Truth
by Robert Reed

The author tells us " 'Truth' is a companion piece to 'Veritas' (July 2002). When I started working on it, I assumed that it would neatly parallel the first story's plot: a small group of invaders from the future hellbent on conquering a more primitive world; but that vision was soon thrown under the bus. And, as so often happens when I am enjoying a project, stuff happens that is as surprising to me as I hope it is to my audience. This is also the first story I've written while linked to Wikipedia. My research there and elsewhere on the Internet has probably been noticed by government software." 1

Three days later, I still hadn't met our prisoner. But I had invested nearly sixty hours watching what seemed to be a gentle life that revolved around old novels and classic movies. I took note of his postures and motions, and I tried gauging his reactions to what he was seeing on the page and screen. But most interesting to me were those occasional moments when he did nothing but stare off in some empty direction. I wouldn't let myself guess what he was thinking. But the black eyes would open wide, and the handsome features would quickly change their expression. Smiles lasted longer than frowns, I noticed. I saw flashes of pity and scorn, mild embarrassment and tight-lipped defiance. A few staff members volunteered opinions about the prisoner's mind. He was reflecting on his childhood, some offered. Others claimed he was gazing into our shared past or the looming future. But what I focused on was an appealing and graceful face that moved effortlessly between emotions—the well-honed tools of the consummate actor.

Twice each day, the prisoner was ushered into a long exercise yard built specifically for him. His gait was always relaxed, long arms swinging with a metronome's precision and the elegant hands holding five-pound weights, shaped like dog bones and covered with soft red rubber. I thought of an aging fashion model marching on the runway, except he lacked a model's wasted prettiness or the vacuous gaze. He was endlessly pleasant to whichever guard was standing at the locked door. I paid close attention to his attempts at conversation, his words less important than his charming tone and the effortless, beguiling smiles. Most of the staff was under orders to never speak with the man, which made for intriguing games of will. Somehow he had learned each guard's first name, and he wasn't shy about using what he knew. "How's this day of ours, Jim?" he might ask. "Is it the best day ever? Or is just me who thinks this way? Feel the sunshine. Listen to these birds singing. Doesn't this kind of morning make you happy to your bones, Jim?"

There was no sun underground, and there were no birds to hear. But after twelve years and five months of captivity, one man seemed to be absolutely thriving.

I watched the five daily prayers, the salat. But I didn't intrude when the prisoner used the bathroom or shower. (Let others record what he washed and wiped. I could check the database later, if I found reason.) While he slept, I sipped coffee and kept passing tabs on his snoring and the busy dreaming brain. Delicate instruments buried inside his Tempur-pedic mattress tried to convince me that they provided a window into that unknowable soul. But there were no insights, of course. That's why those nights were opportune times to pick my way through an endless array of summaries and reports, clinical data and highly intelligent, utterly useless speculation.

A favorite teacher once told me that our bodies are epics full of treachery and important residues. That's why I turned again and again to the medical data. Samples of the prisoner's fluids and flesh and his thick black hair had been digested and analyzed by a laboratory built for no other purpose. Three thousand

years of medical science struggling to turn meat and bone into a narrative that I could understand. But in most cases, my subject's DNA was remarkably unremarkable—save for a few dozen novel genes tucked into the first and fifth and nineteenth chromosomes, that is. The dental evidence was unusual, but not remarkably so. The first x-rays had revealed an old break in the right wrist that never healed properly. Later, more intrusive examinations had found an assortment of microscopic features that might mean much, unless they were meant to mislead. Only a handful of qualified experts had been allowed to examine that body in full; yet even those few voices managed to produce a chorus of contradictory opinions about the man's nature and origins. Was our prisoner telling the truth about his birth and life? And if not, from where did he come and what could he possibly represent?

Of course those medical masters were shown only a nameless patient and a carefully trimmed, strategically incomplete biography.

In a dozen years, only nine people had been given full access to every transcript, test result, and digital image. I was one of the nine, or so I had been promised. One can never feel too certain about a government's confidences, particularly when it involves its deepest, most cherished secret.

The prisoner was known as Lemonade-7.

That designation was entirely random. But the copious records showed that yes, he was given that drink once, and after two sips he said, "Too sour," and ordered that it was never to be brought to him again.

"Ramiro" was the name he went by. And for reasons that might or might not be significant, he had never offered any surname.

"So what about Ramiro?" Jefferson asked.

"What do you mean?"

"When will you actually get to work on him?"

"That's what I'm doing," I replied.

Jefferson was the prison's CIA administrator. This had been his post from the beginning, which was remarkable. In any normal operation, he would have been replaced by a sequence of ambitious, usually younger types. New guards and fresh staff would have come and spent their allotted time and then gone away again. But that would have swollen the pool of individuals who knew too much about matters that didn't exist, and what the public had never suspected would have soon leaked out into the world.

"I realize you're doing work," Jefferson said. "But are you ever going to talk to Ramiro?"

"Actually, I'm speaking to him now."

Jefferson was a short, squat fellow with thinning brown hair and a close-cut beard that turned to snow years ago. His files gave the portrait of an officer who had been a success at every stage of his professional life. Running this prison was an enormous responsibility, but until last week, he seemed to be in complete control. Then events took a bad, unexpected turn, and maybe more than one turn, and the stress showed in his impatient voice and the irritability that seeped out in conversation and during his own prolonged silences.

Jefferson glared at me, then looked back at the monitors.

"Okay," he whispered. "You're speaking to him now."

“In my head,” I said. Looking at Jefferson, I used my most ingratiating smile. “I’m practicing. Before I actually go in there, I want to feel ready.”

“You’ve had five days to prepare,” he reminded me.

Circumstances put a timetable on everything. Two days had been allotted to a full briefing, and then I was brought here, and for three days I had enjoyed the freedoms and pressures of this ultra-secure compound.

“Collins went straight in,” said Jefferson.

Collins was a certified legend in my little business.

“Right into Ramiro’s cell and started talking with him.” That was twelve years ago, but Jefferson still had to admire what my colleague had accomplished.

“He also stopped the torture,” I mentioned.

Jefferson shook his head. “He liked claiming that, I know. But everything about the interrogation was my call. I’m the one who put an end to the cold rooms and sleep deprivation.”

I offered a less-than-convinced nod.

“And by the way,” he continued, “I was responsible for bringing Collins in from the Bureau.”

“I guess I’d read that,” I admitted.

“And I just happen to be the hero who let your colleague work however he wanted, whatever method he thought was best, and fuck those hundred thousand orders that Washington was giving us then.”

The old bureaucrat still had a belly full of fire and bile. He offered a very quick, completely revealing grin, sitting back in his chair while thinking hard about past glories.

“But you didn’t select me, did you?”

“I guess not,” he said.

“Collins picked me,” I said. “Last year, wasn’t it? Not that anybody told me, of course. But in case he couldn’t serve anymore, I was his first choice as a replacement.”

Jefferson shifted his weight, saying nothing.

“I’ll grant you, the candidate list is short. But you’d have to admit, I’m rather well regarded.”

Jefferson shrugged.

“If you want,” I mentioned, “I can suggest a viable candidate to replace me. In the event you lose all faith in my methods.”

He was tempted. I saw it in his face, particularly in the sly smile.

“But that would mean more delays,” I warned. “And I doubt if my replacement would be as effective as me.”

“You’re a cocky gal, aren’t you?”

“It has been said.”

“Help you get ahead, does it?”

“It helps keep me sane, mostly.”

Jefferson turned away, staring at the largest screen. The prisoner was sitting at his desk, reading Jane Austen in Portuguese. The date and time were fixed in the bottom right corner: August 5th, 2014. Three minutes after three in the afternoon.

“Before I go in there,” I began.

“Yeah?”

“Tell me about the first days,” I said. “Before you brought in Collins. Right after Ramiro was caught . . . what was your mood, early on?”

“My mood?” His smile grew bigger and sourer, wrapped around a painful memory. “You can imagine what I was thinking. March 2002, Osama was still the big monster, and some stateless warrior slips across the Canadian border with five kilos of bomb-grade U-235. That’s what I was thinking about. But his luck hit a stretch of black ice in Montana, and the state trooper found his Maxima flipped on its back, this bastard behind the steering wheel, unconscious.”

I had seen hundreds of images of the crash scene.

“The man’s fingerprints were unknown. His passport and identity were quality fakes, but we couldn’t tell which foreign power had done the work. Nobody knew who he was. Al Qaeda, or Iraqi, or was he something else? All we knew was that, at the very least, our prisoner was part of somebody’s A-bomb project.”

“You needed to know everything, and as fast as possible.”

“How many like this guy were there?” Jefferson turned in my direction, but never quite made eye contact. “And would his associates be happy hitting New York or Washington? Or did they have more terrible targets in mind?”

I found it interesting: The person most familiar with the full story was still jolted with a simple replay of known events. Jefferson tensed up as he spoke about that heavy lump of gray metal, shaped like a cannon ball and hidden by the spare tire.

“We didn’t know anything,” he continued, “but it was obvious our man was the biggest trophy in the ongoing war. That’s why another Maxima and a compliant corpse were rolled off that Montana highway, the crash restaged and the wreckage burned up. It was treated like an ordinary accident. Now our prisoner had a good reason to miss his next clandestine rendezvous, wherever than might be. Because he was officially dead.”

“You unleashed a lot of specialists,” I said. “Working their delicate magic on his stubborn corpse.”

Jefferson didn’t like my tone.

“You had to make the call,” I continued. “The stakes seemed treacherously high. The proverbial fuse was burning down.”

“Don’t give me that attitude,” Jefferson warned. “Your career has seen its share of hard interrogations.”

I admitted, “It has,” without hesitation. “And believe me, I will never question those early decisions.”

What was the point now, after all?

Jefferson heard resignation where none was offered, and because he was a good career officer, he made his features soften.

“A frustrating subject, the records say.”

“He was.”

“Hard interrogations and potent drugs, in tandem. But how much good did all that do?”

He didn’t answer.

I asked, “So who figured it out first?”

“Figured what out?”

“Ramiro’s list,” I said.

With only his eyes, Jefferson smiled. “It’s all in the files.”

“I don’t always believe what I read.”

“No?”

“But here’s my understanding of the story,” I said, leaning forward. “For five months, that man was abused relentlessly. Every half-legal method was applied to him, often several at once. Then you brought in a fresh crew—old KGB hands, as I understand it—who brought tricks that made everybody feel Hell’s breath. And what did you get in the end? Nothing. Your prisoner gave us nothing. He didn’t offer any name. He didn’t even utter an intelligible word. He screamed on occasion, sure. But only after his elbows were pulled from their joints. And the curses weren’t in any known language.”

I paused, waiting.

Jefferson said nothing.

“And then one day, when his arms were working again, he motioned to his interrogators. He indicated that he wanted a paper and a pen. And when those items were delivered, he filled several pages with letters and numbers—peculiar looking to the untrained eye, if not out-and-out bizarre.”

The original list was sitting in an important vault. I pulled out one of the three copies that had been made since, the writing neat and legible, with a few artistic flourishes, particularly in the 5s and Ts.

“So tell me,” I said. “Who figured this puzzle out?”

Jefferson named one of his staff. Then he quietly reminded me, “It’s all in the records.”

“No,” I said. “I think the genius was you.”

Surprise turned to wary pleasure. With a smug little wink, he asked, “How could it be me?”

“Because you would have gotten the first look at his list. And you’re a bright, bright fellow with a lot of hobbies. I know that because I’ve checked your files too. I think what happened is that something he wrote jogged a leftover memory from your school days. In particular, from astronomy class. The first

sequence in each line is obviously a position in the sky, if you know the subject. But it takes a bigger leap to realize that the second sequence is a date."

"It took me five minutes," he boasted.

"Easy to do, as long as you understand that the dates are based on the Islamic calendar. The significance of both notations, taken together, would have been answered on maybe a dozen websites. But that answer was crazy. And it left you with a much bigger puzzle sitting inside a cold, cramped cell. Even the earliest dates on Ramiro's list occurred after his incarceration. And each one marked the day and position of a supernova bright enough to be noticed by earthbound astronomers."

Jefferson put his arms around his chest and squeezed, shaking his head with an enduring astonishment.

"You were the one, weren't you?"

He admitted, "Yes."

"But you didn't trust your insight," I suggested.

"Like you said. It looked crazy."

"So in a very general fashion, you told your subordinate to see if the list might just have something to do with the sky. Because you're a smart player, and if your wild idea didn't pan out, you wouldn't be held accountable."

Jefferson knew better than to respond.

"And how long did you have to wait?" I asked. "Before the next supernova sprang into existence precisely where it was supposed to be?"

"You know."

"Seven days," I answered. "And that's when you were certain. Sitting in the cold room was something far more dangerous than a few pounds of uranium. Somehow our terrorist, or whatever he was, knew the future. Against all reason, Ramiro could predict celestial events that nobody should be able to anticipate in advance."

Tired, satisfied eyes closed and stayed closed.

"That's when you went out and found Collins. An entirely different species of interrogator. A smart, relentless craftsman with a history of convincing difficult people to talk about anything. And for twelve years, you have sat here watching your prize stallion slowly, patiently extract an incredible story from your prisoner."

Jefferson nodded, smiled. But the eyes remained closed.

I stared at the creature sitting inside his spacious, comfortable cell. And with a measured tone, I reminded both of us, "This is the most thoroughly studied individual in the world. And for a long time, he has given us the exact minimum required to keep everyone happy enough. And as a result, he has maintained control over his narrow life. And yours."

Jefferson finally looked at me, squirming a little in his chair.

"Fuck timetables," I said. "I think that I'm being exceptionally sensible not to march in there and offer my hand and name."

“I see your point,” he allowed.

“To be truthful? This entire situation terrifies me.” I hesitated, and then said, “It’s not every day you have the opportunity, and the honor, and the grave responsibility of interviewing somebody who won’t be born for another one hundred years.”

2

Jefferson can write the history however he wants. Collins’ arrival was what brought real, substantive changes for the prisoner. The still nameless man was unchained and allowed to wash, and under newly imposed orders, his guards brought him clean clothes and referred to him as “sir.” Then after the first filling breakfast in twenty weeks, he was escorted to a comfortably warm room with a single folding chair of the kind you would find in any church basement.

In those days, Collins worked with a partner, but the two agents decided that it was smarter to meet the mysterious visitor on a one-to-one basis.

Collins carried in his own chair, identical to the first, and he opened it and sat six feet from the prisoner’s clean bare feet.

For a long while he said nothing, tilting his face backward so that the overhead light covered him with a warm, comforting glow. I have watched that first meeting twenty times, from every available angle. The interrogator was a bald little man, plain-faced but with brilliant blue eyes. I knew those eyes. I first met Collins in the late nineties, at some little professional conference. From across the room, I noticed his perpetual fascination with the world and how his effortless, ever-graceful charm always found some excuse to bubble out. Collins had ugly teeth, crooked and yellow. But his smile seemed genuine and always fetching, and the voice that rose from the little body was rich and deep. Even his idle chatter sounded important, as if it rose from God’s own throat.

For a full ninety seconds, the interrogator made no sound.

The prisoner calmly returned the silence.

Then Collins sat back until the front legs of his chair lifted, and he laughed with an edge to his voice, and waving his hand at the air, he said in good Arabic, “We don’t believe you.”

In Farsi, he claimed, “We can’t believe you.”

And then in English, he said, “I’m here to warn you. One lucky guess won’t win you any friends.”

“Which guess is that?” the prisoner replied, in an accented, difficult-to-place strain of English.

Those were the first words he had uttered in captivity.

“You have some passing experience with astronomy, I’ll grant you that.” Collins had the gift of being able to study arcane subjects on the fly and then sound painfully brilliant. For the next six minutes, he lectured the prisoner about the stars, and in particular, how giant stars aged rapidly and soon blew up. Then he calmly lied about the tools available to the Hubble telescope and the big mirrors on top of Hawaii. “You had access to this data. Obviously. In your previous life, you must have studied astronomy. That’s why you took the chance and gave us some random dates, and by pure coincidence, a few stars happened to

blow up in just about the right slices of the sky."

A thin smile and a dismissive shrug of the shoulders were offered.

"Or maybe you are genuine," Collins allowed. "The implication, as far as I can tell, is that you can see the future. Which is insane. Or you know the future because you came from some to-be time. Which seems even crazier, at least to me. But if that's true, then I guess it means I should feel lucky. Just being in your presence is a privilege. How many times does somebody get to meet a genuine time traveler?' "

Silence.

"But if that's true," Collins continued, "then I have to ask myself, 'Why spring this on us now? And why this strange, cosmic route?'"

The silence continued for most of a minute.

"We can't break you," Collins finally pointed out. "Believe me, I know how these things work. What you've endured over these weeks and months . . . any normal person would have shattered ten different ways. Not that you'd be any help to us. Torture is a singularly lousy way of discovering the truth. Beaten and electrocuted, the average person ends up being glad for the chance to confess. To any and every crime we can think of, particularly the imaginary misdeeds. But everybody here has been assuming that we're dealing with a normal human specimen. And what I think is . . . I think that isn't the case here. Is it?"

The prisoner had a thin face and thick black hair that had been shaved to the skull, and in a multitude of ways, he was handsome. His teeth were white and straight. His shoulders were athletic, though captivity had stolen some of his muscle. He was mixed-blooded, European ancestors dancing with several other races. The best estimate of his age put him at thirty-two. But nobody had yet bothered to examine his genetics or his insides. We didn't appreciate that his indifference to pain had organic roots, including novel genes and buried microchines that insulated both his body and stubborn mind.

"Okay, you want us to believe that you're special," Collins said.

The prisoner closed his eyes. When he opened them again, he took a dramatic breath and then said nothing.

"But I don't think you appreciate something here. Do you know just how stupid and slow governments can be? Right this minute, important people are thinking: So what? So he knows a few odd things about the sky. I'm impressed, yes. But I'm the exception. Maybe there are some bright lights in the administration who see the implications. Who are smart enough to worry. But do you actually know who sits in the Oval Office today? Do you understand anything about our current president? He is possibly the most stubborn creature on the planet. So when this clever game of yours is presented to him, how do you think it's going to play out?"

The prisoner watched Collins.

"We won't torture you anymore. I promise that." And after a long sigh, Collins added, "But that isn't what you care about, I'm guessing. Not really. Something else matters to you. It deeply, thoroughly matters, or why else would you be here? So let's pretend for the next moment that your list of supernovae is true. You can see the future. Or, better, you come from there. And if it is possible to travel in time, then I guess it stands to reason that you aren't alone, that others made the journey with you."

Here the prisoner's heart quickened, half a dozen machines recording the visible rise in his interest.

“I’m guessing you’re part of a group of time tourists. Is that about right?”

In Collins’ copious notes, written several hours later, was the open admission that he had taken a chance here, making an obvious but still bizarre guess.

“You come from some distant age,” he continued. “You’re the child of an era where this is normal. People can easily travel into their past. And who knows what other miracle skills you have at your disposal? Tools and weapons we can’t imagine. Not to mention the historic knowledge about our simple times. Yet here you are. You’ve been sitting in the same closet for five months, and after all this time, maybe it’s finally occurred to you that your friends and colleagues—these other visitors from tomorrow—have no intention of rescuing you from this tedious mess.”

In myriad ways, the body betrays the mind. With the flow of the blood and the heat of the skin, the prisoner’s body was showing each of the classic signatures of raw anger.

“If I was part of a team,” Collins began, “and we leaped back a thousand years into the past . . .”

Then, he hesitated.

The prisoner leaned forward slightly, waiting.

“To the Holy Land, let’s suppose. And suppose I was captured. The Saracens don’t know what to make of me, but just to be safe, they throw me into their darkest dungeon.” Collins sat back, his chair scrapping against the tiled floor. “Well, sir, I can promise you this: I would damn well expect my friends to blow a hole in the stone wall and then pluck me out of there with a good old futuristic Blackhawk helicopter.”

The prisoner leaned back.

Quietly, in that accented English of his, he said, “One hundred and forty years.”

“That’s how far back you jumped?”

“A little farther, actually.” The prisoner grinned faintly, mentioning, “We have been among you now for several years.”

“Among us?”

“Yes.”

“And who is ‘we’?”

“Our leader. And his followers.” The prisoner paused, smiling. “We call the man Abraham.”

Collins hesitated. Then he carefully repeated the name. “Abraham.”

“The father of three great religions, which is why he took that important name for himself.”

“You came here with Abraham.”

“Yes.”

“And how many others?”

Silence.

Collins was not acting. He was worried, his fingers shaking despite the room's heat, his voice trembling slightly as he asked, "How many of these friends came with you?"

"None."

"What. . . ?"

"They are not my friends," the prisoner stated.

"Why? Because they won't save you?"

"No." The thin face tilted backward, teeth flashing in the light. "Because I have never particularly liked those people."

"Then why join up?" Collins put his hands together, squeezing the blood out of his fingers. "Why go to the trouble of leaping back to our day?"

"I believed in their cause."

"Which is?"

No answer was offered.

"You want to change the future? Is that your grand purpose?"

The prisoner shrugged. "In one fashion or another."

Collins leaned close, and for the first time he offered his name and an open hand. "You're being helpful, sir, and I thank you."

The prisoner shook the hand. Then he quietly said, "Ramiro."

"Is that your name?"

"Yes."

"I'm pleased to know it, Ramiro."

"Don't put me back into that cell again, Collins."

"But I have to," the interrogator replied.

Ignoring that answer, Ramiro said, "I have a set of demands. Minimal requirements that will earn my cooperation, I promise you."

"Two names and the vague beginnings of a story," Collins countered. "That won't earn you much."

"And I will ask you this: Do you want to defeat the invaders?" When it served his purpose, Ramiro had a cold, menacing smile. "If you insist on mistreating me, even one more time, I will never help you."

"I don't have any choice here," Collins told him.

"Yes," said Ramiro. "Yes, you do."

"No."

Then the prisoner leaned back in his chair, and through some secretive, still mysterious route, he woke a microscopic device implanted inside his angry heart.

For the next one hundred seconds, Ramiro was clinically dead.

By the time he was fully conscious again, calls had been made. Desperate orders had been issued and rescinded and then reissued. Careers were either defined or shattered. And the only soldier from a secretive, unanticipated army was given every demand on a list of remarkably modest desires.

3

My home was an efficiency apartment no bigger than Ramiro's quarters and only slightly more comfortable. But I was assured that no tiny cameras were keeping tabs on me. As a creature of status, I also enjoyed communications with the outside world—albeit strained through protocols and electronic filters run by intelligence officers sitting in the field station outside the prison. And unlike our number-one citizen, I was free to move where I wished, including jogging along the wide, hard-packed salt streets that combined for a little less than six kilometers of cumulative distance.

No one had ever predicted "temporal jihadists," as Abraham's agents were dubbed. Uranium-toting terrorists suddenly seemed like a minor threat by comparison. Collins' first interview resulted in a secret and very chaotic panic roaring through Washington. Black ops funds were thrown in every direction. Ground was broken for half a dozen high-security prisons scattered across the world. But then some wise head inside Langley decided that if time travelers were genuine, then there was no telling what they knew, and if they were inspired, there were probably no limits to what they could achieve. A tropical island might look fetching in the recruitment brochure, but how could you protect your prisoner/asset from death rays and stealth submarines? How would any facility set on the earth's surface remain hidden from prying eyes? The only hope, argued that reasonable voice, was to hide underground, and short, efficient logistical lines were only possible inside the United States. That's why the last prison to receive funding was the only one finished and staffed: an abandoned salt mine set beneath Kansas, provided with a bank of generators and layers of security that kept everyone, including most of its citizens, happily confused about its truest purpose.

Each guard was a volunteer, most of them pulled from submarine duty. To qualify, they couldn't have close families, and like everyone on the skeletal staff, they were forewarned that leaves would be rare events, and brief, and subject to various kinds of shadowing.

Most people didn't even apply for leaves anymore, preferring the safety of the underground while padding their retirement funds.

Life inside the salt mine was never unpleasant, I was told. My superiors—those gray-haired survivors of these last decade-plus—liked to boast about the billions that had been spent on full-spectrum lights and conditioned air, plus the food that most of the world would be thrilled to find on their plates. But nobody went so far as to claim that I was fortunate, nor that this posting was a blessing. The terms of my assignment were grim, any success would bring repercussions, and nobody with half a brain told me that this was an honor, or for that matter, a choice.

Collins' slot had to be filled, and I was the new Collins.

"Ma'am?"

I showed the guard my ID and badge.

“I don’t need them, ma’am. I know who you are.”

I was a slow, sweat-drenched jogger who had slugged her way through three kilometers of dressed-up tunnels. Technically the guard was off-duty, and he was using his free time to fling a colorful hand-tied fly into what looked like an enormous water-filled stock tank.

“Any bites?” I asked.

“A few.”

“Trout?”

I knew the water was too warm for trout. But the questions you ask often define you in a stranger’s mind, and I thought it was smart to start with a mistake.

“Bluegill,” he told me.

“Really?” I sounded interested.

He was a big strong man, a kid when he arrived here and still younger than me by quite a lot. But in a society where males outnumbered females ten-to-one, I had to be an object of some interest.

“Ever fish?” he asked.

“No,” I lied.

He thought about offering to teach me. I saw it in his eyes, in the tilt of his head. But then he decided on caution, forcing himself to mutter a few colorless words. “They bite, but they’re too tiny to keep.”

Surrounding the tank were huge plastic pots, each one holding a tropical tree or a trio of shrubs. Some of the foliage was thriving. Most just managed to limp along. I could see where a few million dollars had gone, and I suppose it helped the cave dwellers to coexist with living plants. But I could also imagine that a sickly lemon tree standing under fancy fluorescent lights would just as surely defeat a soul or two.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

He began with his rank.

“Your first name,” I interrupted. “What do friends call you?”

“Jim.”

“Hi, Jim. I’m Carmen.”

To the boy’s credit, he saw through me. “You already know my name. Don’t you, ma’am?”

“Carmen,” I insisted.

But he wouldn’t say it. He reeled in his feathery fly, pinning the hook to the largest eyelet, and then he did a modestly convincing job of packing up his tackle. He didn’t want to stop fishing, but my presence made him uncomfortable.

“So you know who I am?”

Jim nodded.

“And maybe you’re wondering if this is a coincidence, our paths crossing in the park like this?”

“It isn’t,” he stated.

“Probably not,” I agreed.

Surrounding the stock tank was a narrow cedar deck. I happened to be blocking the stairs leading down.

“Talk to me for a minute,” I said.

Not as an order, just a request.

Jim hesitated. Then with a nervous grin, he said, “Yeah. I found him.”

“Collins?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

I didn’t react.

“Is that what you wanted to ask me?”

I nodded. “You found him inside his apartment.”

“Yes.”

My sense of the moment was that the young man was embarrassed, first and foremost. Security was his duty, and one of the most important citizens of this nameless, unmapped town died during his watch.

“I read your report,” I mentioned.

The boy’s eyes were open but blind. He was gazing back in time, crossing a little more than a week, standing before a long dark pool of congealed blood leading to a pale corpse sitting in bathwater that had turned chill.

“Did you know Collins very well, Jim?”

“Yeah. Sort of.”

“As a friend,” I continued. “Did you talk with him much?”

“I didn’t see it coming, if that’s what you mean. Ma’am.”

“We often don’t with suicides,” I assured him. “People expect depression, despair. Afterwards, we try to remember a telltale noose hanging from the high beam. But that’s usually not the case. And do you know why?”

He blinked, watching me.

“A person is miserable, let’s say. Sad and sick of being alive. Then one day, he finds the perfect solution to his terrible problems. ‘I’ll just kill myself,’ he says. And in that moment, his miseries are cured. He can suddenly smile through his final days, knowing that every pain will soon be left behind.”

Jim shook his head slowly, probably wondering if this middle-aged woman was as bat-crazy as she

sounded.

“I knew Collins too,” I admitted.

He sighed, looking at me with curious eyes. The two of us had something in common, it seemed.

“I’ll miss him,” I offered.

The man’s face dipped.

Then before I could ask my next question, he looked up. “Salt Lake City,” he mentioned.

“What about it?”

“How is it, ma’am?”

“Carmen,” I insisted.

“Carmen.”

“Salt Lake is just fine.”

He said, “Good.”

I waited.

He took a deep breath, drinking in the negative ions that were being generated by a filtration system stolen from NASA. Then with a trace of frustration, he admitted, “We don’t get much news down here.”

“I know that.”

“It’s hard. You can never tell what they’re holding back. It’s done for good reasons, I know. But we always have to wonder.”

“Indian Point,” I offered.

“Yeah, it was four days before we heard anything about that. And then only because somebody with clearance decided to jump protocols and tell us.”

“Collins did.”

“I’m not saying,” he said. Which was the same as, “Yes.”

“Did he explain how awful Indian Point would be?”

Jim didn’t answer, carefully turning his reel two clicks.

“The reactors and storage facilities obliterated, all of those poisons thrown up by the mushroom cloud.” My voice broke—an honest shattering. Then I managed to add, “I watched it all on the news. That wind carried that shit right over New York, and then Washington and Philadelphia, and all the mayhem that resulted . . .”

“Yeah,” Jim whispered.

“And then to learn that it wasn’t just some crude uranium bomb that killed twenty million, no. But a fat fusion monster that led straight back to Russia . . .”

With a nudge, I could have knocked Jim off his feet. Almost two years had passed, and the memory was still that raw.

I promised, “Nothing big has happened lately.”

Jim needed a couple of deep breaths. “But at least . . . are things starting to simmer down?”

I shrugged. Honestly, how could anyone assess the state of our world?

“What about the wars?” he asked.

“Some are worse, some better. It just depends, Jim.”

He gave me a long, studious stare. “You know what? You don’t really look like a Carmen.”

“I need a tall hat covered with fruit?”

“Ma’am?” he muttered, puzzled by the cultural reference.

I stepped away from the steps, allowing him enough room to escape.

But he didn’t move, and with a soft, importunate voice admitted, “Some of us are wondering. What is your mission, ma’am?”

“To replace Collins.”

That’s what he wanted me to say, because the other possibilities were too hard to measure, and probably even more terrible.

“I’ll meet our prisoner tomorrow,” I confessed.

Jim nodded, trying to show nothing with his face.

“You often stand guard over Ramiro,” I mentioned.

“Everybody gets that duty.”

“Of course.”

He glanced at the stairs.

“So what do you think about the man, Jim?”

“I don’t know anything about him,” he said too quickly.

I said, “Good,” and left it there.

Then he added, “He seems smart, I guess. But odd.”

“Odd how?”

He had a guard’s burly shoulders. He used them to shrug, saying nothing else.

“I was hoping, Jim. Maybe you can help me.” I paused, just for a moment. Just to let him wonder what I might say next. “What was Collins’ mood when you walked him back to his apartment?”

And now the shoulders tightened, just a little.

“I saw you two on the security videos. Walking and talking.”

“I was going off-duty, ma’am. Carmen.”

“Collins didn’t visit Ramiro again.”

The young man seemed surprised. “No?”

“Didn’t he see the prisoner almost every day?”

“Most days, I guess.”

“But that was three days before he killed himself.”

“I’ll trust you on that.”

“So I’m going to ask you. Officially. What was Collins’ state of mind when you walked with him back to his quarters?”

Jim’s eyes gazed into the past.

“Did he say anything?”

“I did most of the talking.”

“Was that normal?”

“Not particularly. No, ma’am.”

“You stopped at his front door for a minute,” I said.

“Yeah. I guess.”

“Did he show you anything, Jim?”

“Like what?”

“Papers. Something with writing on it.”

“Well, Collins had his black case with him.”

“But you didn’t see a legal pad, or anything like that?”

Jim tried to see yellow paper, but he couldn’t make himself.

“Under the blood,” I said.

“What?”

“Papers got burned. Somebody incinerated them at least twice, to make sure every mark was erased.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“How about the coin?”

“I saw that.”

“Beside the bath?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“A dollar president’s coin.”

“I noticed it, sure.”

I waited a moment. Then I said, “So you walked him and his attaché case back to his apartment. And Collins said nothing that you can remember?”

“Just . . .” Jim held his mouth closed for a moment. Then he forced himself to look at me, and with an impressive talent for mimicry, he used the dead man’s voice. Deeply, with an appealingly slight Southern drawl, he said, “ ‘Want to hear something funny?’ ”

“He asked you that?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Did he tell you what was funny?”

Jim shook his head. “Which was too bad, I thought at the time. Collins was real good at jokes, when he wanted to be . . .”

4

Healthful food and regular rest, plus years of tempered exercise, showed in the prisoner’s fit body and the youthful face. He was wearing beige trousers, a clean white polo shirt and sandals that looked comfortably broken down. It was easy to confuse him for a middle-management worker in the final days of a long vacation. When he heard the reinforced door being unbolted, he stood up. Ramiro didn’t seem at all surprised to find a strange woman walking into his home. “Hello,” he said with a voice that had grown almost American over the years. Then he offered a warm smile and his right hand.

I introduced myself.

“A lovely name,” was his response. Then the spirit of generosity took hold. He surrendered his favorite chair and asked what I would like to drink. Coffee? Tea? Or perhaps the blue Gatorade he kept cold inside his little refrigerator.

I took the chair and requested green tea.

There wasn’t any stove, so he heated the water inside the microwave. Staring at the revolving mug, he told me, “It’s very sad about Collins.”

“It was,” I agreed.

“In a sense, he was my best friend.”

“This must be hard for you.”

“Not particularly.” Ramiro seemed to relish how cold that sounded. He pursed his lips and shrugged, giving me a momentary glance. Measuring my reaction, no doubt.

I stared at the wall behind him, gazing at an enormous photograph of the snow-clad Himalayas.

“By any chance, did you know Collins?”

I waited for a moment. Then I said, “Yes.”

That delay piqued his interest. Ramiro invested the next several moments studying my face. “How well did you know him?”

I said nothing.

“Were you lovers?”

“Guess,” I told him.

That earned an easy laugh. “I know you weren’t.”

“Why not?”

With a calm voice, he asked, “Do you like honesty, Carmen?”

“Always.”

“You aren’t pretty enough for Collins. Or young enough, frankly.”

“Fair points,” I agreed. “But how do you know this?”

“Occasionally the man would entertain me with his stories.” Ramiro glanced at the mug and then stared at me. “I don’t have a passionate life, I’m sure you know. But if only half of his stories were true, then the young pretties didn’t have much chance against his charms.”

“Local girls, were they?”

“I shouldn’t say. Your fraternization rules are ridiculously strict.”

I said nothing else.

Then the microwave beeped, and Ramiro set a tea bag into the plain white mug before bringing both to me. He didn’t use the handle, and when I touched the mug’s body, just for an instant, my fingertips came close to burning.

He pulled his office chair out from under his little desk and sat before me, the right leg crossed over his left.

“Collins and I enjoyed some professional moments,” I began. “In fact, we met long before you happened along.”

He nodded, smiled.

I waited him out.

Then with a sharp grin, he mentioned, “You must be exceptionally qualified to receive this posting.”

“I must be.”

“May I ask a few questions?”

"By all means."

"Without giving away secrets," he began, "what kinds of experiences have you suffered during these hard years?"

"Are they hard?"

"I hear little news, and who knows if it's complete." Ramiro shrugged, laughing softly. "Which is Jefferson's idea, I think. Give the subject just enough information to tease out a few fresh, hopefully useful opinions." Then he sat back, a good-natured sigh rising out of him. "But yes, Carmen. From what I have learned, I think these times are genuinely terrible."

"Montana," I said.

"What about it?"

"The day you were found beside the road and captured . . . I was stationed outside Kabul."

When interested in any subject, Ramiro leaned forward and stopped blinking, his black eyes filling up his face. One examining physician had proposed that the microchines inside his brain were boosting his neurological capacities, and the eyes were a kind of tell. Others thought it was just a personal quirk. Whatever the reason, he was using his interested gaze on me now.

"Then the following year," I continued, "they stationed me in Iraq."

"Of course."

"I was sent to help hunt for WMDs. My assignment was to interrogate the old Baathists and such."

A thin smile surfaced; he saw the punch line coming.

"Of course there weren't any nukes or biological nightmares. But we didn't know that yet. And by 'we,' I mean the people on the ground. Washington had strung together the ridiculous intelligence, and the media beat the drums, and we went into Baghdad and kicked Saddam out of his palaces. Victory was declared. But then during that window between the celebrations and the first car bombs, my assignment shifted. That country was collapsing. Our soldiers were pretty much letting it happen, as far as I could tell. But someone gave me dozens and then hundreds of shackled bodies, plus an ever-changing checklist that made no sense to me."

My host leaned back, his chair offering a comfortable creaking. "I can appreciate your confusion."

"You understand how my game works," I said. "I try to know more than I'd ever admit to my subject. But when it suits me, I can be very stupid. And if she gives me something . . . most of my prisoners were female, I should mention . . . if she offers some bit of intelligence that I didn't have, my first response is to say, 'Oh, yes. We know all about the cement mixer with the fertilizer bomb. You can't help yourself with that crumb of old news.' "

I had shifted into my best Arabic.

Ramiro was fluent in Arabic and English, Portuguese and Spanish. But his natural tongue was an odd Creole that borrowed from each language, plus a rich seasoning of peculiar syllables and tech-terms that wouldn't exist for another hundred-plus years.

I wished I knew his native tongue. But I was too old and cranky to learn it in a workable span of time.

The prisoner stuck to his Americanized English, asking, “With that checklist, Carmen . . . what sorts of items made no sense to you?”

“Individually? Nothing was blatantly strange. But it was the whole goofy package. My bosses were hunting people who didn’t belong in Baghdad. Who weren’t native to Iraq, and maybe not even to the Middle East. I made some discreet inquiries, asking for clearer instructions. But nobody knew the sense behind any of our orders. One of my prisoners would eventually stand out—that’s what the generals promised. She would be in her late twenties or thirties, or maybe her forties. Her accent might be wrong. Unless she was exceptionally good with languages, which was another key to watch for. There wouldn’t be any genuine records showing her whereabouts more than five years earlier. And a three-star general confided to me—to all of us—that in the worst interrogations, my phantom would enjoy an extraordinary tolerance for pain and drugs and boredom. And the general promised that when I finally found my girl, she was going to be worth a hundred bloodied mistakes.”

With a dismissive gesture, Ramiro said, “I told Collins. I told everybody. As a young man, I purchased a cheap package of tailored genes and various nano-organs.”

“Of course.”

“Common add-on talents popular in my world.”

“To insulate your poor citizens from the ravages of poverty,” I said, nodding agreeably.

“My warnings were explicit,” Ramiro told me. “I couldn’t be certain about the genetics of the other warriors, or their current identities, much less how well or how poorly they would blend into any local population.”

“You gave us Iraq,” I mentioned.

He bristled. Then after a moment, he said, “This is very old ground.”

“It is,” I agreed.

“Iraq,” he repeated. “Over twenty million people, most of them young. And what percentage of that population did your colleagues and you process? One percent? Was it that much?”

“We tried our best,” I claimed.

“I told Collins. One of the voices mentioned Iraq to me, in passing.”

“It wasn’t Abraham?”

“No, it was one of his associates. He said Iraq was our focus. But even if that was the case, and even if Abraham and his people didn’t slip out of the country before your noisy invasion . . . well, I was always critical of your clumsy methods and your very poor odds for success.”

“I know. You gave Collins ample warnings.”

“Even in the smallest country,” said Ramiro, “there are so many dark corners in which to hide.”

“You warned everybody,” I said.

“And you were following orders,” he said flatly. Then he added, “Carmen,” with a suddenly friendly, familiar tone. “But really, how could your masters expect you to find anybody of substance?”

I paused, just for a moment. “Yes, it was a difficult assignment.”

He didn’t seem to notice my careful tone. “What about blood and skin?” he asked. “Were you taking samples?”

“I wasn’t. But some med-techs were doing just that.” I finally pulled the soggy tea bag into the air and sipped from the cooling mug. “Everybody had their own secrets to keep. Nobody knew more than a sliver of the whole incredible story. I didn’t know samples were being sent back home, thousands of them, and being tested for key genes.”

“Genes that might not have been there,” he pointed out. “Or that could be removed or easily hidden.”

I nodded. “We knew your genetic markers, sure. But who could say what we’d find inside another warrior’s chromosomes?”

“Precisely.”

“But what else could my people do? We were facing an unexpected threat—temporal jihadists born in a distant, treacherous future. What reasonable, effective measures would have helped our security?”

Ramiro swiped at the air.

Quietly but fiercely, he said, “I told you what I knew.”

“Of course.”

“Once my terms were met, I explained everything to our friend Collins.” His voice rose, cracked. “Imagine that a foreign power captured the man standing guard outside my door. They would easily break him. In a few days or weeks, he would confess everything. But what is the operational knowledge of a lowly soldier? Does that man . . . my friend Jim . . . does he even halfway comprehend my importance?”

“Probably not,” I conceded.

“And I’m just a simple soldier too.”

“Simple? I doubt that.”

A sly smile blossomed, faded. “What happened next, Carmen?”

“In 2005, I was yanked out of Iraq. I was flown back to the States and promised a new assignment. But before orders came down, they pressed me into helping with certain war games. Very secret, very obvious stuff. After the endless mess in Iraq, we were going to try to do a better job taking on Iran.”

Ramiro watched me.

“Two strange things happened at that conference,” I admitted. “On the first morning, I ran into a colleague on his way to a back room breakfast, and I was roped in and told to play along. It seemed like a chance deal, but of course it wasn’t. There were a lot of strange faces sitting with eggs and oatmeal. And there was Collins. I hadn’t seen that man in ages. God, I thought, he looked tired and pale. But he practically latched onto me. We sat together. This other fellow sat in the corner, watching the two of us. I think we managed maybe five minutes of catch-up. I told him about coming home. He gave me a cover story, but he didn’t bothering pushing it too hard. Then one of the unknown faces, a guy sitting at the end of the table, threw out this odd, odd question.”

Ramiro leaned forward, absorbing my face and soul with a blinkless gaze.

" 'What if you could jump back in time?' the gentleman inquired. He was pretending that his question wasn't serious, that it was for shits-and-giggles only. He made himself laugh, asking, 'What if you and some like-minded friends gathered together? Say there's a few dozen of you, a couple hundred at most. You're going to travel back in time together. But there are rules. You can cover only one or two centuries, and with restrictions. Your journey has to be a one-way. You can carry only a limited amount of mass. Bodies and a little luggage and that's all. There won't be any return missions to the future. There's no supply train with fresh M-16s and laptops. And your goal? You want to conquer that more primitive world, of course. You are invaders. Two hundred soldiers armed with your beliefs and training and your superior knowledge, and you'll have to find some clever way to make your little force strong enough to defeat the old horse armies."

Ramiro smiled.

"Of course there was a purpose to his wacky scenario," I allowed. "That much was obvious to everybody there. But the gentleman didn't offer explanations. For all I know, he was told that our own physicists had just built a time machine, and we were trying to decide what to do with our new toy. The truth never had to get in the way. During a five-hour breakfast, he led a clumsy, half-informed discussion that ended up with tactical nukes burning up London and Paris. And do you know why this happened? I think the show was put on for Collins' benefit. To give him ideas, to help guide his future conversations with you. And meanwhile in those other rooms, the future Iranian war ran its imaginary, surgical course."

The prisoner had leaned forward, elbows on knees. Then he revealed something of his ability—his clear focus, his absolute mastery of detail—when he said, "Earlier, Carmen. When you admitted that your Iraqi assignment was difficult. I had the impression—tell me if I'm wrong—but it seemed to me that despite some very long odds, you were successful."

I said, "I was."

"You found a suspect? Somebody out of place in our world, did you?"

"Yes." I paused. "A young woman without family. With no paper trail reaching back more than a few years. She claimed to have worked as a lab technician, nothing more, and she had reasonable explanations for the gaps in her records. But she was the right age, and she was very, very tough. I worked her and worked her, and the only information I got from her was the name of a river in Kashmir."

Ramiro stared at me.

"At least that's what others heard when they listened to the interrogation later." I shrugged, glancing down. "I couldn't tell you what she was saying exactly, since she was throwing up at the time. But two days later, a special ops group came and took her away."

My new friend smiled. Then after a moment or two, he guessed, "Collins told you this news at the breakfast, did he?"

"Later, actually."

"You had uncovered one of my sisters. Is that what he told you?"

"Not in those terms. But Collins took me out for drinks and mentioned that my girl was interrogated by other teams, and when she finally talked, she admitted to pretty much everything."

“Very good,” he said.

I kept my voice as level and cool as I could manage it. “Collins told me that she was a holy soldier in a war that hadn’t seen its first shot yet. But that day was coming soon, he confided. And my prisoner . . . that young woman . . . had promised that our world would be helpless before this mighty hand.”

Ramiro watched me sip the tea. “Collins never mentioned the girl to me.”

“That’s the way it should be,” I said.

“Of course.”

Then I leaned forward. “I asked about her.”

Ramiro waited.

“I asked Collins if she was still being helpful to us.”

“Was she?”

“Not anymore. Since she managed to kill herself.’”

A doll’s eyes would have been more expressive. Very calmly, he asked, “A suicide implant, was it?”

“No,” I said. “She slammed her forehead into the corner of a desk, breaking a blood vessel in her cortex.” I set down the cold mug of tea, adding, “But now you know why I’m so highly regarded, at least in some circles. I’ve had some measure of success at this very odd game.”

5

To do this job, you need an iron ass. The capacity to sit and listen, nodding with enthusiasm, and remembering everything said while measuring every pause—that’s what matters. Find the inconsistencies, and you can be good at it. Connect this phrase to that sigh, and you’ll earn your paycheck. What years of experience have shown me is that inflicting pain and the threat of pain are rarely necessary. It takes remarkably little to coax the average soul into revealing everything. Extramarital affairs. Cheating on critical exams. Dangerous politics. Some years ago, during a commercial flight, I sat beside a lovely old lady who spoke at length about cooking and her husband and her cherished garden, which she described in some detail, and then she mentioned her husband again. For a moment, she paused, looking in my direction but seeing something else. Then she quietly admitted that the poor man was beginning to suffer from dementia. It was that pause that caught my attention. It was the careful tone of her voice and the way her steely green eyes stared through a stranger’s head. Afterwards, on a whim, I checked with a botanical guide and learned that an astonishing portion of her beautiful garden was poisonous. She never said an evil word about anyone, including that senile old man, but her intentions were obvious. She had made up her mind to kill him, and she was simply waiting for the excuse to use garden shears and a cooking pot, summoning Death.

But my subjects are never ordinary citizens. As a rule, they consider themselves to be special—committed, determined warriors in whatever grand cause has latched hold of their worthy souls. But their passions are larger than ours, their enthusiasms having few bounds. Rock music makes them pray. Cattle prods and mock executions are exactly what great men expect to endure. But if you treat

them as fascinating equals, they will happily chatter on, sometimes for years, explaining far more to you than you ever hoped to know.

For twelve years, Collins sat inside a very comfortable prison cell, listening to one man's self-obsessed monologue.

Thousands of hours of autobiography begged to be studied. But I didn't have the time. Even the summaries made for some massive volumes. I had to make do with an elaborate timeline marked with every kind of event found in one man's life. According to my briefings, the enigmatic Ramiro was born in the second decade of the twenty-second century. His family had some small wealth. The paternal grandfather was a Spaniard who had converted to the Sunni faith before immigrating to Brazil, and the boy was raised in a city that didn't yet exist today—a sugar cane and palm oil center in what was once Amazon rainforest. A maternal uncle was responsible for Ramiro's interest in astronomy. Lemonade-7 was preparing for a long, successful career as some type of scientist, but at a critical juncture, politics ruined his dreams. At least that's the story that Collins heard again and again. The entire family was thrown into sudden, undeserved poverty. At seventeen, the young Islamic man had to drop out of school and find any work. At eighteen, when he was a legal adult, he bought a cheap package of poverty genes and nanoplants to help insulate him from his miseries; but, unlike many, Ramiro resisted any treatment that would make him happy in these decidedly joyless days.

People want to believe that in another twenty or fifty or one hundred years, the earth will grow into an enduring utopia. But among the prisoner's unwelcome gifts was a narrow, knife-deep vision of a disturbingly recognizable world. Yes, science would learn much that was new and remarkable. And fabulous technologies would be put to hard work. But cheap fusion was always going to need another couple decades of work, and eternal health was always for the next generation to achieve, and by the twenty-second century, the space program would have managed exactly two walks on the Martian surface and a few permanent, very exclusive homes hunkered down near the moon's south pole.

Ramiro's world was ours, except with more people and less naivety. Most of its wealth and all of its power was concentrated in the top one-half percentile. National borders would shift here and vanish there, but the maps would remain familiar. The old religions would continue struggling for converts, often through simple, proven violence. But the Islamic Century would have come to its natural end. Mormons and Buddhists and Neo-secularists began to gradually gnaw away at their gains. And in the backwaters of Brazil, young Ramiro's faith would seem quite out of place—another liability in his sorry, increasingly desperate prospects.

But then a team of physicists working in the Kashmir Free State would build and successfully test the world's first time machine.

"I can't believe that," Collins had blurted out.

Perhaps the prisoner was a little irritated by his interrogator's tone. There were many moments, early on especially, when Ramiro displayed a thin skin. But then he made a smile break out, dragging his mood into a sunnier place, and with a tight proud voice, he asked, "And how did I come here?"

"This is about me, not you," Collins replied. "I'm just having trouble accepting this preposterous concept."

"You want details, do you?"

"I want the science. At least enough to show around and get a few smart-sounding opinions."

"Of course." The smile warmed. "I assumed this would happen."

This was the first interview inside the new salt-mine prison. Despite a self-induced coronary, Ramiro looked fit and comfortable. His room was finished, but little else was done. Despite copious amounts of soundproofing, the deep drumming of machinery bled into the audio track—the Army Corps working fast on what they were told was a new secret shelter for the wise heads of their elected government.

"Paper and a pen," Ramiro demanded.

I wasn't the first to notice that while making important notes, our time traveler preferred ancient, proven tools.

He wrote hard for half an hour, breaking only to mention that he was by no means an expert in this esoteric branch of science.

Neither was Collins. But that little bald character had done just enough reading to decipher a few equations and recognize the general shape of the diagrams. With a nod and a poker player's guts, he said, "This looks like you're playing with the Casimir Effect."

"Very good," Ramiro responded.

"Parallel plates set so close together that they tap into the vacuum energies everywhere. Is that about right?"

"Something like that, yes."

"I've heard there's a lot of energy in a vacuum. Virtual particles and structure too." Flipping through the pages, Collins allowed the overhead camera to record everything. "So what are you doing on this page? Making a wormhole?"

"Hardly."

"Doesn't time travel need a wormhole?"

Ramiro sat back. "That's a very difficult trick to achieve. And in the end, unnecessary."

"Why?"

"A pocket of Lorton Energy is far easier to make."

"Who's Lorton?"

"An unborn Australian genius, if that matters. In my day, he was just as famous for his piano playing as for his peculiar physics." Then Ramiro launched into a lengthy and occasionally self-contradictory lecture about exotic states and branes and the means by which modest energies can throw matter across years and entire eons. But there were strict limits to the magic. The larger the mass to be moved, the shorter span it could cross. A substantial building might be thrown several years into the past, while a tiny grain of sand could find itself resting in the sultry Jurassic.

"Is that how they tested their machine?" Collins asked. "Make a probe and send it back, then dig it up in a fossil bed somewhere?"

Ramiro's smile flickered.

"Hardly," he said.

"Wait," his interrogator said. "I forgot. You told me already . . . what was it you told me. . . ?"

“The universe is a quantum phenomena,” Ramiro mentioned.

“Which means?”

“Your physicists have played with a very difficult concept. They call it the many-worlds reality, and to an amazing degree, that model is correct. Everything that can happen will happen. An unstable nucleus might explode today or in a thousand years, which means that if it detonates both events will happen. And it also explodes during every nanosecond between now and then. In our astonishing, endlessly inventive universe, every possible outcome is inevitable. Every consequence plays out endlessly. The most unlikely event happens too often to count. And possibility is as easy and perfect as the great thoughts that pass through God’s good mind.”

Collins was a natural actor. But many years later, watching the interrogation, I could tell that he was impressed. It wasn’t play-acting on his part. This was no feigned emotion for effect. The camera showed an awestruck gaze and hands that had to find one another, wrapping their fingers into an elaborate knot. Collins was pleased. No, he was thrilled. For a moment or two, he allowed himself to stare at the stack of papers in his lap, humble and unexpected, and in ways that few people can ever know, he felt honored.

Then he remembered his job—his duty—and quickly returned to the scruffy matters of state and war.

“Okay, it’s 1999,” he said. “In one reality, nobody jumps back to our day. Nothing changes, and the world pushes on exactly as before. Lorton is going to be born and stroke the keys and play with his mathematics—”

“Exactly.”

“But there’s this other 1999,” said Collins.

“Yes.”

“Abraham and you, and the rest of the group . . . they calmly step out into our world. Is that about it?”

“Except that process was never calm,” Ramiro mentioned. “There was a crack like thunder and quite a lot of dust. Since they occupied a fair amount of space, your native air and ground had to be pushed out of the way.”

“Naturally.”

Ramiro waited.

“Where?” Collins asked.

Then as Ramiro began to speak, his interrogator interrupted, saying, “I know. It’s in Kashmir. You’ve mentioned that before.”

“It was beside the Shyok River.”

“The Shyok? Are you sure?”

“Of course I am sure,” said Ramiro, bristling slightly.

“And how many came?”

“One hundred and ninety-nine warriors,” Ramiro reported.

“You’re sure?”

“I didn’t count the bodies. But that number was mentioned to me.”

“Is that how much mass can be thrown back across one hundred and forty years? About two hundred men’s worth?”

“Men and women.”

“How many women?”

“I don’t know.”

“Because of the masks. You claim.”

The first interrogation had delivered that sour news. Collins had wanted Abraham’s description, but Ramiro couldn’t identify any of the temporal jihadists. Every head was covered with a thick black fabric. It was a miraculous cloth, transparent to the person beneath but hiding the faces from the outside world. And if that wasn’t terrible enough, the cloth also wiped away the character and even the gender of every voice.

“Very smart,” Collins.

Ramiro nodded agreeably.

“And your leader, this Abraham fellow—”

“I never saw his face. But please, ask me that question twenty more times. I love repeating myself without end.”

“Sorry,” Collins said.

Ramiro waited for a few moments. Then he thought to mention, “We also brought a few personal effects and some special equipment too.”

“I have to ask this again,” Collins said. “My bosses insist.”

“As I told you, I can offer only guesses about what kind of equipment was included. My cell was small, and it was not responsible for any of it. I saw some anonymous packing crates. Nothing more.”

“A reasonable step,” Collins allowed.

Both men sat quietly.

“Again,” the interrogator said. “What can you tell me about Abraham?”

The biography was brief and chilling. Abraham was the only known name for a young gentleman who according to rumors was born into one of the world’s wealthiest families. He had invested ten years and his personal fortune preparing for an invasion of the past. What Ramiro knew was minimal, and he openly admitted that he might have been fed lies. But the heart of the plan was for the invaders to come with little but make friends with a useful government, and then they would fabricate the kinds of weapons that would bring this primitive world to their leader’s feet.

Ramiro patiently told the story again, and then his interrogator suddenly interrupted.

“Wait, I know,” Collins blurted. “It’s the future.”

“Pardon me?”

“That’s how they tested their time machine.” He shook the papers in the air. “If they threw a probe into the past, it would only create a new reality. A separate earth diverging from us. But if they had a marked, one-of-a-kind object . . . and then let’s say they sent it a minute or a day into the future . . . then according to this quantum craziness, that probe would appear in every reality leading out from this scruffy little moment of ours.”

“Exactly,” said Ramiro, smiling like a long-suffering but proud teacher.

“That’s how your physicists proved it?”

“Grains of marked sand were sent two moments into the future,” said Ramiro.

“Huh,” said Collins.

The prisoner sat back in his chair.

“Which makes me wonder,” Collins continued.

Silence.

Then Collins sat back.

“What are you wondering, my friend?”

“What would happen?” The interrogator lifted his hand, holding an imaginary ball before his gaze. “If you had a time machine, and you happened to throw, I don’t know, a couple hundred lumps of U-235 ahead in time? If you sent one of them every minute or so, but you aimed them to appear in exactly the same place, at the same exact moment…all of that nuclear material pumped into the same tiny volume . . . what kind of boom would that make. . . ?”

I watched those ripe moments at least half a dozen times before I was sure of what I had seen. For an instant, the prisoner flinched. His heart kicked slightly, and the sweat came a little faster than before. But what held my interest was Ramiro’s face, and in particular, how guarded he acted for the next little while.

“I will have to be careful,” he was thinking.

“This man is sharp,” I could imagine him warning himself. “Sharp and quick, and I need to watch my steps.”

6

“A good day’s work?”

“Reasonably exceptional.”

Jefferson nodded, and then he smiled. Then after careful consideration, he decided not to mention what was foremost on his mind. “How’s the lamb?” he asked instead.

“Delicious.”

“And the rest?”

“Everything’s wonderful,” I told him. “Thanks again for the invitation.”

Jefferson’s efficiency apartment was the same as everyone else’s, except for every flourish and individual oddity that he had impressed on its walls and floor and the serviceable, government-issue furnishings. Either his housekeeping was thorough, or he had changed his nature for me. He had a fondness for Impressionist painters and political thrillers. The worn carpet implied a man who liked to pace, possibly while talking on the phone. Only two people were allowed to communicate directly with the outside world, and even then, we had to accept some inflexible restrictions. Every image that entered or left the prison, and even the most ordinary sound, had to be examined by several layers of elaborate software. Hidden messages were the main justification. Ramiro might have secret talents; who knew what any of his microscopic implants really did? Those security measures gave voices a half-second delay, and the news broadcasts were delayed for nearly thirty minutes before they dripped their way down to us.

Jefferson’s small television was perched on the kitchen counter, muted and presently turned to CNN. Not sure what to say, he glanced at the images coming out of China. I preferred to invest my next few moments staring at his Monet—a good quality reproduction, matted and framed above the sofa bed. Then I set down my fork and knife, and after wiping the juice from the corner of my mouth, I quietly announced, “You know, I don’t like him.”

Jefferson turned back to me, trying to guess my intentions.

“Lemonade-7,” I said.

“I know who you mean.”

Picking up my fork again, I showed him a serious, sober expression. “There’s something about that man . . . I don’t exactly know what . . . but it’s just wrong . . .”

Jefferson risked a neutral nod.

“Control,” I said.

“Pardon me?”

“He demands it,” I said.

“Of course he wants control.”

“And he does an amazing job holding on to it.”

Jefferson shrugged. “In small ways, he does.”

I said nothing.

“But he’s still our prisoner. That never changes. Beyond our assurances to keep him secret and safe from harm, what can he count on?”

“Not much,” I agreed. But then I asked, “But what has he given us in these last five or six years? What do we have that’s genuinely new?”

With the tips of two fingers, Jefferson scratched his short white beard.

“Does he offer any fresh insights now? Is he able to make any one of our wars a little less terrible?”

“You know how it is, Carmen.”

“Remind me.”

“The well always runs dry.”

“With our sources, you mean.”

“Of course.”

“So why did Collins remain here?”

A good poker face reveals nothing, except that it is a poker face. Which is a useful clue in itself.

“Collins was better than anybody,” I said. “Nobody else understood the minds and makeup of these time travelers. So why didn’t he step out into the world, take a new post, and use his hard-earned skills to interrogate fresh suspects?”

“Ramiro was his boy.”

“I understand that.”

“And honestly, I didn’t want to lose Collins,” he said.

“Thanks for being honest.”

Jefferson shifted in his chair. “Maybe you’re right,” he allowed. “Looking back, I suppose we might have gotten more good out of Collins.”

“I was scouring the world for Abraham,” I pointed out.

Hearing the name, Jefferson blinked.

“It’s just that nobody bothered to tell me who Abraham was or how many people he had with him, much less what these temporal jihadists were trying to do. There were so many layers of security that responsible, effective work was impossible.”

“Why should I defend policies I didn’t make?”

“I did piece a few things together for myself,” I mentioned. “At least to the point where I knew there was something deadlier than al-Qaeda, a powerful and hateful and almost invisible organization, and it could be anywhere in the world, and I shouldn’t trust anybody completely.”

The bureaucrat fell back on his instincts. “Knowing what you know now, Carmen . . . do you really believe that you should have been told?”

I didn’t react.

“And everybody else with high clearances too? Should hundreds and thousands have been brought into the club?”

I gave the Monet another glance.

Jefferson bristled. “This operation has had its share of leaks over the years. Sure, most came from higher

up. But I know of three incidents tied to this facility. And we could be on the far side of the moon, as isolated as we are. So what happens if we brief everybody who might like to know about Ramiro? In thirty seconds, nothing will be secret, and in ten minutes, we'll have forfeited what might be our only advantage."

The fork had grown warm in my hand. "If it's an advantage," I replied, "why aren't we enjoying some real success?"

"You don't think we are?"

I shook my head.

"We've done a marvelous job of undercutting Abraham," he told me. "And since he's our main enemy, I think I should feel proud of my work here."

I stifled a bleak little laugh.

He noticed. Outrage blossomed, and a tight voice said, "I shouldn't have to defend myself or my people." Which was the kind of noise you make when defending everybody. "Before you take that tone with me, perhaps we should both remember what our prisonerman who you do not like—has given us."

Then I smiled and nodded. "My parents live in Seattle," I mentioned.

"Exactly. Yes!"

Two years ago, government geologists announced that low rumblings beneath the Pacific were precursors to a substantial earthquake. It was a bogus operation, but well staged. As a precaution, everyone in the Pacific Northwest was told to step outside before 10:30 in the morning, and the highways were closed down, and the airlines stopped landing and taking off. Sixteen minutes later, an 8.0 trembler hit western Washington, and it might have killed thousands. But instead of a mauling, only a few dozen perished and a few billion dollars in infrastructure fell down—almost a nonevent, considering these recent years.

"Seattle is the perfect example," Jefferson said.

Ramiro had given us the dates and epicenters for dozens of future eruptions and earthquakes. But I wasn't the first voice to ask, "What kind of person carries those kinds of tidbits inside his head?"

Jefferson gave his beard another good scratch.

"An amateur astronomer might remember exploding stars," I agreed. "But tectonic events too?"

"The man is brilliant," Jefferson declared. "You've seen his test scores. Those extra genes and his buried machinery give him nearly perfect recall—a skill, I'll add, that he has kept secret from us."

"Seattle didn't hurt his reputation, either," I pointed out.

Jefferson needed to look elsewhere. So he glanced at the television, but whatever he saw there didn't seem to comfort him.

"I wish he'd given us more," I mentioned.

"He can't do the weather," Jefferson replied. "Hurricanes are chaotic, and the Butterfly Effects—"

"I don't mean weather." Shaking my head, I asked, "What about the tsunami off Sumatra?"

"Which one?"

"The worst one," I said. "The day after Christmas, in '04."

His shoulders squared. "That wasn't my call."

"But you recommended caution," I pointed out. "I read Collins' full report. He asked for some kind of warning to be released. But you didn't want us to 'give away the store.' Did I get the cliché right?"

Beneath the white whiskers, sun-starved flesh grew red.

Again, Jefferson said, "It wasn't my decision."

"I realize that."

"In those days, we couldn't fake this kind of knowledge. Any intervention on our part could have exposed our source."

"A quarter of a million dead," I said. "And mostly Muslim, too."

He wouldn't let me drag him down this path. With a snort, he said, "You have no idea how difficult this has been."

"Tell me."

He wanted to do just that.

"Please," I said.

But caution took hold, and Jefferson's mouth disappeared inside the coarse whiskers.

"Is Ramiro real?"

Jefferson didn't seem to hear me. He bent forward, staring at his own half-eaten dinner. Then quietly and fiercely, he said, "A lot of brilliant people have spent years wondering just that."

"He's a lowly soldier," I mentioned. "The lowliest of all, he claims."

Silence.

"So what was Ramiro doing in Montana? Is it the story that he tells? That he was a delivery boy bringing one little piece of an ultramodern bomb into our helpless nation?"

Jefferson gave the television another try.

"Maybe he is a genius, and maybe he came from the future. But the poor bastard didn't know how to drive on ice, did he?"

"Few Brazilians do," Jefferson snapped.

I showed him a narrow, might-mean-anything smile.

"Do you think that the crash was staged?" he finally asked me.

"It has to cross my mind," I allowed.

“Which means Ramiro was sent here, and he’s supposed to feed us all the wrong information. Is that what you’re thinking?”

I sat back, and I sighed.

“Okay, I’ll tell you why Collins stayed right here.” Jefferson straightened his back, and he took a deep breath. “Out in the world, what are the odds of finding a second Ramiro? They’re minimal at best. Collins would have bounced from one hotspot to another, wasting his skills. But he remained here instead, playing the patience game, waiting for one of you to stumble across a genuine candidate. We had a good plan in place, Carmen. The new prisoner would be brought here and thoroughly interrogated by Collins, and when the time was right, Ramiro would be allowed to meet with him, or her.”

“I once found a suspect,” I mentioned.

Jefferson remained silent.

“A young woman in Baghdad.”

He allowed that statement to simmer. Then with keen pleasure, he said, “You know the old story about Stalin, don’t you? One evening, the dictator can’t find his favorite pipe, and his first assumption is that it has been stolen. So he demands a full investigation. But the next morning, Stalin realizes that he simply set the pipe in a different drawer, and he admits as much to the head of his secret police. To Beria. Which leads to a very uncomfortable silence. Then Beria clears his throat, admitting that three men have already confessed to stealing the missing item.”

I showed surprise. “What? Are you claiming that my girl wasn’t real?”

“I’ve seen all of the files on her. And everybody else who looked good, at one time or another.” Jefferson couldn’t help but lean across the tiny table, saying, “When your prisoner broke, she confessed to every suggestion that was thrown her way. Give her enough time, and I think we could have convicted her for a thousand crimes, including stealing Stalin’s pipe.”

I said nothing. Pretending that this was unwelcome news, I chewed on my bottom lip and refused to look him in the eyes.

“We’ve had dozens of candidates in the pipeline,” Jefferson claimed. “But none ever reached a point of real interest to us.”

“Too bad,” I whispered.

“Your girl was unique because she managed to kill herself. That’s what kept her apparent value high. At least back in Washington, it did.”

I was silent.

“By the way, did you ever see the autopsy results? They took her apart cell by cell, basically, and not one tiny, futuristic machine was found. Just some oddities in the blood and gut, that’s all.”

“I tortured an innocent woman? Is that that what you’re saying?”

Jefferson gave me a moment to dwell on that sorry prospect. I think that if I’d asked for a tissue, he would have leaped up to help this naïve and disappointing creature.

“We have hard jobs,” he finally said.

I got up from the dinner table.

“For what it’s worth,” he began. Then he hesitated before adding, “Carmen,” with a warm tone.

“What?” I asked.

“Collins had a lot of sleepless nights, dealing with all the possibilities.”

I walked past him, standing close enough to the Monet that the water lilies turned into unrecognizable blobs of pink and white.

After a minute, I asked quietly, “How many times?”

Jefferson was chewing the lamb. He had to swallow before responding. “How many times what?”

“These unrecorded conversations,” I said, my eyes still focused on the gorgeous, senseless painting.

I heard him turn in his chair.

I asked, “When did the secret interrogations begin?”

He decided to stand. “What interrogations?”

“Sometimes Collins disabled the microphones and cameras before entering the prisoner’s quarters.” I turned, showing Jefferson my best stony face. “I know it because I’ve checked the logs and other forms. Nine times in the last six years, some odd software error has caused the complete dumping of everything that happened between Collins and Ramiro.”

Jefferson considered his options.

I said, “These are very convenient blunders, or they are intentional acts of treason.”

“No,” said Jefferson.

“No?”

“Those interviews were Collins’ idea. But I okayed them.”

“Why?”

Too late, the man began to wonder if I was playing a game. “I don’t think I need to remind you, miss. I have the authority.”

“You do,” I agreed.

“And I’ll tell you this: Despite what you might believe, Ramiro continued to offer us help. Valuable, even critical insights. And we were justifiably scared of using the normal pipeline for that kind of news.”

“Name one insight,” I said.

He refused to respond.

“I do have the authority to demand an answer, sir.”

“What if another nation has captured one of Abraham’s people?” Jefferson posed the question and then shuddered. “It’s sobering to consider. Another power, possibly one of our enemies, is keeping

somebody like Ramiro in their own deep, secret hole—”

“What else?”

He winced.

“Give me your worst nightmare,” I demanded.

“I’m sure you can guess that.”

“All right,” I said. “After many years in prison, Ramiro happens to mention, ‘Oh, by the way, my basic assumptions might have been wrong from the beginning. Maybe Abraham isn’t looking for a cooperative Middle Eastern country. Maybe his sights are focused on a wealthier, much more advanced nation.’ ” I laughed sadly. “That isn’t the sort of news you’d cherish sending up the pipeline, is it?”

Jefferson studied me, once more trying to decide what I really was, and just how adept I might be.

“That last session with Ramiro,” I began.

Squaring his shoulders made Jefferson’s belly stick out.

“I can’t find any recording of the interview. Is that right?”

“There isn’t any,” he conceded.

I couldn’t decide if he was lying.

“Collins didn’t share any details with you. Did he?”

“Why do you think that?”

“Because when there was important news, he always came straight to you. But that night, he walked home with Jim.” I used a suspicious smile, pointing out, “Or maybe there was important news. But he knew that his audience would never accept whatever he was carrying with him.”

Jefferson looked up and to his right.

I glanced at his television, just for a moment. The civil war in China seemed quite small and smoky, a few pain-wracked bodies flicking in and out of existence, a single tank burning in an anonymous street.

At last, Jefferson asked me, “What exactly is your assignment here?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” I asked.

Then he laughed—a miserable, sickly utterance—and with a tone of confession, he said, “Oh, shit . . . that’s what I thought.”

7

“I’ve seen your arrival site.”

“Have you?”

“Not physically, no,” I confessed. “And even if I had the chance, I think I would pass on it today.”

“Reasonable of you.”

I stopped walking.

Ramiro took two more steps before pausing. His exercise yard was long and narrow, defined by brownish green walls, and for no discernable reason, his potted plants were healthier than those in the public avenues. Standing between vigorous umbrella trees, he watched my mouth, my eyes.

“Kashmir,” I said.

He decided to offer a narrow, unreadable smile.

“You couldn’t know this, but some years ago, I was able to walk on the Indian side of the disputed region. It wasn’t a long visit, but I came away with the impression that Kashmir was one of the most beautiful and most dangerous places in my world.”

My comments earned an agreeable nod.

“Did Collins tell you? Various teams have visited the Shyok River.”

“He mentioned that, and I’m sure you know that.”

“Tough work, those people had. Trying to verify the unthinkable, and doing it in what was a low-grade war zone. That first survey team was tiny and ignorant. They went in fast and flew out again on the same day, pockets full of soil samples and photographs. But the evidence was plain. Something energetic had happened there. The toppled trees and soil profiles were odd, and obvious. So we came up with a workable cover story, a fable that allowed us to move around the area, and when it was absolutely necessary, involve Pakistani Intelligence.”

Ramiro’s eyes remained wide open.

“But that second team didn’t know what the hunt was for either. Our top people were told not to ask for specifics, but to always watch for details that seemed out of place.”

“You said you’d been to the site,” Ramiro mentioned.

“By VR means.” I placed both hands over my eyes, pretending to wear the cumbersome mask. “Those agents came home with high-density images. I learned about them when I was first briefed about you, and I demanded to be given the chance to walk the site.”

“Did you learn anything?”

“Much,” I mentioned.

He waited.

“Knowing nothing, I might have guessed that some passing god had sneezed. A perfect circle of ground, big enough for a couple hundred people, had been swept clear. Locals had already carted away most of the downed trees, but there was enough debris to give a sense of what the scene had looked like. That second team dug a trench, took its pictures, and then covered everything up again.” I drew a vertical line with a finger. “A little more than a hand’s length underground, the old soil was waiting. It looked a little like shale. But according to the data, what was under that line was identical to the soil sitting straight above it. And by identical, I mean the same. Pebble for pebble, sand grain for sand grain.”

“The Lorton Energy was shaped carefully,” he said.

“Seventy feet across, eight feet tall.”

He nodded.

“I like studying the weird crap that they found in the soil. Do you know what I mean? The nano debris, the occasional busted machine part. Little stuff that we couldn’t make today, even if we wanted to.”

“There would have been more debris,” he mentioned. “Except our clothes and bodies were thoroughly cleaned before.”

“Smart,” I said.

He waited.

“Of course we needed Pakistani help,” I admitted. “There was no way to poke around their side of the disputed border without being noticed. And since they happened to be our loyal allies in the war on terror, at least for the moment, we invented some very scary intelligence about an armed group, possibly Indian radicals, who had slipped across the border in ’99. Our mutual enemies had carried gold and guns, and to help explain all the sampling, maybe enough radionuclides to build a few dirty bombs. They would have been on foot, we told our allies. And they might have had odd accents. Then we asked for help interviewing the local people, trying to find anybody who remembered strangers passing through three years before.”

“Some remembered,” said Ramiro.

I waited.

“Collins mentioned as much.”

“Stories about strangers, yes.” I started to walk again, and Ramiro fell in beside me. “I haven’t gone over all the testimonies. Just a few summaries, that’s all I’ve had time for. But there were witnesses on the local farms, and more in a couple of nearby towns. Exactly what you’d expect if a large group of quiet pedestrians had come in the night and quickly scattered across the landscape.”

“Most of us hid,” he said.

“Naturally.”

“A few were dispatched to secure transportation.”

“Those who would blend in best, I’ll assume.”

“I assume the same.”

“You and your little cell hunkered down together.”

With Ramiro beside me, I was keenly aware of how much taller he was. “In a woodlot by the water,” he said.

“And Abraham?”

“I don’t know where he was.”

“I wouldn’t believe you if you claimed otherwise.”

Silence.

“After all, you’re just a convert who got lucky. You weren’t scheduled to join the invasion. But at the last moment, one of the chosen warriors fell ill—”

“My friend.”

“The German, your benefactor. Sure. He cleared your entry into Abraham’s group. And when he couldn’t make the trip, you did in his place.”

My companion held his gait to the end of the room, and then with the precision of a big zoo cat, he turned and started back again.

“I have a question about the German.”

“Yes?”

“But first, let’s talk a little more about Kashmir.”

“Whatever you want, Carmen.”

“Even our crude virtual-reality technologies make it beautiful.”

“Our arrival site was lovely,” he agreed.

“Seeing the mountains and that glacial river . . . it made me sad to think about what’s happened to it since.”

He waited.

I said, “Sad,” once again.

“And I am sorry,” Ramiro volunteered.

“For what? You told us what you knew, and we acted on it. You had to pass through Kashmir because that’s where the only substantial time machine existed in your day. Point-to-point transfer is the way time travel is done. And it was your German pal who claimed that Abraham would center his operation inside Iraq. Because they had industry and an educated middle class, he said. Because of a greedy dictator and a useful secret service. Abraham planned to approach Saddam with the fantastic truth, and if the Baathists cooperated, there would be riches beyond all measure.”

“Iraq was a disappointment,” he allowed.

I nodded in agreement.

We had crossed the room again, stopping short of the door—a heavy metal door with thick glass on top, a single guard watching us from the other side.

“I was surprised,” Ramiro admitted. “I expected that you’d find a good deal of physical evidence.”

“We did find some lost nanos in warehouses, and a diamond screwdriver out in the oil fields.”

He shook his head slowly. “Perhaps you understand why I don’t like these people.”

“They manipulated you.”

His pace lifted, just slightly. And his hands swung the weights just a little harder.

“Then we bombed Iran hard. And goaded Israel into mangling Syria for us.”

We walked until the room ended, and like two cats, we turned and walked back in our own tracks.

“Two more disappointing wars,” I muttered.

He pointed out, “Your leaders made those decisions. I was very honest. I would have handled these conflicts differently.”

“I know.”

Then he said, “Pakistan.”

I waited.

“That was a possibility I mentioned to Collins.” His tone was frustrated. He sounded like a proud man who had suffered a public embarrassment. “Very early in our relationship, even before you reached Baghdad, I suggested to Collins that my people might gravitate to the nearest compliant government.”

“Except the Pakistanis were our friends. And we had close, close ties with Musharraf.”

Ramiro smiled. “Do you trust anyone, Carmen?”

I waved the question aside. “But of course Pakistani Intelligence—our partners on the ground—was full of ambitious souls.”

“That’s true.”

“The future that we should have lived could have been very instructive. Somebody like Abraham, setting his sights on potential allies, might identify the name and address of a young captain who would have eventually ruled his empire. A fledging Napoleon with connections and toxic ambitions. Leave him alone for another twenty or thirty years, and he would have earned his power. But patience isn’t common in would-be emperors. A man like that would surely look at the temporal jihadists as gifts from God.”

“Collins and I discussed the Pakistan possibility. In addition to several other scenarios.”

“I want to talk about Pakistan.”

“Of course.”

“Do you know why we hit it next?”

He took a moment before shaking his head.

“What did Collins tell you?”

“Its government was on the brink of collapse,” he said. “A powerful bomb was detonated in Islamabad, and a peculiar device was found in the wreckage. Collins brought the object to me, to ask my opinion.”

“I haven’t seen the device myself,” I admitted. “From what I hear, it’s sitting in a vault under the Pentagon.” And for a thousand years, that’s where it would remain, protected by the radioactive nightmares from Indian Point.

Ramiro lifted one of his weights, remarking, “It is about this size, but hollow. Cylindrical and composed of intricate nanostructures that give it some interesting properties.”

“Juice it up with electricity,” I mentioned, “and it turns invisible.”

“I gave a demonstration.”

“The machine has a structural flaw and can’t be used. You claimed. But if it functions, it could play a critical role in the construction of a portable, low-energy time machine.”

Ramiro lowered the weight, saying nothing.

“I trust everyone I know,” I mentioned.

He glanced at me, his gaze curious. Alert.

“What I trust is that people will always be people. They will do what they want, and when you search for motives, rationality proves to be a luxury. Fear and love and hatred: those are the emotions that count for something. And everything that involves us comes naturally from our human beast.”

“A reasonable philosophy,” he replied.

“What if Abraham was busily fabricating a new time machine?”

Ramiro said nothing.

“Our nightmare kept getting worse and worse,” I continued. “By then, we had a new president. A chance for fresh beginnings. But what if our enemies were trying to cobble together a small, workable time machine? They could bring it into our country and drive it wherever they wanted to go, and with modest amounts of power, they could aim at the future, launching the makings of bombs. It was just like Collins suggested early on, wasn’t it? The jihadists could launch atomic bombs or the ingredients for a chemical attack.” My voice picked up momentum. “We wouldn’t have any defense. Deadly, unbeatable weapons sent through time, invisible to us now. This moment. Abraham’s people could travel from city to city, and ten years from today, at a predetermined instant, our entire country would be wiped clean off the earth.”

We paused, turned.

“That’s what they made me read,” I confessed. “After I got my chance to walk beside a beautiful virtual river, that apocalyptic scenario was shown to me.”

Ramiro nodded.

“Of course we went into Pakistan,” I said. “I would have attacked, in an instant. Any responsible president would have been compelled to do nothing less. Because Abraham might have been hiding in Islamabad or Karachi, probably in some baby potentate’s guest room, and we had to do something. Didn’t we? Another little war, another stack of wreckage to poke through. But maybe we’d find enough this time, the kinds of evidence to show us where to go next, and who to hit next, and maybe even get a prisoner or two worth interrogating.”

Ramiro let me pass into the lead.

“Pricks,” I muttered. Then I slowed and looked up at him, saying, “It’s too bad about India. Too bad. But a few dozen nukes dropped into their cities is a lot better than total oblivion for us.”

My companion slowed, almost stopping, and with a patient, almost soothing voice, he asked, “What

about the German?"

"Your friend?"

"You had a question about him," Ramiro reminded me.

I stopped altogether. Something in my posture worried the guard on duty. But as he started to work the door's lock, I waved to him, ordering him to remain where he couldn't hear our conversation.

"I'm sure Collins already covered this ground," I said. "He was always thorough. I just haven't found it in the files yet."

"What do you want to know?"

"His name was Schwartz?"

"Yes."

"And you met him outside Madrid? In the refugee camp where he worked as a counselor, right?"

"Yes."

"He became your sponsor. He was the one who converted you to Abraham's cause—the violent overthrow of a flawed, weak past—and then he worked hard to have you accepted into his group."

"Collins and I thoroughly covered my history."

"But on the last day, your friend got sick."

"A strain of flu. Yes."

"That we haven't seen in our time." I stood close to Ramiro, letting his face hang over mine. "Your people didn't want to spark an unnecessary pandemic, particularly in a population you wanted to use as an ally."

"Schwartz was disappointed."

"Just disappointed?"

He shrugged. "Devastated is a better—"

"Did you make it happen?"

Ramiro blinked.

I took one step backward while staring at him. "Did you infect him with the flu? Just to free up a slot for you?"

The prisoner stared at me until he decided to stare at one of the bronze walls. "That is an interesting proposal."

"Collins never asked that?"

"No."

"Did you do it?"

“No, Carmen. I didn’t do any such thing.”

“That’s good to hear,” I allowed.

He nodded.

“In twelve years, Collins never asked that question?”

He shook his head and smiled, saying, “He didn’t.”

“But could Abraham have thought that you did such a wicked thing to your friend? Is that possible?”

“I have no idea what the man considered,” he said.

“But both of us can imagine the possibility. Am I right? A person might do the treacherous and horrible, just to get his chance to jump back through time.”

The disgust looked genuine, but not particularly deep.

“This is what I believe, Ramiro. I believe that there isn’t one question, no matter how unlikely or silly or outright insane, that you haven’t already anticipated. At one time or another, you have considered every angle.”

His next smile was cautious but proud.

“Whatever you are,” I said.

“What do you mean by that, Carmen?”

I closed my mouth, my heart slamming hard and steady. “I think you’re ready to say anything,” I told him. “Anything. If it suited your needs, short-term or long, you would happily admit to inoculating Schwartz. Or you’d agree that yes, Abraham was suspicious of you. Unless you decided to confess that you have been his most trusted agent from the beginning, allowing yourself to be captured, and then happily causing us to step everywhere but where we needed to be.”

“That,” Ramiro allowed, “is a singularly monstrous image of me.”

Then with no further comment, he swung the weights in his hands, continuing with his morning exercise.

8

I rode our smallest elevator to the surface, passing through the concrete-block field office and several more layers of security. One of the CIA girls gave me a lift to the nearby airstrip. As she drove, we chatted about safe subjects. The weather, mostly. And then she smiled in a certain way, mentioning Collins. “I haven’t seen much of him lately.”

I said, “He’s brutally busy.”

“Oh, sure.”

Collins was a cat locked in a box. In her mind, he was nothing but alive. Since there was no good reason for her to know what happened underground, she knew nothing.

“I’ll tell him you asked,” I lied.

She smiled. “Would you? Thanks.”

An old Globemaster was waiting on the runway, bound for undisclosed places but called out of the sky to snatch me up. Its crew had strict orders not to speak with their important passenger, which meant that I sat alone in the dark along with the rest of the cargo—a pair of battered Humvees and crates of medical supplies bound for some desperate place. My seat had the luxury of a tiny window, but there wasn’t much to see, what with the clouds of black smoke from the burning Saudi oil fields. But night found us over Missouri, and we crossed into a wide pocket of relatively clear air. The stars were exactly where they belonged, and I had the best reason to believe that none of them would explode in the near future. A power outage had struck Kentucky. A wilderness lay beneath me, broken only by a few headlights creeping along and the occasional home blessed with generators and extra fuel to burn. Who was the culprit tonight? At least two homegrown insurgencies had been playing hell with the TVA lately. But the power grid was tottering on its best day, what with every reactor mothballed and barely a fart’s worth of hydrocarbons finding its way to us.

I didn’t belong in this world.

Some years ago, I had carelessly stepped off my earth, entering a realm that only resembled what was home. I was lost, and it was the worst kind of lost. No matter how hard I looked, I couldn’t decipher which day and which hour had transformed everything familiar and happy.

Was it in ’99, when the future decided to invade us?

Or in ’02, when Ramiro was found just south of the Canadian border?

Neither moment felt worthy of this kind of dislocation. There were too many ways to redraw the following events, to many reasonable acts that would have minimized the damage wrought by faceless, nameless souls.

Even our early wars seemed incapable of obliterating so much.

But then we hit Pakistan, with India’s gracious help, and despite our assurances to obliterate the Muslim A-bombs, the Pakistanis managed to hit their neighbor with half a hundred blasts, pushing our final ally back into a peasant state, desperate and starving.

Three months later, fifty million were dead and the ash of the murdered cities was beginning to cool the world. That’s when a half-megaton nuke hidden in a barge was floated in close to the Indian Point reactors north of New York City. A cold front was passing through, and the resulting mushroom cloud threw up an astonishing array of toxins. Everything to the south was doomed. Infrastructure and millions of humans, plus trillions of dollars and the last relics of a working economy—all these good things were lost in a single act of undiluted justice.

Like most people, I watched the horror on television, from the safest room inside my helpless house. After years of government service, I had temporarily left the military. I was burnt-out, I believed. I was actually considering going back to college. To teach or learn; I didn’t have any definitive plan yet. I have a fair amount of imagination, but those following days and nights were too enormous to wring so much as a tear from me. I couldn’t grasp the damage, the horror. Great cities were rendered unlivable, perhaps for a thousand years. My countrymen, now refugees, were spreading a kind of inchoate, embryonic revolution as they raced inland. And during the worst of it, my government seemed unable to make even simple decisions about martial law and protecting our other reactors, much less mobilizing our shrinking resources and pitiful manpower.

That was the moment, at least inside my little circle of interrogators and ex-interrogators, that Abraham became a known name: The terrorist's terrorist.

He was a mastermind. He was a disease and a scourge. But even then, the most informed rumors avoided any mention of time travel.

People who knew Ramiro's story naturally assumed that Indian Point was the work of temporal jihadists. My government was temporarily hamstrung by the idea that their enemy had launched their bomb months or years ago, and there was no way to know where the next blast would blossom. It was almost good news when the event-team digested the nuke's isotopic signature and ruled out the bizarre. What we had witnessed was a plain hydrogen warhead—an old Soviet model—that had been smuggled into the country by one of our countless, and to this day still nameless, enemies.

Two years ago, I couldn't cry. But that night, sitting alone in the big overloaded aircraft, I began to sob hard. Sob and moan, but always trying to remind myself that in our quantum universe, every great event was nothing but the culmination of human decision and human indecision, chance and caprice. The poverty and despair surrounding me was vanishingly small. Our earth was just one thin example of what was possible, and because it was possible, this history was inevitable, and why did people waste their time believing that we could ever be special in God's unbounded eye?

After the tears, I got up to pee.

Turbulence struck before I could get back to my seat. I ended up taking refuge inside one of the Humvees, belting in as the entire plane shook and turned wildly. Obviously, the earth's atmosphere was furious at the damage we were doing to it. Even the most rational mind slides easily into a mentality where ancient forces focus their rage on what looked like a fat, helpless, soon-to-be-extinct mechanical bird.

Somewhere in the jumping darkness, an alarm sounded.

Then after a long five minutes, and with no visible change in our circumstances, the blaring stopped.

The only voice I heard emerged from the cockpit. "Who would you fuck first?" he screamed. "Ginger or Mary Ann?"

"Why not Lovey?" an older, wiser voice asked. "She's got the money!"

I laughed somehow, and I held tight to the seat beneath me, and with no warning whatsoever, we dropped hard, plunging through the last of the mayhem. Then the air calmed abruptly and the flaps changed their pitch as the big wings brought us around and down onto a great long slab of brightly lit concrete.

The tires screamed and survived.

Then the lights came up inside, and I finally saw my Humvee wasn't just old, but it had seen a few firefights. Bullet holes and shrapnel gouges begged for repair, but someone must have thought: Why bother? Since we never brought equipment home from the Middle East, I was left wondering if this was LA damage. Or Detroit. Or just the run of the mill unrest that doesn't earn national notice.

As the plane taxied, a crewman came to retrieve me. I rather enjoyed that moment when he stood beside my empty seat, scratching his tired head, wondering whether the only passenger had fallen overboard?

I said, "Hey."

He said, "Ma'am," and then regretted that tiny break of the orders. Without another sound, he showed

me to the hatch and opened it moments before a ladder was wheeled into position, and I stepped out into what was a remarkably cool August night, pausing just long enough to thank him.

But he was already wrestling the hatch closed again.

A single limousine waited on the otherwise empty tarmac. I had expected a convoy and probably a quick ride to some bunker or heavily guarded warehouse. But in times like these, important souls preferred to slip about in tiny, anonymous groups. The Globemaster revved its jets and pulled down the runway, fighting for velocity and then altitude. I reached the limousine just as the runway lights were killed. A pair of secret service agents emerged and swept me for weapons. I can't remember the last time I'd held any gun. I bent down and slipped into what proved to be an office on wheels. I would have been more surprised if the president was driving. But only a little more surprised. He offered his hand before he smiled, and his smile vanished before he was done welcoming me.

No pleasantries were offered, or expected.

I sat opposite him and sensibly said nothing.

He needed a shave, and a shower too. Which made me feel a little less filthy after my trip. I kept waiting for the voice that I often heard on the news—the deep voice that reminded us how the struggle wasn't lost and courage was essential. But what I heard instead was a tired bureaucrat too impatient to hold back his most pressing questions.

"What happened to Collins?"

"I don't know," I answered.

"Suicide, or murder?"

I nearly said, "Yes." Since this is a quantum universe, and everything that can happen does happen. Without hesitation or shame.

But instead of humor, I offered, "It was a suicide."

"You're certain?"

"Basically."

He had to ask, "Why?"

"I warned you," I said. "I'm not a criminal investigator. But I think that's the way Collins would have killed himself. At home, quietly, and without too much pain. But if somebody had wanted him dead—"

"What about Jefferson?"

I shrugged. "No, he wouldn't have been that neat or patient. Jefferson, or some associate of his, would have shot Collins and then planted evidence to make it look like a suicide. At least that's my reading of things."

The president wanted to feel sure. That mood showed in his face, his posture. But he couldn't stop thinking about Jefferson. "What about the prison's security?"

"You're asking is there an agent on the premises. One of Abraham's people, maybe?"

His mouth tightened.

“That I can’t answer,” I cautioned. “Really, I wouldn’t even know how to figure it out. If I had the time.”

He bristled. He had invested a lot of hope in me, and he expected at least the illusion of results. With a dramatic flourish, he opened a plain folder waiting on his lap. Then with a low grumble, he asked, “What about Collins?”

I wanted past this traitor-in-our-midst talk. But my companion happened to be my government’s most important citizen, and he was exactly as paranoid as it took to successfully represent his people.

“Was Collins one of them? I don’t think so.”

“You know the emergency council’s report,” he muttered testily.

“Which part? About the future knowing all our secrets? Or the DNA masking Abraham’s people?”

“I mean everything.” The president took a long moment to frame his next comments. “They didn’t show their faces, and for obvious good reasons. Even without Ramiro’s testimony, it’s hard to deny the possibility—the certainty—that profound genetic manipulation will be possible in a hundred years. Under those masks, the bastards could have looked identical to anybody from our world. At least anybody who happened to leave behind hair or a flake of skin.”

The emergency council was a cheerless room filled with scared specialists—off-plumb scientists and old sci-fi writers, plus a couple of psychics who happened to get lucky once or twice about future disasters. They had access to secrets, including scrubbed synopses of Ramiro’s insights. And during one pitiless night, they asked each other how could our fight, begun with so many good intentions, have gone so tragically bad.

Their answer was the worst nightmare yet. Among Abraham’s soldiers were there perfect duplicates of men and women who would have served in our highest offices, starting in ’01? Before our election, they could have slipped into the United States and replaced each of those historic figures. Unknown to us, the worst monsters imaginable would have worn stolen faces and voices. And later, sitting in Washington, those same pretenders could have done untold damage to the innocent, helpless world.

That scenario seemed to explain everything—bad decisions, incompetent methods, and the miserable follow-ups to each tragic misstep.

Paranoia had never enjoyed such an acidic, malicious beauty.

The file was important enough to leave open, and I caught one long glimpse. Which was what the president wanted, I suppose. He was eager to prove to me just how awful everything had become.

On top was a photograph, a famous face gazing up at the camera. The man was elderly now, shaved bald and very weak and far too thin. Each bruise was ugly and yellow, and together they defined the color of his cowering face. Was this where we had come? Taking our own people into a cellar to starve them and beat them, all in the vain hope that they would finally admit that they deserved this horrid treatment?

“Jefferson is Jefferson,” I maintained.

The president closed the file.

“And Collins was always Collins.”

He sighed. “Are you as sure as you are about the suicide?”

“Even more so,” I declared.

“But there was one day last year,” the president began. Then he made a rather clumsy show of pushing through more files, lending a banal officiousness to the insulting moment. This was what my leader had been doing while waiting for my plane. Thumbing his way through old security papers that meant nothing.

“I don’t care about last year,” I said.

“Collins went missing,” he snapped. “He was out on leave, and for fourteen hours, the man dropped out of contact with everybody.”

“He explained that later,” I pointed out. “The man was exhausted. He needed to be alone and regroup. And that’s what I believe.”

“You do?”

“More and more.”

“He wasn’t one of Abraham’s agents?”

“If he was, then maybe I am. And you are too.”

My reply was too awful to consider. I read revulsion in the man’s face and his fists. And I kept thinking that if I had bothered to vote in our last election, I never would have helped elect this dangerously incompetent man.

“I am not one of them,” he whispered.

“Maybe you are, and you don’t know it,” I said.

“What do you mean?”

“If our enemies can remake their faces and blend in everywhere, then why not rewire the thought patterns inside other people’s heads? If they have that kind of magical technology, then why not inoculate the world with a tailored virus that makes everybody into loyal Muslims who have no choice but to accept the wisdom of this never-seen Abraham?”

Here was one proposition that had never been offered to the president. And he responded exactly as I expected, eyes opening wide, seeing nothing.

I laughed it off.

He hoped that I was joking now, but he didn’t dare mention my suggestion again. Instead he posed one final question. “And why did Collins kill himself ?”

“Remember the dollar?” I asked.

“Excuse me?”

“On the bathroom floor, they found a coin in the blood. Do you remember that detail from the reports?”

He had to admit, “No.”

“Collins didn’t see or speak to Ramiro for three days. Other than that, nobody remembers him doing anything out of the ordinary. But I have reason to believe that our prisoner gave him something.

Something new. Something that was so difficult to accept that it took three days for Collins to wrestle with the concept. And then what the man did . . . I'm guessing this, but I would bet my savings on it . . . Collins went into his bathroom and ran a warm bath and got a knife and then flipped the coin. And the coin happened to come up tails."

"Which means?"

"It's a quantum-inspired game. In this reality, tails meant that he would slit his veins and bleed out."

"And if it was heads?"

"Then Collins would have done something a lot more difficult."

"And what would that have been. . . ?"

"Show the entire world what Ramiro gave him."

"And what was that, do you think?"

"I wish I knew." My laugh was grim and sad, and it suited both of us. "In my mind, I keep seeing Collins sitting in that bathtub, flipping the coin, working it until he got the answer he wanted."

A phone set between us rang once, very softly, and then stopped.

The president gestured at the invisible sky. "Another plane's heading west. It'll arrive in another hour or two."

His wave was a signal; my door suddenly popped open. It was still summer, but I could feel frost threatening.

"Do I still have full authority?" I asked.

Again, the presidential phone rang, begging for attention. He offered me a nod, saying, "For the time being, yes."

"Full authority?"

"Yes."

"Thank you, sir."

He stared at me for another moment. Then he quietly asked, "What do you think our world's chances are?"

"Very poor," I offered.

"Why?"

I had to say, "With people like us in charge, sir . . . our enemies don't have to do much at all."

The sound was soft but insistent, coming from the middle of my apartment door. I heard the first rap of the knuckles, but I did nothing for what seemed like a very long time. Aware of the bed beneath me, I looked at my hands in the faint blue glow of the nightlight, and then I turned and gazed at the red face of the clock on the edge of my nightstand. Eight minutes after three in the morning, I read. Twice. Then the knock quickened, and I sat up and put on my only robe and took the time to find my slippers before letting my visitor inside.

"You're not watching," Jefferson began.

I said nothing.

He looked at the darkness and rumpled sheets, his expression puzzled. Then his face fell back into a kind of breathless horror.

"What?" I asked.

He couldn't say it.

What passed for the outside was gloomy, not dark. A single guard stood in the middle of the enormous tunnel, meeting my eyes before she retreated into the shadows.

After my guest stepped inside, I said, "Come in."

Once the door was closed, Jefferson turned on my ceiling light. Then he showed me a tired, frazzled expression that set the tone. "Now Russia has been hit."

"Hit?"

"Bad."

I said, "Fuck."

"Moscow," he told me.

I sat on the edge of my bed.

"Half a megaton," he muttered, standing in the middle of the small room, hands dangling at his sides.

I stood up again, slippers popping as I walked to my television. The filtering software had a lot of work to do before we could be trusted to see the news. That's why the thirty-minute delay, and that's why the world before me was nearly two thousand seconds in the past.

A handsome Russian was sitting at a news desk, speaking quickly but with a surprising measure of poise. It was easy to believe that Jefferson was wrong. Nothing awful had happened. Not understanding the language or the Cyrillic lettering streaming past, it was easy to embrace the doubts assuring you, "This is nothing. Nothing."

Then the feed switched abruptly, picking up CNN. An older but equally attractive newscaster sat several thousands of miles from the tragedy. But he didn't have any trace of Slavic stoicism. Practically screaming, he declared, "In the morning, without warning, Hell was released just a mile from the Kremlin!"

Jefferson collapsed in my only chair.

I reclaimed my bed, watching the first in a series of inadequate views of an unfolding disaster. The flash

was only as bright as the amateur equipment could absorb. The images jumped, and I could hear people screaming in Russian . . . and then the camera and I were being carried into the subway, the screen going black when the power abruptly shut off . . .

The next view was a ten-second snippet from some high-rise far enough away to be spared by the blast.

The third was from someplace very close, and more recent. A digital camera was shoved over a concrete wall, showing a firestorm that was starting to grow wings.

"It's their turn now," I whispered.

Jefferson didn't seem to hear me.

I glanced at my guest and then looked away. "Russia almost seemed to be blessed," I mentioned.

"This is bad, Carmen."

"Yeah."

"No," he said.

I stared at him. "What do you mean?"

The last decade had been relatively sweet for Russia. Pragmatic and naturally authoritarian, it had managed to avoid most of the mayhem. And it didn't hurt that when the Middle East turned to smoke and warlords, the Russians happily sold their oil and natural gas to the EU and a few select friends, increasing their own wealth many times over.

Again, I asked, "What do you mean?"

Jefferson dipped his head.

The television jumped to the BBC. The Prime Minister had a few sturdy words to offer about giving support to all the victims of this latest misery.

I muted the sound.

Which helped Jefferson's focus. With a conspirator's whisper, he told me, "I was just in touch with somebody."

"Who?"

He named the CIA director, using the friends-only nickname.

I said nothing.

Jefferson gave my brown carpet a long, important study.

"What else is wrong?"

The man looked old and extraordinarily tired. What he knew was so urgent that he had to practically run over here to tell me. But now he lacked the courage to put into words what a confidential voice had told him five minutes ago, from the other end of a secure line.

"Has there been another explosion?" I prodded.

"No," he managed. Then he added, "Maybe."

"Shit, Jefferson—"

"Do you know how we were after Indian Point? Down here, I mean. We were terrified that the big assault was finally coming. But then we heard that an old Soviet warhead did the damage. Which meant it wasn't Abraham." He breathed faster, his face red as a blister. "And this bomb wasn't Abraham's either. The yield and isotope readings point to it being one of ours. One of eight."

"Eight? What eight?"

He rubbed his belly.

"Just say it, Jefferson."

"I just learned this for the first time," he reported. "After Indian Point, when everything was crazy . . . Washington dead and millions fleeing . . . somebody with the necessary skills ripped open an Air Force bunker and took out eight high-yield marvels, any one of which matches what we're seeing here . . ."

I said, "Fuck," once again.

He nodded.

"But the failsafes," I said. "Soviet bombs are one thing. But how could somebody make our damned things detonate?"

"Like I said, these people have skills."

The horrific images had returned, and we watched in silence for another minute or two.

"What's Russia doing now?" I asked.

"Their president's in St. Petersburg. And he's talked to our president two, maybe three times."

"The Director told you this?"

"Yes."

"Seven more nukes?"

"What if somebody wants payback for Indian Point?" he asked me.

Or himself.

"But the Russians weren't responsible," I said. "At least not directly, they weren't."

"But what if we're responsible for this?"

"Who's 'we'?"

Wearing an interrogator's face, he stared at me. "I know where you went last week, Carmen. Believe me, I have friends. I have connections. I know whose limousine you sat inside."

I stared back at him.

Then I carefully told him, "No. We had nothing to do with Moscow. Our president's too scared of

phantoms to pick a fight with an old enemy."

Jefferson bristled slightly. "What do you mean? 'Phantoms'?"

I didn't answer.

He said, "Carmen," twice, and then gave up.

A truce was declared, ushering in ten minutes of silence. I pushed the television back up to a comfortable volume, and using e-mail and my private sources, I pieced together a chain of events roughly the same as his.

"Their president wants to believe our president," I reported.

Jefferson nodded.

"But if there's a second attack . . ."

He looked at me. For the first time, he had the roving eyes of a healthy male. As if emerging from a fog, Jefferson realized that he was sitting in a woman's apartment and she was wearing nothing but a nightgown and slippers and a fuzzy old robe.

If only to change the desperate mood, he wanted sparks.

I pulled the robe across my chest. Then I told him, "You should go back to your apartment."

He said, "Maybe."

"Now," I said.

He stood stiffly and looked at me. Suddenly I could see Jefferson at his high school dance, standing beside the wrestling mats, too smart to bother asking any girl to accompany him out onto the gymnasium floor.

Against my wishes, I felt sorry for the poor guy.

Then I ushered him to the door and shut and locked it.

Alone, I slowly dressed, and after another hour of television, I stepped out into a tunnel that was beginning to go through the motions of dawn.

In the brightening gloom, I walked.

Then I ran.

I was pounding along my favorite stretch when I passed the round pond with its bluegill and a single dragonfly. Standing on the wooden deck was our resident fisherman. "Hey, Jim."

He almost jumped at the sound of my voice.

"Any bites?"

He said, "Hi, Carmen," and rolled his head. Then he flicked the fly out onto the windless water, and after a pause and a couple of deep swallows, he said, "Somebody just told me something."

"What's that, Jim?"

Looking at his own hands, he explained, “It’s this guy I know. He works security upstairs. And I know it’s against every order, and we aren’t supposed to talk—”

“You heard about Moscow?”

“And St. Petersburg.”

I had just enough time to ask, “What about St. Petersburg?”

Then the alarms began to blare—throbbing, insistent noises meant to jangle every nerve—and the fisherman threw down his gear and sprinted toward the nearest elevator. But he was too late. The field station on the ground had declared a lockdown emergency, and according to protocols, every exit disabled itself. Just once, Jim struck the steel door of the elevator with a fist. Then after a moment of quiet muttering, he returned to the pond. His face was as white and dead as the salt surrounding us. Not quite meeting my eyes, he said, “I’m sorry, ma’am. That won’t happen again.”

And then he picked up his tackle and silently struck out for home.

10

For nine days, our prisoner was allowed to keep his normal routine. Guards brought hot meals, clean clothes, and the expected little luxuries. His plumbing and lights worked without interruption, and at appropriate intervals, we spared enough power to brighten his exercise yard. The only significant change was that I stopped meeting with Ramiro. But he didn’t mention my absence, not once, just as he refused to discuss what must have been obvious. The shrill alarms would have been audible from inside his cell, and less than an hour later, the first in a sequence of deep, painful rumbles passed through the surrounding salt bed.

Fuel was limited, which was why the tunnel lights were kept at a midnight glow. And that’s why the vegetation began to wither and drop leaves, including inside Ramiro’s yard. The dying umbrella trees garnered a few extra glances, I noted. Then after six days, Ramiro’s milk turned to the dried variety, and there was a sudden influx of fried bluegill in his dinner, and the banana slices on his morning yogurt were brown at the edges. But his guards provided the largest clues. Even a sloppy observer would have noticed the miserable faces. Not even the hardest professional could hide that level of raw sadness. Ramiro would have kept track of which guards skipped their watch and who was pulled early when they felt themselves about to start blubbering. But again, he didn’t say one word that was at all removed from the ordinary.

Jefferson was a minor revelation. That sturdy old bureaucrat threw himself into the disaster, holding meetings and ordering studies. Key machinery had to be identified, inventories made of every spare part. Our generators were industrial fuel cells, and it was a minor victory when two extra barrels of methanol were discovered behind a pile of construction trash. For two days, the practicality of hydroponics was explored. But a determined search found no viable seed, save for some millet and cracked corn meant for his assistant’s pet parakeet. Our home was a prison, not a long-term refuge. But at least there were ample stocks of canned goods and MREs, and the water and air were agreeable to purification. Plus, there were quite a few handymen in our ranks. Most estimates gave us at least six months and perhaps as many as eight months of comfortable security. That was a point worth repeating each day, at the beginning of our mandatory meetings.

With nobody watching us, Jefferson was free to transform himself. He announced that there were few secrets worth keeping anymore. Only Ramiro remained off-limits. Then he told the grim, brief history of our latest war. All of us were invited to his apartment to watch the recordings that he'd made of news broadcasts and secret communications, and then the final pitiful message from the field station. Few accepted his invitation, but that didn't matter. Word got out quickly enough. Everybody knew what had just transpired, and the long-term prospects, and in a fashion, just how extraordinarily lucky we had been.

Through it all, Jefferson dispensed clear, critical directions as well as praise and encouragement, plus the occasional graveyard joke.

I preferred to keep to myself, investing my waking hours in the endless study of Ramiro.

Sometimes when he was alone, the man would suddenly grin. I had never seen that expression on him before. It wasn't a joyful look, or wistful. What I saw was an empty expression—a broad sycophantic look that I have seen in other faces, on occasion, particularly when people are struggling to believe whatever thought is lurking behind their bright, blind eyes.

Ramiro would fall asleep at his usual time, but then he'd wake up again, usually around three in the morning, and lie very still, staring up into the darkness for an hour and sometimes much longer.

Instead of new books and movies, he requested titles that he already knew—as if granting his mind an easier, more familiar path to walk.

On the ninth day, I had a tall cold glass of lemonade brought with his lunch, and he drank it without complaint.

On the tenth morning, Jim opened the cell door and said, "Sir," before ushering the prisoner down the short hall to the exercise yard. After the usual bookkeeping, he took his post inside, standing before the only door. Some of Ramiro's guards had shown worrisome symptoms. But after his initial panic, Jim had turned outwardly calm, sturdy. Maybe if I had paid closer attention, I would have seen some clue. But then again, even the best interrogator must accept the idea that she knows more about the beginnings of the universe than she will ever learn about the shape of a person's true mind.

But Ramiro noticed something.

I don't know what it was or why then, but after a few trips back and forth in the yard, the prisoner paused, passing one of the rubberized weights to his other hand and then bending down, picking up the thick dried and very dead leaf from the floor beneath the starved tree.

For a long moment, he stared at Jim, saying nothing.

They were ten feet apart, and the guard was watching everything.

Normal procedures demanded a second guard be on duty outside. She was watching on monitors and through the two-way glass, and sensing trouble, she set off a silent alarm. I arrived half a minute after a backup team of armed warriors, and two steps ahead of Jefferson.

In that span, nothing had changed.

Maybe Ramiro was waiting for an audience. But I think not. My guess is that he still wasn't sure what he would say or the best way to say it, and like any artist, he was simply allowing time to pass while his invisible brain struggled to find the best solution.

Through the monitors, I watched the brown leaf slip free of his hand.

“So, Jim,” said Ramiro. At last.

Jim didn’t move, and he didn’t make any sound. And if his face changed, the expression didn’t register on the security cameras.

As if getting ready to unwrap a wonderful gift, Ramiro smiled. It was an abrupt, startling expression followed by the joyous, almost effervescent words, “So how’s your home town these days? How is Salt Lake City doing?”

Jim sagged against the door.

From outside, Jefferson ordered, “Get in there!”

“No,” I ordered.

The backup team ignored me.

“No!” I stepped in front of them and looked at Jefferson. “You tell them. Who’s in charge here?”

With a tight sigh, Jefferson said, “Wait then. Wait.”

Jim was crying now. In a matter of moments, a weepy little boy had emerged and taken charge.

I told the guards to back away from the door.

Jim muttered a few words, too soft for anybody to understand.

“What’s that, Jim?” asked Ramiro.

Nothing.

“I can only guess,” the prisoner offered with a warm, infectious tone. “Another nuclear weapon must have struck another reactor. But this one was closer to us, wasn’t it? And the wind must have blown those poisons over the top of us.”

That was a dreamy, hopeful explanation, considering the circumstances.

“So we’re temporarily cut off down here. Isn’t that about it, Jim? And we’ll have to wait what? A few weeks or months to be rescued?”

“No,” said Jim.

Finding success, Ramiro smiled.

“Am I wrong, Jim?”

The response was abrupt, and vivid. With a string of awful sentences, Jim defined the scale of the new war and its brutal, amoral consequences.

“Everything above us is dead,” he declared.

Ramiro’s smile wavered, but he wouldn’t let go of it.

“About a thousand nukes went off, and wildfires are still burning, and the entire continent is poisonous

dead. The field office is abandoned. We aren't getting any messages from anybody. Not a squeak. We've got some security cameras working, our only connections to the surface, and they're only working on battery power. It's the middle of August, but there isn't any sun, and judging by what we can see and what we can guess, it isn't even reaching forty below at noon. . . !"

Maybe Ramiro had genuine hopes for his dirty nuke story—an awful but manageable nightmare. But this nightmare was more plausible, and he must have known that for several days. Yet he refused to react. He did nothing for one, two, three breaths. Enormous events had pushed him farther than even he could handle, and discovering what might be a weakness on his part, the prisoner suddenly looked lost, perhaps even confused, unable to conjure up one thin question, comment, or even a word.

And then Jim pulled his weapon.

The pistol would work only in his hand, and its ammunition was small and lightweight, designed to bruise and break bones but never kill. That's why I told everyone, "No. Leave them alone!"

My instincts were looking for a revelation.

But other people's instincts overrode my order. The guards pushed me away and started working at the door's stubborn locks. For a few seconds, nothing happened. Neither man spoke or moved. But then Jim set the gun's barrel against his target's eye, and I heard a quiet thump, and the bullet shattered the back of the socket before burrowing its way into the miserable, dying brain.

Ramiro dropped the weights, one striking his right foot. But he didn't appear to notice. Unblinking eyes stared at the corpse twitching on the floor in front of him. The prisoner was impressed. Enthralled, even. Perhaps he had never seen a man die. Cities and nations had been destroyed, but carnage had remained cool and abstract. Until that moment, he never appreciated just how messy and simple death was, or that he would have to take a deep breath before regaining his bearings, looking up slowly before noticing me standing in the open door.

"So this is what you wanted," I said. "The death of humanity, the end of the world . . ."

"No," he whispered.

"Are you sure?"

He sluggishly shook his head.

"Or Abraham wanted this," I suggested. "A nuclear winter, the extinction of our species."

No reply was offered.

I stepped over Jim and then stared up into Ramiro's face, allowing him no choice but to meet my eyes. Quietly, I said, "There is no such creature as Abraham, is there?"

He didn't react.

"And no army of temporal jihadists either."

His eyes closed.

"Just you," I persisted. "You're the only time traveler. Fifteen years ago, you arrived alone in the backcountry of Kashmir. You brought no more than what you could carry on your back, including the uranium and a few odd gizmos from your world. Then you littered the Middle East with just enough

physical evidence to give your story legs. Like that bomb in Islamabad, right? You set that up before you came to America. And then you let yourself get caught in Montana, which was your plan from the beginning."

His shoulders lifted, a shrug beginning.

I grabbed his chin and shook him. "Why send an entire army? Why bother? When a single soldier armed with the right words can do just as well . . . that's what this is about . . ."

Ramiro opened his eyes.

An impressed little smile began to break loose. He asked softly, "And when did you realize this, Carmen?"

"Always," I admitted. "But I couldn't believe it. I wouldn't let myself even admit that it was possible. Not until I saw a photograph of a former official with my own government, bloodied and terrified, and I realized that our own hands had done that to him." I shook his chin again. "That's when I saw what made sense. Finally. Maybe there was an Abraham, but if you happened to be him . . ."

Ramiro laughed, and with a cat's grace grabbed my wrist and yanked, stepping out of my grip.

"Who's the prisoner here?" I muttered.

The laugh brightened.

"And who is the torturer?"

He offered a slight and very quick bow.

"But why?" I wanted to know.

"Carmen," he began. "Believe me, I could offer a thousand plausible stories. But how would you know if I was being truthful, in whole or even in part?"

"Try it anyway," I said.

But he backed away, waving both hands as if to fend off those temptations. "The point is, Carmen . . . your world was deserving. Almost every outrage that has happened to you has been justified. A necessary, reasonable revenge has been taken. And these many years . . . almost every day that I have spent in your world, Carmen . . . has brought me untold pleasure . . ."

11

Last year, during an official leave from the prison, Collins managed to slip away from his official escorts. His shadows. I can only speculate what he did during most of the day, but fourteen hours is a very long time, if you have a good plan and the discipline to make it happen. My personal knowledge extends to two hours spent together during the afternoon, inside a second-story room at a Red Roof Inn just outside Denver. Despite Ramiro's insistence to the contrary, I'm not unlovely and I have my charms, and his interrogator and I had been carrying on an infrequent but cherished affair—five surreptitious encounters

over the course of an ugly decade, moments where sex and sexual talk could dominate over the secrets of state.

I never discussed my work with him, and he almost never mentioned his.

But Denver was different. I stepped into a darkened room to find a changed man. Collins was pale and much heavier than usual and obviously exhausted. After an hour of sweat and modest success, we gave up. I talked about showering, and he talked about slipping away in another minute or two. Then for a long while, we just sat side by side in bed, and in that way people in our world would do, we began to list the friends and associates that had died because of Indian Point.

Until that moment, I didn't realize that Collins had been a father. Not that he was close to his fifteen-year-old son, but the unfortunate boy had lived on Long Island with his mother. The fallout plume blocked every bridge to safety, and like a million others, they spent the next several days chasing a string of promised rescue ships and rumors of airlifts. Collins' best guess, based on a couple of sat-phone calls received near the end, was that they had managed to survive for a week or eight days, and then both died, probably during the Islip riots.

"Sorry" is a weak word. But I offered it anyway.

This man that I didn't truly know silently accepted my sorrow. Then he tried to shrug, and with a bleak resignation that I couldn't understand at the time, he mentioned, "This could have turned out differently."

When haven't those words been valid?

With his deep, godly voice, Collins said my name. Then he smiled—a crooked, captivating smile on his worst day—and quietly asked, "Why are we doing what we do? Anymore, what are we after?"

"It's our job," I offered.

He saw through those words. "Bullshit, darling. Bullshit."

"Yeah, but we're still the good guys," I said.

Then we both enjoyed a sorry little laugh.

"I'll tell you what I'm doing," he said, shaking his head. "Every day, I'm trying to save the world."

"Oh, is that all?"

He kept smiling, though he didn't laugh. He let me stare into his eyes, taking my measure of his soul. Then carefully, slowly, he said, "You once told me about this woman. Do you remember? You met her on some cross-country flight. You got her to talking, and she eventually confessed her plan to kill her elderly husband. Do you remember that anecdote?"

"Sure."

"Did you ever follow up on it?"

"What do you mean?"

He didn't have to explain himself.

With a defensive growl, I admitted, "No, I haven't bothered."

"Why not?"

I could have mentioned that it wasn't my particular business, or that I never knew anything of substance, or that no crime had been committed. But I didn't offer excuses. Instead, I admitted, "The woman loved her husband. Agree with her or not, I don't believe she would have harmed the man to be cruel or out of convenience."

"And you're sure that she loved him?"

"I could tell," I said.

"And I believe you, Carmen."

I sat quietly, wondering what was this about.

"You know, you're very good. Piecing together clues, I mean. Reading the subject's emotions, their intentions." Then he laughed, insisting, "Maybe you're not quite my equal. But there's nobody better than us."

Just then, I could not read that man. I had absolutely no clue what Collins was thinking.

"Saving the world," he repeated.

I waited.

"I'm working on something huge," he admitted. Then with a wise little sneer, he edited his comment. "I'm working on somebody huge. A subject unlike anyone you've ever met or even imagined."

I didn't want this conversation. He was breaking our most essential rule, bringing work into our bed.

"That man is still holding some big secrets," Collins confided. "All these years working on nobody but him, and I still haven't gotten to his core."

I climbed out from under the sheets.

"If I could just get what I wanted from the guy," he muttered.

I said, "Stop that."

With sharp disappointment, Collins stared at me. It took several moments for him to decide what to say next. Then he offered what had to be the most cryptic and peculiar excuse that I had ever heard.

"If he gives me what I want," he began.

A genuine smile broke across his weary white face.

"If he shares what he knows, Carmen, I can save the world. Not once, but a thousand times. A million times. More times than we could count . . . and now wouldn't that be a legacy worth any cost?"

We decided to throw the prisoner into Jefferson's apartment, accompanied by half a dozen pissed-off guards, and the guards were instructed to sit Ramiro down before the television, and in sequence, play the Apocalypse recordings for him.

Jim's body was carried away, and Jefferson found himself standing alone with me. He asked the walls, "So what do we do with him next?"

"What do you want to do?"

My colleague refused to look at my eyes. "Our food is limited," he pointed out. "Ramiro constitutes more than 1 percent of our population. At this point, can we really afford to keep him alive?"

Then he braced himself.

But I surprised him, saying, "Agreed," as if I had come to the same inescapable conclusion.

But our methods seemed important, and that's what we were discussing when one of the guards returned.

"Lemonade-7 wants paper and a pen," she reported.

"Give him whatever he wants," I said.

She glanced at Jefferson.

He nodded.

"And tell him he doesn't have much time," I yelled as she ran off.

For a few moments, Jefferson studied me. But he didn't have the stomach to ask what he wanted. Instead, he quietly admitted, "Maybe you're right, Carmen. A bullet is simple. But shoving him out on the surface, letting him fend for himself . . . that makes more sense . . ."

Yet that left various logistics to consider. One of the elevators had to be unlocked, power had to be routed back into it, and every passenger except Ramiro had to be protected from the radiation and cold. Those necessities took dozens of people nearly two hours of determined labor, and then somebody mentioned that a short-wave antenna and Geiger counter could be set up on the dead prairie and spliced into the elevator's wiring—helpful inspirations, but cause for another hour delay.

According to the guards, Ramiro remained cooperative and busy. Unblinking eyes paid close attention to the news broadcasts, particularly during those desperate minutes when city after city suddenly quit transmitting. Each of his guards seemed to nourish a different impression of his mood. The prisoner was relishing the slaughter, or he was numbed by what he was seeing, or maybe he was only pretending to watch events play out on that tiny screen. But every witness agreed: the prisoner's first focus was in filling the yellow pages of the legal pad, his head dropping for long intervals, that delicate artisan's hand scribbling dense equations and weaving diagrams and sometimes adding a paragraph or two in his unborn hodgepodge of a language.

It was early afternoon when he set down the pen. A few minutes later, without explanation, he was brought to the elevator. He was still wearing dress trousers and a short-sleeved shirt, plus his favorite sandals. But the two volunteers waiting for him were half-hidden inside layers of cumbersome gear.

Ramiro handed the filled pad to the shorter figure.

I didn't look at his gift. I knew what was on it. With both hands, I folded it in half and handed it to the nearest guard. "It's a little goddamn late now, isn't it?" I snapped at him.

"Maybe enough people will survive," he offered.

I tried to cut him open with my gaze. Then I turned and shuffled through the open steel door, my oversized fireman's boots clumping with each step.

Jefferson checked his sidearm, picked up the makeshift antenna and Geiger counter, and followed me.

There was just enough room for our equipment and three bodies. Jefferson pulled his oxygen mask aside and gave a few final orders. Then the door shut, and with a sudden crotchety jolt, the elevator started to climb, shaking slightly as it gained momentum.

"Do you understand what I just gave you?" Ramiro asked.

"Of course I understand," I said.

"Tell me, why don't you?" Jefferson asked.

Ramiro smiled, but he sounded uncharacteristically tense. "Time travel is not particularly difficult."

Neither of us reacted.

He said, "Lorton Energy is cheap, if you know the right tricks."

I looked only at Jefferson. "The first time Ramiro wrote about Lorton and Casimir plates, he didn't give us those tricks. He pretty effectively misled our scientists into chasing the wrong methods. But of course a man who remembers the dates and positions of dozens of supernovae—a creature with that kind of faultless memory—would easily digest the plans for a working time machine. That's what Collins realized. Eventually. He didn't mention it to anybody, but for these last years, Collins was chasing the tools that would allow us to go back in the past, like Ramiro did, but this time make things right."

Jefferson shook his head. "Yeah, but each incursion in the past is a separate event," he recalled. "If he jumped back, he would accomplish what? Setting up a new time line?"

"Except we could send back a million teams," I replied. "A million attempts to make amends, and each new history owing its existence to us."

No one spoke for a moment. The only sound was the air rushing around the racing elevator.

Then Jefferson turned to Ramiro. "You gave Collins the time machine. But then for some reason he killed himself."

"Ramiro gave him more than the time machine," I explained. "He also told him the rest of the story. How he had come alone, and there was no Abraham, and every tragedy that had happened to the world was directly tied to what Ramiro had said to Collins, and what Collins had unwittingly fed upstream to the gullible and weak."

Jefferson put a hand on his pistol.

I watched Ramiro's face. If it weren't for the tightness around the mouth and the glassiness to the eyes, I would have imagined that he was relaxed. Happy, even. Maybe he was assuring himself that these years and his sacrifices had been a great success. Not perfect, no. But who could have guessed that Moscow would have been nuked? Which meant that in countless realities—realms not too different from ours—he

had achieved exactly what it was that he'd set out to achieve here.

"And Collins didn't expect that part?" Jefferson asked.

"That's my guess," I admitted.

His hand dropped back to his side.

A few moments later, the elevator began to slow.

My ears were popping. I felt my heart quicken, and I judged that Ramiro was breathing faster too. A sudden chill was leaking into the elevator, and I mentioned it, and then I suggested, "We should put on our masks."

Jefferson looked tired and angry. He wiped his eyes twice before making himself strap the oxygen mask over his weepy face.

I left mine off for the moment.

"I don't think you wanted this world to die," I said.

Ramiro didn't respond.

"You were hoping to hurt a lot of people and leave the rest of us wiser," I continued. "At least that's what you told yourself. Except what really inspired you was wielding this kind of power, and you won a lot of fun for your troubles, and now it's finally over. You're done. We're going to throw you into the cold, into the wasted darkness, and you'll have to stumble around until you die some miserable way or another."

Ramiro made a soft, odd sound. Like when a bird cheeps in its sleep.

The elevator had nearly stopped. I stood facing the prisoner, my back flush against the door.

He smiled with a weak, vacuous charm.

In the end, the prisoner was defiant but terrified, utterly trapped but unable to admit his sorry circumstances. He believed that he was still in charge of his fate. Arrogance saved for this moment made him smile. Then he said, "You know quite a bit, Carmen. I've been impressed. But you should realize that I won't allow any ignoble, indecent finish for me."

The elevator door began to pull open.

Ramiro's eyes never closed, even once he was dead.

Behind me, a young woman's voice—a voice I knew from my ride to the nearby airstrip—called out, "Hello? Yes? Can we help?"

The day was bright and warm.

Two men suddenly dropped to their knees. But Jefferson stood again, stripping off the mask and then his heavy outer coat, staggering into the functioning, fully staffed office, finally stopping before a window that looked out over a flat, glorious landscape and a sky of endless blue.

"Everything was faked?" he whispered.

“Everything,” I said.

“The newscasts, the communications?”

“Digital magic,” I mentioned. “And playacting by real people, yes.”

“The security cameras.”

“Easy enough.”

“But I felt the cold,” he said.

I started to explain how when the elevator started to rise, a dozen portable air conditioning units began cooling down the top of the shaft.

“But we felt the explosions, Carmen!”

“Those were the easiest tricks,” I admitted. “A few tactical nukes thrown down some nearby oil wells.”

He pressed his face against the warm glass, not fighting the tears anymore. Maybe he was crying out of relief. But in my case, I was crying for Jim, and for Collins, and for countless dead souls that I couldn’t put names to. Behind us, a medical team was working hard to revive a man who refused to return to the living. When they finally gave up, we went to look at Ramiro’s limp body.

“Do you think he saw?” Jefferson asked.

I knelt and closed the eyes.

“In the end,” he persisted, “do you think he realized just how badly you tricked him?”

“Yes,” I said.

I said, “No.”

Then I stood and walked away, adding, “It happened both ways, and more times than I would care to count.”