent into the grid."

I was almost dancing in my excitement and I could tell that Xu was feeling it as well.

Finally Xu spoke, "What if we pulse the magnets?"

I cocked my head, listening.

"Instead of trying to draw a steady flow of the fifth force into our super vacuum, what if we draw it in for a nanosecond or less and then release it into spinning the device? Then we do it again a nanosecond later and so on. It would probably be easier to control than trying to maintain a steady rate.

"Right," I said, sliding into my chair again, "You work on the pulses and I'll work on creating something to spin."

Eventually we came up with something like a Catherine's Wheel—a firework pinwheel which spins as little fire crackers go off at its center, the force of which is channeled out from the center through spiral tubes exiting in a bright display of sparks. Our pinwheel lay on its side, was made of lead and carbon steel, and was the size of a small house—but the principle was the same. Inside our massive pinwheel we designed four tiny-diameter tubes, which start near the center of the wheel and spiral out to exit from the outer edge.

In our computer model, instead of tiny firecrackers going off in the core, carefully-timed pulsed bursts of the fifth force provided the power to spin it.

Xu configured the magnetic containment field so that it could create a pocket of fifth force energy near the center of our massive pinwheel. The fifth force pulse was released at the beginning of a long spiral tube. The released fifth force energy would immediately expand in all directions but the line of least resistance was along the tube toward the outer edge of the giant pinwheel. In expanding outward toward the outer edge, the energy, obeying Newton's Third Law (for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction), would also push in the opposite direction, causing the pinwheel to spin on its axis.

As soon as the giant pinwheel begins to spin, the second of the four spiral tubes would move into position for a pocket of fifth force energy to be created and then released inside it. And so on to tubes three and four and back to tube one again. Each release of a pocket of fifth force energy inside one of the spiral tubes would increase the speed of the spin. Eventually the pinwheel would be rotating at thousands of revolutions per second and generating thousands of kilowatts of electricity—or so we hoped. The model we made was the most complicated we had come up

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with by far. To our previous models we added the complexity of mechanics, materials and electrical generation.

It was once again after midnight before we had the computer models designed and the simulations set to run. In our simulations we varied the size, and thus the energy contained, in the fifth force bubbles we were going to create and release in the spiral tubes. We also varied the weight and size of the pinwheel. With great anticipation we began to run them.

They all failed again—some quite spectacularly—the pinwheel either exploded immediately or, if it had been real, would have spun so fast that it literally would have flown apart. Only the simulation with the most massive pinwheel lasted over a second. That may not sound like much, but that meant it lasted almost a million times longer than any of our other simulations. We knew we were closing in. We made a few changes and ran it again.

We sat almost not breathing. The simulation was not in real time. The supercomputer took seconds to run calculations for what would actually happen in nanosecond or less. Nonetheless the simulation ran fast enough that we could watch it unfold.

Our eyes were glued to one computer screen. What we saw was a scrolling series of numbers in ten columns, but we had now seen them so often that a picture formed in our minds as the numbers emerged. As the simulation ran, Xu whispered, “No failure yet. No failure yet.” His voice began to rise in volume and he said, “We’re already past the longest lasting simulation we’ve managed to do. No failure..., no failure...” After a long pause he said, “It’s stable. It’s stable. The simulation indicates that it could keep going indefinitely!”

Before celebrating, we needed to check the most important number of all. I rolled sideways on my chair to go to another workstation and began calculating. I began to mutter, “Almost there... almost there...here we go...a net gain of 1078.218 kilowatts per second!”

That was our “Eureka!” moment. The simulation was stable and producing more electricity than it required to keep going. Xu stood up and did a caricature of a fist pump and we began to laugh. We stood together with grins of satisfied accomplishment on our faces.

We had done it. There was a huge amount of work yet to be done, requiring hundreds of engineers, materials development and prototype development and testing. But by using the equations from Lee and Wilson, and applying them to our giant pinwheel, we were certain the approach was feasible.

“We need some champagne...” I began.

But our champagne moment was shattered when the door to the control room slammed open behind us, and Rockshaw walked in holding a gun.

So much for my ability to keep an eye on the security feeds.

Rockshaw was quickly followed by another man, who walked over to Xu and held him at gun point. And then to my surprise and shock, Elle walked in, looking just as I had first seen her, and stood next to Rockshaw. She didn’t have a gun, but no one was pointing one at her either.

I couldn’t take in what I was seeing. I was completely thrown by Rockshaw showing up so suddenly, and I was disturbed and bewildered by Elle being with him. At my look of astonishment, Rockshaw laughed a gloating laugh, and then continued flatly. “I’ve known what you were up to and where you were going every step of the way.”

Rockshaw paused and looked at Elle, then back at me, and laughed with spiteful glee. “How does it feel to know that one of your own betrayed you?”

I turned to Elle and saw the truth in her eyes. My heart sank. It was impossible. But her eyes told me differently. All the anxieties and worries I had been experiencing, my sense that

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something was badly wrong, coalesced into this one wrenching moment. Elle? It couldn't be Elle. But it all fit. I had known while sipping my latte in Atlanta that only three people could possibly have tipped off Rockshaw that we were coming to Hocktief – Xu, Elle and myself. I just hadn't been able to face it. I still couldn't face it.

"Now down to business," Rockshaw said grimly, "Thank you for doing all my work for me. Your work will make me a very rich man." Then he raised his gun and pointed it at me. I could see the intention in his eyes. He was simply going to shoot me.

Elle shouted, "No! You promised you wouldn't hurt him."

Rockshaw turned his head to look to at her and spat out, "Did you really think I would share the fifth force with you? Or that I would leave these two alive with the secret in their heads?"

As Rockshaw was speaking, Elle began to back away from him. She held out her hands as if beseeching Rockshaw. With no warning, no pause, no hesitation, he turned the gun on Elle and shot her. The sound of the gun was earsplitting in the enclosed space. Elle was slammed backward, her hands clutching her heart, and she fell with a crash into the chairs Xu and I had pushed against the wall, finally coming to rest with two of the chairs toppled on top of her.

In less than an eye blink, two more things happened. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Xu move in a blur and grab the gun arm of the other man. Then the gun fired and hit Rockshaw. Rockshaw never saw it coming. He was just turning his head to look at me again when the bullet ripped into his chest. He staggered, dropped his gun, and fell backwards to the floor.

Xu finished disarming the other man and held him in an arm lock as I rushed over to Elle. I threw off the chairs that had fallen on her. She lay completely still, unnaturally still, one hand still clutched over her heart where Rockshaw's bullet had struck her. I went to the floor on my knees and grabbed her wrist. Her arm was completely slack. I checked her pulse. There was none. I winced when I saw her lifeless eyes staring into space. I turned away.

Elle was dead.

I glanced at Xu and shook my head. I saw the pain in his eyes when he understood.

Then I heard Rockshaw. He lay on his back where he had fallen, his breath ragged, a pink froth of blood on his lips. I stood up and went over to look at him. His eyes didn't even move my way. They stared upward with a look of utter agony. The bullet had entered his right lung. His heart was still beating and filling his lung with blood. But I knew his heart wasn't going to beat for long. A pool of blood was spreading out underneath him. I could sense the life force ebbing from him. Death, long evaded, was going to claim him very soon.

He was beyond first aid. If I called an ambulance, it would come too late to save him, if he could be saved at all. Even in the few seconds I had been looking at him, his breath had become more ragged, his color more pale.

As I looked at him I thought few men deserved to die as much as Rockshaw. He had callously spread ruin for nearly two centuries. He had tortured and killed us in Essen. Only a few feet away lay Elle's lifeless body, dead once more at his hands. He had enjoyed shooting her. And, though I didn't want to believe it, he had somehow seduced her into betraying us.

All I had to do was wait and the monster Rockshaw had become would soon be dead. The fifth force would be safe from his exploitation. His empire would collapse, and though others of his stripe would pick up the pieces, at least for awhile the ruin he could cause would be checked.

All these thoughts and feelings ran through me, but when I gazed down into his pain-filled eyes, I could no longer see a monster. I saw instead a person like myself, or Xu, or one of my students, utterly alone and in agony. Whatever he had become, he was still, underneath it all, the

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same essence as all men. I realized that if I had known nothing of his past, my heart would have gone out to him. He was suffering terribly, alone and confronting his greatest fear.

Suddenly, to my surprise, I began to feel compassion for him. I knew in my heart that I could not simply let him die—uncomforted and alone. Elle’s words floated back to me, “We are not warriors *for* the Light. We are warriors *in* the Light. To act out of harmony with the Light goes against our very essence.”

Also in that moment, I recalled my memory of Tillie and me leaning over a dying man during the war, our hands on his chest, and I realized with a shock that reverberated through my whole body that we hadn’t been just giving him human comfort. We had been healing him.

I understood now with perfect clarity—I was able to heal.

I also understood with perfect clarity that I had to try to heal Rockshaw. Even though it meant throwing away our mission, even though it meant that Rockshaw might get his hands on the fifth force after all, even though it meant Rockshaw could continue to spread ruin and suffering, even though he had just killed Elle with sadistic pleasure, I knew that I had no choice. If I could heal, I had to try.

With a long sigh, I got down on my knees next to Rockshaw, the blood pooling beneath him immediately soaking into my pants, the hard floor pressing painfully on my knees. Then I leaned over him and placed my hands over his wound, the blood welling between my fingers. His face contorted and he tried to squirm away from me, expecting, I suppose, that I was going to take some sick pleasure in causing him pain because he had shot Elle. He was already very weak, and he choked and coughed up blood at the effort of trying to move. His eyes filled with an expression of terror when he realized he was helpless to fend me off.

Ignoring Rockshaw’s reaction, I closed my eyes and breathed in and out a few times with slow deliberation. Without conscious decision I began to visualize Atria. I imagined her placing her hands on my head, as she had done with Atri when they had awakened me. My visualization quickly became so profound that I thought I could actually feel her hands pressing gently on my head.

I began to feel a current of energy flowing from my head, to my heart, to my hands. It felt as if a reviving stream was cascading through my body. The current grew in intensity until I felt my whole body pulsing with its power. I slowly opened my eyes, remaining very still lest I break my subtle connection with Atria, but almost gasped at what I saw. A soft, golden, light was flowing through my arms and into Rockshaw. Gradually, the flow of golden light intensified, seeming to fill him from head to toe, eventually radiating from him in a bright nimbus.

After a few moments, I looked into Rockshaw’s eyes. He was staring at me in astonishment. “Michael?” he whispered weakly.

Reading his thoughts I understood that he somehow knew that I was Michael Faraday. Our healing connection must be opening up my thoughts to his. So I showed him more. I opened my heart to him. In flashes of memory, I showed him scenes of my repeated attempts to reach him. He saw the suffering I had endured as he tortured me in his prison in Essen. He remembered with me that we had once been friends before his jealousy had turned to hatred and rage. He felt my sorrow that I lost him as a friend. He felt my forgiveness. His expression gradually turned from astonishment to wonder and, I thought, to regret.

There was another, greater Will at work here than mine, however. My memories were as though swept aside and the memories we began to share were no longer mine. As though a neutral observer, I saw, in kaleidoscopic fragments, the suffering, pain and countless deaths

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Rockshaw had caused during his lifetime. They played through his mind and heart in rapid flashes. Eyes open and staring, he became rigid with agony as the experiences poured through him. He could feel the bullets from his machine guns ripping into flesh, the searing pain of mustard gas and the agony of the torture he had inflicted. Long minutes passed before the flashes stopped. When they finally ceased, he closed his eyes and took a deep, shuddering breath.

At that same moment, the healing light ceased to flow through me and I suddenly felt the weight and substance of my body as if I had been floating in space and had now returned to earth. A look of infinite relief stole across Rockshaw's features. The physical pain of his wound and the emotional pain of his memories were gone.

He brought his hands up to his chest and felt where he had been wounded. He took a deep, pain-free breath and a tear trickled down his cheek. Then his face spasmed and he began to sob. Deep wracking sobs shook his whole body. He turned on his side, away from me as if to hide, his knees drawn up like a child. After a few minutes, his sobbing eased and then stopped. Finally, he stood shakily, and looking down at me, still kneeling, he said, "What have you done to me?"

I had no answer because I knew that it was not I who had done it.

He walked haltingly out the door, as if unsure of where he was or where he was going. I, too, stood as though coming out of a dream. I noticed that Xu was now holding the other man at gunpoint. With a quick lift of my head I indicated to Xu that he should let the other man go. The gunman, now without a gun, hastily got up and hurried out the door after Rockshaw. He cast one last fearful glance at us before going out of sight. I heard the elevator doors opening and then closing. Rockshaw and his man were gone.

In a daze I went over to Elle and knelt once again. What I saw was not Elle. The life and vitality that was Elle was utterly gone. I knew, without even trying, that I could not heal her. Death was beyond my powers.

Heedless of Rockshaw's blood on my hands and clothes, I leaned over and pulled her to me. Her head lolled backward limply. I used my hand to hold her head against my shoulder and held her to me tightly. Xu came and knelt beside me, his eyes expressing more than words could convey.

Suddenly Elle's body began to shake as if a current had run through it and she drew in a gasping breath. I almost let go of her, I was so startled. I cradled her on my lap and watched, amazed, as she took a few more breaths. Relief flooded through me like a wave. Then Elle's eyes began to blink, as if waking from a deep sleep. After a moment, she looked up and saw me gazing at her. She looked back with an expression of sparkling love and joy. On impulse I pulled her to me once more. This time she returned my hug.

After a moment, she pulled back and looked at Xu kneeling beside us. She sat up and looked around, noticing my bloodstained hands and the pool of blood where Rockshaw had fallen. Then her eyes fell on all the chairs around us. She reached out and pushed one of the chairs away from her and said in exasperation, "What the *hell* were all these chairs doing here? I almost killed myself when I fell on them."

There was a beat of silence and then we all burst out laughing at the absurdity of what she had just said. We laughed long and hard, the crackling intensity of the last ten minutes waning with each gust of laughter.

Finally, after catching my breath, I said, "OK. Out with it. Why aren't you dead? You just got shot. You had no pulse and you weren't breathing."

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“Well, not getting killed was the easy part. The hard part was catching the bullet.” At that she held out a hand and showed us the bullet nestled in her palm.

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## Chapter 16

She grinned at my astonishment. Even in the midst of everything, she was still obviously getting a big kick out of surprising me. She continued, “Do you remember when you brought the roof down on Rockshaw’s torture chamber?”

I nodded.

“Do you remember that I held up my hand and created an energy screen to keep the debris from hitting us?”

Then I got it. Elle holding up her hands beseechingly to Rockshaw had been an act. She had created an invisible shield.

“OK. I get it. You created an invisible shield, caught the bullet...”

“Hey,” she said, “catching the bullet was the hard part. I had to know the instant Rockshaw was going to pull the trigger so I could time it just right. I knew he was going to kill me. I’d been reading his thoughts for days but I needed to be completely focused on the moment when he pulled the trigger. I knew my shield would stop the bullet, but I had to catch it before it fell to the floor and gave the game away.”

“But you were dead. I checked your pulse. You were gone.”

“I only appeared to be dead,” Elle continued before I could say anything. “I know. It looked like it. But I wasn’t. I stopped my breath and heartbeat. All Protectors can do it. You’ll learn to do it again soon. Yogis have been able to do it for millennia.”

I placed one more astonishing fact on my mental shelf for later consideration.

“Why didn’t you just fake it?” I asked.

“Are you kidding? I didn’t want Rockshaw coming over to check on me and then just have him shoot me again when he found out I wasn’t dead. The bullet catching trick was not going to work a second time. He’d have just put the gun to my head and pulled the trigger.”

Elle held up her hand again to ward off more questions, “That’s it. No more questions until I’ve had a shower and a nice meal. I’ve been cooped up with Rockshaw and his goon for two days.” She shuddered. “I wasn’t about to get into a shower with them around. The thoughts they were thinking were bad enough.”

Then she looked at me and at herself and said, “You could use a shower too. You are covered with blood and you got it all over me.” Feeling around she drew a bloody hand away from the back of her head and said, “yuk.” But her smile told me she wasn’t unhappy that I had held her in my arms.

She must have seen something in my eyes though because she said softly, “I didn’t betray you.”

A knot of tension eased in my heart. As relieved as I was that Elle wasn’t dead, I hadn’t been able to forget that moment when Rockshaw said she had betrayed us. A dawning hope flooded through me.

Elle left me just as confused, however, when she added with spirit, “Just promise me you won’t ever make me lie to you again. I don’t ever want to see you look at me that way again!” Easily getting in the last word—because I was speechless—Elle got up and headed for a shower.

Before heading off to cook a well earned meal for Elle, Xu spent a few minutes making sure our discovery was as safe and as encrypted as he could make it. Before heading for a much needed shower myself, I decided to clean up the bloody mess in the control room. As I went through the motions of cleaning, my thoughts were elsewhere.

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I was immensely relieved that Elle was alive. In just a few short days I had experienced a relationship with her like no other. I was deeply satisfied that we had discovered the fifth force. But I couldn't shake the feeling of disappointment that by healing Rockshaw I had failed to fulfill the heart of the mission Atri had given me. Not only were we supposed to discover the fifth force, but we were to keep its discovery out of the hands of those who would exploit it.

Sometime later, Elle and I showered and changed, the three of us consumed with relish a fantastic breakfast. Afterward we were all comfortably arrayed in the sitting room. The floor to ceiling shades were up, now that there was no need to hide, and the early morning sun was streaming in the windows. We were enjoying the sunrise in momentary silence, fragrant cups of cinnamon hibiscus tea in our hands.

I realized in amazement that only seven days ago, practically to the minute, the three of us had sat here in the same chairs, also drinking tea and watching the early morning sun, while we figured out how we were going to discover the fifth force.

Only seven days ago. It seemed impossible. An eternity had passed since then.

During our breakfast Xu and I had filled Elle in on our breakthroughs with the fifth force. Some of the feeling of the "Eureka" moment had returned after Rockshaw's sudden entry had so quickly squelched it. Xu even produced a bottle of champagne and we made a toast. Our enthusiasm had grown with the telling. It reminded me what an extraordinary thing we had done.

We also told her what had happened after she was shot. How I had healed Rockshaw and his stunned departure. I let Xu do most of the telling and kept my mixed feelings about it to myself, not wanting to dampen their high spirits.

I had been patient during breakfast, but once we were sitting with our tea, I finally asked the question uppermost on my mind. "OK," I said looking at Elle, "Time to explain. What were you doing with Rockshaw?"

Elle looked at me with delight in her eyes and said, "I was the mole. I kept Rockshaw up on everything we were doing." And as if to demonstrate she pulled a mobile phone out of her pocket and waved it at me.

"What! Why?"

"You told me to," she said with immense satisfaction, as if she had been waiting to spring it on me for some time. I was still trying to take it in when Elle added with a lot of feeling, "And you're going to have to personally apologize to every Protector in the entire world for making them believe that there was a traitor among the Protectors. The shock waves must still be reverberating."

I was taken aback by the depth of Elle's feeling. Without thinking I blurted out what I had been holding back for some time.

"I'm also going to have to apologize for blowing our mission."

Xu and Elle looked at me with uncomprehending stares.

"I healed Rockshaw and let him go," I said. "Our mission was to find the fifth force so we could keep it out of the hands of people like Rockshaw. Now he knows we have it."

Elle looked at Xu and said, "He still doesn't get it, does he?"

Xu shook his head, a faint grin playing around his mouth.

"Don't get what?" I asked.

"You really don't know, do you?"

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As I shook my head, a look of anticipation filled Elle's features, like a child being given an unexpectedly wonderful gift. I could tell that she was going to surprise me again, and her look told me that this surprise, compared to all her other surprises, was going to be the most fun of all.

Elle said very carefully, "Healing Rockshaw *was* the mission."

A moment later she added, "The fifth force was just the bait to draw him out."

I just stared at her. Healing Rockshaw was the mission? The fifth force was bait? It felt like one of those moments when you realize you've been reading the map the wrong way round, when you thought you had been traveling north and suddenly you realize you have been traveling the wrong way for hours.

"Wait. Was our discovery of the fifth force a ruse? Was it fake?" I looked at Xu in sudden alarm, hoping he was going to say no.

"Oh no. It was real," Xu reassured me. "The two goals, healing Rockshaw and discovering the fifth force, worked together. You conceived the plan in your cell in Essen with Atri's blessings and help. Atri revealed to you that a fifth force would be found and when it would be found. You and Atri formed your plan around you being awakened at just the right time to pursue the discovery."

Taking enormous satisfaction at my once again befuddled expression, Elle continued, "It will be easiest to explain if I start at the beginning."

"Please do," I said, my mind still racing to try to make sense of what I had just been told.

"I suppose it began in Essen during the war. We didn't get captured by Rockshaw in Essen. We let ourselves get caught."

Her words were another bombshell, but they succeed in jarring loose a fragment of memory. I saw a brief scene in which I was arguing with Elle—and losing.

"I didn't want you to come with me, did I?" I said hesitantly. "Because I knew we would probably be killed."

"That's right. But there was no way on earth I was going to let you go it alone."

She said it again just the way I remembered it. Our eyes locked in mutual understanding. I felt moved by her unflinching support.

"Why did I want us to get caught?"

"You thought you could reach him. You hoped that by submitting to his torture and remaining calm and untouched by it that you could somehow awaken his better nature."

"It didn't work though, did it," I said, as painful memories surfaced.

"Oh, no, just the opposite. Instead of giving him the information he wanted about the Protectors, you gave him forgiveness. Instead of cowering before his power, you remained untouched. It just enraged him..."

"...and he killed us," I finished for her.

"But not before you came up with your next plan."

"My plan to discover the fifth force?" I asked, still feeling confused.

"No, your real plan. You thought that if you could turn the tables, if you were the one in power and he was the prisoner, so to speak, if he was the one in pain and feared for his life, and you showed him compassion, you might penetrate his hard shell of hate and self-protection and reach his heart."

"When you showed up and were shot, and then Rockshaw got shot, I thought my plan had gone completely off the rails..."

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“No. Amazingly enough, considering how unlikely your plan was, things unfolded just as you hoped they would.”

“Everything that has been happening was according to my plan?”

“In essence, yes, it all went according to your plan. But there were so many things that could have gone wrong. And there were so many things you asked me to do to make it happen the way you wanted.”

“First, you asked me to draw Rockshaw out of his protected world. You and Atri worked out that the fifth force would be irresistible to Rockshaw. But you also knew he would only come after it personally if he felt completely safe. So you told me to be a mole, to pretend to betray you.”

She gave me squinty eyes and said, “Never again, right?”

I gave her squinty eyes back and said, “Maybe.”

Before she could levitate me out a window I quickly asked, “I still don’t understand. Why did I want you to betray us? He almost caught us several times. That would have ended the mission right there.”

“There wasn’t much danger of that. Since I was the one feeding him information, I knew when he was going to be coming after us. I was always ready,” Elle said with easy confidence, “It wasn’t as much of a risk as it seems.”

If you say so, I thought.

“And it was crucial. You wanted Rockshaw to show up alone, or nearly alone. The only way he would do that is if he thought he would be absolutely safe. I had to convince him that everything I told him was true. The easiest way to do that was to tell him the truth.”

“At first he didn’t believe me. I told him it would be a waste of time to hack into all the Devas Foundation research centers but he went ahead and did it anyway. I told him it would be smartest to let you guys discover the fifth force and then grab you when you had it, but he insisted on trying to grab you whenever he could. But at least every time I told him where we were and what we were doing, he discovered that I was giving him accurate information. He believed me more and more after each bit of information I fed him.”

“Didn’t he suspect a trap? A guy like Rockshaw doesn’t trust anyone.”

“I don’t think he ever really trusted me. He shot me, after all. But he really did think I wanted a piece of the fifth force—because that’s the way he thinks—and as long as I acted like someone with a motive he understood, he trusted me to go after it.”

“Why did he grab you at the Dallas airport then?”

“I arranged for that.”

“Why?”

“You were catching on too fast.”

“I obviously didn’t catch on at all...”

“Why couldn’t I know my own plan? Why couldn’t I just heal Rockshaw?” I blurted out in exasperation.

“You were adamant about not knowing. We went back and forth about this, mentally that is, as we sat in our cells in Rockshaw’s prison. I thought it was the weakest part of the plan. How was I going to be able to maneuver you into the right position at the right time? I thought it was crazy.”

“But you were insistent. You said there was no point in even trying otherwise. You had already seen that you hadn’t been able to reach Rockshaw in the prison. It was somehow too

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obvious, too contrived. From that experience you decided that healing Rockshaw would have to appear to be totally spontaneous for Rockshaw to be truly changed by it. There could be no hint of contrivance, no thought in your mind, or awareness in your heart, that Rockshaw might pick up on.”

“It had to be a genuinely heartfelt and unselfish act of love,” I said, finally comprehending.

“Despite all that you knew, despite the pain and betrayal you were feeling, you chose to heal him. You gave him back the one thing he held most dear—his life—without any motive except love.”

After a pause Elle continued, “That’s another reason you wanted me to feed information to Rockshaw. You told me to rush you along so that you wouldn’t remember too much of your plan before the moment came to heal Rockshaw. With Rockshaw hounding us, it became a race, just not the race you thought it was. It was a race against your memories returning too soon.”

“That’s also why I told you to hurry when you contacted me mentally. By then Rockshaw trusted my information enough that he was content to wait and let you make the discovery for him. We were just down the road in a motel. There really was no hurry by then, I just wanted you to think so.”

“How did you know when to come? How did you know we had made the final breakthrough?” I asked.

“Xu emailed me.”

I turned and looked at Xu, and said in mock tragedy, “Et tu, Xu?”

“It was easy,” he said, “you were so fixated on the security feed screen that you never noticed I was sending emails.”

“You were in this up to your eyeballs all along?”

“Oh yeah. Elle enjoyed it more than I did, though,” he added, a sparkle of humor and apology in his eyes.

“Wait...” I said. I just realized there was one more piece of the puzzle. “Rockshaw getting shot wasn’t an accident, was it? You just made it look like one.”

“It was your plan,” said Xu holding his hands palms upward. “It was your idea to wound him.”

I shook my head, “Isn’t that unethical or just plain wrong...or something?”

Elle broke in, “You convinced me that it would be like lancing a boil or pulling a tooth; causing someone necessary pain in order to heal them. You said this was an operation on Rockshaw’s heart and it could save him. It took you a very long time to convince me, and it took me a very long time to convince Xu.”

“So you just grabbed that guy’s arm and hoped he would pull the trigger and it would hit Rockshaw?”

“I didn’t just hope,” Xu said feigning injured pride. “I had to grab his arm and aim and then give his trigger finger a little nudge with my life force at just the right moment. I shot him right where I wanted. Elle and I had talked quite a while about the best ways to wound him. We decided a shot through the right lung was best—a mortal wound but not instantly fatal. I thought I did a fairly good job of it, though either one of us was prepared to do it depending on how it went down.”

“You mean Elle getting shot by Rockshaw wasn’t part of the plan?”

“Just icing on the cake,” replied Elle, as if commenting on a job well done. “It made your decision to heal Rockshaw even more moving to him.”

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“What if it had just pushed me over the line and I didn’t heal Rockshaw?”

Elle said softly and carefully, as if I had said something almost insulting, “When you get your memories back you will understand why it was never a possibility. You would never ignore a soul in pain. You have a heart as big as the world.”

At her words I remembered how hard it had been to walk through the airport in LAX, feeling so much pain around me, but unable to do anything. I remembered wanting to reach out and embrace the woman whose family had abandoned her. I recall the many memories I had explored trying to reach Rockshaw. As if sharing my thoughts, Elle nodded.

After a moment I asked, “Are my plans always this convoluted?”

Elle and Xu both started to speak but then just laughed instead.

Then Xu answered soberly, “Protectors will go to any length to help someone. Mr. Hyun devoted an entire lifetime to make sure that he would be there to be a teacher for Ri Pun Hui. You’ve been trying to help Rockshaw for almost two hundred years. Protectors never count the cost. But your missions often tend to be, shall we say, very creative.”

After a shared smile all around, Xu announced that he should wrap up our work and make the supercomputer available to his Dyson Center staff again. After he left, I stood and walked over to the floor to ceiling windows and gazed unseeingly at the view. I was still stunned by the whole experience, and I knew I would have more questions later, but for now I was content. Even though I couldn’t fully take it in, the realization was sinking in that we had completed our mission—all of it. We had made the breakthrough with the fifth force and I had healed Rockshaw.

After a few moments, Elle came over to stand at my side. “Now that you know what the real mission was, do you think it worked?”

“I don’t know. It was powerful,” I said, assuming Elle would know I was referring to the experience Rockshaw had had while I was healing him, “and it was profound. He saw his past life and he felt its consequences. He suffered the pain of his victims.”

Elle looked at me questioningly, “It wasn’t me,” I answered the unspoken question.” It may have been Atria. I don’t know. Rockshaw essentially had a near death experience. Many who have had such experiences are deeply changed by them. We can only hope the same is true for Rockshaw. We just have to wait and see.”

Elle put an arm around my back and her head on my shoulder as we stood silently together for a few minutes.

Finally she said, “Come on. Let’s get you started on all those apologies you’re going to have to make to every Protector in the entire world. We should call Jonathon and let him know what’s happened.”

Two Weeks Later

“Professor Dinsmore, do you have any comment on Warren Buffet’s remark that you might own one of the most valuable patents in the world?” shouted yet another reporter at me. I was standing behind a podium covered with microphones on the steps in front of the main entrance to the Fifth Force Dynamics offices in San Jose.

“Only time will tell,” I said. “But it’s nice to hear Uncle Warren thinks so.” This got me a general laugh.

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“Forgive me, Professor Dinsmore, but until Fifth Force Dynamics released a statement this morning, no one had ever heard of you before, yet now we learn that your work provided the key to a practical application of the fifth force. How do you explain that?”

“Like all scientific breakthroughs, mine is only possible because of the work of thousands of other scientists, and the careful development and generous sharing of ideas among the scientific community. I was thinking about the right subject, at the right time, and got lucky,” I said with more truth than they knew.

“Isn’t it unusual to be given a patent?” came another question.

“I need to remind you that the patent has only been applied for and not yet granted and that it is a co-patent. I only own a part of it. But Fifth Force Dynamics is an unusual company. It is funded by foundation grants, and is set up as a non-profit. The company is busily filing for patents, because they don’t want this technology, which can benefit the entire world, to be co-opted only for making profit. In fact, I was asked to read a prepared statement describing the company’s plans.”

“But before reading the prepared statement I’d also like to take this opportunity to say that another co-patent has been applied for, for Professor Wilson for his work done on magnetic fields, which are essential to the practical application of the fifth force.” I didn’t say that Professor Lee would also be given a patent and that money would soon be funneled to him from Fifth Force Dynamics to help set up his new identity. Eventually we hoped he would be able to work for the company.

I began to read from the prepared statement. “Harnessing the power of the fifth force presents an opportunity to generate inexpensive, clean, power anywhere in the world. No ‘fuel’ in the conventional sense is required to generate electricity using this new technology, so any country, regardless of the presence or lack of natural resources, can benefit from this breakthrough.”

“However, the cost of developing a generating facility will be high, and the knowledge needed to build such a facility will be rare for some time to come. In order to overcome the usual pattern of the poorer and less developed nations being left out of the benefits of leading edge technology, Fifth Force Dynamics intends to build and lease generating plants in all countries that apply.”

“Fifth Force Dynamics will bear most, and where needed, all of the initial costs, and will be repaid through leasing the technology and a small percentage of the revenue generated from the sale of electrical power. Fifth Force Dynamics is established as a non-profit corporation which will insure that all income will be used to fairly compensate patent holders, build new plants and improve the technology. Fifth Force Dynamics will never become a publically traded company driven by the need to reward its shareholders. The sole purpose of Fifth Force Dynamics is to insure the use and adoption of this new technology around the world.”

I looked up as I finished reading and noticed that the statement was being handed out to the reporters.

“What will you do with all your money from the patent?” another reporter shouted.

“There isn’t any yet,” I said, and got another laugh. “Full development of the fifth force electrical generation system is months, if not years away. Meanwhile I am an employee of Fifth Force Dynamics.”

“The statement this morning said you had been made a Vice-President?” came a quick response.

“A well-paid employee, then,” I ended, garnering another laugh.

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At that, I was relieved at the podium by a smooth talking professional PR man working for the company. A security man escorted me down the steps, across a small plaza and into a waiting limousine. I sank back gratefully into the soft leather seat and closed my eyes for a moment. It had been a hectic day.

“So what are you going to go by, Professor Dinsmore or Vice-President Dinsmore?” I opened my eyes and turned to look at Elle, her eyes sparkling.

“I was thinking Doctor Michael Dinsmore. The alliteration is very appealing,” I said.

Elle rolled her eyes and then with a smile of great warmth she said, “Can we go?”

“Yes. I’ve done everything I needed to do—and not just for today. After getting the new Fifth Force Dynamics engineering teams up to speed on the work Xu and I had done at the Dyson center, the press conference was the last remaining thing the company wanted me to do. From now on, Vice-President Dinsmore will only be trotted out for special occasions. The development of fifth force electrical generation has passed into other hands.”

Elle pressed a button and asked our driver to take us to our hotel. As we glided soundlessly through traffic, I realized there was nowhere I needed to be and nothing I needed to do. While passing on the secrets to the fifth force to the new engineering teams, I’d sold my house at Elle’s urging—she said it was too exposed and lacked a really good escape route, as we had recently learned together; I’d resigned my professorship at Berkeley; and Elle and I had spent many happy evenings with my Protector parents, Steven and Marie, who I now recognize as very old friends, not just loving parents.

I had also gotten most of my Protector memories back beginning with being Awakened by Jonathon in ancient Egypt. I had been Imhotep then, master architect of the Great Pyramid, and Jonathon had been Menes, the first Pharaoh of Egypt. A hundred other identities and life times had come flooding back.

“What should we do next?” I mused.

“Clearly we need to go someplace very private and far away from people. We still need to get your telekinetic skills up to speed. If you explode a few more chairs, or blow up another office building, at least no one would get hurt,” Elle deadpanned with a twinkle in her eye.

“Are you ever going to let me forget it?”

She just looked at me with an amused smile.

I didn’t really need to ask. When my memories had returned I remembered that Elle had been routinely zinging me about a spectacular and amusing failure of mine to levitate a camel during the middle-ages—the camel survived, by the way—because of Elle. I could tell from the look in her eyes that she thought my nearly suicidal destruction of Rockshaw’s torture chamber was *much* funnier.

Good-natured banter about where we could go to keep mankind and animal-kind safe from me continued until we arrived back at the hotel and were sitting in my room. Elle was about to take another gentle poke at me when a sphere of light slowly grew in front of us within which we watched two forms taking shape. Suddenly there was a brilliant flash and Atri and Atria were floating before us in the lotus pose.

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## A Conspiracy of Darkness

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## Chapter 17

Atri and Atria's young-old faces held similar expressions of love and intelligence. Atri's fathomless eyes looked deeply into mine.

As always, as I gazed into his eyes, I was engulfed in the bliss of our Teacher's presence. Gradually, my perception of the seemingly-solid physical world lost its sharp edge of reality and appeared to me as shining clouds of light, as though my camera-lens of perception had gone out of focus. I remained aware of Elle, Atri, and Atria, although their forms were gone from my sight. Boundless and bodiless, we soared into the Infinite.

After what could have been merely a moment, a day, or an eternity of joyful freedom, the physical world returned to my awareness. Curiously, I felt both in, and not in, my body. Reluctantly, I took in a slow and deliberate breath, and again took on the far more limited experience of body and senses. I glanced at Elle and saw that she, too, was once again dutifully accepting the confining garment of flesh.

Atri and Atria, still with us, patiently allowed us time to make the transition back to physical awareness, a transition they had long-ago mastered. Once we were ready, Atria spoke. "We are pleased with the success of your last mission. Now we need to ask you to undertake another."

Atri looked gravely at each of us. "A mere handful of people hold enough sway over the affairs of man to affect the course of nations and control the lives of billions. Their unseen manipulation of the world's wealth has left millions upon millions of people in crushing debt, grinding misery, even starvation, while allowing a small number of people to enrich themselves, and subvert the world's resources to utterly selfish ends. Soon, very soon, their control will become impossible to break. You must discover their identities and stop them before it's too late."

Atria added, "Asher is at the heart of it. Be wary of his mental powers."

Atri and Atria gave us a farewell gesture of blessing and their forms began to fade, their sparkling eyes the last thing to disappear.

### One Month Later

Elle drove her Ferrari Enzo past mine on the winding two-lane road. At the last possible second, swerving out of the way of an oncoming car, she slid in scant inches ahead of my matching Ferrari. I thought she must have used her abilities to slow down the other vehicle. My guess was confirmed by the bewildered look on the face of the frantically honking driver as we flashed by him.

We were leapfrogging each other down through the mountain switchbacks heading into Monte Carlo, roofs off, wind whipping our hair in the chilly afternoon air. Ahead we could see the high-rise center of Monte Carlo bunched up between the sea and the steep mountain we were hurtling down.

We tried our best to appear reckless—and we appeared *very* reckless—while at the same time keeping bystanders safe. Doing so required single-pointed concentration. From behind us, the now-familiar sound of police sirens came as no surprise. Our attention-getting game had become a daily ritual since our arrival last week. Would the police catch us this time? My money was on No.

We flew down the steep mountain face and entered the city; the noise of our twin supercars echoed thunderously in the man-made canyons. I checked a young couple from starting across the street. A comically surprised expression appeared on their faces as I raced by, Elle's car mere feet from the rear of mine. Show off. Several people, indignant at our recklessness, shouted and shook

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their fists at us—or selected parts of their fists. I laughed at the people as they shouted and gestured at us—at least on the outside. Inside I was silently apologizing.

Now there were sirens in front of us. I cut down a side street, heading seaward. Elle turned with me as though we were one car. Temporarily eluding the police, we shot out onto du Larvotto, the main seafront artery, and drove as if we were in the Monte Carlo Grand Prix.

We passed each other along the waterfront, weaving through cars as if they were standing still. We could hear sirens coming from just about everywhere now. I put on a burst of speed and passed Elle's Ferrari, slewed around in front of her, tires smoking, and made the last turn toward the Monte Carlo Casino. Moments later, honking our horns to clear a path before us and slamming on our brakes in unison, we slid sideways to a stop in front of the Monte.

We got out of our cars, laughing and pointing at each other, just as a score of police cars arrived, sirens going and lights flashing. Radiating fury, policemen leaped out of their cars and ran toward us—but they arrived too late. We were already surrounded by our security detail.

I shouted to Rajan, the head of our security team. "I thought you had taken care of this!" I gestured at the police. "Why do they make such a fuss over a little bit of fun? Take care of it! Tell them we'll make a donation to the policeman's retirement fund or something." We tossed him our keys.

Turning our backs on the police's outraged shouts, we were met by the strobing camera-flashes of a phalanx of paparazzi. We went up red-carpeted steps as two members of our security team not-so-gently made a path for us.

Why all the interest in us?

It's simple. Elle and I were now the richest people in the world and our infamous lifestyles had made us into global mega-celebrities. We've been on countless magazine covers, have been the subject of endless news and entertainment programs; every aspect of what we think, do, or say is minutely scrutinized and blared from the tabloids.

There was a gala this afternoon for some big shot or other and only the richest, most glittering, most socially desirable had been invited. Once through the main doors, we were surrounded by society-press television crews, cameras and microphones were thrust eagerly at us. The press inside were better behaved, but just as hungry for stories as the paparazzi outside.

When we entered the Monte, as usual when we showed up in public, all eyes were on Elle/Ambika. My appearance is average—the typical dark hair and eyes of India atop a stout body. Her appearance is stunning: dark hair, worn long and chic, Bollywood figure, flashing white teeth in an enchanting smile, perfectly-arched eyebrows, and arresting brown eyes.

"Ms. Gupta! What are you wearing tonight?" one of the reporters shouted loud enough to be heard over the other crews as we moved forward to the casino floor.

Elle/Ambika stopped and twirled to show off a shimmering, iridescent-purple, full-length gown. Matching sparkling sandals peeked out from beneath the hem and dangling platinum-and-diamond earrings danced in the light from the camera flashes.

In the round tones of cultured Indian-English she addressed the reporters, "It's a Saab. When I told him last night that I had nothing to wear for the gala he begged me to wear something of his. He had it couriered to me this morning."

More questions were shouted at us but, as usual, we moved forward, feigning bored disinterest. Just as we were about to enter the casino floor, I heard a shouted question that caught my attention.

"Mr. Gupta! Is it true that you just bought up hundreds of acres outside Pune and will evict thousands of people so you can build a palace?"

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I whirled around with feigned anger, secretly pleased that someone dared to ask such a question. How a hard news reporter got in with the fashion and entertainment press I don't know, but it was a perfect opportunity to pretend, for the thousandth time, how little we cared for anything besides our own pleasures.

"Yes, it's true we bought the land. It's our ancestral city, after all. Why shouldn't we be able to build there?" My tone was angry, scolding, and dismissive.

"But you will be displacing people who have lived there for generations. They have nowhere else to go."

"India needs shaking up. It can't just keep living in the past. It will be good for them in the long run."

Barely able to hide her disgust, she asked, "Don't you feel responsible in any way to those people?"

I paused as if giving her question some thought. "No, not really. Why should I?"

With an indifferent shrug I moved on, Elle/Ambika still at my side and, with our two body guards following us, we passed through the velvet ropes and left the press behind—rich, reckless, arrogant, and uncaring—poster children for all the misuses to which money can be put. And, if our assumptions were correct, perfect bait to lure our quarry out of the hidden deeps and onto our hook.

I don't mind telling you I was heartily sick of the whole charade. I've played the part of the villain many times on other missions—but never for so long—and never so publically. I could feel the enmity people felt toward us like an actual physical pressure.

As we strolled deeper into the casino, Elle mentally flashed me an image of me receiving an Academy Award to the applause of thousands.

I flashed back an image of a sad-faced, crying child who wanted to go home.

After Atria's warning about Asher's mental powers, we kept our use to a minimum in public, lest we unknowingly reveal ourselves to our yet unknown quarry.

So I whispered, instead. "If we don't get lucky tonight I vote for moving on to Plan B."

"And which one, exactly, was Plan A?" she asked with pretended innocence, while nodding to people she knew.

I gave her a sideways glance and sighed. It's a long story. I'll tell you later.

Playing our parts, we idled our time away in the venerable casino. Its rich carpets, marble floors, and ornate style were a throwback to a bygone era. Ambika and I lost more money playing roulette than most people make in a year. We did it without turning a hair. Elle/Ambika managed to be surly to a waitress and then over-tip her while appearing not to notice either the rudeness or the extravagance. Our bodyguards, weapons clearly visible under their jackets, microphones in their ears, hovered with a certain degree of menace. Room, as you can imagine, was made for us at any table we approached.

Even among the rich we stood out. No one else bothered to bring bodyguards into the already highly-secure event. People we had met before approached us with a certain wariness and carefully concealed distaste. We were often rude, disparaging, mean-spirited, and dismissive of others.

As we wandered from table to table, we shook hands with some minor royalty, met a few Grimaldis, whose family still ruled Monaco, and spoke indifferently to a lot of very rich people—all of whom were left in no doubt that we found them unimportant.

As usual, we saved our real interest for the least reputable guests—people who managed to cultivate a veneer of civilized sophistication while making their money in decidedly uncivilized

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ways. We had already made small and discreet "investments" with some of them—but not so discreet that word didn't get around.

People who spent any time with us soon believed that we were amoral, even sociopathic, and that all we cared about was ourselves. They believed even sooner that we were bent on accumulating more wealth, regardless of how, as long as it was fast. Even the real villains we associated with found us a little scary. Our civilized veneer appeared to be much thinner than theirs. They had some limits to their behavior. We appeared to have none.

After an hour or two, just as we'd decided to leave, a woman coming our way caught our attention. A bubble of interest traveled with her as she came toward us. Heads turned as she walked by. She radiated power and sensuality. Men were frankly admiring but at the same time wary. There was something disturbing about this woman that was felt at a primal level. Women wore fixed smiles and took firmer grips on their escorts. She was escorted by two body guards, but, unnoticed by most, she had at least a dozen more. The extra bodyguards were dressed like guests but their movements gave them away. They stood at key vantage points, their eyes constantly sweeping the room while everyone else looked only at her.

She came to a stop in front of us and offered me her hand. She spoke in a husky contralto, "I am the Countess Genovese."

The countess was a beauty. Long, curling blond hair surrounded an oval face and hazel eyes. Her figure was just short of voluptuous. Her skin had the look of expensive treatments, nails perfect, makeup understated but exquisite. Her dress fit to perfection. She wore masses of jewelry, including one outsized antique ring on the middle finger of her right hand.

Her age could have been anywhere between thirty and fifty. Her every move was sensual, aware of herself and aware of me. Too aware of me. When her hazel eyes met mine her expression included a frank question.

When she turned to Elle/Ambika and took her hand in greeting, Elle tensed almost imperceptibly, but her polite response betrayed nothing. "A pleasure to meet you."

Silence had attended the countess' arrival but was now replaced by an increased hum of conversation—speculation, no doubt, as to who this woman could be and why she wanted to meet us.

Facing both of us, she spoke so that only we could hear. "I would like to meet with you for a few minutes to discuss a matter of mutual advantage."

Elle/Ambika and I looked at each other as if considering her offer. If we had not been on our guard about communicating telepathically, we would have been sending each other the mental equivalent of high fives. Weeks of offering ourselves as colossally rich, arrogant, and amoral bait had finally attracted someone we believed to be a very big fish.

The Countess Genovese fit the big fish profile we'd developed very well: little known, seldom seen, yet powerfully connected. We'd seen no photographs of her, heard and read many conflicting stories about her, and had no idea how to contact her or where to find her. We hadn't, until this moment, been entirely sure she even existed.

Although we both knew this meeting could be the opening we were looking for, it wouldn't do to appear too interested. After a bit of a shrug from me, and a reluctant nod from Elle/Ambika, I turned back to the countess. "We could give you a few minutes."

We arranged to meet a short time later in a private room.

After she left, I turned to Elle/Ambika and said, *sotto voce*, "Plan A is obviously working."

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I got one slightly raised eyebrow to acknowledge my Plan A comment and then she added a quick rejoinder. "Just be careful if she offers you a drink."

My turn to raise an eyebrow.

"That was Lucrezia Borgia and she's still wearing her favorite ring."

Not something you usually hear in casual conversation.

"Lucrezia always kept something special in her ring for those pesky relationship issues that come up from time to time. A little drop of poison in the right drink—problem solved. Believe me, I remember her well—and she doesn't look a bit different than she did when I first met her five hundred years ago."

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## Chapter 18

Shortly after Atri and Atria gave us our mission to discover the identities of the small group of people who have such outsized control of so much wealth and power—and to somehow stop them—we set about assuming a cover that would allow us to mix with the rich and powerful. What better cover than to be rich and powerful ourselves? We put the full resources of the worldwide network of Protectors to work and emerged a short while later as twenty-something brother-and-sister holders of the largest private fortune in the world. Our goal was to make ourselves into, we hoped, irresistible bait to catch our prey, and we were dangling our colossally-rich selves from a hidden hook with as much notoriety as we could generate.

Our "father," Sunil Gupta, was himself a Protector who had amassed a large fortune in India. But as Protectors can live far longer than is normal, it was a good time for him to appear to die and move on to a new identity, lest he begin to attract unwanted attention. His faked death offered a solution to the problem of creating a cover. His actual children, a brother and sister whose identities we had assumed, were also Protectors, and they, too, were moved on to new identities.

Thus we became Anil and Ambika Gupta from Pune, India.

Sunil Gupta had made a vast private fortune—the true extent of which was unknown to the world. We made it appear to be even more vast when, over the course of a few weeks, our fellow Protectors added to Sunil's fortune by secretly moving huge sums of money into our control—stock portfolios, Swiss accounts, properties, factories throughout the East, multi-national corporations, and more. We became richer than the richest.

Very quickly after the death of our "father," we went on a spending spree. Pretending to have been held in check by a puritanical miser, we spent like no one ever spent before. With wanton disregard for cost, we acquired every kind of luxury item imaginable: private jets, helicopters, fast cars, exclusive fashions, breathtakingly expensive jewelry, and we were currently kicking the tires on the largest yacht in the world.

When we traveled, we insisted on bringing our toys with us. We acquired our own Boeing 747 just to fly our army of servants, massive security team, several specially armored SUVs, our favorite cars, and staggering amounts of baggage, to wherever our fancy took us. We arrived later on our smaller private jet—an expensive and outlandishly decorated Gulfstream.

In less than a month we'd bought an ocean-side estate in Bali, skied Aspen by day and partied by night, taken an entire floor of the Plaza to throw extravagant bashes that dazzled even New Yorkers, and less than a week ago we'd arrived in Monte Carlo to try out our latest new digs—an exclusive castle estate high on the mountainside overlooking the city.

As planned, during this impressive buying binge, the full scope of our wealth had been revealed to the world. It's difficult to imagine that we haven't caught the attention of the people we want to find.

Which brings us back to the Monte:

"Lucrezia didn't recognize me, of course," continued Elle. "The last time I saw her was five centuries ago in Rome. I was playing the part of Vittoria Colonna and looked nothing like I do now. At the time, people thought I was Michelangelo's muse, but I was also his Protector."

Elle had once told me that Michelangelo had been a very lonely man. Elle had become his confidante and muse because it was the easiest way to deflect him from Lucrezia. Lucrezia had set her sights on him more than once—in between husbands and other lovers—and he would easily

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have succumbed to her advances if Elle hadn't steered him away. Lucrezia was poison in more ways than one; even if she hadn't killed him, she would have eventually destroyed him just for the pleasure of it. Had she succeeded, many of Michelangelo's stirring works would never have been created—no David, no Sistine Chapel, no Pietà—and the world would have been a far poorer place.

"I repeatedly kept Michelangelo out of Lucrezia's reach and she knew it. Her little trick of poisoning those who got in her way definitely kept me on my toes. She was a cold-hearted sociopath even then. It's scary to imagine what she's become since."

A five-hundred-year-old Lucrezia could mean only one thing: Asher had taught her how to extend her life. This was good news and bad—more good than bad. The good news: We'd anticipated having to work our way through several people before we got close to Asher. Lucrezia's extended life could only mean that she was very close to Asher, perhaps in his inner circle, so rather than having to work our way up a tall ladder of people, we were near the top already. The bad news: From what Elle said about Lucrezia, the "big fish" we'd just managed to lure our way was a great white shark. We needed to take great care to set the hook without being savaged in the process.

The Protectors have long known of the existence of people like Lucrezia. Thousands of years ago, Asher learned secret techniques to extend his life indefinitely and, over time, has taught those techniques to a select few. Knowing Asher was at the center of the shadow group we were seeking, we'd contacted our fellow Protectors to learn if they had any current information about him or any others with unnaturally extended lives. We found that most Protectors had never encountered such people. Even when they had encountered one, like Elle's experience with Lucrezia, the tides of time soon carried them far apart and out of contact.

We did learn a few things, however. We learned that the people like Lucrezia and Asher prefer to live hidden in the shadows. They have been able to accumulate enormous wealth because they have gained knowledge and experience far greater than those living merely one lifetime can ever achieve. That wealth allows them to hide themselves from the rest of the world in secret locations, well protected by armies of guards, and often with the covert government cooperation of the counties in which they hide.

We also learned that all their elaborate efforts to be secure have not given them any *feeling* of security. Far from it. The truth is that Asher and his inner circle have achieved only a pale and fear-filled imitation of immortality. Protectors find immortality in the blissful, bodiless infinity of Spirit. Asher and his ilk haven't achieved true immortality; they have only extended the time they spend in their frail *mortal* bodies. Far from *overcoming* death, the longer they live, the more they fear it. This all-consuming fear of death, combined with their nearly limitless wealth, results in a lethally paranoid ruthlessness that is used against anyone who even remotely threatens them.

So not only was Lucrezia a great white shark, she existed in a state of perpetual frenzy, ready to attack at the merest scent of danger.

Casually late to underline our importance, we went to see Lucrezia. One of our bodyguards knocked on the door of a private meeting room. The door opened and the countess and her bodyguards looked us over. There was an awkward moment.

Protocol suggested that we leave our bodyguards in the hallway, but we were known for brashly insisting on bringing our people everywhere. The countess, who had brought even more bodyguards to the gala than we had, took in the situation and motioned her guards out into the hall.

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They did not look happy. The countess gave me a measuring look. After a quick exchange of glances with Elle/Ambika, I gestured for our two to wait outside as well.

Without saying a word, we'd agreed to meet privately. Promising.

"Please, come in. Thank you for taking the time to meet with me. Have you been enjoying yourselves this evening?"

I cleared my throat and assumed my arrogant and unpleasant alter-ego. "Countess . . . you mentioned something to our mutual advantage . . .?" I put as much doubt and impatience into my tone as I could, to convey that we were not here to exchange meaningless pleasantries.

The countess handled my boorish behavior smoothly. She gave no evidence of annoyance—but I was sure she felt it—and would remember the slight. "Yes. Yes. Please come in and sit down."

She ushered us over to elegant armchairs and a settee. The room was furnished opulently; gilt, polish, and crystal reflected from everywhere. Oriental carpets, brocades, and satiny, textured wallpaper nearly smothered us in rich gold and yellow tones.

Before sitting down herself, she asked, "May I offer you something to drink?"

Elle/Ambika turned down her offer—a shade too quickly. The countess gave her an odd look, but sensing our impatience, she, too, sat down and began. "I represent influential people, very influential people, who can help you leverage your wealth . . . considerably."

"I'm listening." My tone said, ". . . but not for much longer."

"I am acquainted with a certain Mr. Taylor who mentioned that you had a business interest with him . . .?"

Mr. Taylor is one of the least reputable people we have dealt with. We know he has his fingers in illicit activities around the world. We'd made an "investment" with him. Our millions had gone into a currency manipulation scheme. We'd weighed the risks of venturing money with Mr. Taylor. We didn't want to hurt anyone, even for the sake of our mission. In the end, when we'd learned that the people being manipulated were just as venal as Mr. Taylor, we'd gone ahead. Anyone who thinks there is honor among thieves has never met Mr. Taylor.

By mentioning Mr. Taylor, the countess had communicated what she wanted: These very influential people she knew were comfortable in the world of black money, a world without laws or morality. Her mention of Mr. Taylor was a question and an invitation.

I glanced at Elle/Ambika as if seeking her thoughts. She nodded. I pulled from my pocket a small device about the size of a compact mobile phone. I'd asked my security team to bring it to me before the meeting. I set it on the table and pressed a button.

The countess had watched me calmly, showing no trace of alarm.

I asked, "Do you know what this is?"

"It is a jammer to counter any electronic eavesdropping. Don't you trust me?" she asked with an amused twist of her lips.

"We don't trust anyone," Elle/Ambika said simply.

"Good. Nor do I. This device protects us both."

"So. . . . Who are these influential people?"

"I can't tell you. Even if I told you who they were, their names would mean nothing to you. They remain out of public view. The only thing I can tell you is that collectively . . . they control trillions of dollars."

Now Elle/Ambika glanced at me. I manufactured a smile of avarice and quickly tried to hide it—but not so quickly that the countess didn't see it. Elle/Ambika's expression matched mine. We

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both turned to the countess and everything that needed to be communicated was passed from eye to eye—she had us—or so we wanted her to think.

Now for some sleight-of-hand—my sleight, Elle's hand. I rose, as if restless and excited, and moved to the other side of the countess from Elle/Ambika. "When can we meet these influential friends?"

As I expected, she evaded my question. I asked a few more questions I knew the countess wasn't going to answer. I knew that she'd withhold names and information until a great deal more trust had been established, if it ever was. We were being invited into a high stakes and highly secret world. Gaining trust would take a long time.

Longer than we could afford to wait.

Thus the real purpose of my questions. I was distracting the countess while an object the size of a bean floated away from Elle/Ambika's hand, around the countess' back, and into the purse at her side. Knowing Elle's well-honed skills, I was sure our magic bean made it to the very bottom of the countess' purse.

Seeing the object disappear, I stopped my restless pacing and looked at the countess. "I want one thing, though."

She raised a questioning eyebrow.

"I want a way to contact you."

She considered my request. "Very well. You can reach me at this number." She reached into her purse and then handed me a card. On it were her name and a single number, nothing more. I hadn't expected more, and I'm sure the location of the number would prove untraceable, but it suited our purposes.

The countess rose and so did we. Business was concluded. The countess' business had been to give us an invitation. Our business had been to get a tiny tracking device into her purse.

Moments later we left the room, the jammer back in my pocket, our bodyguards in tow, and we made our way toward the casino floor. Still walking, I pulled out my mobile, entered and sent a single number, then put the phone back in my pocket. The number was a prearranged signal. It meant *be prepared*. With the tracker in the countess' purse, we might have to go just about anywhere in the next few minutes and we'd need support.

I had sent my text to Xu. He had been working with us behind the scenes since the beginning of our mission. The last I saw him he was wearing a T-shirt with Darth Vader in a business suit on it. He'd had ear-buds in, and his head had been moving rhythmically to what could be anything from Chinese folk music to the Goo Goo Dolls.

Message sent, I turned to one of our bodyguards. "Backup car. On my call. We want to leave unseen."

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## Chapter 19

My bodyguard looked startled at my abruptness, but then hurried off, talking quietly into a microphone hidden in his cuff. This wasn't the first time we'd left an event by the back door. We always have our team bring an extra, more ordinary car. Trying to sneak away in a pair of flaming-scarlet Ferraris was not likely to work too well. We'd have paparazzi chasing us for miles.

I felt my phone vibrate, pulled it out, and looked at the screen. A map appeared with a winking red dot. I nodded to Elle. The tracker was working. It emits a high-frequency pulse every two minutes for a millisecond and then turns itself off. Bug detectors rely on continuous signals to be effective. Even if the countess had been suspicious and had had her bag electronically scanned, the chance had been remote that it would have been scanned at the precise millisecond the tracker emitted its signal.

Elle/Ambika and I found a quiet corner where I pretended to talk on my phone. We were actually waiting for the next two-minute signal. It came, the phone vibrating in my hand. As we had hoped, the tracker showed that the countess had already left the hotel. Time to move. We rose and I told our remaining bodyguard that we wanted the car immediately. He spoke into his cuff and led us away to a little-used side entrance; it was well guarded. No surprise, given the guest list. By then our backup car had arrived and our team had cleared our departure with the guards. We climbed in, Elle/Ambika at the wheel. We waved our bodyguards away. They had resigned themselves to this, what they must consider suicidal behavior on our part—the richest people in the world are ideal targets for kidnapping—but they knew we would insist on going alone. We'd done so a number of times just to get them used to the idea that we would leave their protection anytime we felt like it.

The short winter days meant it was already full dark when we left. Elle drove a short way from the hotel, found a secluded spot, and stopped. While she drove, I had gotten out my phone and studied the glowing map. When the tracker emits its signal, it's received by GPS satellites and its location sent to my phone. Thanks to Xu's hacking wizardry, our use of the satellites goes undetected, but relying on satellites comes at a cost. Creating a signal strong enough to be detected by an orbiting satellite takes significant energy; the battery in the tiny tracker would only last twelve hours.

Off vibrate, my phone beeped this time. The blinking dot had changed position and indicated the countess was now some way from the hotel and on one of the main roads. Good news. If she had merely driven to a local hotel, our efforts would have been wasted.

"You ready?" I asked unnecessarily as we waited for the next beep. Elle nodded, equally unnecessarily.

Weeks of preparation had led to this moment. As a result of our signal to Xu there would be a long-range jet spooled-up and on standby at the Nice airport and, warming up in the harbor, a fast boat capable of taking us anywhere in the Mediterranean. If the countess stayed on the roads, the powerful Mercedes we were driving could keep up with the fastest touring car.

There was a secret compartment under the dash that contained three alternate identities for each of us—passport, licenses, credit cards, the works—and there were more in the plane and on the boat. I reached under the dash to get at them only to have a sealed packet drop into my hands. Elle/Ambika's mouth twitched in a tiny smile. Choosing to ignore Elle's impressive kinetic-meddling, I sorted through our choices. Choosing one set, I handed one passport to Elle and studied the other.

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We both shape-shifted in moments. Anil and Ambika were gone. Adriano and Vanda Perone now sat in the car, wealthy visitors from Parma visiting friends in Monte Carlo. Although I had done it a thousand times, I never grow tired of the electric thrill.

As we sat waiting to see where Lucrezia was headed, I was fervently hoping our elaborate charade as Anil and Ambika would finally pay off. It had been a month since Atri and Atria had given us our mission and this was our first real chance to discover *anything* concrete about *anyone* we suspected of being in Asher's shadow group.

Right now, all we had was a list of maybes. Maybes we had no way of contacting or finding. Maybes we couldn't even be sure were real people. The list was too long and too hazy to do us much good. We needed more concrete information.

Compiling the list of maybes had also brought us dangerously close to being discovered.

Immediately after Atri and Atria had given us our mission, we'd turned Xu loose in cyberspace to find any information that might tell us who was in Asher's group. We'd steered Xu away from obvious public figures, like the head of the Trilateral Commission, or the Bilderberger Group—semisecret organizations that have long been suspected of exerting hidden control over money and politics. The public members of those organizations were simply too well known to be in our shadow group and, in any case, they were already hounded by zealous conspiracy mavens. If any of them were members of a secret cabal it would have come out long ago.

Instead, we directed Xu to look deep into the shadows to find the people we had begun to think of as the *connectors*, people who were barely noticed but were in the background behind more important public figures—in *every* background of *every* gathering that mattered. Connectors might be *seen* at a Bilderberger retreat but would not be publicly registered as members. They might be *seen* at a meeting of select members of the World Bank but, on investigation, no one could say who they were, or at least no one would admit to knowing who they were.

Working at a pace only Xu can maintain, he had found a surprising number of ubiquitous nonentities who seemed to be everywhere people of power met. Once Xu had identified a number of these shadowy connectors, we tried to piece together their lives. We had very little luck. We found conflicting information, often multiple false identities, and no clue as to where they might be found. Xu tried to dig deeper. It required hacking into ever more secure systems: government records, financial systems, even intelligence agencies. This was tricky ground, even for Xu, and in one exploit Xu triggered an alarm.

Reaction was swift and retribution was absolute. We learned later that within *minutes*, agents entered the Dallas building that housed the server Xu had been hacking into, physically seized the server, and in the hour that followed, disabled, one after another, the remote servers Xu had been working through to hide his tracks. We still don't know exactly who they were or where they came from, but we do know that their actions had to have been sanctioned at the highest levels of the U.S. government. Xu's skills kept them from tracing the hack back to him, but he admitted that he might not always be so lucky. If Xu tripped another alarm, and *our* location and identities were revealed, we would find ourselves at the wrong end of a manhunt.

Imagine the security and protection that surround the President of the United States and you'll have some idea of what we were up against. Make a serious covert attempt to learn about the President's travel plans? Hundreds of well-trained white-hat hackers will search for you relentlessly. Result: Jail for life. Try to hack secure files at the White House? You may never be heard from again. Attempt to break into the White House? Shot on sight.

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Xu had reached the limits of safety and we had had to call him off the search. His efforts weren't a complete waste, however. While we'd learned nothing specific about anyone who might be in the shadow group, we had learned something important. We'd learned that there *was* a shadow group and that the people in it had enough influence to be protected to a degree given only to the heads of state of powerful countries. If we'd needed confirmation that a hidden and powerful group existed, we'd gotten it in spades.

Once we'd realized we couldn't sneak in the back door, we'd decided to try to be invited through the front door. Enter Anil and Ambika: unimaginably rich, ambitious, amoral, and looking for ways to expand their wealth no matter how—Plan A. All right. All right. Technically Plan B, since we'd been unsuccessful trying to hack our way in the back door, but Plan A always sounds so much better.

And current Plan A appeared to be working. The countess, a previously hazy member on our maybes list, had contacted us. But I knew we couldn't afford to be passive and wait for her to contact us again. We might not get invited to meet the countess' influential friends for weeks—or ever—and our cover might not hold up indefinitely. We needed a way to force a meeting; following the countess might just give us what we needed.

We'd taken a big gamble and put the tracker in her purse. If she discovered it before we learned anything important, she would simply disappear and put the rest of the shadow group, if indeed she was a member, on their guard against us. If that happened, the most colossal deception ever—Anil and Ambika Gupta, the world's richest people—would go to waste and we'd have to start over.

As I sat waiting to see where Lucrezia was headed, I kept my mental fingers crossed. We were running out of time and options.

My phone beeped once more. I studied the map for a moment. "Looks like she's heading for the airport."

Elle/Vanda pulled out and headed away at speed. We knew our tracker was working but we needed visual confirmation that the countess was still with it. She likely had the support of a security force equal to the best trained in the world. It was possible that our tracker had been discovered and we'd be sent on a wild goose chase. If the countess was going by air, we needed to confirm that she and the tracker were on the same plane.

Elle sped along an alternate route to the airport. We wanted to get there first. Traffic was light and Elle made good time. Twenty-five minutes later we passed through the gates to the private terminal and found a place to park. We were only a few minutes ahead of the tracker.

"I'll find the tracker, you find our plane." Before Elle could even respond, I was out of the car and hurrying toward the terminal. As I entered the terminal, I glanced around, looking for a model. I spotted a man in maintenance overalls, raced into a bathroom, ducked into a stall, visualized his form and clothes, and shape-shifted. Moments later I came out looking like his twin.

Back in the terminal, I walked purposefully toward the nearest Airport Employees Only door. I pretended to open the door by swiping a security card. Actually I used my telekinetic ability to close the electric circuit inside the lock mechanism. The door buzzed and popped open. I was at the top of a stairwell. I raced down and quickly wended my way through a maze of corridors. No one looked my way twice. After a few wrong turns, I found my way out among the planes. The smell of jet airplane fuel and hot machinery washed over me.

I pulled out my cell phone and checked the map. The tracker's last signal had come from just outside the terminal; the next signal was in twenty-seven seconds. I looked around while I waited.

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The planes were small and sleek. Private jets. One, bigger than the rest, and several gates down from my position, caught my attention. It was an even beige all over and had no markings—none. Unusual. I began to head that way.

Moments later, the phone beeped. The red dot was very close. I looked around casually and saw a limo and three SUVs heading toward the unmarked jet. I had to get closer to confirm the countess' presence before the entire party got on the plane and flew away.

I jumped on a baggage cart and had it moving before I even sat down. I headed for the beige plane. I had the wisp of a plan. I grabbed a headset from the dashboard—the kind used to deaden the sound of jet engines—and jammed it on. While looking in toward the terminal, I aimed the baggage cart for the plane. Anyone looking my way would think I wasn't paying attention to where I was going.

I finally looked in the direction the cart was going when I thought I was close enough to see the countess. I went through the pantomime of being surprised I was so close to the plane, jamming on the brakes, and coming to a stop. A hard-looking man with a gun aimed squarely at me moved in front of the cart. My hands went up and I looked afraid—not altogether an act; Elle would be really annoyed if I got killed at this point. I was grabbed roughly, dragged out of the cart, thrown face down to the ground, and a knee was placed painfully in the middle of my back.

Acting shocked, bewildered, and afraid, and shouting the French equivalent of “hey,” I turned my head to look around. My gamble was rewarded by a good look at the countess looking down on me with annoyance and impatience writ large on her face just before heading to the plane.

She and the tracker were still together.

I was dragged to my feet and frisked expertly. My mobile phone was thrown carelessly to the ground. My arms were held none too gently behind my back by one guard, while another held a gun on me. After everyone had boarded I was told I could go—but only after I was given a final shove and a menacing look or two from the security men. The countess was well protected. She also had an efficient flight crew. When the two guards who had given me the farewell shove got inside the plane, the stairs were pulled up and the plane began to move the moment the door closed.

I picked up my phone and was happy to find it still worked. I took a quick picture of the retreating plane, then called Xu. He answered immediately. “I've got a beige unmarked Citation X. I need a flight plan.”

“On it. Give me a minute.”

I hung up and called Elle. “The countess is on the plane with the tracker. Where are you?”

“Gate seven.”

I hung up and got back on the baggage cart I'd already commandeered. Before I reached Gate 7, Xu called back.

“No such plane filed a flight plan either into or out of Nice. In fact, no such plane exists. There should at least be a transponder signal. Nothing. The countess is beyond connected. Having no transponder is almost impossible. You either turn it on or you are shot out of the sky.”

“Okay. No real surprise. I thought we were going to have to rely on the tracker anyway.”

I was approaching Gate 7 when I rang off. I saw a smaller jet with Elle/Vanda looking out the passenger door. I headed under the terminal to find a hidden place to change back into the guise of Adriano Perone. I reappeared moments later and boarded the plane.

Elle/Vanda poked her head out of the pilot's cabin when I entered. I joined her in the cockpit and took my place as co-pilot. Our Perone cover documents included pilots' licenses indicating

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that we were qualified for small two-engine jets. In fact, Elle could pilot anything, including fighter jets or a 777. Me, I just hoped nothing went wrong that would mean I had to do the piloting.

"Where to?"

"We don't know. Xu couldn't find any flight plan, plane, or transponder code."

Elle/Vanda whistled appreciatively. "Having no transponder takes cooperation on a zillion levels."

"Xu agrees with you. We're just going to have to wait to see which way they go."

As if in answer, my phone beeped. I studied the map. "They're heading south."

I expanded the range of the map to see where they might be headed.

"Sardinia? Africa? Rome? Sicily?" Any of these could be their destination.

Elle thought for a moment. "I'll file for Palermo, Sicily. We can always change in flight if we need to." Elle/Vanda put on her headset, flipped a switch, and went into a mixture of French, English, and control-tower-ish. We were airborne a short time later.

Elle's guess proved to be right: the countess's plane was nearing Palermo two hours later. We expected that she would land at the Palermo airport. She didn't. The tracker showed her plane heading farther south. About ten minutes later we knew she had landed because the dot stayed in the same place—but our tracker map said that where she landed was no place at all—it was a large blank space. I dialed Xu to explain what happened.

I put him on speaker while we waited for him to see what he could find out. A couple of minutes later we heard his voice as if he were with us in the cockpit.

"All satellite images of the area have been removed from every mapping database I can find. There is no reference to anything being there. For all intents and purposes it doesn't exist. But one thing I *can* tell you."

"What's that?"

"It's in the middle of Mafia country. No one's going to get near the place who hasn't taken a blood oath."

Elle and I looked at each other consideringly. Xu remained silent.

Various plans surged through my mind. We'd discussed numerous ploys we might use, depending on how things unfolded. Finally I said, "I think we need to force her hand."

Elle gave me the special look she reserves for moments like this: part pleading that I'll change my mind and part resignation because she knows I won't. And also because she knew that things were about to get extremely dangerous. "You're going to get us killed again, aren't you?"

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## Chapter 20

"Countess. Anil Gupta. Ambika and I am here in Palermo and thought you might like to join us for a late breakfast."

A sharply indrawn breath told me I had scored a hit. Why else would I call from Palermo and invite her to breakfast if I didn't know where she was?

"You are playing a dangerous game." Her voice was hard.

"Please, before you have us killed, I think you would be interested in hearing a story or two. And I think it's only fair to tell you that, should we die, certain information will be circulated that you'd rather not have publically known."

If there could be such a thing as a vicious hiss, I'd just heard it.

"Countess, what have you to lose? Join me at the Mondello in, say, one hour? That should give you enough time to 'copter in. After breakfast you can hear what we have to say, and decide to kill us—or not—on a full stomach."

The countess hung up. I decided to take that as "Yes, I'd be delighted to come to breakfast."

A little more than one hour later there was knock on our door. I opened the door, wondering if it was going to be my last act until my next lifetime, and met the glare of five pairs of eyes. Two pairs belonged to hard men who shoved me roughly inside and began to frisk me. Two pairs belonged to more hard men who were subjecting Ambika to the same treatment. The last pair belonged to the countess. She was dressed as elegantly as when I'd seen her last night but the politely civilized manner she'd been wearing then was absent this morning.

The men who frisked us were similarly not politely civilized. They looked decidedly more home-grown than the team in tuxedos we'd seen last night. Dark complexions and days-old beards set off eyes that burned with anger. The countess had been tricked, their eyes said, and a price would be paid. Not just now, but soon. The manhandling completed, the men pushed both of us onto a couch. Next they pulled electronic equipment out of shoulder bags and began to sweep the room for surveillance devices. They would find nothing because there was nothing to find.

While they did their sweep, the countess drew a mangled and misshapen metal object from a pocket and wordlessly tossed it onto the low glass-topped table in front of us. It landed with a tinny sound. I recognized our tracker. I suspected it no longer worked. The now wafer-thin remains bore the marks of countless blows with a heavy hammer. The treatment went beyond disabling the device and into the realm of savagery. A message had been delivered.

I merely smiled, stood up, and gestured her toward a well set table. "I didn't know what you would like for breakfast so I ordered a little of everything."

She stood and stared at me half in rage and half in disbelief. Apparently no one had dared to tweak her tail in a very long time. But my continuing unconcern threw her. For the first time I saw a brief flash of uncertainty in her eyes. Reining in the full intensity of her feelings, she turned to her guards and told them to wait outside. She came to the table and sat with us, but declined my offer of coffee.

"You mentioned a story or two?" It was her turn to be arrogant and impatient. Her tone matched mine from last night almost perfectly.

I smiled amiably and nodded, acknowledging her touché. Time to raise the stakes. "Countess, I'm afraid we have not been entirely truthful with you. You see, Ambika and I are not as much interested in your influential friends' trillions . . . as we are in their exceptionally long lives."

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I looked at her intently as I spoke. She was shocked. I might as well have slapped her. This was far more than anything she had suspected. Taking advantage of her frozen surprise I continued to speak pleasantly, as if we were old friends. A tone guaranteed to really annoy just about anyone.

"Let me tell you a story." I gestured expansively as if I had all the time in the world. "You may want to have some coffee after all. This may take a while."

Stony silence.

"As I imagine you know, our father died recently. He was ninety-one. I am twenty-six and Ambika twenty-four. Our father had us late in life because his real passion had borne no fruit."

The countess frowned at my last comment.

"You see, he had spent all his life seeking immortality, as had his father, and his father before him."

The countess' uncertainty deepened. She was not sure this was a story she wanted to hear.

"Our family's quest for immortality goes all the way back to the Gupta kings who reigned over all of South India. The quest, and the knowledge that goes with it, has been passed down through my father's line for nearly two thousand years. Our father was obsessed. He thought he was close, that he would be the Gupta who made the final discovery, and would need no children to continue his quest for immortality. But his efforts eventually proved fruitless, and he finally accepted that he must have heirs to whom he could pass on what he knew.

"He had us both by a servant. After Ambika's birth he sent her away and raised us himself. We had few tutors or outside influences. Father had engaged hundreds of agents throughout his life to investigate anything that could possibly relate to immortality. Heedless of the cost, he spent decades gathering information to add to that already collected by his predecessors. As we grew up, he told us everything he knew, or believed he knew, about the secret of immortality, and insisted that we read for ourselves every scrap of information the family had garnered over the centuries."

The countess was motionless, focused on my every word.

Ambika weighed in, "Anil and I endured his strict training and faithfully studied all the information he had accumulated over the decades. Although our father had become discouraged and thought he had found nothing but maddeningly elusive hints, we saw something more, something concrete in the welter of otherwise inconclusive information. What we saw wasn't *how* to attain immortality; it was *who* had attained it." She looked directly into the countess' eyes. "We discovered a small group of very long-lived people."

She let her gaze linger on the countess as she spoke the last words. I could almost see shutters go up behind the countesses' eyes who stiffened, her breath held.

After a moment she spoke with anger born not of outrage but of fear. "And what has all this to do with me?"

Ambika continued smoothly, "Perhaps one day you will choose to tell us. But first allow me to share a sample of the kind of information we have."

Still very much off balance, the countess agreed with ill-grace. "Very well."

Ambika picked up her iPhone. While her fingers played on the screen she began to explain. Many years ago, our fathers' agents had a very interesting conversation with a very old man in Essen named Fraunhofer. Herr Fraunhofer has died long since but we have a recording of the conversation.

Ambika made a final press on her phone screen and the recording began:

"Herr Fraunhofer, please tell us how old you are."

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"I am one hundred and three years old." He spoke in clear but heavily accented English with a voice peculiarly strong for such an old man.

"What did you do during your life?"

"I was a servant in fine houses from the age of six to ninety-five—eighty-nine years. I've met no one who has served longer!" He spoke with obvious pride.

"Where did you begin your service?"

"My mother was French but married my German father. We lived in Essen. Father died in the Great War. After he died we moved to the south of France to live with my grandmother. Eventually my mother took a cook's position in Monte Carlo, and at the age of six I became a kitchen boy. It was on the estate of Basil Zaharoff."

As Fraunhofer's words registered with the countess—Basil Zaharoff was an identity of Rockshaw's and we suspected that Rockshaw was one of her group—her eyes widened and she jerked back involuntarily. This was getting too close to home.

The recording continued, "Basil Zaharoff had grown rich selling machine guns to all sides during the Great War. He thought himself a nobleman, but he was nothing but a merchant." Herr Fraunhofer spoke this last with the particular scorn servants have for those in the privileged classes who do not measure up.

"Tell me how Zaharoff died."

"He lived to be eighty-seven, or so we were told, but he never looked or acted like he was eighty-seven. He was an active man and had a succession of mistresses. One day we were told he had died in his sleep and we were all let go. There was no funeral. We were told the body had been cremated."

I glanced quickly at the countess and saw that Herr Fraunhofer's words now had her complete attention.

"Now tell me about your most recent position."

"In two thousand one, I returned to Germany to live near my father's relatives in Essen. I had thought to retire but I soon discovered that my savings would not be sufficient, so I looked for a position in Essen. I was referred by friends to a large estate and was eventually engaged as a sous chef."

There was a long pause then Fraunhofer spoke stiffly as if he would not be believed, "The owner of the estate was Basil Zaharoff."

There was only a grim silence coming from the countess, who now knew where the story was headed.

"He calls himself Rockshaw now, but he's still an arms dealer—and still no gentleman. He looked the same in Essen as he did the day before he 'died' in Monte Carlo. I didn't say anything—I could barely believe it myself. But I was a sous chef there for three years and I am certain he is the same man. He had not improved his character." This last was said with a sniff. "He never recognized me. I would not have expected him to remember a mere kitchen boy. But I knew *him*. If Zaharoff was eighty-seven when we were told he had died in nineteen forty-three, then he is over a hundred-sixty years old today—yet he looks the same as when I first saw him."

Ambika ended the recording. I let the silence lengthen a moment before speaking. The countess knew well who Rockshaw was: Another person, like herself, who had lived beyond his years.

I caught the eye of the countess, "Interesting, isn't it? Herr Fraunhofer's story would be a curiosity if it weren't for the fact that our father's agents had discovered a *number* of people with similar stories. Ambika and I have investigated them all. We have video recordings, transcriptions,

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and sworn statements from people like Herr Fraunhofer who have firsthand knowledge of, shall we say, exceptionally well-preserved individuals—people who should have been dead long ago.

"Our evidence is very convincing, well-documented, and safely hidden away. Should either of us die, the information will be sent to the usual media outlets—the New York Times, CNN, bloggers' sites, the works. The information may not destroy you all, but it certainly will make it impossible for you to continue to live in secret."

The countess' eyes and nose flared in anger at the threat.

Now to drive home the final point. "So, what do you think, countess?" I paused just a beat before continuing. "Or should I say, *Lucrezia*?"

A long silence followed.

Her beautiful face gradually became rigid. Finally, she spoke, slowly and distinctly, biting off each word. "What do you want?"

"It's simple. My sister and I want what you have: Immortality. We are no threat to you or to the others—unless you make us one. But we will not be put off. You have twenty-four hours, no more, to introduce us to your influential and long-lived friends or we start releasing the information we have to the press."

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## Chapter 21

The countess gave plausibility to the old saying, “if looks could kill.” Her face was a mask of fury. Something old and feral stared out of her eyes. Sensing that she might call in her guards, Ambika waggled her phone at her to remind her that our threat to expose her was real. Shaking with anger she stalked out of the room and slammed the door behind her.

It made me wish we really did have a trove of evidence safely hidden away. Right now it was nothing but a bluff. If they checked, they would find that there was a real Herr Fraunhofer who had been a sous chef at Rockshaw’s estate and he did die when we said, but we’d come up with our story and made the Fraunhofer recording last night. The voices on the recording were decidedly different than our own because we had transformed into different bodies to record them.

“Do you think Fraunhofer’s sniffing disdain for Rockshaw might have been a bit over the top?” I said as if asking a fellow actor to critique a performance.

Elle/Ambika laughed but then sobered. “No, it was perfect. Effective, too. Let’s just say it’s a good thing neither of us needs to sleep. We are going to have to always be on our guard from now on.”

We flew back to Nice without incident, got in the Mercedes we’d driven to the airport last night, and made our way to the highway. Now that we’d poked a stick into Lucrezia’s anthill, we had to assume that she, and anyone else she had alerted, would have a zillion worker-ant spies crawling all over the place. It wouldn’t surprise me to learn that the occupants of half the cars keeping pace with us were keeping covert watch on us.

We wended our way up the mountain flank overlooking Monte Carlo. Switchback after switchback took us higher and higher, the view growing more magnificent with each turn, until we arrived at our newly purchased castle estate. Wrought-iron gates flanked by ancient stone walls opened as we approached. Guards waved us in. Two more switchbacks would get us to the castle; to our right were the converted stables that now stabled million-dollar cars, and next to the stables, the converted castle garrison’s quarters that now housed the modern garrison of security guards and scores of servants that the traveling Gupta circus required.

As we made our way slowly up the final switchbacks, cutting through several narrow terraces supporting gnarled olive trees and scrubby oaks, the crenellated walls of our ancient castle came into view. It had been refurbished many times over the centuries, and now had every luxury, giving it the aged, genteel elegance often desired by the ultra-rich. It looked south, offering a spectacular view of the Mediterranean, and now, in the deep twilight, the diamond-scintillation of the lights of Monte Carlo.

We drove into a high-walled courtyard and up to a covered entrance. A servant opened the car doors for us and bowed us through the entrance. We both headed to our separate quarters after telling our butler that we needed nothing and wanted to be left undisturbed. Not long afterward Elle came in looking as she had on our last mission: slim and athletic frame, running shoes, jeans, tank top, and jean jacket. Her familiar gray-blue eyes, set off by pale skin and short dark hair, sparkled with interest. I decided to follow her example and shifted back to looking like Michael Dinsmore—not Michael Dyson, for those of you keeping track—short brown hair, blue eyes, six feet tall, chinos, running shoes, polo-shirt, my standard garb while I had been professor of physics at Berkeley.

My quarters, previously for the lord of the castle, abutted the rear wall of the keep. This section of the castle had been designed to be defended by a mere handful of men. Should the castle ever

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have been overrun, a few loyal guards could have given their lord the time he needed to make a secret escape.

A very secret escape.

Over the centuries, the Protectors have acquired many properties around the world. Although Anil and Ambika Gupta appear to have bought this castle recently, in reality, the Protectors have owned it for a very long time. One thing all Protector havens have in common is secret exits and entrances.

We don't go in for secret panels with hidden switches, or bookcases that swing open if you pull out the right book. Those can be discovered by diligent search or by accident. Protectors prefer secret doors that only Protectors can open. This usually requires moving something extremely heavy because our telekinetic abilities allow us to move objects that no one else can. It's a simple but effective way of keeping our secrets secret.

There had once been a heavy wooden trap door in the floor of my bedroom. When the Protectors acquired the castle many centuries ago, the trap door was replaced with a massive stone block that looks like every other stone block in the floor. Elle concentrated and the block rose from the floor and, barely grating against the sides of its enclosure, it cleared the space it had rested in, then glided to the side and settled without a sound. Elle's telekinetic skill never ceased to amaze me.

Elle's magic revealed a steep stone staircase barely lit by the light in my quarters. We descended into increasing darkness until Elle plucked a flashlight from a deep niche that still holds candles and lanterns from who knows how long ago, and turned it on. Now below floor level, she repeated the process of moving the stone block—only in reverse. The stone block settled silently back into place.

It was time to go check in with Xu. We hadn't called him from the plane. As soon as Lucrezia had left us, we had to assume that all ordinary communication would be intercepted.

Elle led the way down a long flight of stairs; a musty smell wrinkled my nose. At the bottom, we entered a tunnel, damp and cool, its walls roughly hewn long ago. The tunnel sloped gently downward. We passed several side tunnels that earlier exploration had shown to be long-since blocked up. Occasionally, we passed rusted iron torch-brackets still affixed to the tunnel walls. We walked until we reached a dead end. Wordlessly, we placed our hands on the end wall and it began to move as if pushed toward us from the other side. Light gradually framed the uneven stone slab we were drawing backward. We blinked as our eyes adjusted.

We squeezed around the slab on either side and entered another world. We'd gone from medieval to modern. The space we entered was full of the hum and whirl of computers. It was a makeshift command center. Two long rows of folding tables were littered with computer equipment. One corner of the room held a tall rack of servers, multi-colored cables spilling out and flowing across the floor. A dozen large monitors displayed everything from security camera feeds to CNN.

Xu's home away from his Dyson Center home.

A wooden staircase ascended to a door to a modest house located on the less posh side of the peak on which our castle was perched. Xu stayed here pretending to be a tourist. The neighbors had long ago grown accustomed to the absentee landlord, part of the Protectors' network, letting the house to a succession of artists and holiday-makers.

Xu, his T-shirt now featuring Marilyn Monroe wearing the same business suit that Darth Vader had been so recently wearing, greeted us with obvious relief. "Glad to see you got away. You were wise not to call me. I discovered that all your phones in the castle are compromised and your

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mobile phones might as well be open radios. Someone has also started using laser audio surveillance on the castle. Laser beams are being bounced off the castle's windows in order to pick up any vibrations in the windows caused by sounds made inside the rooms. It's state-of-the-art stuff, too, CIA-grade. The people doing this can get any equipment they want; the usual rules don't apply. They could have heard anything above a whisper anywhere you have windows. Whoever came after you is not on a budget and is wired in with the right people at the highest levels."

Xu had tapped his command center into the Gupta's security team's computers and surveillance systems for the castle. One night while we were away from the castle and most of our security team had been protecting us, Xu had used the passwords I'd given him and sneaked into the castle's main control system, and programmed back doors into all their computers and security programs. Now Xu knew whatever our security team knew, but they had no clue they'd been hacked.

Xu sat in front of a semi-circle of three outsized monitors and took stock. "I saw that your regular security team tumbled to the laser surveillance almost immediately. They obviously went after anyone nearby. Looks like they were successful. I don't know exactly what they did, probably chased them away, but all the laser surveillance appears to have stopped." He pointed to a graph on one of the three monitors. "Your phones in the castle are okay at the moment, too, but with the kind of connections these people have they could tap your phones again anytime they want, and while the laser surveillance appears to have stopped for now, these people could move to new positions and start up again anytime. Best to consider yourselves still totally compromised."

"We're still secure here?"

Xu's fingers were a blur over his keyboard. A series of graphs and images rapidly appeared and disappeared on his monitors. He nodded after a couple of minutes. "Still secure here. But hackers are going after Anil and Ambika's personal data big time. They're pretty good, too. But so far they are only seeing what we want them to see. They've confirmed that you've got money by the sackful, and they seem to be digging around at random for something. I'm not sure what."

We told Xu about our bluff: Our threat to expose Lucrezia and her circle with our non-existent collection of evidence.

"That explains what I'm seeing. They aren't interested in the data they're finding. They're looking for hidden servers, information about safe deposit boxes, properties you own, that kind of thing." Xu grinned. "They will have a tough time finding something that doesn't exist."

I hoped their search would keep them running in circles for a while. "Okay. Let's check in with Jonathon."

After a few minutes of setup, and using the encryption that Xu likes to call his special sauce, the three of us were seated in front of a large monitor looking at Jonathon Devas' smiling face as he sat comfortably in his office in Aspen, Colorado. As always, his tranquil brown eyes, set amid his serene features, seemed almost liquid. Behind him we could see one of his many beloved floral paintings; this one depicted an endless meadow brimming with vivid blue lupine and orange poppies.

"We got a bite," I announced without preamble.

At my words, Jonathon smiled with relief. A lot of time and effort had gone into this gambit. A substantial part of the Protectors' assets had been hazarded on making us the richest people in the world. Now, finally, we had a result.

Elle dove in before I had a chance to say anything further. "It's my old friend, Lucrezia. Lucrezia Borgia."

That got Jonathon's attention. "This is excellent news."

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We filled Jonathon in on our contact with Lucrezia, the Fraunhofer recording, and our ultimatum that the rest of her circle meet with us or we expose them.

"We've definitely gotten their attention. Things are already hot and going to get hotter. Xu says that Anil and Ambika's communications are totally compromised and that hackers are trying to get in anywhere they can—personal history, banks, businesses—looking for our supposed trove of information. Lucky for us, they can't find what doesn't exist. We're gambling that if they can't find anything they'll decide to meet with us rather than simply take the threat we pose off the board, consequences be damned."

Elle spoke. "I don't think they will risk trying to kill us just yet. They'll want to find out just how much we know first."

There was an uneasy silence on both sides of the screen.

Jonathon was the first to break it. "What next, then?"

"If we are going to play out the hand we just dealt the countess, we need to establish that we can play in the big leagues. For a start, we need to show them there's a price for snooping."

Xu smiled like a child given a new toy.

"Don't show them your best stuff, but make them respect us."

"I'll get right on it. One of these guys is already annoying me."

I looked at Jonathan. "And now that I've told Lucrezia we have a secret trove of information, I think we should begin to create one just in case we need it. Can you get Andrew going on that?" Andrew, in addition to designing gorgeous suites, is the Protector's master forger and has a hidden workshop deep under Milliefiore.

"I'll get Andrew on it. Anything else?" Jonathon asked.

"We're going to need reinforcements and some specialized help." I told him what I had in mind.

"I'll take care of it. And I think I know *just* the right person to give you the specialized help you need." When he finished speaking, his eyes were laughing.

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## Chapter 22

Elle had been right. There'd been no late-night assault, no cruise missile sent accidentally off course. We were still alive. We emerged from an uneventful night to have a quiet breakfast served on our patio overlooking Monte Carlo and a sparkling swath of the Mediterranean.

The patio was enclosed by glass; we were comfortably warm in the clear winter morning sunshine. Our servants attended us with slightly nervous devotion. They knew from experience that tiny slips could trigger a petulant tirade. Elle and I took turns being the most difficult. It was my turn. I snapped at a server when a single drop of coffee spilled into my saucer. She looked terrified. I'd sacked someone last week for less.

The only thing that made continuing this hateful charade bearable was knowing that the bait had been taken and our fish had been hooked. I reminded myself why we were doing this. Millions, even billions of people have suffered foreclosures, bankruptcy, and loss—worse yet, the impoverished nations of the world remain locked in grinding, fatal poverty—because of the cold-hearted manipulation of trillions of dollars by people who cared nothing for others, who looted the world's wealth and potential, and gave nothing in return.

I took a deep breath to steady my resolve. With breakfast nearly over, our servers had left us alone. Taking a final sip of coffee, I sent Elle a mental image of curtains going up on stage—it was show time. Time for the play within the play.

Earlier we'd sketched out what we wanted to say and the tone we wanted to convey. We wanted our adversaries to think we admired them and believed we belonged in their club; that we desperately, passionately sought immortality, but at the same time, we weren't fools. A fine line that: Acting like a fool without being taken for one. Assuming that every word we spoke would be faithfully captured by spies using one surveillance device or another, I started our performance.

"What did you think of the countess?"

Elle/Ambika's answer—probably not faked—was, "She makes my skin crawl."

"Why is that?"

"I don't know. The way she looked at you at the casino, I guess. It was as if she were sizing up a meal."

I laughed. "She *is* beautiful."

Elle/Ambika rolled her eyes, conveying, "Men," "Fool," and, "If she touches you I will personally punch her lights out," all in one economical expression. I wasn't sure that some of Elle's real feelings hadn't leaked through, but all Ambika actually said was, "Idiot."

I chuckled but became more serious. "Don't be so quick to judge. We could be working with these people soon. And remember, you're as beautiful as the countess, Bika, and you could stay beautiful forever."

"Do you really think they will meet with us? I can't bear the thought that they won't. We are so *close* . . . ." Her voice caught in her throat.

Trying to sound reassuring, I said, "Bika, they'd be fools not to, and I don't think they can possibly be fools. To have lived so long and gained so much power. . . . No, they have everything to gain by meeting with us and a lot to lose if we release our evidence. Besides we're perfect for them. With our wealth and influence added to theirs, we'd be an unbeatable force. I'm sure we can convince them if we just get a chance."

"I hope you're right. I don't know what I'll do if this doesn't work."

I nodded and we lapsed into silence. I read the paper while Elle/Ambika surfed on her iPad.

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Maybe it was our performance, or maybe the wheels had already been turning, but before we left the table we got a call from the countess. I put it on speaker phone.

"Mr. Gupta?"

"Countess. How lovely to hear from you. I hope you have good news for us. Twenty-four hours is up quite soon. We'd hate to end a beautiful friendship before it really got started."

"You will be picked up by helicopter at the Nice heliport in one hour." Her voice was flat but I felt her barely concealed fury.

"And where will this helicopter be taking us?"

"You'll know when you get there. Do not wear anything with metal in it. You will be wanded before you get on the 'copter and you will not be allowed to bring anything with you."

"This is a bit extreme."

"Take it or leave it." Her harsh tone implied more: Take it or die. The countess's voice was filled with satisfied malice now that we were on the receiving end of the same kind of high-handed treatment I'd given her.

Since the countess could be watching us on a monitor right now from anywhere in the world, we played our parts faithfully: I looked at Elle/Ambika and got a nod. "We'll be there."

The helicopter headed directly out to sea. The thin, early morning sunlight that had warmed us at breakfast had been eclipsed by dark-gray clouds. The sea was leaden except where the wind tore the crests of the waves into white spume. Few boats were out. The weather was raw and cold—not a promising day to be out on the water.

Elle/Ambika and I sat in the back. We'd opted for casual clothes: jeans, T-shirts, running shoes, and windbreakers. But Elle/Ambika looked as stunning as ever. It would take more than casual clothes to diminish her beauty. A glass and metal grill separated us from the pilots. We'd been given noise-deadening headphones to wear. There was no way to communicate with the pilots or anyone else. Knowing our adversaries would be highly suspicious after we'd put our bug in Lucrezia's purse, we'd decided it wasn't worth trying to bring anything with us that would allow us to communicate covertly with our team or track our journey—no phones or hidden gear. We were completely on our own.

Not for the first time, nor probably the last. But we were unafraid; we'd long ago lost any fear of death. Once you've been Awakened you never fear death again. Elle and I knew with elemental certainty that we were putting only our bodies at risk, not our lives. If we were killed, our only regret would be that we had failed in our mission; if we failed now, the course of world affairs could get much darker.

I glanced at Elle and noticed that her eyes were closed and her body relaxed. I decided to do the same. I risked the barest of telepathic brushes into the minds of the pilot and co-pilot. I sensed nothing immediately threatening. No images of us being shot or our bodies being dropped in the sea. We were safe for now.

Satisfied, I closed my eyes, breathed deeply, consciously relaxing each part of my body. Quite soon, for this was a familiar practice, I lost the sense of where my body began and ended. My physical senses became indistinct; my breath ceased of its own accord. After a minute or two I was aware only of the deep, pulsing vibration of the helicopter. I allowed myself to melt into it, to flow with the sound as if riding expanding ripples on a pond. Soon I began to experience a vibration deeper yet, a soundless roar far more powerful than the throb of the helicopter. All awareness of

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my body was gone. I became an ever-expanding ocean of Sound. The experience was indescribably blissful.

Everyone's true nature is far greater than the senses alone can reveal. Yet Protectors forgo the unbroken experience of this exalted awareness in order to serve, because in service we learn, grow, and finally achieve the ultimate liberation that Atri and Atria enjoy. But whenever possible, we dive deep, drinking thirstily from the all-refreshing Fountain.

At some point I sensed Elle with me, immersed in blissful awareness. We have a connection that defies simple definition. We are unlike in many ways. During our missions, we often disagree on tactics. Yet, even if we were more unlike, we would remain always connected at our core. Perhaps we are soul mates, two halves of the same whole. All I really know for sure is that, beyond the eternal Presence, there is nothing more certain for me than Elle.

My awareness shifted back to my body when the pilot banked and veered in a new direction. Elle and I opened our eyes at the same moment. We could see a yacht and we were heading directly for it. Elle and I exchanged a glance which conveyed nothing in particular and everything that mattered. If death awaited us below, we were ready for it.

As we got closer, we could see that the yacht was mid-size and gleaming-white. There was a fancy flying bridge and other touches common to expensive pleasure. No one seemed to be taking any expensive pleasures, however. Its spacious decks were deserted, a hot tub at the bow was covered, and the cushions for the surrounding benches were lashed down tight against the raw wind. It also looked somehow generic. I suspected that it was a high-end yacht for hire and that the reason it had been hired was for anonymity, not for pleasure—and for the helipad near the stern.

We noted the name, *The Lazy Day*, but I had little expectation that we would learn anything about our adversaries if we tried to track down who had chartered it. It was probably chartered by a company, which in turn was owned by another company, which was owned by yet another company, and so on. Every clue would lead to five more and eventually there would simply be too many clues to follow.

Expertly fighting the wind, our pilot brought us down on the ship's helipad. Two Chinese men crouched and ran over to open the door. They beckoned peremptorily for us to get out. Stepping out, we were buffeted by the cold wind, the smell of the sea quite strong. Our windbreakers flapped and snapped in the breeze. If Elle/Ambika's hair had not been tightly bound, the wind would have blown it into a whipping tail.

The two men wore black coveralls and carried guns in hip holsters. They wore identical tattoos on their necks, indicating they were members of the Hip Sing tong. The Hip Sing tong was notorious for gang wars in Chinatowns around the world. These guys were international muscle-for-hire. We were led toward the main cabin but before we got there we were stopped and once again searched. Any semblance of the civilized search with a metal detecting wand we had undergone before boarding the helicopter in Nice was gone. This search was physical, rough, and thorough.

Elle and I had discussed our options on the way to the heliport. Experience has taught us that planning too carefully doesn't work. Situations are fluid; our expectations might be wrong and what we planned might not work. We decided that our best option today would be to simply stay in keeping with our cover. In this case, our cover was that we were arrogant, self-confident, and not accustomed to this kind of abuse.

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The first guard never saw it coming. Elle/Ambika's elbow strike to the temple knocked him unconscious. The second guard's eyes were just starting to widen when a running shoe encasing Elle/Ambika's foot crashed into the side of his face and, he too, went out like a light. As always, Elle likes to check on her handiwork. She bent down and felt their pulses. She nodded, satisfied that she'd not hit them too hard and they were still alive. We took their weapons and threw them overboard.

We walked confidently toward the doors to the main cabin and let ourselves in. It was, as expected, a roomy cabin, well-appointed with dark-green couches on gray carpet. Brass lamps in wall sconces were lit to fight against the gray gloom. All the tables had brass rails to keep objects from sliding off in the swells. All in all, comfortable but impersonal. It confirmed my suspicion that this was a charter and had no connection to our quarry.

Heads turned our way, their faces registering expressions of surprise and shock. Guns were drawn and pointed at us with lightning speed. The surprise would have been comical if it hadn't been potentially fatal. Knowing that their fellow guards should be right behind us, they looked around wildly, expecting to find a threat—hard men with guns of their own—not just two ordinary people standing calmly in jeans and windbreakers.

A large and imposing Chinese man was seated in a comfortable chair near the center of the cabin. He showed no surprise at all. In fact, he showed no reaction whatsoever. He sat without moving. He merely looked at us. His hands, gently resting on the arms of his chair, did not move a millimeter. He exuded a powerful, motionless control.

Looking at him I gestured at the guards. "Is all this *really* necessary?"

My relaxed and sarcastic delivery startled all of them except the seated man. He continued to watch us with detached interest.

"And where are the others? I told the countess I wanted to meet all her influential friends. You're it?"

My feigned irritation finally provoked a reaction from the seated man; his eyes widened slightly. His meeting was not going as he had planned. I suspect he had intended to intimidate us. Instead, the tables had been turned. Making a decision, he raised one hand and gestured for his men to put away their guns. One went outside to see what had happened to the other guards.

He finally spoke. His English was clear and precise but tinged with formality. Though obviously Chinese, his accent was placeless. "As you say, there are no others here. Nor will you ever get to meet them. Although I give you credit for getting this far, you are out of your league. You have no idea whom you are dealing with. You think your wealth means something to us. It is nothing. You think your threat of exposure means something to us. It is nothing." He paused to let that sink in. "If you surrender your information now, we will let you live."

He delivered all his sentences as if he were making a series of pronouncements—pronouncements made from the highest level; pronouncements from which there was no appeal. This was a man used to wielding unquestioned authority.

After a pause, I spoke as if musing on a mystery. "And yet, here we are, when we could *so* easily have been shot and dumped in the sea. Ah," I continued, mock-pretending I had just realized the reason why, "I wonder if the threat of exposure might mean something to you after all? You want to know what we know, don't you? Protecting your lives in the shadows does mean something to you, doesn't it? Well, let me give you a free sample." I paused as if considering. "Perhaps you'd prefer if your men waited outside . . .?"

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Once again, there was the slight widening of his eyes in surprise. I would imagine people on the receiving end of his pronouncements usually cave in abjectly. Cocky, self-assured comebacks would *not* be the norm.

He knew, and I knew, that even if we did have reams of information, even if the world press did have a field day with it all, nearly everyone would simply not believe that anyone could be immortal, let alone wield such surpassing influence over the affairs of the world—the furor would eventually die down. But even so, before deciding to have us killed, he'd like to find out just how detailed our information was, in order to gauge just how much trouble its release would cause them.

If we knew enough, their faces might be recognized everywhere in the world. Paparazzi would vie to photograph them whenever they traveled; the locations of their well-protected estates would be revealed, they'd be constantly spied on; they'd be tabloid fodder, the subjects of countless conspiracy theories—some of them even true.

As we'd learned, notoriety plays no part in their plans. It is essential to their success that they remain far in the background. Their anonymity also protects the people over whom they hold sway. Should they be exposed, the people they control would have no choice but to distance themselves from them—if for no other reason than to disprove the allegations. Most significantly, the people they control would no longer trust that their actions would remain hidden; they would no longer feel safe dancing to their tune.

No, despite what he had said, exposure is a potent threat, one they would want to head off if at all possible.

In fact, our original Plan A was just that: Learn everything we could and expose them. Exposure *is* a potent weapon, and it would certainly disrupt their current plans, but we soon realized it would only do so temporarily. It would only slow them down. They would find ways to disappear and regroup. They play the longest game of all. Their plans span centuries. One decade, even two decades of disruption to their plans would alter very little in the end.

So we'd scrapped our original Plan A and adopted, ahem, a new Plan A. We decided we needed to do something more lasting, something from which this shadowy group would never recover. If only we knew what that was. . . .

"If your men leave, I'll guarantee your safety."

This was pure showmanship. Elle and I could take out all these men with ease but not without revealing abilities that must stay hidden if we were to complete this mission. What I really wanted to do was rattle him—and I succeeded. A spasm of anger, quickly quelled, passed over his features. I think he may have moved the tiniest bit as well. Hard to say. I had turned the tables once again. I, not he, was dictating events.

After a prolonged pause, he once again raised a hand and gestured at his men, this time telling them to leave. As they filed out, one of them, another tong tattoo visible on the side of his neck, gave me a murderous glare. We were definitely not making friends here.

Once the men had left, I casually wandered over to a bar on one side of the cabin. I found a mineral water in a small refrigerator. I raised it in the usual gesture of offering a friend the same. He said nothing, but his expression was glacial.

I made my way back to a divan across from him. Elle/Ambika joined me and I made an elaborate show of opening the mineral water and taking a drink. Smiling, I began. "Where to start? So much to tell you. The Guptas have been gathering this information for almost two thousand years. A lot has piled up, I can tell you. Ambika and I learned pretty much all of world history by reading it—

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that is to say, world history as it *actually* happened with the, shall we say, guidance from you and your buddies." I paused as if sorting through possibilities in my mind. Nodding, I looked directly at him. "I imagine what you want most to know is what we know about you—*Shi Huang*."

He definitely moved this time. He started to rise, caught himself, and slowly sank back down.

"Or would you prefer I use your full name and title? *Chin Shi Huang, First Emperor of China*."

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## Chapter 23

This was no wild guess on my part. Xu had suspected that we'd find Chin among Asher's inner circle and had described him to us in great detail. Xu knew Chin well. Millennia ago, Xu had been given the mission, along with many other Protectors, to save as much ancient wisdom as possible from Chin's wanton destruction. Newly established on the throne, Chin set about burning all the scrolls and manuscripts in China—and often the scholars who wrote them along with the scrolls—for Chin could brook no knowledge, or no person, wiser than himself. Xu and his fellow Protectors managed to smuggle some of China's sacred scrolls into Tibet where many remain hidden today. But this rescue was small consolation; Chin succeeded in destroying an irreplaceable treasury of ancient knowledge.

In the third century BC, through ruthless conquest and slaughter, Chin, still a young man, had united five warring provinces under his banner. He consolidated his power and then thirsted for more. He became obsessed with attaining physical immortality. He sent men and ships to the far reaches of the earth in search of magical elixirs or wise sages who possessed the secret of eternal life.

He searched long and hard for Anqui Sheng in particular, a magician believed to have already lived for thousands of years before Chin was born. History records that Chin failed in his quest and died. The Protectors believe he succeeded; Jonathon thinks that Anqui Sheng is none other than Asher.

Hearing me say his full name and title rendered him mute, an expression of shock frozen on his face. Time for more.

"And you didn't just rest on your laurels. We kind of lost track of all the famous generals you became. Hong-wu, the first Ming emperor, was impressive, and Emperor Wu of Wei was a good gig, but, hands down, we were most impressed by your stint as Kublai Khan."

For the first time a wisp of concern crossed Chin's features. His knuckles showed white as he gripped the arms of his chair.

"It all had to be a little disappointing, though. How many times do you have to unite or reunite China before it's going to stay done? You were definitely on track again recently and, wham, along came Chairman Mao. But I've got to hand it to you: You stay patient. The Chinese invented the long view. You got Deng in there in the 'eighties and now China is an economic power again. If only people could know how much you've done for them."

Elle/Ambika leaned forward and gestured at him. "And I must say we are very pleased to see how well you look for a man almost two thousand years old."

We got back alive. What we'd told him was alarming enough for Chin to let us go. I could tell rage had warred with caution and caution had won—but just barely.

My parting words had probably not helped. "You have twenty-four more hours. This time we meet everyone or the information we have goes out. You might be able to use your connections to keep it from reaching *some* news outlets, but you'll never keep it from getting out altogether. Just think 'Wiki leaks.'"

It was noon when we returned to the heliport. At our castle we had a meal for appearance's sake and then retired to our quarters. We told the staff we were not to be disturbed.

Elle again joined me in my quarters where I once gain looked like Michael. Then we went to see Xu. When we came out of the tunnel, blinking in the bright light of the computer room, we

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saw three things at once: Xu wearing an enormous grin, a young woman with a blaze of bright red hair on one side of her head set off by her jet black hair, and our faces displayed on a bank of computer monitors.

I looked around and finally found the camera. Even knowing roughly where to look by the position of our faces on the monitors, the camera was still hard to find. It was hovering at head height about four feet in front of me—but it was only the size of a small fly. It nearly was a fly: I could just make out a small blur of wings and a tiny lens.

The young woman with the arresting hair sang out in a clear English accent, "I love this thing!" Before we could say anything, the still-grinning Xu spoke up. "Meet Fiona."

His eyes danced with the same amusement I'd last seen in Jonathon's eyes when he told us he knew just the right person to give us the specialized help we needed. The young woman, Fiona, was holding a device you see people use to control model cars and planes—long antenna, two joy sticks, and lots of buttons—and wore a look of intense concentration.

She remembered herself and came over to us. As she did, she moved the joysticks with her thumbs and deftly landed the little flying camera on a table. She removed one hand from the controller and extended it to shake ours. "I'm Fiona, but my friend's call me Fi." Xu must have been brought her up to speed a bit because she said, "You must be Michael and Elle."

Fiona was tiny. Five feet nothing and thin as a rail. She seemed bigger, though. She had presence. In addition to her neon-red patch of hair, she had a dozen rings in one ear, one in her nose, and a floral tattoo that started on her forearm, disappeared under her black t-shirt, and reappeared on one side of her neck. All her clothes were black: t-shirt, jeans, and high-top tennis shoes.

But what stood out the most were her eyes; big, dark-blue, and sparkling. The rest of her seemed drab by comparison—and that was saying something. She radiated energy, goodwill, and enthusiasm in equal measure. She looked about sixteen but at the same time she seemed ageless—the agelessness Protectors all share. There was no doubt she was Awakened.

She stood grinning at us. She pointed to the section of wall Elle and I had moved to enter the room and then spoke over her shoulder to Xu. "And you say one day I'll be doing that, too? If my Dad could only see me moving a daft big wall like that. . . ."

Xu, this time wearing a T-shirt with an orangutan wearing a suit, explained. "Fi became a Protector only a few weeks ago. She had been doing time when Atria appeared to her in her cell and Awakened her."

Fiona jumped in with enthusiasm. "I'm telling you, you could have knocked me down with a feather! One moment she wasn't there; the next moment she was. She reached out and touched me right between the eyes before I could even think. I started seeing an amazing light and all sorts of things from my past—or pasts, I guess I should say. When I came back to normal awareness, she was still sitting there. She told me going to the nick for my family was the last thing I needed to do to work out my karma."

Seeing the perplexity on our faces, Xu filled in, "Fiona's family robs banks."

"I was raised by the best in the business. My Dad and my Uncle Zeb had never been caught. I went in the nick for them, if you know what I mean. I didn't want them to get caught and ruin a perfect record."

She continued to talk in a kind of breathless rush. We learned that after Atria had Awakened Fiona in her cell, all charges had been mysteriously dropped and she had been released. After Fiona was out, Atria had visited her again and asked if she would like to serve as a Protector.

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"I asked her what kind of service she had in mind. She said, 'Robbing banks.' It was all I could do to stop laughing."

We learned more. Fiona was far more than a petty crook. She was nothing short of a genius with high-security electronics. The failed "bank job" had been an attempt on the main depository of the Bank of England. What they'd been after was rhodium, a rare type of platinum, worth by the gram what gold is by the kilogram, untraceable and easily sold on the black market.

Fiona had gotten her father and uncle through all the layers of the most sophisticated security in the world. They would never have been caught if they hadn't been betrayed. Fiona suspects a rival family. Once Fiona knew the police were on their way, she actually went *into* the bank to get her father and uncle out before they were caught—but not in time to avoid being caught herself.

Fiona had been fiercely loyal to her family. She had happily used her brilliance for them. But when she Awakened, she saw, like all who Awaken, that her experiences in this life were the last links in a long chain. A long chain of learning and growing. A chain that finally breaks. Now she was free, no longer bound by her past. Such is everyone's destiny.

Fiona changed gears and exclaimed, "And I brought toys from Jonathon! I would have given *anything* for these back when." She picked up the little flying bug and then pointed to a table littered with backpacks out of which equipment was spilling. "Some of this stuff is straight from DARPA. No one else's got it, not even the alphabet folks."

"You know—MI5, CIA, FBI, NSA—those boys. Jonathon said these goodies were exclusive. We've got beyond state-of-the-art stuff here. This fly-sized camera uses an x-ray frequency which means it can send and receive for miles—even through solid rock and metal. It also can recharge its tiny little battery just by being near electrical sources. We also got next-gen night-vision goggles, infrared heat detectors, and all manner of bugs. . . . Xu and I were just getting acquainted with it all when you came through the wall."

Xu pulled a vibrating cell phone out of his pocket and put it to his ear. "Great. I'll be right up." He headed for the stairs and then spoke over his shoulder to us. "The rest of the reinforcements have arrived."

Less than a minute later, Xu came back down the stairs preceded by an elderly couple.

"Ambika, Anil. Wonderful to see you again."

Moments later, I watched with delight as an expression of utter astonishment passed over Fiona's features; the newcomers shape-shifted into Ambika and Anil. Her eyes were open so wide that the rest of us couldn't help laughing.

"I'll be gobsmacked and served for dinner. I have *got* to learn how to do *that*!"

Elle laughed happily at Fiona's enthusiasm. "All in good time. Right now we need you to do what you *already* know how to do."

Fiona looked mystified but pleased.

Elle walked over and hugged the real Anil and Ambika. "Sorry we can't visit. We have to race. Xu can fill you in, but basically we need you to stand in for us. We need more freedom of movement than Anil and Ambika have right now. Oh, and I'm so sorry for the mess we've made of your reputations. . . ." Turning to Fiona, Elle concluded, "Come on, Fi. Pack up your toys. We've got a date with a saint—and a very dear friend."

We walked along a narrow track high in the hills outside Palermo, about fifty kilometers from Lucrezia's compound. We were a long way from the nearest village, even farther from the small

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hotel where we'd stashed our gear. We'd driven as close as we could to our destination. We were now on foot wending our way toward a hilltop about a quarter kilometer away.

It was icy cold. A steady wind made it feel even colder. We wore puffy parkas and wooly caps. The land around us was arid and rocky. You could hear the wind whistling faintly through the winter-dry and naked branches of scrubby plants and bushes that seemed barely alive. This part of Sicily was sparsely populated. Farms and vineyards were few and far between. The barren land produced little bounty.

As we made steady progress, our hilltop destination grew larger—a stone church showed above the walls of a compound. Surrounding the compound we could see vineyards and olive groves that seemed to grow right out of rock. The church was clearly old and much repaired. Even when newly built it had been very humble. From previous visits, I knew this was a church for peasants, made by their hands from stone they quarried and dressed, from wood they cut and shaped and tended devotedly for generations. It may be a humble structure but it had something not even the grandest church could buy: It was loved.

After a few more minutes of silent progress, we arrived at the high wall surrounding the compound. We walked along it until we reached a gate. A man was waiting for us in the courtyard.

"Lupo!" Elle flew over to him and nearly knocked him down with her enthusiastic hug.

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## Chapter 24

Lupo can only be called ugly—and that's being charitable. His features are coarse and irregular, and his body, draped in rough, brown homespun cloth, is lumpy in ways that defy anatomy. But one hardly notices. His smile was beaming and his laughter at almost being knocked down was booming.

Others came out from various doors to see what the commotion was all about. We were at a monastery and visitors were few and far between. The brothers were shy but smiling. Swathed in numerous layers of robes and shawls against the bitter cold, they were probably wearing every stitch of clothing they possessed. They were obviously enjoying the exuberant antics of their abbot, known locally as Saint Lupo, and openly curious why a lovely young woman would be giving him such a warm embrace.

Lupo disentangled himself from Elle and laughed anew at the expressions on the faces of his fellow monks. "These are old friends. They come from America." He spoke to them in the soft sibilants of Sicilian-Italian. Elle and I had no trouble following him; we'd learned a lot of languages.

On hearing that we were from America, the monks' expressions varied from astonishment to incomprehension. Most of the brothers had never traveled more than a few miles from where they stood. Nearly all of them had been born into poverty and at a young age had chosen the monastic life of service and contemplation. America might as well be a fantasy.

Reading their expressions, Lupo laughed once more. "I will tell you more tonight, after vespers." Turning to us, his voice boomed out in English, "Come in, my friends! Welcome to the Monastery of St. Vincent. Let's get you inside where it's warmer and get you some food. All travelers are hungry, no matter what they say." Lupo gestured us toward the refectory and spoke in Italian to a young man who had been standing silently while looking at us with astonished interest. "Brother Anthony. Please bring our guests some food."

Once inside, we sat on benches on either side of a rough wooden table. Several more tables sat empty. The monks took their meals here. There was a lectern at the end of the refectory. I knew from lifetimes' of experience that the monks would take turns reading from the Bible while the others ate in silence. Happy memories of such simplicity ran through my mind. Peace permeated the monastery and I welcomed it as it seeped into me.

Lupo and Elle were looking deeply at each other across the table. Fiona was openly curious and stared at each of them in turn. Fiona's eyes widened when Elle transformed into a round-faced young woman and then quickly back again. If you hadn't been looking at the second it occurred, you wouldn't have noticed.

But Lupo noticed; it had been done for him. "Ah, Sister Scholastica, it warms my heart to see you again."

"Brother Leo, you look the same."

"As ugly as ever," Lupo finished, followed by a laugh—and when Lupo laughed his whole body joined in.

Fiona now looked lost. I mouthed that I would fill her in later. She was seeing the meeting of two old friends. Centuries ago, Lupo had played the part of Brother Leo to watch over St. Francis; Elle had played the part of Sister Scholastica to watch over St. Clare.

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Their eyes locked, silent memories exchanged mind-to-mind, sweet, soft expressions on both their faces. For decades, they had watched over their charges with only each other to confide in. The feeling between them ran deep.

Their moment of private communion was interrupted by the arrival of Brother Anthony carrying a platter of food. While Anthony arranged plates, cheese, bread, wine, and goblets for us, I noticed Fiona was studying him intently. Anthony was trying hard not to meet her eyes. Earlier, we'd convinced Fiona to remove the rings from her ears and nose, and to keep her hair covered with her cap, but even so, I was sure Fiona's steady gaze was a distraction Brother Anthony could do without. I nudged her under the table. She took the hint and turned her large blue eyes on Lupo, instead.

Lupo grabbed a knife and began to cut the bread into thick slices.

Brother Anthony stood and looked at us all intently, seemingly unable to walk away. Finally he blurted out in rough Sicilian, "Father, they all look as you do. They all have great lights shining around them."

I turned to look at him and noticed what I might have seen right away had I not been so enjoying the reunion of Elle and Lupo—Anthony's aura nearly filled the room, a shimmering blue-white with a violet flame rising from his head. Now I understood why Fiona was staring at him: Anthony must be very near to his Awakening.

Everyone has an aura, but once Awakened, the aura becomes greatly expanded. I shifted into an awareness, more astral than physical, that allowed me to see Anthony's aura more fully. I was moved by the beauty radiating from him. I also saw Lupo, Elle, and Fiona's auras blended together with Anthony's in an entrancing show of supernal colors and subtle movement.

Lupo knew what I was seeing and nodded. He spoke softly so Anthony couldn't hear. "He is close. He is why I am here."

It was a simple statement, but as Protectors, Elle and I knew what he meant. Lupo had been here since Anthony was born, carefully guiding his life, drawing him to the monastery, teaching him, preparing him for the day when he would Awaken. Pure-minded children like Anthony often have a rough time growing up among people who do not understand them. With a child's innocence, they share with others what they see and what they experience. In a superstitious culture such as rural Sicily, someone like Anthony is as likely to be considered evil as good. For most Protectors this is their only mission—to help those nearing Awakening to come to full awareness, while at the same time protecting them from the ignorance and fear of those around them.

Lupo turned to Anthony. "Yes. They are our brothers and sisters. But you must tell no one. Remember what happened when you told the Bishop that his light had gone out?"

Anthony looked sheepish but Lupo burst out laughing. Lupo's mirth was impossible to resist and we all joined in—especially Anthony. Barely able to control his laughter, Lupo explained. "A bishop visited the monastery last year about this time. I have taught Anthony to respect the church, but I failed to explain that just because someone has an important title doesn't mean he is Awakened. Anthony has been able to see my aura for many years and he naturally assumed that a bishop would have an even grander aura than mine . . . and, well, you can imagine the rest."

Lupo and Anthony continued to laugh long and hard at the memory of a no-doubt confused and probably very annoyed bishop. We couldn't help being swept up once again in the tide of Lupo's unrestrained joy.

People, whose awareness is limited to what the senses tell them, can neither see auras nor generate much of one themselves. Just as black and white film doesn't register color, those

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immersed only in their senses simply cannot see the splendor of the astral light that suffuses the physical world—although it's there all the time.

If our adversaries, like Chin and the countess, weren't wedded to the preservation and enjoyment of their physical bodies, they would see through our disguises at once. Our auras would give us away. But their determination to live only for physical pleasure makes them oblivious to the finer light.

When our laughter subsided once more, Lupo addressed Anthony. "These old friends have come for help. Would you please go get *Signor Bonciorno*? He is waiting in the chapel."

When Anthony left, Lupo turned to me and spoke quietly, once again in English for Fiona's benefit. "I got Elle's mental message this morning that you would be coming and that you needed information about the Countess Genovese's compound."

We'd decided that our best course of action was to infiltrate Lucrezia's domain. We knew who she was and we knew at least one place where she lived, but that was all. If we were going learn anything of value, something we could use to stop the shadow group, we needed to get inside. To do so we needed to know a lot more about her security set up than we did now.

Trying to learn more by spying on her compound from the outside would immediately arouse suspicion—and, at best, if it didn't get us killed, we'd only be able to learn about the outermost layers of her security. Directly questioning people who might have *inside* information would almost certainly get us killed. Lucrezia undoubtedly surrounds herself with those most loyal to her, probably blood relatives. You can imagine how quickly word would get back to the wrong people that outsiders, while having a *grappa* in the local *taverna*, were asking about the countess' security arrangements.

No, for us to learn what we needed, we had to have a contact with firsthand knowledge of the buildings and grounds inside her compound, but a contact who was not loyal to the countess. Finding such a person on our own would be next to impossible. Even if we did find such a person, he would never trust perfect strangers with such information. If word got out that he was an informant, it would cost him his life.

To find such an informant—and to convince him to trust us with information so dangerous to him—we had to have the help of an established member of the community whom the potential informant already trusted. Enter Lupo. Elle had been very happy to remind me about Lupo. She'd been wanting to see him again for a long time.

Lupo is loved and trusted, even revered. He knows everyone's stories—and their children's, and their children's children's stories. If anyone knew the right person for us to question, it would be Lupo. And if anyone could persuade such a person to trust us, it would be Lupo.

Lupo told us about our potential informant while we waited for Anthony to bring him to the refectory. "*Signor Bonciorno* has no love for the countess. One of his nephews was recently found dead and *Bonciorno* believes he was killed by some of the countess' guards. *Signor Bonciorno* goes into the compound often. He is a craftsman, a master plasterer. The countess lives in a palace, but an aging one, and it needs constant repair. *Signor Bonciorno* is frequently brought in for work too delicate for her normal laborers. I hope he can answer your questions."

*Signor Bonciorno* was ushered in by Anthony. He was clearly nervous.

"Pino, these are my friends. I vouch for them with my life. You can speak to them as you would to me."

Pino appeared slightly reassured and sat down next to us, though his nervousness was still evident.

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"Pino—may I call you Pino?" I asked and he nodded, though he was obviously surprised I spoke his dialect so well. "Pino, we need to know about the layout of Countess Genovese's compound."

He gave me a long look. "What will you do with the information?"

"Nothing you tell me will get back to anyone." I didn't really answer his question. I answered the question behind it.

He stared at me as if steeling himself. He glanced again at Lupo, who nodded. Finally, he took a deep breath. "My nephew Gino was killed and his body was dumped just outside the countess' compound like so much garbage. *Bastardos!* Gino had gotten interested in a young girl who lived inside—a Genovese. I took my nephew inside sometimes to help me with my work. That's when he met her. He was eager to see her the last time we went in. They talked openly. Next day, he was dead. There was nothing I could do. There was nothing anyone could do. They own the police. They own the army. . . ." His voice trailed off in impotent rage. After a moment he began speaking again. "What I tell you, I tell you for Gino, and *Mio Dio*, I hope you can make them pay for what they did to him!" His eyes glittered with passion. His grief, so near the surface, was overridden by his desire for revenge.

I spoke carefully and softly. "We can't give you justice for Gino but we may be able to keep the same thing from happening to others."

He had stared at me as I spoke. His eyes blazed. Finally, he nodded once, sharply, as if making a decision. "I will tell you whatever you want to know."

He knew a lot. Lucrezia's hideaway was enormous, over twenty kilometers across. The outer perimeter was protected by dog patrols, guard towers, and mine fields nearly half a kilometer wide all the way around. There was only one entrance. The entrance brought one immediately into an Italian Special forces base with its own airfield—no doubt where Lucrzia's jet had landed. Pino estimated there were over a thousand people on the base. Whenever he went to work on Lucrezia's palace, after passing through the Special forces base, he had to pass through three more checkpoints in the ten kilometers before he reached the entrance to the palace grounds.

The palace itself was located roughly in the center of the protected area. It was surrounded by a high stone wall, and again there was only one entrance. Once inside, you dealt with the countess' *own* special forces, made up of handpicked men from her extended family who were sworn to her allegiance. There were more dog patrols both inside and outside the palace's ancient wall. Inside the palace, there were guards in nearly every room. Workmen like Pino were never left alone.

"She is a beauty, though."

We looked startled.

"The palace. She is a beauty. Pure Renaissance. The floors, the walls, the art, the sculpture. She is pure—and *bellissima*." Despite his hatred for the countess and the Genovese, the craftsman in him couldn't help but admire the palace.

We had been translating everything for Fiona. She had pulled a sketch pad out her pack and roughed in a map of the grounds and the palace. Pino took the pencil from her hand and made a few corrections.

Now Fiona began to direct our questions. We began to see the security expert come out. Are there cameras outside? How far apart are they? Where are they mounted? How many guards are there at one time? How often do the guards patrol? When do they change shifts? Had he ever been there at night? What kind of lights had he seen? Did he know where the security control room was located? Did he know where the countess had her apartments? Did he know how many people slept inside the palace? How many cameras did he see inside? Were there cameras in every room?

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In the bathrooms, hallways, stairs? How high were the ceilings? Did he know what a motion detector looked like? Had he seen any? Were there locks on interior doors? What kind? Fiona kept at him until she was convinced there was nothing more he could tell us.

In the end we learned that no expense had been spared on security technology, cameras, motion detectors, and magnetic locks, and that the guards were well-trained, alert, and professional. We learned that the countess' private apartments were near the center of the palace and that all doors leading to her apartments required magnetic cards *and* thumbprint readers. On top of that, before anyone could pass through any door, visual recognition by a guard was required.

Piece of cake.

We thanked Pino and then bid a heartfelt goodbye to Lupo and Anthony. Elle gave Lupo a fierce hug. Tears shimmered in her eyes.

We made our way back along the track in silence until Fiona couldn't stand it any longer and piped up. "I hope you aren't expecting me to already have a plan. It would take a month of Sundays to come up with a plan to get us in there. Let alone a plan to do whatever you think you want to do once we're inside."

"That's too bad, because we need to go in tonight."

She turned and looked at me as if I'd lost my mind.

Elle smiled at her. "Relax. Getting in is the easy part. Trust me. You'll love it!"

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## Chapter 25

Even after thirty minutes, Fiona still wore an expression of delighted wonder. We were now hovering, motionless, three hundred feet in the air, looking down at Lucrezia's palace from the deep darkness of a moonless winter night. We'd glided over the perimeter fence many kilometers ago, leaving the mine fields far behind, and now we could see the palace and grounds spread below us.

After an initial squeal at being carried up in the air, Fiona had quickly acclimated to floating along with nothing but Elle's calm self-confidence to reassure her that she wasn't going to plummet to the ground at any second. Elle's control was extraordinary. She never showed even the slightest sign of tension. I felt as if I were being held gently and that there was something solid beneath my feet. I felt completely safe.

Elle controls matter like an artist. No other Protector even comes close to her level of skill and flair. Atri and Atria have abilities that far exceed hers, but those abilities originate in realms beyond this one. Having attained complete control over time and space, they can manifest and unmanifest the very atoms. Elle can only manipulate the atoms—but that still provides Elle with a vast canvas on which to work her artistry.

I once expressed amazement when she levitated an entire automobile. After lowering it gently, she turned to me, and explained, "When you see everything as light, then nothing is heavier than anything else. The challenge is in maintaining concentration and visualization, size doesn't matter at all."

After the first minute or two of speechless wonder, Fiona had become like a kid at her first amusement park. She had asked Elle if she could do any tricks, and Elle had obliged by spinning us in slow circles to the tempo of a waltz. Fiona had giggled so much that Elle had had to stop. Even though we'd been many kilometers from the compound, with no chance of being heard, we'd been ultra-cautious. Since the last twirl of the waltz, we'd remained dead silent.

Hovering high above the palace we could see that it was shaped like a cross, with a large dome in the center, surrounded by four, smaller, evenly-sized domes on the arms of the cross. The grounds around the palace were revealed by security lamps placed at regular intervals, their pools of light showing us well-manicured gardens, fountains, and graveled paths.

Even if the guard I was watching had looked exactly in our direction, it would have been impossible for him to see us. We were dressed completely in black, our faces were blacked, our backpacks were black, even the whites of our eyes were covered by the DARPA-provided night-vision goggles we wore.

But I could see him easily. Though greenish in the enhanced night-vision goggles, by adjusting the magnification, I could easily read the name on the badge clipped to his uniform pocket—Lt. Luciano Genovese. I could also clearly see the alert look on his face. No hope of inattention and boredom tonight. Not that we had counted on it after listening to Signor Bonciorno.

Now that we'd arrived, our next goal was to find a spot to set down undetected. I turned around carefully. Fiona reached into my backpack and handed me a black plastic instrument shaped like a gun, except that the barrel of the gun was large and at the end of the barrel was a lens like a telescope's. I pointed the instrument at the roof of the palace. Meanwhile, Fiona had turned on a ruggedized tablet computer, careful to keep its screen pointing upward; its nearly black screen showed reddish glows whenever I pointed the instrument at a heat source.

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My instrument was an infrared scanner. It showed us heat signatures on, and even inside, the palace. The tablet showed us what we had hoped to see—an absence of guards anywhere on the roof—but we weren't home free yet. The roof of the palace was huge and the scanner showed numerous tiny heat signatures from surveillance tech on the roof, probably surveillance cameras and motion detectors. We needed to land somewhere not covered by their unrelenting vigilance.

In addition to the infrared scanner, we used a frequency scanner to locate transceivers sending information wirelessly. We discovered another layer of tech which emitted too little heat to be picked up by the infrared scanner. We saw a clear pattern: The edges of the roof were the most thoroughly monitored. The cameras and other sensors were less densely placed toward the central portions of the roof. After a silent half hour of scanning, we decided on a safe place to set down.

Elle moved us directly over the spot we had chosen and we slowly descended until she set us down without a sound. We had our backs against the wall of the central dome of the palace. On either side of us were huge stone buttresses supporting the dome and creating an area of deep shadow in which to hide. We sank down carefully and sat cross-legged on the slightly slanting roof, mindful not to make any scuffing sound on the orange terracotta tiles.

From our initial Elle-fueled launch into the air, to landing on the palace roof, had taken an hour. Faster than Fiona's month-of-Sundays. But we had only just started.

It was time for the mosquito, as Fiona had decided to call it.

We got out the tiny flying camera and its controller, and synched its video feed to the tablet computer. Now we got to see how good Fiona was at flying it. One moment it was perched on the palm of my hand, the next moment it was gone.

Elle sat with the tablet in her lap so that Fiona could see the image being sent back while both her hands were free to use the controller. We watched as the little camera flew between the domes and slopes of the roof as if it were a tiny airplane flying through canyons. When it flew past the edge of the roof, we saw the ground far below as if our tiny plane had flown off a cliff. Fiona stopped it, hovered, and turned it around to look back at the palace.

Now to find a way in. Fiona began to fly the mosquito around the outside of the palace.

We weren't worried about our little flying camera tripping any alarms. It's so small that a security camera wouldn't see it unless it practically landed on its lens, and motion detectors are programmed to filter out tiny movements, otherwise flying insects would constantly set them off. What we *were* worried about was finding a way to get inside the palace.

We needed an open window or door. The middle of the night in winter was not the best time to find one. Twenty minutes of fruitless searching brought the mosquito around to the main entrance. Grand doors, which might have once been open to admit guests for an equally grand soiree, were firmly closed. To one side was a smaller door, two guards on sentry duty at attention beside it.

Time to wait. We had to hope that someone would enter or leave before we ran out of time.

Fiona flew the mosquito closely along the palace wall and landed on a flood light just above the smaller door so the mosquito's battery could recharge. We waited a long time. I was just on the point of signaling to Fiona to try something else when a uniformed man walked into view and began speaking to the two sentries. Fiona had the mosquito hovering in seconds.

Elle cocked her head. She had a tiny wireless speaker in her ear and could hear any sounds near our little flying spy. It would have been better if Fiona had had the speaker in *her* ear, but she didn't understand Italian. After listening for a moment or two to the conversation between the man and the sentries, Elle gave a quick nod to Fiona.

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After the brief exchange concluded, one of the two sentries opened the smaller door for him. Fiona kept the mosquito just above the man. When the door opened fully, we could see two more guards inside. Would they see the mosquito? In a moment of inspiration, Fiona gently landed the mosquito on our unwitting guy's cap. We couldn't see much except green fabric, but the other guards were no longer visible, and if we couldn't see them, they couldn't see our hitchhiker. Once past the guards, Fiona flew the mosquito up to the ceiling to look around.

It didn't take us long to agree with our informant, Pino, that Lucrezia's palace was *bellissima*. We saw graceful arches, intricately patterned marble floors, walls painted with murals, priceless artwork, and exquisite statues. I soon recognized paintings by Titian, Donatello, and Raphael, a fresco that had Botticelli's unmistakable style, and a sculpture of Venus that could only have been done by Michelangelo. I'm sure none of these were known to the world. They had been kept for Lucrezia's personal pleasure—as had the entire palace—their wonders hidden from the world like a miser hides his gold. If her hoard of Renaissance art was revealed, it would outshine the collection of any museum in the world.

Despite enjoying the beauties of Lucrezia's palace, I soon began to worry at how long our surveillance was taking. Our ultimate goal was to find our way to Lucrezia's apartments. We'd spent hours waiting patiently, the mosquito recharging while perched near light fixtures outside various closed doors, waiting for them to open, so Fiona could zoom through into a new section of the palace. We seemed no closer to finding her apartments than when we began. It was now nearing four in the morning; we didn't have much time left. The morning light would give us away. Sunrise was still a couple hours away but we needed to be long gone by then. It was imperative for our plans that not only did we not get caught, but that no one ever knew we'd been here.

I was just about to suggest retreat when, after another long wait spent staring at a closed and guarded door, the guard opened it for another to go through. Fiona flew the mosquito right behind the guard and was able to follow him through three successive doors without waiting. Our luck was short-lived, however. Two more of a seemingly infinite supply of guards were stationed outside yet another door. We'd already gathered from comments heard by our amazing flying bug that the countess was at home tonight. Now we heard that this was the entry to her apartments—but it was almost certain that her door would remain firmly shut for what remained of the rest of the night.

We appeared to be stymied. We'd seen a lot of the palace but nothing we'd seen helped us with our mission. We might go away empty-handed. I closed my eyes and thought for a bit.

I smiled when an idea came to me. It was time for an old ploy.

I leaned over and whispered into Elle's ear so quietly I couldn't even hear myself. She stared at me momentarily, shrugged, and prepared to do what I asked. Elle turned the tablet her way and intently studied the image. While she was doing that I leaned the other way and whispered into Fiona's ear. I had more to tell her than Elle. Elle's part was simple but dramatic. Fiona's part was more complicated. By the time I finished whispering into Fiona's ear, Elle was ready. She turned the tablet back so that it directly faced Fiona, shut her eyes and became still as a statue.

The guard our flying spy had followed had left and the screen showed us the door to the countess' quarters and two unmoving guards on either side of it. Like the rest of the palace, the hallway outside her quarters was sumptuously appointed. The door was ornately framed by gilt moldings; to the left of the door was a table with a small vase, a lamp with an extravagant yellow silk shade, and behind the table, a beautiful tapestry covered the wall. The tapestry was probably as old as Lucrezia—too bad, really; Elle was about to ruin it.

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As I watched the screen, I noticed the light from the lamp getting brighter. The lampshade began to discolor and smoke curled up from the cord leading to the lamp. The two guards must have heard or smelled something at the same moment because they both turned to look toward the lamp just in time to see flames shooting from the shade and running up the tapestry.

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## Chapter 26

Thick smoke began to obscure our view. Fiona wisely flew the mosquito down toward the floor below the level of the smoke. Outside on the roof we could hear an alarm go off. The guards yanked open the door to the countess' rooms and rushed in. Fiona flew the mosquito right on their heels.

Once inside, our camera gained height and stayed close to the guards. After following the fast-moving guards through two rooms, we were finally rewarded for our long night's work with a view of the countess turning on a bedside lamp. She was sitting up in an enormous canopied bed. Golden yellow brocades hung gracefully from the four carved pillars that held up a circular canopy like an enormous crown above her head. The amber light from her lamp reflected off satin sheets and lit Lucrezia's tousled golden hair. It was almost a fairy-tale moment.

Or it would have been, if Lucrezia's face hadn't been set in an angry scowl and if she hadn't been shouting. Her shouting was soundless to Fiona and me, but I could tell by Elle's expression that she was getting an earful of language not used in your typical fairy tale. There were a lot of gestures and we could hear more alarms joining the first. Lucrezia rose, grabbed a robe, and gestured for the two guards to leave. Elle explained later that the guards clearly did not want to leave, but Lucrezia was nastily insistent, told them to go deal with the fire, and that she'd leave by another way.

The guards rushed back toward the fire and smoke but Fiona kept the camera on Lucrezia. Lucrezia rushed over to a painting, pulled it away from the wall, revealing a safe. She rapidly spun the dial, opened the safe door, pulled out a thick leather-bound book, clutched it to her breast, and headed in the direction opposite the fire.

Fiona kept pace with her. Lucrezia went through a few rooms and finally out another door. There she began demanding answers from the guards stationed outside. Abruptly, the alarms stopped. The fire must have been put out. Another, older man arrived, his uniform marking him as a colonel. Elle told me later that the countess had given him a dressing down in gutter Italian; Fiona and I only saw Lucrezia's angry face and a stone-faced colonel standing at attention.

Another guard arrived—this time from inside the countess' quarters—and gestured for her to enter. She went in with ill grace, but not before throwing one last comment over her shoulder at the still motionless colonel.

I whispered in Fiona's ear to land the mosquito on the unfortunate colonel's cap. As I hoped, he carried our little passenger all the way out of the palace—probably wanting to get as far from the countess as possible. Minutes later our mosquito landed on my palm.

We packed up silently. When we were ready, Elle took us straight up in the air, much higher than before, and then headed back to our car. Faster this time. After only fifteen wind-blown minutes, we landed back where we had started.

Immediately, Fiona began to giggle. She must have been ready to burst for some time. "'A Scandal in Bohemia' . . .? Really?"

"It worked, didn't it?" I defended my ruse with a laugh.

Fiona was referring to Conan Doyle's, *A Scandal in Bohemia*, in which Sherlock Holmes tricks Irene Adler into revealing her hiding place by making her think her house was on fire. We had just done the same to Lucrezia.

"And why were we interested in Lucrezia's hiding place?" Fiona asked curiously.

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"We weren't so much interested in the countess' hiding place as we were in discovering what she kept there. Of all the things she could have rescued from the fire, she chose an old leather-bound book."

"What do you think's in the book?"

"I don't know. Addresses? Phone numbers? A list of people in her network? Codes? Passwords? Her favorite recipes? I just don't know—but it has to be important. If there are passwords in that book, Xu might be able to use them to hack into her computer, which might lead us to other computers, and so on. Tomorrow night we'll break into her safe and find out what's in the book."

Fiona's mouth fell open. "We're going into the countess' bedroom and crack her safe? Tomorrow night? Just like that?"

"You got it in one. But don't worry—we have all day today to figure out how to do it."

Fiona could only stare at me. She was used to months of precision planning before an attempted heist. We had less than a day. But Fiona wasn't yet used to thinking like a Protector. We have abilities not available to your average safecracker. And it was a good thing we have them, because in the end we didn't even have the rest of the day to plan, or at least Elle and I didn't. Shortly after we returned to our small hotel, Xu called my burner mobile from his burner mobile.

"Anil got a call from Lucrezia."

He meant the real Anil, substituting for me, the fake Anil—stay focused now.

"Anil and Ambika are to be at the Burj in Dubai by noon local time to meet, as she put it, 'the rest of her influential friends.'"

Xu's news seemed too good to be true—and probably was. It was almost certainly going to be a trap. Although I'd left Chin with the parting threat that we had to meet the rest of the group in twenty-four hours or we'd start releasing our information, I hadn't actually expected results. I'd expected delaying tactics while they tried to find a way to neutralize us.

Too good to be true or not, walking into a trap or not, we had to go. We had to take the risk if there was the slightest chance that we'd learn who else was in the group.

Xu and I discussed logistics for a bit. We needed Anil and Ambika to make the trip to Dubai, with all the usual Gupta fanfare, and then to switch identities with Elle and me before the meeting.

We set off for Dubai, but not before Elle gave Fiona a short demonstration of a few of her more amazing abilities—abilities that would be the envy of thieves everywhere. After her initial astonishment, Fiona promised she'd have a plan to get into Lucrezia's safe by the time we got back.

We left her staring thoughtfully into the distance.

The Burj Hotel, or to give it its full name, the Burj Al Arab, is famously opulent and perched on a manmade island just off Dubai's beachfront. As our taxi drove over the causeway to reach the island, we could see the sixty-story hotel curving up like a giant billowing sail. Anywhere else in the world it would be an extraordinary sight, in Dubai it seemed almost ho-hum. Dubai was an architect's playground and it was populated with wealthy oil princes vying with one another to fund the latest ideas for fantastical buildings. Looking over our right shoulders we saw a sparkling forest of high-rise buildings, including the tallest building in the world. Looking to our left, we saw acres of manmade islands, some shaped like palm fronds, which were the most expensive real estate on earth. Dubai was nothing if not audacious.

If the outside of the hotel suggested a ship at sea, the inside suggested a sultan's palace: lustrous, filigreed, and plush. Just inside the main entrance, the balcony-ringed, multi-storied atrium rose above us. The very air seemed to glow with a golden hue. Pillars with exquisite arabesque and gilt

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fountains vied for attention. Every centimeter was decorated. It was like being inside an enormous piece of jewelry.

We entered the lobby as Hans and Andrea Berliner from Frankfurt. We were both short and stout, gray-haired, and looked like well-to-do grandparents. Xu had arranged our room in advance and we went through the usual check-in process. As planned, while we were at the desk, Anil and Ambika arrived, surrounded by fawning hotel greeters, after having shaken off the inevitable crowd of photographers—who appear as if out of thin air wherever the Guptas travel.

The fabulously wealthy don't check-in like the merely wealthy—but they do have to use the toilet. Anil and Ambika waved off their security detail and headed immediately for the lobby-level bathrooms. We followed close behind—without appearing to be following close behind.

Because bathrooms are one of the few places left where one can be reasonably sure there are no security cameras—at least not in the stalls—we managed to do an unseen do-si-do of identities. The Anil and Ambika who went into their respective bathrooms were the Hans and Andrea who came out. And of course, the Hans and Andrea who went in were now the Anil and Ambika who came out. The newly shape-shifted Hans and Andrea proceeded to the Berliner's room and we returned to the lobby ready to make new friends.

Elle/Ambika was wearing a black Armani pants suit, white silk blouse, and silver Jimmy Choo sling-back stiletto heels. Her long dark hair was drawn back above her ears but otherwise fell naturally down her back, sunglasses perched on top of her head—just as they had been perched on the head of the real Ambika when she'd gone into the bathroom. I was, as usual, outshone by Ambika: dark-suit, red-tie, and loafers. I'm not sure anyone ever looked at me—including our own security guys, who were *paid* to look at me. I thought, whimsically, that I could have come out of the bathroom dressed like Santa Claus and no one would have noticed.

By the time we'd come out, Rajan, our security head, had learned from the hotel concierge that we were to meet in a conference room on the 56th floor. It was a few minutes shy of noon local time when, accompanied by an obsequious assistant concierge and our bodyguards, we got into an elevator. When we got out of the elevator, we were met by—no one.

Something was wrong.

The entire floor should have been swarming with security people. Instead, it was just the two of us, our four bodyguards, and our starry-eyed concierge, who was no doubt dreaming about how large a tip he would get from the richest people in the world. I glanced at Elle. This wasn't what we'd expected, but I sensed no danger. If they'd wanted to kill us, they could have already done so many times and in many ways. I shrugged ever so slightly in Elle/Ambika's direction. She acceded with a very slight tilt of her head. Decision made. We'd go on. The concierge led us to the conference room, used his keycard to open the door, then ushered us in.

Still no one.

The room was dominated by floor-to-ceiling windows with a panoramic view of the Dubai skyline and the ocher sand beyond. Placed in the middle of the spacious room was a table large enough for eight, but there were only two chairs at the near end. The rest of the table was surrounded by six large monitors on stands—their blank screens facing the two empty chairs—and atop each monitor, a video camera.

Clever. We weren't going to meet with them in person—we were going to meet with them *virtually*. They had met my terms without meeting my terms. We might see them on the monitors, but all of them would remain safely elsewhere. We couldn't repeat our ruse with Lucrezia, and follow any of them back to their hidden locations, because they'd never left them.

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Even so, this was still a breakthrough for us. Simply seeing the faces of our adversaries, if that was indeed going happen, would give us far more to go on than we had now.

We sat in the two empty seats. Our concierge went over to a computer atop a small desk on one side of the room, tapped a few keys, and the monitors came to life, showing the logo of the Burj Hotel; simultaneously, the smart-glass windows darkened to reduce the desert glare.

The concierge addressed us as he pointed to a small device on the table that had only a single button. "When you are ready, press that button and you will see and hear all the other attendees—and they will see and hear you. Press the button again and it will shut everything off. This is an encrypted and completely secure system. If you need me, I will be waiting outside."

Elle/Ambika and I glanced at each other but gave nothing away. Despite what the concierge had said, as far as we knew, the cameras pointing at us could be active, and our adversaries could be watching us even now. In any case, we had nothing to say to each other we hadn't already said. All of Xu's research, all the information we'd gathered from our fellow Protectors, would either pay off now—or we'd be looking for a new Plan A. I didn't want to think about the other possibility—if our research was wrong, we might soon be dead.

We'd agreed on the way here, that in order to convince them that we already knew who they were—and that our knowledge of them posed a significant threat—we had to be able to identify all of them correctly. We knew we'd been lucky in our initial encounters with Lucrezia and Chin. Elle had recognized Lucrezia from having crossed paths with her centuries ago, and Xu's description and past history with Chin had made it easy for me to confidently identify him on the yacht. Now we'd need to identify everyone *else* without a miss.

We were fairly confident—but not completely confident. We'd put together a well-researched list of possible members of this all-powerful group with the aid of Xu's computer hackery, and through lots of conversations with Jonathon and other Protectors, but it was a long list—fifty or more people. And even then we were still left with two vital questions: Did the list have all the right people? And did we have all the right information about the people who *were* on the list?

We'd find out very soon.

Elle/Ambika reached out and pressed the button. Six screens flickered to life. Six people looked our way. We could see their life-size upper bodies as if they, too, were sitting at our table, their faces remarkably clear. It was easy to imagine that we were all sitting around the same table.

"Ah. We get to meet you all at last!" I'd spoken without hesitation. We'd decided we should take the initiative to reaffirm our threat to them before anything else was said. "Countess. Chin. Should I call you Chin, by the way? Or would you prefer Emperor?" I tried to make my tone respectful, but not altogether free of self-confident arrogance. "Thank you for bringing us all together. I can't tell you how much we've looked forward to this."

While I was talking, Elle was evaluating faces, hoping one matched up to a name and background we knew. I sensed the slightest relaxation on her part. She must have found one she thought she knew. Smoothly, she turned her head to a woman who appeared to be sitting on our right. She was a middle-aged woman, her body thick and her clothes dowdy. She was wearing a purple wool suit jacket as if she were somewhere cold, and a white blouse buttoned up under her chin. She had a long Roman nose and dark features, and her heavy black hair was arranged in an old-fashioned bun on top of her head. If it weren't for the hard and calculating look in her eyes, I would pass by her in a crowd without a second glance.

Elle began by nodding to her. "Empress. Or should I say Julia? I would imagine that the first name you had tends to remain a favorite. You can let me know when we get to know each other

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better. And let me say the Rothschild clan was brilliant, but my personal favorite, hands down, was the Hapsburgs. You had an emperor, a king and a queen from one set of kids. Amazing. And controlling successive generations like puppets on string. Brilliant."

Like me, Elle/Ambika had tried to make her tone respectful, but not overawed. We were trying to walk a fine line between making them think we genuinely wanted to become a part of their group and arrogantly maintaining our advantage of having the power to expose them.

If Elle had guessed right, the hard-eyed woman was Julia Agrippina—sister to Caligula and mother of Nero—and she was now over fifteen hundred years old. Even though we hadn't been sure what she looked like, we were fairly confident that we knew a lot about her. Of all our potential big fish, we had gathered the most information on Julia.

We were pretty sure that she had cut a ruthless, scheming path through ancient Rome's high-risk and often fatal politics, which brought her to Asher's attention and earned her a place in Asher's inner circle—and an unnaturally long life. We'd pieced together that after Rome's fall, and with Asher's help, she'd eventually become a mother and matriarch in nearly every kingdom and royal house in Europe. She'd been wife to Charlemagne, consort to a Medici, queen to more than one Louis of France. History ascribes no accomplishments to any of those women—but we believe her hidden accomplishments were staggering.

We were certain that early in the seventeen hundreds in Germany, she'd married Mayer Rothschild, who went on to be the founder of the largest bank in the world. Out of that marriage came a banking dynasty still potent today. She gave Mayer Rothschild *ten* children. Those children went on to create an empire of banks throughout Europe and America.

The Baroness Rothschild "died" and, with Asher's hidden influence, Julia resurfaced later in the seventeen hundreds, as Maria Theresa, daughter of Charles the VI of Austria. By marrying the Holy Roman Emperor, Francis the First, she became Empress of Austria. With Francis she had *sixteen* children—kings, queens, and emperors among them—the most famous being Marie Antoinette. Marie's eventual beheading was far from Julia's plans, but most of her other children, and their children, and their children's children, held influential positions in Europe for centuries, and many of her descendants hold lofty positions even today.

Julia's children had had no idea who, or how old, she really was. Julia's children had believed that she died at the end of a natural span of life. But her various cleverly faked deaths had not ended her influence over her children—far from it. Our information is thin, but we believe that she told her children early and often that certain *instructions* would be given to them from time to time during their privileged and influential lives—and that they were to follow those instructions without fail—and to keep the knowledge a deep secret.

She told them that the instructions they received would always be accompanied by a code word or phrase by which her children would know the instructions were genuine. Her grown children soon learned that by complying with the instructions they received, they *always* gained more wealth and more power as a result. As far as they were concerned, the instructions were like manna from heaven.

None of her children had known—or would have believed—that the people covertly passing on these instructions to them were getting *their* instructions from the long-lived Julia. Julia's children were also taught to pass the knowledge of these secret instructions on to *their* children—and why ever not pass on what had worked so spectacularly well for them?—thus perpetuating her influence through generations of well-placed rulers, bankers, and politicians.

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Just the banks alone under Julia's indirect sway, banks started by her Rothschild children three centuries ago, have assets nearing twenty trillion U.S. dollars and a loan portfolio in excess of one hundred trillion dollars. The nations of the world are deeply in debt to one or more of the banks that Julia can influence when she chooses, and the indirect control those loans provide over the leaders of the world is almost inconceivable.

The empress, or at least the woman we hoped was the empress, said nothing, nor had her stony expression given anything away. But I had been watching the others while Elle/Ambika addressed her. Judging by Lucrezia's reaction, we'd scored a hit. One down, and with Lucrezia and Chin already identified, three down, three to go.

My turn to try to make it four down, two to go.

I zeroed in on a dark-complexioned man on our left. Identifying him was going to be risky. No photo we had found in our research—grainy, blurry, tiny, or otherwise—looked anything like this man. He was dressed in a dark suit, white shirt, and striped tie—just like a billion other men. All I had to go on was his flat-black eyes, hooked nose, and a certain weathered hardness. Time to trust my intuition.

"Abdul. Lovely to meet you face-to-face. Or would you prefer Your Royal Highness Prince Abdul Rahman Saud? We don't know how formal you all like to be. You've certainly come up in the world since your Bedouin days. And oil. Did you see that coming? Now the world can't get enough of it. The cartel, by the way, was a stroke of genius."

If my guess was correct, the man I'd just addressed was the three-hundred-and-some year old brother of the founder of the Saudi Dynasty, and has remained, like Julia, indirectly influential over thousands of royal heirs in Saudi Arabia and throughout the gulf region. We believe it was Abdul who set in motion the cartel that now controls the price of oil throughout the world; that it was Abdul who engineered the crushing of Iraq by America, thus eliminating an uncooperative Saddam Hussein as an object lesson to others; and that it is Abdul's influence that keeps the Palestinian "conflict" alive—providing a perpetual bargaining chip in mid-east politics.

If our sketchy research is accurate, Abdul's network of contacts controls virtually all the world's oil. Last year's combined revenues from oil was over three trillion dollars. And monetary value is only a small part of oil's power. The foreign policies of the developed nations of the world are dominated by the need for plentiful supplies of oil. No industrialized country can exist without it. A whisper of slowing supplies can send world markets into panic, and even the merest hint that the flow of oil might be reduced—or cut off—can bring entire countries to heel.

The man I addressed as Abdul betrayed just enough satisfaction at my praise that I thought I'd gotten him properly identified. Four down, two to go.

Elle's turn again and number five was going to be easy—and painful for me. I had *so* hoped he would no longer be in this group. Elle looked at the man next to Abdul, his compact, hard-set features familiar to both of us.

"Rockshaw. I hope you don't prefer a first name, because we're not sure what it is these days. Humphrey? Basil? Alfried? In any case, we're pleased to meet you at last. Too bad about missing out on the fifth force discovery, but I'm sure you'll figure it out eventually."

While Elle spoke, I had to be careful not to let my emotions show. In our last mission, I had risked three lives—Xu's, Elle's, and mine—to try to touch his heart, hoping I could reawaken his better nature.

Had my attempt to reach him completely failed?

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If you could trace the AK-47 held in the arms of the thirteen-year-old African freedom-fighter, or the thousands of mines still buried around every zone of conflict, or the stores of nerve gas hidden by despots around the globe, if you could trace these back to their origin, you'd find Rockshaw.

No one knows how much money is spent on illegal arms, but what *is* known is that illegal arms are largely responsible for the instability throughout the undeveloped world. Nascent democracies falter when faced with the armed might of warlords and strongmen. A significant portion of the world's population is kept in perpetual poverty and near slavery because arms are freely supplied to adversaries on all sides of all disputes—disputes which have often been fomented by the arms dealers themselves. While these disputes rage, people's lives are destroyed, their country's wealth plundered and funneled into the hands of people like Rockshaw.

Weapons, like oil, are vital to most countries—not just those in the third world. Access to the latest technology, the most potent weapons, is believed to be essential for every country's safety. Controlling the supply gives arms dealers enormous leverage. Government leaders will do a lot to insure that they have adequate weaponry. Going along with suggested political directives, adjusting to certain monetary and banking policies, is considered a small price to pay for national security.

Despite the fact that it was Elle/Ambika who spoke to him, Rockshaw never took his eyes off me. He had been staring at me since the monitors came to life. His look was unreadable, unwavering, and bored into me with probing intensity. I avoided looking directly at him. I didn't trust myself to hide my feelings. But even looking away, I could feel the steady pressure of his stare. Did he somehow recognize me?

Elle continued our act. "Lucrezia, I can see you've still got it. That bit of blackmail with the minister from Germany was artistry itself."

Elle/Ambika's eyebrow was raised slightly during her remark. In her voice there was just the *hint* of the catty tone that only a younger woman could use to an older one. Lucrezia, already not a fan, glared at Elle/Ambika with baleful envy for her effortless beauty.

Based on what we recently learned, added to what Elle already knew, we thought Lucrezia was what you might call the group's enforcer. We knew she practiced some of the oldest arts: seduction, entrapment, and blackmail. Apparently, when powerful and influential people got out of line, when they bridled against the instructions they were given or developed a conscience, Lucrezia ferreted out their weak points—financial impropriety, people they cared about, illicit affairs—and then used these against them. Lucrezia was often herself a willing participant in the illicit affair used to blackmail the unwilling. The hapless minister or general never knew his blackmailer was also his mistress. Playing a double game must add spice to Lucrezia's life.

As far as we can tell, when the victims of Lucrezia's attentions made amends, when they stopped resisting the instructions they received, life got better. But if they continued to resist, they were destroyed: cabinet ministers forced to resign in disgrace, wealthy investors suddenly bankrupt, whistleblowers discredited, suicides—that weren't suicides—found in their homes.

Elle tossed Lucrezia an invitation. "Let's meet up. There are some great spas in Bali."

Lucrezia said nothing, but unconsciously fingered her ring.

My turn again. "Chin. We've been admiring your work for years. You may not have seen Chairman Mao coming but you've gotten the right people in power once more. China is an economic powerhouse and a major player again. Once you get China's banks in line, you'll be unstoppable."

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Thanks to Xu, we knew almost as much about Chin as we did about Julia. Chin has for millennia maintained influence at all levels of Chinese society, government, and economy, sometimes as a public figure, but more often than not, as was the case now, his influence has been from behind the scenes.

Mao's grassroots revolution may have caught him out. But now, after decades of China's anti-western, anti-capitalist, and isolationist tilt, Chin has managed to steer the country back toward the modern world. Working hidden levers of power, Chin managed to move a new generation of politicians into the Communist elite; in the eighties, Deng and his comrades executed an about-face toward capitalism and engaged the world community once more, while still maintaining the political veneer of communism.

Addressing everyone, I continued, "In fact, the world owes all of you a debt. Without you, there'd be chaos."

Time to identify the sixth and last member of the group.

I looked at the monitor on the far side of the table and saw the dark silhouette of a man. A strong light behind him made it impossible to make out his features. Two small points of light reflected from his eyes—and that was all—and yet there was no question who he was.

"Asher. The world owes no one a greater debt than it does to you."

Jonathon told us that Asher had decided long, long ago to stay deeply hidden and to work his will only through others. He has never been in the public eye; we knew of no famous people he'd masqueraded as anytime in the sweep of history. He has always been the advisor, the fixer, the man who could pull the right strings, who made the right suggestions to the right people.

Yet, of all those assembled, *his* power is the by far the greatest. It is safe to say that by earthly standards, he is the most powerful man in the world. Far more powerful than any single president or world leader. Not with a single command, no. But through calculated, coordinated suggestions into the ears of those whom he has cultivated, enriched, and empowered, he can destroy entire economies, topple governments, or trigger wars that cause unimaginable death and suffering. Asher has demonstrated such power many times over.

Asher is willing to do *anything* to further his long-term plans. He is a chess-master whose board is the world, whose pieces are people, and whose time to work his strategies is limitless. His long life span, perhaps more than his brilliant mind, has made him succeed where others have failed. Other men and women who have tried to control the world have had only decades to make the attempt—Asher has had millennia.

Jonathon believes that Asher works primarily through the members of his inner circle, by coordinating their influence over hundreds of bankers, oil sheiks, generals, investors, politicians, media moguls, and opinion-shapers. No single step in his plans is obvious. But each carefully orchestrated step brings him and his confederates closer to his ultimate goal—the complete consolidation of world power.

Call him a megalomaniac. Call him obsessed on a colossal scale. His single burning desire is to wield more power than anyone has ever wielded. To succeed where Alexander, Genghis, and Hitler failed; to conquer the world, not by outward might, but by stealth; to conquer the world, not through overcoming all resistance, but through engineering everyone's ignorant acquiescence.

And, according to Atri and Atria, he has almost achieved his goal.

It had taken us bare minutes to give our rapid-fire greetings. The six people we faced hadn't given much away, but judging by their minute reactions, I think we identified everyone correctly—six down, none to go—and our brief comments about their activities were right on the mark.

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Frozen silence followed my last remark to Asher. The air vibrated with tension. I think we had more than established that our threat to them was real. Time stood still while we waited for one of them to speak.

We had been under no illusion that demanding membership in this group would be well received, or successful. Our only goal had been to make them think our ability to expose them was real, to force them to delay our death sentence while they tried to find a way to eliminate the threat they thought we posed to their plans.

In reality we were no threat—at least not yet. We desperately needed more time. Right now we had no believable evidence that could do them any real damage. We didn't even have enough evidence to convince a blogger on the fringe, let alone people in the corridors of power. We needed more time to find their weak points, any weak points, before we could hope to do something to counter their power and influence.

Were we going to get more time? Had we convinced Asher and the others that with what we knew it would be too dangerous a risk for them to kill us?

An instant later, I found out. I felt an explosion of searing pain behind my eyes, as if a red-hot poker had been driven into my brain.

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## Chapter 27

The pain increased to a crescendo. The invisible searing poker was stabbed simultaneously into every part of my brain.

I had no doubt who was inflicting this torment. Atria had warned us that Asher had mental abilities. Elle and I had wondered what Asher might be able to do, but nothing we'd considered had prepared me for this. We had discussed ways Asher might use his mind to read our thoughts; it had never occurred to us that Asher would use his mind as a weapon.

Among Protectors, thoughts, images, feelings are frequently exchanged directly from mind to mind. This ability allows us to share much more profoundly than speech alone could ever do. But Protectors would never force their way into another's mind, or seek to cause someone harm; we don't even know how.

I was receiving a crash course.

I was nearly blinded by the pain. My body writhed in agony. I wanted to resist the attack, to shut Asher out of my mind, but I clung desperately to the thought that, if I tried to resist him, it would be the end of our mission. If I tried to resist the force of his mind, then I was clearly not who, or what, I was pretending to be. To maintain our cover, I had no choice but to endure the burning torture. I made no attempt to hide the pain; I wanted Asher to know he was excruciatingly effective. Believe me, it was easy to let the agony show. I clutched my head while my body shuddered.

Abruptly, the pain stopped as if a switch had been turned off.

I poured out a sigh of intense relief. I dropped my head into my hands and my whole body trembled with shock. I was vaguely aware that only a few seconds had passed, though the ordeal seemed far longer. I felt the icy-cool sensation of sweat drying on my face and body. I was drained and disoriented.

But Asher wasn't done. Elle/Ambika spasmed as if electrocuted. I could only watch in acute sympathy as beads of sweat formed on her forehead and her eyes roved wildly. Seconds later she, too, slumped forward, her head in her hands, her body wracked with gut-wrenching sobs.

I turned to look directly at Asher, but I couldn't help noticing out of the corners of my eyes the looks of twisted pleasure on Lucrezia and Chin's faces. They had enjoyed our pain and humiliation during this demonstration of Asher's frightening mental power.

I mustered enough energy to weakly shout, "What the hell was that for?"

Asher's shadowed form was motionless. When he finally spoke, he did so in an ordinary voice—but there was nothing ordinary about what he said. "There are worse things than dying." He paused for a long time to let his words sink in. "Give us the evidence you have and I will not have to do that again. You experienced the pain for only a few seconds. After a few minutes you will go permanently insane."

His delivery was clinical and matter-of-fact, far more chilling than if he had sounded angry or vicious. He felt nothing. It was clear that no human consideration—mercy, compassion, pity—would sway him if he decided to destroy our minds.

Despite his threat, despite the agony we'd just endured, I felt relieved.

*He believed us.*

Our little performance had convinced him that we had evidence dangerous to him and to his plans. If we hadn't been convincing, he wouldn't have bothered to reduce us to quivering jelly. If we hadn't been convincing, he wouldn't have stopped his torment and demanded the information

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from us. If we hadn't been convincing, he would have continued the torment until he had driven us insane—or killed us.

Time to show a little backbone, and some not-entirely-difficult-to-muster anger. "Don't be ridiculous, Asher. We aren't fools. We know that if we give you our evidence you'll kill us anyway. Besides, the information is beyond our control. We gave it to five different people with strict instructions: If we die, release it; if you don't hear from us for more than three days, release it; if we try to get it back from you, release it. We have no idea where all the copies are—and we have no way of finding out. *There is nothing you can do that will stop its release—except to give us immortality.*"

My turn to let *my* words sink in. I continued after a couple of beats. "We knew from the minute we planted the tracker on the countess that there were only two possible outcomes: We'd be killed or we'd live forever. We knew what we were risking. We are *Guptas*! We were trained for this one purpose since we learned to walk. We will not be deterred by your threats—or by torture. We *will* have immortality—or *we will die*—and if we die, we will bring you all down with us!"

My voice had slowly risen while I spoke until, with the last words I shouted and spittle sprayed from my mouth. I wanted to appear unbalanced, to appear to be more than a little crazy. I hoped my performance would play well to people who were clearly more than a little crazy themselves.

And make no mistake, these people *were* more than a little crazy. They were sociopaths: ruthlessly egocentric, intellectually brilliant, and remorseless. Their extreme perceptiveness about the feelings and motivations of ordinary people made it possible for them to manipulate them with ease—but they themselves were utterly lacking in those same normal human feelings and motivations. Even now they were looking at us as a scientist might look at bacteria in a Petri dish.

I tried another approach. "What have you got to lose? Give us the secret to immortality—you can always kill us later. Bring us into your plans—we can help. We already have huge positions in the Bank of India; we know people in other Indian banks corrupt enough to do whatever we suggest. That's what you're after, right? To consolidate your control over all the banks?"

There was a hint in one or two faces that I'd said the unexpected.

"Your last gambit was brilliant. Creating a world-wide real estate bubble by having the banks provide easy money—and then, when you were ready, pricking the bubble in 2008 and causing the recession. It moved trillions of dollars of the middle-classes' money right into your coffers." I laughed. "You even got the still clueless middle-classes to pony up even more money to their country's governments to shore up the very banks that shafted them. We love your work." I paused a moment before making my final case. "Chin is close to giving you control of the People's Bank. We can give you control of the Bank of India."

I floated this idea for two reasons: To impress them that we could be useful allies, but more importantly to see if we were right about the importance of the People's Bank of China to Asher's plans. We think Chin being effectively in control of the People's Bank would give Asher the final lever he needed to control the world's money supply.

We'd speculated on Asher's grand strategy ever since Atri and Atria had given us our mission: Our research indicated that Asher had for hundreds of years fostered the development of larger and larger banks. Every engineered war, every manipulated economic crisis, resulted in fewer but larger banks, and every new law that Asher and the others had oh-so-carefully suggested to every government granted ever-greater freedom to the ever-expanding banks.

The so-called Great Recession, had provided the banks of the world with yet another reason to coordinate their efforts to an unprecedented degree. Regulations were eased. Incomprehensibly

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large sums were exchanged. All in the name of economic recovery. And now China, the last bastion of isolated economic power, was on the verge of joining the nearly unified banks of the world.

We believe that a faction of Chinese leaders, secretly influenced by Chin, are advocating greater "cooperation" with the world banking system—advocating the removal of "antiquated" rules that have prevented the free flow of China's enormous hoard of cash into yet other astronomically large funds controlled by transnational groups like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank—groups whose members operate at but one degree of separation from Asher and his friends.

Should Chin's Chinese powerbrokers, under the pretense of immediate benefits to the Chinese economy, successfully lobby for the removal of the last firewall between the People's Bank and the world banking system, there would be no going back. Like the recent mixing of the world's monies and assets through the worldwide sale of trillions of dollars of real estate derivatives, should China's banks begin merging with the rest of the world's banks, it would be impossible to reverse. The fortunes of central banks and investment banks throughout the world would become so intertwined that independent action would become unthinkable.

If that happened, an inescapable logic would dictate all future decisions: The international network of banks would have to act as one—competition would be self-defeating, even dangerous for the world's economy. The governments of the world, already largely hostage to the power of money and business, would have no choice but to dance to the tune played by the few hundred money men who run the banks—and those few hundred money men would dance to Asher's tune.

Mentioning the banks had definitely gotten the group's attention. Chin looked slightly alarmed. The others looked carefully neutral. I think we were right: Gaining control of China's banks was their next, and most crucial, move.

Elle picked up where I left off. "After you've wrapped up the banks, we're thinking you should go after world food supplies next. That's what we'd do. Start by creating false food shortages around the world. You know, cause accidents here and there to contaminate essential foodstuffs, reduce food supplies going to back-water populations. The world will be in an uproar when thousands die in famines. The banks of the world can step in and shore up shaky agricultural systems—and look like heroes in the process. Before you know it, the banks will control the world's food supply. After that, we can run the prices of food up as high as we want—just short of riots—and we'll all be a lot richer than we are today."

As she calmly suggested deliberately causing the deaths of thousands, perhaps millions of people, Elle spoke with the flat tone of one describing a chemistry experiment.

Nodding my head up and down as if in admiration, I provided the clincher: "Control the banks and you control the governments. Control the food supply and you control the world."

I think our audience was actually impressed. Except for Rockshaw, who continued to stare at me no matter who was talking, and Asher, whose silhouette gave nothing away, there was an easing of postures, a subtle relaxation around the eyes that indicated they might be warming to us—as warm as unfeeling, utterly self-centered people can become. But we were singing their tune. Maybe they thought we could be of some use to them after all.

There was a prolonged silence after my last comment. We'd done our best. Now we waited to see if we'd be invited to join this exclusive club—or have our minds destroyed.

We didn't have to wait long. Apparently it was option number two. A flood of acid poured into my brain and down my spine—burning into every nerve in my body. Simultaneously, Elle's body shook uncontrollably as she let loose a nerve-shattering shriek of absolute terror.

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## Chapter 28

With my last shred of will, I reached out and slapped the button on the table. The six monitors went blank. The pain, mercifully, subsided.

I looked at Elle. She, too, appeared to be recovering from Asher's excruciating mental attack.

We stood shakily and stumbled out of the conference room as quickly as we could manage. Glancing at Elle, I could read in her eyes the same fear that I was feeling. Could Asher attack us anywhere and at any time? Had we only gained a few seconds' reprieve because we'd surprised him? Could the agony incapacitate us again at any moment?

Our only hope was that Asher needed visual contact to make a connection. He hadn't invaded our minds until he'd seen us. Visual contact *was* necessary for Protectors who were just learning to communicate telepathically. Novice Protectors needed to see whomever they tried to communicate with, but eventually, with practice, they learned to make contact with familiar minds no matter how far away.

I clung to a desperate hope that a self-taught Asher might not be as adept as Protectors who have the advantage of learning from other Protectors, because, if Asher could reach our minds at any time, from anywhere, our mission was over. Elle and I stared intently at each other, looking for signs of a renewed attack by Asher. My relief grew cautiously with each passing second without pain.

Rajan and our security detail were hurrying toward us when we staggered out of the conference room. No doubt Elle/Ambika's unnerving wail had brought them running. When the concierge began to flutter around us, we waved him off. At my glance, one of our security team escorted him down the hall toward the elevators. After seeing our shaken expressions, our concierge looked crestfallen—the tip of his wildest dreams was vanishing like a mirage.

If we were right, and with each passing moment it appeared we were, if Asher could only enter our minds when he had visual contact, then we needed Anil and Ambika to disappear.

I spoke urgently. "Rajan, we need to get to a safe house. But first we have to talk with some people a few floors down."

Rajan looked like he wanted to say no to anything except taking us to the fastest escape route. Asking for a safe house indicated we were in extreme danger and that we needed to be taken to safety as quickly as possible. Stopping even for a brief time increased the danger. But, seeing the determined look in my eyes, he said nothing, formed up his other three men in a defensive square around us, and escorted us to the elevators.

Rajan spoke rapidly into his mobile while we waited for the elevator to arrive. No matter where we went, Rajan always had an emergency escape plan—the means to get Anil and Ambika to a safe house without being detected. He maintained safe houses all over the world, all fully equipped to hide us and a small security team, for weeks. We entered the elevator and I selected the thirty-seventh floor. As we went down, I could see that Rajan was mentally going through his checklist.

Elle/Ambika broke into his thoughts. "Rajan. Elite forces from around the world are going to be trying to find us. We are in extreme danger. You cannot make even the slightest slip."

Rajan's expression wavered, but then firmed. We'd never felt anything but cool professionalism from him, but we've long suspected that his coolness might mask an actual dislike of the Guptas. Heaven knows, in the process of pretending to be decadent and amoral, we'd given him every reason to despise us. But he had his pride and his reputation. I sensed he would do everything he could to keep us safe—including putting his own life on the line.

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While the wheels turned in Rajan's mind, Elle/Ambika added a bit more for him to think about. "You are probably going to hear through the news and Internet that we are wanted for some crime."

Rajan nodded and Elle looked at him searchingly. "None of it will be true. We have done nothing illegal—whatever else you might think of us."

Rajan was caught off balance by the emotional force and clear honesty of Elle's delivery. His professional mask slipped to reveal a complicated mix of surprise and the fondness of an old soldier for a young woman. I guess he *hadn't* despised us after all—at least not Ambika.

"Understood." He glanced at the other three guards and got their nods in return.

Rajan immediately got onto his mobile again. While he was talking, the elevator door opened and we walked to Room 3728. I knocked and moments later Anil/Hans opened the door. After telling Rajan and his team to stay in the hallway, we slipped in.

Publically connecting Anil and Ambika with Hans and Andrea Berliner wasn't the best tactic, but I wasn't too worried. If our adversaries learned about the Berliners, which they surely would, and checked up on them, which was almost a certainty, they would discover that the real Berliners had died in an automobile accident seven years ago. Further investigation would lead them nowhere.

I took the small risk because we were in a hurry. Anil and Ambika needed to disappear as quickly as possible—and that meant the real Anil and Ambika needed to do the disappearing for us. Hurriedly, we explained what had happened. They understood what was needed almost before we finished—to once again assume the roles of Anil and Ambika—and go wherever Rajan took them.

Elle/Ambika looked steadily at the real Anil and Ambika. "You will be taking a fearful risk. If Asher finds you, he could destroy your minds using the most excruciating pain imaginable. We wouldn't ask anyone to take such a risk if the stakes weren't so high."

They were standing close together, as they often did. They were Awakened at the same time when they were brother and sister. They have played the roles of siblings many times since. Even by Protector's standards, they are especially attuned to one another. We'd spent a week getting to know them before we assumed their identities. Even in that relatively short time, we'd connected with them as only fellow Protectors can. We'd learned much of who they were, mind-to-mind and heart-to-heart. Opening to another telepathically is a deeply bonding—and deeply revealing—experience.

It came as no surprise that they barely glanced at each other before the real Ambika spoke. "You would take this risk for *us*."

It was simply said but carried the weight of complete conviction. Protectors do not count the cost of their actions. Our purpose is to serve and to give our lives if necessary.

Her brother nodded. "Anyone who can inflict such pain on another human being must be stopped—whatever the sacrifice."

Though I had expected nothing less, I was still moved.

Once again, employing the magic of shape-shifting, we again became Hans and Andrea and they resumed their guises as Anil and Ambika. We gave them several mobile phone numbers that would reach Xu, but advised them to communicate sparingly and to only use untraceable phones. After nods all around, the real Anil and Ambika, who now once again *looked* like the real Anil and Ambika, opened the door to the corridor and gestured for Rajan to come in. He eyed us, now the elderly Hans and Andrea, with suspicion, but didn't say anything.

"We're just about ready. The decoys will be here in just a second."

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We all stood in uneasy silence until Rajan's phone buzzed. "Rajan here. Okay. I'm opening up."

Rajan went to the door and opened it to allow a young man and a young woman into the room. They looked enough like Anil and Ambika to pass for them at a distance. Rajan wasted no time with explanations.

"Anil, you go into the bathroom with this man and exchange clothes with him. Ambika, you go with her into the bedroom and do the same. Time is of the essence."

Scant minutes later the exchange of clothes was complete. Anil and Ambika's decoys were now wearing Armani and Saville Row, and the real Anil and Ambika were now wearing dark blue blazers and khaki pants like the rest of Rajan's security team.

Rajan handed Ambika a scarf. "It's a *hijab*, a head scarf. It will hide most of your face."

With the help of the woman decoy, Ambika got the scarf on so that her hair, forehead, and neck were covered and only part of her face visible. She took a pair of large sunglasses from her decoy and put them on. It would now be hard to recognize Ambika—even though her face was plastered on magazine covers all over the world.

Rajan nodded that he was satisfied and headed for the door. When he opened it, we could see a crowd of security people. He gestured for Anil, Ambika, and the decoys, to go out ahead of him and closed the door behind himself. We heard the tramp of feet heading away and then silence.

We sank onto a convenient couch in unison, letting out deep breaths through puffed cheeks. I was barely aware of our opulent surroundings and the room's spectacular view. With the next steps set in motion, I finally had a chance to think about the meeting upstairs.

My thoughts immediately returned to Asher's savage mental attack and turned to Elle. "You okay?"

Elle held my gaze, slowly shaking her head. "I have been physically tortured before, but I could always escape by turning my mind away from the pain. But there is no escape when the pain is *in* your mind. To keep from giving myself away I had to endure it. It was like deliberately holding my hand in a fire when I knew all I had to do to stop the pain was pull my hand out. . . ." Elle shuddered.

I reached out and we joined hands in silence. I couldn't help feeling that once again I had put Elle in mortal danger.

Reading me accurately, Elle held up her other hand, palm out, to forestall anything I might have said. "Don't even think of apologizing." Elle went on in as serious a tone as I can remember her using. "Before today, this group," she gestured vaguely toward the upper floors where we'd seen them, "was only an idea, an idea I agreed to stop. Now they are horrifyingly real. Millions have died because of them and if we don't do something to stop them millions more will die—and *they will feel absolutely nothing at all.*" Taking a deep breath, she seemed to be crystallizing her resolve. "If I have to hold my hand in fire until my fingers drop off to stop these people, so be it."

The sobering possibility of the need for such sacrifice left us silent. Still holding hands, we took strength and resolve from each other. We looked into each other's eyes and saw what we had long known: We had each other—and we had each other's back. Wordlessly, we acknowledged that we might not live through our mission. It had always been a possibility, but now it was real.

She nodded once, as if sealing an agreement. I nodded back. Elle broke the spell and asked me, "Do you think they bought our act?"

I nodded. "I think we identified everyone correctly. We may even have convinced them that we are as wacko as they are, but I can't imagine Asher, or anyone of them, for that matter, accepting us as part of the group while we hold a perpetual threat of exposure over their heads."

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"Do you think Asher was going to kill us there at the end?"

"I don't know. Maybe. I think by identifying everyone correctly we convinced him that our non-existent evidence is a threat to them, but I'm not sure I convinced him that the evidence was beyond our control—it sounded pretty farfetched even while I was saying it. Maybe he wanted to try again to terrify us into telling him where the evidence is located—or maybe he thought he could simply rip the knowledge right out of our minds."

We sat silently confronting the idea that we may have been only moments away from a nightmarish death.

Finally, as if dreading the question Elle asked, "Why was Rockshaw staring at you the whole time?"

I was dreading the question myself. "I don't know for sure, but do you remember that he recognized me as Michael Faraday when I healed him at the Dyson Center? Healing someone so near death can create a deep bond. What if that bond allowed him to recognize that Anil Gupta, too, was Michael Faraday? He may be afraid to tell Asher what happened, and why he didn't get the equations for the fifth force, or he may tell Asher if he thinks it would get him on his good side—and that would destroy any possibility of succeeding in our mission...."

As if shaking off the possibility, Elle stood up and went to look out the windows. After a bit, she looked over her shoulder to ask, "What do you think they'll do next?"

"I think they will do anything and everything they possibly can to find Anil and Ambika—and the evidence. Lucky for us, the trove of information doesn't exist. But they are going to put massive resources to work trying to find both. I hope Rajan is able to pull off a perfect disappearing act." I added, "At least we've accomplished one thing."

Elle cocked her head.

"We now know who's in the inner circle. That's far more than we knew before. We have to make use of that somehow. . . ."

I trailed off. Our adversaries, though identified, remained hidden behind impenetrable walls. We needed to find weak spots in their defenses and, at the moment, I didn't see any. I had to hope that we'd find something at Lucrezia's tonight that would show us a crack in their fortifications.

As I mused on our situation, I remembered something I'd seen during the conference call—something the terrifying avalanche of pain had all but swept out of my mind. Maybe there *was* a small crack in their defenses. I sat up abruptly. "Let's call Xu."

Elle/Andrea had been watching me as my thoughts had carried me far away. Knowing me well, she took my sudden shift in stride. I called Xu on yet another burner phone. He answered immediately.

I put him on speaker phone and we filled him in on what had just happened.

When we'd finished, Xu jumped in. "I think you made quite an impression. Hacker activity has gone off the charts in the last fifteen minutes. I'm simultaneously monitoring twenty different servers and attempts have been made to hack into almost all of them. A lot of these guys aren't even trying to cover their tracks. They must be working for legitimate intelligence agencies. They probably have warrants. Your new friends have a lot of pull."

"Have any of the hackers found anything they shouldn't?"

"They seem to be looking for personal background information about the Guptas to see if they can ferret out where they might go to ground. If Rajan's good at his job, they won't find anything. Plus, everything in Anil and Ambika's background is one-hundred percent genuine. There's nothing to worry about *there*—"

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Elle broke in. "What *is* there to worry about?"

"To make you guys irresistible bait, we secretly transferred a lot of wealth and property to the Guptas. We did a good job of eliminating our tracks, but it's possible we left some traces. Before any traces could trip us up, however, someone would have to become suspicious that your wealth was bogus before they'd try to dig for that kind of information. So far I'm not seeing anyone taking that particular approach. So far, they appear to think your wealth is genuine."

"How long do you think we have until someone stumbles on a clue?"

"Impossible to say for sure. Probably days, not weeks."

"Well, I asked you to hold back your best stuff—now is the time to use it. You can go on offense if you need to. We don't want any of these hackers finding what we're hiding." Although I couldn't see his face, I'd bet large sums that Xu was wearing a huge grin. "Don't bring down any governments." I was only half jesting.

Xu chuckled. "I'll try not to." He was only half jesting, too. "What are you guys going to do next?"

I paused for a moment before answering. "We need to figure out how to get to the Six before the Six get to us."

"The Six?!"

I laughed. Xu and Elle had both spoken at the same moment—and reacted the same way—half surprised, half aggrieved.

"Well, what *else* should we call them?"

Silence. I had them there.

"Whatever we call them, right now these people appear to be unbeatable. Even if we did have the evidence we pretend to have, releasing it would only slow them down. If we hope to break their hold on power for good, we've got to learn more about them. Tonight, I hope we'll find something in Lucrezia's safe that reveals a weak point."

Elle spoke up. "It's pretty much the only thing we have to follow up on."

I nodded, but added after a moment, "There may be one other possibility. It's a long shot, but we may have been given a clue to the location of one other member of the group."

I hadn't had time to mention this to Elle. She looked questioningly at me.

"Did you notice that Chin was the only one of the Six who had anything other than a blank wall behind him?"

Elle's eyes narrowed when I said "the Six" again, but then unfocused as she searched her memory. After a bit she brightened. "He had a window behind him!"

"And do you remember what you could see through the window?"

Elle thought for a moment. "It was the flank of a hill."

"Right. But not just any hill. Do you also remember that, at the top of the hill, there was a tall pole with a red banner?"

Elle paused and then nodded. Eureka!

"I think that red banner is one of four that fly atop one of the most famous locations in all of China—the pyramid tomb of Chin Huang Shi, First Emperor of China. I visited there years ago and, if my memory serves, it means Chin participated in that video conference within eyesight of his own tomb! Xu, can you check it out and see if a red banner was flying there today?"

"You got it. And good luck at Lucrezia's little place in the country."

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Darkness found us once again hovering hundreds of feet over the countess' palace. Tonight, however, we knew a lot more than we had the previous night. Fiona had studied the data our little flying spy had gathered and, while we were in Dubai, had also gone back to Father Lupo's monastery to talk again with *Signor* Bonciorno. She'd put all her information together to create an accurate floor plan of the palace.

She'd also come up with a detailed plan for getting into Lucrezia's safe.

Before we'd left for Dubai, Elle had demonstrated for Fiona what she was capable of doing. Fiona had looked in turns stunned and delighted. By the time we returned, Fiona had moved through both reactions and factored Elle's abilities into her plans as if she'd known about them all her life. Elle raised an amused eyebrow or two when Fiona described her plan—but agreed that she could do what Fiona wanted.

Now it was time to turn her plan into action.

As Elle slowly brought us down, Fiona and I turned back-to-back and scanned the grounds with our night-vision goggles. None of the guards so much as looked our way before we landed out of their sight at a pre-selected spot close by one of the four small domes—the dome that provided a roof for Lucrezia's bedroom.

Fiona, confident that we would not be seen, pantomimed drawing a circle on a section of the roof just in front of us. Elle glanced around her. She studied the dome and the terracotta-tiled roof. She was particularly interested in the windows that ringed the cupola which were visible just above our heads. I suspected I knew what she was doing. She was assessing the thickness of the walls and the construction of the roof. Elle's next feat would depend on an accurate assessment.

Even opening locks, which Elle does with apparent ease, depends on her being able to visualize the tumblers inside. Her skill *is* an art, but an art she works at very hard. Elle's idea of relaxation is studying locks. Her favorite gift from me was an obscure book on Russian bank vaults. When Elle opens a lock, she visualizes the hidden mechanism in her mind's eye before she "moves" anything. If telekinetic force is used without an exact knowledge of a lock's working parts, either nothing happens, because you've moved nothing but air, or something bad happens, because you've broken something vital.

Most Protectors can easily apply telekinetic force. I could easily crush a house or hurl a car through the air. I'd released so much telekinetic energy in Rockshaw's torture chamber that the energy had ripped up through many floors and out the roof. Wielding telekinetic energy is the easy part, but without exercising fine control, and without the right visualization, I couldn't open a single lock.

Apparently satisfied with her examination of the dome and its windows, Elle turned her focus to the roof just before her. As we watched, a narrow, triangle-shaped outline of light appeared. I turned to watch Fiona. I'd seen Elle do this before. What I really wanted to see was Fiona's reaction. I was amused by the wide-eyed wonder on Fiona's face as a wedge-shaped six-foot-long and two-foot-thick section of the roof began to rise noiselessly like a piece of pie floating out of the pan.

As Fiona and I watched the wedge of the roof emerge, our night-vision goggles allowed us to see the cross-section of tiles, wood, and plaster of which it was composed. I nodded, uselessly, since no one was looking at me, but what I saw confirmed what I'd guessed: Elle had chosen the triangular shape to avoid any major structural elements—no beams had been severed. If any beams *had* been severed, we might have found ourselves buried under a big pile of rubble.

The pie-slice of roof rose above our heads and stopped. Without any change of expression, Elle levitated herself over the wedge-shaped hole she had created and dropped into complete darkness.

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Seconds later I felt myself rise. I, too, was levitated over to the hole, then descended into the darkness. Moments later I felt solid ground beneath my feet. I moved out of the way as Elle brought Fiona down to join us. Once Fiona was safely on the ground, Elle lowered the wedge of roof back into place. There was a faint shimmer of light around the edges and then complete darkness.

We were in.

It was so dark where we stood that not even our night-vision goggles showed us anything. I pulled the goggles down around my neck and turned on a tiny light fixed to a strap around my forehead. As Fiona had assured us, we were in a storeroom. It was long, narrow, slightly curving, with a very high ceiling.

The storeroom's inside curving wall supported the dome. Its outside curving wall was obscured by scores of paintings slotted into vertical racks. Fiona had learned from Signore Bonciorno that Lucrezia's apartments were ringed round with rooms full of valuable furniture and art—especially art. Judging by the few paintings I could see, we were standing near countless millions of dollars of probably stolen treasures.

At one end of the storeroom was a single door. I was surprised to find it unlocked—in fact, it had no lock at all. After listening carefully, I cautiously opened the door and then understood why. We were in one of several connected storerooms arranged in a gentle curve around the heavy wall that supported the dome. Walking through two more rooms, I found a locked door through which all the connected storerooms were accessed. There was a line of light shining along the bottom edge. According to Fiona's floor plan, this light was coming from a passageway. I put an ear to the door. Satisfied that I could hear no sound, I slowly levered the door handle downward. This door *was* locked. Good. We had no intention of going out. But we didn't want anyone coming in, either. I returned to Elle and Fiona, softly closing the door of our storeroom behind me.

While I was exploring, Fiona was getting oriented. To ensure she was in the proper place, she shone her headlamp up at the ceiling several times, she then used a cloth measuring tape to determine her exact position. After a few minutes, she nodded to herself, went to the inner wall that supported the dome, and once again pantomimed the drawing of a circle—this time with a bit more precision.

Elle directed her headlamp at the place Fiona had indicated. A shimmer appeared where Fiona had indicated. A section of wall, circular this time, emerged like a cork from a bottle. Elle drew it across the room, where it hovered at the same height at which it had emerged from the wall.

The removed section had left a cavity behind—not a hole going all the way through the wall. The cavity was about half a meter deep. As prearranged, Elle began to remove thinner, wafer-like sections, one after the other, deepening the cavity about a centimeter at a time. Once she had removed a wafer, she floated it over to join the still-hovering section she had removed, and with a flash of light, the hovering section and the wafer merged into one piece.

After each wafer was removed, Fiona shone her light inside the slowly deepening cavity. Each time she shook her head no. I lost count of how many wafers Elle removed. The hovering section was now about a meter thick. When the next thin wafer was removed, Fiona made her usual inspection. This time she looked more closely. She looked back at us with a triumphant grin and pointed to a spot where a shiny bit of metal was showing.

Elle allowed herself a smile and removed only a paper-thin wafer. After the wafer floated out of the hole, we saw a shiny metal surface about half a meter square in the back of the cavity. Fiona gave Elle an excited thumbs up—her plan was working. After a score of paper-thin layers had been

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removed, the shiny metal vanished, and a dark hole took its place. We were looking into Lucrezia's safe—from the back.

Back-slapping congratulations were in order, but they would have to wait. Now we needed to proceed in the deepest silence. With the back of the safe removed by Elle's impressive skills—and Fiona's clever planning—only the safe's front door blocked any sounds we might make from reaching the next room. And we have every reason to believe that Lucrezia was lying in her bed, asleep, only meters away from her safe. Waking her was not part of our plan.

Fiona stepped into the hole and shined a tiny penlight into the back of the safe, carefully memorizing the position of all its contents. Then she reached in and slowly withdrew the leather-bound book that Lucrezia—when she thought her rooms were on fire—had saved before all her other treasures.

Its leather cover was cracked and seamed. It may have been red at one time but had now faded to a murky brown. It was hefty, the size of a magazine but several inches thick. I opened it with care. What we saw was a series of handwritten entries no more than a sentence or two in length. All in Italian. Each one dated. All the dates on the page we examined had been entered in the year 1845.

I leafed through the pages until I found an entry made this week—about two-thirds of the way through the book—beyond that the pages were blank. Then I turned to the first page. The earliest date was in 1493. Lucrezia had been thirteen. The handwriting appeared to be the same throughout, but the writing in the first pages of the book was done with antiquated quills, by the end, the writing was done with modern pens.

We were looking at over five-hundred years of Lucrezia's hand-written entries. There was no time now to read them. While Elle stood patiently, effortlessly keeping several tons of stone and masonry hovering in the air, Fiona turned pages in the countess' book as I photographed them. We began with the most recent entries and worked backward. We made rapid progress. The dates on the last page I had photographed were from 1578. We had less than a hundred years to go.

Our steady concentration was shattered when we heard a noise. Someone had entered one of the storerooms that connected to ours. We shut off our headlamps and froze. Moments later, light appeared under our door. Even the thin line of light was enough to reveal a tableau we could not let anyone see: three people in black camouflage, the open back of Lucrezia's safe, and an enormous hunk of wall hovering in midair.

Only an unlocked door stood between us and our unwelcome visitor.

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## Chapter 29

Getting caught was not an option. Not only would we get caught, we'd be caught doing something impossible—at least impossible as understood by most people: Large, heavy objects simply do not float in midair.

Another light came on, now in the room directly next to us. The light under the door became even brighter. It was clear the visitor was coming our way. Wracking my brain for what to do, a memory of how a basic door handle works surfaced in the nick of time: I telekinetically broke the connection between the handle and the bolt that went into the door jamb.

Our unseen visitor tried the door handle several times and then hit the door in frustration. "*Merda!*"

I caught Fiona's eye, then tilted my head to the safe. Fiona gathered up the book and carefully placed Lucrezia's journal exactly where it had been before. I couldn't help but note her cool head in a crisis. No hesitation. No nervous movements. Just business-like calm. A decade or more of robbing banks was obviously good preparation for our line of work.

The moment Fiona stepped out of the way, Elle guided the immense section of wall back toward the hole. Once it began to re-enter the wall, she slowed its movement to nerve-wracking slowness. I knew that she didn't want to make a sound—Lucrezia might hear any grating or grinding—but it seemed to take forever. I let out a sigh of relief when at last I saw the subtle flash of light as the giant plug merged seamlessly into the wall.

Elle was already looking up to the ceiling when we heard voices coming our way. The voices were muted but clear.

"Luigi, it is an old door. What do you expect? Old things break. We should leave it and fix it in the morning. We might wake up Her Highness." There was more than a little sarcasm in his tone when he said "Her Highness."

"Be quiet, you old fool. Get this door open. If I don't inspect every room in my charge, I will lose my head. But be as quiet as possible. If you wake her, we'll both lose our heads."

I heard the sound of a metal tool being applied to the handle. Once a few screws were removed, the handles would fall off and the bolt could be withdrawn from the door jamb by hand.

I looked up to see what progress Elle was making at getting us out of here. I could make out a faint rim of stars around the section of ceiling that Elle was slowly levitating up. Just then I heard the door handles tumble to the floor with multiple clunks—one on their side, one on ours. Seconds later, I heard the bolt being moved sideways.

We weren't going to make it.

Suddenly, I was drawn upward, as was Fiona, and together we joined Elle hovering in the darkness just below the high ceiling and directly over the door. Elle flattened us as close to the ceiling as possible. The door opened, letting in more light and banishing some of our concealing shadow. Two men entered.

The older of the two, dressed in rough workman's clothes, the top of his balding head shiny in reflected light from the other room, knelt down and examined the lock. The younger man, Luigi, wore the uniform of Lucrezia's guards. He reached out and turned a knob. Light flooded the room. All shadows fled. All either man had to do was look up. It crossed my mind for a split second that I would enjoy seeing the expressions on their faces. . . .

While the repairman muttered about old, shoddy workmanship, the guard walked the length of the racks which held Lucrezia's ill-gotten art. He'd brought a clipboard and was slowly and

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meticulously ticking off item after item. Obviously a familiar routine and one that, apparently, required no hurry. After about a thousand years, Luigi finished and walked back to the door where the baffled repairman was still shaking his head.

"Come on, old man. You can fix it in the morning."

The old man glanced at him with a perplexed look on his face. "I don't know, I've never seen anything break like this before."

As he offered Luigi a view of the odd break, a drop of sweat rolled down my face and fell toward the old man. I managed to arrest its fall only inches above his bald pate. It hung in the air, light sparkling from it like a dewdrop in the sun.

Luigi pushed back his cap as he examined the broken handle he'd been handed. He examined it for an eternity, then he shrugged. "What does it matter? You said yourself it was old. Let's go. I'm behind on my rounds."

The two men left, leaving the broken door open. When we heard the outer door open and close, the three of us let out a collective breath. My errant drop of sweat hit the floor with a quiet splat.

Lucrezia's entries proved to be worth the thousand years of suspense Luigi had given us.

We'd made it back to our hotel well before dawn. After our escape we'd hovered above the palace. We'd wanted to make sure no alarms sounded, no shouted excitement ensued. After about thirty minutes we were satisfied we'd made a clean escape. Elle must have been pleased, because, once we were well away from the compound, she sent Fiona into a fresh fit of giggles by performing a few loop-the-loops.

Back in our rooms, we grabbed a laptop and uploaded the photos of Lucrezia's journal. It would've been fascinating reading for someone who was fascinated by the skin-crawling worst of human nature—I had to force myself to keep reading. We were looking at a logbook of blackmail, extortion, and murder. Lucrezia had kept a record of every scrap of information she'd ever discovered that could be used to twist people to her ends. An initial entry about some transgression Lucrezia had thought she could use to coerce or destroy someone was often followed by entries indicating what she'd done with her dangerous knowledge—a neat and tidy record of the suffering, shame, humiliation, and death she had inflicted on her victims for over five hundred years.

All the entries referred to people by their initials only, and, maddeningly, we could only guess to whom she was referring. After hours of translating everything for Fiona, she noticed an unexpected pattern: There were a few instances of multiple entries referring to the same set of initials that spanned centuries—far longer than ordinary people live. Fiona was not only the first to notice the pattern, she was also the first to understand what it meant.

"She's keeping dirt on the others in the Six!"

Closer examination proved her right. There were many entries about other members of the Six. Entries regarding AS began about three hundred and fifty years ago. Entries regarding HD began about two hundred years ago. AS for Abdul Saud and HD for Humphrey Davy, now Rockshaw. We eventually found entries for JA—Julia Aggripina—and simply C for Chin. We even found entries for A—Asher.

The entries about her fellow members of the inner circle showed, among other things, that there was no love lost among them. Lucrezia and Julia passionately hated each other, Abdul and Rockshaw had fallen out for half a century, and Lucrezia's poisonous spite showed through in many entries about Chin. Only Asher held them together—and he did so with fear.

A recent entry was, "HD missed fifth force. A very angry."

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Elle noticed something else. There were other entries about an R and a P which covered more than a normal lifespan. The entries for R were mixed in among the oldest entries we had, and then ended around 1860—a span of over three hundred years.

As far as we could piece together from Lucrezia's listing of his blackmail-worthy transgressions, R lived his last fifty years in America where he'd been a Senator from Georgia.

The very last entry for R, dated 1854, read, "A upset with R—slave profits down—skimming?"

Had R been too greedy and stolen from Asher? Had Asher killed off someone to whom he had given the secret of immortality? The entries in Lucrezia's log for P had also ended some time ago. Had there been more than six members of Asher's inner circle in the past? Seven? Eight? More? Less?

Reading Lucrezia's entries made it obvious that not one of the Six trusted any of the others; instead, there was a great deal of fear of betrayal.

When the entries began to blur together, I let my thoughts drift through the information and got a glimmer of an idea. I thought I saw a weakness in their defenses. If I was right, it might give us a way to stop the Six from consolidating their power. The outlines of a plan began to form in my mind. Elle had been watching me as I stared off into space. When my eyes suddenly returned to focus, she raised an eyebrow.

"I think I've got a new plan!"

Elle began counting off on her fingers. "Let's see, there was Plan A, Plan B, Plan C, Plan D. . . ." When she got to her little finger, she looked up with pretended innocence. "Plan E?"

"A *new* Plan A, thank you very much."

Fiona giggled.

"So what's the *new* Plan A?"

"A Trojan Horse."

I got blank looks.

"You know. The Greeks left a wooden horse as a gift for the Trojans. The Trojans pulled it into their city, and the Greek soldiers who were hidden inside came out in the dead of night and opened the city gates—" I stopped. They were both looking at me with expressions of exaggerated patience. "Right, right. You know the story. Here's how I think we can do the same thing to the Six."

As I shared my idea with Elle and Fiona, an actual plan took shape. New ideas flooded my mind so rapidly I barely had time to share one before another took its place. Their eyes began to light up. Soon they were offering suggestions themselves.

After about an hour of animated discussion, we ran out of steam, but not before we felt convinced that we had a plan that really would stop the Six from consolidating their power, not just temporarily, but perhaps permanently. Many things would have to go our way for the plan to work, and we would have a lot to do before the plan could be put in motion, but if—if—we could pull it off, we were certain it would neutralize the Six.

Feeling newly energized, I scrambled over to my bag, grabbed another prepaid phone, and called Xu. Before he could say a word, I began, "Xu, we need to go to Milliefiore. Let Jonathon know we're coming, and alert Andrew that we need him and his team to create a masterpiece: A modern-day Trojan Horse." I explained the plan to Xu and told him to expect a zip file of the pictures of Lucrezia's journal right after this call. "We're going to start creating some soldiers. Tell Andrew to get started on the horse."

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Xu said he would contact Jonathon right away and get the pictures to Andrew. Then he added, "By the way, you were right about the red banners flying from the top of Chin's tomb. They've been there for decades. There are four of them, just as you remembered, one at each corner of the flattened top of the pyramid."

"Good work. I have a feeling we're going to need to pay the pyramid a visit. Anything else?"

"Have you seen the news since we last talked?"

"No. We've been kinda busy."

"Well, the Guptas are in the news everywhere: TV, Internet, newspapers, you name it. Anil and Ambika are wanted for questioning by the police. There's a worldwide manhunt underway. No official reason has been given as to why they're wanted, but hints have been not-so-subtly dropped that they are suspected of running an international drug cartel."

There was more. While we'd been breaking into Lucrezia's safe, French and Monacan police with warrants had arrived at our Monte Carlo castle and conducted a thorough search. Simultaneously, our ancestral home in Pune and our vacation home in Bali had been exhaustively searched by Indian and Balinese police, our planes and cars had been searched, our computers seized, and bank accounts frozen. The same story was hinted at everywhere—the Guptas were suspected of smuggling illegal drugs.

Elle had been right to warn Rajan that we'd be accused of some crime.

Xu added yet more. "These guys don't mess around. They're using about a million police and intelligence agents to do their work for them. If Anil and Ambika are actually found, they'll simply disappear again, this time into Asher's tender custody."

We were all silent at the prospect.

A few hours later, we were aboard a jet chartered in Palermo, bound for London. As usual, Elle was at the controls. I was in the co-pilot's seat, once again hoping nothing would go wrong. I did know how to fly but was nearly hopeless at talking with air traffic control.

Elle and I had become Alejandro and Odetta Morales from Barcelona. Elle was round and plump. I was skinny as a stick. We owned bottling plants in several countries. Fiona was still traveling as herself. If anyone asked about her, we'd say we were doing a favor for friends by taking their daughter along with us. We had little choice since Fiona could neither shape-shift nor did she have multiple sets of ID. Once we got to Milliefiore, we'd get her set up with several alternative identities. Before we flew to Milliefiore, however, we were going to stop in London and New York to create a couple of soldiers for the Trojan Horse.

Elle abruptly jumped out of the pilot's seat and gesturing at my co-pilot's controls. "Would you please fly the plane? I promised Fi I'd start teaching her telekinesis."

"Okay, but you have to be back in the pilot's seat before we get anywhere near Heathrow ground control."

She gave me a pitying glance. For Fiona's benefit, she shook her head sadly and said as they headed out of the cockpit, "The poor man would be nowhere without me. Rather than talk to an air traffic controller, he'd fly in circles until the plane crashed into the sea. There was a time in. . . ." Her voice trailed off into a murmur as they made their way into the passenger area of the plane.

I sat in the co-pilot's seat and checked the gauges. Autopilot was set. Skies were clear. I relaxed. I soon heard the sound of breaking china, followed by a lot of laughter. Minutes later, the plane shuddered violently, accompanied by the sounds of wrenching plastic and buckling metal. Just as abruptly it stopped. I checked all the gauges but could see nothing wrong.

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Elle raced into the cockpit and slid into the pilot's seat. She, too, checked all the gauges and after a few seconds let out a relieved breath. "Remind me in future not to train people in telekinesis while in an airplane..." she smiled happily, "...but Fi has unbelievable potential."

After landing at Heathrow, we took a taxi to London's Savoy, where Elle/Odetta Morales took a sumptuous suite. We stayed about an hour. That was all the time we needed to create the first "soldier" for Andrew to put in our Trojan Horse.

We made one more stop in New York before heading on to Aspen. The Morales took another suite, this time at the Plaza. We spent all of fifteen minutes in one of the most expensive places on earth, then headed back to the airport. We'd created soldier number two.

Fiona turned to me with a grin as we headed for JFK. "Expensive sets."

I nodded and grinned in return. "Worth every penny if our plan works."

That was some hours ago. Now we were about to land at Aspen's airport. We arrived around 5:30 PM local time. When we got off the plane, there was just enough daylight to see that the mountains were covered in a thick blanket of snow. This time of year people were arriving by the thousands to ski, be seen skiing, or at least be seen, at one of the most famous resorts in the world.

No skiing for us, however. We had other plans. A limousine met us and whisked us away. We arrived at Milliefiore in thirty minutes.

We pulled up to the familiar portico in the dark. Jonathon was standing in the entryway to greet us. As always, Jonathon dressed with casual beauty: soft clothes in exquisite colors. This evening, his white cotton pants set off a deep azure silk shirt, complementing his dark complexion and shining eyes. Jonathon not only liked to wear things of beauty, he liked to surround himself with beauty.

Unfortunately, there was no time to see what new and beautiful blooming wonders Jonathon might show us. There would be no peaceful evening spent enjoying Milliefiore's exquisite beauty, and no morning arising to the enthralling view of mountains and aspens. We had much to do tonight and we needed to get to it as soon as possible. We'd return one day soon to soak in the peace and the beauty. We always did.

I had spoken to Jonathon at length from the plane as we flew from New York. I'd told him about Lucrezia's journal and my plan for bringing down the Six. Knowing the urgency of the situation, Jonathon greeted us warmly but briefly. Almost immediately he began walking, and we fell in behind.

Over his shoulder, he said, "As you know, Andrew is already working on your Trojan Horse. He's also brought in some special help." He gave Elle a mysteriously playful smile.

We passed through Milliefiore's largest room. It was decorated in gray and white, with magenta accents. I admired anew the velvet-white orchids blooming on climbing lianas; their intense aroma suffused the room.

Passing through several more adjoining rooms, we headed down a long corridor and soon reached a dead end. At least it would be a dead end for most people. While Milliefiore is home to many Protectors, there are others who visit or work here who are not yet Awakened. For them the corridor appears to end in a secluded alcove containing a small wooden bench, a trickling bamboo fountain, and a triptych depicting a Japanese garden in bloom, a nice quiet place for rest and contemplation, one more lovely touch found at Milliefiore.

For Protectors, the inviting nook is actually a door.

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Once Jonathon, Elle, Fiona, and I had entered the alcove, it began to rotate. Jonathon was using his well-honed abilities to spin several tons of wall and floor on a pivot under the wall. Jonathon spun us around one hundred and eighty degrees. Anyone on the other side of the wall would now see an identical bench, fountain, and triptych.

Andrew, the Protectors' master forger, was waiting for us. He wore an eager expression. My request for a Trojan Horse, complete with soldiers, would be an intriguing change from his usual tasks. There were only brief hugs all around, for Andrew, too, knew we were in a hurry. He led off down a gently sloping tunnel. The tunnel had been hewn out of the native Colorado granite; the walls were rough, but the floor was smooth and wide enough for two people to walk abreast. Several flights of stairs took us deeper and deeper underground. After a few more minutes of steady descent, we reached a closed metal door. Andrew, with a slightly dramatic flair for Fiona's benefit, opened the door and ushered us through.

Fiona's wide blue eyes opened even wider. We were on a balcony overlooking a natural cavern. The cavern, like all things at Milliefiore, was exquisitely displayed. Hidden lights subtly revealed colorfully-striated columns which rose into a dimly-seen ceiling and marched into the distance out of sight.

Its size was lost on Fiona, at least for now. Her attention was on the foreground, her eyes riveted on a series of curving, overlapping opalescent pools, from whose perfectly-still, clear waters grew enormous amethyst crystals, some taller than a man. Unique in all the world, they had grown for eons in the darkness, but now several light sources illuminated the crystal shafts, making them scintillate in exquisite deep purple and violet.

Though I'd seen the amethyst formation many times, I never tired of the experience. The crystals gave off much more than reflected light. They poured forth a healing balm which I had often gratefully received. We all remembered the first time we'd seen and felt the wonder of this magical formation and gave Fiona a long measure of silence as she took it in.

After a moment or two Andrew interrupted Fiona's steady gaze. He gestured to his left. "My workshop."

He was pointing to a nearby area free of natural columns. A space was enclosed by transparent interlocking wall and ceiling panels to create a workspace about fifty feet on a side and twelve feet high. Three sides and the ceiling of the crystal-clear structure looked out into the cavern; the fourth side was formed by a wall of the cavern.

In the brightly lit interior of the workshop, we could see desks and workbenches, computers and numerous instruments. We made our way down a staircase and across the cavern floor to enter a small antechamber. Here we all donned clean-room gear: booties, coveralls, and headgear designed to keep the workshop particle-free. Entering, I could hear the faint sounds of air being run through filters and the chill of the cavern was replaced with a pleasing warmth.

A woman waited patiently to greet us. Despite the bulky clean-room suit and hair cap, she still managed to look elegant: high cheekbones, porcelain skin, and clear gray-blue eyes. Now I understood the meaning of Jonathon's playful smile for Elle. Elle rushed over to give the waiting woman a generous hug.

Turning to Fiona, Elle said, "Fiona, I'd like you to meet Audrey Champlain—my most recent mother."

After taking in "most recent mother," Fiona stammered out, "Pleased to meet you."

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Her expression made us all laugh. Fiona was still learning, although at a rapid pace. Fiona joined in the laughter. She knew ours was shared amusement, not amusement at her expense. Among Protectors many things are cause for laughter. Joy is our natural state.

Introductions over, we went to a table where we could show Andrew, Audrey, and Jonathon the results of our brief stays at the Savoy and the Plaza. Next, Andrew showed us what he and Audrey had accomplished using the pictures of Lucrezia's journal that Xu had sent them.

Audrey pointed to some journal pages that she'd printed. "Having so many pages to look at made it easy to copy Lucrezia's handwriting. Luckily, we have Renaissance-era paper available. . . ."

As Audrey spoke, she pointed vaguely in the direction of a metal door in the cavern wall that made up the fourth side of the workshop. I knew the door opened into a gigantic storeroom which had been mined out of the rock. It was bursting with a forger's raw materials: old books and papers, period paintings and canvasses, inks and authentic ink-making materials from all over the world.

The storeroom also contains troves of blank passports, credit cards, drivers' licenses, visas, pilots' licenses, and any other form of identification in use anywhere in the world. From this workshop, Andrew is able to produce the cover identities for the hundreds of Protectors around the world. He is also able to create masterpiece forgeries of almost anything—from ancient manuscripts to modern audio and video recordings.

Andrew and Audrey were old hands at this. They had been artists in the lives in which they had Awakened. Audrey had been Botticelli. Andrew, whom we sometimes call Angelo, the world had known as Fra Angelico. In Florence, he'd left behind a treasure of delicately sensitive frescos lovingly painted on the walls of his fellow monk's cells.

They made an excellent team and they'd need all their past knowledge and present skills to pull off what I had in mind.

We spent the next hour going over all the work they had already done, then I described in detail the rest of my ideas, Elle and Fiona chiming in with their own suggestions. Next, Elle and I made a series of recordings. Andrew had already assembled as many different kinds of recording devices, old and new, as he could round up. There were wire, reel-type, and cassette recorders, as well as myriad modern digital devices from MP3 recorders to cell phones. Elle and I, in various forms, made recordings on all of them, using a sound studio in one corner of the storeroom.

After a few hours, we'd done all we could with what we had, but the conviction had been growing in me that what we had wasn't enough. If the Trojan Horse was going to work, we needed something more. We needed an undefeatable soldier—a super-soldier—to put inside our Trojan Horse, and I wasn't confident that we could create one with what we had.

I looked at Elle. "It's not enough, is it?"

She paused before answering. "Maybe. I'm not sure. Lucrezia's journal gives us lots of ammunition for our soldiers. But, even if it isn't enough, what else can we do?" Elle watched me intently, waiting for my answer.

"Andrew and Audrey have days of work left to do and there's nothing we can do to help; we've already done our bit. Let's follow up on the red banner we saw over Chin's shoulder. Let's go to China and see if we can find him. If we can, maybe we'll find something as useful as Lucrezia's journal."

"You think a hillside and a red banner will be enough to go on? China is a mighty big place. He could be anywhere. He might not be in China at all."

"I know. It's a long shot . . . but I'm feeling more and more strongly that we should go."

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"Okay, that's enough for me."

And it was enough for her. Her complete trust still surprises me sometimes.

She continued, "Should we bring Fiona?"

"Might as well. It will be good training. And something tells me we're going to need her to operate our little flying spy."

Before we left Milliefiore, we made a stop in Jonathon's study to tell him about our China plans and, while we were there, to contact Xu.

Xu's face came up on our monitor as clear as if he were sitting opposite us. He looked as he always did, bright-eyed and cheerful. This despite the fact that he has been sitting at his monitors fully-focused for several days, single-handedly doing the work of a dozen people.

"Keeping the wolves at bay?" I asked.

Xu grinned. He was eager to tell an appreciative audience what he'd been up to. "I took out one hacker's servers with a virus, got a nasty worm past the firewall of a group of Russian secret service guys—their servers should go down any time now—and I've got a whole bunch of guys chasing a big chunk of data all over the world. If they ever find it, and then decrypt it, they'll get to enjoy the last two World Cup games."

We laughed, then Xu's expression became more serious. "The Guptas are safe, so far, but there's been no letup in the hunt. The police and secret services of more countries than I can count are beating the bushes. Every record or property even remotely connected with the Guptas has been seized or searched."

"Any word from Rajan?"

"He sent me the all-clear code just a few minutes ago."

Rajan had no idea who Xu was. All he knew was that if everything was okay, he, or a trusted lieutenant, was to send a coded text every hour to a prearranged number. If Xu didn't get the all-clear code, it would mean that Anil and Ambika had been discovered or were on the move. If Xu didn't get an all clear code for several hours, it would mean the worst: Anil and Ambika had been captured.

Anil and Ambika were safe for the moment, but time was against us.

It was a matter of when, not if, Anil and Ambika were captured. Once captured how long could they hold out against Asher's powerful mind? How long could Xu keep our cover from being blown? The answer to all these questions was the same: Not long at all.

We had to get moving. I felt, with unexplainable certainty that, if we were going to have a chance to bring down the Six, we needed more than we had—and what we had seen behind Chin during the virtual conference with the Six was the only other clue we had to where we might find more.

"Buy us as much time as you can Xu. We need a few more days...."

We flew commercial—one doesn't just fly a private jet into China—landed at the airport for Xi'an around noon local time. We were now the Meriwethers: Susan, John, and our daughter, Hyacinth. We had British passports and a Kensington address. I was short, stout, and tweedy. Elle/Susan was slim, almost six feet tall, and dressed in sensible travel clothes and shoes. Fiona/Hyacinth looked like, well, Fiona, since she couldn't yet shape-shift.

We arrived in Xi'an just as the sun was going down, too late to go to Chin's pyramid tomb. I chafed at the delay but we had no choice but to wait until morning. The odds against our finding

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where Chin had been during our video conference meeting were already a thousand-to-one; trying to do so in the dark would make the odds a million-to-one.

So we took a taxi to the Xi'an Garden Hotel, which, if we'd actually spent any time there, would have been a pleasant place to stay. We checked in, had a dinner for form's sake, and then headed out for a walk to get a feel for things. As we strolled along through the busy evening crowds, Elle unexpectedly stopped and moved out of the flow of walkers. Her face took on an unfocused expression, as if her thoughts were far away.

After a moment, she looked my way and her face lit with a huge smile. "He's here! Sifu Sanfeng is here in Xi'an! He just flashed me a message."

Elle shot me an image of our old friend. We had overseen his training, and his Awakening, a very long time ago. Such an experience forms an eternal bond. We had thought he would be in Beijing, but in the instant I received the image from Elle, I understood that Sanfeng was here in Xi'an for only a few days, giving special instruction at a Tai Chi school a few streets away from where we stood.

Fiona was looking back and forth between us and finally couldn't stand it any longer. "What?!"

Elle looked at Fiona and smiled. "You ready for some more training?"

Fiona grinned; no answer required. We set off immediately.

Fiona's usual curiosity bubbled up. "How did he know we were here?"

"Call it the Protectors' grapevine. Jonathon no doubt sent out mental messages to the other Protectors alerting them about our trip."

"Who is Sifu Sanfeng?"

"Sifu means master. Master Sanfeng is an itinerant Tai Chi teacher—and a Protector. He now goes by the name of Chen Xiaowang. But he's really a Chinese legend."

Elle's answer just raised more questions for Fiona but she had to be content with it for the moment.

Elle led the way to a door between two storefronts. We entered, ascended a staircase and discovered that the upper floors of several stores had been combined to create a spacious, high-ceilinged temple. Statues of Taoist masters, set between bright-red columns and flanked by dragon-and-lion-guardian statues, sat in front of a richly-carved altar at the far end, where candle flames wavered gently. Wafting incense smoke filled the temple with its rich scent.

In the middle of the temple stood four rows of students, young and old, male and female, dressed in white tunics and black pants. Before them, moving through Bend the Bow and Shoot the Tiger, was Sanfeng, the man they knew as Chen Xiaowang. He appeared to be an old man, bald and thin. But his movements belied his appearance. He radiated enormous presence, his graceful motions centered and powerful.

He completed his demonstration, looked toward his students and saw us waiting patiently. His face lit with pleasure. He practically ran over to us with the enthusiasm of a young man, and to his students' round-eyed surprise, bowed to us with the deepest respect: us, a tweedy-ish English father and matronly mother, and a tattooed, black-and-crimson-haired young woman with enough ear piercings for the entire class. We returned the bow with the same degree of respectful inclination but none of us could resist the humor of the odd situation. When Elle began to chuckle, the dam broke and our laughter flooded out. Sanfeng's students listened in further astonishment as their highly-revered visiting teacher began to laugh like a child.

Eventually catching his breath, Sanfeng asked us in Mandarin if we would like to observe his class.

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Elle spoke in English. "Of course. May Fiona join your students?"

There was the barest flicker of surprise from Sanfeng and then he gestured for Fiona to join the other students.

Fiona looked at Elle for reassurance.

"Just follow along. You'll understand."

Fiona shyly joined the front row of students and after a few moments began to mimic Sanfeng's movements. Though the veriest beginner in Tai Chi, Fiona had a profound advantage over the other students: She could feel her life force as if it were a tangible thing. It was obvious as we watched her that she felt her *chi* flowing from her core and through her arms and legs. During one slow, circular movement of her arms, I noticed all the altar-candles guttering as if blown by a gentle wind.

Sanfeng dismissed the class thirty minutes later. They filed out, casting curious glances at Elle and me as they went. They looked at Fiona as if she were an exotic creature from another world. After the students left, Sanfeng locked the door behind them.

Turning back to us, he looked at Fiona and spoke in English. "You have just recently Awakened?"

"Sticks right out, does it?"

Sanfeng laughed at her directness. "You are most fortunate to have such teachers. It was my great good fortune to be Awakened by them. I was doubly blessed that it was Elle who taught me to control my *chi*. None compare to her." Sanfeng bowed to us again, longer and more deeply than before.

Fiona looked at Elle and me with new eyes and, I thought, a measure of awe. I didn't want her to become overwhelmed. She was, after all, Awakened, and would one day be a teacher herself, even as we have been privileged to be teachers for so many.

I decided to lighten the moment. "Elle, Sanfeng, why don't you show Fiona the dance?"

Elle's face lit up. It had been nearly nine hundred years since she'd performed her "dance" with Sanfeng. Without a word, Elle gestured for Sanfeng to join her in the middle of the temple. He wore a pleased smile of anticipation.

I turned to Fiona and spoke in an undertone. "Elle created the dance to help Sanfeng become aware of his life force. Someone who knows Tai Chi well would see in it the essence of all Tai Chi forms and movements. The dance is the foundation for all Sanfeng's work as a Protector. Sanfeng started all six schools of Tai Chi by assuming new guises in different eras and varying locations. Even though he tried to keep his true identity a secret, somehow the truth of his long life got out, and a popular legend grew that Sifu Sanfeng was immortal. He became the subject of many mythic and fantastic tales. Ironically, the core of the legend *is* true. But only Protectors know that this unassuming itinerant teacher is actually the still-living Sifu Sanfeng."

As I spoke, Elle and Sanfeng took identical stances just a few feet apart. There was a blurring of Elle's form: Susan Meriwether disappeared and Elle appeared as she had when the two of us were here nine hundred years ago. She was tiny, maybe a meter and a half tall. Today she'd be mistaken for a child; nine hundred years ago she'd been of average height for a woman. Two dark, oval eyes shone from her pale-white Chinese face, mouth small and serious. Her hair was black as a moonless night, some piled high and held in place by two wooden pins, the rest poured down her back to her waist. She wore a dark, belted robe over a white tunic and wooden sandals. The robe's sleeves were full and long, reaching nearly to the ground.

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Sanfeng shape-shifted after Elle transformed, to become the young student we had first met so many centuries ago: black hair drawn sharply back into a long braid, patrician features, wearing jet-black silk jacket and pants.

They were ready. As one, they extended their right arms palms upward, stepped forward, and turned their upper bodies in slow, graceful motion. Their faces were still and serene, their movements exactly synchronized. It had been almost a thousand years since they had last performed the dance, but its movements were as much a part of them as breathing and walking.

I glanced at Fiona. She was entranced. I whispered again. "Look at their auras."

Fiona grew still as she sank into more subtle awareness, then her eyes widened in pleased surprise.

I shifted my awareness, too, so that I could see the subtle light of the dancers' life force. No matter how many times I experience it, I never grow tired of seeing the hidden beauty all people possess. I could see in astral awareness that with each movement of their bodies multi-hued light undulated away from them like waves on water. The colors were enthralling: iridescent, pure, transcendent, from deepest violet to luminous white. The light waves flowed away from the dancers, blending together kaleidoscopically into ever-shifting, ever-new shapes and hues, the supernal light reaching us and wending around and through us. Fiona and I watched, spellbound.

It was not clear whether the dancers were moving the light or the light was moving the dancers. As they continued, Elle/Shi Yin and Sanfeng became the center of a steadily expanding sphere of woven light. The sphere extended high above them, and well below them, as if the floor were no longer there. Each dancer, still in perfect synchrony, slowly raised an arm until it pointed directly upward. Tilting their heads back, they began to spiral gracefully upward in matched majestic flight, gravity a forgotten restraint.

I felt a thrill of pleasure as I felt myself begin to rise along with them. I saw that Fiona had also begun to rise. It was our turn to join the dance. Eyes alight, Fiona raised her arm and tilted her head back, twirling upwards. We soared in joyous flight to join them, our movements casting out waves of astral light which blended beguilingly with theirs. We came together high above the floor and revolved in a circle. Our eyes on one another in shared ecstasy, the sphere of light we created enlarged until it banished all limits of space. Heads back, hearts outthrust, we floated in dimensionless Light.

Much later, Elle brought us down to the now visible floor and we stood in silence. Words were both inadequate and unnecessary. In unspoken agreement, we settled slowly into lotus pose and meditated for the remainder of the night. At one point, Elle nudged me and pointed at Fiona. She hovered several feet above the ground, eyes closed, and in her ecstasy was unaware of what she was doing. Elle and I shared a pleased understanding; Fiona would master the arts of the Protectors very quickly.

When dawn came, we roused Fiona from her stillness and bade goodbye to Sanfeng. He embraced us with great feeling; precious memories of the past brought the hint of tears to his eyes. Not immune, I was moved to my own tears, as was Elle. We had been midwives for Sanfeng's Awakening, but the role we had played was a sacred privilege; we were as blessed by the experience as was Sanfeng. He placed a hand on Fiona's cheek with the gentleness of a mother's sweet touch. They shared a radiant smile and bowed to each other.

Sanfeng never asked us why we had come to China or what we would do next. He knew we were on a mission. Had we asked for his help, he would have gladly done whatever we asked. But he was a teacher; not a warrior. Ours is a singular form of service, even for Protectors.

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We left the temple and began walking to our hotel. We were surrounded by thousands of bustling residents on their way to work. Fiona, still profoundly immersed in ecstasy, once began to float off the ground. Elle took a firm grip on her arm to keep her with us. These things happen. She would master her abilities in time.

Back at the hotel we made arrangements to visit the Tomb of Chin Shi Huang. After a twenty-minute ride, another taxi dropped us off at the main entrance. Our eyes were immediately drawn upward. The pyramid-shaped mountain rose before us. Over seven hundred meters wide at the base, and ninety meters high, it was so massive it seemed impossible it could have been made by man.

Parting with some *renminbi*, we entered a modern reconstruction of what might have been here at the foot of the pyramid almost two thousand years ago: various buildings, gardens, statuary, and fountains surrounded by an ornate wall. We saw the usual tourist shops as we followed the crowd toward the long staircase that would lead us to the top of the pyramid. Although the pyramid had never been excavated, we stopped in front of a display to examine an artist's rendering of what legend says would be found inside—an elaborate palace-like mausoleum and flowing mercury streams.

We began walking up the hundreds of stairs leading to the top of the manmade mountain. Our long climb was finally rewarded with a three hundred and sixty-degree view from the summit. The viewing area at the top was a flat square, as if the top of the pyramid had been sliced off and tossed away by a giant hand. The crowded summit was colorfully demarcated at each corner by large crimson banners atop tall poles.

We took binoculars out of our daypacks, went to different sides of the viewing area, and began searching. We were looking for a window in a building that could have provided the view I'd seen over Chin's shoulder: a single banner and one flank of the manmade mountain. Although the area was mostly rural, there were lots of buildings from which the pyramid could easily be seen. I had a good way to eliminate most of them, however. Wherever Chin had been, it had to have been highly secure. I doubt that he did anything, or went anywhere, without a slew of guards for protection, as we'd experienced on the yacht.

I concentrated on finding secure locations: buildings enclosed by walls or several buildings forming a compound. I saw a few prospects, but none with the additional telltale signs of high-security, like cameras and patrolling guards. Looking southeast, I finally spotted a prospect that fit on all counts. There were a half-dozen buildings within a walled compound. I could see razor-wire running along the top of the outer wall, security cameras at frequent intervals, guards inside the compound and on patrol outside the compound, and crucially, an upper window in the right place to have provided a view of the red banner I was standing under.

I strolled nonchalantly over to Elle/Susan and Fiona/Hyacinth, making a show of admiring the view, and then herded them over to where they could see what I had spotted. They put their binoculars to their eyes and looked where I directed. After a moment or two, Elle nodded. We continued to study the compound until Elle pointed out the obvious.

"It's awfully small and exposed to be a main base for someone like Chin."

She was right. Lucrezia had an enormous palace inside a twenty-kilometer-wide compound. What we were looking at was tiny in comparison. Also, and we'd thought this all along, it seemed such a strange place for Chin to use at all: too open to prying eyes. It could be seen easily by anyone, like us, who made the climb to the top of the pyramid.

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Maybe the building I spotted didn't have anything to do with Chin. Maybe Chin had merely been traveling through the area at the time he needed to join the conference call. Even as I entertained the thought, it didn't feel right to me. Chin couldn't expect to drop in just anywhere and find an encrypted teleconference setup ready and available to him. No, that building had to be under Chin's control. But why have it at all? Was there something else nearby that could explain why he used it?

I acknowledged Elle's comment. "You're right. Let's see if we can find something else in the neighborhood."

We began surveying the area again. I looked in widening circles beyond the compound to see if I could spot something that could explain why Chin would want to use that particular building during the conference.

Fiona tapped my arm and nodded toward a small group of buildings to the south. "What do you think they are for?"

I raised my binoculars and studied a group of three utilitarian buildings sitting in isolation in the midst of a large green field, more than a kilometer from what we guessed was Chin's compound. I'd glanced at the buildings before but dismissed them as not fitting my profile. Now I gave them a closer look. What had probably caught Fiona's eye was the huge plume of steam rising from one of the buildings. Close by, I saw half a dozen fuel storage tanks that were nearly as tall as the buildings. They could hold an enormous amount of fuel. But why? Was this a power generation plant? If so, why weren't there any power lines leading away from the buildings? If it *was* a plant for generating electricity, where was the power going? And did it have anything to do with the other compound where Chin sat during the conference call?

As I mused on what the collection of buildings could be used for, everything suddenly clicked together. I stood stock still and stared unseeingly over the countryside. I thought I had the answers to both questions: What the utilitarian buildings with the mysterious plume of steam were for, and why Chin would make use of such a small compound so close to the pyramid. Both answers fit together like pieces in a larger puzzle.

Elle and Fiona had noticed my abrupt stillness and waited for me to explain.

Before trying out my idea on them, I mentally turned the puzzle pieces this way and that a few more times. My certainty only grew. I began to laugh at the sheer audacity of it. Elle and Fiona looked at me in mounting concern as I continued to laugh and shake my head in disbelief. People had begun to look my way. I continued laughing so hard I had difficulty getting the words out.

Finally, I pointed to the compound we'd been observing. "You see that compound?"

They nodded; humoring me.

"That compound isn't what it seems."

More nodding; more humoring.

"It's a doorway. It's just the *entrance* to something else."

Comprehension dawned in Elle's eyes, but Fiona still stared at me blankly.

I pointed straight down.

"We're *standing* on Chin's hideaway. *He's living in his own tomb.* The compound I spotted must hide a secret tunnel that leads into the pyramid and the buildings you spotted generate the electricity to power whatever is going on inside."

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## Chapter 30

We left Chin's tomb shortly afterward and returned to our hotel. All three of us spent the hour or two before dark finding out as much as we could via the internet about Chin's tomb. I found countless references to the legend that the mound covered a huge inner chamber inside of which was Chin's elaborate tomb inside a grand and ornate mausoleum; wooden, stone, and jade carvings of plants and trees in an eternal garden through which flowed a silver river of mercury; and, of course, treasures galore.

Fiona looked up from her search. "That pyramid is huge. This says there could be as much as a hundred thousand square meters inside. You could do a lot of things with that much space. And it says it took over seven hundred thousand people to build it. It was finished just before he died, or, er, is said to have died."

Elle nodded. "It says pretty much the same thing here. Interestingly, I also read that excavation of the tomb has been forbidden by all the ruling dynasties since Chin. All requests continue to be turned down even though Chin's tomb is believed to contain treasures that would make Tut's tomb look like an old storeroom. Certainly sounds like excavation is being blocked at high levels."

Fiona added, "It says here that all seven hundred thousand workers were killed so they couldn't reveal anything about the tomb and that the tomb was built with booby traps so that tomb robbers couldn't plunder it."

That gave us pause. Tonight we were going to try to get inside—if there *was* an inside to get into. We'd considered the dangers of getting caught or getting shot, now to those dangers we could add getting squashed, impaled, or . . . something worse.

When it was dark we headed out onto Xi'an's nighttime streets. Xi'an is a prosperous bustling city; traffic was heavy and noisy, bicyclists rode by in swarms, their breath steaming in the chill night air, and the sidewalks were jammed. We walked away from the crowds. We needed to discreetly commandeer some transportation, and for that we needed no one around.

Elle could easily take us on another ride through the air, but unlike the desolate hill country of Sicily, there were people everywhere in Xi'an. It was likely we'd be seen. Nor could we take a taxi: "Please drop us off at Chin's tomb. Thank you very much. No, no, please don't wait. We could be a while."

We wandered away from the city center for about half an hour before we found what we were looking for: A motor-pool. A dozen vans, the universal phone-symbol painted on their sides, sat in a row awaiting tomorrow's assignments. A maintenance building's rollup doors were closed for the night. A careful reconnoiter found no night watchman. Emboldened, Elle opened a lock with a gesture. Once inside, we found keys and a rack of laminated ID badges, each with its owner's name and picture. I hoped we'd be as lucky the rest of the night.

Minutes later, Elle and I were sitting in the front seats of one of the vans. My ability to read Chinese characters is limited, but I think the person's name I had shape-shifted into was Bao Wang; Elle's new name and identity appeared to be Chang Zhang. Fiona was sitting in the back, ready to hide herself under a tarp in the event we were stopped.

We cleared Xi'an's suburbs after twenty minutes of driving, and entered the semi-rural farmlands that surrounded Chin's tomb. We drove as close to our target as we thought safe and looked for somewhere to hide the van. We spotted a dirt lane leading into a fallow field and turned in. The going was bumpy but the lane led us to a small copse of trees. The trees sheltered an old brick structure open on one side. The dirt-floored little building contained a rusty plow and harrow,

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patiently waiting for the distant beginning of the growing season. We pulled the van in beside them. It was unlikely to be noticed anytime soon.

Chin's compound was two kilometers east from where we hid the van. If I was right, somewhere inside the compound we'd find the entrance to a tunnel that would get us into the pyramid, but, if I *was* right, we'd not only find a tunnel, we'd also almost certainly find a small army of armed guards long before we got into the pyramid.

I was hoping for an easier way in.

Between us and Chin's compound lay another possibility: The buildings that Fiona had seen to the south of the pyramid, from which the huge plume of steam was visible, might provide an alternative.

It was worth a try.

We walked over fallow fields through the cold black night and skirted the occasional collection of buildings. Nearing our destination, we could see, by the aid of a half dozen utility lights mounted on poles, the large cloud of steam we'd seen earlier today. Whatever had been going on in there earlier today, it was still going on tonight.

We crept up behind a section of decrepit, vine-covered rock wall several hundred meters away from the cluster of buildings. Fiona pulled off the one daypack we had brought with us. After rummaging around for a moment, she handed us the binoculars we'd used earlier that day. Peering over the wall, we could see three buildings of the squat, flat-roofed concrete kind thrown up everywhere in China after the Communist revolution, six massive fuel tanks, a few vehicles, and only one visible door.

Time for Elle/Chang to reconnoiter. With a nod from me she/he soared soundlessly into the air and was soon out of sight. Ten silent minutes of waiting and watching passed and then Elle/Chang returned. "There are skylights. I couldn't see any cameras or motion sensors on any of the roofs—though I saw plenty on the walls of the rest of the buildings."

"Let's go then."

Elle/Chang levitated us high into the air, moved us sideways, and lowered us onto the roof from which an enormous T-shaped duct blasted out hot air quickly turning to clouds of vapor. We peered cautiously into the nearest skylight but saw no one. Although from the outside the building appeared to be only a single story, the floor we could see through the skylight was at least three stories below us. We gave one another a mutual shrug.

Elle removed the skylight with her usual mastery, but she was unprepared when the skylight was blown upward by hot air blasting out of the opening. The skylight window flew up ten meters before she could catch it with her invisible hand. I put my head cautiously through the skylight into a blast of air and looked around for security cameras or motion sensors. We didn't have our DARPA gear to search with this time because we'd had to fly on commercial flights. All I could do was a visual inspection. I saw nothing and mentally crossed my fingers.

Elle/Chang lowered us through the skylight and, as we descended, we were buffeted by the continuous blast of warm air. By the time we had touched down Elle/Chang had replaced and resealed the skylight. Once on the ground, we saw a single door with a tiny window. Peering through, all I could see was an empty corridor leading toward the other buildings. I made an "all clear" motion. We headed as one for the most prominent feature in the otherwise completely empty space: a gigantic fan at the end of a ten-foot-diameter pipe. The fan was so powerful that it was almost impossible to stand directly in front of it. The air erupting out of the roof-duct was obviously

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coming from this pipe—and, I was pleased to see, the pipe was oriented directly toward Chin's pyramid.

The pipe itself extended into the chamber about two meters. Going around to the side, we could see why: There was a man-sized door to allow access to the pipe. When we released the latch, the small door flew open dangerously fast. Once inside, it took two of us to pull it closed again. We began walking and had to lean into the wind to make any progress.

As we began to trudge forward, I could just make out through the dim light coming through the fan that heavy electrical cables ran along the inside top of the pipe. Whatever was going on inside the pyramid—and I no longer had any doubt that *something* was going inside the pyramid—it used a lot of air and electricity.

There were no lights in the pipe, and after a while it became pitch black. I debated whether to use a flashlight. Despite the danger of being seen, the image of walking into a giant fan like the one at the end of the pipe made up my mind for me: I risked the flashlight. In the end, after walking for close to half an hour, we didn't run into another big fan; instead, our large pipe became six smaller pipes, each with its own fan. End of the line for us. We couldn't get past those fans, but I don't think it mattered. I'd counted my steps, and if my reckoning was accurate, we were now underneath the pyramid.

We began looking around for a way out. We found another small door like the one we'd used to get into the pipe at the other end. Only now we had no idea what, or who, was on the other side of the door. The rushing air made such a constant roar that we had no chance of hearing anything outside the pipe. The blasting air was loud enough that it would drown out anything short of a clap of thunder. There could be twenty-five guys right outside the pipe playing Ping Pong for all we could know. We could open the hatch and take the chance that no one would see us, but the bigger risk was that when we opened the hatch, the enormous blast of air that slammed through would make a huge noise.

Elle/Chang apparently had a solution. She indicated that Fiona should stand to the left of the door and gestured for me to stand in front of it. Once we were in place, she stood to the right of the door. All three of us were now standing side-by-side close to the wall of the pipe with the small door at my back.

Suddenly there was no wind.

It was startling: From one moment to the next the roar of sound stopped. The silence would have been complete except for the ringing in my ears from being in the windy tunnel so long. I knew the ventilation hadn't been shut down—by the light of my flashlight I could still see the six smaller fans whirring away—but we were no longer being buffeted.

Elle had created an air lock, a bubble of force the air couldn't penetrate, forcing it to go around us.

Elle/Chang looked at me, pointed to the small door with her chin, then mimed moving the door latch. I opened the latch and pushed the door open a crack. I winced when it made a screeching noise. All I could see when I looked through the crack was a concrete wall—but I could see it clearly. Wherever we were, it was well lit.

I didn't hear any sounds, so I opened the door wider and stuck my head out into an empty corridor. I pushed the door all the way open and scrambled out. Checking once more that there was no one around, I gestured for Fiona and Elle to climb out. Again it took two of us to close the door.

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We were at the end of a long corridor. It paralleled the now six exhaust pipes our pipe had become, and was lit by utility lights placed on the ceiling about every five meters. Our first concern was security cameras. Fiona was way ahead of me. She was peering down the corridor through her binoculars. After a moment she shook her head: No cameras. We started walking. As we made our way, we checked for security cameras several more times, but finally concluded that there weren't any. Apparently no one expected intruders to get into the pyramid *this* way.

We soon discovered that we were in a warren of utility tunnels; there were pipes and cables running in every direction. We encountered large rooms full of enormous pressure tanks, banks of electrical panels, or enormous pumps. Whatever all this was in aid of, it was extensive, and surprisingly modern. I'm not sure what I expected, perhaps something more along the lines of ancient stone and torches, but I hadn't expected concrete, steel, and electric lights.

After fifteen minutes of cautious wandering, during which we didn't see or hear anyone, we reached a door with a small observation window. A glimpse through the tiny window revealed the bottom of a staircase. We went through and stood quietly, checking for sounds. Hearing nothing, we cautiously made our way to the top of the stairs.

We found ourselves in an enormous, high-ceilinged pantry-storeroom. Most of the space was taken up by row upon row of towering metal shelves filled with pallets of dry goods, canned food, and hundreds of sacks of rice. On one side were a dozen stainless-steel walk-in refrigerator doors, three of which were secured with padlocks. I opened an unlocked one to take a quick look and saw cases of vegetables stacked to the ceiling.

There was enough food in here to feed a small army. What was Chin up to?

At the end of the storeroom farthest from where we entered, we saw a large, and currently closed, metal door with no handles on this side. Not far from the door with no handles we saw a set of double swing doors common to kitchens around the world. Beyond the double doors we could hear the commotion of a kitchen in full production.

Time for our friend the mosquito. Although we couldn't bring through customs the DARPA gear like night-goggles and infrared scanners, we did bring the mosquito in Elle's jewelry case and the controller in Fiona's carry-on along with a small radio-controlled car to explain the controller.

I pushed open one of the double doors just enough to let the mosquito go through, then joined Elle and Fiona hiding high in a shelving rack among giant sacks of rice. On the DARPA laptop screen I could see the usual bedlam of a busy kitchen. A quick count of cooks and hashers came to over twenty-five. We saw another set of swinging doors on the far side of the kitchen through which we caught glimpses of a dining room thronged with people.

Obviously we weren't going into the kitchen without being seen. In fact, there were so many people around that I was worried someone would see the mosquito and Fiona brought it back to rest on a convenient light fixture above the swing doors so that it could recharge. We held a brief and whispered counsel of war.

"Fi, I think this is as far as you go. Elle and I are going to have to shape-shift, probably more than once, if we are going to go any farther."

Fiona nodded but I could see the curiosity shining in her eyes. She wanted to see what was beyond the kitchens as much we did.

"I'm taking the mosquito with us. I'm counting on it in more ways than one. I hope the X-ray frequency transceiver will in fact penetrate stone. I'll have to keep it hidden some of the time, but when I can, I'll use it to show you what we're seeing."

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Fiona nodded happily, then played back the video of the kitchen for us until we had a clear idea of what the cooks were wearing. Seconds later, still looking like Chang and Boa the telephone repairmen, we were wearing work clothes and white aprons. We helped Fiona move a few sacks of rice to create more cover, left her with the daypack, and scrambled down from the shelves.

Elle/Chang and I picked up giant cans of a vegetables; the picture on the label looked like a mutant carrot. Cans under either arm, we went through the double doors, down a short corridor, and into the kitchen. No one gave us a second glance. The kitchen was in high gear. Rapid-fire Mandarin and Cantonese swirled around us. The roar of burners, the clang of pots, and the clattering sound of chopping raised a deafening din.

We set our cans down on a convenient counter at the back of the kitchen and made our way purposefully toward the dining room. Never look in doubt. Never hesitate. The secret of impersonation is to act as if you're doing what you do all the time. We hung up our aprons and walked into a spacious dining room.

Everyone was dressed in the same kind of work clothes: dark pants, white shirts. Sitting at various tables, they acted like workers everywhere—some tired and quiet, some chattering and laughing—a scene you expect to see in the backrooms of hotels, airports, convention centers, anywhere that caters to large groups of people. The utter normalcy of it all was baffling.

The only departure from normalcy was a table full of men wearing black coveralls. None of the tables near them was occupied, as if others were keeping a wary distance. The men wore hard expressions and at least one of them wore a gun on his hip. They were obviously guards, but hotel-type guards aren't usually feared by their fellow workers—just the opposite, they're usually well-liked and considered part of the team. These guards had an aura of malice.

Without breaking stride, we headed for an open exit at the far end of the dining room. No one looked at us as if trying to figure out who we were—not even the guards. I got the impression that there were so many people inside the pyramid that no one was surprised to see a stranger.

The deeper we penetrated Chin's secret world, the more the mystery deepened. I knew this was a secret world—the world outside had no clue that anything like this existed—yet everyone was acting as if it were just an ordinary place to work.

We left the dining room just behind a small group. We walked along with them down a broad passage and up two flights of stairs. As they walked, they talked. Elle and I easily understood them. Many missions in China had honed our Mandarin, Cantonese, and other dialects.

The main topic of conversation was how much longer they had on their contracts. One said two weeks, another a few months, another said he had just arrived and had the full year to go. We chimed in with, ". . . just arrived." They gave us a look of commiseration and congratulated the lucky woman who had only two weeks left.

She brightened visibly at the prospect of soon leaving. "I will be so happy to see my family again. Not being able to talk with them for a whole year has been the hardest thing. But it's going to be strange to not be able to tell them anything about where I've been or what I've been doing."

The others nodded sympathetically.

A short woman added, "But the money is good!" She said it as if it had been said a thousand times by people trying to reassure themselves that whatever they had to put up with in here, it was worth it.

Her comment brought wry smiles all around.

We walked along with our adopted group as they headed down another broad passage. More and more people joined us, pouring in from other corridors, until we reached a bank of doors with

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a large sign above them reading: Changing Rooms. One of our chance companions asked another, "What are you playing today?"

"I'm down as audience again. I'll probably have to wear some idiot nobleman's costume again. But at least I get to sit."

His companion said, "I need to check."

We added our, "Me, too's," and followed him to a large printed list posted on a wall, while a steady stream of people continued on into the changing rooms. Dated for today, the list contained several hundred names. Pretending to be looking for our names, we tried to figure out what it all meant. After a minute our companion grunted.

"*Nao can* server again! I'm never going to get to be a *bai mu* soldier."

He left unhappily to be a brain-dead server again, instead of a stupid soldier, and rejoined the flow of people going into the changing rooms. We continued to study the list: servers, noblemen, dancers, singers, musicians, courtesans, soldiers. This was getting stranger and stranger.

Ever practical, Elle/Chang raised her eyebrows at me and made a suggestion, "Soldiers?"

"Sounds better than nobleman or server, I guess. We definitely don't want to be dancers, singers, or musicians. We'd have no idea what to do."

Decision made, we headed deeper into the unknown. We rejoined the flow of people going into the changing rooms as if we knew where we were going, but, without moving our heads, we were rapidly scanning for clues. The first thing we saw was a large sign with Chinese *hanzi* characters for server, dancer, soldier, etc., and by each designation there was an arrow indicating where to go. Following three arrows, we made three turns, then entered an enormous open room full of ancient Chinese armor.

It took self-control not to look at Elle/Chang and shake my head. Ancient Chinese armor? We're dressing to become ancient Chinese soldiers? I felt as if we'd gone down the rabbit hole to join Alice.

A voice came from behind us. "Ever been soldiers before?"

We turned and shook our heads. The owner of the voice didn't bother to ask what our names were or check to see if we were on a list. He just sighed. Apparently first-timers were a chore. "Okay. Start here." He took us slowly through the hall, explaining, adjusting, all the while adding piece after piece to our costumes. He was talkative as he helped us and we soon learned why. "How long you guys been here?"

"Just a few days."

"Yeah, you got the look. Me, I'm leaving in a week!"

We smiled at his good fortune.

"I'll finally get to spend all that money. I'm going to be able to get a house for my family and parents and still have enough to get a new truck for the farm. It will make it worth the year I spent in this cave. I can't wait to see the sun, eat fresh food, and breathe fresh air again."

Our happy friend proceeded to give us advice on which were the best rooms and who could provide extra cigarettes and other luxuries, never seeming to stop adding items to our intricate costumes.

After a while, I realized they *weren't* costumes; they were the real thing. Numerous scars, nicks, dents, and wear patterns indicated we were wearing armor that had been worn regularly, perhaps in battle. The armor was genuine: tunics of overlapping iron scales, gauntlets and greaves for our arms and legs of forged interlocking bronze plates, neck guards and helmets of mixed iron and

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turtle shell scales, sword belts of leather with unsheathed, curved, and sharply pointed swords thrust through them. A collector would pay a fortune for even one set of this armor.

"Okay. You're done. Don't stick anyone by accident with those swords. They are as sharp as hell. You'd better get going; it'll start soon."

While we had been outfitted, scores of other men had come in, donned their armor with a bit of help from one another, and left. The last one was heading out the door. We fell in behind. We followed him around a turn or two and ended up bunched up in a queue going slowly into a tunnel made of dressed and mortared stone.

We were surrounded by people dressed in ancient Chinese regalia: noblemen, noblewomen, servants, musicians, dancers, jugglers, scholars, and soldiers. Everyone was richly dressed, even the servants. The women were so heavily made up it looked as if they were wearing masks. The musicians carried priceless period instruments. They all gave our swords a wide berth. Apparently they knew from rumor, or experience, just how sharp they were.

As we shuffled slowly forward, I took the opportunity to pull the mosquito out of my sleeve where I had hidden it. I reached up, as if adjusting my neck piece, and nestled the mosquito in between two iron scales.

After making slow progress through about twenty feet of tunnel, we came out onto a wide balcony. We stopped and gaped. Before us towered a magnificent eight-story palace, surrounded by courtyards and gardens, all enclosed inside an immense open pyramid lit as bright as day. We were in a horribly twisted theme-park.

"I hope you're seeing this," I whispered to Fiona. I thought I heard the brief buzz of tiny wings.

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## Chapter 31

The palace was in the classic Chinese style: curving roofs of green tile with upswept eaves, supported by red pillars and latticed walls. Each floor was smaller than the one below it; the palace tapered gracefully as it rose.

Among the dozens of outbuildings and surrounding courtyards, the largest courtyard, now filling with people, culminated in a grand staircase leading up to the palace. The staircase had several landings; each landing was flanked by red stone dragons. There were other courtyards formed by numerous walls and long buildings. The courtyard walls and buildings were constructed in the same style as the palace, green-tile roofs and red pillars. Some of the courtyards enclosed gardens, others surrounded fountains, some contained silk tents and divans for taking one's ease.

Suspended near the top of the open pyramid were lights such as you'd see in a sports stadium. Paying no heed to reality, inside it was daytime in ancient China, while outside a drab and modern China slumbered through the night.

We were seeing Chin's world as it had been when he was emperor in the third century BC. Rather than being impressed, I was chilled by the utter power the scene implied. Chin could, apparently, do anything he wanted, including hiding this right under the noses of millions of people.

Our gaping moment of amazement was broken by a very un-third century BC guard. "Come on, you turtle eggs. Get moving."

The guard wore the same black coveralls as the group we'd seen earlier and carried a holstered gun on his hip. He looked mean and stupid—and clearly enjoyed being feared. He sneered at everyone as they edged as far away from him as the crush would allow, going silent as they passed.

We moved with the crowd down a wide stairway at the end of the balcony. We were headed for the large courtyard at the foot of the palace's grand staircase. As we made our way, I noticed that at least one of the legends of Chin's tomb was true. Examining a beautifully tended garden, I was startled to realize that many of the shrubs were jade but so skillfully carved that only the glint of light reflecting from their leaves gave them away.

When we reached the main courtyard, another armored soldier beckoned us over to him. I thought he must be playing the part of a general: His helmet had broad wings and the scales of his armor were mixed with precious stones. Without a word, he sent us to the right side of the courtyard. There we saw about fifty soldiers standing in a loose group, smoking cigarettes, and talking casually with one another.

As we walked toward them, I saw soldiers on the left side of the courtyard, and yet another group at the back. Each group of soldiers was standing near one of three gates into the courtyard, each gate a multi-pillared, multi-roofed masterpiece of design. I imagined that the soldiers would soon come to attention to form an honor guard in front of the gates. Once that happened, we would be hard-pressed to break ranks without calling attention to ourselves.

When we reached the milling soldiers, therefore, I mentally flashed Elle an image of us ducking through the gate and hiding. We sidled casually backward through the gate, apparently unnoticed by our fellow soldiers, and moved sideways out of sight behind the courtyard wall until we were standing in relative shadow. We turned slowly around to see if anyone had spotted us. We could still pretend we'd been curious about what there was to see on this side of the gate. Satisfied that no one was watching us, I whispered in Elle/Chang's ear, "Guards." A few seconds later we'd

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shape-shifted from ancient guards to modern ones. Modern guards definitely had a lot less to carry around. I was glad to be free of the armor's weight.

On our side of the courtyard wall was a dense patch of trees and shrubs. We ducked under the nearest tree and cautiously pushed our way into welcome cover. The wall separating us from the courtyard was mostly lattice, artfully constructed to look delicate, even though it was over four meters high and topped with a meter-wide stone cap. We found a spot where we had an unobstructed view through the lattice wall into the courtyard, while we were completely hidden in the interior of a low-spreading tree. Before shape-shifting, I'd removed the mosquito from my armor.

Now I held it up to my mouth and began whispering. "Fi. Can you hear me?"

The little mechanical flyer's wings buzzed briefly.

"Great. Watch our backs, but stay fairly close in case we have to move quickly."

Fiona made the mosquito perform an impressive spin and then buzzed off.

The courtyard had nearly filled. The grandly dressed noblemen and noblewomen were settling onto cushions by low tables set with delicate china and exotic arrangements of flowers. The musicians sat together on a raised dais, still tuning their instruments. On another dais, singers and dancers sat awaiting their cues. On the opposite side of the courtyard, servants gathered around tables covered with steaming bowls and mounded platters. The air was full of savory smells.

Sitting empty at the foot of the grand staircase, a high dais commanded attention. On it were several tables even more elaborately set than the ones the nobles enjoyed. What most dominated the dais was a grand throne made of carved and gleaming ebony, set off by panels of crimson silk, embroidered with gold and silver thread, and, on the seat, mounds of golden cushions of shimmering satin.

Here was a Wonderland fit for Alice—a royal feast about to begin—only the Red Queen was missing.

All eyes were drawn to a man standing on the front edge of the musician's dais. He was dressed in elaborate emerald and silver robes and a headdress with hanging copper coils—perhaps the royal chamberlain. He made a surprisingly loud clack by rapping a wooden rod on a wooden board. Instantly, the courtyard became silent.

"Before we begin tonight's performance, let's give a warm send-off to some departing colleagues."

At his signal, about thirty people filed into the open area in front of the main dais. They were dressed in modern Chinese clothing, bouncing on their feet, and smiling in anticipation of going home.

"Our colleagues have finished their year's contracts. Let's wish them well."

There was enthusiastic applause. I suspect the applause was as much for their own future departures as for the people who were leaving. A few waved goodbye to people they knew and received waves in return.

Someone shouted, "Lucky ones!"

There was general laughter and more applause. Then the happy throng filed away in the opposite direction from which they'd arrived. I noticed that several of the guards in the black coveralls stepped in behind them.

"And now, everyone. Let's give a great performance tonight!"

A cacophony of cymbals and drums began. Heads raised to look up the grand stairway. Chin strode out of the palace doors and stood gazing over the courtyard. Everyone rose to their feet—

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and then got to their knees and pressed their foreheads to the ground. The soldiers went down on one knee and bowed their heads.

Chin was not dressed as we had last seen him—silk suit and tie—but in the panoply of the First Emperor of China. His joined hands were hidden in the billowing sleeves of his flowing robes of richly embroidered golden silk. His emperor's headdress glinted with precious stones, the whole surmounted by an upswept band of golden silk, ending in a scroll and surrounded by a winking curtain of golden beads on silver strings which hung down on either side of his face.

He made his way slowly down the grand staircase, the flanking dragons emphasizing his power. He was followed by a small retinue of only slightly less fabulously dressed courtiers. The symbols and drums continued their din until he had mounted the dais from behind and taken his throne. He examined the preparations in the courtyard in the ensuing silence. A feeling of tension built in the air. Finally, he turned to his chamberlain, who, though kneeling and keeping his head down, managed to keep one eye on Chin.

Chin gave a curt nod of approval.

The chamberlain rose gratefully to his feet. Judging by his barely concealed expression of relief, I'd say Chin does not always approve. The chamberlain rapped on his wooden board and the feast began.

Chin's personal servants hastened to bring him food; the rest served the noblemen and noblewomen sitting at their ease. Peculiar atonal and arrhythmic music began. Musicians played instruments resembling mandolins and sitars, others sat on cushions in front of stringed instruments too large to be held, while yet others played flutes, cymbals, harps, and curious shaken drums.

It sounded just awful to me.

Judging by the look of satisfaction on Chin's face, it sounded just *right* to him. In fact, *everything* was just right for him; everything was exactly as he wanted it; everything was as if time had stopped when Chin was still the First Emperor of China.

There was a perverted genius to it all. Once Asher had taught Chin the secret to prolonging his life, Chin had obviously built this hidden palace as a refuge, not a tomb—not a place to *commemorate* his glory, but a place to perpetually *relive* it. The hapless ancient builders had to die—as must also be true of the modern builders who added ventilation, light, and electricity—not because they could have revealed the secrets of his death, but because they could have revealed the secret of his continued life. It was a twisted Disneyland, created for the pleasure of one man.

I wonder if he thought this was fantasy—or reality?

When the servants brought out the food, conversation broke out at every table. There was a good approximation of genuine laughter and delight on every hand. Chin must like his feasts to be jolly. After a few minutes, a small group of women entered the open area in front of Chin's dais, kneeled, and placed their foreheads on the courtyard tiles. They remained that way for ten long minutes. Chin was speaking with someone and chose to ignore them.

Eventually Chin nodded to his chamberlain, who in turn signaled to the musicians. When the musicians began a new piece, the women rose and started to dance. Their movements were so carefully synchronized that they appeared to move as one. Their arm movements were flowing; their long sleeves created swirls of bright color as they turned gracefully in place.

Chin was entranced.

I nudged Elle/Chang. Time to go. We knew where Chin was going to be for a while.

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Making as little sound as possible, we made our way out of our small, concealing forest. When we reached the edge, Fiona had positioned the mosquito right in front of us. I whispered, "Is there anyone nearby that we can't see?"

She managed to make the mosquito move its head from side to side in the negative. I couldn't help smiling.

Safe for the moment, Elle and I held a nearly soundless conversation—half whispers, half mental images—deciding what to do next. We reached a decision. Elle turned back to the hovering mosquito. "We need to get into Chin's private rooms—study, sitting room, that kind of thing. We think they must be inside the palace. Please find them for us."

Our flying spy shot off like a bullet. We moved back into the trees to wait. In less than five minutes the mosquito swooped back into view.

I asked immediately, "Did you find Chin's apartments?"

The mosquito's head moved up and down in the affirmative. It was hard not to laugh.

Elle/Chang began a series of questions. "What floor?"

When she asked, she held up both hands but with only one finger raised. Then she raised two, then three, and so on. At six fingers, the mosquito nodded.

"Which side? This side? Back side?" At back side, she got a nod.

"Are there guards all around the palace?" We got another affirmative nod among the glitter of wings.

Nodding back I said, "Fiona, take the mosquito to Chin's apartments and get it charged up. We'll be there as soon as we can."

We'd learned what we needed to know: Chin's private apartments were on the sixth floor opposite the main courtyard—and the palace was surrounded by guards. Now we had to figure out how to get in.

Elle and I held another half-verbal, half-mental conversation. The inside of the pyramid was too brightly lit to risk taking to the air, and there were too many guards around the palace for us to slip past them unnoticed. There was nothing for it: We were going to have to bluff our way in. We were good at it. We'd bluffed our way into a thousand places—but bluffing was always the riskiest gambit. Once we start a bluff we never know how it's going end.

Elle/Change glanced at me. "Let me take the lead."

I nodded happily. Elle could act any part she chose—and could adjust her part without a pause, depending on what happened. We stepped out of our concealment, walked toward a side entry to the palace, reached a wide stair, and began to climb. There were two guards at the top of the stairs flanking the palace entrance.

Elle/Chang flashed me the thought to look uncertain.

That was not entirely hard since I *was* uncertain. I stumbled, as though nervous, on one of the steps, and Elle/Chang kept her head down meekly, shooting only quick glances at the two guards. When we reached them, one of the guards looked at us as if we were idiots.

"What do *you* want? You guys must be new. I've never seen you before."

Elle/Chang nodded with enthusiasm. If she'd been a dog, she would have been wagging her tail, hoping for a pat on the head.

"My friend and I just come today." Elle looked nervous and stammered out, "We must report inside—"

"Who are you supposed to report to?"

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Elle/Chang managed to look painfully embarrassed. "I do not remember name. We were told we find him inside. . . ."

One guard turned to the other. "Must be Yang."

"Yes. Yes. Yang. We are to report to Yang." Elle/Chang looked enormously relieved. I looked dull and stupid.

"Go ahead. You'll find him up those stairs and at the back. You melon heads are lucky I'm in a good mood today." He waved us through and muttered to his fellow guard, "These guys won't last a week."

Once inside we headed up the indicated stair. The inside of the palace was stunning. Red columns formed a two-story atrium. In the center of the atrium there was a jade and nephrite carving of a garden. Colors ranged from deep green to white. A world of miniature trees, shrubs, rocks, paths, ponds, and bridges, surrounded one lone person perched on a bench in the midst of it all. The whole was at least three meters square. I'd never seen anything like it.

Everywhere my eye was drawn I saw more exquisite objects: deeply carved screens, rich red pottery, polished wood, and more jade or nephrite statues, vases, and bowls. We were in a treasure house of precious Chinese art. No wonder it was well-guarded. It wouldn't do for the performers to get inside. Even small objects that could be slipped into a pocket would be worth a fortune outside.

Elle brought me back to focus with a tap on the arm. She pointed to her face and I noticed that she/he now looked like one of the guards we had just spoken to outside. I took my cue and transformed myself to look like the other guard. If anyone challenged us now, at least we'd be recognized as real guards.

We continued up a series of stairs. We saw no more guards, but we did encounter a group of elegantly dressed and beautiful young courtesans. Their eyes momentarily widened in fear when they saw us. Immediately, they looked down, standing motionless until we passed. We made it to the sixth story without encountering anyone else, and headed toward Chin's private rooms. Then our luck ran out. Coming around a turn we saw two more guards barring our way. They challenged us immediately.

"Chun, Ho, what are you *hun dan* doing up here?"

"Yang told us to come up here, you *bai chi*."

Mutual insults exchanged, Elle/Chang tried our luck. "We have to get something for Chin."

"You know that no one goes in there. Yang knows that better than anyone."

It had been worth a try.

We'd continued walking toward them during the exchange. Just as we got close, Elle flashed an image of me hitting the guy on the right in the solar plexus. At the same moment she spun a full turn, launching a kick that caught the guard on the left on the side of his head, sending him crashing into a pillar. The other guard was so surprised that hitting him in the solar plexus was easy—he didn't see it coming. Bending forward and gasping for breath, he also didn't see Elle's fist strike the side of his neck. He dropped to the floor like his fellow guard. Elle knelt and felt their pulses. She nodded, satisfied that they were okay—or as okay as you can be when you've been hit so hard you're knocked unconscious.

We looked around. There was no place to hide them so we dragged them through the doors they had been guarding and into the first room we saw. It took just a few moments to turn a priceless woven-silk hanging into gags and ropes to bind our unconscious captives. They weren't going to

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bother us anymore but, as soon as someone noticed that they weren't at their posts, there would be lots of *other* people wanting to bother us. We were now on the clock and it was ticking fast.

With a wordless glance at each other, we raced down the corridor toward Chin's rooms.

We found Chin's sitting room two doors down from where we left the guards. The mosquito flew off a small lamp where it had been recharging and did a tiny backward loop to show us that Fiona was happy to see us. The decor in the room was exquisite. On a marble table in the center of the room sat yet another a jade carving—and the best of any we had seen. It was an exact miniature of the palace. The detail was astonishing. The carving even had a figure of a man, clearly recognizable as Chin, out on the balcony of this room, leaning on the rail, and looking out over the view below.

Perfect. No one could mistake this room for any other. The jade carving was memorable and the room distinctive.

Time to create another soldier for our Trojan Horse—this time a *super-soldier*.

As prearranged, Elle and I shape-shifted. I instructed Fiona to land the mosquito on Elle's shoulder, now elegantly attired in crimson silk, and to keep the camera focused on me. It took only a few minutes to record our lines. We did a few more takes just to be safe.

Elle was about to shape-shift into a new guise when we heard distant voices. Fiona must have picked up the sound through the tiny microphone because the mosquito immediately flew out into the corridor. A second later the mosquito flew back into the room and whacked into my forehead. I got the message.

Voices were getting nearer—then abruptly became excited. The voices' owners had probably found the two tied-up men. We had seconds to make a move. Inspiration struck. I flashed an image to Elle and she nodded. We transformed ourselves into two young and beautiful courtesans, frightened and crying. Only instants later, three guards burst in. I began to speak shakily, my words punctuated with sobs, while clinging to Elle.

"Two men. Guards. They forced us here. They hit two guards and brought us here. They ran away when they heard you."

All three guards raced out of the room. We wasted no time before going the other way. Even though we saw several other groups of guards anxiously searching—their terrified expressions indicating there was real cost for failure in Chin's fantasy world—we made it all the way to the ground floor, and nearly out the way we had come in before we were stopped. It was our old friends, who we now knew to be Chun and Ho, still guarding the side entrance.

"What's happening?"

"Two men disguised as guards tried to get into Chin's rooms."

Both guards paled when the realization sank in that they could be the ones who had let the disguised guards into the palace. We took advantage of their shock to walk down the stairs and head back toward the main courtyard; contemplating their own bleak future, they didn't call us back. Before we reached the entry to the courtyard, we heard the clack of the chamberlain's rod on his board, and his subsequent terse announcement: "We're done for the night. Everyone is to leave immediately."

This was a lucky break for us. We could use the milling exodus to blend in with the crowd. We ducked into the trees in which we'd earlier hidden and resumed our guise as armored soldiers. We made our way cautiously to the gate. Elle peeked around the corner, turned to me and nodded. As if on cue, the mosquito appeared in front of me, and then landed on my outstretched palm. I whispered a well done to Fiona before tucking it away.

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Moments later we were trailing along behind a group of weary soldiers. All the performers obviously knew something was up. Guards were racing everywhere and none of the performers said a word as they trudged toward the changing rooms.

I glanced toward the palace and saw Chin, on a landing halfway up the grand staircase, gesturing angrily at a small knot of black-garbed guards. Two guards were kneeling in front of him, looks of terror on their faces. I couldn't be sure from this distance but I suspect they were Chun and Ho.

We followed the crowd toward the stairs leading to the balcony. There was hushed silence as we walked between a gauntlet of angry-looking guards inspecting all of us as we passed. The performers' expressions were studiously blank in an attempt to hide their fear. They knew someone had kicked the hornet's nest and no one wanted to get stung.

We removed our armor piece-by-piece once in the soldier's changing room. A harried-looking guard came in and asked our previously chatty armorer if all the soldiers had returned. He picked up a clipboard, examined it, then pointed at Elle/Chang and me/Bao.

"They were the last two. All the other soldiers have come back." He spoke with satisfaction. He, at least, was free from blame for whatever was happening. I suspect he also took satisfaction in the fact that his answer provided no help to the apparently universally disliked guards. The guard left with frowning urgency.

Though I was careful not to show it, the guard's urgency matched my own. The search was spreading rapidly. Soon, the guards would be looking into every nook and cranny. Unless we got her out of there, I knew it was only a matter of time before they found Fiona hidden among the sacks of rice. Free of our bulky armor, we followed the now-chattering crowd back to the rapidly filling dining room and slipped into the kitchen. We wended our way through, picking up dirty pots and pans, and took them to the scullery at the back.

We glanced around. As before, the kitchen was in full swing, and no one paid us the slightest attention. We headed down the corridor to the pantry, reached the double doors and pushed. Nothing happened. The doors wouldn't open. I tried again, this time with more force.

Abruptly one of the doors opened a crack and a guard stuck his head through. "Go away, you *wonang fei shi dan*." Then he withdrew his head and closed the door.

My gutter Mandarin was a bit rusty but I was pretty sure he'd just called me a useless piece of dung. That didn't concern me. What concerned me was that when he'd opened the door I'd caught a glimpse inside the pantry—it was full of guards.

I pulled the mosquito out of my pocket spoke into it. "Fi. Are you okay?"

No response.

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## Chapter 32

A voice from behind startled us as we stood staring at the closed doors. "What are you melons doing?"

We turned to face one of the cooks. He was an older man and had the harried look of cooks everywhere; cooking for crowds was a race you could never win.

A seemingly not-too-bright Elle/Chang responded in confusion, "We go to get food and guard tell us we not go in."

The cook looked frustrated and a touch fearful. "*Da-shiong bao-jah-shr duh la-doo-tze!* I'm never going to get the food cooked on time if they keep doing stupid things like this!" Having vented his frustration he gave us some earnest advice. "Stay away from those guards. They're dangerous. A few weeks ago they beat up a guy and he had to be taken to the infirmary. We never saw him again." He paused, then added reassuringly, "They do this every week. Just wait, they'll be gone in a few minutes."

Our fatherly friend turned and stalked back to the kitchen. We went back to the scullery. A young man stood at a large sink, suds up to his elbows, and gave us an incurious look when we started washing pots and pans at an adjacent sink.

My thoughts were in the storeroom with Fiona; I kept hoping to feel the buzz of wings in my pocket. I washed one pot three times and dropped another. Our scullery companion was now eyeing me with concern. Elle/Chang made a gesture over my head and he relaxed. I'm assuming Elle indicated that I was simple-minded.

We kept at it for ten long minutes, until finally Elle said, "Come, Bao. We must get supplies for master cook. There is no reason to be afraid of those men now. They will be gone."

I followed Elle/Chang back down the corridor to the storeroom-pantry. We pushed cautiously on the double doors. This time they swung open. We entered and were relieved to see that all the guards had left. While I kept watch, Elle scrambled up the shelves where we'd left Fiona in her nest of rice bags. When she reached the top, she turned and held her hands palms up. Fiona wasn't there.

Ignoring the risk of being overheard, we both started calling Fiona's name in loud whispers. A moment later, Elle glanced around in surprise and smiled. I saw Fiona's face peeking over the sacks. Her hair was full of rice grains and sacking bits. I released a pent-up breath and scrambled up to join them. Fiona's eyes were open wide in shock but, on seeing us, she rallied quickly. We soon learned that her shock wasn't from fear of capture. It was from what she'd seen when the guards came in. She stammered out a description.

"Those guys in black came in through the other door—not the one from the kitchen—the one with no handles on this side. They were pushing carts. Then they opened one of the locked walk-in's...." Fiona trailed off, reliving what she saw in her mind's eye. Gathering resolve, she took a deep breath, then spoke vehemently as her outrage rose up and spilled out. "That walk-in is full of dead bodies!" Her words hung in the air vibrating with anguished disbelief. "They were all naked and piled up like trash. Then they threw in even more bodies they'd brought in on the carts." Fiona shuddered at the memory. "There were no way I was going to get caught by those guys, so I wormed me way down into a crack between two bags and pulled another one on top of myself."

I felt my own emotional shudder. "Which walk-in was it?"

Fiona pointed to one and I climbed down to investigate. I popped the padlock with a quick use of kinetic force and pulled the door open. There was, as Fiona had said, a sprawling pile of dead

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bodies. I examined them until my suspicion was confirmed. Too late, I noticed there was silver security tape running around the door jamb. Stupid, stupid mistake. I had just set a light blinking, or a bell ringing, somewhere. I slammed the door closed and clicked the lock back together.

I sprinted over to Fiona and Elle and gestured for them to come down. "We need to get out of here now! That walk-in door had a silent alarm and I've set it off."

They were down in seconds. We jogged down the stairs into the basement. I hoped we could get to the ventilation pipe before we were seen. My hurried mistake could cost us the mission—not to mention our lives.

I whispered over my shoulder as we hurriedly retraced our footsteps through the basement maze. "Remember the group that was sent back to their homes with the well wishes of the crowd?"

They nodded.

"They're all dead and on top of that pile in the walk-in."

Horried realization swept across their faces.

"No one leaves this place alive. All that talk about year-long contracts and then going home is a lie to keep everyone willing to play in Chin's fantasy. Ever since this pyramid was built, he's never stopped killing people to keep the place a secret."

Fiona hissed, "Chin's bleedin' well got to go down!"

Couldn't have said it better myself. But to take him down, first we had to get out.

Fiona reached forward and tapped me on the back. "Michael, I've got to tell you something. It went out of my mind when I saw them bring in the carts."

I looked back at her and raised an eyebrow. "What?"

"While I was waiting for you to come back and get me—and before the guards came in with the carts—I saw two guards go down here."

"How long ago did they go down?"

"Maybe twenty minutes ago."

Elle/Chang and I looked at each other and back at Fiona. There was nothing for it. We had to keep going and hope we didn't run into them. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Elle shape-shift into a guard wearing black coveralls. I did the same. If we were caught, maybe we could talk our way out.

We'd nearly made it back to the ventilation pipe when we began to hear voices. We slowed down and crept up to the last corner. I lay down on the floor and took a quick look. Two guards had been posted by the little metal door into the ventilation pipe. Maybe we'd left some clues when we got in or out of the pipe, maybe we had set off some kind of alarm, or maybe this was routine. Whatever the reason, they were blocking our escape. We could easily overpower the guards and get into the pipe once again, but, if those guards were discovered unconscious or missing while we were still in the pipe, we'd be easy to catch. I rose to my feet and shook my head. We turned around and walked away on cat feet. I remained silent until I was confident we wouldn't be overheard.

"Suggestions?"

Fiona looked at Elle and whispered hopefully, "Can't you just make a hole for us?"

Elle shook her head. "I don't know how far underground we are. It might be fifty meters. And I don't know what's between us and the surface. I might slice through something important—or someone."

I pointed my chin in the direction we were going. "Let's see if we can find a way out of this labyrinth other than by the stairs to the storeroom."

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We began walking, but heard voices again—now coming from in front of us. We dodged into an electrical room crammed with panels and cables. It was crowded with equipment, with no obvious places to hide. After an increasingly desperate search, we squeezed in behind a bank of humming panels. They looked like gym-lockers with thick cables rising from their tops. It was a good thing Elle and I were skinny at the moment. As it was, there was barely enough room for us—though Fiona's microscopic physique had room to spare.

Seconds later, we heard two sets of footsteps. Both stopped. A pair of guards must be looking around the room.

"Come on. There's no place for someone to hide in here. And it don't matter where we look, we ain't gonna find no one down here. Some dung-for-brains cook musta pulled on the wrong walk-in door and set off the alarm."

The other guard answered. "Idiot. This ain't just about the meat-locker alarm. I heard from Chow that someone got into the big man's rooms in the palace. Yang's hair's on fire. The whole rabbit warren is bein' searched from top to bottom. If Yang thinks we searched down here like a couple of *fei wu*, we'll end up in the meat-locker with the other stiff's."

After a brief wait, we heard their footsteps moving away. We slid out of our tight space and ventured out cautiously. We soon discovered that there were now several teams of guards searching for us in the maze of utilities. We managed to stay out of sight but, unless I'd lost my sense of direction, we were steadily moving toward the center of the pyramid—and away from more likely escape possibilities.

After walking down a long passage, we came to a door like you'd see on a bank vault set into a slanting wall of ancient mortared stone, no doubt part of the inner-pyramid's wall. The door was old, even rusty in spots, with a single combination dial and large wheel to spin to pull in the bolts and open the door. Elle/guard was staring at the door with an unhappy expression. She said softly, "It's old, Chinese, and I've never seen one before. I can't open it without knowing how it works."

Elle could blast it open, but if she did the guards would know where we'd gone and follow us immediately.

Fiona whispered, "I know how it works. I read about it in a book on the history of bank vaults."

Elle/guard looked at Fiona with the shining enthusiasm that only recognizing a kindred spirit could evoke. The two of them, heads together, immediately began whispering, gesturing, making circles with their hands over various part of the door.

I heard distant voices. If guards were coming our way, it wouldn't take long for them to get here. I got Elle's attention, "Company coming."

Wasting no time—the voices were getting louder and definitely coming our way—she began moving her hands from side to side and in circles, but this time I could her things moving inside the door. She spun the wheel and the door popped open a crack. Elle/guard pulled and it swung silently open. Fiona and I were through in an instant, Elle/guard right behind pulling the door to a close as she came through plunging us into complete darkness.

Almost immediately we heard muffled voices on the other side of the wall.

"Did you hear something?"

"Yeah, I heard something all right, but, as usual, there's nothing here. I hate it down here. It gives me the creeps. This place is going to drive me *shen jing bing* someday."

"You're already nuts. But you're right about one thing. This whole *hun* place is creepy. Let's keep going. No one can get through that door without the combination."

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We waited another breathless minute or two then pulled flashlights out of Fiona's daypack. Elle reversed her hand motions to relock the door.

She said softly, "You realize that I just locked us inside a vault. Vaults have only one way in and one way out."

"It's worse than that," I said with revulsion in my tone.

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## Chapter 33

We'd discovered what will happen to the dead bodies in the walk-in.

While Elle had been relocking the vault door, Fiona and I had been exploring with our flashlights. We saw hundreds of regularly-spaced, massive stone pillars marching away into cavernous gloom. The pillars stood about three meters apart; at their tops, stone arches spanned from pillar to pillar, buttressing the ceiling. If my reckoning was correct, this columned space underlay all of Chin's fantasy palace and grounds.

Amidst the pillars as far as our flashlights could reveal were piles of cremated human remains. The piles contained unburned bones and skulls. Looking to our right we saw banks of huge ovens—some ancient, some modern—no need to guess what they were for.

We stood in unbelieving silence. Now we knew what had happened to the workers who built the pyramid—and countless more people after that. Chin's world, past and present, was built on murder and stolen lives.

The deaths these men and women had endured had not been easy ones. Their terror and pain lingered like a chilling fog. Nothing here was an imminent danger to us, but it was a nightmarish reminder of the danger a sociopathic Chin posed to the rest of the world. Who knew what else he had done—and what he might do in the future.

Death holds no fear for us, but it was impossible not to feel an aching compassion for the thousands who had been betrayed and died in misery.

Chin had to be stopped.

After a brief consultation, we decided to follow the wall to the left to look for a way out. As we walked in uneasy silence, our flashlight beams crisscrossed the wall. We hoped to see a door, a vent—anything—anything that might get us out of there. Our lights revealed nothing but a blank wall—until we reached a corner. There we found a large square opening partially covered by a rusted iron grate.

We'd found an ancient drain.

From the moment Elle had gotten us through the wall, we'd seen and heard water dripping from the ceiling and trickling down the columns. I assumed that the water came from watering the plants and trees we'd seen in the palace grounds above our heads. The drips and trickles had come together into a soundless stream that flowed under the ruined grate and into the tunnel. With a mutual sigh of unhappy resignation we decided to go in. We squeezed through an opening that rust and time had provided, and began to walk.

The tunnel was square and tall enough that I could walk without stooping. It was made from dressed stones, like the inner pyramid, and sloped gently downward. Elle was in the lead, and had so far managed to keep our feet dry by walking on skiffs of debris, left like sandbars in an old river. Knowing the debris' likely source, none of us looked at it too closely.

If my pace count was accurate, we'd gone about a quarter of a mile when we encountered a jumble of stone blocks almost completely blocking the tunnel. Elle shined her flashlight up and we could see the cavity in the ceiling from which the blocks had fallen. Something didn't look right, but I couldn't immediately grasp what it was.

We climbed up and over the pile of stone blocks without mishap, but when I was nearly over, I glimpsed light reflecting off something in the midst of the blocks.

"Wait." Shining my own flashlight where I'd seen the glint, I saw something made of copper. It was a linked chain of some kind. Further search was interrupted by Fiona.

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"There's something here." Her tone was not pleased.

Elle and I looked where she was pointing. The foot of a skeleton stuck out between several stones. After more investigation, we could see that at least two people had been crushed under the blocks when they fell.

As if on cue, we all shined our lights up into the cavity.

Fiona spoke for all of us.

"Bloody booby trap."

What I hadn't been able to grasp before became clear to me now. There were far more blocks in this pile than would have come from the ceiling simply caving in—the cavity was far bigger than it would be if just a few blocks had fallen from it. The cavity had been built deliberately to hold a massive clutch of blocks that would kill anyone unlucky enough to be under them when they fell.

We searched in vain for a trigger. We concluded that it was probably buried beneath the unfortunate men's unwelcome cairn. Perhaps the copper chain I had seen was part of the trigger. Perhaps whatever had been the trigger had long ago rotted or rusted away.

My turn to lead. We continued with a great deal more caution, constantly on the lookout for the trigger of another booby trap, but we didn't see anything suspicious. The tunnel made several slow, curving turns, but we saw no deviations in the walls, no indentations or protrusions, no chains or brackets, just flat, dressed stone. Our vigilance was made doubly difficult because the tunnel's gradual descent was causing the water in the tunnel to become deeper and deeper. It had now risen to our calves. If the trigger for a booby trap was on the floor of the tunnel, we wouldn't be able to see it. We moved forward with agonizing slowness, in single file, to minimize the number of places a foot might be put wrong.

After ten minutes of slow-motion progress, Elle whispered, "Stop. I think I hear something."

Listening carefully, we heard faint, echoing voices coming from where we'd entered the tunnel. Great. Chin clearly did not suffer intruders gladly. He had searchers looking everywhere, even in his charnel house. Now we were caught between the need for caution and the need for speed. The bends in the tunnel had kept our pursuers from seeing the light of our flashlights, but they might soon catch up with us, especially if they paid no heed to the warning of the fallen stones.

After an almost soundless consultation, we decided we had no choice except to continue to creep slowly forward. Going faster might kill us. One threat at a time. We'd deal with our pursuers if they caught up to us.

To make matters worse, the water level had risen even higher. The tunnel must be going down more steeply. The water was soon up to our thighs. I was worried on two counts. Escape would be impossible if the water level reached the top of the tunnel before we could get out. But my greater worry was that the ruggedized laptop that stored the video we'd made in Chin's apartment—the laptop that stored everything we'd come here to get—might not survive prolonged immersion.

My thoughts were abruptly interrupted by a shout. Our lights had been seen. We heard excited voices and noisy splashing. Just as we turned to face them, a huge section of the ceiling fell with a grinding rumble.

Our pursuers had triggered another booby trap.

One man was directly beneath it. His sudden cry was cut off with a heart-wrenching sound. Moments later a wave of water reached us, washing up to our chests, nearly sweeping Fiona off her feet. The wave of water was followed by a cloud of dust that had us coughing and blinking until it passed by.

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We sloshed our way back toward the rubble which choked the tunnel from floor to ceiling. A grotesquely broken arm protruded from the pile. Though clearly hopeless, Elle reached out to check for a pulse. She shook her head. We stood and listened for the cries of pain and agony that would mean someone was trapped but still alive. We heard voices on the other side calling for their comrades. There was no reply. Eventually we heard the sound of splashing heading away from us. I was happy that not all of our pursuers had died. Killing our adversaries was never our goal. But I was not happy knowing that the survivors would soon alert others to our presence.

Turning away from the deadly pile of rubble, we surveyed the tunnel ahead. Go on? Turn back? Elle could move the stones in a trice so we could head back the way we'd come. But now that we'd been spotted, we might not reach the pyramid before being met by an even larger posse of guards coming our way. Going on seemed our best choice.

The wave of water that hit us had soaked Fiona to the neck. Her teeth were chattering and she was shivering so violently that she could barely walk. Elle and I could keep ourselves warm in any circumstance; by controlling our life force, we could generate enough heat to make the water around us steam, if we wanted. But Fiona had yet to learn such control. She was soaked to the skin; hypothermia was a very real prospect.

Over her half-hearted protests, I hoisted her up and carried her piggy-back. So near my ears, her chattering teeth sounded like castanets. As we waded forward I sent waves of heat into her body. After a bit, the chattering subsided, but she still shivered violently as her body tried to generate some warmth of its own.

Elle was leading now. The water was above our waists. Her flash revealed nothing but endless tunnel—and steadily rising water. I was about to suggest that we needed a new Plan A when I sensed a change. I wasn't sure what it was at first. I couldn't *see* anything different, but something definitely *felt* different. I stopped. It was the top of my head. It was colder. I looked up—into blackness.

Elle realized I had stopped and waded back. She shined her flashlight up and we were rewarded with the view of a tunnel much like the one we were in now—only this one went straight up. We were at the bottom of a well. By the time I dug my own flashlight out of my pocket and shined it up the well, Elle was already soaring up the shaft. She was never one to hang about and wait.

It was a long way to the top. Eventually my flash didn't reach her at all. We could only tell where she was by the tiny receding light of her own flash—and then that, too, went out. After a minute or two we saw it again and it rapidly grew larger and brighter. Elle was coming back down. We moved over to give her room, but she only came down far enough to stand on top of the water.

Show off.

But probably a show off with good news.

"There are two huge slabs of stone covering the top of this shaft—but there's a sliver of a crack between them and I could see a star."

At last. We'd all be more than happy to get out into the open air and far away from pursuit. Elle levitated us up, our sodden clothes dripping as we rose, and we soon neared the top. She stopped about five meters shy of the massive stone slabs that covered the well. On one side of the well shaft we saw a series of iron rungs forming a ladder. Elle drifted over and yanked hard on a few of them. Though rust-flakes came off at her touch, creating a dull red cloud in our flashlight beams, the rungs seemed sturdy.

"I can concentrate more easily on getting the stone slabs off the top if I don't have to hold you guys up as well. These rungs seem safe enough for you to stand on."

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Elle moved us over to the ladder. Fiona grabbed a rung and then swung off my back. I took a position just above her. Satisfied that the ladder rungs would hold us, Elle rose to make her usual careful study of the stone slabs that closed us in.

To ease my position, I reached up to grab a higher rung. It came out of the wall about two centimeters and then stopped with an distinct *thunk*. Suddenly there was a scraping sound and a rush of air. A block of stone tilted out of the wall and swung directly at my head.

Another one of bloody Chin's bloody booby traps.

As suddenly as the block began to move, Fiona rocketed up, probably unaware that she was levitating, and pushed me to the side and out of the way. The tilting block swung on a pivot and, with lightning speed, slammed against the wall. If Fiona hadn't reacted as fast as she had, the block would have crushed my head to pulp. As it was, Fiona couldn't get herself out of the way in time. I heard a sickening snap as Fiona's arm got caught between the block and the side of the well. The block rebounded off the wall, came loose, and then fell past us, making a fizzing sound as it hurtled down the well.

Fiona's eyes were rolling up in her head and I grabbed her before she could fall. Mercifully, she fainted. At the same moment Elle found us with her flashlight. She took in the scene at once, her face twisting in alarm. Without a word, she shot her arm into the air and the two giant stone slabs exploded up and away with a sound like a thunderclap.

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## Chapter 34

Elle had us out of the well and into the cold night air before the explosion even reached its peak. Elle's uncharacteristically hasty and unnecessarily huge blast of kinetic energy had shattered the multi-ton slabs and shot the pieces a hundred meters into the air. As I watched, everything stopped. With a gesture, Elle had arrested the explosion of energy in mid-moment, like freezing a single frame in a high-speed camera.

She gave me a sheepish look. She was simultaneously worried about Fiona and annoyed with herself for losing her calm. Elle moved us sideways and quickly lowered us to the ground.

"Give me a second."

I was holding the still-unconscious Fiona in my arms as if she were a child. Glancing down in the dim starlight, I could see that her arm was bent sideways at an unnatural angle, a starkly-white sliver of bone stuck out, and blood dripped from her hand. She needed help immediately. She'd already been close to hypothermia and the added shock and blood loss could kill her in minutes. I held her tightly to me and continued to send wave after wave of heat through her, but my warmth was fighting with her body's shock response, which was sending her into new waves of shivering spasms.

Elle, meanwhile, reeled in her explosion as if running a film in reverse. She had only just begun when we heard the thudding beat of a helicopter heading our way. Apparently a massive manhunt was in progress outside the pyramid as well as inside, and the noise of the explosion had attracted unwelcome attention. I saw headlights in almost every direction and the cone of the copter's searchlight was racing toward us. If the helicopter reached us before Elle was done, it would hover over us, and we'd have hundreds of armed policemen and soldiers bearing down on our position. Once caught in the searchlight, we'd be unable to use any of our Protectors' abilities to escape.

Elle worked steadily. Although it was taking only a few seconds for Elle to reverse the process, it seemed to go agonizingly slowly. I looked back and forth between the approaching helicopter and the shrinking explosion. It was going to be a close run thing. There was a final shimmer, the two slabs were whole once again, and back on top of the well. In a heartbeat, we were flying sideways. Looking back, I saw the circle of the helicopter's searchlight reach the top of the well—then flash on by.

Exhaling, Elle gave me one more look of mute apology, then lifted us cautiously up into the night and got her bearings. We could see the helicopter's searchlight playing restlessly across the ground as it sped away from us, and we could see vehicles everywhere—several still converging on the old well. I doubt if the forces searching for us outside the pyramid knew anything about Chin's fantasy lair. They were probably police or military, called out on some pretext to look for strangers where they shouldn't be. But getting caught outside the pyramid would be just as bad for us as getting caught by Chin's secret guards inside—either way we'd end up in Chin's hands.

"We've got to get Fiona somewhere right away. She doesn't have much time. We could lose her."

Elle looked shocked. She hadn't known how badly Fiona had been hurt. We took off flying to where we'd hidden our borrowed telephone van. The dimly seen ground became a blur and the wind blasted against us so hard I had to squint to see. Moments later we swooped down and landed near our van. Elle opened the back doors and I climbed in as carefully as I could, trying not to jar Fiona. Even so, as I lay her down, still unconscious, she screamed when her arm touched the floor of the van.

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I looked at Elle. "We can't move her. The slightest bump would be torture and we don't have time for you to take us anywhere that's safer. She could die any moment. I'm going to have to do it here."

Elle nodded. "I'll keep watch."

I relaxed. Having Elle keep watch is like being surrounded by a small army. I was already going into a healing trance as Elle gently closed the back door of the truck.

I sat in lotus pose, as close to Fiona's shattered arm as possible. I reached out and gingerly placed my hands on her bicep and forearm. Even the gentlest pressure caused her to whimper and flinch in her faint. I closed my eyes and with inward vision saw Fiona and myself as bodies of light—brightly shining, weightless, and formless.

Healing isn't like telekinesis. It isn't like moving parts inside a lock. Telekinesis requires a clear visualization of the moving parts and a deep focus to control kinetic energy. Even if healing could be done by moving the internal bits of someone around, the human body is far too complex and too uniquely varied, to visualize accurately. Nor is healing like shape-shifting. The *essence* of the body doesn't change when we shift our form—only the surface. Healing is another art altogether. Healing takes place when we *add* our life energy to a person's own—when we add our power to a person's own innate power to heal himself.

Going deeper into my trance, I could feel life energy coursing from within my body, through my arms and into Fiona. It was as if she were a magnet, drawing a powerful current from me to her. In the blending of our energies, I could also feel how weak Fiona had become. I realized with a deep pang that her life was ebbing away. She was teetering on the edge of death.

Inwardly, I called to Atria. I opened my mind and heart to her, and visualized Atria's evanescent body within my own. Her mind was in my mind. Her heart was in my heart. Her arms and hands were in my arms and hands. The coursing stream of energy I had manifested on my own quickly grew into a flood. I couldn't contain it. It swept me out of my body and out of time; I existed only as a channel for a mighty, roaring river of healing power.

After some time—it could have been minutes or hours—I began slowly to come back to awareness of my body. The healing torrents of energy flowing through me had diminished. I began to feel the weight of my body once again and, as I made little movements, I became aware of my arms and legs. Finally, with a deep breath, I opened my eyes.

In the darkness inside the van, I could just make out Fiona's arm, still bloody, but I knew it was whole. I glanced to see if she had come out of her self-protecting faint and found two shining points of light directed intently toward me. There is a connection made in a deep healing that never goes away. Fiona and I shared that awareness in wordless understanding.

I spoke into the silence, "Thank you for saving my life. I would be dead and lying at the bottom of that well if you hadn't reacted so quickly."

Fiona's voice was soft and tentative as she answered, "I just did it. There was no decision. Suddenly I was flying through the air, next thing I knew, that rock crushed my arm. And thank you for saving *my* life. I could feel myself slipping away."

We were silent for a few moments as we felt the deep bond of love that now connected us.

I lifted my hands from her arm. "How does it feel?"

I heard a rustle of clothing as Fiona gingerly moved her arm. Her face lit with wonder. The rustle increased and Fiona sat up.

"It might feel sore for a bit," I warned.

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Hearing me speak, Elle opened the back of the truck and peered in. Opening the door turned on a ceiling light and she saw Fiona sitting up and flexing her arm. Elle smiled. "He's handy to have around sometimes, isn't he?"

Fiona laughed weakly and a tear of relief tracked down her cheek. She'd had quite a night.

Unable to help herself, Elle asked brightly, "So, how do you like being a Protector so far?"

Fiona began to laugh, and then sob, and then laugh again, as pent-up feelings bubbled up and ebbed away.

Elle smiled in understanding. "You guys will have to get out of the van. We've got better transportation."

We got out and saw two police cars. Their four occupants were lying peacefully on the ground in a neat row. I suspected headaches would be part of their immediate future.

"We'd better go before they wake up."

I turned to Fiona. "She's handy to have around sometimes, too."

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## Chapter 35

We impersonated the hapless policemen and eventually made it back to our hotel, and out of China, without incident. Several plane flights and a limo ride later, we showed off our super-soldier to Jonathon, Andrew, and Audrey. Elle and I were applauded; we performed mock bows to show our appreciation. It *was* a rather good performance. Fiona flew the mosquito in front of us and it took a bow amidst more applause and much laughter.

After we showed off our super-soldier, Andrew and Audrey began to show us what they'd done while we'd been away. They'd worked miracles. There were only a few more items to be finished before the Trojan Horse was complete with its full complement of soldiers.

With the addition of our new super-soldier, I was certain—if we could get our Trojan Horse inside Asher's gates—our soldiers would defeat the Six.

Now we need to talk with Xu. Andrew made a video link for us. I filled Xu in on our progress with the Trojan Horse and all its soldiers. I showed him the super-soldier. He grinned widely.

I continued, "We've built the horse, but we still have to get Asher to bring it into his fortress, and we need a way to do that without Chin, Lucrezia, Abdul, or Rockshaw knowing. Any ideas?"

"Let me see what I can come up with. I'll get back to you." Xu's image faded from the screen.

Andrew and Audrey needed several more hours to finish their masterpiece. Their work couldn't be rushed. Our Trojan Horse had to be perfect—not just good—if it were to work at all, and it had to stand up to intense scrutiny. The best thing we could do was be patient and stay out of Andrew and Audrey's way. There was nothing more we could do to help them.

I smiled. I knew a way to use our time while we waited. I had a surprise for Fiona. A small thank you for saving my life. "Fi. I've got something to show you."

Fiona looked intrigued.

Elle knew me well enough to guess what I had in mind, and she followed us out of the workshop. We took off our clean room suits in the antechamber, donned parkas against the cavern's chill, and walked over to benches placed with a perfect view of the exotic garden of blooming amethyst crystals.

Fiona needed no urging to sit and gaze at the crystals. She'd been entranced when she'd first seen them. I let her settle in and enjoy the play of sparkling light reflecting off the crystals. Meanwhile, I shifted into a more subtle awareness and, because of my recent healing connection with Fiona, effortlessly shared it with her, mind-to-mind. She gasped audibly when the connection was made and smoothly shifted into the same awareness herself—she learned fast.

Now she could see the subtle light of the amethyst crystals. Each crystal pulsed in a slow rhythm. With each pulse, shimmering shades of white-purple-violet astral light, unseen by the physical eye, radiated from each crystal. With each pulse, harmonic tones, unheard by the physical ear, reverberated from each crystal. The waves of astral light and celestial sound emanating from all the crystals together created a magical, ever-changing experience, a quicksilver fusion of light and a heavenly symphony of sound. I'd always found it entralling—and healing. I'd come here many times, never tiring of the experience.

Pleasant hours later, our rapt silence was broken by Audrey's gentle voice. "It's done."

Fiona looked longingly at the crystals, shook herself, and took a deep satisfied breath. She'd be back. We made our way inside Andrew's see-through workshop.

Andrew handed me a DVD with an amused sparkle in his eye. "One Trojan Horse with all its soldiers."

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Our Trojan Horse was one hundred percent digital.

We quickly made a video connection with Xu. As soon as I saw him, I began to speak. "Andrew and Audrey have finished the Trojan Horse. Did you find a way to upload the material directly to Asher?"

Xu made a slight grimace. "No. I've re-examined every connection I've hacked into since we started looking into the Six. We could upload our digital horse onto any number of servers, but there is no telling if the servers are checked regularly and, even if they are checked, there is no telling whether anyone will pass our Trojan Horse on to Asher. Also, if someone does find it on one of these servers, he's as likely to pass it on to one of the four people you don't want to see it as he is to pass it on to Asher."

"What about Julia?"

"Same story. All the time I spent hacking into their systems, I never knew for certain to which of the Six a particular system was connected. There are layers upon layers of servers. I can't give you any assurance that if I upload the Trojan Horse it will make it to Julia, any more than I can assure you that it will make it to Asher."

So much for the easy way.

If we could have uploaded it directly to Asher, we would have been able to sit back and watch from a safe distance as our soldiers brought down the city. Instead, it looked as if we were going to have to do it the hard way.

I exchanged a solemn look with Elle. We were not looking forward to the hard way.

I asked Xu, "Can we contact Asher or Julia directly? Email? Phone?"

"I've never found even the slightest hint of a way to contact Asher. I did find one possible way to contact Julia. A mobile number. I don't know if it will connect to her, but I do know it's active."

"Thanks, Xu. We'll contact you after we give this a try. Let's hope it works."

Mentally preparing myself, I dialed the number on speaker phone so that Elle and the others could listen in. The number rang and Julia answered. It was almost too easy—but we were due some luck.

"Empress. It's Anil Gupta."

"How did you get this number?" Julia's quick response and steely tone expressed her angry annoyance—we knew far too much about her and the rest of the Six for her comfort.

"Empress," I said, doing my best to charm and skip over how-did-you-get-this-number, "I assure you you'll be glad I called. We have something that Asher will want to see—and once you see it, you'll understand why you were the only one we could contact—and once Asher sees it, he'll call off this totally unnecessary manhunt of his. It's all digital. I can send it to you easily."

There was a short pause while Julia Agrippina, mother of Caesars, kings, and emperors, and master of intrigue and self-preservation, made a rapid calculation of how to use this opportunity to her best advantage.

"No. Don't send it. It sounds as if it is too important to trust to the Internet. You must bring it to me in person."

Her demand came as no surprise, but the importance of what we wanted to show her had nothing to do with why she wanted us to bring it to her in person. Julia could care less about what we brought with us. She wanted to capture us and then deliver us to Asher.

I reached out and took Elle's hand. We'd thought for days that this was going to be the price we would have to pay to deliver our Trojan Horse to Asher. Now we knew for certain.

I arranged to meet Julia in New York City and ended the call.

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We contacted Xu again and asked him to get the real Anil and Ambika to New York so we could trade identities one more time. "Tell Rajan that Michael and Elle are coming to see Anil and Ambika and that our password is Trojan Horse."

"You have something to show me."

Julia Agrippina stared stonily at us; she radiated intense hostility. I don't think she liked the Guptas. But she *was* curious, and she was also cautious. She didn't want to pass anything on to Asher before she knew what it was—and whether it could possibly be to her disadvantage. She no doubt planned to turn us over to Asher, but there was no point in not taking credit for the information we were bringing with us if it would make her look even better.

Earlier we'd exchanged identities with the real Anil and Ambika at a safe house outside New York City. Rajan and another Gupta guard had met us at the front door, and, after we'd given them the password, they had led us into a bedroom where we found Anil and Ambika. Ambika had told a reluctant Rajan to give us privacy. We immediately switched identities once again while we filled them in on our plan. Once the switch had been made, Anil/Michael and Ambika/Elle had left. Before departing for the meeting with Julia, we'd had to overcome Rajan's vigorous protests against our going into the meeting without protection. We'd told him, truthfully, that this meeting could end our need to hide, that we couldn't stay on the run forever. Dropping us off in New York City alone had gone against every fiber of his professional being. A lot of my being's fibers objected as well.

Now, Michael/Anil and Elle/Ambika sat opposite the former Madam Rothschild. We sat with deceptive civility on silk brocade couches in her suite at the Pierre, perhaps the most exclusive hotel in the city. It was obviously a personal suite. The decor had a feel of Old Europe to it—dark, heavy furniture, parquet floors, and Meissen china on every surface.

Ignoring her unrelenting glare, I pulled a laptop out of a case—a case that had been thoroughly examined by the large unsmiling men stationed outside her door—and set it on the coffee table between us. I inserted the DVD Andrew had given us, fiddled for a bit, and then clicked on a button. I swiveled the laptop around so she could watch it.

Her angry glare gave way to shock as she took in what she was seeing and hearing. When it ended she said nothing. I reached around and clicked the button again. She watched more intently this time, hoping, no doubt, to discover it was fake, but, judging by her frozen expression, she'd found no reason to think it was.

"There's more. Much more. You'll find it all on the DVD. I think you'll find it all equally fascinating."

"Where did you get this?" Her voice shook with anger—and a hint of fear.

"In a safe in Lucrezia's bedroom. We hired Italian ex-Marina Militare special forces operatives who found it two days ago. They photographed her journal, some letters, and copied the video and audio recordings. Lucrezia doesn't know we've got this. You should get this to Asher as soon as possible. He's going to thank us for it, believe me."

We both tried to look as if Asher was going to be especially pleased with us.

Though still reeling from the implications of what we'd just shown her, she stared unbelievably at us and shook her head slowly from side to side. "You two are pathetic. You don't belong with us, with Asher. Did you really think he would let you live after you threatened him? Giving this to Asher, even if it's real, will make no difference. You were dead from the moment you put your tracker in Lucrezia's bag."

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We'd suspected the same thing.

The next sound we heard was the sound of a bullet being racked into an automatic. We turned our heads and saw three men, one of whom was pointing a pistol at us. The other two stepped forward and plunged hypodermic needles into our necks.

Time for the hard way.

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## Chapter 36

My tormentor sent another searing jolt of electricity through my body. I heard my joints crack and felt tendons tear as my muscles contracted with useless, mindless force, my body straining against the restraints that held it down. I screamed involuntarily, barely recognizing that I was the one making such an inhuman sound.

I was not enjoying this.

I could easily rise above the physical pain by shifting my awareness beyond my body altogether. My body would appear dead, though I would be able to return to it at will. All Protectors have such physical control. Those of us who can shape-shift can also heal ourselves even while the body is being damaged.

But I couldn't do those things and still convince Asher that he was getting the truth from me. Convincing Asher that our meticulously created Trojan Horse and all its soldiers were genuine, meant I couldn't fake it. There was only one way to sound completely convincing. I had to give in to the agony completely so that my answers to my torturer's questions would have the raw ring of truth.

More crucially, Asher was observing me from behind a one-way mirror. My torturers often looked nervously at the silvered window. Even without their confirming glances, I knew Asher was present. I could feel him probing my mind. It was small comfort, amid this shattering ordeal, to be able to confirm that Asher did indeed need visual contact in order to make mental contact.

He was definitely making mental contact, but this time not with his excruciating mental knives. He didn't need to. His soulless minion was providing more than enough pain. This time Asher was employing more subtlety. I felt his presence in my mind like spidery fingers, trying to touch on knowledge that I'd so far kept hidden. Yet another reason to give in to the pain; to focus my thoughts on the pain so absolutely that it became my only reality, to use the pain to blast away any errant thoughts that could betray me to Asher.

It was a prolonged but necessary horror, and it was the price we had to pay to maintain our deception.

It was a price I would continue to pay, a price Elle would continue to pay, if it meant the Six's monstrous plans for humanity would be thwarted. There is no torture that can touch us if we don't want to feel pain, and no prison that can hold us if we don't want to be held. We can move continents, rearrange the planets, cause a star to go nova, but our greatest power, right then, was willing self-sacrifice.

Before leaving the Milliefiore cavern, Elle and I had discussed the possible scenarios that might play out once we got to Julia's.

When Fiona had realized what we were calmly discussing, she was round-eyed with surprise. "Don't go! There's got to be another way. You don't have to do this!"

Elle looked at Fiona, a sweet expression on her face. "Michael and I knew all along that in order to sell our story to Asher, we might have to let ourselves be tortured, even killed. Nothing sells a story like sticking to it during intense pain."

Fiona's eyes were wide and staring.

Elle continued as if describing the weather. "In order for the work all of us have done to be successful, Asher has to be convinced *absolutely* that the stuff we've put in our Trojan Horse is genuine."

Fiona looked thoughtful.

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Elle cut her eyes sideways to me before speaking. "We've done this before. Many times before. It's terrible and we often die."

The matter-of-fact delivery was as surprising to Fiona as what Elle had actually said.

"But we'd do all of it all over again. Being a Protector sometimes requires the full measure of sacrifice. But know this for certain: No matter what happens, nothing can truly touch us. Everything is but a passing show. And it is a small price to pay to keep Asher and his ilk from causing others untold suffering."

I could tell that Elle's calm acceptance had made Fiona feel better, but the whole exchange had been deeply sobering for all of us. We may have no fear of pain or death, but we do not take the prospect lightly.

Goodbyes had been poignant and tearful. Andrew and Audrey had understood better than Fiona what lay ahead for us. Their hugs were long and full of love, and they held our eyes with looks of melting compassion.

Fiona had struggled to adjust to all she had just learned. "Will I see you again?"

Elle answered, "If not soon, then much later, after we've been reborn. You are a Protector now and I feel strongly that our paths are intertwined."

Fiona struggled to hold back tears and failed. "Make it soon. You promised me you'd show me how to shape-shift."

Her humor helped. We'd left the cavern wrapped in their love. We needed it now. Oh, how we needed it now. For the first time I did not know how much longer I could last.

My tormentor kept at it. Shock. Question. Shock. Question. Though my rational mind knew each shock lasted only seconds, there are truer measures of time than a clock's. Eventually I was carried back to my cell and dropped like a sack of potatoes on a narrow bunk. I felt an all-encompassing throbbing of savaged nerve endings and ripped muscles.

Despite the nearly overwhelming pain, my thoughts went immediately to Elle. We'd been kept apart. I knew she had been alive before my last session because we'd risked sending mental flashes to each other—but only brief ones. We were very wary of Asher. I risked another contact. I sent Elle an image of us lying on our favorite beach. In moments, I received an image of Elle in lotus pose, eyes serenely shut. The message was clear and reassuring. Whatever else she might be feeling, on the inside she was untouched.

I didn't know where I was or what time of day or night it was. After Julia's drugs had worn off, I'd awoken alone in this windowless cell. Its old stone wall suggested I was somewhere in Europe and reason suggested it had been about a day or two since we'd been abducted. But, as far as my heart was concerned, I was in some dark hell and an endless eon of agony had passed since I'd arrived.

The torture chamber was down a short passage—close enough that I'd been able to hear Elle/Ambika screaming—no doubt all part of the treatment. The chamber of horrors looked like a hospital operating room—but I can assure you it had nothing to do with healing. I'd been six times.

I'd stuck exactly to the story that Elle and I had drilled into each other over and over again before our plane had reached New York, before we'd put ourselves in Julia's hands. According to our carefully rehearsed story, we'd hired two men, who used to be in Italy's elite Marina Militare, to get into Lucrezia's palace. We didn't know any details of how they did it. We didn't know their names. We never even saw them. The stuff on the DVD was sent to us over the Internet. We'd paid them through a numbered Swiss account. The only thing they'd told us was that they had confederates inside the special forces base that protected the Countess Genovese's palace.

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I'd also stuck to our well-practiced story that our father, Sunil Gupta, had raised us to seek immortality; that we had a stash of information going back nearly two thousand years; that the stash was now out of our hands and couldn't be recalled. Elle and I had memorized a detailed description of its non-existent contents. It was crucial that both of us say the same thing. If our stories diverged even a little, Asher would never believe us.

Not only did we need to say the same thing we needed to think the same thing. The highly advanced discipline of mind that had enabled us to Awaken was being sorely tested. Asher could perceive our thoughts—but only the thoughts actively in our mind—therefore we had to avoid thinking about anything we didn't want Asher to know. No easy trick, and one which took unrelenting concentration when Asher's spidery fingers were in the mind and physical pain was being delivered.

And the greatest torture of all—did he believe us? Had we convinced him, or had we given ourselves away? I clung to the hope that he did believe us, or else our sacrifice would be for nothing.

I now concentrated on healing my battered body on the inside, while keeping the external signs of my torturer's handiwork unhealed. If we were going to make it out of here alive, I'd need a fully functioning body. My self-healing was abruptly stopped by the arrival of two men. The iron cell door screeched open and they hauled me roughly to my feet. I pretended to be weaker than I was, and let my legs give out beneath me. They half-marched, half-dragged me out of the cell.

Feeling soul-wrenching dismay, I was expecting to be delivered yet again to the interrogation room. Feeling profound despair, I did not know how much longer I could avoid a slip in concentration. To my surprise and immense relief, I was taken up several flights of stairs, propelled along several long passages of what I could now see was a castle, and finally pushed roughly into a chair and handcuffed to its arm.

The first thing I saw was that Elle/Ambika was handcuffed to the chair next to mine. Ambika's beautiful hair was a matted mass of blood. One of her eyes was swollen shut, her lips split, and the rest of her face a mottled black and purple bruise. I looked at her hand cuffed to the chair and winced. Her fingernails were gone, leaving raw, slowly-bleeding wounds.

I know I looked no better—but I felt acutely for Elle. I was looking intently at her and feeling a deep pang of guilty sympathy. Suddenly I received a mental image of her looking sternly at me and wagging her finger back and forth. The message was unmistakably Elle: "Don't even think about feeling guilty!"

She turned her head and winked with her one good eye.

I sometimes fall into thinking of Elle as a woman, even though I've long known Elle is beyond such a definition. Sometimes she's in a woman's body, sometimes in a man's—but she's always indomitable. I smiled inside at her message. If either of the two of us needed sympathy and protection right now, it was more likely to be me than her.

I tore my eyes away from Elle's battered body and looked around. Our two chairs were part of a circle. The six remaining chairs were empty. The rest of the room was baronial. Tapestry-covered stone walls were lined with heavy chests and tables. The one exception to the medieval theme was a large-screen TV atop an oak table. The scenes in the tapestries made me think we were in Switzerland, as did the snow-clad mountains I saw through two tall, narrow windows. The slanting sunlight suggested early evening, but it was just as likely to be early morning.

I was dismayed but not surprised when Rockshaw entered. When he saw our battered and bleeding faces, I saw revulsion briefly spasm his features. By the time he sat, however, revulsion

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had given way to triumph. He'd recognized me. He looked directly at me and gloated. Was he gloating over our suffering? Was he gloating because he had already told Asher what he knew about us? Or was he gloating because he was *about* to tell Asher?

I risked connecting with him mind-to-mind. I immediately knew he hadn't yet told Asher about us, but I sensed eager and self-satisfied anticipation—in moments he was going to tell Asher all that he knew. Not only would his knowledge destroy our mission, it would inevitably lead Asher to the conclusion that there was a much bigger threat to him than just the two of us.

I had only seconds to do something that might save the mission and safeguard the Protectors. It was now or never.

His expression changed to bewildered surprise when I cast a wave of loving warmth into his mind and heart. I had only an instant to reach into Rockshaw's feelings, where I knew, from the deep healing experience we'd shared, there still remained a remnant of the love we'd felt for each other so long ago.

Along with the wave of love, I sent an image of the two of us, working side-by-side in his laboratory. We were sharing a smile of triumph. We'd just made an important breakthrough. Excitement danced back and forth between us. It was an electric moment. A shared moment of regard, friendship, and genuine love.

Rockshaw's expression became momentarily open and vulnerable. Then I felt him panic. These were not the thoughts and feelings he wanted to entertain.

Communication from mind-to-mind and heart-to-heart has one surpassing quality—the receiver has absolutely no doubt that what he is receiving is true. A good actor can pretend to love someone when he actually despises that person, but no one can pretend to love someone in a heart-to-heart exchange. There is no possibility of pretense in the intimacy of such communication.

Rockshaw looked shattered. He could not deny the sincerity of my love. It must have affected him like a bomb exploding in the flinty recesses of his feelings. Long untouched emotions broke loose and surged to the surface, leaving him looking hollowed out and uncertain.

I croaked out through broken lips, "I am so sorry."

A small phrase, inadequate for the task of conveying all that I meant. I was sorry our friendship had died. I was sorry for my part in it. I was sorry I'd had to thwart his plans at every turn for so many decades since. I was sorry we'd come to this. But my wordless communication of love overcame the limits of mere words and conveyed all that I meant.

Rockshaw looked as if he would explode. A roiling mixture of love and hate, hope and denial, threatened to overmaster him. He could only stare at me in helpless confusion, torn between the desire for revenge and the thought of forgiving me.

The moment was broken when we heard approaching voices. Rockshaw wrenched his attention away from me. There was no way I could do more now. The voices we'd heard belonged to Abdul, Chin, and Lucrezia. Before entering the room, they spoke together in the passage outside.

Chin was speaking. ". . . No, I have no idea why Asher insisted on a face-to-face meeting. He knows this puts us all at risk. We haven't met together in years. He'd better have a good reason."

I recognized Abdul's harsh voice. "He always has a reason. Let us hope, as you say, that it is a good one—for us."

Lucrezia chimed in with confidence. "Why wouldn't it be?" she asked over her shoulder as the three of them entered the room.

They stopped to stare at us. We were a grisly sight, so bloody and battered we were almost unrecognizable. But eventually they did recognize us and, when they did, they smiled—especially

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Lucrezia. We'd made a fool of Lucrezia and worse, Ambika's radiant beauty had eclipsed hers. Nasty hatred burned in her eyes. It was her turn to gloat.

Lucrezia, as always, was dressed as if she were about to walk the red carpet. Her hair and makeup were perfect, set off by a form-fitting but elegant aqua silk dress. Savoring the moment, she walked slowly over to where Elle/Ambika was slumped in her chair. Leaning down, she examined her face closely then spoke with spiteful satisfaction.

"*You* will certainly never be beautiful again now, will you?" When she finished speaking she slammed her fist down on Elle/Ambika's bleeding fingers. Ambika arched her back in pain and sobbed. Chin and Abdul watched with flat indifference. Then Lucrezia turned her malevolence on me. "Not so arrogant now, are you?"

I'll never know what cruel act she intended to do to me because, from the next room, we heard Asher's loud and angry voice as he headed toward us. Lucrezia looked surprised, turned away, and hastily took a seat. With a shared glance of alarm at the distressing intensity of Asher's voice, Chin and Abdul also sat. Asher entered the room, Julia just behind him. Julia took a seat but Asher stood behind the last empty chair.

Elle/Ambika and I both stiffened when we saw Asher clearly for the first time. Not in fear, but in astonishment. There was no time now to reflect on what we were seeing. We'd ask Jonathon later—if there was a later. What we saw was a man of medium-height, dark hair, dark skin, and average features. Normally, he would not have attracted particular notice anywhere he went.

Just now, however, he would have attracted plenty of notice. His eyes seem to blaze and he radiated an almost palpable aura of menace. I could sense a wave of fear pass through the others. They knew they were in extreme danger, even if they had no idea why. They all knew Asher was capable of killing any one of them with his mind—and that he would not hesitate to do so. The Six had not always been six.

He looked around the circle of chairs, carefully meeting their eyes. He was rigid with anger and spoke in an intense whisper. "You fools! We were so close. We could have had everything—everything!"

Ignoring their bewilderment and fear, Asher pulled a remote from his pocket and turned on the large flat screen monitor just behind where Julia sat. An image began to form. As it came into focus, Chin gasped in surprise.

On the screen we could see a still image of Chin sitting in full third-century BC regalia: a golden silk-strip curling up from the front of his oriental crown, curtains of shining beads framing his implacable features, and flowing, golden silk robes. He was sitting in the clearly recognizable sitting room of his pyramid fantasy world, the unique jade replica of his palace visible on the table beside him.

Frightened comprehension began to dawn on Chin's face. He was no fool. He knew that two never-captured intruders had taken great risk to invade his hidden world, get past his guards, and enter his study. He must also remember that he had been wearing those identical garments the night the intruders had come and then escaped his guards. He put those memories together with the image of himself on the screen, Asher's burning anger, and the unusual summons to meet in person and came to a terrifying conclusion: He was being framed.

He shot to his feet. "This is a lie!"

"You will be silent!" Asher's words were like thunder.

Chin froze. At first I thought he was merely trying to think of what to say, but then his face gradually became a mask of intense concentration. A battle of minds and wills was taking place. I

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was surprised to see that Chin was able to hold out against Asher. Apparently Asher was not the only one of the Six who'd developed mental powers. But he did not hold out for long. Slowly Chin's expression changed from concentration to fear, then his eyes widened in pain as Asher inexorably won the battle.

"You will sit." Asher's tone was contemptuous.

Chin sank slowly back into his chair like an automaton, obviously deep in the grip of Asher's mental control. He was in visible pain, but not so much so that he wasn't aware of what was going on. He could only look on helplessly.

Looking away with a sneer, Asher pressed another button on his remote. The image on the screen came to life.

The Chin on the screen began to speak. As he spoke, the image occasionally wobbled as if the camera had been accidentally moved. From time to time golden hair obscured the lens. Then a hand appeared to brush the hair aside, Lucrezia's heavy antique ring clearly visible. It was obvious to everyone that Lucrezia had been surreptitiously recording the conversation, perhaps using a broach with a hidden camera. The sight of her deadly antique ring had elicited a gasp from Lucrezia. Having seen what happened to Chin, she did not make any protest, but her former fear escalated into near hysteria.

We could all clearly hear Chin's recorded voice. "Asher moves too slowly. We have control of all the levers of power! Yet he will not use them. He waits and he waits like an old man afraid to act. The world is ours to take. It is our time to rule! We can smash any resistance that remains. It is time he moves aside—or is moved aside—to let us seize the opportunity."

Lucrezia's voice was carefully flat. "Moving Asher aside will not be easy. Others have died trying."

Chin nodded confidently. "We have Rockshaw and Abdul. The four of us are more than a match for Asher."

The video came to an end, Chin's arrogant and self-confident face remaining frozen on the screen. A fraught silence held the room. Chin was unable to speak, the others were too afraid to do or say anything lest they get the same treatment as Chin.

The video Asher had played was the super-soldier we'd put inside our Trojan Horse. And, as we'd hoped, our super-soldier had just dealt Chin a decisive blow. Creating this video was why we'd risked our lives to infiltrate Chin's hideaway: to fake what Asher had to believe couldn't possibly be faked. Our mosquito's camera had faithfully recorded a conversation that would stand up to any scrutiny. The video had captured Chin and Lucrezia inside Chin's unique palace and pyramid—a palace Asher had no doubt visited. If that hadn't been enough, to act out our little drama, Elle and I had shape-shifted into Lucrezia and Chin. Even voice analyzers would confirm that the voices were theirs—as I assumed Asher had already confirmed in the days since he had received our Trojan Horse DVD.

Even though we had been confident that Asher would believe that this video was impossible to fake, in case there had been any doubt, we'd provided more evidence on the DVD. Our Trojan Horse had many other soldiers that had since been let loose inside Asher's mind. Lucrezia's lifelong habit of collecting information she could use to coerce and extort other people had given me the idea. Our Trojan Horse DVD was full of apparently genuine evidence of a long-running conspiracy to get rid of Asher. And we made it appear that Lucrezia had been collecting the evidence of the conspiracy for decades, for use as possible blackmail material against the other members of the Six.

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We'd told Julia that all the material on the Trojan Horse DVD had been stolen from Lucrezia's safe—a story we had stuck to through untold agony in Asher's torture room. A story we'd paid to tell with great sacrifice and risk of death. A story, I now dared think, we'd succeeded in making Asher believe.

A wave of relief flooded through me. *We'd sold it. We'd sold it!*

Asher believed everything. There was no other explanation for his seething rage. Our carefully created evidence had held up under minute forensic scrutiny and we'd held up under extreme torture.

Andrew and Audrey had done an incredible job in the short time they'd had. Lucrezia's genuine journal had been provided the framework for our Trojan Horse. Working from the photos we'd taken of Lucrezia's journal, new, but altered, pages had been created—not just Photoshop-altered pages that an expert could spot—but actual new pages. The new pages were made from authentic paper and inks that dated from the Renaissance—the inks used on the altered pages changed according to the eras in which the entries were made.

The altered pages were then photographed using the same camera we had used in Lucrezia's palace—and with dim lighting conditions that perfectly simulated those in Lucrezia's storeroom. No forensic specialist would be able to spot the altered pages. They looked like every other genuine page in her journal.

The alterations in Lucrezia's journal pages told a story that Asher's undoubtedly active paranoia made him readily believe—members of his inner circle had been planning to betray him for almost half a century. The fake journal entries fit Lucrezia's usual MO—collecting damning information on people—information that she could later use for threats, extortion, or blackmail. By now Asher must think that Lucrezia had been hedging her bets: If the conspirators succeeded, she would appear to have been with them all along; if they didn't succeed, she would appear to have been gathering evidence to give to Asher. But by now Asher must also think that she'd never warned him—and that should seal her fate.

The new entries we'd created in Lucrezia's journal made reference to the new material we'd faked—letters it appeared that Lucrezia had received or stolen, conversations it seemed she'd secretly recorded—all involving other members of the Six. We'd made a video at the Savoy of a damning conversation between Lucrezia and Abdul, another at the Plaza between Lucrezia and Rockshaw. In Andrew's workshop, we'd faked cell phone calls and meetings that had taken place over the last forty years, all recorded using period-appropriate recording devices—all providing direct and indirect evidence of a decades-long conspiracy to overthrow Asher. If the super-soldier video of Chin had failed to convince Asher, the rest of the material would have put it beyond doubt, and it was now obvious that Asher believed he had been deeply and completely betrayed.

Once the video of Lucrezia and Chin ended, Asher stood in silence, locking eyes with the uncomprehending conspirators one by one. Chin remained immobile, beads of sweat running down his face. The fear on Rockshaw, Lucrezia, and Abdul's faces grew as each one realized that Asher believed every word Chin had spoken in the super-soldier video. Even though *they* knew it was untrue—that somehow, beyond comprehension, it had been faked—they knew with equal certainty that Asher was convinced it was genuine. They also knew that their lives hung in a fatal balance.

Rockshaw suddenly turned to look at us in the momentary silence after the video ended. Like Chin, he was no fool. He put together what he knew. Rockshaw pointed at us and began to speak. "I can explain this—"

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## Chapter 37

"Silence!"

Rockshaw was too late. Days too late. The moment Asher first watched the video of Chin and Lucrezia conspiring against him it had probably been too late for him to try to unmask us and Rockshaw's attempt to explain cost him dearly, instead.

Rockshaw began to twist in agony. The torment on his face was the same as I'd seen on Elle/Ambika's face when Asher had savaged her unprotected mind. After a few seconds of writhing in pain, Rockshaw, like Chin, sat immobile in his chair, a frozen expression of pain on his face.

"And you!" Asher turned to look at Lucrezia. "You were nothing but a tramp before I found you. I made you! And this is how you repay me!"

Lucrezia began to stammer out a protest and was cruelly seized in a vise of overwhelming pain, her face a rictus of horror. Abdul shot to his feet in an attempt to escape. Asher grasped his mind with claws of pain and he collapsed in his chair.

Asher began to shout. "You utter fools! You complete and utter fools!"

His voice rose to a shriek. He could no longer contain his unbelieving frustration that these four could have been so stupid as to betray him, so stupid as to destroy what he had so carefully and patiently worked to achieve for *millennia*. His attempt at total financial domination was ruined. It was too much for him to bear. Fury overwhelmed him. The hapless four began to scream, all of them writhing in their seats under Asher's mental onslaught. I don't think he was going to stop this time. They were going to die in unendurable agony.

Although we'd suffered nearly unendurable pain at his hands, I felt no satisfaction that Asher was now meting out to these four what he had inflicted on us. I felt no desire for retribution. Protectors don't stand in judgment, nor mete out punishment. Our mission was to disrupt the Six—but no more.

I had accepted, when I'd first conceived it, that our plan to drive a wedge between the members of the Six could, and probably would, end in violent reprisals and death as the various factions vied for new supremacy. I was untroubled by this. The Six, and all the people they had drawn to them, lived by violence, and, as often as not, would die by violence. By the standards of the world the Six all deserved to die, they deserved to die many times over, the blood of thousands, even millions, stained their hands, but...even if violent deaths are the inevitable outcome of lives led by violent people, that didn't mean I could just stand by and watch it happen right before my eyes.

I had to stop Asher before he killed them.

I had a rough idea—but no time to think it through. It might work or it could go spectacularly wrong. I had no choice. They could die in seconds. I focused on a point on the wall behind Asher, and in nanoseconds I expanded a tiny dot of kinetic force to the size of a walnut. This may not sound like much, but like a patch of plastic explosive going off, the nearly instantaneous expansion of energy blew a satisfyingly large hole in the meter-thick stone wall of the castle. Pulverized stone fragments exploded out the other side of the wall, just as I had hoped they would.

Self-congratulation was not entirely in order, however. I'd forgotten Newton's third law: For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. A shockwave slammed *into* the room like the blow of a giant hammer. Thankfully the shockwave wasn't pushing shattered fragments of stone ahead of it. If it had been, we'd all have been gruesomely shredded. As it was, the shockwave was powerful enough to blow Asher off his feet and to slam the rest of us to the floor.

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The sound of the blast had been deafening in the enclosed space. My ears rang painfully. A number of stunned-looking guards rushed into the room. Two in green uniforms rushed over to Asher's motionless body. I craned my head around to get a look from my position on the floor. One of the guards put his fingers to Asher's neck. I gathered from his relieved look that Asher was alive but unconscious.

The other guards went to their respective employers. One guard knelt beside an unconscious Julia, while Chin and the other accused conspirators were helped shakily to their feet amid a babble of four different languages. They all took one look at Asher, and the hole blasted in the castle wall, and blanched. They knew what it looked like, or at least what it would look like to Asher. They realized that Asher would think they had planted a bomb to kill him. They did not stay around to find out if they were right. With abrupt gestures to their uncomprehending guards, they made their way hurriedly out of the room.

Escorted by two bodyguards, Rockshaw was the last of the four to leave. He paused for a moment to look at me. It gave me one more chance. I flooded him with love once again, and I added a feeling of sorrow that we'd had to implicate him in our plan. Even a *moment* of heartfelt contact is powerful. He could not deny what he was feeling from me. As before, he looked confused and conflicted. His eyes held mine, but the moment was again broken too soon. This time one of his guards nudged him forward. Dazed, he turned away and left the room.

Asher's guards were still checking him for injuries, too distracted to notice the exodus. After a huddled consultation, one of his guards raced out of the room, another stood up and began to look around. His eyes lingered on the unconscious Julia for a moment, and then he saw us, lying on our backs, arms handcuffed to our chairs.

He ordered one of the other guards to take us back to our cells. He spoke Russian; I filed that away for future reference. If we ever need to find Asher, that may be our starting point. The Russian speaker handed his fellow guard a small key to the handcuffs. The guard came over with his pistol drawn, bristling with suspicion, but visibly relaxed when he saw how bad we looked.

His mistake.

He unlocked our cuffs and stepped back, wagging his gun up and down to tell us to stand up. We both pretended to be weak and in great pain, and staggered to our feet, half-helping, half-leaning on each other. He gestured for us to head for the door, using the gun as a pointer. As we shambled forward, he prodded me painfully in the back with the muzzle of his gun.

I was really getting tired of all this.

He led us back toward our cells. Once we'd put some distance between us and the scene of the blast, Elle/Ambika staggered and fell against the wall. Our Russian friend had just begun a rich curse from the Motherland when Elle's foot shot out backward, connected with the side of his head, and lifted him off his feet. I caught him before he hit the ground. After Elle's kick he'd need physio; no point adding a concussion to his problems.

I whispered to Elle, "You okay?"

"It wasn't enough I had to be tortured, you had to try to kill me as well?"

I tried a smile but she wasn't having any.

"Was it really necessary to blow a hole in the wall that big?"

I tried for injured innocence. "I may have miscalculated slightly." When that didn't work either, I held my arms apart, palms up. "Hey, everyone one survived, didn't they?"

Finally smiling, she shook her head. "I can't take you anywhere."

She was okay.

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Time to make our escape.

We both studied the guard on the floor. He wore a green uniform and zippered jacket with a black baseball-style cap. In moments, so did we. I looked like someone you'd probably call Ivan, and Elle you'd want to call Olga. Just then we heard gunfire.

Elle/Olga tilted her head to listen and then spoke for both of us. "I imagine Asher's guards are trying to keep Chin and the others from leaving before they've sorted out what's happened."

Soon we heard automatic weapons' fire coming from several directions. We cautiously headed in the general direction of the sounds. We found a window after a few turns. We saw one end of a huge courtyard enclosed by massive castle walls. From our vantage point, we could see the main gate, now closed by two enormous wooden doors, reinforced by iron bands and held closed by a heavy bar. It was guarded by a large number of Asher's green-uniformed guards, standing well-shielded behind stone parapets. It looked like Asher's guards would be able to keep anyone from leaving.

They weren't prepared for what came next.

We saw three flaming streaks hit the massive doors, exploding them into a cloud of smoke and splinters. Someone had come prepared for a small war. Before the cloud of splintered fragments had even begun to fall back to earth, three SUVs drove at high speed through the now wide-open gate. Asher's green-uniformed forces poured on automatic fire but they were unable to even slow down the SUVs. The escaping SUVs were armored, and the hail of bullets managed only to star the windows and dent the bodies—but not to penetrate. I'd guess that Chin, Lucrezia, Abdul, and Rockshaw had just gotten safely away.

Even after the SUVs had cleared the gate, there were still sounds of continuous heavy gunfire coming from a part of the courtyard we couldn't see. We ran through several passages to the opposite side of the castle. This new vantage point allowed us to see why there was continuing gunfire.

Asher's guards, inside the castle, had two groups of men pinned down in the courtyard. One group was trapped in a small stone room built onto the castle wall, and another bunch, not far away from them, was hiding near the wall behind several thoroughly shot-up vehicles. The men must be Chin, Rockshaw, Abdul, and Lucrezia's remaining guards, who'd banded together after the three SUVs had gotten away. Normally, they'd probably be just as happy to shoot one another—but right now the enemy of their enemy was their friend.

The situation did not look hopeful for them. They were pinned down by Asher's men in the castle and by Asher's men near the main gate. There were several armored SUVs in the middle of the courtyard they could escape in, but they might as well have been on the moon: They couldn't reach them without getting shot.

Not all of the remaining guards were alive. The center of the courtyard had served as a parking area where a dozen cars and SUVs sat in the middle of the crossfire. It had not been a safe place to take cover. We saw bodies sprawled everywhere.

The bodies gave me an idea: "Do you think it's a good time for the Guptas to die?"

Elle/Olga looked startled, then she understood, and nodded an emphatic Yes. Being a Gupta had started out as a bit of a lark, but recently, it had lost a lot of its appeal.

"And let's see if we can't help those guys escape, too. There have been more than enough deaths already."

I looked around. Up against the castle wall opposite the now-destroyed main gate was a long lean-to structure serving as a covered garage. A small contingent of fleeing guards had apparently

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tried to find cover there, but had been cut down before they made it to safety. We could see at least half a dozen cars sitting inside the garage. I saw two Maseratis and a flamboyantly orange Lamborghini.

That settled it. The Guptas had always been flamboyant.

I flashed my plan to Elle in mental pictures. It was Elle's turn to blow something up. I had little doubt she'd do a better job than I had.

Elle studied the cars parked in the center of the courtyard for a moment or two. Seconds later, I saw a fireball burst up from one of the cars and I felt a deep thump through my feet. She'd raised the temperature of the gas in the tank until it exploded, with satisfying effect. She did the same to six more vehicles in quick succession. The burning vehicles began to put out billows of acrid-smelling, oily-black smoke, which cut off the castle guards' view of the trapped men—and their view of the garage that held the Lamborghini.

We both looked toward the Lambo. One of the reasons I'd chosen it, besides it being a color that naturally occurs only on the surface of the sun, was that two bodies lay nearby. Another was that it was a convertible with its top down. Elle levitated one of the bodies into the driver's seat and I levitated the other into the passenger seat. I sent a silent apology to the souls of the two men who had so recently vacated their bodies, but I assured them that they were about to earn some good, though belated, karma.

Now that we'd placed the dead men's bodies in the car seats, it was time for the tricky bit. Elle had no trouble transforming the driver's body into a battered and tortured Ambika lookalike. A few failed attempts later, I managed to make the other body look enough like a beaten Anil Gupta to pass.

By the time I was done, Elle had started the Lambo and was ready to drive it by telekinetic remote control. She was about to make her run, when we heard the squealing of tires. As we'd hoped, the trapped men had seized their chance. The oily black smoke was beginning to abate just a bit, and we could blurrily make out one, then two, then three armored SUVs, windows starred but unbroken, racing for the shattered castle gate.

Perfect timing for us.

With a scream of its high-powered engine, the Lamborghini shot out of the garage and accelerated madly to catch up with the SUVs. My job was to keep the two bodies upright. Elle's job was to make the escape look real. With the engine revving at an insane pitch, she raced it into the cloud of oily smoke. Moments later, it burst out the other side like a high-speed sunrise.

By this time, the armored SUVs were making good their escape. They took heavy fire, but like the other SUVs that had already made it through the gate, they were impregnable. Our orange rocket was not as good a getaway car to use in these circumstances—not if the occupants wanted to live. Unlike an armored SUV, the Lambo was defenseless. As soon as it emerged from the smoke, bullets penetrated the rear side, and the windshield disintegrated into a spray of shattered glass. I moved the bodies as if they were trying to dodge the flying glass while Elle swerved the car wildly, then I made both bodies slump forward, hoping it would look as if they were ducking.

Elle made the streaking flame of a car careen out of control, tires smoking and spinning in a full circle, then straighten up, as if the driver had regained control and again headed for the gate. The Lambo accelerated once more, still taking gunfire. Abruptly, as if the driver had finally been hit, Elle swerved the car, missed the gate, and slammed into the unyielding castle wall.

The impact compressed the car to half its length. The gas in the tank detonated into a towering plume of flame. I added a secondary explosion of my own that was so powerful that it disintegrated

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the car into minute fragments. The shockwave blew out a score of castle windows. Debris fell like hail, peppering the remaining cars in the courtyard with a clattering staccato.

I thought it went rather well—for a quick improvisation—and it accomplished what we wanted to accomplish.

What we wanted Asher's guards to remember, what we wanted etched into their minds, was that the Guptas had tried desperately to escape, and had died spectacularly in the attempt. My secondary explosion had been necessary to eliminate even the remotest possibility that any part of the two now-vaporized bodies could ever be examined. There could be no doubts, now or in the future, that the Guptas were dead.

So ended the brief and dramatic tale of Anil and Ambika Gupta, once the richest people in the world.

Our job was done. I looked at Elle/Olga. "See. Plan A worked just like I said it would."  
Elle/Olga let me see a flicker of a smile.

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## Chapter 38

### One Week Later

After another of Xu's fantastic breakfasts—crepes, with figs and cherries in cream—I padded into Milliefiore's solarium on soft shoes, a cup of steaming tea in one hand, and under my arm, a thick clutch of newspapers from around the globe. I stood for a moment and drank in the view.

The solarium is my favorite room in the winter. On a sunny day, its glass walls reveal a sparkling panorama of the tree-fringed, snow-clad Rockies. It was late morning and the piercingly clear winter sunshine had already warmed the slightly humid room. The solarium itself was a riot of blooming cyclamen, artfully placed on tables and shelves anywhere there was room. I breathed in their sweet scent with pleasure.

It was good to be back.

After Chin, Abdul, Lucrezia and Rockshaw escaped Elle and I had simply hidden in the castle until it was dark enough for us to levitate out unobserved and make our way toward the distant lights of a village. As I had guessed, we'd been in Switzerland. Before we escaped the castle, we'd overheard enough passing conversations to know that Asher and Julia had both survived, and that the other four had indeed all gotten away. All six still lived—but they were the *Six* no longer.

Once we'd made our escape, we'd contacted Xu, who had been pleased to arrange a return to Milliefiore. Xu had also been pleased to tell us that the Guptas' real identity had never been breached. Our deception had held.

One day after we'd returned, a visibly distressed Rajan, head of Gupta security, had had to announce before the cameras of the world press that the Guptas were missing, perhaps kidnapped, possibly dead. Rajan's distress was obviously genuine. I wish we could tell him the truth.

I took my usual seat, facing the view, and began what had now become a daily ritual since we'd made it back from Asher's castle. I took the first newspaper from the top of the pile to see what the latest headlines were.

Alive, the Guptas had been a worldwide item, missing and possibly dead, they were an unprecedented sensation. The mystery of the disappearance of the richest people in the world had dominated page one ever since Rajan's announcement.

Yesterday's headlines were typical:

*USA Today*: INTERPOL REPORTS NO LEADS ON GUPTAS

*New York Times*: NO RANSOM DEMANDS FOR GUPTAS

*Wall Street Journal*: FATE OF GUPTA FORTUNE UNKNOWN

Today I expected to read something different. I was not disappointed. I found it blaring from the headlines of several papers. The Guptas' last act was completed. The *Times of India* had been the first to run it:

GUPTA TROVE EVIDENCE OF IMMORTAL CONSPIRACY

As we'd threatened Asher and the rest of the Six, if the Guptas were unable to contact their confederates, the media would receive copies of the collection of evidence the Guptas had purportedly gathered for nearly two thousand years—evidence that a small number of immortal men and women controlled the world from the deepest shadows. Andrew and Audrey had completed making the Gupta trove, and had yesterday anonymously delivered it to a number of influential reporters.

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After a flurry of astonished conjecture, the "evidence" will probably be dismissed, or discredited—but we'd told Asher that the documents would be released if we were out of contact—and they had been. We needed Asher to continue to believe without question in the reality of the Guptas. As a bonus, some people might not dismiss our manufactured evidence at all. The work Andrew and Audrey had done was amazingly convincing. They'd created scores of handwritten reports appearing to have been delivered by paid agents to generations of Guptas over hundreds of years. The reports were written on dozens of different writing media, in dozens of different languages, including many languages that are no longer even spoken.

Even if the ancient documents excited only curiosity, the modern portion of our information might cause Asher and his former associates real heartburn because it was all true. We'd put in everything Xu had dug up during our original computer research. It provided enough present-day information about the Six to set an avalanche of reporters in motion. An enormous number of journalists were going to be digging into the lives of the Six with the determination that only the fervent hope for a Page One story can generate.

Meanwhile, the Guptas were being elevated to undying celebrity status by the tabloids, *sine qua non* of newspapers.

*Weekly World News*: GUPTAS RETURN TO PLEIADES

*The Sun*: GUPTAS FINAL SHOCKING MESSAGE: JFK ALIVE

But my personal favorite, hands down, was: *National Enquirer*: GUPTAS: LOVE CHILDREN OF ELVIS

My perusal of the papers was interrupted by Elle's arrival. I looked up and nodded to show that I was truly impressed. "Well done, Fiona."

Fiona/Elle looked slightly crestfallen and morphed back into her familiar guise.

As promised, Elle had wasted no time in teaching Fiona to shape-shift. Fiona picked up the skill faster than anyone Elle had ever taught. Now Fiona was trying to see how good she was. She *was* good—and she would only get better. She'd learned to make small changes in her usual appearance. Her hair was now electric blue, streaked with pure white, and if I wasn't mistaken, the floral tattoo on her neck was new. The possibilities were endless.

"How did you know it was me?"

I deadpanned. "You had only one ear. Easy mistake to make."

Fiona looked startled, then laughed when she realized I was teasing.

I smiled. "You're doing great. I've never seen anyone get it so fast."

"I told you that you wouldn't be able to fool him." Elle's voice floated into the solarium before she appeared herself. Grinning proudly, she came to stand by us. I wasn't sure she was grinning proudly because I hadn't been fooled by Fiona, or because Fiona had gotten so good so fast—my money was on the latter.

Elle and Fiona took their customary places at the table. Elle rooted around in the newspapers, trying to find one she hadn't read yet. I held up the *Times of India* front page for both of them to see. They provided light applause. Xu chose that moment to join us. He was carrying an iPad and wearing a T-shirt with a picture of a business suit on it—this time with no one wearing it. He looked confused at the applause until I held the paper up for him to see.

He grinned happily in understanding and held up his iPad. "It's all over the 'Net. There's already a Twitter hash: #guptaimmortals. All that stuff may not take Asher and the rest of them down for good, but it's really going to complicate their lives."

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After a few more congratulations, we got down to more serious work. Xu searched the 'Net on his tablet, and the rest of us scanned today's stack of international papers looking for anything that might tell us what had happened to the fugitive members of the Six.

Three days ago, we'd seen something in Italy's *Corriere della Sera*: "Billions in Stolen Art Recovered." We'd dug further and learned that authorities had raided the palace of one Countess Genovese, near Palermo, and found an estimated two and a half billion dollars' worth of stolen Renaissance art. The countess' whereabouts were unknown.

Retribution from Asher? Probably. Whatever the cause, Lucrezia's government-provided protection was gone. By now, she was undoubtedly hiding somewhere safe. All of the Six must have had plans for escape should they have need to get away fast. And, equally not in doubt, Lucrezia will, while in hiding, be using the information in her large leather book to extort favors from the rich and powerful to protect herself from Asher's long reach.

Two days ago, Germany's *Suddeutsche Zeitung* had reported on the sudden seizure of more than a dozen factories in and around Essen, factories suspected of illegally manufacturing and shipping high-tech weapons to the Middle East. The factories were owned by a number of shell companies, investigation into which, the reporter suspected, would lead nowhere. Rockshaw wouldn't be caught, but he'd been cut off from his base of operations.

And what of Rockshaw the man? The connections I'd made with Rockshaw in Asher's castle had clearly disturbed him—even moved him. But was that enough to stem his enmity toward me, now that, on top of everything else, we'd just destroyed his base of power? Will I ever know? Will I ever have another chance to right my wrongs with Rockshaw? Or is he now so set against me that nothing I can ever do will reach him?

So far, we'd heard nothing about Abdul, and we had little expectation that we'd hear anything out of China. The press in China is strictly controlled. Xu had, however, found one tidbit yesterday. A high-ranking Politburo minister was quoted as saying that proposals for excavating Emperor Chin's tomb were once again under consideration. Perhaps the powerful people who had been shielding Chin's ancient fantasy hideaway had received new instructions.

It wasn't much to go on. It could mean nothing.

Elle spoke up. She was reading the *London Financial Times*. "Says here that the European Union banking commission has received complaints from Japanese banks about unfair international interbank lending practices. An investigation is being considered."

A loosening of Asher's grip or business as usual? Hard to know.

Xu looked up excitedly from his surfing. "I think I may have found what we've been hoping for. This is coming out of Singapore. The press there is a little more open than in China." Xu read out loud: "Officials of the People's Bank of China and other major Chinese banks in Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Singapore have been arrested on charges of illegal collusion. Reports indicate that the network was extensive and may have included officials at American and European banks. Over twenty Chinese finance ministers have resigned or been arrested. Sources say this may be the biggest corruption scandal in Chinese history."

Finally, news we wanted to hear. On the run from Asher, it appears Chin can no longer provide protection, and his old boy network was crumbling. Without high-level protection, it would soon become every man for himself. We might soon see a mad scramble, by now-vulnerable officials, to be the first to point the finger at corruption, in order to ward off having the finger pointed at them.

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We plowed through the rest of the papers but found nothing else. Just as we were finishing up searching the ‘net and reading today's papers, Jonathon came in and we brought him up to date on the latest articles we'd found.

Jonathon nodded, then spoke with satisfied certainty. "You've succeeded. All of you. You've succeeded in breaking the Six's grip. I've been hearing rumors from high-level contacts that many people in prominent behind-the-scenes positions of influence have suddenly disappeared. There's now a vacuum at the top. It's making a lot of people uneasy."

We continued to discuss what we knew and to speculate on the future. After a while Xu and Fiona left. Xu had promised he would teach Fiona some of his hacking techniques.

Promising.

Xu's hacking skills, Elle's telekinetic abilities, and Fiona's experience as a high-tech thief will make quite a combination in one Protector.

Xu and Fiona's departure left us alone with Jonathon for the first time since we'd returned to Milliefiore. I glanced at Elle and she flashed me a mental *go-for-it*. Jonathon immediately sensed a question was coming.

I cleared my throat and began tentatively. "Ah, you know that we finally saw Asher face-to-face."

Jonathon nodded calmly. I think he knew where this was going. We hadn't mentioned to him our astonishment when we saw Asher for the first time—but we definitely hadn't forgotten.

"We, ah, couldn't help but notice that he looks a lot like you. In fact, he looks exactly like you."

I let the question hang in the air.

Jonathon laughed out loud at my tip-toeing up to the subject, then assumed a serious expression. "I haven't seen him in a very long time, but I'm not surprised he still looks like me. He's my identical twin brother."

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## A Madman in the Desert

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## Chapter 39

Michael

My eyes widened in pleased wonder.

Three hours ago, before going into meditation, I had a lovely view of some of California's oak-forested foothills. Now I looked upon a milky sea dotted with green islands. While I was meditating, low clouds, like cotton wool, filled the valleys between the hills. Only the forested peaks were visible. A molten yellow sunset burnished the cloud-sea to a warm golden glow.

A magical moment.

I turned to Elle to share the magic, but she had yet to open her eyes. Still deep in ecstasy, she levitated a few inches above the ground. When I turned back to drink in the beauty the magical view was slowly transformed by a higher magic. All sound and motion stopped as if the scene before me were a movie put on pause. The scene was split by a widening opening, like curtains being drawn aside. As the rent widened, I was engulfed in bright supernal light. Enhaloed in the light were my angelic Teachers, Atri and Atria.

My heart leapt at the sight. Their blessed presence engulfed me in surpassing peace and stirring joy.

At the same time, I felt a brief pang of loss. It had been a year since our last mission to break up *The Six*. During that time Elle and I had been visiting various Protector havens and had just been enjoying several blissful weeks of giving and receiving blessings in this particular hallowed enclave. While Atri and Atria's coming added to my already brimming joy, I knew it meant an abrupt and likely perilous end to our blissful time here. Their presence only meant one thing—we were about to be sent into the middle of something dangerous.

Elle, now out of her meditation and aware of their presence, began to lean forward to kneel with reverence at Atri and Atria's feet. Before I could follow suit, Atri extended his hand palm outward to halt us. His expression grave, he spoke with an urgency I had never before heard from him before, "There is dire need and time is short."

Atria spoke quickly after him, "Billions of lives are at risk."

Atria and Atri never exaggerated. Atria was simply stating a fact. I heard Elle gasp; I felt the weight of Atria's words like a blow.

Atria continued, "A madman intends to release a cyberweapon capable of destroying all the world's data and computers. He is a once good man whose mind has betrayed him; he does not fully understand what he is doing. He made his final and fateful decision only a few moments ago...."

Atri paused only a moment, "You'll find the madman in the Empty Quarter. You have days only. You must leave *now*."

Seeing us thoroughly shaken, Atria added with compassion, "You will soon feel sorely divided. Another urgent matter will crash upon you. It will tear at your hearts. But you must not be distracted from your mission. You, Michael, will be tested as never before."

Even as she was speaking Atria and Atri had begun to move backwards in the enveloping light until the rent closed and they disappeared. We stared at each other in astonished alarm.

Minutes later Elle had us racing toward a nearby private airport down the tightly winding mountain road we'd so sedately driven a few weeks before; taking thirty mile-an-hour corners at eighty. Saying that she kept us *near* the road is far more accurate than that she kept us *on* the

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road. She also kept the drivers of oncoming cars from doing anything that would interfere with our speed. We got more than a few astonished looks from wide-eyed drivers whose cars inexplicably slowed down, turned out of our way, or stopped altogether. Normally she'd never use her Protector's abilities so openly, but the urgency of Atri and Atria's words threw "normal" out the window.

I began making calls the moment we got in the car. First call: Jonathon. While being slammed from side to side in the passenger seat, I quickly told Jonathon what Atri and Atria had told us. I finished with, "We'll soon be in the air coming to you. Is Andrew there at *Milliefiore*? Can he put together some identity packages and have someone bring them to the airport? Near-east identities might be helpful. Enough for Elle and I plus Xu and Fiona. We'd come to *Milliefiore* ourselves but we have no time to lose."

Jonathon said he would bring the new identities to the Aspen airport himself; while we were in the air he'd work the Protectors' network to find out if anyone had heard rumors of such a devastating cyberweapon.

"Any idea what this 'other matter' is that might distract you?" Jonathon asked.

At that moment Elle brought us to an impossibly short stop—slowing us down faster than mere brakes could ever manage—and I was crushed forward against the seat belt so hard that my breath came out in a gasping whoosh. Looking up, I saw another car inches away, its driver staring at us with terrified eyes. Without a word, Elle backed up, swung out, and accelerated unnaturally fast, slamming me back into the seat.

When I got my cell phone back to my ear Jonathan was asking anxiously if I was OK. "I'm fine. Elle is not wasting any time."

"What about that 'other matter.' Any ideas?"

"None. None at all. What could distract us from something that could result in the deaths of nearly half the people on the planet?"

Next I called Xu at the Dyson Center near Santa Fe. Xu has been training Fiona in all things computer, including the fine art of hacking. Wasting no time I told him what Atria and Atria said to us. "Grab Fiona and get to the Aspen airport as fast as you can. Every minute counts."

An instant later we went around a corner like a ball on a string. Looking up from my mobile, I saw hills, trees, a bridge railing, and, I think, a river, going by in a blur.

Next call was to CIA Special Agent Grace Choi our friend and fellow Protector who had gotten Elle and me into and out of North Korea. She was currently a cultural attaché for the U.S. Embassy in Tokyo—a common cover for CIA agents. Thankfully, I got right through. If she had been deep into an op she might not have been able to answer. After telling her the dire news I asked, "Can you shake your network and see if anyone has heard of a new computer virus or something like it in development? Please check with Homeland Security, the NSA, any agency that monitors terrorist chatter and see if there are any new threats. And call in every favor you need to find out what the foreign agencies like Mossad might have heard. But don't cause a panic. That's the last thing we need. Just push as far as you can go without raising an alarm. Nothing we've ever worked on together has been more urgent than this."

There was a stunned moment and then, "On it."

Sliding sideways to a halt at the tiny local airport we abandoned the car with its doors still open and rushed to our Devas Foundation Gulfstream V. Elle took the pilot's seat and I buckled in as co-pilot. Performing almost no flight check, we taxied to the runway and cajoled the tower into letting us make an emergency take-off, then took off at maximum speed.

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Two hours to Aspen.

Finally able to concentrate on something other than keeping our car on the road and getting our plane into the sky, Elle asked the question on both our minds, “What kind of cyberweapon could possibly kill so many people?”

“I have no idea, but I do know that the world is nearly completely dependent on computer infrastructure: financial systems; healthcare; food distribution; refining and distribution of fuels like gasoline and natural gas; transportation systems from air travel to buses; electrical generation and grids; safety net services like hospitals, emergency care, police, fire departments; the military, intelligence services, and governments; all communication systems: internet, radio, broadcast television, the phone system.”

“If a cyberweapon could bring all of them down at once there would be chaos. Imagine no government control; militaries blind and afraid that other militaries would take the opportunity to attack; emergency services paralyzed; no food delivered to cities; no electricity for pumping water; gasoline refineries shut down; shipping unable to navigate; airplanes unable to fly; no one able to communicate with anyone or get news about anything; and no money because everyone’s money, from bank accounts to credit cards, is digital.”

“If all these systems stayed down for any length of time it is easy to imagine that people could die in large numbers— there would be riots, wars, and starvation—and the longer they stayed down the more people that would die.”

The sobering vision left us in momentary silence.

“I’ve asked Grace to check but I’d be surprised if any intelligence agencies were sitting on knowledge of a secret cyberweapon so powerful it could bring the world to its knees.”

Elle asked another question, “Why the Empty Quarter? It’s well named. There’s nothing there but dunes. I was there hundreds of years ago when I was the Protector for Rabi’a. The Saudis rarely go into it except to the oil fields in the east. There are only a few sources of water. Not even the traditional Bedouin spend much time there now.”

Having once played the role of a Sheik in what is now Iraq, I was familiar with the Bedouin life. I understood their customs and their fierce family loyalties. If plunged into that world, my Arabic would quickly come back to me. But the Empty Quarter was one of the few places I had never been. Only the strongest and the most austere could live in the Empty Quarter, the Rub’ al Khali. Those who could survive there were believed to be favored by Allah. In fact, many prophets have come from its purifying sands.

That made me ask Elle, “Where is Rabi’a now?”

“Good thinking: She now has a small convent just outside the Empty Quarter.” Ever since her first Awakened lifetime as the first woman Sufi saint, Bibi Rabi’a Basri, Rabi’a has continued to secretly help Arab women who show signs of inner awareness. When her long life begins to attract notice she disappears and then reappears somewhere new.

“A visit to Rabi’a may be our next step. Being so close, perhaps she would know something about our madman. At least we’d be a lot closer to the Rub’ Al Khali.”

We looked at each other and shrugged a mutual shrug. We’d not heard from Grace about her CIA contacts. We’d not heard from Jonathon. We didn’t know enough to even guess what we should do next.

I got back on my cell phone and called ahead to the ground crew at the Aspen airport. The Devas Foundation maintains several small jets and has a private hanger at the airport. I wanted to make sure the crew was on hand to refuel and get us back in the air as quickly as possible.

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I was pleased when the phone was answered by Mira. A gentle Indian woman, Mira was Awakened in Rishikesh when she was only three years old. Her shy and quiet manner gives no indication that she is a world-class mathematician, physicist, painter, poet, experienced pilot, and master of Indian martial arts.

“We got word that Xu and Fi will get here before you. They chartered a plane from Taos. Jonathon and Andrew will also be here by the time you arrive. Jonathon sent me ahead to get the other jet ready just in case you want to send people to more than one place. It’s fueled up and waiting.” Mira asked me more questions than I had answers and I ended the call hoping that some answers would arrive soon.

Elle and I discussed who should go where in which jet but without more information we had no way to make a decision. We remained largely silent until we approached Aspen’s airport. Once landed, we taxied as quickly as possible into the Devas Foundation hanger. We lowered the GSV’s stairs and found Mira, Xu, and Fiona waiting for us. There were quick hugs all around.

“Where is Jonathon?” I asked, “He should be here by now.”

Xu replied a bit anxiously, “He hasn’t arrived and we haven’t heard from him. Fi and I got here about ten minutes ago and I tried calling, texting, and emailing him—no reply at all. We also tried to contact Andrew and Booker. According to Mira they should both be there—neither one has responded.”

“Mentally? Did you try to reach them mentally?”

“No response,” Xu added with greater concern.

I looked around the group. I could tell by Elle’s somewhat abstracted expression that she was again trying to reach them mind to mind. After a minute while we all waited silently she shook her head.

The more I thought about it the worse I felt. Suddenly my heart clenched so sharply that I fell backward into Mira. “Something is horribly wrong.”

Elle shouted, “Let’s go!” as she ran for a nearby SUV.

Elle kept the SUV going as fast as she could as we made our way through the more populated area around Aspen. Once traffic thinned she stayed at top speed until we reached the turn for *Milliefiore*.

At the gatehouse there were no guards to greet us. Hesitating for just a moment Elle glanced at me—the question unspoken, “Do we get out and investigate or go?”

“Go. Go.”

Elle stomped the accelerator to get us moving but then gave up any pretense of normal driving. The multi-ton SUV and all its passengers lifted into the air and flew. Normally a twenty-minute ride, we were approaching *Milliefiore* in three. Ahead we saw a dim glow.

There was a collective gasp. “*Milliefiore* is on fire!”

Arriving seconds later, Elle got us on the ground and brought us to a hard stop on the circular driveway in front of what had once been one of the most beautiful homes in the world. Now it was a disaster area. The side farthest from us was in flames. By the light of the flames we could see that the side nearest us was devastated. Debris from what must have been a powerful explosion had landed on a limousine parked just in front of us and littered the grounds as far as we could see in the flickering firelight.

We spilled out of our SUV and began shouting for Jonathon, Andrew, and Booker. Smoke from the fire watered our eyes and burned our noses. We heard nothing but the crackle of flames and saw nothing but ruin.

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Xu, Fi, and Mira headed toward the burning side of *Milliefiore* and Elle and I went to see if anyone was inside the damaged limousine. I was shocked to see that the near-side windows were starred with bullet holes. Before I could take it all in, we heard the revving of multiple engines coming our way from the maintenance and greenhouse areas. Turning to look, we were blinded by headlights. Standing together, Elle and I realized at the same instant that they were coming right at us. Elle reacted quickly. I felt her grab me in a bear hug and then we were both flying sideways.

Before we hit the ground I heard the chatter of automatic weapons.

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## Chapter 40

Michael

Two black SUVs raced by us and down the road continuing to fire in our direction until they were out of sight in the forest. I leapt up, as did Elle. We saw Mira, Xu, and Fiona running back from checking the other side of *Milliefiore*.

“Should we go after them?” Elle asked.

“No. No. We simply can’t. Atria warned us. We have to stay focused on our mission.” I’d almost shouted. Everyone looked my way in shock. My voice must have expressed the frustration and pain I was feeling. My decision was one I would agonize over for days to come. Whatever my inner anguish, Atria’s words sounded so clearly in my mind that I could not doubt my choice.

I’d already told everyone what Atria had said. Now I repeated her words with the grim realization of what she had meant: “You will soon feel sorely divided. Another urgent matter will crash upon you. It will tear at your hearts. But you must not be distracted from your mission.”

The others looked at me and slowly nodded as the import of the words sank in.

Whatever may come, my decision was made. I let out a pent up breath. “Let’s see if we can find anyone in the wreckage. No more than fifteen minutes. We need to get back on the plane and in the air. After we look, we’ll call the police and let them take over. I’ll search the back.”

I raced around the side of the house. The lower floors, unseen from the front, were also on fire. One of the upper floors at that moment collapsed in a huge cloud of flames and sparks. The four-story outer wall had fallen outward obliterating the fountains and luxuriantly full flower boxes that once graced beautiful garden terraces. I noticed with a pang that the glass-enclosed temple that surmounted *Milliefiore*, the scene of many a Protector’s Awakening, had fallen with the outer wall and now lay in shattered fragments among the rubble, its golden cupola a twisted ruin.

I saw no one—alive or dead—and ran back the way I had come. I found Xu, Fiona, Mira, and Elle trying to see well enough through the smoke to examine the area around the initial explosion.

“Anything?” I asked, dreading that the answer might be bodies—or body parts.

“Nothing but destruction,” Xu answered.

“Wait!” Elle spoke suddenly, her head cocked to one side. “Booker is here somewhere and alive!” We all stopped and tuned in.

Mira, who often works with Booker was the first to speak, “He’s weak and hurt but he made it into the tunnel.”

We all knew what she meant: The secret tunnel that leads from the house to the natural caverns deep below the ground. We headed in the direction of the secret door only to be brought up short by an enormous mound of shattered stone, mangled iron beams, splintered wood, and pieces of carpet and furniture. I noticed the corner of a once exquisite floral painting sticking out of the pile. So much loss of beauty and beautiful memories.

Eyes stinging with smoke, we all began telekinetically to lift and move aside bits of the mound. No one had to say, “Be careful.” We knew that we might find Booker underneath. No one was now getting mental communications from him, not even Mira. He might have passed out—or worse. We simply had no way to know exactly where he was.

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We had no choice but be careful, and we had no choice but to rescue Booker if we could. But I was begrudging every second. Every careful second added up to minutes that we were not flying at top speed toward the Empty Quarter to find and stop a madman.

After six minutes, according to my watch, and an eternity, according to my heart, we cleared enough debris to see the door to the tunnel. It was designed to pivot on a single point but there was so much unmoved rubble on either side of it that our only choice was to wrench it forward.

While we cleared away most of the rubble, Elle coached us on a plan. She would pull the door forward while we stood to the side to prevent loose debris falling on Booker if he was just on the other side.

As Elle applied telekinetic pressure to the door. It groaned but wouldn't budge. Bits of debris and dust cascaded down from above. The door was being held firmly in place by the weight of the rubble still on top of it. Elle took a deep breath. Suddenly, with a sound like fifty sledgehammers hitting concrete in unison, the stone door cracked horizontally and bent toward us. In one coordinated motion Elle pulled the door out and up, and threw it sideways onto what remained of the front garden.

As I peered into the dimly lit tunnel my heart sank. Two motionless bodies lay sprawled on the floor. Xu kept the tunnel stable while I rushed in. Booker was the first. His head was lying in a pool of blood. Shattered rocks from the natural stone ceiling were scattered around and on him. There was a nasty gash on the top of his head with bits of white bone showing through. His shirt front was soaked with blood and what could have been bullet holes. I reached out to check the pulse in his neck. I let out a slow breath. He was alive.

Moving farther into the tunnel I could just make out a wide smear of blood along the tunnel floor leading to Andrew. I knelt down to check for a pulse. The flickering light of the fire outside reflected off Andrew's open staring eyes. His chest was covered in blood and I could just make out what I was now certain *were* bullet wounds. I checked for a pulse though I knew in my heart I would find none.

Protectors have no fear of death but we are not immune to the feelings of loss. One dear friend dead and a second wounded was a harsh blow. Tears filled my eyes. Elle too was crying. I stood silently for a moment wanting only to do nothing. Taking a deep breath, I shook myself mentally. If we don't get moving these deaths would count as nothing against the toll of death worldwide.

I walked back to Booker. Fiona and Mira knelt on either side. Mira was holding her wadded up jacket against the head wound and trying to get Booker to respond to her voice and touches. Fiona had opened his shirt and was gently exploring for wounds that would explain the blood soaked shirt.

I knelt down to get a closer look. Both of them locked eyes with me. I answered their unspoken question. "Andrew is gone." In the dim light, I could just see their eyes widen and felt their shock. Mira blinked back tears.

Pointing to Booker I asked, "Can you tell how he was injured?"

Mira pointed to one of the rocks scattered around that had fallen from the ceiling. "I think that rock landed directly on his head when it fell. His skull is fractured and he's lost a lot of blood." She paused, "I think he's going fast."

I looked at Fiona who was still carefully probing for wounds on Booker's chest and stomach. Feeling my gaze, she looked up, "There are no wounds here." She poked her finger through a bullet hole in his shirt, "He was shot four or five times but there are no wounds under the shirt."

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I think I knew the answer to the mystery but instead of explaining I let out a sigh of mixed frustration and acceptance over the amount of time this was taking away from our mission. I gestured for Mira to move and I took her place sitting cross-legged next to Booker. I extended my hands and placed them over Booker's head wound.

Going quickly into a motionless trance, I willed life force to flow from my heart and out through my arms and hands and into Booker. Mira was right. Booker was going fast. His skin was cool to the touch. I felt his life force retreating to his core, the body's last resort to hold off death. I moved one hand to cover his heart.

Attuning myself to Atria I sent her a desperate prayer. Immediately I felt a wave of power flood through me. With eyes closed, deep in my trance I saw golden light filling Booker. Moments later I felt his heart beat more strongly. I could see astral light healing his wounds, repairing tissue. Under my hand I felt the head wound closing. With my subtle awareness I could see the fractured and splintered bits of his skull moving together and knitting. I saw brain tissue repairing and the delicate energies of the brain—moments before a throbbing, flaring, uncoordinated, and angry red—returning to a steady pulsation.

As the healing progressed I felt his emotions and shared his thoughts: the pain of his wounds and the anguish of loss. I saw several disjointed scenes: the sound of gunshots, Booker anxiously carrying Andrew into the tunnel all the while expecting an explosion, and a sense of helplessness about Jonathon.

I don't know how long I sat in trance. I never know. Time stands still. Finally I felt the flood of golden light abating, withdrew my arms, and opened my eyes. Booker wore his usual warm smile and his eyes held a look of wonder. To be a channel for healing means I have almost to become that person. I become aware of them, and they of me, with such intimacy that a bond like no other is formed. Fiona was glancing from one of us to the other with a knowing look in her eyes.

Booker cautiously touched his head and began to breathe more deeply when he realized there was no pain. Mira began to help him sit up then asked, "Can you talk?"

Booker began to speak but croaked instead. Clearing his throat, he managed to say, "Yes," in a normal voice.

"What happened?" Mira asked for all of us.

You could see the memories flood back into his mind. He immediately looked down the tunnel and saw Andrew's motionless body. We all shook our heads slowly. He winced and closed his eyes. Making an obvious effort to get a grip on his emotions he took a deep breath and began.

"Jonathon, Andrew and I were getting ready to get in the limo and head to the airport to meet you when we heard three cars pull up in front. Thinking that it might be you, we all went out to greet you. Eight men sprang out of the cars pointing automatic weapons at us."

Booker paused. He was staring off in space barely aware of our presence.

"One of the men asked for Jonathon and he stepped forward. The moment he did, without warning three of the other men opened fire on Andrew and I. I was hit several times, collapsed, and blacked out. I may have hit my head. I don't know.

"I don't know how long I was out, it couldn't have been more than minute or two, but when I came to I could see the back of one of the men. I closed my eyes to slits and, going into a partial trance, I began to heal my wounds. In my trance I could see that I'd been shot four times. It was

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pure chance that none of the bullets hit my heart. If I had been unconscious longer than a minute or two I would have bled to death.

“Still in my partial trance, I heard men shouting to each other inside the house and a minute or two all of them came out. One of them spoke to the man who had waited outside, who I think must have been the leader, and told him that there was no one else inside.

“The leader told everyone that he would take ‘the prisoner’ and that the others knew what to do. I heard him say, ‘You, pick him up and come with me.’ I couldn’t see what was going on without moving but for a brief moment, as he came in and out of my narrow view, I saw a big guy carrying Jonathon over his shoulder. Jonathon’s hands and feet were bound and he had tape over his mouth. He was slack, so unless he was faking it, he was unconscious. They took off with Jonathon in one of the SUVs.”

“I think the whole thing was carefully planned. There was no discussion among the men. They seemed to know exactly what to do. Knowing that if they saw me move I’d be shot again I had no choice but to stay perfectly still. In the house I could just hear someone talking about where to put charges. I almost jumped up when I realized they were going to blow up *Milliefiore*. When they came out of the house, one of the men told the others to get into the SUVs and drive over by the greenhouses and wait; they were to stay around and make sure everything went as planned. Then I heard the flick of a switch and he said, ‘Ten minutes.’”

“Once I thought the SUVs were far enough away, I raised my head and looked in the direction they had gone. I couldn’t see them so I hoped they couldn’t see me. I looked around me. When I saw Andrew, my heart almost broke. The only place I could think to go was the tunnel. I didn’t know where the charges were and I didn’t think I could disarm them in time even if I could find them all. I couldn’t bear leaving Andrew. I put him over my shoulder and ran inside. I spun the door open, got us inside, and closed it again when I heard and felt the explosion.”

“I felt a piece of the ceiling hit me on the head. I passed out again and came to just enough to send you a mental message. I thought I connected with Mira just before I passed out again and the next thing I knew you were healing me. What happened to *Milliefiore*?”

“It’s gone. What didn’t get destroyed by the blast is burning down.” At my words I could see the same sadness in his eyes that we all felt. *Milliefiore* held a special place in all our hearts.

Fiona, who had been unnaturally quiet, finally exploded. “Who the bloody hell were these people and why’d they take Jonathon? Why’d they kill Andrew? And why’d they blow everything up?”

Booker looked as bewildered as we felt. “I don’t know. None of this makes any sense. The only thing I know is that they spoke Russian with an Azerbaijani accent.”

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## Chapter 41

Elle

We're flying in two separate planes now. I just ended yet another satellite phone conversation with Michael in the other plane—about the tenth lengthy call since we took off from Aspen airport.

Once Booker told us what happened, Michael left him to deal with the situation. Booker is an old hand at cleaning up after Protector's messes. He'll contact the police and fire department but first he'll take Andrew's body deep into the cavern and collapse the tunnel to hide it. Once police and fire arrive the press will be hot on their heels. Booker's story will be that Jonathon has been away. The press is used to Jonathon's reclusive secrecy and won't try more than a thousand times to find out where he is.

Once the first wave abates, Booker will almost certainly be closely questioned by the police. I don't know how he'll manage, but he'll have to explain why the limo out front was full of bullet holes, why the house was blown up, and why he wasn't killed in the blast. I don't envy him the grilling.

The drive to the airport was even faster and more nerve-wracking than the drive to *Milliefiore*. There was no conversation in the car. With my slamming everyone around corners at over a hundred miles per hour, and no one wanting to break my concentration, the ride was silent. But the silence was overlaid with a heavy feeling of shock and grief.

Michael must have been thinking about what to do next because when we got to the Devas Foundation hanger he immediately told Xu and I to take the other Gulfstream. Mira, Fiona, and he would fly in the one we'd come in on. The planes were fueled up and ready to go. We were off the ground in another twenty minutes. I was amazed to realize that it had been less than two hours since we landed—it felt like forever.

We'd taken off not knowing where we were going but we set a general course toward Saudi Arabia. Somewhere along the Eastern seaboard our plans came together and we changed our flight plans: Xu and I are now on our way to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia's capital city; Michael, Mira, and Fiona on their way to Cairo.

After hours of sat phone conversations, the only reason Michael will give for going to Cairo is that he needs to look up an address. Right. Sometimes—and this is one of those times—Michael is just too mysterious. He's usually mysterious when he has an intuition he can't explain rationally—to give him credit his intuition is rarely wrong—but it still drives me crazy.

Xu and I are only going as far as Riyadh together. From there Xu is going to Azerbaijan. I'll be heading for the Empty Quarter.

Xu's off to Azerbaijan because we trust Booker's knowledge of the accent—Booker lived a lifetime there as a Sufi master—and because Michael thinks there might be a connection between Jonathon's abduction and our mission to stop a madman in the desert. Xu and I, and probably Mira and Fiona, can see no logical connection between Jonathon's abduction and a desert madman, but none of us, even in the face of death on a global scale, can bring ourselves to say no to the idea of Xu trying to find Jonathan.

How Xu is going to get into Azerbaijan is anybody's guess. The multiple sets of identities that were prepared for us by Andrew could not be found. Xu will figure out something. He always does.

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My mission is going to be easier—at least to begin with. I'm to find the fastest way to get to Rabi'a's convent near the Empty Quarter to find out if she's heard any rumors of a madman in the desert. Even if she hasn't heard anything I'll be that much closer to where Atri and Atria told us to look. No electricity, no phones at the convent. I've already tried to contact her mind to mind but have made no connection. She may be asleep or distracted. I'll keep trying....

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## Chapter 42

Michael

I hope I am not being a fool sending Xu to look for Jonathon when Xu might be able to play a key role in finding the madman and stopping his plans. Is my intuition right that Jonathan's abduction is connected to the madman's plans or did I simply want to believe that it is to justify looking for Jonathan? Honestly, I don't know for sure. And Atria's warning not to be distracted from our main mission keeps ringing in my mind like an alarm bell....

Before I could worry any further, the sat phone buzzed. It was Grace. She'd been tapping her network of agencies, agents, and friends for over ten hours. I'd spoken with her as soon as we'd gotten back in the air but she'd had nothing to report. Maybe, now, we'll finally learn something.

Her tone of disappointment answered my question before I could even ask. "Michael, I've still got nothing. I just heard back from my most promising contacts in the Mossad and Saudi intelligence. No one has heard of a new computer virus or a madmen in a desert. I'm getting a complete blank."

My heart sank but I wasn't surprised. My intuition has been telling me the cyberweapon had been created completely under the radar.

After a pause Grace asked, "Anything on Jonathon?"

I imagine Grace, like the rest of us, has been trying to contact Jonathon mentally. I've tried repeatedly but have made no contact. He may still be alive but unable to respond—or he may be dead. I refuse to accept that he is dead.

"Still nothing. I spoke with Booker an hour or two ago and he's not found any more clues. All we have so far is the Azerbaijani connection."

I ended my call to Grace and stretched. I've been on calls for hours while Mira and Fiona, now fully trained as a pilot, flew the plane. I looked at my hands and saw with mingled sadness and surprise that there was still blood around my nails and in the creases of my skin from healing Booker. I looked down and, as if waking up, saw that my shirt and pants were the same bloody mess as when I left the ruins of *Milliefiore*.

I'd barely noticed while talking on the sat phone but now I realized that Mira and Fiona had taken turns going into the sleeping compartment at the back of the plane and came out showered and in fresh clothes. Before taking my turn I stuck my head into the cockpit.

"How long until we reach Cairo?"

Fiona and Mira turned their heads and removed their headsets at the sound of my voice, and Mira answered, "We'll be on the ground in fifty minutes."

"What time will it be in Cairo when we arrive?"

Fiona made a few stabs at her mobile. "It will be just after 10pm local time."

"Perfect, just the right time to go see the pyramids."

Despite the tension of our mission, I enjoyed the look on their faces.

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## Chapter 43

Jonathon

Another nightmare or reality? I feel violated and sick. I'm know I'm in danger but my mind offers up only confused images. I try to move but I am held down by something enveloping and heavy. Trying to think is like moving though molasses. I can't concentrate enough to reach out with my mind to find another mind and I can't concentrate enough to move whatever is holding me down. I feel a pinprick and the shock of a memory returns. I've been drugged. My whole being recoils at the thought; but I've been drugged again....

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## Chapter 44

Xu

Elle and I decided to leave the plane at the airport in Riyadh. Even if I wanted to use it, one can't simply fly into Azerbaijan without a slew of official permissions—permissions I'd need weeks to get.

In the public part of the airport I was scanning flights on the departure board. I saw that the last flight to Azerbaijan tonight is in two hours—just after midnight. I need to be on that flight. The next one I can find is almost twelve hours from now. Now all I have to do is figure out how to get on that flight. I can't just buy a ticket—no visa and no chance of getting one on short notice.

I wandered around the modern and upscale airport looking for inspiration. While I wandered I saw television screens showing clips of Booker fielding questions with a dozen microphones thrust in his face. I didn't stop to listen. Booker knows better than anyone what to say.

On the way from Aspen to Riyadh, thanks to the jet's satellite internet access, I'd learned everything I could about Azerbaijan. Its government is corrupt and authoritarian. The country's infrastructure is a mess. The old Soviet era roads, trains, industries, schools, and hospitals are falling apart. It's not safe for westerners, who are treated with envy and suspicion, and frequently robbed.

I trust Booker's opinion that the hit squad that kidnapped Jonathon and shot Andrew and Booker are Azerbaijanis. He would know the accent. It's a long shot that they would take Jonathon to Azerbaijan. Right now that long shot is all we've got. From what I've learned about Azerbaijan, it's going to be an even longer shot finding him if he *is* there.

But first things first. How to get there?

I saw a crowd of people pressed up against a railing and waving. Pushing in to see what was happening, I found myself overlooking the customs hall where people await their baggage before heading through passport control. Well-wishers were following the progress of their friends and relatives with smiles and waves. When their arrivals retrieved their luggage and made it to the passport control booth, their greeters made their way down a broad stair to meet them at the exit to customs.

Suddenly I knew how to get on the midnight plane. Quickly I found an arrivals board and started looking for *incoming* flights from Azerbaijan. There is only one and it arrives seventy minutes before the midnight flight out. Probably the same plane will do a turnaround and fly back to Baku.

The timing is going to be tight.

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## Chapter 45

Michael

After grabbing a few essentials and putting them in a shoulder bag, Fiona and I left Mira at the Cairo airport with the plane. In an impoverished country like Egypt the Gulfstream will be a target for thieves. Mira's presence alone will be enough to keep most thieves at bay. But anyone more bold, and who thinks that a small Indian woman would not be able to stop him, would be in for a big surprise. Even if Mira kept hidden her telekinetic abilities, as a master of *shastra-vidya*, India's ancient system of martial arts, she'd be more than a match for him.

In addition to insuring that our plane will still be there when we get back I'd given Mira a another task. My intuition is telling me that at some point we are going to need help from many more than the five Protectors now in action—Elle, Xu, Mira, Fiona and myself. I asked Mira to use her time guarding the plane to contact all the Protectors she could. Since many of them would not be available by phone, she would also need to contact them mind-to-mind. Mental telepathy has many advantages but one disadvantage is that the person you are trying to contact may be absorbed in something and not notice your mental message. Mira might have to make many attempts before she succeeds.

Only Jonathon knows all the Protectors and where they are. Mira will need to ask the Protectors she knows to contact Protectors she doesn't. It was going to take a lot of time. Once she makes contact, she'll tell them exactly what Atri and Atria said, what happened to Jonathon, and to remain available to go anywhere at a moment's notice.

We got to Mena House, the closest hotel to the pyramids, in thirty-five minutes. I'd promised our taxi driver a big tip if he could make the trip in under forty minutes. The drive wasn't as fast as Elle's last drive but a lot scarier. He drove with the same kind of abandon as Elle but without her telekinetic skills. As unobtrusively as possible both Fiona and I had used our skills to improve our chances of survival.

We must have looked a rather odd pair to the Mena's liveried doorman and two assistants. I was wearing chinos, a too-large button down shirt, and too-small tweed jacket I'd found aboard the plane. Fiona's hair was deep purple with white streaks. She was wearing baggy shorts and a T-shirt proclaiming, "Forget lab safety, I want superpowers."

The waiting phalanx of hotel greeters, clearly hoping to earn a tip, were disappointed to hear we were there only to meet a friend in his room. To avoid arousing any suspicion, we went to a lobby phone and pretended to call and talk to someone. Nodding to Fiona and pointing to an ornate staircase we made our way up the stairs, through the hotel and out the back, arriving at the Mena's luxuriant gardens. Once outside, our eyes were drawn like magnets to the brightly lit Great Pyramid looming above us.

We made our way through the gardens getting as far away from the hotel as we could and I set aside my shoulder bag. "OK, time to become Egyptians," I told Fiona. "Young boys I think. On the poor side." Moments later I was looking at the cheeky face of a young Egyptian boy wearing ragged blue jeans, tattered running shoes showing three bare toes on one foot, and a ragged T-shirt with a rock band on it—standard street urchin. I looked the same except with sandals and a dingy white T-shirt and a torn nylon jacket over it. Fiona nodded approval.

"Why do you want us to look like young boys?"

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“If we get caught, we’ll just get a kick or a cuff, maybe a beating, and then be chased away. If we look older they might hold us and call the police. We’d no doubt get away but it would use up too much time.” She nodded vigorously. I saw in Fiona’s eyes my own feeling of urgency.

I grabbed the shoulder bag and we scampered over Mena’s high garden fence. We made our way up the steep slope that led to the top of the Giza plateau. After negotiating a few more boundary fences, we wended our way through rows of small mud brick mastaba tombs until we were as close to the Great Pyramid as we could be without being seen.

All of the pyramids were brightly lit by huge spotlights. We’d be easily seen by guards if we tried to cross the two hundred meters to the entrance of the Great Pyramid in the actinic glare of the lights.

“Fiona, can you shut the light down for five or ten minutes without destroying the lights. We don’t want the guards searching for vandals. We just need the lights to go off for a bit and then mysteriously come back on.” I was hoping Fiona had learned Elle’s secret to controlling the flow of electricity through wires.

Cheeky-boy Fiona nodded thoughtfully, then stared off into the distance in concentration. I began to hear a building hum. The lights got brighter briefly then abruptly went out—along with the rest of the lights in a wide area around the plateau.

Running for the entrance, we heard shouting. My Egyptian was rusty but I understood well enough. All the shouts were along the lines of, “What the hell happened?”

Hidden by the sudden darkness and unheard because of the shouted conversation of the guards, we moved quickly. When we got near the entrance to the Great Pyramid I slowed us down with a hand on cheeky-boy Fiona’s shoulder. There would be a guard at the entrance and I hadn’t heard him yet. We stopped. I waited, unhappily, fearing the lights would suddenly come back on and expose us in sharp relief against the bare stones of the pyramid.

Finally, my caution was rewarded. I heard a cough from where I knew the entrance to be and a plainly sleepy voice called out wanting to know what was going on. The pyramid guards are not known for their vigilance. This one had likely been getting in a nap in preparation for falling completely asleep later tonight.

The questions now being shouted by the other guards—three others I think—had begun to resolve themselves into, “What the hell should we do?”

Our entrance guard, embarrassed by having been asleep, and wanting to establish his greater wisdom asked, “Why the hell hasn’t someone gone to check the fuses?” One of the other guards called back, “You idiot! Can’t you see there has been a blackout?” As far as I could tell none of them had moved from their probably comfortable positions.

If I subdued our entry guard he would raise an alarm when he came to. Even as I was wondering what to do next our entry guard, perhaps annoyed by being called an idiot and wanting to show decisive action, announced he was going to go to the main guard post and see what he could find out. We heard him make his way down the four courses of stone below the entrance and then the soft crunch of his sandals moving away from us. He wasn’t far when I heard the building hum again and saw a dim reddish glow coming from the giant search lights. Fiona worked her magic again and all went dark once more.

This was, of course, cause for more shouting, “Why the hell didn’t the electricity come on all the way?” The shouting gave us perfect cover to climb the stones to the entrance without being heard. The welcome darkness that kept us from being seen left us to find the lock to the entry gate by feel alone. The gate had two halves made of bars about a hands-width apart. My fingers

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eventually found a chain holding the two halves together and secured with a massive padlock. I whispered, “Get them to start shouting again.”

Moments later I heard a scattering of rocks hitting the mastabas we had come through. Shouting began on cue, “What the hell was that?” I used my telekinetic skills to pop open the lock and then remove the chain as slowly and quietly as I could. Chain removed, I pulled one side of the gate open aching slowly. By some miracle it didn’t shriek. I was about to repeat the process from inside the gate when abruptly the guards stopped their shouting.

I whispered again, “More rocks.” Fiona obliged. Under cover of a fresh chorus of questions I carefully and soundlessly rewrapped the chain and closed the lock. We quickly withdrew into the darkness of the entry way. We were making our way purely by feel when the giant lights came back on.

We headed around a bend in the tunnel and up a winding metal stair. Once I knew we were safely out of sight I shifted back to my usual form as did Fiona. I produced flashlights from my shoulder bag. At the top of a steep ramp, the Grand Gallery opened up before us. Our lights cast odd shadows on the walls and the ceiling far over our heads. I picked up the pace going up the steep set of stairs bolted into the granite walls of the gallery. At the top we had to stoop to go through a low passage into the King’s Chamber—at least that’s what it is called these days.

Fiona asked, “How does it feel to be back inside.”

Fiona knew I had designed the Great Pyramid and had overseen its construction. It had been a long time since I’d been inside.

“Even after all this time, I still feel annoyed at what people have done to it.”

Today the Great Pyramid is in poor shape. The interior chambers were long ago ransacked, their purpose no longer understood. It’s a machine designed to focus subtle energies in order to accelerate spiritual growth. It was never a tomb.

“Though they call this the King’s Chamber it is actually the Chamber of Awakening.”

Fiona remarked, “I can still feel the power. The whole room is pulsing. I can feel waves of energy washing through me.”

“Yes, and it was much more powerful before the white limestone casing stones were stripped off the outside of the pyramid. When the pyramids were newly finished the polished limestone shone like a mirror in the sunlight. They could be seen for miles.”

I could see them clearly in my mind’s eye. “The pyramids were breathtakingly beautiful, but the limestone’s deeper purpose was to act as an insulator, to hold in and intensify the subtle energy that was channeled into the pyramid through various pyramid-shaped capstones placed at the top of the pyramid. They were made variously of gold, silver and crystal and long since lost. Awakened masters like Jonathon could draw tremendous power into the pyramid through them.”

“Wasn’t it dangerous for people? Wouldn’t it just fry their circuits or something.”

“Yes, it was dangerous for anyone who wasn’t ready, who hadn’t prepared their body and nervous system to handle that much energy. There was once a large stone block that closed off the entrance to this chamber. Only someone already Awakened had the telekinetic ability to move the stone and allow a carefully prepared initiate to enter.”

“Why doesn’t anyone know about all this?”

“The knowledge was lost in the Dark Ages. When the Library of Alexandria was burned the original papyri plans went up in flames. Also lost was any record of the school of initiation that surrounded the pyramids. The school was Jonathon’s mission at that time. The initiates were taught rigorous practices of life force control, concentration, and meditation. When they were

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ready, they were allowed to meditate in the lower chambers beneath the three pyramids. As they developed, they were admitted to meditate in other chambers such as the Chamber of Concentration below us. And finally, they were brought here, to the Chamber of Awakening.

“There still remain other chambers in the pyramids that have not been discovered. When the age declined the Awakened masters sealed these chambers with massive stones and closed down the school.”

After a bit of reflection Fiona finally asked what I’m sure she’d wanted to ask for quite some time, “So why are we here?”

“I need to use the Chamber of Seeing.”

I went to the back wall of the chamber and began to push telekinetically. A massive block in the wall began to move backward. In a few seconds I had pushed the gigantic block into a void. With Fiona right behind, I squeezed past the block. Our flashlights revealed a very small chamber, not much larger than the block I’d moved, but on one side was a stair leading up.

Before we climbed the stairway, I moved the block back into its original position. After several landings, short passages, and more stairs, we came to a small chamber. The chamber we stood in was itself pyramid shaped with the same proportions as the Great Pyramid. In the center of the chamber was a single wooden bench, wide enough for only one person. Beneath the bench was a beautiful golden silk carpet, still as beautiful today as when it was made. The walls scintillated with tiny crystals.

“No one has been in this chamber for thousands of years. It’s just as I remember it.

“Fiona, you’ll need to be outside the chamber. Get comfortable. This may take me a while.”

Jonathon brought me here twice after the pyramid was completed. Although I was Awakened I still needed to learn how to access the gift bestowed by this chamber—the ability to see people and places anywhere in the world. My first attempt was a failure, my second slightly better. I can only hope I have grown enough to use it successfully now because Jonathon never gave me another lesson. I also have to hope that the pyramid will still work without the limestone insulation and without the powerful energies drawn in by Masters like Jonathon. If not, I’ve wasted many hours we can’t afford to lose.

You may think that my intention is to find the madman—but the chamber doesn’t allow you to see just anyone—you have to know the person you are seeking. I don’t know who the madman is nor what he looks like. I do, however, have a specific person in mind.

I sank into a meditative trance and visualized him. Gradually, my thoughts subsided, my concentration deepened, and my visualization became crystal clear. I didn’t know what to expect nor how long it will take. I sat for what felt like hours and nothing happened. I was nearing the end of my ability to hold my visualization so one pointedly. Flickers of doubt began to assail me. Perhaps the chamber no longer functions? Perhaps I don’t know how to use it?

With a mental shake I reminded myself what is at stake and renewed my determination. I called inwardly to Atri. Suddenly I was frozen in place. My breathing ceased and I felt bodiless. I was completely mind. My concentration became absolute; my visualization sharpened. A scene came into view. I was no longer visualizing, I was seeing. The person I was visualizing with such intensity was now before me, sitting at a desk reading, unaware of my presence. I could see him clearly and heard the whisper of paper as he turned over a page. I could smell a damp mustiness.

The room was utilitarian; concrete walls and no windows. In vain I searched the room for clues to its location. From what I could see, it could be anywhere in the world. I tried to move beyond the room, but I seemed to be tethered to him. I could only see what he could see.

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As I wondered what to do, I got lucky—and we certainly needed some luck. He stood up from his desk, went out his office door, walked down a bare concrete corridor, and arrived at an open elevator. Entering, he pressed a button with an arrow pointing up, the doors closed. The doors opened and he walked down another bare corridor like the first, opened a door at the end and went outside. It was nighttime. I saw large buildings, their exteriors brightly lit. I heard, more than saw, activity all around me: distant voices, vehicles moving, hammering sounds.

Then, more distinctly, I heard two people speaking nearby and recognized the language: Hausa. It was a good bet this was west-central Africa—maybe Nigeria.

My quarry continued walking and now got into the backseat of a waiting black Mercedes. The Mercedes drove slowly through a compound containing scores more buildings than I first saw. Most looked like warehouses. We passed numerous jungle-camo-clad guards with automatic weapons. They came to attention as the Mercedes glided by but I saw no rank or insignia—these men were mercenaries wearing whatever they liked—different style camo, caps of all kinds.

I saw dozens of vehicles parked by what could be barracks housing more mercenaries and beyond the buildings I caught glimpses of a tall brightly-lit fence with razor wire along the top, elevated guard posts with search lights and machine guns, and guards patrolling with dogs. I also saw two helicopter gunships and what I was pretty sure were SAM emplacements. This was a heavily armed military camp manned by soldiers for hire.

Eventually we arrived at a tall metal gate flanked by guardhouses. A guard came to the car, shone a flashlight over the driver and then the passenger in the backseat. Inhaling sharply and suddenly coming to attention, he immediately signaled for the gate to be opened. We emerged into an area devoid of vegetation. After a kilometer or so we drove into the illusion of a tunnel created by the headlights shining on the dense forest. We were in a rain forest. The cleared area outside the fence was a killing zone carved out of the jungle—a clear field of fire in case the base is attacked.

After ten minutes in the forest tunnel we emerged into open farmland; after another fifteen minutes we reached a tarmac road. Less than a minute later I saw what I needed to see—a public bus stop. The bus stop was an old battered light pole with a rusted time table bolted to it. I saw the name of the bus route—Abuja-Kaduna—and the name of the stop in the cone of light cast from the top of the pole.

I had enough. I could find him.

I came out of the trance into absolute darkness. Hearing me take a deep breath Fiona flicked on her flashlight just outside the chamber giving me a dim light to see by. I felt disoriented. It seemed as if I had been somewhere else; the vision had been so vivid that being in the Chamber of Seeing felt like a different reality. I have no idea how much time has passed. “What time is it?”

“It’s after 3:00 am.”

I calculated how much time we needed to get out of the pyramid unseen and I weighed the value of one more attempt at seeing against the burning need to be on our way. I decided to make one more try.

“Fiona, I’m going to try to find Jonathon. If I don’t come out of the trance on my own in one hour you have to get me out of it.”

As it turned out I only needed a few minutes. I was quickly able to sink back into the trance. My concentration was sharp and I easily visualized the form of Jonathon, familiar for millennia.

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The trance intensified as before but instead of seeing Jonathon I saw nothing but brilliant white light. I continued to try but had the same results. Does this mean Jonathon is dead?

I heaved a deep sigh at the thought that he could be dead, a possibility I deeply did not want to be true. On hearing my distressed sigh, Fiona came in quickly flashlight in hand. In the weird reflecting light of the crystal-covered walls of the chamber I saw the concern on her face.

“I couldn’t see Jonathon. All I could see was beautiful white light—and I don’t know what it means. He could be alive but I’m not able to see him for some reason or he could be dead.”

I felt suddenly and unexpectedly drained by my two experiences. I nearly fell off the bench. I held out my hand to Fiona in a I’ll-be-fine-in-a-minute gesture. I took a few deep steadying breaths.

“A good thing I wasn’t in the Chamber of Projection. I might not have gotten out again.”

Fiona looked at me. I pointed upwards and said, “The Chamber of Projection is right above this one but there is no passage to enter it. You have to be able to dematerialize and then rematerialize in the chamber. In this way only the most advanced can even attempt to use it. Jonathon never taught me how.”

“What can you do there?”

“You can project yourself in any astral form to anywhere in the world. Jonathon did it often. He taught the pharaohs of the high kingdom, who were themselves Awakened, how to project themselves so that they could converse with their subjects at any distance. In the higher ages rulers were highly advanced. Only those who were Awakened were fit to rule.”

“Time to go.”

“Oh? And where to this time?”

“We’re going to go visit Rockshaw. He’s in Nigeria and I know right where to find him.”

“Rockshaw!”

“Yep. He’ll probably be none too pleased to see us but who would be more likely than an illegal arms dealer to know where to find a powerfully dangerous and undoubtedly illegal cyberweapon.”

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## Chapter 46

Elle

It was after 2:00 am when the helicopter settled onto the sand near Rabi'a's convent.

I spoke to the pilot over the headset: "Wait here. It's a convent and no man can enter. Keep the engine running. I won't be long and I will be bringing another passenger."

It was surprisingly easy to charter a helicopter at the airport even at midnight. Because much of Saudi Arabia is not easily accessible by road there were numerous 'copter services to choose from. But even though the pilot flew as fast as he could I felt every minute like a timer ticking down to zero.

Rabi'a had built her present convent a long way from anywhere. The half-moon gave me enough light to see the almost unbroken expanse of desert we'd flown over for the last thirty minutes. I was barely out of the helicopter when I saw Rabi'a hastening toward me and waving a flashlight.

We met in a warm hug. We had been communicating telepathically since I landed in Riyadh. She now knew what I knew. She'd heard no rumors about a madman in the Empty Quarter—but she'd heard one about a prophet. Now that she knew of the world's extraordinary peril she insisted on taking me to the source of the rumor. She also insisted that I meet her nuns before we go.

"Come, come. Let us not stand out in the cold. You must meet my little ones."

At her words, and no longer in her warm and loving embrace, I noticed the piercing cold for the first time. The desert's paradox: fiery by day, frigid by night.

As Rabi'a led me toward her convent I could see only a single candle flickering in a window. Moments before, as the helicopter came in to land, I could see that the small cluster of convent buildings were sheltered on three sides by a rock outcropping. We entered through a plain but stout wooden door, the ever present sandy grit making the door's hinges grate.

I was greeted by the bright eyes and shy smiles of a dozen women of all ages peeking out from various doorways. Rabi'a laughed whole-heartedly and the nuns grinned. "They've never had anyone come in a helicopter before!"

Gesturing to me Rabi'a said, "Hala is a sister in Allah." She was using the name I had gone by when I was her Protector. "We are blessed to have her here. Sana please light the lamps so that we can make our guest comfortable. Faizah, please make tea. Laila and Zahra please prepare food."

Much as I wanted to get back on the helicopter and continue the search for the madman—who might also be thought a prophet—I know that among these desert dwellers it would have been unthinkable not to offer me food and drink, and to refuse would be the worst of insults. Even in the middle of night, the timeless ritual of offering aid and shelter must be given and received.

I had tried to convince Rabi'a in our mental conversations simply to meet me at the helicopter and depart. I relented when I felt her deep concern for her charges, her spiritual children. She did not want to alarm them by a sudden and mysterious departure without giving some reassurance that she was safe—and would return.

Rabi'a led me to a corner of what must be their main living area. The floor was covered by a carpet, clean but threadbare its once deep red, purple, and orange pattern faded with age.

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Scattered about were cushions of various sizes on which to sit or recline. Selecting a pillow, I sat with legs crossed. Rabi'a left me to check on the tea and food.

The nuns sat in what I guessed were their usual places and tried not to stare at me while we waited. They wore loose robes with shawls for warmth. They were not wearing their hijabs to conceal their heads; these were unnecessary where there were no men. Their dark classically Bedouin hair was worn long. My jeans, jean jacket, dark hair cut short, and European features obviously intrigued them. Though we did not speak it was a comfortable silence. I have found that those who lead solitary lives do not feel the need to fill every moment with speech.

It wasn't long before Rabi'a placed a small tray in front of me with a plain hammered-tin teapot and the small glasses preferred to tea cups by the Bedouin. We were so close to the Empty Quarter I was not surprised to find this tradition honored here. Kneeling, Faizah poured my tea. I drank it with pleasure. There is nothing to be found anywhere to compare with the strong, spicy, sweet tea of the Bedouin.

Wanting to put the nuns at ease, and, I hoped, reassure them that I was a trustworthy friend of Rabi'a, I complimented Faizah, using the Bedouin dialect, on the slightly bitter taste of marmarya, an herb found only in the deserts nearby. Faizah stood stock still in the center of the room, her face a picture of surprise. The other women looked at me as if I was a statue that had just, impossibly, spoken.

Rabi'a burst into her uninhibited laugh. "Stop looking like camels who have just seen a horse. Hala is a Bedouin in her soul." Their surprised expressions changed to amused bewilderment. Rabi'a laughed again but offered no explanation.

Rabi'a set the tray down near to me and then sat by my side. Like everything else in the convent the food was simple: unleavened bread, yogurt, and halwa. I made the appropriate show of eating with enjoyment. I was not surprised to see the nuns only sip their tea and nibble a bit of bread or halawa. It was very late and they ate only to fulfill the custom of hospitality to a stranger.

I began to notice two very young nuns watching me with more than curiosity. I could tell they knew I was no ordinary visitor. Seeing me looking at them, Rabi'a nodded. "Soon," was all she said. I knew that she meant these two would Awaken soon. For a Protector whose life is measured in centuries or even millennia, soon could mean next week, next year, or next decade. To be midwife to the birth of Spirit in another requires a timeless patience.

I took a brief moment to slip into a deeper state in order to see them in their subtle forms. As I expected, their bodies were surrounded by a flowing golden light, and around their heads a brilliant blue which shifted with their thoughts. In my heightened state I nodded, dipping my head to them briefly in acknowledgment and respect. Gravely they nodded back and then smiled spontaneously like the children they were.

I was brought out of my regard by Rabi'a who stood and announced, "I must go with Hala in the helicopter. I do not know when I will be back. You all know what to do. If you have questions, ask Sister Zahra."

Rabi'a spoke matter-of-factly, trying to reassure, but I saw by their reactions that many of them had never seen Rabi'a leave the convent.

"Come. Let me bless you before I go."

Each nun came forward and knelt before her. Rabi'a laid both hands on each one's head for a few moments and then kissed her on the forehead.

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“Meditate on Allah as I have taught you. Sing sweet songs of love to your Beloved. Be gentle with each other.”

Rabi’a paused and in a mock scold said, “And do not forget to water the garden or we shall have nothing to eat but bread.”

There was genuine laughter at her jest but it did not lessen the weight of concern I could see in their eyes. It was clear to them by Rabi’a’s manner and lack of explanation that something very grave was taking her away from them.

Once we were outside and walking toward the helicopter, Rabi’a turned back for a final glance and a wave for her spiritual children. Standing just outside the door, silhouetted by the spill of light from inside, they all waved back. When Rabi’a turned back toward the helicopter her eyes were full of tears.

As I climbed into the helicopter I glanced at my watch. My stay had lasted only fifteen minutes. It seemed far longer. A bare minute later we were airborne and on our way to Wadi al-Dawasir, a major entry point for anyone going into the Empty Quarter. If there were rumors to be heard, we should hear them there. If our madman was also a prophet, we should learn where to find him.

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## Chapter 47

Jonathon

My mouth tasted sour and my eyelids seemed glued together. I tried to move my body—remembering with a stab of concern that the last time I tried I felt as if I were buried—but this time I could move freely.

Moments later I felt tiny hands prodding my shoulder. Forcing my eyes open, I met the gaze of a young girl. She couldn't have been more than six. When she saw my eyes open she turned and ran out through a doorway. She quickly returned with a boy about her own age. Whispering to each other in what I knew was Russian, the girl held up a piece of paper with a message written in English:

DO NOT ATTEMPT TO ESCAPE OR TO CONTACT YOUR FRIENDS  
TELEPATHICALLY OR THESE CHILDREN WILL BE TORTURED AND KILLED.

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## Chapter 48

Xu

I slipped through the door unseen. It was just past 5:00 am in Baku, Azerbaijan's capitol city. Standing very still in a dimly lit hallway I didn't hear a sound in the massive Soviet-era offices of the Ministry of Finance. I needed to work fast. Workers were bound to show up anytime in the next few hours.

I managed to catch the midnight flight for Baku out of Riyadh. Using an ATM I got enough riyals to buy a ticket. With no time left to go back to the Gulfstream and stash my American identification, I sent it to the Dyson Center via a FedEx kiosk. I stood with the crowd of eager friends and relatives overlooking the customs hall in Riyadh and followed the progress of two men who looked distinctly Azerbaijani—Slavic features, beards, and white turbans. They interested me because they did not look up to see if anyone was waiting for them.

When the first man made it through baggage inspection and entered the queue for passport control, I went down to the lower level to wait for him. Protectors learn many skills that one wouldn't associate with being on the side of the angels. I'd long ago learned the art of being a pickpocket. I didn't have time for subtlety. I used the most direct method. As soon as the man emerged, as if by accident I collided with him. I collided with him so hard that I knocked his bag off his shoulder. In my (feigned) embarrassment I picked up his shoulder bag and began apologizing and pointing to his suitcase, which I had also knocked over. The brief moment that he looked at his suitcase was all I needed for the dip. I inserted two fingers into the front pouch, found and removed his passport. I knew that stealing the poor man's passport was going to cause him no end of trouble, but I knew if he could have understood why I needed it he would have given it to me willingly.

I helped the man get his suitcase upright and clumsily put his bag over his shoulder, still apologizing in English, which I doubt he understood, and then walked away. The whole thing took less than thirty seconds.

Once out of sight of my mark, I raced into a bathroom, got in a stall, and transformed into the appearance of my unfortunate victim, Aygul Abbasgulyev. After a quick look in the bathroom mirror to make sure my transformation was without unwelcome surprises, I made haste to the AZAL desk and bought a ticket to Baku for the midnight flight. I made it to the departure gate with almost no time to spare. The tired flight attendants showed no sign that they recognized the same man who had just deplaned from Baku was now boarding the return flight.

Once smoothly through customs and passport control in Baku I knew how lucky I had been: without his passport Aygul Abbasgulyev would not have been able to check into a hotel in Riyadh and he might have already alerted his embassy about a stolen passport; in my carryon bag was an expensive computer plus other odds and ends that a skilled inspector could have identified as American; or passport control could have checked my previous departure time and wondered why Aygul Abbasgulyev had spent less than an hour in Riyadh.

Instead, I was waved through baggage inspection and the passport was given barely a glance. Late night fatigue or just plain luck got me through. Now I needed even more luck.

During my internet search of Azerbaijan on the flight from Aspen to Riyadh I had identified the likely sites that would give me access to government data. Although I could have tried to

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hack into the government networks from anywhere that gave me internet access the easiest way to hack was from within the network itself. Thus my entry into the Ministry of Finance offices.

Moving quickly, but quietly, in case there was a night guard I hadn't seen or heard, I made my way along the office doors lining the hallway. I could read the titles painted on otherwise blank and windowless doors courtesy of a lengthy mission here five centuries ago. I needed the computer of someone high in the ranks. The higher the rank the more likely the access to sensitive data. When I found an office belonging to Sevinc Camilov, Deputy Secretary to the Minister of Finance, his title sounded as good as any I could find quickly. Unlocking his office door telekinetically, I entered a room with no windows. Perfect. I switched on a desk lamp to make sure there was a networked computer. I saw the telltale network cable snaking up from the floor and plugged into the back of a ten-year-old Russian computer. Everything I needed. I closed and relocked the door and got to work.

Once the computer booted up an old version of Windows, I was presented with the first challenge—a password was required. It took me less than 30 seconds to find Sevinc's password scrawled on a piece of paper in the top middle drawer of his desk and, Eureka!, several other potentially important passwords as well.

During the flight from Aspen to Riyadh, Michael and I had spoken by sat phone about what I should try to do once in Azerbaijan. My first priority was to hack into air traffic control logs in search of any record of a private airplane landing in Azerbaijan that could have left Aspen or Denver after Jonathon had been abducted. The second priority was to look for evidence of Asher having a base in Azerbaijan because, quite simply, Asher is the only person Michael or I could imagine who would kidnap Jonathon and so savagely and pointlessly destroy *Milliefiore*.

If Asher had found out that it was the Protectors who had created the false plot to break up the Six, and thereby destroyed his hundreds-of-years-long strategy to control the world's banks, his desire for vengeance would know no bounds.

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## Chapter 49

Michael

Close to the equator, Nigeria was hot and muggy even before the sun had come up. The smell of damp vegetation was strong in my nose. The heat was oppressive even in an open Range Rover going fifty kilometers per hour. The air was so heavy with humidity that I was already sweating—and the day was only going to get hotter.

Mira had landed our jet in Abuja, the capital city of Nigeria, an hour before. Grace had pulled CIA strings to get us into the country without visas and to arrange in-country support. A Range Rover pulled up to the plane before we'd even come to a full stop. We left Mira on guard and to continue contacting Protectors—she had only reached a small number so far. Fiona and I deplaned and got into the Rover.

Our driver, Akeju, was a CIA contact and had known the area around Abuja since boyhood. Once I told Akeju the name of the bus route I'd seen in my vision—Abuja-Kaduna—and the name of the stop on the rusty sign I'd seen in my vision—Diko, Akeju nodded and took off at full speed.

My musings about the heat were interrupted by Akeju's pulling over to the side of the road. He pointed at a light pole with a rusty sign. I leapt out, crossed the trafficless road, and took a closer look. No doubt this was the right pole. It leaned at an angle I recognized and the pattern of rust on the sign matched my vision. Continuing on, even in the predawn darkness, I soon recognized the red gash of a dirt road coming from Rockshaw's compound where it met the highway.

Akeju looked stricken when I asked him to stop. "My friend, you have picked the most dangerous place in Nigeria to investigate. No one is allowed to go there. Those who try do not come back."

"Do you know what it is?" From my vision I was pretty sure I knew the answer but I asked to see how much was known about it.

"It is a secret military base. I have seen the CIA satellite photos. But you will not find it on any map and you will not find it on Google's satellite maps. The official position of the Nigerian government is that it does not exist. Whoever maintains the base has ties to top Nigerian military and government officials. Major bribes are being paid, and powerful favors given, to keep it off any official radar. Not even the army goes in there and from what I've seen on satellite photos they have good reason not to go. It would take a large and well-armed force to take over that base."

I nodded. That was about what I had expected. Rockshaw was the largest illegal arms dealer in the world and would have more than enough money and influence to keep the highly corrupt Nigerian powers-that-be in line.

"Akeju, I need you to wait for us back at the bus stop. We have to go alone from here."

Akeju looked at me doubtfully, and even more doubtfully at tiny Fiona with her tattoos and purple hair, but got out of the Rover without saying a word.

As I shifted across into the driver's seat I said, "If we're not back in two hours contact Grace Choi and let her know where we went." Fiona scrambled into the seat I had just vacated. We took off down the red-dirt road.

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We passed through several kilometers of cassava fields; the plants' spiky leaves and spindly trunks emerging in the predawn light. "Fi, you don't have to try to go in with me. It might be better if you stayed outside in case I don't come out."

Fiona looked at me intensely with her outsized blue eyes, "There is no way I'm going let you go in by yourself. Elle would levitate me inter outer space. The last thing she said to me before we got on different planes in Aspen was, 'Whatever happens, keep him safe.' She said you're the only one who can accomplish this mission."

I wasn't surprised that Fiona insisted on coming with me or that Elle would put her up to it. The last time I had connected telepathically with Elle she and Rabi'a were on their way by helicopter to Wadi al-Dawasir to find what they could about a madman who might also be a prophet. I'd filled her in on our experience in the Great Pyramid and my decision to find Rockshaw.

Now I sent a brief thought her way, \*we're going into Rockshaw's base\*

\*just landed, heading for the souq, say hello to Rockshaw for me\*

I chuckled at Elle's droll humor since Elle's last few encounters with Rockshaw and been both painful and fatal. Fiona gave me an odd glance.

"Talking to Elle," I explained.

Fiona nodded her head in understanding and smiled.

\*Fi says she's supposed to be my bodyguard\*

\*you be her bodyguard too, don't get killed\*

At the end of her thought I felt an indescribably sweet mental caress.

Leaving the cassava fields behind, we drove through dense jungle. When we finally emerged at the edge of the cleared zone around the Rockshaw's compound I looked like Michael Faraday, the guise in which Rockshaw knew me.

Even a kilometer away I could see that our Range Rover had attracted immediate attention. I saw movement in the guard posts on either side of the main gate and a small drone was sent our way—I hoped it wasn't armed. Although Fiona and I could deal with whatever threat it presented I didn't want to get into a battle.

When we reached the gates there was a welcome committee in body armor bristling with automatic weapons, some of which I'd never seen before. Working for an arms dealer meant you got the latest and the best.

I stopped the car and Fiona and I raised our hands in the air with the bored expression of people who'd been through this a hundred times. We were jerked out of our seats and roughly frisked. The Rover was inspected inside and out. They found nothing. After a few silent and efficient minutes one of the welcome committee spoke into a shoulder mic, "Clear."

A door by the gates opened and a giant black man in jungle camo strode over to us. He was clearly feared. Even armed and wearing body armor, the others quickly backed out of his way and never took their eyes off him. He walked right up to us, now with our arms held behind our backs, and towered over us.

"What do you want?" He spoke menacingly in English with a South African accent. His eyes switched back and forth between us.

"We need to see Rockshaw." Though he towered over me, I spoke to him as I would to an underling. My eyes never left his. My words conveyed complete confidence that we'd be allowed to see him.

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I could see that I'd thrown him. His eyes flickered when I said Rockshaw's name—a name I suspect isn't used here.

He leaned a few inches closer to me and said, "There is no one here named Rockshaw."

"Listen, just tell him Michael Faraday wants to see him. Better yet take my picture and send it to him. Believe me he'll make time."

He gave me a full minute's aggressive stare to see if I would flinch. I stared back with complete indifference and a shade of impatience. Irritated, he finally took my picture on his mobile and as he walked a little distance away to make a call he said over his shoulder, "If you're jerking me around it will be the last time you jerk anyone around."

Fiona's thought drifted into my mind, \*I don't think he likes you\*

\*maybe if he got to know me?\*

I felt her laughter dancing in my mind but her body language and facial expression conveyed nothing but boredom. In the one year since she had Awakened Fiona had become not only highly skilled but also a most accomplished actress.

I couldn't make out what he was saying but I heard my name and then his voice went up in surprise. He came back to us quickly. "Zip their hands and bring them inside. The man wants to see them." He gave me a look that indicated I'd won this round but he was looking forward to my losing the next one. Arms still held behind our backs, we soon felt plastic zip ties being tightened painfully around our wrists. We were marched forward through the door and pushed into the back of a waiting Mercedes.

The giant got into the passenger seat in front. The car rocked on its springs and settled. He turned in his seat and leveled a nine millimeter at us. The driver took off at a nod from him.

We drove in silence. Which was good because I needed to communicate with Fiona.

\*I'm going to leave this guy to you...things are probably going to happen fast so don't hesitate\*

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Fiona give him a new appraisal. She'd steadily been learning martial arts from Elle and was now no doubt considering the best way for a tiny woman to take down a giant.

After a few minutes of steady driving I saw that the base was even bigger than I'd been able to see in my vision. In daylight I could see that far from the gates there was an airstrip with a row of enormous hangers on one side. Visible were several large transport planes and a row of American F-16's and another row of Russian MIG-29's. Rockshaw could arm a small country.

We arrived at a nondescript, single story building in the middle of the base. The driver and the giant pulled us out of the back seat and, each holding one of our arms, maneuvered us through the building's only door and into the elevator I'd seen in my vision. We rode in silence as we went deep underground.

Exiting the elevator we walked to a blank door with a security camera mounted just above it. At our captor's knock there was a buzz and the door clicked open. We were pushed forward into the windowless room in which I'd first seen Rockshaw. We were slammed down into two chairs facing Rockshaw behind his desk.

Rockshaw, his expression grim, held an automatic pointing at my head.

"Gazini. You stay." After a quick look at the tiny purple-haired Fiona, Rockshaw indicated with a nod of his head the driver should go. Big mistake. The door clicked shut behind him.

"Give me one good reason why I shouldn't kill you right now." When Gazini heard Rockshaw's voice, he lifted his gun from his side as if in response to an order.

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\*now\*

I saw Gazini's gun jerked telekinetically out his hand and flying toward a corner of the room. Fiona flew from the chair, hands becoming free of the zip tie in midair, and scissored her legs around his neck. Her momentum carried her over his back pulling him down like a tree being felled. They landed with a splintering crash onto a wooden chair and small table.

That was the last thing I saw. I turned to concentrate on Rockshaw. With a gesture I bent the barrel of his gun ninety degrees. Rockshaw's astonishment was almost comical. I kept my eyes fixed on him in case he tried to reach for another weapon. The hand not holding the now useless gun darted downward. I simply stopped him from moving. I don't know whether he was going for another gun or an alarm switch—but neither was going to help our mission.

Meanwhile Fiona and Gazini were grappling on the floor. A quick glance in their direction showed me that Fiona still had a choke-hold on Gazini with her legs; his face showed that he was about to pass out. An odd silence passed while we waited for Gazini finally to succumb. I continued to hold Rockshaw frozen. His expression had now changed from astonishment to resignation.

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## Chapter 50

Elle

The main *souq*, or market, on the eastern side of Wadi al-Dawasir was bustling even at sunrise. Although most of the city was modern, this bazaar had an older, timeless look—it was a favorite of the nomadic Bedouin. There were hand-wheeled barrows filled with plantains and oranges, dried dates and figs, and other basic fare. Deeper in the souk we saw rows of tiny stalls selling the necessities for the dwindling numbers of nomadic Bedouin—saddles and tack for their camels, cookware for their fires, carpets for their comfort—the stalls' proprietors hammering, weaving, or shaping their wares while surrounded by their goods. When the wind blew, the *souq* was treated to the fragrance of the nearby camel market.

Most of the men we saw wore long robes with turbans or the ubiquitous red-patterned headscarf and the black-rope *agal* which holds it in place. Unlike the *hathar*, the city Bedouin, the traditional nomadic Bedouin has an unmistakable weathered look to his clothes and in his face, and a hard and wary look in his eyes.

Few traditional nomadic Bedouin remain. Most of the tribes have moved into the cities. The Bedouin that maintain their nomadic herder existence are given great respect and even admiration. The traditionalists still depend on camels and herds of sheep and goats for food, shelter and trade.

I had shifted form into that of a typical Arab male. Because Rabi'a had never learned to make such transformations she walked behind me as my wife, her black headscarf wrapped Bedouin fashion to leave most of her face uncovered. Wandering through the *souq* as if looking for items to buy, we wore clothes that were deliberately shabby to explain our few purchases, and to discourage vendors from bothering to push their wares on us.

What we were really doing was opening our minds to the thoughts of those around us. Under normal circumstances a Protector would never without permission listen to the thoughts of others—but our mission was far from normal. We did not probe deeply. We were hoping to pick up snatches of thought at the surface of people's consciousness regarding a madman in the Rub' al Khali, the Empty Quarter—or to learn more of the prophet about whom Rabi'a had heard rumors.

Gleaning nothing in our slow progress through the *souq*, we sat in an open air café and ordered tea. There I finally received a glimmer of thought of the kind we have been seeking from a man who had just sat at a small table. He looked travel-worn; his robes had the same shabbiness as mine, the pattern on his once bright-red headscarf had faded to a pale rose, and his eyes had the perpetual squint of the man who spends long hours in the fierce desert sun.

He greeted the other man at the table, and from the tone of their emotions I was experiencing in my telepathic rapport, I knew these were old friends that had not seen each other for some time. After the usual greetings, his companion asked him how he had been faring. His mind was immediately filled with a scene of a Bedouin encampment surrounded by dunes. Nothing surprising there. I was about to turn my attention elsewhere when I felt the man's great upwelling of feeling; the image he was seeing in his mind's eye had inspired him and moved him deeply, far more than would a mere encampment in the desert.

Tuning into his side of the conversation, I learned that he had visited this Bedouin encampment some weeks ago. While there he had listened with awe to a small tribe's *Sheik*,

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Yūsuf ibn Ya‘qūb. My unknowing source of information clearly had been transported by what he heard.

Needing to know more and afraid the conversation would end, I took a risk. Leaving Rabi’a waiting for our tea, I went over to their table and greeted them, “*As-salāmu ‘alaykum.*” Peace be upon you.

I received the customary, “*wa ‘alaykumu s-salām,*” in return: And upon you, peace.

I continued, “I could not help but hear you talking of this man Yūsuf.” There was brief flicker in his eyes because he thought he had not been speaking loudly enough to carry to our table but, as I hoped, his passion overcame his natural desert wariness.

“Yes, yes. I was most fortunate to have heard him speak. He is a true Bedouin and servant of Allah. Those around him think him a prophet.”

I widened my eyes in interest. “I have heard rumors of this man but no one I have met has actually seen this prophet. What does he say?” I deliberately spoke loud enough to get the attention of the others sitting at various tables in hopes that they, too, would have thoughts from which I could learn about this man. I felt immediate interest from those around us.

“Yūsuf, blessed be his name, spoke about the need for all true Bedouin, for all those faithful to Allah, to live in purity, to forsake the cities and their corruptions, and to live as their forefathers had.”

I saw some nods and felt an upwelling of pride swirling around the café. To be a true Bedouin is a high calling—part austerity, part moral character, part courage, part strength—many great Muslim prophets have emerged from the purifying crucible of the desert.

“Already there are hundreds who have joined his *‘aṣā’ir*, a new tribe which he calls the *Bi’tḥah* to commemorate the beginning of Mohammed’s mission. He strictly observes the old customs.”

A murmur of approval rose around the café. So strong was the appeal that even the city Bedouin, evident by their spotless clothes and cell phones, felt the call.

“He has visions of a great cleansing. The world will soon be rid of those who do not live in simplicity.”

Sounded like we had found our man.

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## Chapter 51

Michael

Fiona released her hold on the giant Gazini. He was out cold. She stood and rolled him over onto his stomach as if he weighed nothing, yanked the electric cord off a nearby lamp, and tied his wrists to his ankles.

Rockshaw watched disinterestedly, as if Gazini had nothing to do with him. He sighed, seeming to be admitting a kind of defeat. I released my telekinetic hold on him. He remained sitting with both hands in sight on top of his desk, making no move to trip an alarm or grab another weapon.

“Rockshaw, I need your help. The world needs your help.”

“Why would I help you—or the world. You and those fools in the Royal Society ruined my life. Took away my discovery, my acclaim, my rightful place in the world. I wouldn’t help you do anything.”

His words sounded hollow—words spoken a thousand times but now emptied of force or conviction. He seemed mildly surprised he had even bothered to say them.

This was not the man who only a year before was gloating at the prospect of revenging himself by exposing me to Asher, who would have destroyed my mind with the greatest pain imaginable.

When he heaved another sigh I realized with surprise that he was depressed. I looked more closely and saw also that he looked different. The skin of his face was more lined, his hair thinning and touched here and there by gray.

Noticing my inspection he spoke with resignation and a kind of relief: “Yes. I am going to die soon. Thanks to you and your meddling with my emotions I can no longer bear to do the things I need to do to prolong my life. My anger has been the only thing that has kept me going. I was determined to make the world pay for what you had done to me. But you changed me—you took away my anger. Now I can’t live with the monster I have become. I am a man waiting to die. Although I am too proud to take my own life and still unwilling to be killed, natural death cannot come too soon.”

I felt a great burden fall away. For a century and a half I have felt responsible for Rockshaw’s turning to darkness. A depressed and broken man waiting to die was not an outcome I had hoped for—although I’m not sure what I *had* hoped for—but it was far better than an angry man spreading death and destruction.

Again Rockshaw spoke as if confessing: “I now understand what happened. My own pride and your inappropriate slip with my friends made me insane with rage. After that I was ripe to be recruited by Asher. He fed my wrath. He fed my injured pride. He convinced me that taking out my revenge on the world by getting thousands of fools to kill thousands of other fools would be a great satisfaction—though it never was. He manipulated me first with my own anger and then with fear.”

When I started to speak he cut me off with a hand as if pushing me away, “No sympathy. No apology. You showed me what you felt when you healed me and again in Asher’s castle—and I believe you. I can’t bear anymore. Leave me some shred of dignity.”

We sat in silence. Finally I ventured, “I can offer you more than a shred of dignity. Vast numbers of people are going to die if we can’t stop the release of a hidden cyberweapon. Help us

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find the weapon before it is released and you will be saving far more lives than your weapons ever took.”

That got his attention—and a flicker of his eye told me that he knew something.

“We don’t know what it is or where it is, but unknown weapons mean rogue operators, rogue labs, black market purchases of equipment, illegal channels for information, and that means you—or someone you know just like you—might know something about it.”

There was another flicker. He definitely knew something.

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## Chapter 52

Jonathon

“Hello, brother.”

I had a spatula in hand cooking for the unwitting child-hostages to my good behavior—homeless children who I learned had been grabbed off the streets of Baku, thrown in a van, tied, gagged, blindfolded, and locked into these three rooms with a toilet and a tiny kitchen—and who would be tortured and killed by Asher if I did anything but what he wanted.

The children were looking back and forth between us in surprise.

Asher’s greeting dripped with sarcasm. We had long, long since stopped feeling any brotherly sentiment. Born together almost seven thousand years ago in a small kingdom in India that no longer is even remembered, we were identical twins, Jagadeesh and Jaganath. Variations of Jaganath have been my name through the hundreds of roles I have played as a Protector. I was now Jonathon; Jagadeesh had long since become Asher.

As princes we trained together to master the mental arts under the highly accomplished warriors of our father’s benevolent kingdom. We both excelled and took equal joy in our mastery of the arts of the warrior. But where my interests took me on a journey of inner conquest, Jagadeesh was drawn to outer conquest. He sought victory in combat; I sought victory in self-transformation.

India was peaceful. There were no wars. But there were other powerful warriors in other kingdoms. To measure himself against those other warriors, Jagadeesh departed our home for many years. In his absence I travelled to the Himalayas and there found my immortal teachers, Atri and Atria. With their guidance and grace I was Awakened.

After my Awakening, Atri and Atria told me that the high age I lived in was declining and that the coming lower ages would bring much suffering. As were all who became Protectors, I was given a choice: to serve through many challenges here on earth and to continue to grow and become a Master, as had Atri and Atria, or to enjoy the blissful realms beyond the earth. I chose to be a Protector.

After almost thirty years with my teachers, I returned to the kingdom of my birth. My father had long since died; Jagadeesh now ruled. Gone was my father’s benevolent kingdom. Jagadeesh had become powerful and prideful. He had conquered several nearby kingdoms and was training a great army to conquer more. Conquest for the sake of conquest was unheard of in that advanced age. The only righteous reason for going to war was to protect the unprotected, to safeguard an ordered society that valued peace over conflict.

When I first saw Jagadeesh upon my return I knew my shining brother was gone. In his place was a hard, merciless man. No longer using simply the name Jagadeesh he now styled himself Ashura Jagadeesh, superhuman king. I tried to reason with him, and begged him to cease his aggression, to make amends with our neighbors. He only laughed at my weakness and banished me from the kingdom.

The encounter shook me. We had been close as only twins can be. Together we had reveled in our training and in the shared joy of self-mastery. With aching heart I wandered away from the city of my birth. My joy in Awakening was dimmed—something I had not thought possible. Though I knew an undercurrent of Joy still flowed through me, on the surface I suffered the loss of my brother’s love for many years.

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I left the kingdom, never to return. My missions for Atri and Atria took me far away from India. I lost sight of Jagadeesh. My sorrow gradually diminished. I assumed he must have eventually died in battle or reached the limit of a natural age. More than three thousand years later I was utterly shocked to see him still alive in Egypt. He was the chief councilor, the Vizier Ashara, to Ramses II, the most aggressive military leader of all the Egyptian pharaohs.

How he had extended his life for so long I did not know. Clearly he had shifted his way of conquering—no longer the warrior but the councilor, manipulating events from a position of safety. After my distant encounter with Asher in Egypt I heard only rumors of his activities. In the mid-1800s Michael told me that a man in the shadows, named Asher, had corrupted Sir Humphrey Davy, who became the arms-dealer Rockshaw. After that I knew the Protector's mission and Asher's goal of world domination were on a collision course.

A conspiracy of light against a conspiracy of darkness.

Atri and Atria hinted to me that my karma with my brother was not over but they gave me no indication of how it would play out. Now I was his captive and prevented by his threat—a threat he no doubt meant—to kill the children with whom he had surrounded me. Whether from our time as bothers, or because he had learned more of me in recent times, he knew I would never cause the death of innocents.

"Why have you brought me here?"

"You are here because it suits my plans. You are here because your spineless Protectors have meddled with my plans. You are here because you are powerless to escape." The last words were spoken with utter contempt.

"There are other kinds of power."

"Spare me. You tried and failed to convince me when you begged at the foot of my throne. There is no other power but the power of might, of absolute control, of domination."

"What do you intend to do to me?"

"Keep you for as long as it pleases me. And do not doubt, brother," and this time he spoke the word 'brother' with acid venom, "that I can read your mind. If you attempt to contact your friends telepathically, I will know, and I will torture and kill these children in front of you."

As he pointed to the children, though they did not understand English, they felt his menace, and shrank back against the wall.

"What has become of you, Jagadeesh?" My words held the sorrow of millennia, a yearning to understand, and bewilderment. How could we two take such different paths?

"Do not use that name again. He is dead. He died long ago. I am Asher now and forever."

He turned away and spoke into a radio he'd pulled from his pocket. A hidden door opened in a blank wall and he stepped through and was gone. Yet the room still vibrated with his malice and hatred.

What did he want? There was more to this than demonstrating his power over me. He could have had me kidnapped anytime for years. Why now?

Did it have anything to do with the cyberweapon that Atri and Atria had charged us to stop at all costs? And could he really know if I communicated telepathically? I looked at the children still cowering against the wall. Could I risk it?

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## Chapter 53

Elle

“I am Hala. I must see the prophet, Yūsuf ibn Ya‘qūb, I have a message for him from Allah.”

The Bedouin I addressed on the outskirts of the encampment were shocked by my unexpected appearance. I had come from the direction of the deep desert—where no one dwelled and nothing existed but gigantic dunes. I had no camel, no bags—and no water. And I looked like something from the stories told round their campfires at night.

Leaving Rabi’a in Wadi al-Dawasir, I had taken a bus to its last and closest stop in the heart of the Rub al-Khali. Beyond a small oil drilling site and a small store, where the bus turned around and headed back along its route, there were no roads. I had walked out among the dunes. As soon as I was out of sight of anyone, I took to the air and sped as quickly as I could toward Yūsuf’s encampment.

I knew where to go because I had read the thoughts of Abdul, the man in the café. His memory of how he had reached the encampment was now a part of my memory. I went as fast as I could, and made it here by midday, considerably faster than Abdul’s week on camelback.

Although I had left Rabi’a behind in Wadi al-Dawasir in body we continued to converse in mind as I flew through the air. We discussed various guises that might allow me to get close to Yūsuf. We knew that his followers would be very protective. Abdul had told the interested listeners in the souq café that he had had to convince Yūsuf’s guardians that he was sincere—and a true Bedouin—to be able even to *listen* to his evening discourse outside among the campfires.

Naturally wary, the nomadic Bedouin are also superstitious. Strange noises in the desert are often interpreted to be the voices of djins or spirits. Djins can be benevolent or malevolent and can appear in many forms. I chose to be the Hag.

The Hag is considered to be somewhat benevolent but capricious. Nomads lost in the desert swear to seeing an old woman with wild hair beckoning to them or calling to them in a crone’s voice. When they follow, they find their way to water or to the hospitality of other Bedouin. Others firmly believe the Hag, according to her mood, may lead some men deeper into the dunes and to their death.

The Hag is also considered to be an oracle. She may come to men who are lost or nearing death to tell them they will survive and even why their survival is important to their family, their tribe, or to Islam.

Superstitious dread will prevent them from killing me, I hope, lest I haunt them and their families. The prevalent belief in the Hag’s oracular power may get me an audience with Yūsuf. And if Yūsuf is a prophet, or a madman, or both, he may actually see me.

I stood before them. Seeing my lined and creased face uncovered, many of them shrank from looking directly at me. My hair is grey and matted, longer on one side than on the other. My fingers are gnarled. My clothes are layers of torn black rags. Seeing my bare feet, their eyes widened. No one could walk barefoot on these hot sands without getting badly burned.

To break through their astonishment and fear I repeated myself: “I am Hala. I have come to see the prophet, Yūsuf ibn Ya‘qūb, I have a message for him from Allah.” This time I spoke unnaturally loudly, my voice carrying deep into the encampment.

There was a hasty whispered consultation and then two of the men rushed off toward the central and largest tent. A minute later they returned with another man. His fierce eyes bored into mine.

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“Who are you and what do you want?”

Returning his fierce gaze with one of my own I spoke. “Abd al-Rashid why do you keep me from your master?”

A flicker of fear crossed his face. I had used his name but had not been introduced. There were murmurs in the small crowd that had gathered. But not too closely. I saw fear in their eyes.

“Abd, I mean your master no harm.”

I peered into his eyes while I tuned into his thoughts. Though his thoughts were mostly questions about who I was, there was one strong thought not far beneath the surface. He was soon to be a father.

“Do not fear for Hajar. Your third wife will soon deliver you a son. You are to name him Mohammed after the Prophet, blessed be his name. He will be a true Bedouin and servant of Allah. He will have a birthmark on the left side of his neck.”

This was part truth and part flim-flam but it had the desired effect. Abd’s eye widened and he could not choke back a cry of astonishment. Without a word he hastened off. I hoped he would be telling Yūsuf he ought to see me rather than bringing a group of strong men to tie me up. I didn’t have long to find out.

“Yūsuf will see you.”

As Abd escorted me, the growing crowd parted ahead and reformed behind us. When we arrived at a large tent, woven from the hair of camels, sheep and goats as befitted traditional Bedouin customs, the crowd stopped a respectful distance away. Abd opened the tent flap and beckoned to me to enter.

I entered and stood while letting my eyes adjust from the bright sunshine to the dim light inside. Abd entered behind me and let the flap of the tent fall closed, further accentuating the dim. The thick tent walls let in very little light even at midday and the gloom was lifted only by a few candles and oil lamps.

As my eyes adjusted I began to see that the floor of the tent was covered in traditional red carpets with cushions clustered near the walls. Everything was handmade, plain and simple, no opulence, nothing modern. I could have entered such a tent two thousand years ago and it would have seen the same.

The glittering eyes of the tent’s sole occupant were fixed on me. When he beckoned me to come closer, I knelt before him. His were the typical features of the Bedouin, dark eyes and hair set off in a dusky intelligent face. Instead of the usual headscarf, he wore a white turban, proclaiming his religious role. Though he seemed about forty years old his skin did not show the usual seams and wrinkles of the deep desert dweller. He was quite handsome and had the indefinable air of an educated man.

“I am Yūsuf ibn Ya’qūb. What do you want here, Hag?” His voice was cultured but peremptory—the voice of one used to command.

“If you are indeed the one I seek, the Prophet has sent me with a message.”

“And how will you know if I am the one you seek?”

“He will be the means of a great cleanse.”

At my words a transformation swept across his features. His expression became hard and intense. His eyes narrowed and bored into mine. I was looking into the fevered eyes of a fanatic.

“I, Yūsuf ibn Ya’qūb, am the instrument for returning the world to simplicity! I have been chosen for this great task. I was educated in the complexities of the godless West. For a time, I abandoned Allah in worldliness but He brought me back to Himself and has given me a great

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mission. I have prepared for a year and now that mission nears completion. Soon the world will be purified. We will return to the simple ways blessed Allah has given us.”

Yūsuf’s voice had risen as he declaimed his mission until even those outside could hear it. He declared every sentence as if he had said it a hundred times. He slashed his arms forward with every phrase as if they held swords. With each sentence his intensity increased until the cords of muscle in his neck stood out and spittle flew from his mouth.

Here, definitely, was our madman.

When he finished speaking, I eased into his thoughts in search of more about his year of preparation.

No sooner had I made a gentle probe than I received a mental blow like a stinging slap, painful and startling.

“Stay out of my mind, Hag!”

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## Chapter 54

Xu

Midday in Baku: I had yet to find either a private airplane that might have brought the kidnapped Jonathon into Azerbaijan or evidence that Asher had a base here.

My time on the Deputy Secretary's computer had opened up access to many Azerbaijani government ministries. But when, as early as 6:30 am, I began to hear sounds of people arriving at the Ministry of Finance office, I had to leave to find a safer place with internet access.

I'd slipped out the building unnoticed, now transformed into an averagely prosperous Baku businessman—I'd studied a few on the midnight flight in their dark suits, white shirts, sober ties, and short haircuts. As for Aygul Abbasgulyev, the unfortunate man whose identity I had stolen, his passport now resided in a public mailbox waiting to make it back to the sorely inconvenienced man.

I was safe as long as no official accosted me—I had no identification at all and no money for a timely bribe. I made my way to the city center on foot, a walk of a few miles, and headed for the gleaming new Excelsior Hotel Baku.

Entering the hotel, I made my way to the elevator as if I already had a room. After a bit of careful searching I found an unoccupied room and opened the electric door lock with a wave of my fingers. As in most modern hotels the instructions and password for logging into their Wi-Fi network were sitting atop the desk. Once logged in, I hacked into the hotel's reservation system and booked a false name into the room so I could be reasonably certain no one would be walking in the door.

I took the extra precaution of hacking into their security system to get the feeds from their security cameras. I wasn't as worried about the hotel discovering I'd high-jacked a room as I was that hacking into computer systems where I didn't belong could lead an alert cybersecurity team to my IP address—and right to the hotel. If they did come, I wanted to see them before they got to my door.

The chance of any cybersecurity team finding me were slim. I was communicating through a chain of servers that I had set up in various cloud services around the world long before today. Each server in the chain of servers was highly encrypted—even if cybersecurity found one of the servers, they won't discover what's on it until they broke the encryption—and that could take a very long time. The chain of servers ended at a back door access to the supercomputer at the Dyson center near Taos—the one Michael and I had used to crack the fifth force.

It is really the supercomputer that has been doing the lion's share of my hacking. Not only does it have the brute strength to get through low levels of encryption quickly, it can run all but endless numbers of hacking exploits simultaneously, routed through hundreds of encrypted server chains.

The passwords I found in the desk of Deputy Secretary Camilov got me into the Ministries of Finance, Justice, Foreign Affairs, and Defense. Multiple forensic programs were running simultaneously sucking up all available data and analyzing it. The programs look for anomalies: money being spent that isn't accounted for; an empty building still using power; invoices for deliveries to a non-existent facility. So far nothing.

On another front I hacked into air traffic control records looking for a private plane fitting the arrival time of a plane that left Colorado shortly after Jonathon was abducted. A private airplane

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*had* landed in Azerbaijan around midnight local time last night. The information was tantalizing but ultimately useless. Although the Baku airport's air traffic control system has a record of a small jet landing, when I searched for its transponder number or passenger list or pilot's name or plane owner or, or well, anything—there was nothing.

Either the traffic control logs were wrong and no plane had landed or there was official collusion to withhold information. If there were official collusion, that would be a strong indication that someone was hiding something but either explanation is a dead end since there was nothing more I could learn—I can't hack into data that isn't there.

Tantalized but frustrated, I could feel the minutes remaining to find Jonathon slipping away like grains of sand in an hourglass.

Time to try the National Security Ministry, the NSM—the secret police of Azerbaijan. If Asher really did have a hidden base somewhere in this country, people high up in the secret police would have to know about it.

Hacking into the NSM is a much bigger risk than into the other ministries; secret police everywhere are paranoid about security. Serious money and resources go into cybersecurity. Azerbaijan may be a bit backward by world standards, but it was a good bet that there were some very smart people working hard to keep someone like me out of their servers, and who would want to find me in a hurry if they detected the attempt.

I began running a password cracker to take advantage of the computational power of the supercomputer. But even with teraflops of computations per second, it could take hours or even days to crack their system if they were—and they probably were—using long, complex passwords.

Meanwhile I was running half a dozen other advanced hacking programs of my own design from the supercomputer. I was looking for vulnerabilities: an open port, a programmer's back door left open for debugging code, ways to intercept and recraft their IP packet traffic; any stealthy way in. If I could find one, I could insert a worm, a virus, or a rootkit to look for what I wanted to find without their programmers ever knowing I was there.

But first I had to find a way in.

After two hours I'd gotten nowhere. I was beginning to think that the Azerbaijani programmers responsible for NSM's cybersecurity were hitting well above their weight. Their servers were secure in ways that were beyond the means of a small country. They were beyond even the CIA's level, even the NSA's. I hadn't encountered security like this since I tried to find the shadowy members of the Six.

If there was one pattern I discovered in my weeks-long search for the identities and locations of Asher's lieutenants it was world-class cybersecurity. Members of the Six had layers of cyber-protections around them—first the computer systems of the country in which they were hidden and then a second ring of protection around those systems. The second ring was beyond the capability of any but the most elite hacker/programmers. These guys were just as good. In time I could beat them but time is what I didn't have.

After two hours getting nowhere hacking NSM one of my programs triggered an alert. The security team at NSM was trying to work its way back up my chain of servers to end at the supercomputer. I was safe. It would take a supercomputer of their own months to hack through the encryption I had in place. Long before that I could simply erase any one of the servers in the chain they were trying to follow.

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Though they could not find me, they were now on alert and I'd gotten nowhere. The secret police were still my best bet for finding information about either Jonathon or Asher's secret base of operations, if there were one. I needed to try a different approach to getting the information I wanted. With a bit of thought, and, I must admit, a long sigh, I tried an approach which I knew would get me into the NSM almost immediately: I tried to log in directly from the hotel's network.

Ten minutes later the door to my hotel room crashed open, a canister of tear gas and a flashbang were thrown in, followed by armed and shouting men in black.

My last thought before a gun butt crashed into the side of my head—ten minutes was too good for Baku.

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## Chapter 55

Michael

We landed in Yemen late afternoon local time.

Rockshaw had not only agreed to help us find the cyberweapon, he said he knew where it was, and had insisted on leading us to it. Not only that, he'd come alone. No Gazini or any bodyguards.

His sudden and full cooperation was so unexpected that I didn't know what to make of it, but, just before he agreed, there was a moment when it appeared that Rockshaw was steeling himself to make the decision to help us, rather like a soldier deciding to go into battle. If he was intending us harm, he'd left himself awfully vulnerable without a security detail. If this was an altruistic act of a changed man I was all for it, but my intuition was telling me there was more going on than I knew. But whatever his motivation, good or bad, we had no choice but to let him lead us. We simply had no other leads.

Once over the Red Sea, Rockshaw showed Mira where to enter Yemeni airspace and what route to follow to avoid radar detection, then guided us to an isolated airstrip. After landing we taxied into a decrepit hanger. Inside we saw an aging Toyota Land Cruiser parked in a back corner. Rockshaw went to the Toyota and pulled out a large bundle of local robes and headdress and gestured for us to put them on. The disguise wouldn't bear up under close scrutiny but from a distance we'd pass as locals. This was clearly a familiar trip for Rockshaw.

Mira was again left to guard our plane and continue to contact Protectors. Rockshaw drove Fiona and me away from the hanger. On the flight in Rockshaw had told us nothing about where we were going or what we were going to find.

He finally opened up: "We're going to a computer lab that I've been supplying for almost a year. I've delivered millions of dollars of computer equipment and a score of top-ranked black-hat hackers."

Fiona asked, "Who is your client?"

"Although he attempted to maintain a false identity, I do not work with people I don't know. It was easy enough to discover that his real name is Gulam al-Murrah. The al-Murrah are Bedouins, most of whom moved into the cities centuries ago. Gulam is from a wealthy family in Medina. He made it into MIT to study computer science, then did his Ph.D. in cybersecurity. He's brilliant. Hired by the NSA, given loads of money and research assistants, he became influential in the NSA's cyberwarfare division helping plan cyberattack strategies that could bring down entire countries. That's why I think he might be the creator of your cyberweapon."

"Three years ago, Dr. al-Murrah was diagnosed with an undisclosed illness. He left the NSA and returned to Medina. When he was introduced to me less than a year ago, he had access to very large sums of money."

Rockshaw made a turn off a two-lane highway onto a desert road that took us up into low rugged hills: bare, rocky, and brown. We saw no one. As the road became steadily more rough and primitive Rockshaw was forced to slow to a crawl in order to maneuver around rocks the size of basketballs.

Over an hour after we left the hanger we arrived at the end of the road. Before us stood an ugly, squat, windowless building, with one closed metal double-door in the middle of a fifty-meter wide, three-meter high, solid-concrete front wall. The building sat in a level area between

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sloping hillsides. Outside was a large truck with a canvas cover over the back and six old four-wheel drive SUVs like ours.

Stopping away from the other vehicles, Rockshaw turned off the engine and, as if by mutual agreement, we all sat and waited. There wasn't a sound except for a faint breeze playing among the rocky hillsides around us. The other vehicles were covered with a layer of blown sand and grit. There were no recent tire tracks and sand had accumulated at the base of the double metal door. No one had been in or out of that door or used any of these vehicles in days.

"This is bloody spooky."

Neither of us disagreed with Fiona. If the lab had been abandoned, why were the vehicles still here. If it wasn't abandoned, why had no one come out to check on who had arrived. Visitors wouldn't be plentiful out here at the end of nowhere—you'd expect a secret operation to send out a guard or already to have one in place to check any arrival.

"Let's go in."

We walked over to the door and I grabbed the handle on the right-side door and pulled. It came open reluctantly. I had to pull it hard to get it through the accumulated sand. Inside it was dark. I turned a light switch just inside the door but nothing happened. There was absolutely no sound coming from inside—but there was an unpleasant whiff of something dead.

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## Chapter 56

Elle

Yūsuf's outraged shouts at my failed attempt to read his thoughts brought in several men, including Abd.

"Bind and gag her and take her away from me. I will decide what to do with her later."

His men obeyed but were more than a little fearful. Superstitious fear of the Hag was learned from the cradle. Maybe I was just a strange half-crazy woman come in from the desert or maybe I was a malicious spirit incarnate. Whichever I was, Yūsuf's commands were powerful enough to override their fears.

Once trussed, I was carried to another tent through a crowd of Yūsuf's angrily muttering followers, and thrown none-too-gently on the carpeted sand floor. Landing face down I was enveloped in smell of the old and worn carpet: camel, feet, sand, and dust. Lifting my head, I could see that I had been deposited in some kind of storage tent. The dim light filtering through the dark wool of the tent revealed little detail, only vague mounds all around me.

Barely aware of my surroundings, my attention was focused on the mental slap I'd received from Yūsuf. His madness gave him a level of awareness that few possess and that blocked—maddeningly—our one sure way to find out what he was planning. I could try to force my way past his block. The problem was that I had never forced myself into anyone's mind. I wouldn't even consider doing so were our need not so dire. But what did I know of forcing my way into another mind? Protectors willingly open their thoughts to fellow Protectors. Not only is there nothing to fear but the experience brings a certain loving intimacy.

Asher is the only person I've ever encountered who forces his way into minds. His approach was to cause agonizing pain, as if he were plunging a red hot poker into your brain. Hardly a role model I would choose to emulate and useless for our purpose. I needed to sift my way gently through Yūsuf's thoughts until I knew what he knew about the cyberweapon—what it was, and more importantly, where it was.

Even if I *could* force my way into his mind—and the very idea made me feel sick at heart—might doing so unbalance his mind even further? Would I destroy the one mind in all the world that could tell us what we need to know?

Before taking that risk I would see if anyone in camp knew what we needed to know. Abd, his trusted lieutenant, might know. I had already dipped briefly into the surface of his thoughts and so could easily find his mind among the hundreds around me. Visualizing Abd, I soon tuned into his thoughts. He was preoccupied with dark thoughts about me, or rather about the Hag I was pretending to be. He was also feeling relieved that bringing me to Yūsuf had not caused him any harm. I could feel that he was fiercely protective of Yūsuf.

I had never before tried to secretly probe the mind of another and was finding it difficult. How to reach deeper levels of Abd's thoughts? Jonathon, perhaps even Michael, would know. But Jonathon was not responding to my mental calls and Michael, when last we connected, was about to enter what might be the lab that produced the weapon we were trying to stop. Not a good time to distract him. He may find everything we need to know and make my task unnecessary.

It occurred to me that sending a thought to Abd could stimulate his own thoughts and so allow me to read them—like stirring a pot and seeing what came to the surface. I sent the thought,

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\*cyberweapon.\* Abd’s mind immediately filled with thoughts and images associated with intense feelings. They were almost overwhelming. Sorting through his emotional storm was bewildering but gradually yielded a coherent picture of a recent scene.

A very short while ago—two days?—a large helicopter had landed outside the encampment. Abd led ten men from the helicopter into Yūsuf’s tent. I could not make out clear features because Abd did not know them and did not look closely at their faces. Inside the tent each was given a computer flash drive. Yūsuf then rose and blessed the men, one at a time. They were then led back to the helicopter and were flown away.

It must have been only moments after this episode that Atri and Atria appeared to warn us: “A madman intends to release a cyberweapon capable of destroying all the world’s data and computers. He is a once good man whose mind has betrayed him; he does not fully understand what he is doing. He made his fateful decision only a few moments ago....”

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## Chapter 57

Michael

I did not like the idea of stumbling over dead bodies while wandering around in the dark. Seeing my hesitation, Rockshaw said, “There’s a generator in the back. Let’s see if we can get it started.”

On our way we found a huge mound of ash apparently the result of a recent burn. When we came to the shed, Fiona commented with a cheeky grin, “The two discoverers of electromagnetism ought to be able to get a generator running.”

Rockshaw and I glanced at each other and smiled tentatively. We soon discovered that the generator had simply run out of fuel. Once we opened the valve for the auxiliary tank the generator started by itself.

Once power was restored we made our way back to the front entrance. Overhead lights revealed a vestibule just beyond the doors. The vestibule was about three meters deep and three wide, with windowless double doors on either side. Shrugging, I chose the door on the right and pulled. When the door came open the smell of decomposing flesh was nauseating. I had to fight down the impulse to run back outside.

Rows and rows of florescent light fixtures hanging from the ceiling shone upon a dark scene. There were bodies everywhere, bullet-ridden, sprawled awkwardly over desks and chairs, on the floors, a few entangled in a corner as if they had run there together to try to escape their murderers.

After a grim walk around showed no one was still alive, Rockshaw and Fiona went to check the other side of the building. I went to the one workstation free of bodies and blood and started up a computer. I got nothing but a blank screen. I tried another computer, and another, and yet another with the same result. I went to the back of the lab where there were racks of servers. When I tried to access the servers, the monitor used to access them showed no activity. It seemed likely that every data drive in the lab had been erased with a powerful electromagnet. Nor was a shred of paper to be seen anywhere. Now the mound of ash outside made sense.

Hoping that one had been overlooked, avoiding the grisly corpses as carefully as possible, I had tried all but a few of the remaining computers by the time Fiona returned.

“Where’s Rockshaw?”

“He went outside. I don’t think he wanted to face this room again.”

“Did you find anything?”

“There are no bodies over there. It’s where they ate and slept. It was a right old mess though. It had been thoroughly searched.”

“While you were gone I’ve tried to boot up the computers and servers. So far they all come up with blank screens. I think they’ve all been wiped. Why don’t you try those two over there and I’ll get these three and that will be the lot.”

A few minutes later Fiona announced, “No luck here.”

“No luck here either. We’re going to need to search every square inch to see if we can find any hidden laptops, cell phones, hard drives, flash drives, printouts—anything that might help us know how this cyberweapon is programmed.”

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Whoever had destroyed the data in the lab had been thorough. I assumed that whoever they were they did not want any part of the cyberweapon to get into the hands of someone who could develop an anti-malware solution for it before it was released.

After two hours I had nothing to show for my time in the lab. Fiona had already headed back to the living quarters to see what she could find. I headed that way to see if she'd had any luck—or maybe just to get away from the stench.

Fiona emerged from a hallway just as I entered. She was holding up a weirdly scrunched sheet of paper.

“Got something. I almost didn’t see it. The guys who searched before us pulled the drawers out of every chest and dumped the contents on the floor. They missed this though. It was crammed into the top inside corner of one of the chests. It probably was wedged in tighter every time the drawer was closed.”

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## Chapter 58

Jonathon

Asher felt my lightest mental touch. Within seconds the youngest child, Natalia, began to scream. Her scream rose to a terrified, keening shriek and then abruptly halted, followed a few seconds later by frightened sobs.

\*stay out of my mind\*

My heart sank. Michael and Elle had told me about the pain they had endured when Asher had attacked their undefended minds. Now, because of my attempt to read Asher's thoughts, Natalia had suffered in my stead.

Asher's powers of mind were highly developed, although in a perverted way. This last demonstration of his abilities convinced me not to try to contact, however subtly, Michael or any of the Protectors. I blocked their attempts to make mental contact. I'm now sure that Asher would know if I made contact or let them contact me. I could not risk Asher carrying out his threat that one of the children would be killed horribly before my eyes.

I let out a long, deeply sorrowful sigh. My brother had become a monster.

Though for the last two centuries I'd known of his dark plans and schemes, experiencing him directly made it all too painfully real that any shred of humanity he'd ever possessed was now gone. All our recent encounters with Asher had shown him to be willing to do anything, no matter how many people suffered, or how many people died, to consolidate his absolute power over the world.

I could easily escape my prison. Asher knows this, and so made the children's life forfeit if I tried. Without knowing where I was, or what lay between me and freedom, I could not risk trying to escape with the children. I could protect them from physical harm, and I could protect them from mental harm, but I was not sure I could do both at the same time while attempting a complicated escape.

Asher knew enough about me to create the perfect prison.

But did he know enough about me to know what I might ultimately do?

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## Chapter 59

Xu

“I must see Asher.”

My standard answer to every question.

Since coming to consciousness in this interrogation room I’ve given that same answer hundreds of times no matter what they asked. My grim-faced captors, agents of the National Security Ministry, had long been unsatisfied with my answer and had escalated their methods of persuasion several times. I could outlast them, however. I could rise above the pain and heal my body. There was nothing they could do that would really touch me.

All they could do was relieve their frustration at getting nowhere with me. I had no identification. I’d shut down all the encrypted servers I’d been using to communicate to and from the Dyson Center super computer, then I’d wiped my laptop with a wave of my hand. They would have found not only no trail of servers in the cloud but no programs, no operating system, no data—nothing—on my laptop. All they had was a man who spoke Russian with a passable Azerbaijani accent, dressed like a businessman, with an annoyingly persistent answer.

I was making more progress than they; my standard answer—bait to catch a fish—had finally caught one. My insistent answer that I must see Asher must have, as I hoped, percolated up through the ranks and gotten the reaction I was hoping for: A Major entered the interrogation room and gave me a long calculated stare. That suited me perfectly. While he was staring at me I moved among his surface thoughts and saw that the name Asher meant something to him—it had been mentioned by higher ranking officers in the secret service, mentioned with an air of secrecy and importance. But I need to know more than that.

Time to throw this fish back and see if I could catch a bigger one. Looking at him directly I said, “Tell Asher I need to see him.”

His eyes widened in surprise. Recovering quickly, his face again became expressionless. Giving me one last menacing stare he left the room.

I just hope the next fish comes quickly. Time to find Jonathan may be running out.

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## Chapter 60

Michael

Fiona and I sat down side-by-side at one of the dining tables and, after carefully smoothing out the well-scrunched paper, began reading. At the top was the title, “Memo from G”—Gulam al-Murrah? Dated nine months ago, early in the development cycle, it was a high-level description of the cyberweapon.

While we were poring over the paper Rockshaw entered. His shoes and pants below the knee where covered in ash. “I’ve been sifting through that big pile of ash with a shovel I found in the generator shed. There’s not even a tiny bit of unburned paper left.” I was surprised that Rockshaw would take so much time and care to help us. I still don’t understand why but before I could give it further thought he said, “So you’ve found something.”

“Yes, and it is far worse than I could have imagined. The weapon is not just one type of malware. It’s a cocktail of every type of malware there is—with some new types added. Every infected computer will send the cyberweapon to every other computer with which it is networked. It includes malware to attack firewalls; once it identifies the firewall type, the malware initiates the optimum exploits to get through it. Once a firewall is breached another type of malware infects all the computers protected by the firewall. Yet another type of malware sends the cocktail to all the email addresses found on any computer it infects employing dozens of different gambits to get the recipient to open the attachment. Last but not least, once a computer has been used for all of the purposes above, another type of malware encrypts all data on all its drives with an unbreakable encryption code—like ransomware but with no intention of getting a ransom for the decryption key. The intent of the cyberweapon is to encrypt any and all data it finds—and destroy the decryption key rendering all the data forever inaccessible. The only purpose of this weapon is destruction.”

“There is also a description of the release strategy: simultaneous release at multiple locations in order to overwhelm any attempt at containment. Financial systems, and the vast underground bunkers that archive all the world’s key financial data from banks and stock markets, are specifically targeted. The military, emergency services, and data storage facilities will all receive specialized and coordinated attacks. Next the weapon will create a worldwide blackout by destroying all the programs and the data that maintain electrical generation plants—including those that are designed to restart the plants. The weapon will contain millions of IP addresses for electrical infrastructure computers as well as millions of stolen passwords to get past their security.

“Everything in the cocktail is being coded from scratch. No existing anti-malware programs will be able to recognize and stop any of the malware in the cocktail. Long before the various ingredients of the cocktail are even identified, there will no longer be any working computers with which to program a response.

“It will be devastating.”

Rockshaw looked away, unable to meet my eyes.

After a brief discussion we decided there was nothing more we could do. There were no more clues to find. We debated taking some or all of the computers with us to see if forensic engineers could get any data from any of the drives. We abandoned the idea simply because it would likely take days to weeks to do the kind of painstaking work required.

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We finally emerged from the lab into darkness.

“There’s something we have to do before we go.”

“Fiona, I want you to create a shield that goes around, over, and under the lab and all its buildings and the vehicles in front. A sphere will probably be the best shape.”

Fiona took a deep breath, let it out slowly, and began to concentrate. I knew she was beginning to visualize an impenetrable sphere of invisible force before projecting it into reality. She nodded after about twenty seconds. Though I couldn’t see it, I had no doubt that the invisible force was actually there. Elle told me that in the year she’d had to train Fiona, she had become better at telekinesis than any other Protector except herself.

My turn. “It’s going to get hot inside.”

In many ways what I intended to do was easier than Fiona’s task. Creating and holding the bubble of force around the lab took clarity and focus; what I was about to do was more like employing blunt force. I visualized all the atoms within the sphere speeding up their natural rate of vibration.

Soon we saw smoke rising behind the lab and then coming from the front door. Smoke gave way to flame. The lab became an inferno. The light from the fires lit up the inner surface of the force-bubble making it visible. As I continued to telekinetically agitate the atoms the double metal door began to melt. From the far side of the lab came a burst of flames—probably the generator’s diesel tanks exploding.

I wanted to be sure that every trace of the weapon created here was utterly destroyed. If we were successful in stopping the release of the cyberweapon, I wanted no trace of it left that could be used for another attempt.

I continued to speed the rate of vibration within the sphere until the rocks and minerals that comprised the walls of the lab and the ground it stood upon began also to melt. Soon everything within the force-bubble was superheated. The concrete walls of the lab had sagged and collapsed into what was now a pool of molten lava. The force-bubble glowed red. Wisps of superheated smoke burst into incandescence creating a pulsating dance of yellow light against a deep red glow.

Convinced that nothing could have survived, I began slowing the atoms. If Fiona released her force bubble now the heat released would incinerate us. Gradually, as I slowed the vibrational rate, the red hot pool darkened and eventually turned to lava-like black. The darkness around us was soon matched by darkness inside the sphere.

“Fiona, I think you can release it now.”

A brimstone smell and a brief gust of heat washed over us. What was left of the lab was a perfectly level circle, fissured and cracked as it had rapidly cooled.

It had taken no more than five minutes to obliterate the lab.

I turned to Rockshaw and noticed his mouth agape, his eyes staring, obviously stunned by the power Protectors can wield. He turned and looked directly at me. There was something in his eyes I’d never seen in him before—awe.

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## Chapter 61

Elle

With the faintest of touches, avoiding the slap-producing direct approach I'd taken before, I have tried several times to enter the mind of Yūsuf. While he has not detected me, I've had little success. His mind is as though on fire—a mixture of great mental power, fanaticism, raging anger, and intense pain. Mentally touching his mind is an agony—an agony I gladly endure—but I cannot get past the surface.

Before I could telepathically contact Michael to ask for ideas I heard voices coming my way. Tuning in quickly to their surface thoughts I knew they had come to take me back to Yūsuf's tent. They found me as they had left me, face down on old carpets, gagged, with my hands tied behind my back, my feet bound to my hands.

The flap of the tent opened, letting more light into the gloom, and soon I felt the release of the bindings that tied my hands and feet. I was allowed to stand and the gag was removed. I showed no fear or pain. I made no move to stretch my body or chafe my wrists. I merely spoke directly to Abd, "Take me to Yūsuf before it is too late."

Since Yūsuf had already ordered him to bring me to him he could hardly refuse, but he clearly didn't like being ordered around by a woman, let alone one that had displeased his master. Without a word he gestured to the others and we made our way to Yūsuf's tent.

Yūsuf was seated as before but now his eyes shone with a different intensity: part reverence, part anticipation.

"What message does Allah have for me, Hag?"

Perhaps his anger at my intruding on his thoughts had blasted away his thin grasp of reality and he'd forgotten about the message until now. Or perhaps his attention had returned to my original message through some deranged pathway. I decided I must take advantage of his attention immediately. "Allah sent me in great haste. You must recall the men you sent away on the helicopter before it is too late. Your intentions are right but your means are wrong. Simplicity must be sought, not imposed. Purification must be voluntary, not forced."

I spoke with as much power and authority as Truth could lend me. It had an effect. Yūsuf stared at me with amazement and dawning comprehension. In his eyes, I saw his resolve waver for an instant, but all too soon the madness and fanaticism returned. He screamed in rage, "You have been sent by Shaitaan not by Allah!"

Yūsuf's voice abruptly lowered into a whispered mutter that I could barely make out. "She comes to divert me from my great work but I will remain steadfast. Allah is only testing me. Allah has tested me through the Hag but she has failed. I have been chosen. I have been chosen. I have been chosen...."

Yūsuf's madness appeared to me to be intensifying even in the short time I had been in the encampment. Will he soon lose any ability to remember what he has done? I made a desperate decision. I plunged into Yūsuf's mind.

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## Chapter 62

Michael

Rockshaw remained silent while Fiona drove us back to the plane.

We now knew more about the madman's cyberweapon but not specifically where and by whom it would be released. I began to telepathically connect with Elle to find out if she had discovered the where and by whom from the madman himself.

Connecting with Elle plunged me into a mental and emotional nightmare.

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## Chapter 63

Elle

The good news was that Yūsuf's madness had become so all-absorbing that he no longer knew I was in his mind. The bad news was that if I stayed in Yūsuf's mind any longer I might lose my own. His heart was consumed with inchoate hatred and his mind was nearly crushed by blindingly intense pain. As long as I shared his mind the pain was blindingly intense for me, too. I could rise only a little above the pain and whirling madness of his mind.

Knowing I had little time, I desperately sifted through his thoughts but could barely comprehend one thought before another surfaced from the maelstrom of his madness. I saw scores of fleeting images of the men from the helicopter but none different from what I had seen in Abd's mind. The strongest thoughts I experienced were about Yūsuf's mad passion to Purify the world.

He was silently repeating, "I have been chosen, I have been chosen," as if trying to convince himself that his actions were justified. He clung to that conviction like a man clinging to a log in a storm at sea. When doubts assailed him they were swept away by the image of the great Purification that burned his mind like fire, once more setting off his obsessive rant: "I have been chosen, I have been chosen...."

Steeling myself to endure the pain and confusion, I plunged deeper into the hurricane of Yūsuf's thoughts looking for a thread that would lead me to the locations of the men with the cyberweapon. But it was as if Yūsuf had created in his mind a locked vault guarded by the conviction that it was information he must protect at all costs.

After repeated attempts to penetrate to Yūsuf's inmost thoughts, feeling battered and emotionally drained, I was on the verge of giving up when I felt Michaels's mind unexpectedly join mine. Immediately soothed and strengthened by the power of his healing love and I took fresh hope.

\*I am getting nowhere, he has hidden the knowledge of where the flash drives have gone deep in his mind, and I cannot reach it\*

\*let's try a different approach\*

Immediately I felt a wave of soothing love flood into Yūsuf's being. The circle of his obsessive thoughts was suddenly broken as if he had awakened from a nightmare. Uncertain of what had happened he mentally took stock. Soon he remembered the Hag, that she had been brought to his tent. He opened his eyes and looked at me. Then he again shouted, "You have been sent by Shaitaan not by Allah!"

With an intensity that could only come from insane rage, Yūsuf blasted me, and unknowingly, Michael out of his mind.

"Take her away. Bind and gag her once again."

Abd asked, "Do we kill her?"

Yūsuf paused. I was glad to see an inner struggle taking place. His blinding fanaticism hadn't yet made him instantly merciless. I was glad not for my own safety but because it provided a slim hope that he was reachable, that his heart was not completely hardened. Killing a person was, to him, still an act to be carefully considered.

"Not yet. But do not let her talk with anyone. Do not let her spread Shaitaan's lies."

A gag roughly forced into my mouth, I was bound and carried back to my prison tent.

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Michael remained with me in thought and feeling even after Yūsuf drove us from his mind.

\*are you alright? were you in his mind for long?\*

\*I'm okay, it felt like an eternity, but I think I was in his mind for less than a minute\*

\*what did you learn?\*

From long practice and the deep loving connection that Michael and I enjoyed, we were able quickly to share what we knew—what Rockshaw had told him about Gulam al-Murrah, the scientist who'd run the secret lab in Yemen; what I had learned about Yūsuf ibn Ya'qūb, who believed he was chosen by Allah to Purify the world, and who clearly was our madman in the desert.

It was likely but not certain that Gulam al-Murrah and Yūsuf ibn Ya'qūb were one and the same person. Why else would ten men come to Yūsuf to receive ten flash drives from him? Gulam's "undisclosed illness" could be what had driven him mad—a madness that used his brilliance and vast knowledge of cyber warfare to create a cyberweapon to purify the world; a madness that had transformed him into Yūsuf ibn Ya'qūb, preaching a tangled combination of Bedouin tradition and the need for simplicity to anyone who would listen.

Michael brought us back to our problem, \*all this adds up to Gulam and Yūsuf being the same person, but it gets us no closer to knowing where the ten men are going and when they will release the cyberweapon\*

\*I'm afraid if we try forcibly to take the thoughts from his mind he may withdraw into a madness from which he cannot return\*

I paused to consider my next thought: \*I sensed some doubt within Yūsuf. He needed to convince himself over and over that he had been chosen and that the world needed to be brought back to ascetic simplicity. Atria said he was a once good man whose mind had betrayed him. I think it is only his madness that is preventing him from revealing where the men have gone.\*

\*Michael, can you heal his madness?\*

\*only if he lets me in. I cannot heal a mind that is hurling its storm of thoughts against my mind. Or at least it's not possible for me, maybe Jonathan could do it...\*

\*do you think he's still alive?\*

\*yes, but he's blocking me from contacting him mentally\*

\*me too\*

\*if he were dead, I think there would be no block, or at least the feeling would be different\*

\*Michael, why is he blocking us?\*

\*I have no idea; he's never done it before, but I do know he must have a good reason. He would never block us if he didn't have to. He knows what's at stake. I told him everything that Atri and Atria told us....\*

We paused again. It appeared there would be no help from Jonathon. I thought the obvious. \*Yūsuf is our best hope\*

Michael offered an unexpected thought, \*there is one possibility\*

With his thought came an image. I felt a pang of alarm, \*Michael, no\*

\*Yūsuf has to let me heal him and I can only think of one way to get him to let me. He has to think Allah wants him to be healed\*

Michael sent me a quick visualization of his plan.

\*you could die\*

\*yes, but I don't know of any other way, and time is running out\*

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I didn't know of any other way either though I wished with all my heart I did. Somewhere in Yūsuf's mind was the information that could save untold numbers of people. If Michael's idea had even a whisper of a chance, he must try it....

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## Chapter 64

Michael

Mira and Fiona were in the pilot and co-pilot seats flying us back to Cairo. I was sitting with Rockshaw in the back of the plane. Rockshaw had been silent since we'd left the lab. Now he took in a breath and caught my eye. "I have to tell you something."

I nodded but remained silent.

"After I escaped from the castle in Switzerland Asher did everything he could to destroy me. He used his influence to have all my labs and warehouses in Essen raided. He turned my customers against me and eventually sent hit teams after me. I thought it was only a matter of time before one of the teams succeeded. I did the only thing I could think of to survive: I contacted him and told him everything I knew or guessed about you."

I watched various emotions play across Rockshaw's face—ending with remorse.

"I told him that you had healed me; that you were at least as old as I; that you were Michael Faraday; that you could communicate telepathically; and that you could look like any one you chose. I told him that you and that woman Elle had beaten me to the fifth force; that you were Anil Gupta; that you had set up Chin and the rest of us in order to destroy his plans. I told him I thought Jonathon Devas was your leader."

He paused, looking downward as he gathered his thoughts.

"Asher was enraged that I hadn't told him sooner. He knew that Chin and the others would never trust him again. I'd reminded him again that his plans for world financial domination were ruined. Though I feared I'd only made things worse for myself he sent no more hit teams. Two weeks later he contacted me and told me to do whatever I could to help al-Murrah create his cyberweapon. I found the location for the lab, secured the landing strip, bribed Yemeni officials to look the other way, and supplied al-Murrah with whatever he wanted."

He paused once again, finally taking a deep breath as if his next words were going to be difficult to say.

"Once I believed that I was safe from Asher I began to relax enough to think about my future. I began to understand the degree to which you had changed me. I'd lost my rage. I'd lost all desire to sell arms. I could no longer bring myself to do anything, really, and I was appalled at the idea of taking a life to prolong my own. What you saw in Nigeria was the last remaining base of what had been a dozen bases and thousands of warehouses scattered around the world. As you probably guessed, I have been depressed. The only thing that motivates me is my fear of Asher. I had once watched him destroy a man with his mind. Asher toyed with him. The man was eventually reduced to a gibbering wreck and killed himself by jumping off a balcony six floors up."

He inhaled deeply and let it out slowly.

"Once we get to Cairo I will try to disappear. If Asher learns that I led you to the lab he will be after me. I don't want to die that way."

Rockshaw lapsed into an extended silence. I was deeply moved to know that he had been risking his life to take us to the lab. He had knowingly chosen a permanent life on the run, or a horrible death if Asher found him, in order to help us prevent this looming catastrophe. I wanted to say something to convey the depth of my respect for his sacrifice but I was sure he did not want me to say it. He would only be embarrassed and uncomfortable.

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Standing by the plane after we landed in Cairo, Rockshaw and I gave each other measuring looks. I wished a better end for him than this but I didn't think he would accept any help from me. He still visibly carried the pride that had led to his downfall.

I sensed that he was entertaining similar thoughts, perhaps wishing that our work together so many years before had also come to a better end.

I offered him the best thing I could, "Sir Humphrey, our discovery of electromagnetism was more than groundbreaking; it transformed the world."

He smiled when I called him Sir Humphrey, nodded thoughtfully, turned, and walked away. I doubted I would ever see him again.

I was again in a taxi heading for the Great Pyramid. Fiona remained behind this time to help Mira contact Protectors and let them know what we had learned and what we were doing.

I turned my mind to Rockshaw's revelation that Asher was behind the cyberweapon. It must have been Asher who had discovered the brilliant but by then fanatical Dr. Gulam al-Murrah. Seeing the former cyberwarfare planner's potential for spreading chaos Asher gave him what he needed to create his purifying cyberweapon. What would Asher get out of this chaos? What he always got. Uncertainty, instability, and power vacuums in multiple countries. If the cyberweapon succeeded, totalitarian governments would increase their power, shaky democracies would be taken over by their militaries, even stable democracies would come under martial law, the courts powerless and the military given free rein. As order was restored he could fill the new power positions with hand-picked strongmen loyal to those who were loyal to him.

I am now almost certain that Asher had Jonathon kidnapped in order to make it more difficult for us to find the cyberweapon; that it was on Asher's orders that the black-hat hackers working on the weapon were killed, the computers destroyed, and the papers burnt; that the men who flew off in the helicopter from Yūsuf's camp with the flash drives were not Muslim fanatics but professional agents provided by Asher and highly trained at deep-cover infiltration of secure facilities.

It is no real surprise to find Asher behind everything but now I ask myself: Should knowing about Asher's involvement change our strategy? I couldn't think what we could do differently. That Asher was pulling the strings only reinforced what we already know: one, that we desperately needed to know where the men were going—and I was about to attempt to get Yūsuf to tell me; and two, once we know their destinations, every Protector we could muster would be needed to intercept them—and Mira and Fiona were already working on that.

Though my mind told me we were doing everything we should, my heart had the uneasy feeling that I was missing something. I just couldn't think what....

Sitting once again on the bench in the Chamber of Seeing I felt the press of time like an actual weight. Atri's words kept coming back to me: "You have days only." And already two days had passed.

For the past two hours I attempted to dematerialize and rematerialize in the Chamber of Projection. I tried and failed so many times I lost count—so many times that I was beginning to despair.

Though I understand what I am attempting to do, I'd never done it before. My ability to change shape gave me some feel for what I was attempting; I could dematerialize one form and rematerialize into another form. But although I had changed form thousands of times over my

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many lifetimes as a Protector, I never rematerialized in another location. Atri and Atria could do so from beyond the physical world and Jonathon taught initiates how to do so here on the Giza plateau when it was still a mystery school. Jonathan had never taught me and I had never asked. I had always assumed he would teach me when he thought I was ready.

Now, with all my being, I wish I'd asked.

I knew the Chamber of Projection's location, its size, and what it looked like before it was closed up in the final stages of the Great Pyramid's construction. In every attempt, I visualized myself inside the chamber as clearly and strongly as I could, just as I would when changing form—but with no success.

With each failure my doubts have increased. I kept wondering whether the pyramid's dilapidated condition was making my attempts impossible or if I needed Jonathon or another Master to charge the pyramid with power before I could succeed. I am also dealing with fear. Not fear that rematerializing in solid granite would mean my death but that failure would result in suffering and death on a horrific scale.

Mentally shaking off my concerns, once more I focused my mind, visualized myself in the Chamber of Projection, mentally called to Atri and Atria—just as I had each time I made an attempt—but I remained stubbornly in the Chamber of Seeing.

Not knowing what else to do I sent a mental message to Elle. She responded immediately as if she'd been waiting. She immediately sensed that something was wrong.

\*are you alright?\*

\*I don't know if I can do this. I've failed over and over...\*

\*tell me what you are doing\*

I told her what I had been doing, adding, \*I can't seem to concentrate strongly enough to make it happen\*

After a short pause she sent, \*maybe the key isn't concentration\*

\*what else could it be\*

\*perhaps instead of trying to direct the process you have to let go and let it happen...not control but surrender\*

I felt the first glimmer of hope in hours. I left a smile in her mind....

Surrender. Elle's insight was a gift that moved me deeply; I needed to concentrate not my mind but my heart's feeling.

Clearing my thoughts of past failures I began to surrender all my worries and fears. One by one I offered them to the Infinite Spirit. I gave no thought to time. I gave the process as much time as was needed to be heart-felt and complete. With the surrender of each worry or fear I felt lighter until at last I soared into freedom. Before giving myself completely to the experience, I sent a mental thank you to Elle, filled with my love and gratefulness.

I left everything behind: thought, feeling, physical body, and world. I gave myself without reservation to Spirit, to God. I simply was. I was not only filled with joy, I *became* Joy. I felt free as never before. I moved though the cosmos not in body but in being. I perceived torrents of energy creating universes, rivers of light forming the heavens; I felt the vibrating power that manifests the cosmos, and realized all was a part of me and I was a part of all. After timeless eternity I returned to my physical body and to the awareness that I was in the Chamber of Seeing. I understood with soul-stirring awe that while my experience had been as though for lifetimes, here in the chamber no time had passed at all.

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I was remade; the Michael that had departed was not the Michael that had returned. Awareness of my present mission returned; I effortlessly concentrated on being in the Chamber of Projection and, at last, felt the familiar tingling of shape-shifting....

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## Chapter 65

Elle

\*I'm ready\*

Michael's thought came clearly and powerfully—his mind stronger than I had ever before experienced. He must have a story to tell—but not just now.

Michael told me mentally what I needed to do for him—to act like a beacon—a location point for his mind.

More than ready to stop lying face down on this old carpet, I removed my bindings with a twist of kinetic energy. Pulling up the back edge of the tent, I slid under into the night. I stood motionless for a moment to make sure no one had seen me then noiselessly slipped off.

Still unnoticed at the outskirts of camp, I took advantage of deep the darkness—the waning half-moon had not yet risen—and levitated straight up then floated sideways high over the camp. Although scores of people were sitting around campfires, I was unworried that I might be seen. Night-blinded by the flames, they would be unable to see me if they looked up. I slowly descended into a deep pool of shade behind Yūsuf's tent. The two men guarding the front did not think to look up.

\*I'm ready to get inside Yūsuf's tent, are you ready for me\*

\*I'm as ready as I can be\*

Slowly moving one hand down the woven camel-hair of the tent-side in front of me, I soundlessly made a slit by telekinetically parting the fibers. I opened the slit with my fingers just enough to see inside. There was only one candle lantern lit but it provided enough light for me to see that Yūsuf was kneeling on a pillow exactly where I had left him two hours ago. No one else was in the tent. Because Yūsuf's back was to me I could not tell if his eyes were open.

I pulled the slit open wider and slipped in. My breath was even and quiet. I moved with all care not to make a sound. Although I didn't think Yūsuf could hear me over the sounds coming from around the campfires I stood perfectly still for some time to be sure I had not alerted him. Satisfied, I levitated nearly to the ceiling and at the same time pulled my legs into the lotus pose. Two meters above the ground, I floated around to the side and above Yūsuf to be sure his eyes were closed. Then I moved nearly in front him but still slightly to one side about two meters away.

\*I'm where you want me to be\*

A piercingly bright white light burst into being directly in front of Yūsuf. His eyes flew open; he looked up wonderstruck. His eyes widened as he gazed at an angelic form taking shape in the light. The angel looked deeply into his eyes. Yūsuf was transfixed.

The brilliant light flooding out of his tent attracted more than Yūsuf's attention. The guards outside rushed in only to gasp in wonder and fall to their knees. Soon more of Yūsuf's followers entered and surrounded the tableau of Yūsuf and the angel until there was no more room.

Although the angel was more light than form his body and face were clear to behold. The face was serene and calm; the eyes blazed with power. Streaming rays of golden light emanating from every part of its body shone on and through everyone as if they themselves were transmuted into light. From the angel's mind, heart, and body flowed auric layers of azure, magenta, and emerald light shifting and flowing in beautiful and soothing patterns.

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Still floating next to the angel I further astonished the onlookers by transforming the harsh plainness of the Hag into demure loveliness, hair no longer matted, torn and dirty robes now fine and white.

Occasional whispers broke the silence. “It is Ridwan come to bless his new Prophet.” “It is Jibrail who gave the Quran to the Prophet, blessed be his name.” A few, more fearful, “It is Israfil come to signal the end of the earth.” The whispers slowly subsided in the wonder of the moment. Yūsuf, still transfixed, was silent. The angel’s eyes staring unwaveringly and directly into his own. Finally, the angel spoke.

“Gulam, what have you done?”

With a choking rasp Gulam/Yūsuf dropped his head in shame.

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## Chapter 66

Michael

I am almost as awed as the onlookers in Yūsuf's tent that I was able to make myself visible to them. I feel as if I am but a channel for the enormous power concentrated in the Chamber of Projection.

And yes, it was me they saw. Not the archangels Jibrail or Ridwan. What they saw was not my physical body, but my astral form. Our astral forms are beautiful beyond the limits of physical matter—our essence as light beings with innate power and majesty.

I had deliberately waited to speak until the tent had filled so that Gulam/Yūsuf would have no doubt that what he was seeing was real and not a hallucination brought on by his madness. I wanted him to be deeply and unquestioningly awed by the experience.

While the tent was filling I held Gulam/Yūsuf's attention with my eyes and flooded him with healing waves of love. But his mind remained a fortress. I could not get past the surface of his mind. He was still mad, still fiercely determined to keep his secrets.

"Gulam, you ignored Allah's messenger." Yūsuf lifted his head but now could not meet my eyes. I glanced sideways at Elle to leave in no doubt who I meant.

\*tell him again\*

Elle spoke so that everyone in the tent could hear. "Allah sent me in great haste. You must recall the men bent on your plan of Purification. Your intentions are right but your means are wrong. Cleanse your own soul of impure thoughts and motives; do not take the lives of those *you* deem to be impure."

The conflict of thoughts raced across Gulam/Yūsuf's face. He had convinced himself—or his madness had convinced him—that the Hag was an instrument of Shaitaan, the darkest and most powerful Djinn. But now an angel who was bathing him in love was telling him that the transformed Hag was a true messenger of Allah.

For a very long time, every thought and all his will had been focused on his mission. In his increasing madness, his mission had become his only reality. Now he was teetering on the brink of accepting that he had no mission, that he had been consumed by a dark dream.

I pushed him a bit harder. "Allah commands you to open your mind and heart to me that you may receive his blessing."

A long silence was finally broken. Gulam/Yūsuf began to weep. A choking, half-expressed sound emerged and grew into uncontrolled sobbing as he released what must have been a terrible burden—the thought that Allah had wanted him to cause such widespread loss of life. A once good man had been convinced by the promptings of his deranged mind that such a monstrous act was the will of a benign and loving God. Now he could let go of the burden.

"Bless me." He fell prostrate before me.

I wasted no time. My projection could last for hours for all I knew, or it might falter at any moment. I dove into his mind, now open and unresisting, all barriers surrendered. I found the knowledge I sought. I knew where and when the flash drives would be used to release the cyberweapon. I nearly gasped at the enormity of what Gulam had created. It was not a cyberweapon; it was cyber invasion; and far more complex than had been revealed by the short description we had read. I also learned that he did not have any way to recall the men sent to release it. We would have to stop each of them without his help.

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With his mind open to me, it took but moments to see the source of his madness. A huge tumor was pressing on the frontal lobe of his brain—the “undisclosed illness” that led to his departure from the NSA. To my astral sight it appeared to be black in contrast to the coruscating thought-colors of his mind. I wondered for a moment if I could heal him without my usual physical contact. My answer came immediately when I raised my astral hands; a flood of light blazed into his brain.

Never before had I been an instrument of such a rapid healing. In a flash of opalescent light his tumor vanished. I saw the wildly coruscating light and thought in his mind slow down and begin to move in coherent patterns. Very slowly, as if afraid to tip himself back into madness, Gulam pushed himself back into sitting position and took a deep shuddering breath. His eyes gazed on me trustingly.

If we survive, Gulam will need help. His guilt and remorse will soon be overwhelming when he feels the full impact of his actions.

I raised one hand in blessing, “Cling to Allah.”

As I uttered those final words, I released the projection and my awareness returned to the pitch-black of the Chamber of Projection. Before I attempted to dematerialize and rematerialize in the Chamber of Seeing, I desperately needed to get the Protectors in motion.

Before I could begin I felt a powerful emotion from Elle and understood her thoughts, \*you truly were an angel, many here felt the waves of love you sent to Gulam, myself included, most of them had not even moved before I settled to the ground and left, some of them were in tears, some looked ecstatic, whatever you did to get into the Chamber of Projection has transformed you\*

I didn’t know how to respond. I felt that everything that had happened had flowed through me. I was as blessed by the river of love flowing through me as were Gulam and his followers. I felt honored and humbled to be an instrument of the experience. I conveyed this more in feeling than in words to Elle.

Finally, a sense of urgency returned, \*stay with me, I want you, Mira, and Fiona to know what I learned from Gulam\*

Moments later Mira and Fiona had opened their minds to my thought, \*the cyber weapon is going to be released tomorrow at noon GMT in ten locations around the world\*

The collective realization hit like a shockwave: noon GMT was less than fourteen hours from now.

I mentally shared with them all the target locations in Gulam’s mind. \*Mira, Fiona, Elle, we need to get Protectors to all those locations immediately, we need them in teams that include as many Protectors as possible that can shape-shift\*

\*tell them to do anything, *anything*, necessary to get where they are going and to find and stop their man before noon GMT—if our powers are revealed then so be it\*

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## Chapter 67

### Xu—Baku

Mira communicated with me just moments ago. I was stunned by the perverse genius of Gulam's cyber weapon. Any doubts I had that such a weapon could bring the world to its knees were gone in an instant. I needed to leave for Moscow right away—but I wondered if I should wait a few more minutes? I could tell from the thoughts of my jailers, interrogators, and torturers that someone highly important was coming soon. They have increased their efforts to get me to break; they are doubtful that I will—and terrified that I won't.

My calm repetition that I must see Asher had them confused, angry, and, now, unnerved. It'd been several hours since the major, whose mind held some small bits of memory of the name Asher, came to look me over. Since then another major came to watch but this one knew nothing about Asher. Now it appeared I was to be visited by a colonel—and not just any colonel—my captors appeared to be in abject fear of him.

Their fear of not being able to break me before the colonel arrives was palpable. Colonel Vüqar was considered to be the most powerful man in the NSM. Even though he was not a general, Colonel Vüqar appeared to have some kind of hold over the upper ranks.

He sounded like my best hope, but if he didn't come in the next few minutes I would have to escape anyway. I decided to wait fifteen minutes. Time I could measure accurately because about the only thing I could see, beyond the anxious faces of the thugs who were currently breaking my fingers, was the face of a clock. I amused myself by making one of my fingers impossible to break while instantly healing the last one they did break.

Ten minutes had ticked by when there was a sudden commotion outside the room. I pulled my mind away from planning my escape and how I would get from Baku to Moscow and tuned into the minds outside the room. There was a lot of fear. Suddenly the door was thrown open and Colonel Vüqar walked into the room.

Needing to go as soon as possible, I locked eyes with the colonel. "I must see Asher."

Colonel Vüqar's eyes widened in surprise and he stared daggers at me. Perfect. His mind full of thoughts of Asher, I could see that Asher controlled Azerbaijan's levers of power through Colonel Vüqar and a score of other military men and government officials. In return these men lived like kings and were immune to any consequences of their actions—generals came and went, politicians came and went, but these men remained in control.

Asher's hidden control over Azerbaijan also explained why the NSM's cyber-security had been so hard to crack. He must have some of the best minds working to keep hackers away from NSM's secrets—and from his own.

Colonel Vüqar also knew where Asher was located. Mentally drinking in the details I almost laughed—Asher was ridiculously close.

Time to go. I'd got what I came for. Now to get out.

I sent a powerful electrical pulse through the wiring. The bulbs in this room and the next shattered. Since we were deep underground there were no windows. The darkness was complete. As expected, there was an uproar with lots of shouting in Russian.

Telekinetically I popped off my shackles, jumped off the table, and transformed into the likeness of a guard I had seen earlier. By sound and feel I made my way to the outer room. I had

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just reached the door when someone began waving a flashlight around. I pretended to have just entered the room. “What happened? Why are there no lights?”

As I expected, everyone ignored me. I was only a corporal. I was supposed to speak only when spoken to.

The next uproar came from the interrogation room. The wandering flashlight had landed on the empty interrogation table. The shouts were louder. I was grabbed roughly by the shoulder by Colonel Vüqar. “Did you see anyone leaving this room?”

I stammered out an answer, “No sir. It was dark, sir!”

He shoved me away. “Go search for him! Everyone go search for him!”

We all ran out in the hallway. I followed the man with the flashlight.

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## Chapter 68

Jonathon

I was feeding the children and trying to convince them—who had lived most of their lives on the street—that a clean body and clean clothes were good ideas, when the hidden door swung open and Asher entered. The children scuttled behind me, instinctively afraid of Asher—as well they should be.

He'd come to gloat. No need to read his mind to know.

"You make a good nanny. I suppose that is all you are suited for, a nanny to the weak and feeble. Protector of the dreamers and the useless," he mocked the idea as he spoke, "who would no doubt die without your help because they have not the wit or the strength to survive. You are pathetic. You would save these children, the unwanted spawn of alcoholics and thieves, before you save yourself."

I looked directly at Asher but without any challenge in my eyes. He wanted me to rise to his bait. I had no doubt he would enjoy again demonstrating his power over me by inflicting pain on one of the children.

"You know if my people don't stop your cyberweapon before it is released it will cause a massive amount of suffering and untold deaths."

He stared at me in a calculating way. He was a past master at learning what he wanted at the expense of others and without giving away anything in return. Though he didn't respond, there was a telltale flicker of surprise deep in his eyes.

Surprise that I knew there was a cyberweapon; surprise that I knew it could cause widespread death; and the biggest surprise of all, that I knew he was behind it. I hadn't really known he was behind it. I only suspected. But his eyes confirmed it.

"You could help avert a tragedy and might save your own life."

Asher laughed a mocking laugh. "Good try, brother, but it won't work. Events are unfolding as I planned."

After he left—earlier than I think he planned; perhaps because my knowledge had shaken him—I considered that I'd learned something and nothing. I now knew what I had only suspected; Asher was behind the cyberweapon. But I was no closer to knowing why he wanted me here—and I was no closer to knowing what I should do. How to stop Asher? Was the Divine plan to allow Asher's horrific scheme to unfold or was there something I am supposed to do? I shrank from my options even as my conviction grew that Asher had become too dangerous for this world...

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## Chapter 69

Mira—Nearing Sao Paulo, 10:48 GMT

Michael and I are close to landing in Sao Paulo. We had been pushing our Gulfstream to maximum speed—and Michael had added speed telekinetically—just shy of tearing off the wings. Michael seemed inexhaustible after his experience in the pyramid; even after twelve straight hours of propelling us along at an additional ninety miles per hour he was relaxed and showed no strain. Even with Michael’s astonishing help, and even if everything went well, we were going to land in Sao Paulo only an hour before the release of the cyberweapon. I’d made arrangements for a helicopter to be standing by, ready to fly the moment we boarded. Best estimate was that we would land on the helipad of our target building, Banco do Brasil, at 11:30 GMT.

The working plan was for all our teams to get as near Gulam’s release points as possible then begin scanning minds for extreme tension, fear, or any thoughts that have to do with cyberweapons, malware, sabotage, or attacks. Once Asher’s agent was identified, then the Protectors who could shape-shift would do whatever was necessary—by any means possible short of physical harm—to stop the agent from releasing the cyberweapon.

All of us, and we were now in almost continuous telepathic communication, were trying hard to stay positive, to avoid offering thoughts about the many ways our simple plan could come apart.

Fiona headed into the Cairo airport immediately after we ended the telepathic connection with Michael. She found a flight to London and managed to get on at the last minute, and on her way, even before Michael returned to the plane from the pyramids. She landed several hours ago. Two other Protectors, Awakened monks from a small monastery near Glastonbury, met up with her and are now just outside the London headquarters of HSBC, one of the largest banks in the world.

Elle flew like a missile from Gulam/Yūsuf’s camp directly to the Riyadh airport where she took off in the other Devas Foundation jet. Elle was the only choice for her particular mission—infiltrating the Pentagon. She would be on her own. No other Protectors who can shape-shift were near enough to help her.

Anil and Ambika Gupta, and their father, all now with new identities, were already in Mumbai. They would soon infiltrate one of India’s largest banks, AXIS. Father Lupo/Brother Leo had already arrived in Brussels with the recently Awakened monk Brother Anthony. Their target was the NATO Headquarters cybersecurity group. Mr. Hyun was making his way from North Korea to Beijing to meet Grace, who had flown to Beijing from Tokyo, at the headquarters of the Great Firewall of China. Booker landed in New York and was already inside the New York Stock Exchange with Maggie, a Protector who lived at *Milliefiore*—away when it was destroyed and Jonathon kidnapped. Tillie and Audrey, Elle’s birth mother, were already in Norway, at one of the largest data storage facilities in the world. Even Mirabai and two of her advanced nuns had left their Topanga Canyon haven after years of unbroken solitude heading for Iowa.

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## Chapter 70

Fiona—London, 11:30 GMT

Gulam's target at HSBC's London headquarters was the servers that coordinate and communicate all the transactions—withdrawals and deposits—between HSBC branches and the thousands of other banks worldwide with which it does business. HSBC was the seventh-largest bank in the world. Disrupt that network and it would very quickly paralyze interbank transfers throughout the world—and then spread within every bank it reached. In its final phase it would encrypt all the data in all the systems it had infected. With the malware spreading from other directions as well—Banco do Brasil and AXIS in Mumbai—in less than a day no individual, company, corporation, or government will know how much money they have nor be able to access it. Worldwide commerce would come to a standstill.

Brother Anselm and Brother Pius, lovely souls from a cloistered monastery outside Glastonbury, could pick up on the thoughts of others but they couldn't shape-shift. They were now sitting with me in suits and ties that may once have fit them. We were in a reception area on the twenty-ninth floor, where the transactions staff work and the servers are located. Using contacts from my days robbing banks I had managed to get an appointment with the manager of this division to give a tour to Greville Malcolm—my assumed identity as Director of the Bank of Hong Kong's cyber-security division—and his two associates.

My dad and uncle were very surprised to hear from me but happy to have their man create all the credentials for us. I provided a picture of Greville Malcolm to use for the ID's. They weren't ready—probably never would be—to see their five foot nothing daughter and niece transform into a six foot man wearing a three-piece suit. I left them looking wistful for the old days and very curious about why I needed the IDs.

Mr. Wantage came out to the reception area at just after 11:30. After introductions all around, he led us through not one but two secure doors, at the second one of which we were thoroughly scanned and searched. After passing through security, we found ourselves in a sea of desks with maybe a hundred staffers working away. It was already 11:48. We had less than twelve minutes to suss out the agent. It could be any one of these staffers and all that one of them had to do was insert a USB flash drive into his computer, click a key or two, and the weapon would be irretrievably released. All the teams were praying that the agents would wait, as per Gulam's instructions, until exactly noon GMT to upload the weapon.

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## Chapter 71

Xu—Moscow, 11:40 GMT

Alekseev—a Protector I had spent most of a normal lifetime with over two thousand years in the past—and I had little time to get reacquainted. He'd led hundreds of souls all over Russia to their Awakening. He gave off a tranquil feeling of peace and safety—but he was unhesitatingly willing to plunge into a potential maelstrom of violence and paranoia. We were going into the Moscow headquarters of the FIS, Russia's equivalent of the CIA, formerly known as the KGB.

Alekseev was fearless and a past master at changing shape. We were going to need both. Our target was the department that oversaw cybersecurity—a department no doubt staffed by highly trained military hackers as well as by semi-reformed cyber criminals. How to distinguish our nefarious agent's thoughts from the cyber-criminals' thoughts was much on my mind.

We had shape-shifted several times and were now colonels. So far we'd passed through check points by virtue of rank and hard stares. We arrived at the final check point at 11:51, only to finally be denied entrance. Colonels or not, we were not on the list of personnel allowed in.

Time for a bluff: "You must immediately halt all activity. Someone in cybersecurity is about to upload CIA-malware that will cripple us!"

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## Chapter 72

Elle—Pentagon, Washington DC, 11:40 GMT

On my flight into D.C. I'd searched the internet and discovered the location of the U.S. Cyber Command's bunker—the destination of Yūsuf's agent. It was ten floors underground on the Southeast side. Amazing what you could find on the internet.

There was no time for stealth. Standing in one of the many enormous parking lots that surround the Pentagon I concentrated on a particular portion of the wall of the lowest floor. I created a force shield just inside the outer wall, then I blew the hell out of the outer wall. Michael would be pleased. The sound of the explosion was as loud as I could make it. It left three blue-uniformed staffers, whose desks had been against the now vanished wall, both unhurt and gaping in shock.

In minutes there were Military Police and emergency first responders gathering from both inside and outside the building. I joined the back of the crowd outside gawking at the wreckage and transformed as quickly as I could into an African-American in a military police uniform. Pushing through the crowd, I climbed up the pile of rubble and went through the exploded gap in the wall. No one gave me a second glance.

As I had hoped there was a lot of confusion. People were shouting questions. An alarm was blaring, signaling what I hoped was an emergency lockdown. Ignoring everyone, I headed for the elevator that should be less than thirty meters away. When I got near the elevator I waited—but didn't have to wait long. Three MPs came around a corner at a jog. I joined them, pretending to be as winded as they were. I nodded at them and they nodded back.

One of them inserted his security card into a panel, entered a password, stared into a retinal scanner, and when all lights flashed green he pressed the button for down. The door slid open and we all got in. Standard procedure was to send extra MPs to the most critical areas when there was any sign of an attack.

No one spoke on the way down. The doors opened at the bottom and a wall of voices hit me. We stepped out into a huge space shaped like a theater, facing a wall of screens six meters high and fifteen meters wide. Above the screens were a dozen clocks. The one for London read 11:52.

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## Chapter 73

Mirabai—Des Moines, Iowa, 11:35 GMT

“What do you mean no one called 911?”

Along with my two nuns, Chandra and Adina, we were posing as two EMTs and a paramedic responding to a 911 call about a heart attack. I had taken the form of a large sandy haired man; Chandra and Adina looked like, well, themselves, as they couldn’t shape-shift.

We rented a car at the airport, made our way to the southern outskirts of Des Moines, found a fire station, with only one guy manning it—now tied up and in a closet—stole uniforms and an emergency vehicle and—red light flashing and siren warbling—raced to Microsoft’s largest data center.

The data center had millions of square feet of servers that store data and run programming for millions of companies and government agencies. Because the center was sited near one of the largest fiber optic pathways in the world it could move petabytes of data every hour as well as constantly back up data from other server farms around the world. Gulam’s cyber weapon launched here could spread to any of thousands of other server farms in seconds—so Xu had told me.

We made our entry running and pushing a gurney on top of which were two red backpacks full of emergency gear. Though there had not been a 911 call, I counted on the security guard’s not being sure.

“Hey. We got a call. There is someone inside having a heart attack. You have to let us in.”

He looked indecisive and wanted to call someone, anyone, who would tell him what to do.

“Look guy, whoever made the call could be dying right now. Do you want it on your conscience that he died while you held us up?”

That did it. The only thing worse than having no one to tell him what to do was the thought that he could be responsible for something likely to be job-ending.

He waved us through the security arch, which of course beeped like crazy because the gurney was mostly metal. Getting into the spirit, he ran ahead of us showing us the way, shouting for the people at the next security point to let us through. Once through, we found ourselves in a broad passageway that revealed more doors and connecting passages. This place was huge.

“Take us where people work.”

Three security guards obligingly led Chandra, Adina, and myself away in three different directions.

We needed some way to make the agent reveal himself. With nothing to lose I sent a mental message to Chandra and Adina: \*when you see people, start shouting—‘where is Yūsuf’s flash drive,’ the agent isn’t going to answer, but keep your minds open for a mental reaction\*

My security guard and now guide took me at a fast walk to a large space full of desks. I startled my guide by shouting, “Where is Yūsuf’s flash drive!”

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## Chapter 74

Grace—Beijing, 11:39 GMT

There were many sudden bows and much surprise when Sun Chunlan, one of four Vice Premiers in China, arrived at the main door of the innocuous Beijing building that manages the Great Firewall of China. Despite the huge risk in impersonating Sun Chunlan, her highly recognizable face, seen often on Chinese television news, eliminated any need for me to show the identification I didn't have. The risk was huge because anyone could check and discover that the real Sun Chunlan was somewhere else.

Together with my assistant Mr. Hyun from North Korea, who now looked like one of millions of Chinese government minions, we were ushered through security in less than a minute.

"I must see the director right away."

China controlled the information Chinese residents could access through the internet by using internet routers to block banned IP addresses. Because of the enormous population of China, the people in this building directly controlled hundreds of thousands of routers. Releasing Gulam's weapon here was the fastest way to spread the virus to the millions of internet routers in the entire world. The last phase of Gulam's cyber strategy, just before destroying the electrical generation infrastructure, was to destroy as much of the internet infrastructure as possible starting with crippling all the routers.

The hastily summoned director, confused and wary, was very soon bowing before me. Bowing back just that little bit less low than the director, as our ranks dictated, I spoke quickly: "We have reason to believe that a Russian sleeper agent is going to release a cyberweapon into our internet router network within the next ten minutes."

Because I knew he would soon be asking himself why a Vice Premier would come in person to deliver such news, I gave him no time to think.

"Tell everyone in the building to immediately leave their workstations and gather outside the front doors. Do not let anyone leave once everyone is outside. Hurry. This must happen in minutes or your job will be forfeit."

He raced off and soon the staff began to race through the front reception area and into the street. I glanced at a clock and calculated the time at 11:50 GMT. The flow of people stopped gratifyingly quickly. The day shift had left hours ago. The evening shift was small in comparison.

I strode out the doors to confront a crowd of about forty people. I demanded, "Is this everyone? Is anyone missing?"

Instantly obeying such a high-ranking member of the Politburo they looked around at their fellows. A woman raised her hand, "I do not see Han He. He must not have come out yet."

I took three steps into the crowd, grabbed her wrist, and said, "Take me to his desk now. We must run."

Eyes wide she sped through the doors with me, my assistant Mr. Hyun, the director, and three security people hot on her heels. We ran down a long wide corridor until our guide darted through a door on the right. In the otherwise empty office, we saw one man sitting at his desk and leaning forward. In his hand was a flash drive.

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## Chapter 75

Mira—Sao Paulo, 11:50 GMT

Our landing had been delayed. Air traffic control had guided us into a holding pattern until we were finally given instructions to land. It was 11:31 GMT by the time we were on the ground. Not bothering to lower the stairs, Michael Had jumped out the door of the plane and raced for customs. It seemed impossible that he could get to Banco do Brasil in time.

Seeing nothing further I could do to help Michael I had tuned back into the mental discussion among the other Protectors—an ongoing group conversation with each one providing the others with updates on progress.

Previously there had been much discussion about when to get into final position. The consensus was that doing so too early risked covers being blown before the agent revealed himself—or even showed up. It was decided that the best time to pick up on the agent's thoughts would be in the tense few minutes before he was about to insert the flash drive. All Gulam's agents had strict instructions to release the cyberweapon at exactly noon GMT—not before, not after.

Now, at 11:50 GMT, every Protector—except Michael—was in position.

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## Chapter 76

Fiona—London, HSBC, 11:50

Brother Pius was the first to pick up on the agent's thoughts. The three of us being toured through a large open-office area by Mr. Wantage must have made our target especially nervous. Brother Pius walked toward him and said, "Jeremy? Is that you? I haven't seen you for ages!"

The nervous and now hard-eyed agent quickly spat out that he wasn't Jeremy. Pius continued up to him holding out a hand to shake, saying, "You could be Jeremy's twin. I could have sworn you were him." Brother Pius never stopped moving his hand as if still determined to shake hands. At the last instant his hand darted forward and snatched a flash drive out of not-Jeremy's hand. Brother Pius was definitely Protector material.

The agent rose aggressively. Brother Pius was no fool but he also wasn't trained in martial arts. He backed away quickly with the agent coming hard after him.

And I thought we might have gotten away cleanly.

To the astonishment of Mr. Wantage, and everyone else in the room, I leapt onto the desk in front of me, ran across two others, papers flying and their occupants shrieking indignation, and landed in front of the agent. He was determined—and well trained. Keeping my Protector's abilities hidden to avoid a lot of unanswerable questions, I was able to knock him unconscious with a foot strike. He dropped like a sack of potatoes. Mental congratulations filled my mind from several Protectors. We were the first team to succeed.

Security had been alerted and guards had come running. I mentally asked Brother Pius to give me the flash drive. While we stood near each other he was able unobtrusively to slip it into my hand. There had been much said mind-to-mind about the best way to destroy the flash drives to insure that not even the most meticulous forensic lab could recover anything from them. I chose to fry the one I had.

Amidst a lot of ongoing confusion and noise, I knelt down next to one of those brass plate electrical outlets you find in the floors of office buildings, placed the flash drive on it, and drew so many amps through it that a fuse blew—but not before I saw the flash drive glow and the plastic cover melt.

Smoke still rising from the electrocuted flash drive, Mr. Wantage and the guards, weapons drawn, invited us to come with them.

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## Chapter 77

Mirabai—Des Moines, Iowa, 11:51 GMT

“Where is Yūsuf’s flash drive,” now echoed through cavernous rooms as Chandra, Adina, and I shouted as loudly as we could. Fortunately the desks in the office areas were mostly empty; it was just before 7:00 am here, just before the end of the lightly staffed night shift. My guide was now looking at me with alarm. He reached for a phone. Good. It allowed me to keep shouting and scanning minds. No one in this area was reacting.

I touched minds with Chandra and Adina—they’d sensed nothing either. The facility was so huge we could be at this for hours—but we had only minutes. We needed to reach everyone immediately.

I needed help from my guide and I needed it now. Stepping toward him before he could move I placed one palm over his heart and flooded him with love. His entire being changed. He visibly relaxed and smiled at me without reservation. Later he would wonder what had happened to him. He would convince himself that the sandy haired paramedic hadn’t really done anything, that he had just decided to help. But some part of himself would never forget.

“We need to be able to reach everyone. Are there loud speakers or some other way to make announcements?”

“We can use the phone system to talk through every phone’s built-in speaker simultaneously.” Suiting action to words he grabbed the phone handset he’d just seconds ago put down, made several choices through a small screen on the phone, then spoke into the phone with a lot of gusto, “Where is Yūsuf’s flash drive!” The question reverberated throughout the facility.

I stood still and listened with my mind. I picked up on panic. I began to run toward it shouting back to my guide, “Keep announcing it!” Both Chandra and Adina’s thoughts flashed into my mind. They’d picked up on panic, too.

\*just head for where you think he is\*

I ran as directly as I could toward the now very strong panic thoughts. Chandra and Adina and I arrived in a dead heat at a set of double doors. Without breaking stride, we raced between rows of empty desks heading for the only three occupants in a giant room.

One of them reached toward his computer with something in his hand. No time to be sure. No time for subtlety. I pushed my arm forward palm out, sending a wave of life force that slammed into the man and catapulted him over the back of his chair. By the time the three of us were at his desk he was up and lunging toward his computer. This time I had the presence of mind to freeze him in place rather than send him sprawling again.

I pulled the flash drive from his fingers, set it on the floor and agitated its atoms so forcefully that it exploded in a bright flash of light that left fine bits of dust to settle to the floor.

Moments later a squad of security guards, guns drawn, raced into the area. The irony was not lost on me that we would be the ones arrested and taken to jail while the agent, who I finally and reluctantly released from my force-hold, would be thought an innocent victim of a bunch of crazy people.

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## Chapter 78

Xu—Moscow, FIS Headquarters, 11:52

The guard stared dumbfounded as we demanded to be let in to apprehend a CIA saboteur about to load malware into the heart of Russia's cyber-defense. Alekseev spoke with a grating voice so deep that it seemed to come from the center of the earth, "Comrade, you should listen to the colonel. Ignore this and you will end up collecting garbage someplace much colder than this. Listen to him and you will be a hero of the people with Putin's gratitude."

The thoughts churning through the poor guard's mind added up to disbelief. I flashed an image into Alekseev's mind. The easy way was no longer an option. Time for the hard way. Alekseev froze the guard just as he was about to say something, mouth half open. I took his weapon and Alekseev released his subtle hold.

We looked at each other, took a deep breath, and nodded. Alekseev blasted open the door and I prodded the guard through the ruined door with his own gun in his back.

I shouted, "Everyone will do as we say. If you do, no one will be hurt."

No one knew that we would never shoot anyone, that our power over them was pure bluff.

Inside the small room were two more guards and about twenty others. No fancy wall of screens. Just a collection of brilliant minds and open license to commit any cyber-crime they could dream up. I had probably tangled with more than one of these guys when we were securing the fifth force and taking down the Six.

Alekseev disarmed the two guards and made them lie face down on the floor. I prodded my hapless guard over to join them. I shouted for everyone else to stand and move to the nearest wall. They were calm and calculating. There were only two of us; many of them had military training.

"Listen to me. One of you is about to upload a huge payload of malware into your network. This malware will destroy all your cyber-defenses and leave you and all of Russia open to the worst cyber-attack ever planned."

I let my words sink in.

"You are the cream of Russian hackers. I'm willing to bet that you can tell me who it is. He probably joined your group less than a year ago. He was gone on a short trip very recently and returned yesterday or the day before. You've always suspected that he might be a mole for some other branch of FIS because he often acts oddly."

While I was saying all this, the hackers were looking at each other, speculating, and glancing at one man more than any other—hacker X. I concentrated on him and sensed concern but no fear. I knew I had next to no time left. The armed guards almost certainly on their way were likely to shoot Alekseev and myself on sight—colonel's uniforms or no colonel's uniforms.

I concentrated on hacker-X's thoughts and recognized a kind of elation. I saw an image in his mind that he had already inserted the flash drive in his computer and that he had programmed his computer to upload the data at exactly noon GMT. As I stared at him he began to smile. He knew we were down to seconds.

I walked nearer, pointed to hacker-X, and demanded, "Which one is this man's computer." Three hands pointed. Not a popular guy. His computer instantly burst into flames.

Hacker-X's smile died on his lips.

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Alekseev and I put the guards' guns down, our hands on top of our heads, and watched the computer burn with a decidedly unnatural and very hot flame.

We heard running feet even before our guards had recovered their guns.

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## Chapter 79

Elle—Pentagon, Cyber Command, 11:52

Scanning the command theater for the highest rank, I spotted a two-star general in conversation near the wall of screens. I made my way to him as fast as possible. I caught his attention and saluted.

Quickly checking his name badge I spoke, “Corporal Smyth, sir. General Soames, I have an urgent message for you from the DIA Deputy Director that this bomb was timed to divert attention from a likely attempt by a Chinese agent somewhere in this room to upload malware into our system that will compromise our entire cybersecurity.”

I had his attention. “I was sent to tell you this in person as there is a danger the Director’s message to you may have been intercepted.”

“What does the Director want me to do?”

“He wants you to tell everyone here to stand up and move away from all computers and computer stations and to remain standing until noon GMT.” I glanced at the clock, “That is in three minutes.”

He stared at me more than a little incredulously.

“Sir, he told me to tell you that if this doesn’t work he will buy you dinner at the finest restaurant in D.C., and that if it does work, he will buy you dinner at the finest restaurant in D.C.”

The merest hint of a smile crossed his face.

“All right everyone!” He shouted as one used to command and being heard, “I want you all to immediately stand up and move away from any computer or computer station. If you have a laptop I want it left where you can’t touch it.”

There was moment of motionless surprise until General Soames shouted, “Move it!”

I quickly glanced at the clock once more, 11:58 GMT. I began scanning for thoughts. The ones I’m looking for would be tinged with anger, maybe fear. Suddenly I picked up a thought from someone considering if he could get the flash drive inserted and uploaded before anyone could stop him. Then I saw him.

I pointed at him and shouted, “You there, freeze!”

His thoughts revealing that he was still undecided whether to make a desperate attempt or not, I gave him no choice. My pointing hand became a beckoning hand. He rose into the air, eyes darting around wildly. I guided him to land in front of me and plucked the flash drive from his hand.

Astonished silence was broken by a babble of voices. I raised both hands in the air while looking into the barrels of half a dozen automatics who owners were shouting at me to unholster my MP weapon and lay it on the ground.

Slowly lowering one hand to do as they ordered, in my other hand I created a bubble of force around the flash drive and melted it into slag.

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## Chapter 80

Mira—Sao Paulo, 11:59:48 GMT

Every team and every solo Protector was successful—but I’ve yet to catch any of Michael’s thoughts for the last five minutes.

Elle, Xu, Fiona, and Mirabai sent mental images of melting, glowing, and exploding flash drives.

Grace and Mr. Hyun were in time to catch their guy.

Father Lupo and Anthony got lucky and caught their man in the NATO cyber-command at 11:55.

Tillie and Audrey in Norway, posing as health and safety inspectors, found their highly agitated man in the first office they visited on their tour of inspection. Tillie distracted him and Audrey levitated the flash drive away and pocketed it. He didn’t realize it was gone until minutes after they had left his office area.

Booker and Maggie froze in place a room full of computer techs and simply searched them by hand. They found lots of flash drives. With no way to know which was the right one, they destroyed them all.

Anil and Ambika Gupta and their father got their flash drive but were at this moment standing with their arms up the air after having hurled some desks around.

I was anxiously waiting to get thoughts from Michael...

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## Chapter 81

Michael—Sao Paulo, 11:56 GMT

I had been in real danger of getting to Banco do Brasil too late. I'd boarded the helicopter at 11:40 GMT, having miraculously gotten through customs in mere minutes.

Before leaving the plane I'd gotten into our emergency money stash. Bribes are often more effective than stealth or guile. The first thing I did once we were airborne was to show the pilot a wad of American dollars. "A thousand dollars for the fastest run to the bank you've ever made."

"Senhor, as you can see, there are many, many helicopters in the air. There are strict rules about flight speeds and right of way."

I had expected such an answer. Sao Paulo traffic was the worst in the world; anyone who could afford it commuted to work in a helicopter. Helicopters in Sao Paulo are like taxis in New York. At any given time there were hundreds in the air driving "roads" in the sky.

Again waving the wad of money at him I said, "Two thousand dollars."

Two thousand didn't tempt him. I upped my offer, "Ten thousand dollars."

He wavered slightly but then pulled back. "Breaking the rules could cost me my license. I would lose my job."

I was running out of time and offered him all I had. "Twenty thousand dollars."

His eyes brightened. "OK, senhor."

He put the nose of the helicopter down and went full speed. Staying low, he threaded his way between high rises rather than risk collisions with helicopters flying the proper routes well above the buildings.

We reached the bank at 11:56. There was another helicopter already on the helipad. "I am sorry, senhor, but we must wait."

I handed him the twenty thousand dollars, opened the door, and dove out.

This was truly a leap of faith. I'd never before been able to duplicate Elle's feats of levitation. Now I had no choice. Concentrating on the entry way to the bank just off the helipad I willed myself there. To my astonishment, I was flying. The few seconds it took to reach the entry gave me no time to wonder how. I landed on my feet, ran hard at the door and slammed it open.

Two people were standing in line putting their bags on a conveyor to get them scanned. Not slowing down, I ran straight through the scanner arch and five meters beyond before the guard had time to shout.

Mira had coached me on the layout of the bank building. Twenty meters beyond the security point was a bank of elevators and a door to the stairs. I flung open the door and raced down the stairs, vaulted the rail to the next flight of stairs below, took a few more steps and vaulted the rail to the next flight of stairs below. I had twenty stories to go. By the time I reached the twenty-second floor I was almost in free fall.

I burst out onto the twenty-second floor and ran to my left, heading for the unit that oversees international wire transfers. I came to the entry door, yanked the door off its hinges, and ran full speed into a large open office space shouting, "Quem tem o flash drive!"

It was just before 9:00 am. The office was full. A madman was shouting, "Who has the flash drive!" Mouths gaped. On one wall was the typical line of large clocks that one sees when international business was conducted. These were digital. London read 11:59:20.

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Out of ideas, I simply kept shouting. “I know who you are. Give yourself up.” All eyes were on me. All but one pair. The agent gave himself away; he was the only person not looking at me. Intent on his computer, he seemed to be pulling his hand back from the front of his computer and moving his hands toward keyboard and mouse.

As he stared in shocked disbelief, his entire computer rocketed toward the ceiling dangling torn cables, mouse and keyboard. Catching the computer out of the air, I saw that the flash drive had in fact been inserted, pulled it out, and with a power I did not know I possessed, crushed it in my hand with such force that it flattened like a coin on a rail run over by a locomotive.

I glanced at the clock. It ticked over to 12:00:01. I let out a huge breath.

Finally I could tune in to the other Protectors and feel their jubilation. I had destroyed the last of Gulam’s cyberweapon flash drives. Relief flooded through us all.

When soon after four guards showed up, I was standing quietly, hands on top of my head, waiting to be arrested. Many of the other Protectors were about to be arrested, being arrested, or being marched away at gunpoint. I felt wryly amused that despite dozens of guns pointed at us everyone exulted in our mission accomplished.

Suddenly my amusement vanished; understanding struck like lightning. Less than a minute after our mission accomplished, exultation turned to dread.

\*it’s a trap!\* I shouted into the combined minds of all the Protectors. \*It’s a trap; check the thoughts of the guards; we’re all about to be shot!\*

I turned to see one of the guards raising his gun to fire. I moved a fraction before he pulled the trigger. The impact of the bullet in my right lung knocked me to the floor. I felt the sensation of sudden suffocation. Despite the shock I managed to telekinetically knock the guard’s gun from his hand. If I hadn’t moved, the bullet would have struck my heart and I would now be dead.

I was able to heal myself more quickly than ever before—revealing a new depth of power I am just beginning to recognize—and I tuned into the others the moment I could concentrate on their thoughts. Jubilation had given way to horror. In my mind’s eye I could see rapidly moving, superimposed images; guards, guns, and Protectors being shot. Overlapping waves of pain struck me as if they were the very bullets that had caused them. In the midst of so much confusion, so many bodies in pain, so many minds suddenly gone from our telepathic meld, I had no idea who survived—if anyone.

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## Chapter 82

Jonathon

Asher stormed into my prison. The children fled to the bedroom.

He was in a towering rage. “Your Protectors stopped my cyberweapon! And some of them escaped my trap!”

With a look of dark malevolence he attacked my mind. The sensation went beyond pain. It was as if every nerve in my body were on fire. I could not move. Every muscle was in spasm, my lungs paralyzed, my heart squeezed in a vice.

Shrieking, Asher lashed out and slapped me. His blow knocked me to the ground but it wasn’t enough for him. He wanted to make me suffer. He spoke with venom, “Your Protectors *will* die and it will be because of you. When they come to rescue you they will fall into a trap that this time none can escape. I will enjoy slowly destroying their minds. They have cost me control over the all the world’s banks—something I planned for three hundred years. I will have my revenge!”

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## Chapter 83

### Michael—Somewhere Over the Atlantic

It had all been an elaborate trap with Gulam's cyberweapon the bait. The real purpose of the threat of Gulam's weapon was to draw as many Protectors as possible to exact locations at the exact same time—so that Asher would know precisely where and when to have each one of us killed.

Asher's twistedly brilliant plan was to be his revenge on the Protectors for breaking up the Six. If the cyberweapon had been released it would have been icing on his cake. But Asher's real aim had been to draw us out, to us force us to expose ourselves, so his people could kill us.

We had unwittingly done everything in our power to show up in all the right places at the right time. We would have done so even had we known it was a trap—but we would not have paid the price we did. Of the twenty-two Protectors, nineteen had been shot. Ambika Gupta and her father died. Shot with automatic weapons there were simply too many wounds for them to heal. Anil is heartbroken. Brother Pius, mortally wounded, was too far gone to respond to Fiona's efforts to heal him. Mirabai, leaping in front of Chandra to shield her, was hit directly in the heart. There had been no time to heal herself or to be healed. She was dead before she hit the ground. Xu and Alekseev were both shot in the back of the head. Alekseev died but Xu's wound wasn't instantly fatal. Only moments from death, Xu managed to heal enough of the bleeding in his brain to give himself a chance.

At least one and sometimes two of the civilian or military guards that had arrested us were Asher's assassins. He must have carefully arranged for them to be in position for months before the final day. Had we not all become so closely linked in the final stages of destroying the flash drives, Asher's plan might have resulted in nearly all of us dying.

The assassins pretending to be guards were in most cases subdued by the legitimate guards, appalled to see their peaceful and voluntarily surrendering prisoners shot in cold blood. The assassins made no effort to be stealthy, secure in the assurance that strings would be pulled to get them out of prison.

We lost five protectors, six if you count Andrew, shot when Jonathon was kidnapped. Had Asher known that protectors could rapidly heal themselves the count would likely have been much higher; he would no doubt have ordered his assassins to cause maximum damage. As it was, fourteen of us remained conscious long enough to heal our own wounds. Whether subsequently taken to jail or to the hospital, all of us eventually escaped.

We'd lost many dear friends and wanted to mourn—but that had to wait.

Now it was time to find Jonathon.

Now it was time for Asher's reckoning.

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## Chapter 84

### Xu—Baku

I couldn't wait to get out of the cesspool of Colonel Vüqar's mind. There were no vices he didn't embrace, no sadistic acts he would not gladly perform.

Dispassionately I understood that even the colonel, through many incarnations, would in time find his way to harmony, but I was finding it difficult to feel compassion for the present man. Currently enjoying his lunch in an upscale Baku restaurant while I searched his mind from another table, Vüqar was looking forward with pleasure to an afternoon of torture and interrogation of one of his own men whom he suspected of betrayal.

Colonel Vüqar was one of a small handful lured into loyal service to Asher by enormous wealth and power in the present—and the promise of immortality. Although the colonel saw an endless future reveling in his own depraved desires, with the paranoid and ruthless Asher as his boss, I doubted his enjoyment would last as long as he thought.

I'd followed him to the Baku restaurant from the National Security Ministry building that I'd escaped from only days before. As repellent as it was to be in his mind I was learning a lot about Asher's hidden base of operations.

Asher's base was built during the cold war. In the fifties and sixties, in case of nuclear war, the Soviets had moved all their command and control functions into hardened facilities deep underground. Asher's wide-ranging influence enabled him to take over one: Asher's underground domain was one hundred feet beneath the streets of Baku.

I was over some of it right now.

This was not as crazy as it may sound. The location gave Asher the ability to come and go without attracting attention. There was access to electricity, water, and communications—and all trace of their use was hidden by the Azerbaijani ministries that Asher controlled through his proxies. The comings and goings of men and supplies that would be out of place in a rural area were commonplace in a big city like Baku.

From Colonel Vüqar's memories I learned that the underground bunker included living space for about eighty people and included kitchens, dining rooms, entertainment rooms, and gyms. I also saw that the bunker was astonishingly dull and drab. For all Asher's power, he chose to live in a concrete-walled cave. Everything I saw from Colonel Vüqar's mind's eye was as utilitarian as a storage room.

Discipline was harsh. Most of the men who did the cooking and cleaning—there were no women—were virtual prisoners, made to work under threat of harm to their families. I knew from Colonel Vüqar's mind that their families were already dead and that death would be their eventual fate as well.

Security was tight. Entrances were guarded night and day and only opened when credentials were presented and the right password given. The farther one ventured into the complex the more stringent security became—retinal and palm print scanners, voice recognition systems, frequently changing passwords, security questions the answers to which only that one person could know.

That was the bad news. The good news was that Colonel Vüqar designed the security system—and he'd already, unknowingly, revealed to me its weaknesses.

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## Chapter 85

### Michael—Baku

We are ready.

After days of planning and preparation it was time to confront Asher.

Standing in front of an elevator door, I put my eye to the retinal scanner. The doors slid open. Pressing the down button took us ten floors beneath Baku.

Two guards were waiting outside the elevator door. Clearly they were not expecting us. In the brief moment of surprise Elle froze one of them and I the other. We disarmed them, shoved them into their security station and slammed the door on them. Elle melted the lock. It would take a welding torch to get them out.

As we expected an alarm began to blare. Through the bullet-proof glass we could see the two guards talking on phones and spreading the news—news that would soon reach Asher. We waited outside the security station. We weren't in a hurry. We wanted to give Asher plenty of time to get to his main control room to monitor our progress through his security cameras.

After a few minutes I nodded to Elle and we began walking toward Asher's lair. We soon reached a huge pair of still-closing, foot-thick blast doors capable of withstanding the shock of a nuclear explosion. We waited for them to close fully. As a show of force for Asher's benefit, Elle slammed them open again with such power that I felt the impact reverberate through my whole body.

We proceeded in a leisurely fashion. Each time we encountered a security camera we waved. Each time we encountered a solid steel security door Elle, ignoring Asher's retinal scanners and key card slots, opened it with a wrenching screech. Occasionally we encountered guards. Now on alert, they had taken defensive positions. We didn't care. Elle had us surrounded in a force shield. Their bullets bounced off. When we could see them I disarmed them, bent or crushed their weapons, shoved them into the nearest room, and disabled the door mechanism.

We wanted it abundantly clear nothing could stop us from reaching Asher.

One more door to go. With another wrenching screech this door not only opened but fell forward into a room with a slam.

We'd reached Asher's inner sanctum.

A half dozen guards let loose with automatic weapons. Spent bullets rained from Elle's force shield while one by one I destroyed their weapons. The last bullet hit the floor. The last shell casing stopped bouncing. The guards were frozen by Elle's magic skill. The alarm went silent in a flourish of our abilities.

We turned to look at Asher. He was standing by himself with a look of fear and awe on his face. Across the room his security screens showed us standing just inside his door. He had watched our slow but inexorable progress. Two unarmed people had gotten into what he must have thought was an impregnable fortress. His personal guards were immobilized, their weapons destroyed. There was no shouts. No running feet of guards coming to his rescue.

But Asher still had one last card to play. Standing not far from him was Jonathon holding the hands of two children.

Regaining a bit of confidence he spoke with as much scorn as he could muster, "I know you won't kill me. Your foolish ethical concerns leave you weak and easy to manipulate. You will do

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anything to save the lives of even these two worthless children. As you know I can instantly kill them with my mind.”

“Go ahead.”

My comment left him perplexed. I think it was the last thing he had expected me to say.

“You don’t believe I will do it?” With a strange growling sound of rage he turned and stared at one of the children.

Nothing happened.

He stared at the other child.

Nothing happened.

Then he froze in shock as the two children transformed into Xu and Fiona.

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## Chapter 86

### Jonathon—Baku

It had taken days to make the substitutions and get the children to safety. With Colonel Vüqar's unwitting help, Xu had been able to take over the security system for the entire complex. The guards in the security control rooms had seen only what Xu had wanted them to see. Michael, Elle, Xu, and Fiona had been able to come and go and move about freely without detection. At one time or another they had impersonated nearly every guard in this underground maze.

Not long before now, Fiona and Xu had incapacitated the off-shift guards that Asher obviously had expected to come to his rescue once the alarm was blaring. The cooks and cleaners, told as compassionately as possible that their families had been killed, were sent to the surface and told to get as far away from Baku as they could.

Realizing the completeness of his defeat, Asher shrieked with rage and turned his mind on me. I stood calmly. Asher's face became ashen and he drooped in sudden defeat when he saw that his most powerful mental strike, usually agonizing, had no effect.

"I let you inflict your torment on me to hide our powers from you. You could never touch my mind unless I allowed it. Your mental powers are nothing compared to mine or theirs." I gestured toward the collected Protectors.

Asher's face fell. Speechless with shock he realized that, for the first time in thousands of years, he was completely helpless. In this moment all his plans, all his schemes, all his levers of power were useless to him.

I walked over and stood in front of him.

Into my voice I put as much compassion as Asher could tolerate. "Brother, power over others will never give you what you want. And the cost, brother, the cost. You live every minute of your life in fear. You hide in a hole in the ground to protect yourself. You constantly worry that your confederates will overthrow you. There is no one who would feel the least sorrow if you were to die tomorrow. Your quest for power over everything has left you with nothing."

Asher's eyes blazed. "You have no idea what it is like to have power. With a word I can cause a government to fall. With another I can begin a war. I control thousands of people who do my bidding like puppets on strings. Real power is beyond anything you can understand."

"Oh, I understand far more about power than you are willing to believe. I also know that you are like a clenched fist that never lets go. Your heart is so hard you've no feeling left. Not even your senses give you pleasure. You've squeezed out of yourself every last ounce of humanity. You have lost every last thing that could bring you any fulfillment. You don't realize that no amount of power will ever be enough to satisfy you."

A brief flash in Asher's eyes betrayed his fear that I could be right. For an instant he wavered, but only for an instant. He spat out, "Do you think I am a fool? You will never change me—and I know you will never harm me."

Not answering Asher, I spoke to the others, "In the long hours of my confinement I have considered what to do with him. There is no prison in the world in which he could be confined. He has too many strings he could pull to be released. We could confine him but we are too kind to be jailors. Someone of us would take pity on him and he would escape."

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“He will stop at nothing to gain power. He was willing to cause the death of billions simply to get revenge on you. He is too dangerous for this world. I’m afraid I have no other choice.”

There was a long silence as I looked long and lingeringly into the eyes of Michael, Elle, Xu, and Fiona. I wanted them to understand how deeply I had considered what I should do.

“Michael, you must take my place. You’ve grown. You’re ready.”

Michael’s eyes widened a fraction in understanding.

I turned back to Asher. “I will show you what you refuse to understand, what you cannot believe. It’s past time for us both to go.”

We left this world in two brilliant flashes of light.

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## Chapter 87

### Michael—Milliefiore

Though nothing had been planned, nothing precisely communicated, over the last two weeks, Protectors, some of whom I'd never met, some I never even knew existed, had come to the cavern below the ruins of *Milliefiore* to meditate together and drink in the healing balm of the amethysts. Drawn together by the pain of losing Jonathon, Mirabai, and the other Protectors, we remained motionless, sometimes for days together.

At times we withdrew to the glassed-in workshop to greet people sometimes not seen in thousands of years. Chairs were gathered in a circles. Reminiscences of Jonathon, Mirabai, Andrew, Brother Pius, Alekseev, and the Guptas were shared. There was laughter and always love. Pictures of many astonishing feats from our last mission, gone viral, were shared with wry amusement; we collectively relaxed in the knowledge that none of those pictures could be tracked back to us. Old friends were hugged and appreciated with new-found depth. Rents in the fabric of the Protectors caused by the loss of so many dear friends had been quietly mended.

I had used some of the time to quietly set a few things in motion. Audrey had agreed to oversee the rebuilding of *Milliefiore*—who better than Botticelli to bring it back to beauty? Booker will run the financial side of the Devas Foundation. Chandra, though still grieving the loss of her spiritual mother, will take over the care and training of Mirabai's nuns. Rabi'a will find Gulam and try to restore him to peace. To Elle I suggested that while Audrey rebuilt *Milliefiore* we take an extended tour of the world to meet Protectors. With Jonathon gone someone needed to know them all. Fiona might come along. Xu was happy to remain at the Dyson Center.

Today, after two weeks of holding vigil, by unspoken agreement all of us went out to meditate with the amethysts one last time—important responsibilities could not be put off indefinitely. Looking with astral eyes at the amethysts emerging from their cascading pools I marveled once more at the ribbons of purple and azure light flowing over us and binding us together. This unplanned vigil had restored us at our core. I slipped deep into meditation.

A light began to shine inside my mind. It grew brighter. I opened my eyes. Before me a tableau grew slowly, gradually encompassing us all, transmuting us into astral form. We were no longer physical—and no longer on earth.

We were now sitting in a meadow of delicately glowing grass. Around us grew flowers of indescribable beauty, each one perfect, each lit from within, some changing colors in rhythm with the deep pulse of joyous celestial sound that permeated everything. In the distance I could see opalescent lakes, sparkling snow-clad mountains, an azure sky effulgent with its own light.

I recognized my surroundings. I think many of us did. This was a gathering place for Protectors on their sojourns between lives. Many had risen and were walking slowly among the flowers, drinking in their heavenly scents. A few enjoyed the perfect freedom of movement that comes when no longer limited by the physical body. They twirled like dancers or simply floated.

Without fanfare, Jonathon, Mirabai, Andrew, Brother Pius, Alekseev, and father and daughter Gupta appeared in our midst. They were radiant—exchanging smiles and embraces with everyone. Words were unnecessary. Thoughts flew back and forth with quicksilver speed.

Wandering slowly amongst the milling Protectors, Jonathon and Mirabai eventually joined Elle, Fiona, Xu, and myself.

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“You have grown Michael, you are more than ready to lead the Protectors. When you were able to materialize in the Chamber of Projection, you passed a great test, your ability to manipulate matter will increase rapidly, your healing powers as well. It will be your powers of mind that will improve the most. You need no pyramid to help you now.”

Jonathon had shared his thoughts with all four of us. Elle gazed at me in speculation. When Jonathon finished she asked him, “Will you return?”

“No, my time on earth has come to a close. I have learned all that I can. Atri and Atria want Mirabai and me to serve here now.”

Xu noticed Andrew and Pius standing in a small group. Mirabai caught his thought. “They, along with Alekseev, Ambika and her father will return very soon to serve once again as Protectors. Even now they are making pacts with friends to be born as their children.”

I looked at Jonathon hesitantly wondering if I should ask. Mirabai smiled, conveying loving understanding. “Ask, he wants to tell you, and you should know.”

Jonathon answered my half-formed question before I could ask: “Asher’s redemption will be slow. I have shown him the highest heavens and the lowest hells. I have demonstrated to him power beyond his imagining. He has been surrounded by the love of archangels. Only he can choose to let go of his desire for domination or pursue it still. At least for now he is not on earth.”

I glanced at Elle, Fiona, and Xu, “We will miss you—and your wisdom.”

“Mirabai and I will always be here for you, there are no boundaries for us.”

Soon, too soon, the light began to fade. The last exchanges were made—mind-to-mind and heart-to-heart. The astral scene appeared to be moving away, becoming smaller and smaller until it vanished. Though the astral light from the amethysts continued to entwine and bless us, we were physical once more.

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### About the Author

A dedicated meditator for nearly fifty years, he has taught yoga, meditation, and universal experiential spirituality throughout the US and Europe. He has also been an avid follower of the unfolding new paradigm of post-materialistic science—with groaning bookshelves to show for it—and he is known for creating bridges of understanding between the modern evidenced-based discoveries of science and the ancient experience-based discoveries of the mystics.

Selbie has also authored *The Physics of God*, a unification of science and religion, *Break Through the Limits of the Brain*, the neuroscience of spiritual experience, and *The Yugas*, a factual look at India's tradition of cyclical history.

Selbie is a founding member of Ananda—a meditation-based community and spiritual movement inspired by Paramhansa Yogananda. He lives with his wife at Ananda Village near Nevada City, California.

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