

HOROLOGE

S. YAHTAHEI

HOROLOGE

Volume I of the Horology Trilogy

S. Yahtahei

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PREFACE

Accomplished writers are subject to pressure from their publishers, as well as the internal stress of visualizing and communicating the detail necessary to produce an idea - a vision - until the full scope and complexities of their story are complete. The undertaking can be daunting. For every writer, there are days, weeks, and, in many cases, years filled with the sheer terror of not having more ideas, more material for their story.

These anxiety and dread-filled experiences happen many times for some writers and even more for others. The copious suffering with the constant pain of headaches, the persistent fear of being alone with the loss of family and friends, drains some writers. This can cause psychological frustration followed by sleepless nights, excessive drinking, drug use, and long walks in solitude. These are all constant challenges for a skillful writer.

Nothing like that, applies here...

From the age of twelve, Cooper Wade dreamed of being recognized in the literary community as one of the greatest storytellers of modern times. Every day he would read historical accounts from famous authors such as McCullough, Hamilton, Douglass, Arendt, Popper, and Weir, to name a few of his favorites.

His interest in studying the accounts of past events was his way of making sense of the present. He thought understanding the origins of societies and the psychological traits of human beings, would give him insights he could use in his own writing career.

Despite his extended knowledge of the past, it did not prepare him for his future. His deep-rooted inner weakness made him unable to cope with the societal pressure from his peers, and his innate desire to be liked and admired.

Eight years later, he succumbed to that overpowering pressure, and his dream was immediately eliminated. It happened the moment he pierced the skin of his left arm with the needle of a makeshift syringe filled with black Mexican heroin.

Even though that self-destructive behavior was now behind him, the deep feeling of lack of self-worth remained. No matter how remote the chance, his dream of writing the ultimate story remained.

Still, at fifty-seven years old, he knew he'd already lived the bulk of his life. Even though he notioned it was all downhill from now, he clung to his dream as if it was all he had; because it was.

Because of his past writing failures, he had to be deceptive. Most publishers would recognize his work if he used his real name, so now he writes the rare story under the pseudonym C.W. Comstock.

Introduction

HOROLOGE (hor-o-loge): “any instrument or device used in telling or measuring the chronology of time.”

As I’m sure many of you may have, I once presumed that traveling through time is impossible. But, do you fully understand the phenomenon of time?

Time, as we know it, is purely a human construct. It is simply the proportional connecting factor comparing one moment with another. Physicists define Time as the progression of events from the past to the present into the future. Some scientists consider Time as the fourth dimension of spacetime, used to describe events in three-dimensional space and provide the modeling of our reality.

In early human history, humans freely worked as long as it was necessary, hunted and ate when they were hungry, and laid down when they were tired. Then we gradually became civilized.

We humans invented our definition of time by cataloging our observations of planet Earth as it travels around our star, the positions of the stars in the sky, along with observed behavior of animals. We then manipulated this ocean of knowledge, viewed through our human perceptions, into numerical references for clocks and calendars. In the process, our minds were molded to associate these natural, animal, and planetary cycles with our construct of time.

Throughout human anthropology, we’ve used these instruments to organize and track events to synchronize our activities, such as classifying seasons to determine the optimum period to plant or harvest crops. We humans are curious and at the same time desire structure, so we need those calculations to make sense of our place on the planet and to organize our individual lives as well as our societies.

As the ages passed and human technology advanced, our understanding of time became etched in our body and our minds. We no longer possess the capacity to imagine living outside our established culture of time. However, human time is an illusion producing a false sense of the reality of the universe.

We know the history of the universe constantly flows and we perceive the movement of time as linear, but time is not linear. A wise human must consider the fact there are millions of planets in the cosmos that have the potential for life. Maybe not life as we know it, but life nonetheless. Who are we, as mere humans, to declare our parameters of time and space to be absolute? Who are we to claim traveling through time is absolutely impossible?

It's very possible the understanding of time for inhabitants of other planets in other galaxies is unlike that of Earth. It can be faster or slower than our own depending on their star, the prevailing gravitational fields, and the velocity of their world. Without which, any understanding of time would not exist.

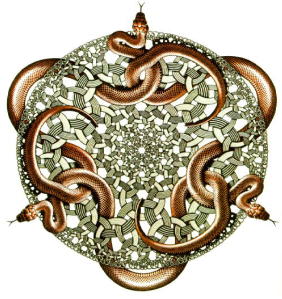
Does anyone really know what time it is? Is there a grand clock that accurately measures the movement of time for every feasible moment of every planet in the universe?

Obviously, reality is what we perceive it to be. But please do not trap the cosmos inside your Earthly view of time and space.

As the future streams into the present, and the present slides into the past, think about how long it took to read this. Did you notice time passing? Did you just travel through time?

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Time, as a man-made concept, has little to do with the evolution of matter.

As my wise great-grand-uncle, Thaddeus J. Fenton III once wrote:

There I sat,
all broken hearted...
I Paid my money to crap,
but only farted....

I really hate pay toilets...

Chapter 1

Earth Standard Year 2068

This journey begins on the morning of September 19th in Earth Standard Year (EST) 2068. It was Thursday; a sunny cool day, just cold enough to remind everyone still alive that the slowly advancing glaciers were not far away.

It was a time when social, economic, and political stability was a welcome change following the previous decades of social upheaval that political deviants referred to as "progress". Old codgers like myself were glad those hysteria-inducing times had finally passed. However, I wasn't particularly affected either way because my station in life was of dubious benefit no matter the social conditions.

At this point in time everyone in the world, including myself, thought nothing significant could be happening anywhere except this one place, right here on Earth. We humans were unthinking social constructs on a minuscule stage fighting over scraps we thought were important.

I sat at my desk, "Time to start writing my ultimate story," I told myself aloud, and started my computer.

Switch on...

System Start-up...

Start-up sound -- loony tunes...

Application open...

Finally...

Author: C.W. Comstock

The title...

In the background, I hear the local radio station notifying fellow travelers that traffic on the city's two major highways is backed up for miles. Highway 51 is obstructed because some other idiot drivers had an accident and people were rubbernecking. Highway 83 is snarled because of the ongoing construction work, which has taken over six years and isn't yet complete. In her excited radio voice, the announcer describes the typical slow traffic patterns as another crisis. She feverishly explains how the hundreds of drivers trapped on the roads could expect to wait 30 to 60 minutes before they were able to move another 3 feet forward.

I looked around my naked office and let out a long sigh. So, this is how I begin another unbearable day, sitting at my computer, staring at the blank page on the screen, trying to write my next story. I am dressed in an old gray sweatsuit with coffee in one hand and a cigarette in the other. Of course, I don't wear the sweatsuit because I would sweat from exercising, it was simply loose-fitting and comfortable on this old body. The grinding monotony of another day has begun with me trying to siphon from the depths of my shallow mind an inspiration, a new exciting storyline. A tale that will jolt the journals of the writing community while at the same time making me loads of money.

With over 30 years of writing experience, I have yet to get the 'big break' that would make my chronicles acceptable for the video industry. That's not to say I haven't been successful or able to make a living. A more apt description would be to barely survive. Of course, there have been a few minor successes over the years in my writing career.

You know, the much-criticized short story, the random magazine article, the freelance writing for newspapers and news blogs, even writing articles for some unimpressive specialty journals.

Oh yeah, I can't forget the many letters to the editor to comment on current events. But my writing opportunities haven't come through frequently enough for me not to have to take the odd job, work part-time at the local Walmart, or sell my own blood for money to keep food on the table.

Overall, I suppose it's been a good life. For a short time, I was married to an intelligent and beautiful woman who brought emotion and passion to my dreary life. Before we met, I was dead inside. At that time my all-consuming passion was getting enough drugs to help me forget something I couldn't remember. If it wasn't for her I probably would have ended up a drug-addicted street urchin begging for money for my next fix by telling exaggerated tales to passers-by.

She was the honest dreamer and I was the amoral fabulist. But together we made a good team. She supported my quest for writing fame while I kept her somewhat grounded in reality. Our partnership was good enough to raise a family. The reality is, I produced the sperm required to proliferate my genes but rarely took part in the actual raising of my two offspring.

They are all gone now. My wife was eternally damaged in an automobile accident, t-boned by a drunk driver at full speed. She finally found peace when she died 7 years ago. My offspring have been pissed at me for years for not being a better husband and father and now have their own lives and families. They do call on occasion, interrupting my self-pity because I'm still unable to produce the ultimate story. I have now reached the age where life stops giving the little it gave and starts taking away what little is left.

Not even a title...

Maybe if I read the newspaper it will give me the spark needed for inspiration. Wrong again. The newspaper is crammed with enough bad news to make me realize how my life has been trivial. Article after article about crisis

after crisis; more crime, death, disaster, destruction, and rancorous politics. It's depressing. Politics, ah yes, our new ultimate leader has decided the country has been so screwed up the last 292 years that he is going to completely change our entire system of governing so he can leave his mark in the history books. He will certainly leave a mark. According to the news, his agenda is to continue taking money from the working people and give it to those who have shown they are only qualified to spend more money than they have so they will vote for him. He uses the typical delusional utopian rhetoric directed at the ill-informed. I guess bankrupting the country isn't such a bad way to do business. It does buy the needed votes to keep him and his political cohorts in power. Maybe it's the best way. Most people are doing the same thing. Living outside of their means, putting everything on credit, buy-now-pay-later, then ask for more or file for bankruptcy. But that's a good thing. It keeps the lawyers and politicians off the welfare lines and living the good life. Perhaps my offspring should have become lawyers. There are never enough lawyers in the world. That way they could take care of me in my old age. Yeah... right!

Ring...Ring...Ring...

Now it's the phone interrupting my lack of inspiration and self-pity. If I wanted to talk to someone, I would've called them.

Obviously, this is going to be yet another unproductive day of writing. Much like yesterday and the day before that and the month before that and the year before that.

Ring...Ring...Ring...

I suppose I should answer it. It might be important. Yeah... right!

Finally answering I say, "Speak," in a demanding tone.

The female voice on the other end is calm and self-assured, not at all surprised by my attitude.

"Is this Mr. Comstock?" she asked in a sweet, soothing voice.

"Yes, this is Mr. Comstock, what do you want?" I asked, keeping my initial tone while trying not to succumb to the urge to yell, "Get lost!"

"Mr. Comstock my name is Juanita Justus. I have been instructed by the board of the U.O.H. to contact you for a possible interview. Can you be interviewed in the near future?" she asked politely.

What the hell is the U.O.H., I wondered. They're probably some charity wanting money for some 'worthy cause'.

"An interview?" I asked. "Why would anyone want to interview me?"

"Is this the Mr. Comstock who is a writer?" she calmly continued.

"Yes," I said with some suspicion.

"Then the U.O.H. would like an interview to discuss the possibility of writing a few stories for them."

A few stories? I haven't been able to write my name without making a mistake. Why me, I wondered.

"What kind of stories?" I cautiously asked.

"Would you be available for an interview in the near future?" she asked again.

"Ah.... sure," I hesitantly replied.

Knock...Knock...

Now it's the door. This was really turning into another day of no writing.

"Just a moment, please," I told the phone.

When I got to the door, I opened it with a sudden jerk. There stood a tall, thin, and very attractive young woman, probably in her mid-thirties, with a wide comforting smile. She had deep blue eyes and lustrous light brown, almost blond, hair. She was wearing a very tight, brightly colored, flowered dress that ended just above her knees. Slung over her left shoulder was a small black leather messenger bag.

"Mr. Comstock, I am Juanita Justus. I'm here for your interview."

"What the hell? Aren't you on the phone?" I said doing a double-take.

"Is this not the near future?" She asked with a straight face.

"Yes, it is the very near future. In fact, it's more like the immediate future."

"You did say you were available for an interview and...."

"Yes, Yes," I broke in, "I know what I said, but this is very sudden," and strange I thought. She must have called from outside my front door.

"The U.O.H. requires an interview with you as soon as possible," she explained.

These must be some important stories to need such immediate attention, I thought.

"First I have to know who or what this U.O.H. is and what type of stories they or it are after."

She smiled showing perfectly straight teeth that were as white as I'd ever seen. Without hesitation, she effortlessly sauntered straight through the doorway while at the same time saying, "May I come in?"

I quickly stepped aside so I wouldn't be trampled. As she passed, I got the gentle smell of a mixture of sweet grass and Lavender.

"Yes," I said, closing the door behind her, feeling very perplexed by the whole thing. That feeling was soon gone and in its place, my overwhelming depression began to gain more ground.

Who could this U.O.H. be that such an attractive young woman would be working for them? What kind of story was so important that I would receive a phone call and personal visit by the same woman within minutes?

Wait... the phone, I thought. Glancing in the direction of the phone, it was cradled back in its recharging stand. When I turned and looked back, this strange young woman had taken a seat on the couch, showing most of her stunningly well-shaped thigh in the process.

Well now, I thought, this might turn out to be quite an interesting interview after all. The least I can do is enjoy the view and that tantalizing smell.

"Make yourself comfortable," I said with a smile in my voice, positioning myself in the chair directly across from her.

"So, what is the U.O.H. and what kind of stories do they want me to write," I asked.

In a matter-of-fact tone, she said, "The U.O.H. is an exclusive organization that promotes writers throughout the universe. One of their purposes is to assist writers who have been unable to find sufficient material. An interview is scheduled and if the writer qualifies, they are given the instruments that will assist them in acquiring the needed storyline material. These instruments are given to them to use for life or until they wish to return them, or pass them on to another qualified person. Are you ready for the interview?"

I was stunned by her directness and unable to speak. Writers in the universe, what the hell did that mean? My mouth hung open in disbelief. Is this some kind of joke? Have I finally reached the point of needing tranquilizers and psychotherapy? After her brash explanation, all I could do was shake my head yes.

"Good," she said, removing a small computer pad from her bag. "Then let's begin. Have you written any successful stories in the last eight or more years?"

She obviously knew the answer or she wouldn't be here. Still somewhat confused by her original statement I simply shook my head no.

She tapped something on the computer pad and asked, "Are you currently working on a story?"

Again, all I could do is shake my head no.

She tapped on the pad again, blinked a few times, then gave me a comforting smile.

"Excellent, you have successfully completed the interview and are entitled to U.O.H. assistance."

With that, she opened her bag and produced a beautifully carved wooden container about half the size of a cigar box.

Her lips spread in a tentative smile, "Here are your instruments," she said, as she handed me the box.

Still in somewhat of a daze, I put out my hand and accepted it, waiting for further instructions. They never came. With my next eye blink, she was gone.

"What the hell?" I heard myself say as I jumped up from my seat. I glanced around the room and looked down. In my hand was the wooden box.

Chapter 2

I've been sitting at my desk for what seemed like hours, staring at the box in front of me, unable to decide what to do. Within 10 minutes, I had been contacted and interviewed by a mysterious yet beautiful young woman, accepted a writing job from some secretive group, and received a peculiar little wooden box.

I just sat staring at the box, unable to muster enough courage to open it. This was all too bizarre, I thought to myself. Had I hallucinated this woman with the long legs and perfect smile? If I had, how did I get this box?

I had to open it...

Hell, maybe there was a list of story ideas inside or maybe the contact number for this U.O.H. if I hadn't also hallucinated that. Damn, I had to do something, not just sit here squandering time. After all, I could be writing the ultimate story.

Ok, I'm going to open it.

I slowly pushed the box out to arm's length. Peeking up from the edge of the desk, with one hand on the bottom and the other on the top, I slowly raised the lid.

When I opened the lid about a quarter of an inch the inside began to glow brightly causing me to quickly close it with a thud. What the fuck was that, I thought.

"Oh, what the hell," I said out loud, and suddenly jerked the lid fully open.

The abrupt blinding light caused me to back up several steps. The glowing corona pouring from the box was a bright orange color. In the center, it faded to shades of reddish maroon then gradually transformed to a mellow purple haze. Little by little, the glow slowly disappeared. Stepping up to the edge of the table, I gaze down at the inside of the box.

Neatly tucked inside was a bracelet about two inches wide. Nestled above it sat a ring. The bracelet looked to be made of strands of gold and silver intricately woven together. On its center face, there were several dials containing numbers and strange-looking symbols. Inlaid just above the center dial there were two weathered-looking stones about half-inch in size. One stone was a dull rusty red while the other was bright emerald green. It certainly wasn't a modern watch with dials functioning as a stopwatch or showing the time at several locations. It was obviously very old and it had no stems. The ring perched in the box above it was about an inch wide and appeared to be made of a mixture of solid gold and silver. It had gold markings set on a silver backdrop. The markings were intricate carvings that covered the entire surface. Set in the center of the ring was a single bluish stone about the size of the fingernail on my little finger.

Attached to the back of the lid was an ancient-looking brown parchment. Written on it was one word... *"Instructions"*

As I cautiously removed the parchment from the lid, it made a crinkling sound. As carefully as possible I unfolded it and began to read:

PLEASE READ THESE INSTRUCTIONS CAREFULLY

1. PUT ONE DEVICE ON AN EXTREMITY - DO NOT WEAR THEM ON THE SAME EXTREMITY

2. THE IMPLEMENT WITH THE DIALS WILL TAKE YOU TO A DIFFERENT TIME

TURN THE DIALS TO THE DESIRED DATE AND TIME

TOUCH THE GREEN STONE

THIS WILL TAKE YOU TO THE SELECTED DATE AND TIME

3. TO RETURN TO THE TIME WHERE YOU ARE BEGINNING

TOUCH THE RED STONE

THIS WILL RETURN YOU TO NOW

4. THE OTHER DEVICE WILL STOP TIME

TO STOP TIME TOUCH THE BLUE STONE

TIME WILL STOP

TO CONTACT A MEMBER OF THE U.O.H. TURN THE CENTER DIAL THREE COMPLETE ROTATIONS IN ONE DIRECTION THREE COMPLETE ROTATIONS IN THE OTHER DIRECTION AND TOUCH BOTH STONES.

Do what? This can't be. How can this be? I am truly going nuts. I closed the box with a loud thud. Sweat was dripping from my forehead.

In disbelief, I began pacing back and forth in front of the box pondering the possibilities.

If this were true, I could go to any time I can imagine. I wouldn't need to rely on secondary, and often biased, sources. I can go there and get all the facts exactly right. I can... I can... Wait a minute... time travel is impossible, this can't be true. How can this be true? What the hell are the U.O.H. and just who do they think they're screwing with?

Chapter 3

Not surprisingly, I haven't written anything for three days. I had tried to convince myself to open the box, but I simply sat at my desk and stared at the computer screen, then at the box, then back to the computer, and back to the box. It's three o'clock in the afternoon and I'm getting nowhere fast. I have to find the courage to try it, even if it means dying or being maimed in the process. I have to at least try it.

I must think of a time that would be safe for a first attempt. Suddenly it came to me. I read in the paper this morning about a man and woman who had vanished. Some friends had reported them missing and the authorities had no idea what happened or where they were. Why not investigate their disappearance? It might make a good story.

I rummaged around the trash until I found the newspaper. The report said a local used car dealer and his wife, Mr. and Mrs. McGee, were last seen around midnight last night when they left a local tavern. By chance, the tavern was just around the corner from my house. Yeah, that's it. I'll try it.

I opened the box and carefully reread the instructions. Trying to gather what little courage I had, I placed the bracelet on my left arm and the ring on the middle finger of my right hand. At first, the bracelet fits a little loose then I felt a slight tingle as it gradually reshapes itself tighter on my wrist. The ring was about two sizes too large even for my middle finger and stayed that way. I turned the dials to read 11:45 pm yesterday, took a deep breath and touched the green stone.

Suddenly, everything went black. Yeah... right, the bracelet makes you go blind, I thought. Neat trick. As my eyes got accustomed to the darkness, I realized where I was. I was standing in the same place I was a few moments ago, in the middle of my office in my own house. I looked at the clock on the table; it read 11:45 pm. I hope this is the right day. If it is, I've only got a few minutes to get to the tavern before midnight. I bolted out the door and ran toward the corner.

I'm glad the tavern was fairly close. It's been years since I had actually run and I was out of breath by the time I got there.

The tavern was a local bar at the corner of the block. I looked down at my watch to check the time. What watch? Crap, in my haste to do something stupid I had forgotten to put it on. Damn, I don't know if I'm here ahead of time or if I'm too late. A slight rain was beginning to fall so I stepped into a doorway across the street from the tavern and waited.

It wasn't long before the tavern door swung open and out came a well-dressed couple, a middle-aged man, and a much younger woman. They were talking, smiling, and seemed to be enjoying themselves as they strolled toward a car parked about 50 feet to the north of the tavern. Just then, another car quickly

came down the block, drove up to them, and stopped. Two men jumped out and began to force the couple toward their car. Wait, what do I do now? I thought. Then it came to me. I reached down to the ring on my right hand and touched the blue stone.

Everything stopped; the people across the street were frozen in mid-stride. Nothing was moving. Even the raindrops were floating in mid-air. There was a dog walking about half a block away, he too had stopped in mid-stride. "What the hell," I said aloud, dazed by the thought of no time passing. "Pull yourself together," I told myself.

Moving quickly, I crossed the street where the couple and the two men were struggling. Slowly walking around them, they were all as still as statues. Neat trick, I thought. I reached into the pockets of the two strangers and pulled out their wallets. The taller of the two men was Nickolis Tartillino the other was Danny Visoleti. I replaced their wallets and went to the open car door. Inside sat a hefty man with a broad mustache covering his upper lip and wearing what was obviously a very expensive suit. Searching his inside coat pocket, I found his wallet. His name was Antonio Bugalitti. I knew that name to be one of the local gangster types. Just as I was in the process of replacing his wallet, I thought I saw him move slightly.

Startled, I quickly backed out of the car and then saw a few raindrops slowly beginning to vibrate. In a panic, I ran back across the street. Just then, with a quick jerk, everything began to move.

This time stoppage thing must last only a short while, maybe a little over a minute. This was very disheartening. Wouldn't you know there would be a limit? That is just bloody great, I thought. The instructions said nothing about how long time stops. This made me wonder what else the instructions weren't telling me.

Turning quickly to look back across the street, the couple were being forced into the car as if nothing had happened. The car then quickly drove away.

Still somewhat bewildered by all this, I began walking down the street to return to my house. That's when I remembered it was still the middle of the night and I had started this journey tomorrow.

Reaching down, I hesitated for a moment then touched the red stone on the bracelet.

Suddenly I was standing back in my office where I had begun. I just stood there, not moving for several seconds. When I looked at the clock, it read 3:05 PM. What an experience, I thought. I was sweating like a fat man on a summer day in Florida.

Somewhat dumbfounded I sat down at my desk, took off the bracelet and ring and carefully replaced them inside the box and closed the lid.

It was at that moment I realized the reality that time travel was indeed possible. But there were unexpected after-effects. I was still dazed and confused by the experience. I really had to think this through. Let's see, I had returned in time to yesterday. I had stopped time for about one minute and almost got caught in the process. I had seen the missing couple being pushed into a car with several gangster types and then driven away. So now what? Oh yeah, now it's

time for the therapy and tranquilizers. My brain was scrambled and I felt drained. I laid my head down on the desk and immediately fell asleep.

Chapter 4

Suddenly the thundering sound of ZZ Top playing "Sharp Dressed Man" was blaring. My clock radio had gone off waking me from a deep dreamless slumber. Out the window, the sun was doing its usual slow-motion rise into the sky. It was 6:00 AM and I was still hunched over my desk with my head lying on the wooden box.

My first time-travel trip had been exhausting. Apparently, I had slept in the same position for hours. I stayed unmoving while my mind drifted, reflecting on my first time excursion.

Then I realized after last night I finally had something to write about.

Click...click...

System Start-up...

Video start-up screen on...

Start-up sound playing 'loony tunes'...

Application open...

I meticulously recorded everything I had witnessed in the abduction of Mr. and Mrs. McGee. I reported on every detail. Exactly how the two thugs had forced them into the car. I even named the two strong-arm thugs as well as the gangster mastermind Antonio Bugalitti.

Then I emailed the three-page story to the editor of the local newspaper. I even included my name as not only a witness to their crime but also the reporter. I had done some freelance reporting for them in the past and knew the editor fairly well.

"Ha, ha," I said aloud, "That felt good."

I had finally written something. True it wasn't the ultimate story of course, but it was still a beginning.

Maybe having these devices is a good thing after all.

Chapter 5

I have started wearing the time transfer jewelry all the time now, trying to get used to them. The added weight of the bracelet on my left arm wasn't a bother but wearing a ring on my right hand with my watch was a different matter. Being left-handed can be a pain when everything in the world is made for those righties. Since I had always worn my watch on my right arm it was nothing new, but the ring was an additional weight that needed getting used to. The size of the ring was so large it would spin on my finger. Most of the time, the blue stone was facing into the palm of my hand. This made picking things up very awkward. I had to be careful not to hit the stone.

Still, I haven't felt this positive for a very long time. Could this be the turning point in my life I've been waiting for? Leaning back in my chair, I put my feet on the desk, lit a cigarette, and wondered where in time I should go for my next story.

Knock...Knock...

Damn, I hope this isn't going to be another one of those days with a lot of interruptions. I had a lot of thinking and planning to do.

Again, Knock...Knock...

As I approached the door I heard a click, clack sound. It didn't register at first, although subconsciously I placed my right thumb close to the blue stone of the ring. When I opened the door, I saw the two men who had abducted the McGees the other night. Suddenly everything seemed to happen in slow motion. They were both raising their arms, pointing guns with fingers on the triggers ready to fire. Bang, Bang came the sounds. Somehow, I touched the blue stone of the ring just as they fired and time stopped. One of the bullets stopped its trajectory just inches from my chest. The other one floated in mid-air about half an inch from my left eye.

I was dead...

Or was going to be. For a split second, I was in shock. Then I turned and ran towards the back door, slipping on the rug as I ran out. Stumbling down the steps, I crossed the backyard and managed to pull my aging body over the chain link fence, scraping my right shin in the process, then hobbled down the alley as fast as I could. I had about a minute before time would start again and I had to

get as far away from these guys as I could. I ran and ran, all the while asking myself why these guys wanted to kill me. That's when it dawned on me.

Of course, those guys want me dead. Like an asshole, I told the world about their crime. Now I'll have these Mafioso types after me forever. How stupid can one man be? What have I done? Wait a minute... wait a minute... why not change that, I thought. I could go back in time and not write the story. Then these guys wouldn't be after me. It was a good thing I had the ring and bracelet on. I vowed to myself to never take them off again. I set the dials to 6:00 AM yesterday just before I had written the story, and touched the green stone.

Black, nothing but black... No sounds... No smells... Just nothingness

Unexpectedly, I'm standing in the middle of a clear round bubble-like chamber with a bright light shining down on me that seemed to come out of nowhere. "What the hell, where am I?" I said aloud. There are strange sounds, almost like breathing or hissing, coming from the dimness around me. They were faint, but I could just make out figures about twenty feet above my head. I put my hand up to block the light, squinting in an effort to get a better look. There were about five odd-looking creatures of some kind glaring down, watching me. It's obvious that aliens have abducted me. Will orifice probes be next? They looked like creatures you'd see in one of those bar scenes from an old Steven Spielberg space movie. I heard sounds as if someone was beginning to speak. I didn't actually hear the words being spoken, it was more like I felt them being formed in my head. Stranger yet, I understood them.

"We are the board of the U.O.H. Because you, C. W. Comstock, are a recent member of the guild, it is possible you do not have total knowledge of the regulations accompanying the acceptance of the scrivener assistance devices. The chronological reference you are attempting is not permitted under the guilds dictate number 788.j.4c and cannot be authorized. You are not permitted to return to a timeline concurrent with a recorded citation, which would allow the possibility of eradicating the previously documented citation. Written citations by the holders of the scrivener assistance devices are milestones that cannot be altered. You may choose to use your device to transfer to another chronological point in time or return to your now by touching the red stone on the bracelet."

This is just freak'n great, I thought. Who and what the hell are these weird-looking creatures? Damn, who does the U.O.H. think they are? They can't do this, I'm an American citizen and....

"You have exactly 24 of your seconds to proceed to the next chronological location of your choice, return to your now, or be sent to your last stoppage... Time begins."

What the hell? 24 seconds? If I don't do something, I'm dead.

Tick... Tick... Tick... Come on, think of something...
Tick... Tick...

I had better do something quick, my 24 seconds was coming to an end fast. I could give the damn ring and bracelet back and tell them where to put them... and get shot. Or, I could go to another time and think about what I have here. Quickly, I chose the latter, turned the dials, and touched the green stone.

The sun was shining bright and I was standing about three blocks from my house. I slowly and cautiously limped up the alley and returned to my house. The two gunmen were not in sight. I bolted the door, went to my office and sat down. The clock on the desk read 8:07 AM.

I had chosen a date three weeks prior to the time I had received these cursed time toys. I would be safe for a while. I looked down and there on my desk was the beautifully carved wooden box. Does it follow the time toys, I wondered. That's just creepy.

The pain in my leg was getting worse so I pulled up my pant leg to inspect my inadvertent wound. There was a large chunk of meat torn from my shin and it was still bleeding.

"You need some medical attention," I told myself. I called the local medical clinic and they scheduled a visit by a nurse practitioner within the hour. She would come to my house to treat me. Gotta love these private insurance companies, they know what customer service is all about.

About fifteen minutes later, the nurse arrived. She cleaned and bandaged my wound, took some blood samples for testing and gave me a tetanus shot. She gave me about a dozen 200 mg Aspirin and said she'd call later to check on me and was off to her next appointment.

I pleaded for some stronger pain pills but she just smiled and said, "Man up, it's not that bad." There are downsides to private insurance as well. They didn't want to get me hooked and have to pay for rehab.

After she left, I poured myself a cup of coffee, downed two of the Aspirin, lit a cigarette, leaned back, and propped my aching leg up on the desk. I picked up the carved box and began to reread the instructions. There was still a lot I didn't know about this time traveling and the stopping of time. Maybe all I needed was more practice, I thought, so I began to ponder my options.

You know, this isn't that bad a deal after all. Hey, this could be fun. It could be dangerous, in fact very dangerous, but fun too.

But I had to plan more carefully of course. The more I thought about it, I could hardly wait to begin my next story.

Chapter 6

Earth Standard Year 1620

My eyes opened with a sudden snap.

It was dark. I couldn't see a thing. I lay quietly, slowly glancing around while letting my eyes get used to the minimal light and dim shadows. There was a cold chill in the air and my throat was aching. The odor of burning wood filled my lungs to the point of choking if I took a deep breath. Eyes now partially open, I tried to connect my memories.

There were those sounds again...

This time I jumped up. What are all the strange noises?

When I took a step, I stumbled over something. "What the Hell?" I said under my breath.

Looking down I thought I was dreaming, still in that not-awake, not-asleep phase. In the flickering darkness, I could barely make out the vague silhouette of a body on the ground. With my eyes finally adjusted to the darkness, I could see it was a woman. She was lying on and wrapped in a large animal skin that looked very much like a bear. Her long dark hair was seductively covering her ample breasts. One curvaceous leg was peeking out from under the skin.

Who the hell is that and where the hell am I, I thought, still confused.

I quickly checked my wrist and finger... good... they were still there. Gradually my hazy memory was returning. It was all coming back to me.

I had driven to Wareham, Massachusetts where, from my hotel room, I had done a time transfer two days earlier to November eighth, 1620. I had made the time transfer to arrive approximately one week prior to the recorded arrival of the English ship the Mayflower. She was due to arrive soon and I wanted to write my next story as an accurate account of what happened when the English first set foot on the soil of a "new world". My only problem was, I had to start from where I was at the time. For accuracy in writing my next story, I had planned to spend some time in that time-space familiarizing myself with the surroundings. I had given myself enough of a head start to make the 40-mile trip to what is now Cape Cod, Massachusetts, right where the Mayflower was supposed to land.

I had planned for anything and everything for my first long-distance time transfer. I was dressed in brown high-top walking boots, blue jeans, and a long-sleeved red and blue plaid wool shirt with a long-sleeved undershirt, gloves, and a leather jacket. I had my backpack stuffed. Inside I had a pocketknife, butane lighter, food supplies - like granola bars, jerky, and single-serving pasta - and a wool blanket. I had also brought with me my iJotter, a Rand McNally road map, and a compass. I was ready for anything.

When I did the time transfer, I arrived in the middle of the untamed forest, studied my map and compass, and began my journey. I had traveled about 10 miles east-northeast through the heavily wooded forest when I made my first contact with a group of natives. They were as surprised by me as I was by them. I'm no expert when it came to Indians and wasn't sure which tribe they were from, but they appeared friendly. So I smiled politely, put my hand up, and said: "Hi..."

At first, the small group of six young braves just stared, studying me up and down. Then, without warning, they began yelling at the top of their lungs and started running toward me, preparing to throw their spears. I know I wasn't dressed for the times, but not so bad to throw spears at me. Apparently, they had their minds made up; they were going to kill me. They were not a happy group of Indians.

When they were about ten yards away, with arms cocked to throw their weapons, I touched the blue stone on my ring and stopped time, then hurriedly walked around behind them.

When time began again, their spears had flown into nothingness. It gave them quite a start when I was suddenly behind them. To them, I must have disappeared and then reappeared.

They were genuinely surprised and I'm sure more confused than convinced that I was harmless, but they had suddenly become a little more pleasant. My disappearing act was all that was needed and we were friends for life, or at least until they could figure out who or what I was.

That was yesterday.

After some semi-cordial back-and-forth gestures, the Indian braves and I walked through the cool weather the rest of the day. Just before dark, we finally came to their main camp. This is where I met what I assume was the chief of the tribe. I can't pronounce his name as he did, but it sounded something like Yohnishkasasus. I just called him Yohn.

He was an old man; I'd guess somewhere between fifty and sixty years old, with deep life wrinkles on his dark ruddy face. He wore a fur cap with feathers tied to it. The combination of long hair, fur, and feathers hung down his neck and upper back. He was dressed in long animal skin pants, a bone chest plate, and what appeared to be a deerskin wrapped around him like a robe. He carried a heavy stone-ended stick, probably used as his weapon, an early tomahawk.

When the leader of the horde I had traveled with explained my disappearance and reappearance. By the looks coming from Yohn, it was obvious he was undeniably skeptical. His demeanor was friendly but cautious. We tried to communicate but that was useless. Yohn was patient, and I was able to determine that he must be a wise leader with an open mind. When I explained who and what I was and where I was going, it was in a tongue that was foreign to him. Yet, he sat quietly and listened to my words even though he couldn't understand them. He would listen carefully, cock his head to one side with a quizzical look on his face, and scratch his head. The other Indians would all look

at each other, say something I didn't understand, and then look back at me. This attempt at communication lasted longer than I needed or wanted. I was tired, unaccustomed to so much physical exercise, like walking, and was cold and numb with exhaustion.

During this frustrating exchange, we had eaten some sort of cooked bread and dried meat that tasted like unspiced jerky and pita bread, all the while trying in vain to communicate. Finally, Yohn became weary, so he motioned me toward an animal skin shelter. I was so exhausted I was willing to sleep anywhere so I followed his directions.

The tribe had me bed down with one of the women, just to stay warm you understand. For all I know I would have been married to her if we had done anything sexual, therefore I wasn't taking any chances. Still, it was nice sleeping with a warm body once again.

Anyway... what was all the noise and commotion outside?

Finally realizing where I was, I quickly got dressed as the female began to stir, threw back the animal skin cover to the shelter opening just as my bed mate ran by me clutching her clothes.

Outside there was panic. The male members of the tribe were scurrying around grabbing their weapons; it looked like they were getting prepared for battle. Yohn was pointing and yelling commands at everyone. He was ordering the braves to gather at the west end of the camp. The women were collecting the small children in the opposite direction. Some of the younger males, I'd guess about eleven or twelve years old, were among the fighters that had grouped together. The atmosphere was charged with excitement. All the young braves were carrying weapons of some kind, long pointed spears, stone-headed tomahawks, clubs, and sharpened sticks about two feet long. They had gathered in small bunches of five or six and those groups merged into the larger army of about 30 braves. Once gathered, they ran off into the woods to the west.

Not wanting to get involved, I went back to gather my stuff, thinking it was time for me to move on. I still had a way to go before reaching my destination.

Several minutes had gone by when suddenly there came loud sounds of shouting and yelling from the same direction the Indian army had gone. A few moments later one young brave in his early teens came running back to the camp. Then another, and another, then all of them were running back. The young army was closely followed, no chased, by about twenty members of another tribe, all older and apparently more seasoned fighters. By the way they were dressed it was obvious they were from another tribe, along with the fact they were clubbing and stabbing the Indians who had befriended me.

The frenzied tribe had long black hair tied back tight against their head. Their faces and arms were painted with stripes of dark red and white colors and they wore only loin cloths and foot covers. Many of them had feathers and beads braided into their long black hair. All were swinging clubs and tomahawks, yelling a high pitch scream, thrashing anyone and anything that was in their way.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted one of the enemy braves running as hard and as fast as he could toward me. I automatically reached for the ring on

my right hand. Just as I was about to be struck by his club, I touched the blue stone of my ring.

Everything and everybody froze.

I must move quickly, I thought.

With that, I pulled the club from the enemy Indian's hand, closed my eyes, and hit him on the side of the head. The club struck with a thud and my hand vibrated and tingled with the blow.

"I'm not cut out for this stuff," I said aloud.

I moved quickly from one enemy brave to another, taking their weapon from their hand, dropping it on the ground then striking them in the back of the head. My time was running out, but I was able to get back just before time suddenly activated with a jump.

When it restarted, I was standing where I had begun, with both hands stretched high in the air. At that moment, six of the enemy braves in front of me instantly fell to the ground, heads bleeding as if they had all been struck at once. The other enemy braves abruptly stopped in their tracks, looking at me perplexed. They looked at each other, then back at me, crowded together, and began to move slowly and defensively in my direction.

I yelled, "Stop right there," raised both arms high into the air, and stopped time again.

This tribal crap is not for me, I thought.

When time reactivated, I was behind them, depriving them of their weapons as I passed. The enemy tribe was shocked and weaponless in the camp of their foe. One second they were on the offense and winning, the next second they were weaponless with the enemy all around.

Yohn was stunned at first, but immediately seized the moment and began shouting orders to his braves. They turned from their retreat and quickly began attacking the other tribe. Several of the enemy were struck down before they were able to withdraw into the woods. Those that had made it to the forest were bloody and helping their wounded brothers with Yohn and his army in hot pursuit.

I slowly scanned the encampment. There were several bodies from Yohn's tribe lying on the ground moaning with pain, blood dripping from their wounds. The women had come out from hiding and started taking care of the wounded.

I went back into the shelter and resumed gathering and packing my things. A few moments later Yohn and his braves, finished with the chase of the other tribe, had returned to camp. One of them came to the shelter and motioned me to come out. Yohn walked directly towards me breathing heavily but with a half smile on his face. The others looked astonished and bewildered. Yohn raised his weapon, pumped his arm in the air, and gave a triumphant yell, then said something I did not understand. I'm not sure, but I think he was saying thank you for helping them in their fight. The others jumped around yelping loud celebratory shrieks then gradually gathered around me, acting as if I were some kind of chief. They fell to their knees and began bowing, at the same time chanting something that sounded like "Ahayuta...Ahayuta...Ahayuta".

"This is just bloody wonderful," I said aloud.

I didn't want or need any of this. All I wanted was to observe the landing of the Mayflower so I could write my story... that's all.

"I don't want to be your hero!" I said loudly as if they would understand.

In an indignant tone I said, "All this admiration is terrific and does wonders for my ego, but I don't have time for this. How the hell am I going to get to Cape Cod?" I yelled, my voice filled with frustration.

The chanting stopped, and they stood up and just stared. Enough of this, I thought. I smiled a broad bright smile, bowed very low, and touched the blue stone of my ring.

Time stopped... Acting quickly, I gathered the rest of my things, stuffed them into my backpack, and ran toward the east-northeast.

Chapter 7

After traveling a couple of more days, and luckily not meeting any more primitive humans, it was early afternoon when I began setting up a small camp. I was tired, the weather was damp and cold, and it had been rough trekking through the thick forest of this time-space, with the terrain overgrown, and no noticeable trails. Then there were the bugs. There were gnats, mosquitoes, fleas, flies, and the like. They are sort of an outdoor kind of thing, I know, and they can bite hard, depending on the bug of course. I should have thought of that and brought some bug spray. Of course, dragonflies are not so bad; they just pass by in a momentary blaze, and then go on about their business.

Occasionally, I would see and hear birds that are most certainly no longer part of my now. Every day I saw ten or twenty bald eagles and the largest redheaded woodpeckers known to man, they were the size of a full-grown chicken. It was a beautiful country this time of year. Various trees had lost their leaves although many were still changing their colors from the normal green to the bright orange, reds, and yellows to the dull browns of fall.

In the evenings, I watched the low-flying dragonflies, and the higher-flying small birds and bats feed on the insects. After they finished their dance, I would study the beauty of the night sky. It was filled with stars, millions upon millions of stars that are no longer visible in my now time, where the city lights block their brilliance. I had never seen so many stars. The moon looked to be in its last quarter phase, but still, a sight to see surrounded by dazzling stars. I was in awe and would lay and stare at the splendor of the night sky for hours, listening to the sounds of nature. There was the hooting of the owls, the crying voices of the wolves, and the crackling of the trees. This was a completely new experience for me.

“It sure would be nice to have someone intelligent to talk to,” I said aloud, curling up in my blanket, and falling asleep.

As a result of my original experience with the local inhabitants, I had become much more guarded, and more acquainted with survival in the wilds. I had learned to keep my campfires low so it wouldn't be seen and to ration my food, which was getting low. I had also learned to stay warm and dry.

This time of year, the nights were getting colder with each passing day. It's been five days since I'd had a bath. I smelled bad and needed a shave. My legs hurt from all the walking over fallen trees, rocks, and uneven ground. I was hungry, dirty, and tired.

“What a bunch of crap,” I said to no one as I sat resting.

By my calculations, using my Rand McNally road map and compass, it was approximately 50 miles from my hotel time transfer to Cape Cod. Studying my map, I began making some calculations... I had been in this time zone for five days. I've probably averaged about twelve to fifteen miles a day, minus my

brief stay with the Indians, that should put me, let's see... about 6 miles out into the Atlantic ocean. I never was very good at math or maps. I had to be somewhere close to Cape Cod. It couldn't be more than eight or nine hours away.

Saying to myself, "Oh what I wouldn't give for a nice greasy burger and fries with a chocolate banana milkshake to drink."

Then the thought struck me like a bolt of lightning.

"C. W. Comstock, you are really dumb." I said aloud, "I can do a time transfer and get some food."

Pulling out my map and compass again I made some quick calculations. Hopefully this time my math would be better. By my guess-ti-mation, I was camped about half a mile west of exit 16 on Highway 24.

Wait... I'd better not return to my original time zone looking and smelling the way I do, I reasoned. I'll dial the bracelet to 1969. That should be a safe time. Hurrying, I gathered my things, packed my backpack, took a deep breath, dialed the bracelet, and touched the green stone.

Suddenly there I was, standing in the middle of a highway. I quickly ran to the side of the road. It's a good thing there weren't many cars on the road or I would have been run over. Even with the sparse traffic, the cars that passed looked like what I remembered seeing pictures of the history of cars of that time. Yes...there went a 1967 Chevy Belair. I'd know that one anywhere. When I was seventeen I owned a rusty 100+-year-old faded blue one. Or should I say the bank owned it and permitted me to maintain, fuel, and pay them for the privilege of driving. I guess that's more like renting a car from the bank.

"This time-traveling stuff is great," I said to no one.

Looking down the road to the south, there was a sign about 100 yards away; it read "Highway 24."

"Perfect, I guess my math isn't that bad after all," and started walking towards the exit hoping to find a place to eat.

I was in luck, there was a truck stop located at this exit. As I approached, I noticed about 10 trucks all parked in a row with their motors running.

This place must be good, it's busy, I told myself as I walked towards the restaurant, realizing at that moment that I had not prepared myself for a trip to this time location. A quick check of my pockets found what little money I had, three dollars and twenty-eight cents. I hope that was enough to get some food.

When I entered the truck stop, I walked directly to the counter, sat down on a stool, and reached for the menu. Just then, the man behind the counter grabbed my arm. He had a stern expression on his face, and growled, "We don't serve hippies here." He was a large burly man with bushy eyebrows dressed in a dirty apron that covered his khaki pants and a plaid shirt. He wore work boots and a ruddy-looking cooks cap, cocked to one side. I smiled, but he showed no change of expression on his face, he just stared straight at me. I looked around and noticed the rest of the faces in the diner watching. When I came in, I was so hungry for that greasy burger I hadn't paid attention to the stares from the other customers.

“OK,” I said, put up both hands then slowly backed away and fell into a booth.

What the hell did he mean, Hippie? Hell, I’m almost fifty years old.

I sat in silence for a few moments, gathering my thoughts. As I sat there, the waitress came over to me and said, “Look, we don’t like you dirty hippies coming in here all the time and causing problems for our other customers, you’d better leave.”

I was stunned. Even when I was younger, I wasn’t called a hippie or treated like this. All I could do was nod my head, stand up, and walk out the door.

Once outside I took a good hard look at my reflection in the window. I was unshaven and dirty. My hair was a mess and I smelled. Shit! I looked like a hippie.

I looked up the road and noticed three people standing at the entrance ramp to the highway. They were dressed in bell-bottom jeans and had long hair. I think there were two males and one female. They looked as if they had been on the road for a long time, just like me. They were sitting on bedrolls and one was playing the harmonica. I walked towards them. On the way, I decided to hitchhike closer to my final destination, Cape Cod.

Chapter 8

My journeys, or should I refer to them as time-traveling excursions, have become somewhat uninteresting. I have traveled to most of what I consider the more important events in history, like the arrival of the Mayflower, Lincoln's Gettysburg speech, Caesars' death at the hands of his alleged friends, the signing of the Magna Carta, Michelangelo's painting of the Sistine Chapel, and various other early events in Europe, Asia, and South America. I have spoken to the people in those times and observed their lives and how they live them. I have witnessed the hardships of each time-space along with the progress made over obstacles that had to be overcome to survive. I have written several books on these and many other historic events, along with several novels centered on the people of those times. My tomes have pleased the U.O.H., but all that writing strained my publisher to the point of exhaustion. But in the process, we both made a butt-load of money. In fact, I've made enough money that I won't have to concern myself with the cost of anything for a long, long time. But now, I'm bored silly. Even so, I still have this driving urge, this feeling inside of me that declares a desire to know more. Be able to do more.

I've not only used writing as a way to make a living, as paltry as it was, but also as a way to learn. Once deciding on a subject I would research it in-depth. I would spend a huge amount of time studying and learning as much as possible before believing myself capable of writing my story.

Maybe that's why I wasn't a successful writer until I got these time toys. There was too much hard work involved. But after I got my time toys it became very easy to simply travel to that particular time, observe and record the events as they actually occurred, then write my story. But now... it was no longer a physical challenge. There must be something that will satisfy my insatiable curiosity.

History... the past... I've always had a passion for history. I would drink up historical events like a fine wine. By using the ring and bracelet, each time excursion had been to a specific instant in the past, personally experiencing those times gone by.

What about the future? It must be possible, using the bracelet and ring, to travel in time to an exact moment in the future.

I've always prided myself on the ability to learn yet it has taken me this long for an idea to seep into my thick, numbed brain. What have I been doing? I've had the ability to see the future for over two years, in real-time, and am just now seeing the possibilities.

What an asshole I've been... I've been trapped in my own inability to see the real potential of these time toys. I've been traveling to the past; why not travel to the future? It could give me insights into stories that will actually happen. Anyway, traveling into the past is dangerous. The slightest mistake

could generate uncontrollable paradoxes or unexpected changes in my now.
Traveling into the future should be relatively safe.

Wait a minute... what happens if I travel to the future, write a true story about that future, and that story changes what was to become the future into a different future?

This is getting much too deep...

Chapter 9

Earth Standard Year 2126

Back and forth...

Forth and back...

“When will that gravicab get here?” Vienna Pitts says in a loud complaining voice, looking at her watch for the umpteenth time, pacing the floor restlessly, “I’m going to be late again, damn...”

The sounds in the background were the local radio station broadcasting the weather report, “Continued snow for the next three days then a slight warming trend to just above freezing.”

“Great...” she says out loud, “just bloody great.”

The news only confirmed what Vienna already knew, it was another cold, snowy night in Washington D.C., continuing the coldest and wettest winter in history. With 83 inches of snow since last October, it’s now the middle of April and winter is still hanging on with no end in sight.

Thus verifying her logic that the only way to get anywhere in this city was by gravicab. Anyway, it’s the only way if you didn’t drive, and Vienna didn’t drive, had never driven, and probably will never drive.

“How did my life come to this,” she says aloud, apparently talking to no one but herself as she paced. Unable to stop her introspective self-analysis she continued...

She had been voted most likely to succeed in her senior year of school at The Kingston Academy. Yet, her journalistic history had not been as glorious as she fantasized about during her years at BSU. During her first year, she had painstakingly plotted her career in year-by-year increments, moving from university to syndication in 7 years, progressing to the journalistic nirvana of cybercasting as an Anchor-woman, then to her own News Torrent within 12 years.

After graduation, reality and truth reared their ugly heads. Since then she has been working at the Fairfax Evening Star for nine years. First as a junior staff writer then, two years ago, she was promoted to a regular contributor on the political comments blog or the RSS and SSH feed. Even with her brilliant political contributions, she has been unable to break into the established Washington good-old-boy political reporters clique. Her attempts at a major e-book deal, where she could show off her artistic talents, have never materialized. Writing something other than the typical boring political commentary has been unsuccessful.

Checking her watch again, “Come on...” she says aloud still pacing forth and back. She stops pacing for the moment, looks at herself in the mirror on the wall of the entryway, touches up the makeup around her forest green eyes,

straightened her dark gray almost black dress, then fluffs her chestnut brown reddish hued hair, wondering again about her life and career.

She likes to believe her success, while minimal, was due to her hard work, but she knew it was really because she had a pretty face. She firmly believes her good looks have kept others from taking her seriously and hampered her ability to spread her journalistic wings. Even at the socially middle-aged status of thirty-six, she still looks good and her body is still in good shape. Well, except like most women her age, she had a somewhat chunky backside. Even with Yoga, martial arts training, and regular exercise trying to keep it to a minimum, she wasn't satisfied that it was much of a benefit, but she did it religiously anyway, living with several days of pain after each session. Her parents had died suddenly four years ago in a subsonic plane crash, so with no siblings and few friends, she was quite alone in this world.

All in all, she's had an average and marginally successful career. Yes, she has a house. But it's only partially furnished and stands empty of any human interactions most of the time. Sure, she has a nice car but doesn't know how to drive it. It was bought as an investment, a tax write-off. A powder blue 1973 Porsche 911 in perfect condition sits in her garage, unused and covered with a tarp.

Vienna continues her pensive reflections... Her love life? "Huh," she says with a shrug. She has never been married although she's lived with a few men who turned out, in the end, to be either narcissists or niggling scoundrels. She has dated recently, but nothing serious. She considers herself a professional person who, at this point in her life, has no need for male companionship or children. It's not that she never wants kids, it's just she's never found the right genetically structured male who sparked in her the necessary pheromones and desire to bear his child.

She dreaded another year of her mundane existence without any advancement of her journalistic career.

Buzz...Buzz... the text message sounds. The message alerts her that her ride is waiting outside.

"Finally..." she says in frustration.

Grabbing her purse, overcoat, gloves, hat, scarf, and earmuffs off the table she hurriedly puts on her coat and gloves as she darts out the door. She slowed to walk carefully down the icy steps and then briskly walked across the salted sidewalk. The snow is blowing almost parallel to the ground with penguin blinding velocity. Holding her hand up to help protect her face and eyes from the punishing wind and blowing snow, she cautiously steps into the street and then into the waiting gravicab.

"It's about time, hurry, let's go, I'm going to be late for my dinner party with the Ambassador to Jodlaan."

"Look lady, you try piloting in this shit all day, I'll go as fast as the weather will let me" bellowed the driver.

"OK, OK, but please, let's go quickly." she bellowed back.

Vienna settled back into the seat trying to stay warm, and stared at the view of blowing snow out the back window, still in that melancholy mood.

“So this is how it’s going to be?” Vienna says to no one. Thinking to herself, she contemplates the upcoming evening. Another night of bullshit political talk with no opportunity to meet any well-known D.C. elites.

Instinctively she knows that most of the guests will not show up because of the severe weather conditions. She is going to be trapped with no way to leave without calling another gravicab, and having to travel again in this hideous cold.

This is crazy, what am I doing? She reflects. Why not just stay at home like the rest of the journalists, rather than go to this stupid party?

“Oh, well, I’m on my way now,” she says aloud as she gradually dissolves, disappearing from the backseat of the gravicab.

Blackness... Nothingness...

Suddenly Vienna feels, but does not hear;

“We apologize for the abrupt departure from your current time, but we need your special talents. We, the U.O.H., have encountered a rogue writer. This matter needs to be quickly rectified. You have been chosen because of your physical and mental abilities as well as the fact that you are solitary and no one will miss you. To accomplish this task you will be given the appropriate tools to track down and modify the residual written documentation trail of the rogue writer.”

Stunned, in a state of confusion and astonishment at what had just occurred, Vienna could only manage to utter, “Current time...What do you mean by ‘current time’?”

“We understand you have many questions. For now, it is most important that you are willing to begin your quest for the rogue writer. It is vital that he be contained as quickly as possible. Further delay may mean a wave in the quantal ora’ which would be impossible for the U.O.H. to replicate.”

“Rogue writer... appropriate tools... quantal ora’ ... What the hell are you talking about, who are you, where is the gravicab, what’s going on?”

“You have exactly 24 of your seconds for a decision. Will you assist us or would you prefer we return you to your now?”

“Look, whoever you are,” Vienna says with a sneer, “I always give at the office. Really, I always try to be helpful to those in need, bu...”

“Excellent, we accept your acceptance, you will be contacted in the near future for an interview and assignment of your tools. Please accept our appreciation for your personal investment in this matter.”

With the next blink of her eyes, she was once again sitting in the back of the gravicab, breathing excitedly, and totally confused.

Chapter 10

As she had expected the dinner party was a waste of time. Only ten people showed up and they were as meaningless to the D.C. journalistic elite as she was. Even the Ambassador to Jodlaan was embarrassed by the lack of attendance. After an hour of useless small talk, mainly about the horrid weather, she called for a gravicab and left.

Now back at her home, she was attempting to make some sense of what had happened earlier. Had she really been taken from the back of the gravicab to some unknown location, or had she simply passed out for some reason? Maybe she should make an appointment to see her doctor. She doesn't remember seeing anyone else; had she really heard that little speech from some unknown group called the U.O.H.? Who or what is the U.O.H.?

Contemplating what she could do, she decided some investigative work was necessary. She logs on to her computer and does a global.google search for "U.O.H.", but finds nothing that would give credence to her experience. The only results Google could come up with were for the University Of Ha'il, and a couple of off-the-wall websites called the Unwittingly Oblivious Heathens and United Octopi Handlers.

"Enough of this crap", she says to herself, trying to regain control of her conflicting memories. You're tired, she tells herself, and still cold from being in that freezing spring weather. It's time for a large nightcap and a good night's sleep. Tomorrow is Saturday and I can sleep as late as I want.

Ring... Ring...

I hope that's not a new assignment, she frets to herself. Now is not the time to be traveling anywhere.

Ring...Ring

"Ok, Ok, I'm coming," she says loudly.

"Hello..."

There was a soft female voice on the other end of the videophone, but no video image. "Is this Miss Vienna Pitts?" she asks in a strictly business, straightforward tone.

"Yes, this is Vienna Pitts, may I help you."

"Miss Pitts this is Juanita Justus and I have been instructed by the board of the U.O.H. to contact you for an immediate interview. Can you be interviewed in the near future?"

“The U.O.H.? ... An interview? Who are they and what do they want?”

Vienna quizzed.

“Weren’t you contacted earlier this evening?” the voice calmly continued, “Didn’t you agree to an interview?”

Hesitating, she slowly says, “Yes... I... think so”

“Then the U.O.H. would like the interview so you can begin as soon as possible”

“What kind of assignment are they talking about?” Vienna asks cautiously.

“Would you be available for an interview in the near future” the woman on the videophone pressed.

In an uncertain voice, Vienna answers, “Ah.... sure, wh...”

Knock...Knock...Knock...

“Just a moment, please,” Vienna, says, clicking the mute button on the videophone. As she walks to the door, she wonders what kind of fool would be outside at this hour and in this weather.

When Vienna opened the door the wind took control and blew it wide open, slamming it against the back wall, blowing snow and cold into the foyer. She grabbed at the door quickly saying, “Come in, come in.”

Seemingly in no real hurry, the visitor casually stepped inside. With a great deal of effort, Vienna pushed against the blowing wind until finally getting the door closed. When she turned to see who had entered there stood a tall woman, at least six feet or more, wearing a pure white fur overcoat with a large hood pulled up to cover her head. The coat was so long that it touched the ground, completely covering her body. Under the hood, she wore a matching, tight-fitting white fur hat, and form-fitting black gloves.

With a wide reassuring smile the visitor says, “Miss Pitts, I’m Juanita Justus. I’m here for your interview.”

Vienna gasped and with a sudden shudder said, “What?”

“I’m here for the U.O.H. interview,” Juanita says bluntly.

“But I was just talking to you on the videophone” exclaims Vienna.

“Yes, are you ready for the interview?” she asked in a strictly business manner.

Vienna was perplexed. She hesitated for a moment then decided to answer, “Yes, I suppose I am. But first, who or what is the U.O.H.?”

“It will soon become perfectly clear. May I sit down?” Juanita asks politely.

“Of course, please be seated,” Vienna, responds while gesturing with her right hand the offer to step into the next room.

As Juanita walked in Vienna got a glimpse of her tall black boots that ended just below the knee. When she removed her hat, she threw her long blond hair with a back-and-forth head-shake and walked directly into the living room.

Vienna followed, walking directly to her favorite chair and sat down. Juanita unbuttoned her coat, smoothed out her dress, and sat in the chair directly

across from Vienna. She crossed her legs and opened the black attaché case that was hanging from her shoulder inside her coat. After opening it, she removed a small computer pad and began.

"The U.O.H. is an organization that promotes writers throughout the universe. Normally they assist writers who have been unable to find sufficient material. An interview is scheduled and if the writer qualifies, they are given the instruments to assist them in acquiring the needed storyline material. These instruments are given to them to use for life or until they wish to return them or pass them on to another qualified person. Ordinarily, you would not qualify."

Somewhat confused Vienna sat quietly and listened intently to every word. She was trying to figure out the logic and purpose of what she was hearing.

Juanita continued; "Because of our current situation, we have modified our qualification process and require your immediate assistance. First, have you ever inscribed any tomes on the subject of history?"

Vienna shook her head and quizzically said, "No..."

Juanita taps on her computer for a moment and continued.

"Do you believe in the truth?"

"Of course," Vienna says bluntly, still wondering where this interview was going.

Again Juanita taps on her computer pad, waits a moment then says, "You have been approved."

She carefully opens her attaché case, retrieves a small wooden box covered with intricate carvings and handed it to Vienna.

"Here are your tools,"

Vienna stares at the box for a few seconds then gently grasps it with both hands. She studied it intently, admiring the unique carvings while wondering what kind of writing instruments could be in a box this size. When she looks up to ask what she was supposed to do next, Juanita Justus is gone.

Chapter 11

Vienna had slept all night and most of the next day. A cloak of eerie quiet hung over her house. She was still wearing her flannel pajamas as she filled her coffee cup with warm water. When she turned the faucet off, as usual, it continued its irregular pattern of drips.

“I’m going to get that fixed someday,” she says aloud, knowing full well it had been dripping for over four months and she still hasn’t called a plumber.

Naturally, in her 200-year-old house, a lot of things needed repair. She justifies her procrastination by using the cold weather, thinking that the moving water would not freeze in her pipes. She once thought about trying to fix it herself but decided against it. She considered herself not mechanically inclined.

Certain she needed it strong today she put three heaping teaspoons of instant Kona Cafecito coffee in the cup, then placed the cup into the microwave. The clock on the microwave oven showed it was 2:47 in the afternoon. Out of the corner of her eye, she notices the wooden box sitting on the kitchen table.

Taking a deep breath, she says with a sigh, “So it’s true.”

She had hoped it had all been a terrible dream, but there was the box. Slowly walking to the table she picks up the box and begins turning it in her hands, inspecting it while wondering what it could contain. Seconds later the microwave signals the three beeping sounds that her coffee was hot and ready. After fetching her wake-up cup, she sits at the table to further study the box. Sipping at her hot coffee, she wonders what to do next.

She remembers she had somehow given her word to help the U.O.H.. She considers her word a promise. And she has never gone back on her word.

“OK... I might as well get this over with and see what’s inside.”

With that, Vienna lays the box down on the table in front of her and flips open the lid. An intense glow of light causes her to jump up and back, shout “What the...” and drop the coffee-filled cup. When the cup hits the tile, it shatters, spewing glass and coffee across the kitchen floor. The glowing light from the box gradually changes to bright orange then turns to a purple haze and slowly disappears.

Still leery of what she had just seen Vienna carefully steps through the mess on the floor, cautiously approached the box, and peers inside. In the residue of the glow, tucked tightly in what looked like black velvet, was an odd-looking antique bracelet and ring set. The bracelet was wide with two large dials on the surface, one inside the other. Around the outside of the dials were assorted numbers and peculiar-looking symbols. There were two stones about half the size of a dime, one red, and one green, on each side of the inner dial. There were no stems or buttons. The wide band of the bracelet looked like it was made from finely woven ropes of gold and silver interlaced into a plaited pattern. The gold and silver ring had complex carvings around most of its surface. On the top

center of the ring was a bright blue stone. Vienna noticed a piece of paper attached to the lid that read... *"Instructions"*

She opened the paper and began to read:

PLEASE READ THESE INSTRUCTIONS CAREFULLY

1. PUT ONE DEVICE ON AN EXTREMITY - DO NOT WEAR THEM ON THE SAME EXTREMITY

2. THE IMPLEMENT WITH THE DIALS WILL TAKE YOU TO A DIFFERENT TIME

TURN THE DIALS TO THE DESIRED DATE AND TIME

TOUCH THE GREEN STONE

THIS WILL TAKE YOU TO THE SELECTED DATE AND TIME

3. TO RETURN TO THE TIME WHERE YOU ARE BEGINNING

TOUCH THE RED STONE

THIS WILL RETURN YOU TO NOW

4. THE OTHER DEVICE WILL STOP TIME

TO STOP TIME TOUCH THE BLUE STONE

TIME WILL STOP

TO CONTACT A MEMBER OF THE U.O.H. TURN THE DIALS THREE COMPLETE ROTATIONS IN ONE DIRECTION - THREE COMPLETE ROTATIONS IN THE OTHER DIRECTION AND TOUCH BOTH STONES.

In stunned disbelief, Vienna plops down in a chair and reads it again. Then rereads it several times.

“Impossible!” she shrieks.

Chapter 12

For the rest of the afternoon and late into the evening Vienna goes over what she remembers from her gravicab experience, the encounters with the U.O.H. and that strange woman. She keeps glancing at the bracelet and ring and rereading the instructions. She had gone through this same routine again and again.

“What if it’s true?” she keeps saying aloud, “what if it’s true?”

Ultimately becoming frustrated with herself and the whole situation she finally makes a decision. She should at least test the ring.

Carefully picking the ring out of the box she turns it in her hand inspecting it. It was obviously too large for her ring finger so she slid it onto the middle finger of her left hand. Even then, it was extremely loose. Vienna stands up, takes a deep breath, holds it, closes her eyes, and touches the blue stone.

Nothing...

She let out her breath with a groan and opened her eyes. When she turned to look at the second hand on the wall clock, it was still moving. She could still hear the dripping water coming from the faucet. Outside it was still snowing and the wind was still blowing.

Shaking her head in dismay she says, “I knew it, it’s a joke, a scam.”

“Ha...” Vienna laughs at herself for believing such nonsense. She removes the ring and places it back in the box, in the process eyeing the instructions. She again rereads them for the umpteenth time. But this time recognizing the instructions implies that both the bracelet and the ring must be worn at the same time.

“Ok, let me try this again,” she says.

She slides the bracelet onto her right arm and the ring onto the middle finger of her left hand, takes another deep breath, closes her eyes and touches the blue stone.

Nothing...

Opening her eyes she looks at the second hand on the wall clock, it is dead still. She looks at the faucet, no dripping water. She begins breathing in gasps unable to believe what was happening. She stood in stupor-like quiet listening to the absolute silence. How long she stood there in silence she didn’t know. Then there was something, a slight feeling of movement. When she looks at the clock again she notices the second hand is shaking slightly, struggling to move. Then came a sudden snap and the sound of the wind outside and the dripping faucet began again.

“Wow... that was amazing,” she blurts out, her mind racing for an explanation.

Vienna is astonished, yet certain she has just stopped time. If the ring works, she must assume then that the bracelet must also work. Smiling with

surprising gratification, she tries to conceive of how to test the bracelet. It had to be a test that would not be too dangerous.

Vienna decided to go back to 2:50 this afternoon, just before she opened the box. This time she will not be surprised and will not drop her coffee cup. She looks at the clock on the microwave. It reads 8:27.

She studies the dials, determines which dials to use then waits. She is hesitant, thinking of the possible consequences. She remembers hearing about the 'butterfly effect'. The concept is that even small events can have large widespread consequences. Although she was never a believer in the concept of humanity's collective desire to condense the complexities and randomness of the universe, into such mystical beliefs. She was not like those pitiful groups of self-marginalizing ignoramuses who flap their wings in obscurity expecting to generate tidal waves of change onto the world.

She shrugs in self-amusement as she touches the green stone.

Blackness...

Vienna is standing where she started, in the kitchen holding her coffee cup, staring at the open box, and wearing the bracelet and ring. The clock on the microwave read 2:50. Smiling confidently Vienna touches the red stone.

Blackness...

Again, she glances at the clock. It is back to 8:27.

With a broad knowing smile, Vienna sits down and ponders how she should use her new jewelry. She remembers the U.O.H. had said something about a rogue writer and wonders about her future.

Chapter 13

Life is full of arrivals and departures, whether to journey from one room to another or one time to another.

Hurriedly entering his office, Sanduval Mule walks quickly to the large solid oak desk and sits down in his plush brown leather chair. Leaning back, he takes a long slow deep breath to calm his innate resolve. He is immediately comfortable and relaxed. When he smoothly slides his right hand into the shallow plasma surface of the desk a translucent Vi hologram above it instantly comes to life. As fast as thought, his mind controls the projected images of the Vi. The image swiftly floats through the listed records, then slows and stops at the item marked “Ev’rmore.”

Moving with exactness, Sanduval’s mind consciously begins to compile and construct his next tour de force. Simultaneously his subconscious mind chronicles in the data archival the results of his latest mission. In his mind, he envisions his plan coming to fruition, the culmination of his many travels and many tomes.

He meticulously fabricates and melds his newly coded noetic module into the perceptions of the existing society populating the targeted planet. He advances their societal structure in a direction only the enlightenment of a true Prophet could accomplish.

Not unexpectedly, he perceives the touch of psychic vibration, “Sanduval.” The contact causes only minimal discomfort.

“Sanduval...” The contact is stronger this time, but still not unbearable.

Remaining serene and composed, Sanduval continues reshaping historic events, progressively altering one of the unsound flaws in the planet’s past. This chronological increment will remove and replace the origin of an established tradition. Embedding it in their cognitive reasoning at this particular time will alter this society forever.

Completing his task, he glides the Vi image to view the geological region of E3BN629S. With his operational knowledge of transmogrifying planetary geology, Sanduval analyses and then conceptualize the unfamiliar terrain. With interplanetary space-time travel, one must consider shifting geological formations. If not, there is a chance of ending up inside a mountain, unable to touch the bracelet.

Sanduval wears his bracelet on the wrist of his left arm, his ring on the middle finger of his right hand. Assured of his precise calculations he turns the dials of the bracelet to his next destination.

With ruthless force, Sanduval mentally sends his reply, “I believe we are through communicating.”

He then rotates the ring on his finger. Keeping his right palm open and flat, he touches the blue stone of the ring to the green stone on the bracelet.

Instantly, Sanduval vanishes into the blue-flowing emptiness between space-time zones. It's a place where space and time are suspended. Being here makes the traveler invisible from observation in either zone.

As if looking through rapidly moving water, it's possible to differentiate moderate-sized obstacles in both zones. He has been in this emptiness before, many times. With self-trained familiarity, he has increased his skillful use of sliding from one time zone to another. Although he can stay within the field for only a few chronological seconds, it is enough time to decide whether to comfortably enter the intended zone.

From his vast experience, Sanduval has learned that moving into an unknown future can be perilous.

Chapter 14

Earth Standard Year 2068

For Christ's sake CW, you need to be more detailed, more focused, I tell myself. Why can't you concentrate? Your mind is wandering like schizophrenic ants at a picnic. Get a hold of yourself and think this through.

I must plan carefully. Every aspect must be thoroughly thought out. I had to be precise and prepared for the unexpected.

My plan for my first journey forward in time will be 20 years into the future from my now. That should be far enough ahead in time to get a feel for time traveling into the future. But I can't travel from this location. I might be noticed. To be less conspicuous I will begin my time transfer in a large city.

While I'm in the future, I'll observe and talk to as many people as feasible about their jobs, their families, and their daily lives. I'll observe quietly and read as much information as possible about how the world has changed. I'll pay close attention to governing and technology since those usually have the largest impacts on society. I'll definitely not keep or bring anything back to my now from that time period.

That sounds like a brilliant yet simple plan. Now... what do I need to take with me? I must make sure I have everything I could possibly need, identification, money, and the proper clothing. I'll need something to take notes and pictures.... No! No pictures. That would be much too dangerous. Although I'm sure, I'll need to take notes so I'll take my iJotter. It's old technology even by today's standards and will be even older in that future time-space, but it's small enough to keep out of sight, yet useful when needed.

Now, from which city should I launch this venture? The teeming masses of New York City, Los Angeles, or London would be the obvious choices and would eliminate any language bearers. Even though it will undoubtedly be hard to get a sense of the world from a congested city, a city will be the safest. And I won't stand out as much. Maybe London, I haven't been to London in a while. Okay then, London it is.

With my plan complete, I check the weather conditions for this time of year, make the necessary flight and hotel reservations then pack what I need. After making flight arrangements, my aircraft leaves in just two hours, so I head for the airport. I have a very positive feeling about my new endeavor; I'm optimistic that knowing the future will have a beneficial effect on my writing career.

Chapter 15

After a long boring flight - even at supersonic speed, it took four and a half hours. After the hassle of getting through customs and securing transportation to my hotel, I finally arrived in my small unassuming room at the modest Sanctuary House on Tothill Street in downtown London. I chose this location because it's in the center of the city. Well within walking distance of Westminster Abbey and the Houses of Parliament.

"This stuff is definitely early English," I say with a nod of agreement. The room is painted an ugly pale green and sparsely furnished with a single bed, an uncomfortable-looking chair, no desk, and a small bathroom. It's 10:30 in the morning and outside I can still hear the sounds of the sprawling metropolis I saw on my taxi ride from the airport. There were the normal sights and sounds of a modern metropolitan city occupied by millions of people. As I unpack and prepare myself for the time transfer, waves of excitement reached their peak, then slowly plateau at Defcon 2. My mind was racing and I was shaking uncontrollably.

Trying to relax, I take several deep breaths while carefully reviewing my well-thought-out strategy.

Interrupting my concentration was my growling stomach and growing hunger pangs. A constant reminder that I haven't eaten anything since yesterday, except the bread and water served to those imprisoned on the people transport. Even with my hunger mounting, I decided to wait until my time transfer so I can sample the food as part of my data gathering.

Sitting on the bed, I again take several deep breaths in my futile attempt to relax. Retrieving my iJotter from my pocket, I began making reference notes to myself.

"OK, it's time to take my first leap into the future."

Standing in the middle of the room, all my muscles were tense. I could hear my heart throbbing in hard fast beats. I then turn the dials to this exact date and time precisely 20 years into the future, 2088.

Pausing for a moment I ask myself aloud, "Have you thought of everything?" No, of course not, comes my next thought. "Oh well, here we go anyway..." was the last thing I said in this time-space.

Chapter 16

Spirals of blue and orange then Blackness...

Regaining my sight and equilibrium, I'm standing in the room where I began. I can hear low moaning sounds coming from somewhere. When I turn to look towards the sounds, there on the bed are a man and woman so engrossed in making passionate love that they are oblivious to my presence. Slowly and gradually, I moved to the door, silently opened it, stepped quietly into the hall, and carefully closed the door behind me.

Making my way down the hall, I head down the staircase from the second floor, then out of the building and into the street, passing no one in the process. It's astonishingly quiet compared to the hustle and bustle of my now time. I glance up to the sky between the ash-colored stone buildings. There was no sun, only low gray clouds, and dreary daylight. According to my projections, this was not abnormal for London this time of year. However the temperature felt much colder than my now time, and there is chilly wetness in the air. It wasn't like normal London fog, it was thicker mist, more like light rain without the falling drops. It's a good thing I had thought ahead and wore my heavier coat.

The traffic on the streets is scant compared to the time-space I had just left. The cars that did pass by were much smaller, resembling four-wheeled motorcycles with bubble-like cabins attached. All of them seemed to be occupied by only two people. They move along very quietly, creating a slight humming sound. I assume their power source was electric motors. Most of the cars were similar in design, like concept vehicles I had seen in my now time, except for the odd digital meters on the exteriors. Every car that passed had a meter on its right side. The meters, about two inches high and a foot long, had large digital numbers that would count down as they moved. I can only assume this was a form of power metering system for the electric motors. But, why are they on the outside of the car? I also noticed there were very few people walking around. This was probably the effect of the colder weather.

Gazing down the narrow street the people were walking slowly, seemingly without purpose, bundled in heavy coats against the cold damp elements. Still, others were huddled together in small groups. Most of those I saw didn't appear to be going anywhere specific, simply milling around in disorganized lines outside various buildings. Some lines were longer than others and none seemed actually to be moving. Most of the buildings were indistinguishable from one another. There were no lighted signs or any indication of the advertising typical of my now.

I searched the faces of passers-by for any indication of good humor. There was none. Their faces appeared glum and distraught. As I leisurely stroll down the street, I pass a few clusters of these frail and gaunt people. There was no obvious reason why they were milling around. The buildings had no signs or

marques to indicate their type of business. The further I walked the more my curiosity grew until finally got the best of me. I needed to know what was going on.

I noticed a small unassuming man leaning against the wall of an old slate-colored brick building away from one of the crowds, so I walked over to him. He had disheveled jet-black hair, a curved nose, thin lips, large morose eyes, and a gray deeply wrinkled complexion. As with most people, he wore a heavy light green canvas overcoat and heavy but worn, brown work boots. When I approached, I politely asked, "Hello, can I talk to you for a moment?"

"Huh, what," he says shyly.

"May I talk to you?" I repeated.

His expression turned docile. "Wha' about," he asked.

"I'd like to know what are you doing out here?" I quizzed.

"Wha' you mean?"

"Why are all of you standing out here, what are you waiting for?"

He looks at me as if I am a fool. "We're 'ere to get our CFP credit allotment. Do you already have yours?"

"Huh, yes I guess I do," I answered not wanting to appear out of place.

"Did your allotment get cut? Mine is going down another three percent this month." He said with a mix of sadness and depression.

Then, seemingly to cheer himself up, he says, "But that's OK, it's better for us all."

Still somewhat mystified, I thanked the man and continued my observational pace. That's when I spotted what looked like a small pub just down the street. I was still hungry and knew I could get something to eat there. I leisurely make my way to the pub, passing more groups of dawdling people, and walked inside.

The atmosphere of the interior was chilly with subdued lighting and few customers. There were only three people spread out the length of the long bar staring at half-empty glasses. Two more were in quiet conversation at a nearby table.

I made my way to a secluded seat at the far end of the bar facing the entrance. While I waited, I picked up a menu to see what my meal choices were. The menu was sparse. It only has a few selections and no prices listed, just a CFP number for each item. For instance, the "Fish'n Chips," which England is so famous for, had a CFP number of 7. And there was something called the "Faux-Blood Pudding" with a CFP number of 4. Then I spotted "American Burger" which had a CFP number of 18. None of this makes any sense, I reflected. It took several minutes before the barmaid finally came to ask for my order.

"Can I get you something guv?" she asked with her thick English brogue.

"Yes," I said. "But first can you tell me what this CFP number is? I'm not from here and don't quite understand."

She gave me a look that even an ugly man would find insulting.

"Look yank, if you don't know what a CFP is then you don't have any, and if you don't have any, you can't get nothing 'ere."

“I have American money,” I said with pride.

She turned her head as if to make sure no one else heard what I said. She eased close to me keeping her voice low and said, “Takin’ American money is highly illegal. I can get whatever you want guv, but you’ve got to keep it real quiet. We’re not supposed to take money, just CFp credits. I’ll make an exception just for you guv, but first, prove you ain’t no CRF.”

“Look lady, if I don’t know what a CFp is, I sure as hell don’t have any idea what a CRF is,” I said as quietly as possible.

“Yeah, bit of a trick that eh?” she whispered. “What do you want, guv?”

“I’ll take the Fish’n Chips and a pint, but first, explain all this CFp and CRF crap.”

Looking around again she quietly explains, “The CRF are the f-all jobbys that make sure we don’t overuse or overscore our allotment of CFps.”

“What does CRF stand for?” I questioned.

“Carbon Regulatory Force, guv.” She says matter-of-factly.

“Okay, and what are CFps?” I asked, trying to understand.

“CFp, why that means Carbon Footprint guv. It’s the law. You’re only allowed so many CFp credits, yah know.”

“Carbon Footprint credits?” I said, “Are you kidding me?”

“No guv, I’m not,” she said plainly.

“Why CFps instead of money?” I asked.

“CFps are more important than money,” she states without flinching.

“Tell me why they’re more important.”

“Listen up chap, the planet has been dying for decades because we humans keep acting like humans, using all the carbon that harms the air. So the UN passed laws that said we could only use so much carbon, you know, our Carbon Footprint. If you ask me, they should pass a law against bullshit footprints for the UN. But that’ll never happen. Anyway, nobody wants the planet to die, so we pack it in instead. Got it?”

“No, I don’t got it. You mean you’ve decided to forfeit your life and your living standards to save the planet?” I asked.

“We forfeit our life as you call it, for our children, so they can enjoy the planet. It’s why we’re ‘ere.”

“It’s why you’re here?”

“Yeah, the scientists and our leaders are smarter than anyone, they know what’s best for us all and what we hav’ta do to save the planet,” she says matter-of-factly, then turns and walks through the double door into the back.

I hoped it was to the kitchen to get my food. By now, I was really hungry.

Why are they committing suicide for their children, I asked myself. The mere thought of it was bewildering. It’s moralism run amok. Why would anyone agree to extinction? And how could the UN get laws passed like that without causing a huge uproar? How could knowledgeable humans be so nonchalant about their own extermination?

I needed some answers to my many questions.

Thinking about it further, I recall a known fact of history. Throughout humanity's long past, fear has been the driving force for those who desire power over others. I had read about this before.

Keeping it as hidden as possible I take out my iJotter and make some quick notes... CFp, CRF, dead planet, dead people, UN bureaucrats, stupid laws, fear... then discretely place it back in my pocket.

After a few moments, the waitress returned carrying a small plate. She puts it down in front of me, walks to the other end of the bar, and begins talking to another customer. The items on the plate have no resemblance to what I remember Fish'n Chips looking like the last time I was in London. When I waved for her to come back, I could tell she was unwilling to interact with me further, but she reluctantly returned.

I looked down at the food in front of me and motioned, "What's this?"

"The Fish'n Chips you wanted, guv" she said rudely.

"Are you sure, this doesn't look like fish," I said trying to be as kind as possible.

"Of course, it ain't fish, guv."

"Well didn't I order Fish'n Chips?" I asked, still trying to be polite.

"You don't know much do yah slag?" she said, "We don't eat real fish anymore. Fish is regulated cause all fishes is classified as endangered species. What you have before yah guv is a tasty mixture of bean curd, ground vegetables stems and gluten formed to look like fish, with some spices thrown in for good measure, yah know, taste."

"But it's not even breaded and fried" I complained.

"We can't fry nothing guv, we don't 'ave the CFps for fry'n"

My hunger had become unbearable so I sighed to myself and said, "Okay, thanks."

I had to have some food or I was going to pass out. I was already beginning to shake. Getting sick in this time-space would not be a good thing. I wouldn't be able to explain without being considered totally insane. At least the glop on the plate was warm.

The taste was like eating putrid biscuit dough with twigs mixed in for crunch. I was barely able to keep it down but did. I was starving.

I finished eating the glop, drank my pint to wash it down, and made some more notes. Calling the barmaid back over I asked how much I owed her.

Obviously, she was still worried someone might hear. She leaned close and quietly said, "That'll be ten American, put it under the plate, and be careful."

Carefully taking the cash out of my pocket, I concealed a \$10 bill under the plate. "Look I'm going to need some of these CFp credits, can you sell me some? I'll give you American cash for them." I pleaded, cautiously letting her see the wad bills in my hand.

Giving me a very paranoid look, she said, "Mister, I don't know who you are and I'd never do nut'n against the law." she said cautiously looking around the room.

This was a very risky issue for her. "Thank you for your help," I say politely. Leaving the bar I headed towards the door.

As I get closer to one of the patrons at the bar, he motioned me over and offered me the seat next to him.

He is an older man, with salt-and-pepper unshaven whiskers, dark deep-set brown eyes, and a bulbous red nose. He had worn facial features and long gray-streaked hair tied back in a ponytail that fell well past his shoulders.

After I sat down he asked, "Where you from, guv?"

"Abroad"

Smiling, he says, "Okay, maybe I can help you out."

"With what?"

"Marley there said you might be interested in purchasing some CFps," making a jerking motion with his head toward the barmaid.

"Well, maybe, do you have some you could sell?"

"Yeah, but it's gonna cost ya some of that American you got there."

"How much?"

"100 American for 2,000 credits."

"That seems a little steep." trying not to be too easy a mark.

"Well mate, that's the price if you want some."

Convinced I will need them if I'm going to stay here a while I agree.

"Okay, I'll take 100 American worth." reaching into my pocket for the cash.

He pulls several small plastic credit cards out of his pocket with "CFp" printed in small letters in the center, shuffles through them and places one on the bar. I put the \$100 bill next to it, which he quickly grabs and puts away, then looks back at his drink as if I am not there. I picked up the card and continued out the door.

Outside the number of people waiting around had increased substantially. The lines were beginning to get longer, but they were still not moving. Spotting what is obviously a taxicab moving slowly down the street, I wave my hand motioning it over. When it pulled next to the curb in front of me the door quickly flew open. After climbing onto the passenger seat the door automatically closes with a slam, and the seatbelt robotically straps me in.

"Where to mister?" asked the driver.

Thinking quickly, I reply. "The nearest library."

"That'll be 120 CFps," he says pushing several buttons on a device attached to the dash, then points to a card slot.

Retrieving the newly purchased card from my shirt pocket, I slid it into the slot. The card reader indicates the card has 1500 CFps, deducts the 120, and with a mechanical whirr the card slides out.

That bastard robbed me of 500 CFps, I thought. Some things never change. There are crooks and thieves no matter the time.

There was a replica of the external meter on the inside of the cab. The number on the digital display increased after reducing the CFps from my card. So, that's what the meter is. It's monitoring CFp usage. This really is strange, I thought. CFps are the new money.

It was less than two miles to the library, yet it took more than fifteen minutes to get there. I probably could have walked faster than this cab was moving, but the experience was worth it.

During my conversation with the driver, I found out he was an ex-business owner from Edinburgh, Scotland. He had owned a clothes-cleaning business for several years but it had gone under. He couldn't afford the CFps needed to stay in business and people just weren't using his service anymore. He got his cab-driving job because his sister's husband owned two taxicabs and needed another driver. Anyway, it was the only job he could find. He lived with his sister, her husband, and one child in a small three-room flat in the Maida Vale area northwest of downtown London.

The Library was made of ashen red brick and looked like an ancient building even for my now time. As I walked toward the large double doors, I noticed that the weather seemed to be getting a little colder. It was almost cold enough to see my breath.

Other than the fact that it was virtually empty, with only two other people in sight, the biggest difference between this and other libraries I'd been in, was the fact there were no books in sight, just monitors. I walked to one of the monitors and sat down. Luckily, there was a "Directions" pamphlet attached to the side. Quickly glancing through the directions, I determine the monitors were touch screens and simple to use. All it needed was some CFps to function. I slid my card into the indicated slot and the screen gradually activates. The monitor asked how long I wished to be connected. Guessing, I taped the keyboard that appeared on the screen for two hours. The screen reveals that I do not have enough CFps for two hours, the total amount of time I could use the machine was one hour, forty-three minutes, and twenty-two seconds.

"I guess that will have to do," I say aloud.

I touched the enter icon on the screen to agree and it gradually changes to a search program. I typed in "reasons for UN Cfp laws" and again touch the enter icon. After several seconds, the search results are listed in chronological order. They numbered six links to EU rules file, twenty-four links to UN Environmental reports, and three links to UN laws.

I read every page and report completely, busily taking notes in my iJotter by summarizing the main points, finishing them all just as the fifteen-minute warning shows on screen. Convinced I have enough information for my story I hit the end of session area and saved a few CFps, probably just enough to get a small drink of water or use a pay toilet, I thought with a chuckle.

During my discovery session, I noticed a short, balding but well-dressed man enter the Library. He walked around seemingly looking for something, then seated himself just four monitors down from my workstation. I thought that was odd with all the open monitors available, but paid no further attention to him at the time and continued my research.

As I finished, he unexpectedly got up and walked over to the monitor next to mine, glancing at my screen as he sat down. I smiled suspiciously as I discreetly returned my iJotter to my pocket just as the screen went to black.

"Did you find what you were looking for?" the stranger asked in my direction.

"Yes, and you?" I politely asked.

“No, not really. I’m not used to this search program, it’s more complicated,” he complained, “Can you show me how it works?”

“Not now, I’ve used all my CFps”

“I have plenty, you can use some of mine.”

“No thanks, I’m finished.”

“Then maybe you can help me.”

“Huh, sure,” I say still somewhat concerned, “what are you looking for?”

“First let me introduce myself, I’m Sir Ansley Trite. Normally I’d use the Parliament’s computers but I need some information rather quickly before my next meeting, which is in just a few minutes.”

“Glad to meet you, sir. I’m C.W. Comstock,” now even more suspicious.

“Well Mr Comstock, what you are doing here?” He asks.

“I’m a writer doing research for a story. How can I help?”

“A writer, hmmm...” he says with uncertainty. He then continued, “I want to find out the total amount of energy produced and consumed in the UK for the last 10 years. How do you think I should word my search to get the best results?”

“This search program seems to accept typical conversational statements, so if it were me I’d ask; ‘UK “statistics” 10-year energy production/ consumption’ that will probably get you the information you’re looking for.”

He typed my suggestion into the search program then smiled and said. “Yes, that worked fine.” Studying the results he said, “This is interesting, we produce four times more energy than we consume, and our average consumption has decreased 9.7% a year for the last seven years.”

“That is interesting,” I said. And quite odd, I thought, considering the people waiting for their CFp credits.

“Now, how should I find out where the energy comes from?” He asked.

Feeling rather inquisitive myself about the information he had found, I suggested he search for ‘UK “statistics” forms of energy production’.

Once more following my suggestion, he typed as I spoke. The resulting information was a little startling to me and it seemed to surprise Sir Trite as well. The data described how 47% of the UK’s energy was from wind turbines, 26% from solar, 22% from fossil fuels, like coal and natural gas, and the remaining 5% from wave power. Peculiar, I thought. No nuclear power is generated.

Lord Trite said “Thank you,” removed his CFp card, stood up, and casually began to walk away before stopping in mid-stride. He hesitated for a moment then turned around and came back to his seat. Turning toward me, he moved his face close to mine and looked squarely into my eyes. The pupils of his eyes were an odd deep maroon color that appeared to move in a flowing circle toward the center, like looking into a whirlpool, he showed no emotion and never blinked. He then said, “Let me tell you a story.”

Uncertain and suspicious, I said, “Sure, if you think I should hear one.”

He began; “There was once a very prosperous world filled with a strong, well-educated, and thriving people. Through decades of misinformation and calculated indoctrination, these strong-willed people were intellectually and morally undermined. They slowly lost all hope. They were beaten. With their

ideals and principles destabilized, they finally surrendered, then embraced a deception, unknowingly allowing themselves and their world to be subjugated by the ruthless and power-hungry among them. Today that world no longer flourishes, its people are no longer strong, they are no longer hopeful, and they no longer exist.”

“Why are you telling me this?” I asked

“I thought it might help with your research.” He said with a quipped smile.

“Here, do some more investigating.” He snorted, handing me his CFp credit card.

He then quickly stood up, turned, walked toward the library entrance, and was gone.

I stared at his back as he left, thinking, what a very strange man. I was especially puzzled, and enormously suspicious, of Sir Trite’s sad account. Who was this Sir Trite, and why did he tell me his tale of woe?

I slid the CFp card he had given me into the library monitor, typed in 10 minutes, and searched for “Sir Ansley Trite.”

Nothing...

I did another search for members of Parliament and Parliament staffers, but again no listing for anyone named Trite. “What the hell is going on?” I said a little too loud.

The other people in the library working at their monitors were suddenly looking my way, watching me.

Putting my head down, I slink low into the chair trying to hide. Staring intently at the blank screen, thinking about my now, I vaguely remember these carbon issues. I didn’t have much interest in the specifics, but as I recall there was a debate centered on carbon taxes. There was legislation passed that heavily taxed every company that produced or used carbon, which, it just so happened, was all industries that produced anything. There was even talk of taxing a person’s personal carbon footprint. But, that is not what is happening in this time-space.

As I recall, there was a lot of debate about the accuracy of the science and whether questionable science was suitable for making public policy. I remember accusations that many of the scientific reports were opinion pieces disguised as scientific research.

I hadn’t paid very much attention to the uproar during my time travels, mainly because I was not there for that purpose and never really thought much about it. Another reason is, I thought it an egotistical and illogical proposition to make humans responsible for the climate of a planet. I also know that politicians thrive on the projection of distortions, and the denial of reality. Typically, most of their policies are intended to increase envy and magnify injustice, using social psychology promotion of self-esteem at the expense of self-control and personal responsibility.

Even so, I faintly remember the issue during some of my time travels. I remember reading about global freezing in the 1970s which provoked a torrent of apocalyptic predictions. I remember the same idea morphing into global

warming in the 1980s, then global climate change in the 1990s, and then to the deteriorating atmosphere in the early 2000s. Each name change included the same predictions of global disasters and destruction.

So, the issue continued to be a prominent topic for all these decades. Why the transformation of the name, I wondered.

Anyway, I need more information about how the people in this time-space lost their ability to reason and their grip on reality. I need to know what these people were taught in their schools and universities.

My ten minutes ended quickly. Still using Sir Trite's CFP card, I decided more research time was needed, inputting 90 minutes this time, I type "UK education curriculum" and touched the enter icon on the screen.

The results were very slow in appearing, but gradually there was a list of data sites offering books, curriculum by grade level, assessment tests, and teacher training aids. All seem to emanate from the same location. A place called the "United Nations Citadel of Reason and Enlightenment." I began my research by reading the curriculum for elementary education, working my way through the college and university levels, and taking notes as I scanned the data.

It appeared that the entire curriculum was designed more as a religious belief than based on centuries of accumulated knowledge. The curriculum taught the students to declare absolute faith in science with a commitment to service and sacrifice. Planet Earth was described more as a deity to worship, than a hunk of rock floating in space.

The more I researched the more it became obvious that children and young adults were being taught that the continuation of what was called the "natural world" was more important than anything human. That protecting the "purity" of the planet was paramount, no matter the consequences to the human species. As the curriculum changed through the grade levels, it developed into sermons of commitment to abstinence from anything harmful to this tradition of "purity" of the "natural world."

I found only one school that actually taught science. It was the "University of Scientific Wisdom" located in Amsterdam the Netherlands. The UN supported the facility from funds collected by a worldwide tax called the "UN Cognition Tithe". The qualifications for how someone would apply and be accepted were not available.

Ok, enough of this, I'm getting ill, I thought.

I think I have enough information and a basic understanding of society's current situation in this time-space. I understand what is being taught now, the ultimate self-sacrifice. Thinking about the time frame, I'm twenty years into the future so this phenomenon should show its ugly head in my now time, and that would give me the historical perspective I need. I'll investigate further when I return to my now.

However, I'm not finished here yet.

Leaving the library, I began walking back to the hotel, thinking as I walked. The future is much different than I had expected. But I hadn't expected anything really. No one can know the future unless they have been there, and now I have. The question is; what am I going to do with the information?

Sharpen up C.W., I scold myself, there will be time to ponder this later.

Feeling a slight chill, I notice the weather seems to be getting even colder as the day passes into late afternoon. About a block away from my hotel, I noticed two people in CRF uniforms had stopped one of the small cars and were talking to a man standing outside. The man, dressed in dirty work clothes, was tall and well-built, seemed very agitated, and was beseeching the officer to let him go. The officer he was talking to was not as tall or as well built, so he had pulled out the equalizer baton he carried on his utility belt. With the driver's attention on the officer in front of him, the other officer was circling and closing in from behind.

As I got closer, I noticed a cute, but sickly-looking brown-haired girl in the passenger seat wrapped in a blanket, trembling and whimpering as the apparent driver was being questioned. Then I spot the meter on his car, it read -2. The driver was pleading his case to the officers. I casually meandered closer hoping to hear the conversation.

"I have to get her some help." The driver is proclaiming.

"You can't drive without the proper CFP credits, it's the law" states the shorter, baton-wielding officer.

"She's real sick, I gotta get her to the hospital." the man pleads.

"Not in this car" the officer states bluntly.

This is very strange; comes my next thought. Why not let this man get help for his kid? Who or what will it harm? The officers couldn't carry her in their car because it was too small.

How frustrating and demeaning for the father.

It was obvious the situation was going to get ugly with a distraught father wanting to get help for his sick child and the officer wanting to make his point of following the law to the letter, without concern for the consequences to the child.

I didn't particularly care for the mindless and inhumane situation I was watching and decided not to let it continue. I reached down with my right thumb, touched the blue stone of the ring, and stopped time.

Everything froze, nothing moved.

Moving quickly, I walked to the driver's side of the car passing the armed officer and tall driver in the process, opened the door, and sat down in the driver's seat. Glancing at the little girl in the next seat, she was cowed and frightened. She had auburn hair with a scattering of freckles dotting her cheeks. Her vacant, blank eyes were empty of life. I removed the card in the slot, put it in my coat pocket, replaced it with the card that Sir Trite had given me, and then returned to the sidewalk just as time jumped to a start.

"Hey," I yelled to the officer, "He's got plenty of credits"

Startled, the bobby replied, "What..." looking my way.

"It looks like he has enough credits, officer," I say politely.

Feeling challenged, the officer gave me a confrontational look as if I had taken a shot at him, then he glanced down at the meter on the outside of the car. It read 08182. Now puzzled and unsure, the officer takes a step back, giving the driver more space, and looks around mystified.

Baffled at what had occurred the officer again looked at the meter and then glared at the driver. Unable to justify keeping the man from continuing, in an official-sounding voice he commanded, “OK mister, on your way. And follow the law.”

The driver, also bewildered by his new riches but more concerned with his child, jumped into his car and drove away. As the car passed, the little girl turned her head in my direction and gave me a slightly crooked smile. Curious, I thought, she couldn’t have seen what I had done.

Feeling pleased and grinning to myself, I continued my stroll back to the hotel. As I walked I gradually descended into deep thought, pondering my next story.

It was obvious that what I was seeing on the streets of London in this time-space were the consequences of the decisions made during my now.

Talk about profound, and creepy, I mused.

I continued my walk in the chilly air, observing as much as possible while thinking about possible storylines. When I arrived back at my hotel, I stopped outside. I turned and slowly looked around one more time, committing to memory what I had seen and heard, soaking in this time-space. I then touch the red stone on my bracelet.

Chapter 17

Back in my cramped hotel room, after a restless two-hour nap, I begin to review my iJotter notes. Outside I could hear the reassuring sounds of a vibrant and bustling city. My hunger had grown almost to the starvation level so I called down to the restaurant inside the hotel and ordered the largest T-bone steak they had, accompanied by fries, or chips as they're called here, a large glass of iced tea, and a piece of chocolate cake. I was starving. I hadn't eaten a real meal since leaving the U.S.

When my food arrived, I ate as if it was my first meal after being stranded on a deserted island, gulping down the meal in a matter of minutes. With my ravenous hunger finally quenched, I set the tray on the floor in the hall outside my room. Opening the window, I pulled the lonely chair over, sat down, and lit a cigarette. Relaxing for the moment as I blow the smoke out the window. It was comforting to see the late afternoon commotion of the city. I watched the cars and people going about their business on the street below, advertising lights attracting consumers to buy this and that, knowing that in a few short years, this sight will be completely different.

Finally content, I flushed the cigarette butt down the toilet and settled down to begin my work. Without a desk available, I was forced to establish a working space on the bed. I collected my portable computer and pushed the power button.

System Start-up... Video on... Sound playing 'loony tunes'... Application open...

“OK, how do I write this?” I say aloud, contemplating my next storyline.

I must write it as fiction of course, or take the chance of altering the future. But the future I had seen should be altered. Those people living twenty years into the future should not have to live that way. Even so, is that up to me? Who am *I* to make such a judgment?

For the most part, the people seemed quite content to give up their lives for what they believed, consenting to their own slow demise. They believed they were dying for the future, for their children. However, their children were also being taught to commit to dying, dying for the cause, committing themselves to extinction.

I have to do more research. I have to find out what these people and the younger generation of my now time are being taught. The young people of this, my now, will become the adults of the future from where I had just returned.

I connect wirelessly to the city's Internet service and then connect to the scholar.google search engine. Typing in “historical climate reports” the results gave me a vast amount of reports from acronyms like CSIRO, IPCC, CCC,

EEA, GISS, and NASA as well as reports from activist groups around the world. I stored the resulting documents on my hard drive. I connect to Nexus/Lexus and search for articles on carbon footprints, again storing the results.

The next step was to first search the curriculum used in elementary education, again working my way through the college and university levels, saving these results as well. The hours passed as I gathered more and more data. Glancing at my watch, it is 11:54 PM local time.

This story is going to take a lot more time to construct than I have now. I need to be methodical and accurate, and I'm going to need a lot more space and a more comfortable place to work. I immediately decide to take the next available flight back home to the US. Connecting via the Internet I make the necessary travel arrangements. Next, I compress the entire folder filled with the saved files and then send them to my cloud storage repository for automatic retrieval by my home computer.

Time to get some much-needed sleep. I have an early flight tomorrow morning.

Chapter 18

Earth Standard Year 2068

After over a week of examining the many reports, journals, documents, and educational curricula, the information I found was shocking and unexplainable. One major discovery was in the educational curriculum.

Years ago the foremost reference text used as the basis for all university science curricula was the well-authoritative book, "History of World Science", which documented the millions of years of Earth's existence, its climate, the growth associated with energy used for production, carbon usage, and the progress of human ingenuity. It described, in scientific detail, Earth's climate as the natural evolutionary correlation of the planet's solar, geothermal, meteorological, and atmospheric relationships. I remember this book. It cost me \$115 when I was in college. I had read it cover-to-cover and still had a copy in my library of books. Referencing and comparing my original book to the newer reference data, the information had completely changed.

This new scientific data was fictitious, and erroneous in comparison. It was a narrow view that blamed humans for every cyclical bad weather event and natural disaster that historically was typical weather patterns. It was obvious the new scientific data had a philosophy. The data appeared to be politically motivated distortions that promoted the poisonous ideology I had seen in the future. The book had been altered and tailored into agenda-driven false information.

The reports from the many agencies were also distorted, and, most of the dissenting comments recorded in my copy about the controversy had been removed. While the "precautionary principle" is used as the main reason to produce fear of planetary catastrophic events into the minds of the public. The minimal number of dissenting articles were labeled disobedient, their authors were looked upon as deniers of truth. Some politicians had even proposed legal action against them.

What's going on here? How had they done this? Who had done this and why?

I also discovered that several anti-progress; anti-human growth groups had seized upon the concept of the planet's naturally changing climate, specifically the atmospheric trace gas carbon dioxide, as the issue and opportunity for which they had been waiting. It was the gateway to shaping the minds of the young while at the same time mutating public opinion into self-induced guilt. By eliminating, in the educational text, the fact that carbon is the major building block of everything on Earth and carbon dioxide is the gas that every plant needs to survive, they instead declare carbon dioxide an immoral toxic pollutant of the "natural world."

Many governments also saw the opportunity to garner more power, as most governments are prone to do, by following a similar blueprint of fear.

They used these same unverifiable theories, along with billions in government-funded and singularly focused scientific research, to deceive and gelatinize people's thinking. Together with years of educational misinformation and media bombardment, they were able to eradicate all common sense and reasoning abilities of the majority of the populous. This made it unproblematic to pass ruinous laws publicized as must-do initiatives to save the planet, their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren.

Under intense pressure from these assorted anti-human progress groups, all the world leaders signed the U.N.'s Carbon Reduction Proclamation of 2021. The proclamation obligated the population of every country in the world to become followers of this quasi-religious cult. It was called enlightenment while it ignored history. It helped the creeping utopian idea of social justice use behavior modification to disguise itself as saving the planet for their children.

When the strong and growing economies began to falter, as economic cycles do, these laws caused enormous hardships for the world's populace. Yet without complaint, the people continued to believe their own fatality was a blessing, the solution to saving the planet for future descendants. All the while, their children were being indoctrinated into the same belief, the moral imperative that human life and human survival were meaningless compared to the life of a planet. They were willingly surrendering their own existence for a falsehood.

I had gone forward in time and had seen human growth and potential come to a standstill. I observed the people of the future descending backward with their acceptance of political governance that, through coerced and immoral policies, abolished the idea of individualism. I've seen the loss of liberty and freedom of thought that always follow such actions.

Wow! What a story, I thought. Asking myself -- but... should I tell it? "Yes!" I proclaim aloud.

Why? I questioned. What about the possible consequences of telling such a story?

Then I remembered the haunting effects I had seen on my travel into the future. The despondent, empty eyes of that little girl, weak and helpless. The heartbreak I felt at seeing the prosperity and initiative of those people stolen from them when they lost their individual liberty. Those who saw decadence in humankind's progress and success had used deception to drain the people of their future with the promise of a better life for their children.

Okay, I have a story that must be told.

Because most of my previous writings have been about historical moments in time, I'm sure my publisher would have doubts about whether I would be taken seriously writing fiction, so I decided the title would be "The History Of The Future" using the same tale of woe that Sir Trite had told me as an origin for the story. Maybe that is why he politely demanded I hear it.

Okay, enough. I have a story; I have a title. Time to start writing...

Chapter 19

Earth Standard Year 2126

Sitting in her living room, Vienna decided to reread the instructions before attempting another time trek. The instructions were straightforward enough, yet they left a lot to the imagination. She's certain she must have as much understanding of the workings of the bracelet and ring as possible.

The explanation given by the board of the U.O.H. said something about a rogue writer. Who was he, and what was she supposed to do about it? It would be prudent, she deduced, for her to first contact them before making her next voyage into a different time. They must have a plan, that's why she was given the time jewelry in the first place.

The instructions said to turn the dials three times one way and then three times the other way. But, there are multiple dials on the bracelet. Should she turn them in a particular sequence? All she can do is guess. She turns the innermost dial first, with three complete rotations to the left, then three complete rotations to the right. Then, going through the same procedure with the other dials, she takes a deep breath and touches both stones.

Blackness... Nothingness...

Gradually she begins to feel an unfamiliar sensation of cerebral communication.

"Welcome guild member Vienna Pitts"

Gradually her sight increasingly grows accustomed to the dim yellow lighting. She is standing in a small bubble-like chamber about the size of a small bathroom. There were no visible walls, only a flowing translucent force field. Her breathing is short and quick almost to the point of hyperventilating. Above and around her she can feel the presence of other living organisms.

"Do you wish to speak to the board?"

Looking around, she's unable to clearly see much of anything, "Yes" Vienna says in a weak voice. Still trying to distinguish some minuscule detail, she swallows and clears her throat, "Whoever this board is, you told me during my first visit that you needed my help with some rogue writer. Just what did you have in mind for me to do?"

"Have you experienced the time devices?"

"Yes...a little."

"Then you are familiar with their use?"

"I suppose so, bu..."

"Excellent, then your first assignment is to travel to Earth time May 21, 2012, and modify the residual documentation trail in the chronicle record of

'History of World Science'. This will restore all records to their original version."

"Huh, OK.... But how do I know how the original version is meant to read? How would I make the necessary changes?"

"You will learn. When you return to your now a member of the board will contact you. He will instruct you. His name is TicTic R'gneraq."

"What, his name is what? How will I know it's him? When will he..."

Too late, suddenly Vienna is again sitting in the living room of her own house, breathing unevenly and a little dizzy from the sudden change in oxygen levels. Sitting there, she tried to gather her thoughts. Her body was aching so she takes a moment to stretch. A long, total body muscle-tightening stretch with arms above her head, hands, and fingers spread wide, legs out straight with toes pointed. She holds the stretch for as long as she can, slowly relaxes, then takes another long deep breath.

"Phew! What an experience," she says aloud. I'm going to need to get in better shape if this happens with each time trek. Wait, that wasn't time travel, I was transported to another location.

Ring... Ring...

I hope this isn't my real job, Vienna thinks as she answers the videophone.

"Hello," Vienna says politely.

On the other end of the vid-call appeared a middle-aged dark-skinned man with a well-trimmed beard, and a brown furry hat.

"Is this Miss Vienna Pitts?" a low raspy voice says.

"Yes."

"The U.O.H. directed me to contact you for some additional training."

"Are you Mr. Ragtagger?"

"No, my name is TicTic R'gneraq. You may call me TicTic. Are you ready to begin your training?"

"Well... yes, can you give me a little..."

Knock... Knock...

"Geez...not again," Vienna says with frustration. It would be nice if I could at least get to the bathroom once in a while. Can't these people ever give a girl a break?

Vienna holds the door with both hands when she opens it to keep the cold wind from blowing it wide open, "Come in, come in," she says hurrying the visitor inside. Using her shoulder, she then forces the door closed.

When she turned to see whom she had just let into her home she is startled by the size and appearance of her visitor. Before her stood a figure at least seven feet tall wearing a long brown hooded fur coat that completely covered him from head to floor. The only things visible were brown leather gloves jutting out the end of the fur sleeves. The hood protruded so far forward that his face was not visible.

“Miss Vienna Pitts?” the stranger questions in a nonchalant voice.

“Yes?” Vienna says apprehensively.

“I am TicTic R’gneraq, here to begin your training. We should begin as soon as possible. May I be seated?”

“Yes, yes... please, come this way,” motioning him into the living room.

TicTic followed Vienna, ducking his head slightly as he passes through the doorway. With both hands, he pushes back the hood of his coat and begins to remove it. That’s when he heard the normal reaction each time he showed himself to an Earthling.

“Whoa-ooh-uh-uh,” Vienna says in astonishment.

TicTic R’gneraq is an Aodaevarian from Otos, a realm several hundred light-years from Earth. He is very slender and his skin is almost pure white, whiter even than albino white. He is so white when the light hits him a faint bluish hue is emitted. His hair is also white, which is cut in what could be considered a typical male hairstyle, slightly long and somewhat shaggy and unkempt. His facial features are almost human-like except his eyes are a deep Han purple, with no distinction between the cornea, pupil, or sclera. This gives his eyes the illusion of depth. His nose is abnormally wide but not overly large, his ears might be considered small for his head size, but Vienna has seen men with small ears before. His eyebrows are as white as his hair and almost unnoticeable against the whiteness of his skin color. His mouth has small lips that are somewhat puckered.

TicTic is dressed in a dark skin-tight brown leather two-piece suit with storage pockets on the outside of each leg as well as each forearm. The suit is pleat-padded on the shoulders and thighs and has what appear to be built-in shoes. In some ways, it resembled an off-world military uniform. When he removes his gloves, it exposes the three fingers with opposing thumbs of his hands.

Shocked, Vienna questions her memory. This is not the face she had seen on the videophone. Then she realizes the ease with which a person can obtain black-market programs that can change your transmitted videophone image. She assumes that was how it was done.

TicTic gracefully places his tall thin form into a chair. Vienna sits in the chair directly across from him smiling an uncertain smile.

Trying not to stare Vienna says, “Okay, where shall we start?”

“The U.O.H. records indicate during your educational phase your second major was what you call computer science.”

“Yes, that’s true, and I did very well,” Vienna admitted proudly.

“Excellent, then we will begin with this.”

He removed from the pocket on his right forearm what looked like two No. 2 pencils stuck together lengthwise. When TicTic separates the two segments a holographic screen image appears between the two unconnected parts. When he lets it go this pencil tool suspends in place, floating in mid-air. He then touched an area of the image, which activated it. Instantly visible on the screen were computer language symbols and moving strings of code expressions.

“This is a factum-terminal,” he explains, “It is capable of data mining manual and digitally recorded code and text. It reassembles the text into code, and then transmits the mined data into any serialized syntax taxonomies currently known from A+ to Z2OOT3. For your convenience, I have compiled the user interface into a decipherable language you will recognize. The language is much like RUST, SCALA, JSON or ooREXX expressions of character encodings based on UCC/IEC 110987.356-28. Do you understand?”

“Yes, I’m comfortable with both JSON and ooREXX,” Vienna says modestly.

“We thought that would be the case,” TicTic replied matter-of-factly.

“Usability is not complex. Simply lay the factum-terminal over the tome of recorded data then touch the “triage” image, here. It will take .000351 of your seconds to complete the transition. Once the text has complied, the factum-terminal’s algorithm will connect to the UTM currently in use as the universal data storage and retrieval system in that time-space. The algorithm is designed to locate and then compare the triaged data and identify any anomalies. If alterations are found the program will request authority for resolution transfer. At that point simply execute the required ooREXX command and all variations will be rectified. Using a nano-bot herder all botnet identifiers will also be rectified.

“What is the authority command?” Vienna asked.

“/* do x over arg || stem ; end,” TicTic replies. “It will be necessary for you to use your time devices to stop time for the rectification process to proceed. The data rectification process will take .000293 of your seconds.”

“OK, that doesn’t seem very complicated. Now, where do I find an original volume of this ‘History of World Science’?” Vienna asked, wanting to seem as efficient as possible.

“There is one known transcript volume in existence. It is located in a place called the Library of Congress.”

“Well, that’s very convenient.”

“You must travel to your time on May 21, 2012. That is the only occasion with which you will have unmonitored access. You must contact the U.O.H. once the residual documentation trail has been rectified,” TicTic explains.

“What? When? 2012? That’s in the past,” Vienna says.

“Yes, is that a problem?” TicTic questions plainly.

“I... suppose not,” Vienna confesses.

With that TicTic stands, and puts on his gloves and coat. He stood for a moment looking at Vienna and smiled, showing his beige teeth. With a jerk of his head, the hood is thrown forward and he disappears.

Chapter 20

Earth Standard Year 2068

Damn, I can't get this out of my mind. The scenes keep seeping back into my consciousness no matter how hard I try to suppress them.

I wrote my book and it was published last month with good reviews. The public seemed to enjoy my "fictional" story and I had been asked to appear on several video chat and podcast interviews. Naturally, I turned them down. That is not part of my contract and I hate the typical stupid and illogical questions they ask.

Still, I'm haunted by my time trek experience into the future. I should be able to help those people. I should be able to do something, but what? What can I do? What *should* I do? What would happen to the future if I got involved and made changes? Any action I take has the possibility of changing the future and possibly making it worse.

Yet, I can't help but feel I must do something.

I know the information in the education curriculum is wrong. My copy of "History of World Science" proves it. My time travels to the past have allowed me to experience firsthand Earth's climate at many different times and locations. I can verify that the effect humans have on the changing climate of this planet is minimal if there is any effect at all.

There is always the possibility of contacting the U.O.H. and asking them for directions. No, that is not a good idea, the less involvement I have with them the better. I don't trust them one iota. They might force me into some unknown situation that would more than likely be harmful to my health.

I wonder, what harm would be done if I locate the exact changes to the original education curriculum in the book 'History of World Science'. Knowing that could be useful, especially for any further time travels into the future.

Have I suddenly discovered the minuscule amount of courage left in the depths of my frightened being? If so, I'll have to be thorough, meticulous, and careful if I decide to continue on this course.

I connect to the Internet and then to the scholar.google web site and search for 'History of World Science'. The result gives a brief description of the book as antiquated printed material and indicates there is exactly one known copy unavailable to the public. It's stored at the Library of Congress.

"Isn't that interesting? The world is unaware of my copy." I say aloud.

The report also stated that the last time the book was available for public viewing was during an event on Friday, May 21, 2012. The event was an exhibit and ceremony on behalf of the centuries of publishing and record-keeping sponsored by the nGATF.

Well now, here is my chance, I say to myself, "I'll do it..."

I'll go back in time and observe the exhibition and maybe get a close look at the book, see who is there, and possibly get a chance to investigate how the data has been changed. I can't imagine there would be any possibility of danger or slip-ups. The chances of that are minuscule. I'll simply observe and stay unnoticed.

Querying the database for more information about the exhibit and ceremony, like who was invited and how the attendees gained access, I find it very easy and straightforward. Anyone could walk in off the street and roam around the exhibit. They could take pictures, but could not touch any of the material.

I then arrange a seat on the next transport to Washington D. C. It leaves in about an hour and a half, so I make reservations at the Washington Plaza hotel and quickly pack my toiletries and the needed clothing. My normal Levis, T-shirt, and sandals would be out of place. A more respectable appearance of slacks and a sports coat would be more appropriate. Do I need anything else, I asked myself. No, this should be a cakewalk.

Okay, time to go...

Chapter 21

Earth Standard Year 2012

I had decided to make my time transfer from my hotel room and walk the short distance to the Library of Congress. The weather this time of year, in this time-space, was magnificent. Sunny, and cool, with a slight northeasterly breeze.

The outside of the Library's historic building was beautiful. From the sidewalk, the gray marble steps of the stairway seem to stretch for the sky. Tall stone columns stood at the top of the staircase crested with beautifully carved headers. Gracing the top of the building's dome was the Torch of Learning. Only a few people were ascending the long broad steps and going in and out of the building. I leisurely strolled up the steps, taking my time to enjoy the clean open air. It's been a long time since I've taken a holiday or had the opportunity to really relax.

Once inside, no words could describe the grandeur of the interior or how it felt to be in such an impressive place. Elaborately decorated murals covered the interior walls. It was extraordinarily embellished with works of art from American painters and sculptors. Around the rotunda, down the aisles, on tall shelves, and on all levels there were millions of authors, trillions of words, and billions of stories. I had died and gone to heaven.

My first stop was to reread the Constitution of the United States and the Declaration of Independence. Then I examine the works of Jefferson, Madison, Adams, Franklin, Allen, and on and on through the country's historical tomes. During my time travels I had personally seen and written about many of the events recorded in these writings. Gradually, I find my way to the beginning of the exhibit in the rare Tutoring and Instruction Collections room. Moving slowly, I browsed my way through the aisles. I was in no hurry so I stopped several times to gaze at specific literary works of art I had completely forgotten. Finally, I reached the reason for this time transfer, the book 'History of World Science'.

The book lay off to one side on a somewhat isolated open table along with several other educational books. It was given no notable prominence in its placement and was readily available to touch by simply reaching over the red velvet crowd control ropes. A few feet away I found a bench where I could sit and watch, as the occasional person would wander by. Typically, they paid no more attention to that book than any other. I was waiting for the opportunity to stop time for further hands-on inspection of the book.

I had been observing for about twenty minutes when I noticed an attractive young woman showing more interest in the book than the other visitors. When she reached the book, she had come to a complete stop, staring at it for longer than normal. She appeared to be your typical tourist; dressed in conventional

relaxed attire, with shoulder-length auburn hair. She carried a canvas and leather backpack slung over one shoulder. Yet, as I watched, she seemed to become increasingly nervous. She began to fidget and looked around as if to see if anyone was watching. When she looked my way, I put my head down, pretending to read the brochure given to those entering the exhibit hall.

Suspiciously, from one of the pockets on the outside of her backpack she withdrew a yellow thing that looked about the same length as a pencil. She slowly looked around again, this time with a wily smile. A moment later, time stopped.

Everyone froze in place. I felt nothing strange or different but sat as still as possible facing forward. To confirm that I hadn't been affected, I forced an eye-blink, curiously there was no effect on me. I watched and wondered who this woman was, how she had stopped time, and exactly what she was planning to do.

Out of the corner of my eye and off to the left I saw something else, something strange and astounding was happening. First, a long leg appeared out of thin air. Then the remainder of a body moved slowly into view, leisurely stepping into the room from nothingness. He, I'm sure it was a he, was tall by human standards, standing well over six feet. His skin, visible only on his face and hands, was a copper-brown color as if he'd spent his entire life in the sun. His hair was not blond, more like light beige, and stuck out in an unruly fashion. His rather large eyes were an odd green color with an austere glow to them. He had a peculiar expression on his face, not a smile, more like a sneer. His slim body was clothed in a pair of pale taupe-colored pants that drooped over the top of his calf-high black boots. He wore an overcoat of the same color that hung well below his waist, almost to mid-thigh. He stood motionless for a moment surveying the surrounding area.

At the same time, the woman began to make her move. She ducked under the control ropes and separated the yellow pencil-like device into two parts, exposing a holographic image. She then started to cover the book with the device.

When the copper-skinned being saw the woman hovering over the book he hastily reached down to his boot with his right hand. He then pulled out something slim, pointed, and metallic-looking, and raised his arm. I was sure the instrument in his hand was a weapon of some sort and he was ready to fire.

I can't let this happen right before my eyes. I have to do something, I thought.

Swiftly jumping up and forward, I took two large steps, leaped over the crowd control ropes, and then slammed into the woman with a full body block. My collision knocks her down just as a blast from the strange being's weapon flashes by my forehead. My eyes open wide with shock. That's a damn laser gun, I told myself. I was surprised at my sudden bravery, or was it stupidity?

We both had fallen sideways onto the hard tile floor with a loud thud. The impact caused her to release an uncontrolled breath. The device she carried instantly retracted and went flying, bouncing twice on the floor. It continued to slide until finally wedging itself against the far wall.

Shocked, the woman turns her head and looks at me with a confused expression on her face. She started to say, “What the hell are you do...” just as the second blast hit the book above us. The blast gives off an intense flash and sets the book ablaze for a moment, then it just vaporizes. With the next shot, the woman covered her head with her hands, curled her body into a ball, and let out a blood-curdling scream.

When I looked back toward the being he was stepping back into the nothingness from where he had come. Jumping up, I ran toward his last location to find out how he was disappearing. There was nothing there but empty space. When I looked back toward the woman, she too was gone.

“What the hell just happened?” I say aloud.

Abruptly time jumps to a start.

Just as suddenly, the fire alarms began sounding and the library personnel started running around in panic mode. Retracing my steps, I casually walked over to where the woman’s device had slid against the wall and picked it up. Nonchalantly I put it in the inside pocket of my coat and continued moving toward the exit along with the small crowd of other visitors. We quickly file through the rotunda and finally out of the library.

Outside the fire department was arriving, and the firefighters were running into the building loaded with equipment. I continued walking in the direction of my hotel. I was trembling from the experience. As I walked, I took several deep breaths trying to relax.

“You are really stupid C.W...” I said to myself as I walked, suddenly realizing my actions could have gotten me killed. In the back of my mind, I tried to comprehend what I had just witnessed. An attempted assassination of someone who most certainly must have had a set of the bracelet and ring and a pissed-off creature that has the ability to walk through time.

I continued moving away from the crowd trying to find a secluded location. Finally, away from everyone, just as I turn a corner I touch the red stone of the bracelet.

Instantly, I was back in my room and finally stopped shaking quite so much. Going into the bathroom, I wash my face and stare at my reflection in the mirror... “You’re a fool,” I tell myself. Stumbling to the bed, I lay for several minutes stretched out just staring at the ceiling, then dose off.

Abruptly sitting straight up on the bed the first thing I do is check to make sure I still had the bracelet and ring. Their presence has begun to give me a sense of security. As I sit there, I again take several deep breaths to relax. Reaching into my coat pocket, I take out the pencil-like device and inspected it, trying to seek a clue as to its use. The two parts easily separate with a steady even pull,

“This instrument is very interesting,” I say aloud. Once the two parts are separated, a very complex computer algorithm appears on a holographic image. I’m not a computer programmer, never wanted to be, and was totally lost in the world of computer language. Therefore, the tool was useless to me. Still, this was an important discovery.

As my mind reconstructs the unusual incident at the library, I can see the woman’s face. For some reason, she looked very familiar. I’m sure I’d seen her

before, but where? She wasn't that Juanita Justus woman, but I'm sure I recognized her from somewhere. Obviously, she has a set of time tools. Why was she there and what was she trying to do? And what is this pencil tool used for?

"Look on the bright side CW," I say to myself, trying to bolster my lackluster mood, "You did learn something today." The attractive woman had stopped time and it had no effect on me or that creature. Obviously, anyone wearing the bracelet and ring is immune to the time-stoppage feature. It's a fascinating and important discovery.

Earth Standard Year 2126

Vienna had planned to return one hundred eighty-four years into the past to help the U.O.H. solve their rogue writer problem. She wasn't sure what all that entailed, but she had made a promise. And she never goes back on a promise. Her final destination, the Library of Congress, was only two miles from her house. She had dialed her bracelet to the appropriate time, and stepped into the cold weather just outside her kitchen, almost freezing because she was dressed in casual clothes, before touching the green stone. She planned to walk the short distance while enjoying the somewhat warmer weather and the sights of that time-space. Her new acquaintance, TicTic, had given her all the necessary information, careful coaching, and a tool to accomplish her first assignment.

She had planned to be successful. She had planned to help the U.O.H. She had planned to give her mundane life a purpose. She had planned to endow a better world to her time. She had planned... but she had failed, and failed miserably. In addition, her ineptness had caused the only book of its kind to be destroyed.

But it wasn't her fault, she thought to herself... she was viciously attacked. Attacked by a gruff man and his laser-gun-toting partner right there in the Library of Congress.

Vienna lay quivering, curled up on the ground in the freezing cold. Don't move, she advised herself. Paying no attention, she continued to try to stand. Still shaking, she crawls her way up the outside wall to a standing position and strains as she reaches for the kitchen door. She awkwardly opened the door, stumbled inside, and closed the door with a slam.

Trembling, she staggers to the cabinet, grabs a glass, and sways her way to the sink. Turning on the dripping faucet, she fills the glass to the top and drinks the ice-cold water without taking a breath. She felt ashamed of herself. But it was her decision and she should own up to the facts. Now she had to follow through on her promise. She had to contact the U.O.H. and let them know the outcome if they didn't already know.

Vienna walked unsteadily to the table and sat down, taking a few moments, she tried to get warm and relax. She sat for several minutes with her head in her hands staring at the table, wishing for what couldn't be wished away.

Leaning back, she looked at the bracelet and paused before turning the dials, trying to think through what she could say to the U.O.H. There were several possibilities. She could make excuses, play the victim, or be honest. Obviously, the only possible thing for Vienna is honesty, plain and simple. She had failed, next time she'd have to be more careful. Next time she would be

more prepared. One thing is for sure, she had learned that time traveling can be very dangerous.

There was something else; the man that had jumped her. She remembers his face. She had seen him before? He looked much like the man in her childhood memories. The exact moment was a fog of memory, lost in the haze of time.

Forget that for now, first things first she scolds herself. She must contact the U.O.H. Turning the dials as she had before she lingers a moment, then simultaneously touches the red and green stones.

Vienna again materializes in the translucent bubble inside the chamber of the board of the U.O.H.

Slowly she begins to feel the succinct sensation of cerebral communication.

“Welcome guild member Vienna Pitts.”

“I’m here to report the results of my assignment,” Vienna says timidly.

“We are aware of the unfortunate results. TicTic R’gneraq will soon contact you for further measures. There are alternatives.”

Vienna starts to protest, then says, “Alternatives?”

“Yes, TicTic R’gneraq will explain.”

With that Vienna is suddenly back in her kitchen, breathing heavily. “I’d better take a bathroom break before TicTic gets here,” She says aloud as she walks down the hall.

Just as Vienna finishes nature’s call, she hears...

Knock... Knock...

“I knew it.” She says with a relieved whimsical smile.

Knock... Knock...

Vienna opens the door. Holding it tight against the wind with a sideward move of her head, she motions the fur-clad TicTic inside, then strains to push the door closed.

TicTic enters swiftly and immediately takes his normal long strides into the living room. Removing his coat and gloves he makes himself at home, again lounging on one of the leather chairs.

Vienna slowly follows, head down, feeling rejected. She again sets down across from TicTic. Excitedly she asks, “Can you tell me what happened? I was at the Library of Congress, I was attacked, I was shot at, I had to escape, what happened, who were those people, what’s...”

TicTic holds up both hands, palms open in her direction and abruptly interrupts, “Please, I will explain what is known. One of the attackers was the rogue writer. First, we must trace the location of the factum-terminal. It is equipped with the program syntax -rescue.term.retrieve - which will inform us of the device’s exact position, time, and location.” With that, he removes a

small computer terminal from his thigh pocket. A few taps on the screen later and he has the information.

“The factum-terminal is located in the timeframe Earth standard year 2048, at this location.”

He holds up the computer's face showing Vienna the latitude and longitude on the screen.

“You will go there now, and regain the factum-terminal.”

“I’ll go there?” Vienna asks wide-eyed, pointing her index finger at herself. “I have to go to the past again? This time back to 2048?”

“You lost it, you regain it.” TicTic said bluntly.

Vienna was annoyed by TicTic’s bluntness. But she also realized it was her amateurish efforts that had failed and accepts that responsibility.

She swallows, takes a deep breath, and exclaims, “Just how am I expected to get the device back? These guys have laser guns. I’m not equipped to have a confrontation with them.”

“You are trained in physical combat and you have other skills. The human with the factum-terminal does not have either weapons or the same skills. You have the coordinates.”

With that TicTic stands, puts on his gloves and coat, looks optimistically at Vienna, and says, “You will do fine,” then walks toward the entryway and disappears before reaching the door.

Chapter 23

Earth Standard Year 2068

Suddenly waking to the loud sounds of the clock radio shrieking ‘Crack the Skye’ by Mastodon, I reach for the off button, roll off the bed, hit the floor with a solid thump, and finally turn off the noise after my third try. I never really liked that song anyway, I deem. It was 7:30 in the morning and much too early to even think about getting up. But I was awake now.

I lay on the floor for several minutes trying to push the cobwebs from my mind. My body felt like a bag of partially congealed Jell-O, still jiggling from my fall. Slowly struggling to a standing position, I stretch my entire body as tall as possible. With my hands above my head, I reach down and touch my toes. I repeated these movements several times while taking numerous deep breaths. I was trying to get rid of the body pains, to no avail.

“I need coffee and painkillers,” I grumble aloud.

Wearing only my boxer shorts, I walk into the kitchen, scratching the whiskers growing on my chin as I go, “I’ll need to shave soon. Or maybe I’ll grow a goatee or a beard,” still talking to no one but myself.

As I start the coffee maker, my memory begins to clear enough to remember why my body is in such pain. It was the amateurish acrobatics I did when I hurled myself through the air and then did a body block in the Library of Congress.

I rummage through the cabinet until I finally find the bottle of double-strength aspirins, dump four of them into my hand, throw them into the back of my throat, and swallow them dry.

You should have known better, I lecture myself. When will you ever learn that being a hero is not part of your DNA, although being stupid is?

I walk slowly into my office and sit at my desk waiting for the coffee to percolate. I like my coffee made the old-fashioned way, it tastes much better than the new cryo-generation method. I pick up the newly acquired device and turn it in my hands inspecting it from different angles. I separate the two pieces and examine the holographic image of the computer programming code. I wondered if I could use this for another story. I’m sure this came from the future. There isn’t any technology that I know of today that is this advanced. If this is from the future then that woman must also have come from the future. But what was she attempting to do with this device and the book? That’s just too complex a question for so early in the morning, and for me without my coffee.

Vienna had flown in from Washington DC earlier that morning and taken a gravicab to this location. The weather conditions were predictable for her now. It was cold, but at least the wind and snow weren’t blowing as bad here as it was

in DC. She dialed her bracelet to make the trip back to 2068 and regain the factum-terminal.

Suddenly she appears in the proper time-space and coordinates given to her by TicTic. Vienna is standing just down the street from CW's house.

The weather is pleasant in this time she thought. She removes her gloves and stuffs them into the pockets of her coat, then removes her coat. The new growing season of spring vegetation had just passed into early summer. The green trees lining the street were in full leaf and there were colorful flowers growing along the walks leading up to the front of the houses. It was not at all like her now where the lingering frigid weather kept anything from growing.

The house she was looking for was in a traditional unassuming residential neighborhood for this time. Spotting her destination, Vienna slowly walks down the street enjoying the nicer weather. As she walked, she wondered to herself how she was going to retrieve the factum-terminal. Somehow, she had to convince the man who attacked her to return it. Why was there still a mystery? The book had been destroyed, what use was the device to her now? Maybe TicTic just wanted it back.

As she walks up the sidewalk to the front door she glances through the glass window and shear curtains into the inside of the house. There he was, sitting at his desk looking at *her* factum-terminal. As she watched Vienna tried to remember why she knew this man, but there was no clear memory of how or why his face was so familiar. She temporarily stops her reflecting questions. This is not the time to dwell on that, she reasons, pushing those thoughts out of her mind, and knocks on the door.

Knock... Knock...

Who the hell can that be this early in the morning? I really didn't want to see anyone. I haven't even had coffee yet, so I pay no further attention to the interruption.

Knock... Knock... Knock...

"Go away." I quietly tell the intrusive sound. Hoping whoever it is will think no one is home. I let the device retract back into one piece then stash it in the middle drawer of my desk.

Knock... Knock... Knock...

Enough, I concede. I get up and walk to the bedroom, grab my Levis from the floor and throw them on. As I take long strides toward the door I got more and more peeved with each step. When I abruptly throw open the door I'm face to face with the woman from the Library of Congress.

"What are *you* doing here?" I question bluntly.

"I'm here to get back my tool." Vienna states flatly. She didn't want to be considered weak so she stood straight and strong with both hands on her hips.

I can see a look of steadfastness and defiance in her eyes. Eyes I've seen before... somewhere.

Thinking better of my initial tone, "Are you okay?" I said in a low concerned voice.

Surprised by his tone, she dropped her hands from her hips, nodded and managed a brief smile. "I'm fine. Thank you."

"So... come in, let's talk about this tool of yours," I say calmly as I open the door wider and gesture her in.

"Would you like some fresh coffee?" I asked while I walk back into the kitchen, leaving her standing alone in the open doorway.

Vienna pauses before entering, her mind quickly reviewing her self-defense training. Collecting her nerve, she walks in slowly, closing the door behind her. She looks around the living room at the neatly spaced furniture, surprised at the unclutteredness of the man's house. The smell of coffee in the air made her somewhat more relaxed.

"How do you take your coffee?" I ask loudly.

"Black with milk and sugar," Vienna replies.

Black? I think to myself, how can anyone call coffee black with all that other crap thrown in, but say, "Is one teaspoon of sugar enough?"

"No, two please, and plenty of milk."

So, she doesn't like coffee. Maybe she should just get caffeine pills instead of acting like a real coffee drinker.

I enter my living room bearing one cup of black coffee and another cup of coffee-flavored sweetened milk.

"So, who are you," I ask as I offer her the cup to her outstretched hand.

"Thank you, my name is Vienna Pitts." She says, sitting straight-backed on the couch with her coat neatly folded over her lap.

"And?" I ask.

"And what, who are you?" Vienna says holding her ground.

I sat relaxed in my overstuffed leather chair and calmly took a sip of coffee before answering, "I'm C.W. Comstock. I'm a writer,"

"I thought you were a criminal or a thief," Vienna says, pulling no punches.

"I don't know what to tell you, I'm a writer, not a criminal."

"You're a writer? What do you write?"

"Most of my writing is about history, maybe you've read some of my stories?"

"No, can't say that I remember reading anything you've written. I was born in England and moved to America when I was fourteen after my father got a job here. So I'm sure I've never heard of you."

CW smiles graciously and then asks, "And, what do you do for a living?"

"I'm a journalist."

"A journalist huh? Do you work for a news organization?"

"Yes, I'm a political cyber-journalist for the Fairfax Evening Star"

"How long have you had the bracelet and ring, and what were you doing at the Library of Congress?" I asked, being direct and to the point.

“I see you have a set also,” Vienna says, pointing to my wrist. “Do you use them to write your books?”

“The library, what were you doing there?” I say getting back to my original question.

“I was simply trying to read the book, but your friend destroyed it.”

“My friend? That creature was no friend of mine. Why would you think that? I kept you from getting killed.”

“If he wasn’t your friend, then he must have been the rogue writer.”

“Rogue writer?” I smile and give her a quizzical look, “Where did you come up with that?” Thinking, this woman is crazier than I am.

“From the U.O.H., the same people that gave you your bracelet and ring. Didn’t they?”

The more I talked to this woman, the more interesting she became. I feel an attraction to her. Maybe it’s just admiration for her confidence and determination to get back her little object. But, her naïveté about the U.O.H. showed a lack of analytical reasoning.

“What did the U.O.H. tell you about this ‘rogue writer’?” I quiz.

Vienna hesitates, wondering if mentioning the U.O.H. was a mistake. She knows nothing about this man. He could be the rogue writer himself and the other person with the laser gun could have destroyed the book to keep him from getting it. The U.O.H. had said they had alternatives. She must be more careful. “I assume you got the bracelet and ring from the U.O.H.? You did, didn’t you?”

“So, you were trying to read the book huh, and this tool you want back, how does it help you *read* the book?” I asked, changing the subject.

“Well, it’s a, I mean it can... it records the book,” Vienna confesses.

“Your little *recording* device is pretty advanced technology, what time-space are you from?”

Caught off guard Vienna says, “Oh, uh, well, I’m from, uh, the year 2126.”

“2126? That’s very interesting. How is life in your time?” I ask, keeping the conversation away from my time tools and me.

Vienna hesitates then explains, “My time is very different, it’s cold, much colder than now, the kind of cold that seeps into your bones and lingers. And technology is more advanced.”

Vienna is taken aback by the incessant questioning. She is wasting time, wondering how she can convince this CW person to return the factum-terminal. Impatiently she stands, her coat falling to the floor, and places both hands on her hips while glaring down at CW.

“Wait a minute, I need my factum-terminal back now.”

Staying seated I simply smiled and calmly replied, “Relax lady, sit down, and don’t get your knickers in a bunch. I’ll return your *recording device* when you tell me why you need to record the book in the first place.”

Vienna, still standing, stares intently at CW trying to consider her limited options. She needed the factum-terminal returned, or so TicTic had told her. Yet, she also felt that this guy wasn’t dangerous. She slowly loosened up a little, picked up her coat then sat back down, again placing her coat across her lap.

Leaning slightly forward, “Look, CW is it? Can I trust you? I mean you attacked me, tried to kill me, so... you can understand why I’m hesitant to trust you.”

“Look lady, I didn’t try to kill you. I didn’t destroy the book. I’m just trying to understand, that’s all. If you tell me why you wanted to record that book I’ll give you your damn duplicating thing. So why did you want to *record* that particular book?”

Vienna stares at CW, stunned by his sudden bluntness, yet concerned that giving him too much information will somehow harm her chances of helping the U.O.H. The more she thought about it, she didn’t believe CW was the rogue writer. The truth is, she didn’t know the answers to some of his questions. She didn’t feel threatened by him. She felt comfortable being with him. The more she thought about it, the more she was convinced that she had to trust him.

“I was told by a representative of the U.O.H. board that the tool would help return the future to its true course. The future has been changed. Its direction has been altered by the rogue writer.” She was hoping her decision to trust this man wasn’t misplaced.

I like her. She’s attractive, well-built and intelligent. Her green eyes were beautiful, even familiar, and when she was angry, they had a salient twinkle to them. Her lips are nicely shaped, with a slight curl in the left corner when she smiles. Her nose was just the right size for her face with freckles running across the bridge and extending slightly down each cheek. In the light of the morning sun, her auburn hair had a shimmering golden hue. Still, what the hell was she doing working for the U.O.H.? Involvement with them can be dangerous.

“The future has been changed?” I say inquisitively. Can that really happen, I muse. I suppose it could. If someone changed the past, it would obviously change the timeline of the future. During my travels back in time, I’d always made it a point not to do anything that could possibly change the future. There’s an old saying ‘he who controls the past, controls the future’, but the consequences would be unknown. Unknown, that is, unless you were able to also see the various potential futures. Is that what this rogue writer is doing? Man, this is getting much too deep for a shallow thinker like myself.

“And how would recording that book with your little device help bring the future back to the correct timeline.”

Vienna admits, “I don’t know how it’s done, exactly, but TicTic said the factum-terminal would record and highlight any changes to the book. Then I could instruct it to repair all the other records connected to its use.”

“TicTic? What is a TicTic?” I asked.

“TicTic was sent to train me in the use of the factum-terminal, where the book was located, and what to do,” Vienna says, truly confessing everything now. “It was my responsibility to utilize the factum-terminal, I made a promise, and I failed.”

“So, this TicTic person or thing or whatever, was sent to you from the U.O.H.?”

“Yes, he was very nice.”

“He, huh?” pausing for a moment, “Look lady, it’s not that I don’t believe you, I do. But before you start trying to change the future of everything known, I think you should find out more about this U.O.H. Don’t you? They might be something completely different than what you think.”

Vienna had never thought about it. She had just accepted that the rogue writer was some villain that needed to be stopped. Thinking back, the U.O.H. had been mysterious, but TicTic was nice, not threatening at all.

“Why do you think the U.O.H. would have some malicious plan? They gave me, and I assume you, our bracelets and rings.”

“Experience,” I say bluntly.

“What *experience*?”

“Never mind that for now.”

“Well, what do you suggest? They don’t control me or you; I think they are really trying to get our future back on track,” Vienna says with a forceful tone.

“I think you should ask them.”

“Me, why don’t *you* ask them?”

“I decided a long time ago to have as little contact with them as possible. However, you seem to have a better connection with them so it would be easier for you. Just turn your dials and ask.”

“Why should I? You are the one who is suspicious of them. They’ve been nothing but nice to me. They gave me the bracelet and ring to help them. They didn’t have to do that.”

“Because if they are truly trying to help and if you are convinced by their answers, I can help you more than simply returning that device.”

“What do you mean, how can you help more?”

With a knowing smile, I say, “Not all copies of the book ‘History of World Science’ have been destroyed. I have an original version.”

Stunned, Vienna stammers, “Huh, huh” then smiles, “alternatives,” she says to herself in a quiet whisper... she had increasing new respect for the U.O.H.

Squirming slightly, trying not to appear too excited she says, “Okay, I’ll do it. I’ll ask them your question.”

“Good, when you return with the answer to my question, I will give you your device and allow you to record my copy of the book.”

“What question do you need answered?” Vienna quizzes, getting more enthusiastic as the moments pass.

“The question is: When the device is used, how will the expected changes to the future help the people of this planet?”

“That’s all you want to know?”

“Yes, that’s all. Isn’t that enough?”

She started to say more but waited. “I suppose so.”

Vienna stands and turns the dials of her bracelet in the same order as before. She takes a quick look at CW, smiles her curved smile, touches the red and green stones, and disappears.

Chapter 24

Time is too slow for those who wait, too swift for those who fear. - George Orwell

Sanduval smiles with the pleasure of confidence as he steps onto the grassy knoll overlooking the town below. This location was completely out of cerebral contact with everyone. His recent travel was a success. He had removed one of only three known obstacles to his transcendent plan.

Even with the intrusion from some unexpected operatives, they were unable to impede his mission. His powers were too vast. He was too strong for their meager attempts at obstruction.

Breathing in the clean air of this now pristine planet gave Sanduval a slight buzz of all-knowing enlightenment. He sat down on the new growth of green Poaceae, stretched out his long legs, and relaxed. He lay quietly gazing at the blue sky filled with puffs of billowing white clouds. He then turned his gaze to the vast valley below with its tranquil and serene inhabitants. He knew this world was optimally enhanced because of what he had done and what he was going to do. He had no doubts. He has the power. He is the architect of the transformation needed to revolutionize societal harmony across the galaxy.

With only two more missions required, his mind continues to construct his long-reaching scheme. There was still plenty of time so there was no need to hasten the inevitable. The seeds had been planted and taken root. The evolution will continue without interruption and with ever-increasing momentum until all immoral perceptions have vanished. Any disturbance will be identified and dealt with by society's ability to adapt itself to this new direction.

With his right hand, Sanduval removes a small device from his pocket. He slowly closes his hand with steady even pressure until the device is totally encapsulated in his palm.

He then uses slight pressure points to activate it. The device is a small plasma controller that connects his mind to the central control in the cabin of his ship floating in orbit more than 500 miles directly above him.

Instantly the Vi hologram image comes to life in his mind. With his normal precision, he gradually drifts through the records.

Surprisingly there is a slight flicker, a yoctosecond of interruption. It was a distant but obvious anomaly in space-time. Sanduval's left cheek twitched with irritation, his mind flinched in contempt at the continued attempts to challenge his powers.

But this is a unique aberration. One he was prepared for but had not anticipated the exact number of those involved. Why had it come at this time, he wonders? He realized there was no way to reverse the anomaly as present time had moved past the delineation position.

Sanduval knows what must be done.

Chapter 25

Vienna appears in what has become an almost normal experience, the transparent bubble of human life. She takes a deep breath to adapt to the change of pressure, which causes both of her ears to pop in the process.

Gradually she feels the communication growing within her mind.

“Welcome guild member Vienna Pitts.”

Eagerly Vienna says, “I have returned to inform you of my progress and to ask a question.”

“Ask a question?”

Excited that she has something positive to report, Vienna says, “Yes, Not all copies of that book were destroyed. I have found another copy, but the owner requires an answer to his question before giving me access to it.”

“Who is this ‘person’ that is the owner of the book?”

“He’s a writer, CW Comstock. You must know him, he has a set of the bracelet and ring.”

“C.W. Comstock?” Is repeated, along with what Vienna perceives as a slight amount of aberrant humor. She then feels a small unfamiliar buzz, a mixture of communications just outside her understanding. It’s as if there was a whispering in the back of her mind.

“Ask the question.”

“What?”

“You may ask the question.”

“Huh, OK, uh, ‘When the factum-terminal is used, how will the changes it makes help the people of Earth?’”

“Your answer is, the people of your planet will continue to exist.”

“What?” Vienna asked, surprised at such a blunt answer.

“You have your answer.”

After that curt response, Vienna was again standing in CW’s living room, looking down at CW. He was waiting calmly, sipping his coffee and passing the time until Vienna returned.

When Vienna appeared she took another deep breath to regain her strength then looked at CW with a frown. Sitting down she clasps her hands in her lap and stares at them for a moment, then says, “The U.O.H. has the answer to your question, but I’m not sure you’re going to like it.”

“Not surprising” I responded. “What bizarre answer did they give you?”

“They said that if the factum-terminal is not used and the changes are not rectified, planet Earth will cease to exist.”

I sat quietly gazing at my half-empty coffee cup, “Well, that was disappointing,” I said sadly.

“Can I have the factum-terminal now?” Vienna asks with a fixed and questioning look.

I said nothing for several moments as I considered the scope of their response and then said, “No. Because that is not an acceptable answer.”

“Wait a minute, you didn’t ask for an *acceptable* answer, just an answer.”

“I know, but if that’s the truth then the situation has changed and we need to talk further with the U.O.H. We need more information than such a no-nonsense answer.”

“We?”

“Yes, we. We. Together. We need more information. We need to know how and when. We need to know who the U.O.H. really is and what they have to do with the possible destruction of Earth. What they have planned, and who this ‘rogue writer’ is.”

“That’s not what you told me.”

“I’ve changed my mind. I can do that.”

“Then you lied to me.”

“No, like I said, the situation has changed. I will still give you the device. But first *we*, both of us, need to know more.”

“*You* need to know more, not me. I know everything I need to know.”

“You should want to know more before you try to change the future, don’t you think? Or do you have such great confidence in the U.O.H. that you would change the future without knowing why or what that future will be? I think you assume to know what you do not know.”

“Since you put it that way, maybe you’re right. Maybe I have been too trusting. It’s in my nature to trust others until they are proven untrustworthy.

“Nothing wrong with that, it’s an admirable trait. However, when we are talking about the fate of the *entire* world, don’t you think we should be a little less trusting?”

“Well... yes... of course, I guess you’re right.”

Vienna likes the way CW reasons things out. She sees him in a different light than before she arrived. At first, he seemed like the typical man wanting sex for fun with no commitments. But, he’s actually a thinker. Perhaps he really is different.

“It’s time for the U.O.H. to explain themselves. I know what we’ll do. Like I said, we, together, will ask the U.O.H. exactly how and when the planet will end and what this rogue writer has to do with it. So let’s turn our dials together, ready?”

Vienna looks at CW and quietly nods in agreement, as they begin to turn the dials of their bracelets in unison. They look at each other again, this time with keen anticipation, and touch the red and green stones of their bracelets at the same time.

Blackness gradually turns to a bright glare.

The voice in their heads told them they had arrived.

“*Welcome guild members Vienna Pitts and C.W. Comstock.*”

The customary translucent bubble was noticeably larger this time to accommodate them both. I could narrowly make out several figures in the chamber above. There were about ten odd-looking creatures seated, I think they were seated, about twenty feet away in theatre-like seating.

Without hesitating I said, “Your answer to my question only generated more questions. We want to know who you are and just what we are dealing with.”

“Yes, we anticipated your reaction.”

I’m sure my face was showing my annoyance at that comment, “Then give us some answers.” When I glanced at Vienna she too was visibly irritated at their response.

“Exactly what do you want to know?”

“First, will you give us complete answers, not your normal obfuscating comments?”

With what felt like a laugh in the back of my mind, I could just make out their reply.

“It is customary for this body to eternally express reality.”

“See, that’s just what I mean,” I said cheekily. “But I guess that will have to do. First, who are you?” I asked directly.

“*The U.O.H. are the protectors of compositions of historic time. We protect and oversee the sequential chronology of acquired knowledge and thus the social and political orientation of each occupied planet in the universe.*”

That was a surprise, I thought. I looked at Vienna and her mouth had fallen open in amazement. When she looked at me I could see her expression change from revelation to fear.

“How many members are on the board?”

“*There are presently eleven members.*”

“Who are you, where are you from, and are you the head of the board?”

“*In your language, you would pronounce my designation as oojavan. I am from Apakhlia. There is no ‘head’; the board speaks to you as one through me. This manner of communication is more comfortable for the human species.*”

Comfortable? I thought. Communicating this way gives me a headache. If I had to do it all the time, I’d need continuous intravenous painkillers.

“Who is this rogue writer and how can he harm Earth?”

Judging by the gestures I could make out they were holding an active conversation between themselves. No actual sounds were heard, just unintelligible prattle bouncing around in my mind. After an unusual amount of time for the U.O.H., oojavan finally responded.

“*Many worlds in the universe are populated with intelligent individual beings. As individuals, they are impervious to synchronized manipulation. They think for themselves, they know who they are, and do not depend, nor do they seek the approval of others. They collaborate with each other as individuals, not as a collective. These individual beings have no desire to be considered a group, but Earth beings are unique. They were, at one time, illimitable individuals. That is until their customs became distorted and they accepted the normalcy of the aggregate. As a collective they were easily led and controlled; groupthink is the way some on your world refer to it.*”

The rogue writer is Sanduval Mule. He created this condition. This was accomplished by changing historic perceptions. Altering present information in favor of the categorization of Earth’s beings into sub-sets. When referencing the

changed historical perception the typical reaction was the demonization of those who would challenge this new normal. His intentions are to shape the future by continually positioning sequentially faulty information that maneuvers humankind in an unnatural and universally atypical direction.

Showing as little emotion as possible, I say, “Yes, yes, I agree that is not a good direction for the people of Earth, but that will only change their lives into one of complete submission and conformity, not destroy them.”

“The destruction of society through collectivism and the illusion of invulnerability is merely the beginning. Subsequently, your planet's decimation will come from the beings themselves. Group polarization leads to impaired logic and destructive obedience. Those who live under the rule of nabobs will ultimately exterminate themselves and their planet. It has happened before. It is the obligation of the U.O.H. to prevent the annihilation of another species within this universe.”

I looked up at the board and stared in silence, then looked back at Vienna. She had a tear trickling from her right eye slowly moving down her freckled cheek. She moved closer to me and put her left arm around my waist, squeezing tightly.

“And using that device will change what exactly?” Vienna asks.

“Using the factum-terminal will return the historic data to its original content and correct the quantal ora’ in this sector.”

“How will that change the future?” I ask.

“The future direction of society is determined by the perceptions of its historic past.”

It would seem that the U.O.H. had the power to make the necessary adjustments. Why did they need us?

“Why are we needed to make these changes?” I asked.

“The U.O.H. is capable of making the necessary alterations, of course, but our decreed authority does not include intimate directional involvement. We are charged only with assisting the beings concerned. Promoting in them the ability to learn to protect themselves from these assaults on their realities does this. Are you not willing to help your world?”

With a questioning look, Vienna turned to CW and said reluctantly, “Maybe we made a mistake.”

“No!” I say emphatically, “It’s not a mistake if we can stop the destruction of Earth. It is unthinkable that a single being like this Sanduval Mule creature can command such power.”

Vienna says with a stern expression, “We must stand against this violation of the liberties of the individuals of our planet.”

Vienna gives CW a resolute look, then a momentary cuddle. With a determined tone in her voice, she replies to the U.O.H., “Yes, of course. We have to.”

CW was becoming more and more pleased with Vienna’s sharp mind and pleasing qualities. The slight hug she gave him when she answered came as a surprise and gave him a warm feeling of confidence.

“By the way, what does U.O.H. stand for anyway?” I ask boldly,

“Undeniable Overseers of History.”

What a humble name, I thought with a smile.

“Do you have further inquiries?”

“No, I think you’ve answered them all, for now. I will allow Vienna to use that factum thing on my copy of the book.”

“If you require additional assistance you may contact the U.O.H. at any time.”

Suddenly, we were back in my living room, both of us breathing heavily from the change in pressure and oxygen level.

I grab Vienna with both hands on her shoulders and push her to half-arms distance, then walk to my desk and open the middle drawer. Fetching the factum-terminal, I return to the living room and hand it to Vienna.

“Here, let’s get this done.” I insist.

“I’ll need the book too.” She reminds me with a smile.

“Right!” I say and return to my desk, open the large lower left drawer, and pull out my copy of ‘History of World Science’. I then stroll back to the living room and place it into her outstretched hand.

“According to TicTic, I must stop time for the factum-terminal to operate”

“Okay, go for it,” I say without hesitation.

Vienna touches the blue stone on her ring, opens the factum-terminal, and places it over the book. Touches the appropriated image, then inputs the authentication command `/* do x over arg || stem ; end.` “There. It's done.” was the last thing I heard her say before she disappeared. Still smiling that crooked smile.

Chapter 26

Release your bond on one reality and cultivate your abilities in the realities of everywhere.

Stunned at the sudden disappearance of Vienna, I grab the factum-terminal, still located on top of my book where it had retracted. “That was unexpected,” I say aloud.

Did the terminal cause her to disappear or, wait... historic time and thus the future, have been changed, and now, she was never here. This time changing the past can be very complex, I observed thoughtfully. I wonder, will I ever see her again? She was beginning to grow on me, a little.

I stood silently in my living room for several moments wondering if I should use my new knowledge to write another story. In the story, I could include this factum-terminal device. However, having this device from the future in this timeframe could be very dangerous.

“I’d better put this thing in a safe place,” I say to myself. Holding the book and factum-terminal in my left hand I begin walking to the desk in my office.

A few steps later, I clumsily trip on the corner of my Esfahan Indian throw rug lying beside my desk. The heavy book immediately falls to the floor with a thud. At the same time, I lose my grip on the factum-terminal and it slides from my grasp. When I grab for the falling tool with my right hand the blue stone on my ring briefly brushes against the green stone of my bracelet.

Dazzling salient liquefied blueness...

Suddenly I am in a world of blue nothingness. I wasn’t standing I was floating. There was the feeling of rapidly flowing fluid all around me. It’s not like I was underwater because I felt no change in pressure on my body. The sensation is like finding a new perspective on the world with no physical presence. I can see the room but I’m not in the room. I began to feel ill, I was dizzy, and my perspective is spinning out of control.

Just as suddenly, I fall out of the blueness and catch the tool with my right hand just before it hits the floor.

“What the frack was that...?” I shout as I continue to stumble, lurch forward, spin, and slump into my desk chair in a daze. I sat there gathering what few wits I had left.

“Phew... where did I just go? You’d better read those instructions again,” I command myself. My mind was racing but I tried to relax. Slowly leaning to one side I strain and open the lower right drawer of my desk, pull out the carved wooden box, open the lid, and get the instructions. I read, reread, and reread them again. With a slight smile growing into a large knowing grin I shake my head and say, “Oh those sly devils.”

I have just discovered why the instructions from the U.O.H. are specific yet ambiguous at the same time.

Anxiously I wonder how I can test this new discovery to make sure I know exactly what it is. How can I find out more about this new ability? Is it a completely different time-space?

I guess I could visit the U.O.H. and ask them. Yeah...right!

The last time I talked to them, they were pleasant but hesitant to offer any precise information. So, that's not the best option. Nevertheless, as a last resort, I'll keep them in mind. I shook my head, bit my upper lip, and sighed a wondering, "Hmmm..."

Opening the bottom drawer on the left of my desk, I retrieve the small black box I use for the safekeeping of all my worldly valuables. It's where I store things like my wedding ring, passport, and the CFp card I had forgotten to leave in 2068. It's the safest place I know, so I tuck the factum-terminal safely inside and replace the box.

Knock... Knock...

I wonder if that's Vienna again. She knows when and where I live and has had time to return from her now. I stand and take a moment to regain my balance then stride toward the door with a strange feeling of anticipation. When I swung open the door, I was disappointed and dumbfounded at what I saw.

There, in the bright sun, was a tall, thin, almost human-like creature at least seven feet tall. He wore loose denim pants and a black sweatshirt with the hood up covering his head. From what could be seen of his face, it was pure white, almost sickly-looking albino white. He had deep purple eyes that looked solid, and his nose was wider than normal. Standing slightly behind him on his left, and equally as tall, was another hooded human-like creature. That one was just as thin but its face was stunning. It had perfectly smooth dark copper color skin and very large radiant blue eyes. The stark contrast between the color of its skin made the creature's eyes shimmer with brightness. They looked almost luminescent. Again, I couldn't make out any eyebrows or eyelashes. The creature's nose had an ideal shape and was normal in size except for small flaps covering the nostrils. The thin flaps silently fluttered as it breathed. It also had plump lips around a slightly larger-than-normal mouth.

I'm sure the expression on my face showed my shocked surprise. I smiled a dubious grin and asked, "Uh, who are you and... what do you want?"

"My name is TicTic R'gneraq and this is Pu-illeo, we are here to see Mr. C.W. Comstock"

So, *this* is the TicTic that Vienna had talked about, but she never mentioned anyone or anything named Poo. "I'm CW Comstock, what do you want?" I ask again, leaving them standing on the front porch for a moment as I wait for an answer.

TicTic didn't flinch, instead, he gave me a beige-toothed smile of knowing authority and said, "I would like to retrieve the factum-terminal."

I glared at them while doing another long assessment, then asked, "What are you?" staring directly at this Poo thing.

Gradually I could feel a sound, a voice in the back of my head causing a fiery pain. The same type of pain I got while communicating with the U.O.H., only deeper, stronger. “*I am Pu-illeo a previous member of the board of the U.O.H.. I am here to talk to you about your future.*”

“Well,” I said with a grimace. I took a deep breath trying to get more oxygen to my brain because of the headache which had just begun, “I guess that takes care of why you’re here, but not what you are. “

“*I am from what for you would sound like Kr’galmaan. I am a Stovian.*” The pain in my head was almost unbearable now causing me to hunch my shoulders uptight. The pain slowly subsided when it stopped communicating.

“Okay, OK... take it easy on the headaches. Why don’t you two come in out of this beautiful weather, so we can *talk*.” I opened the door wider so they could enter.

With that, TicTic lead the way followed by the Poo thing. With long strides, they both walked into the living room and made themselves comfortable, sitting next to each other on the couch. I took a sweeping look around outside to see if any of the neighbors had seen these strange creatures at my door. The street was quiet with the exception of a mail delivery bot moving slowly from postal stop to postal stop. Slowly closing the door I wondered what I’d gotten myself into.

Walking to my favorite chair across from my guests I sat quietly for several moments and studied their appearance. Both of them had removed their hoods and I could now see that TicTic had shoulder-length hair as white as his skin, but the Poo thing had no visible hair, just a round bald head, and no ears. I finally asked, “TicTic, why do you think I have this terminal thingy you’re looking for?”

“You have it,” TicTic says bluntly.

“Well, if I had it, why would I give it to you?”

“It is mine. I allowed Vienna Pitts to use it. You now have it, and I wish you to return it. It is of no use to you. You do not have the need nor the ability to benefit from its use.”

“Well, that may or may not be the case.”

“No, it is truth. You obviously have no concept of its operation or its power. Please return it.”

“And if I had it, and didn’t return it, what can you do about it?”

With a tone of voice filled with sureness, TicTic declares, “Please, do not be foolish or believe that I will play games with you. If it is not returned to me, I will destroy it and every living thing close to it.”

I thought Vienna said this TicTic guy was nice. Maybe, just maybe I’m pushing my luck here, although he *is* right. I don’t have the computer knowledge and really have no use for it.

“Okay, no need to threaten violence. I’ll give it back.”

Slowly rising from my chair I walk to my desk, open the bottom left drawer and retrieve the small black box and take out the factum-terminal, then replace the box. I walked back into the living room and hand the device to TicTic.

“Thank You.” He responds with an unchanged tone and then places the terminal into the right front pocket of his jeans.

In a monotone voice, TicTic declares, “Pu-illeo would like to communicate with you but fears she will impart a certain level of pain which would be uncomfortable. If it is acceptable for you, I can translate.”

She? That’s a surprise. The mere thought of this Poo thing being a female was incredible.

“Sure... at least that would save my head from the pain.”

I don’t think I have enough painkillers around that would touch such prolonged suffering as a conversation with *Miss Poo*.

“Pu-illeo would like to know if you have further plans to travel to the future.”

“I have considered it.”

“She would suggest that you travel with her to your Earth standard year 2452 to meet a friend.”

“Why would I want to do that?”

“She suspects that the rogue writer is in the process of creating unacceptable modifications to chronicled history and the future of her planet. Your experience would be commendable.”

“Why would I need to travel to, what was it, 2452?”

“She believes it to be the instigation point of the modification timeline of her planet’s history.”

This is a very interesting and attractive request. Traveling that far into the future would be very exciting and educational for a new storyline. Another thing, exactly how would I get to Poo-ugly’s planet?

“I’ll consider it,” I say with some hesitation.

“The need is imminent. An answer is required in the near future.”

“In that case, I have more questions. Like where is her planet, how would I get there?”

“There is a craft waiting for you in 2452 if you accept.”

“A craft? Do you mean a spacecraft?”

“Yes.”

Wow... That is exciting. I was getting goosebumps thinking about it. It was very tempting to just blurt out a loud “yes!” and go right now.

Trying to control my eagerness I calmly say, “I will still need some time to think it over.”

Gradually a pain began to materialize in the back of my mind. “*Quite understandable. Here are the exact coordinates you will need if you accept. Please travel within the next 24 of your hours.*”

All of a sudden, I felt a sharp pain, like I had just been stabbed deep into my skull with a white-hot needle. The pain hit me just above my left ear then quickly encircled my entire head.

“Ouch!” I yawp.

“*Pu-illeo apologizes for the discomfort.*”

“Okay...” I say as I grimace while rubbing the back of my head and neck.

“If I decide *not* to make the trip, how will I let you know?”

“We will know,” TicTic responds.

With that, TicTic looks at Pu-illeo. They actually seemed to smile at each other. They touched hands for the slightest moment and disappeared.

I sat there for more than an hour going over and over in my mind the possibilities of traveling that far into the future and to another planet. Yet, I still haven't found out what this new power of the bracelet and ring I have discovered is all about. I should do that first.

“Damn,” I say out loud. So much to do, so little time. I decide to just relax for a while and think about all this. Settling comfortably in my leather chair I light a cigarette and take long slow drags, enjoying the soothing odor and the slightly dizzy feeling that comes with an occasional smoke.

After my Zen cigarette, I decided to experiment with my new power before making a final decision about traveling with Poo thing. I stand and dial my bracelet to 50 years into the past then touch the blue stone of my ring to the green stone of the bracelet.

Instantly I am in the same blue-flowing emptiness as before. It's difficult to fight the impulse to take a breath but I felt no need to breathe. At first, I almost panicked because my body wanted to take a breath, but with intense concentration, I finally begin to gradually relax and go with the flow.

It would seem that I am dangling, floating but not floating between time zones. Looking one way I can just make out the couch, chair, and other objects in my living room. Looking the other way I can see each tree, rock, and bush of the wooded region that was there before my house was built. I am in a completely detached time and space. I try to move and with a little effort, I'm able to gently direct the zone a few feet around several trees and into a clear patch, and then step onto the ground of that time zone.

So, this is how the creature in the Library of Congress was able to step into and out of time. I smiled then chuckled to myself and touch the red stone of my bracelet. I am again standing in my living room. What a fascinating discovery.

Chapter 27

I should always think twice, maybe even three times, before taking on too much responsibility, especially for someone else's problems. But time is running out and I have to make a decision.

Should I go see Miss Poo thing? Or should I continue experimenting with my bracelet and ring theories? Or should I start my next story and be done with all things involving the U.O.H. and their creature features?

Yeah, I might be able to help, but why should I? I might also get myself killed in the process. Then again, I could go to 2126 and look up Vienna. That might be fun too. I'd like to see her again. She is attractive and smart and knows how to operate that factum-terminal contraption. I'll bet my last pain pill she knows more than she lets on about computers. Anyway, we might make a good team. I wonder if she would remember me?

There are still a couple of theories I have about my bracelet and ring that I haven't tried yet. But this may not be the best time to try one of them. When I glance at the clock, I realize there are exactly twenty-four minutes before I have to make a decision.

My headaches seem to come a little more often, and my body pains are a constant, well... pain. I walk to the cabinet, find my bottle of relief, down four more, and chase them with half a glass of water. "Phew... this time travel is hard on the body," I tell myself, as I stretch and twist trying to use the rarely used muscles in my body.

Okay, times up. Make a decision...

"How dull life would be without taking a chance here and there?" I say aloud.

I begin to dial my next destination on my bracelet and for some reason, the coordinates come with ease, as does the feeling of knowing exactly how to dress for the weather. It will be warm, short-sleeve weather and I will need my iJotter for notes.

My destination is EST 2452 and in the desert of middle Mexico, a place called Tecolotes near Mazapil. I will try my new ability to move between zones. The instructions Poo painfully embedded in my head revealed how I could use the symbols on one of the bracelet's dials as the latitude and longitude of a location on Earth. After the visit from TicTic and Poo-thing, as I always do, I recorded the location on my iJotter.

I've been studying these symbols with each of my travels, and as my knowledge has grown, my understanding of the symbols has become more of a certainty than an assumption. The discovery of the blueness zone has convinced me that I'm right. I plan to move into the blueness between time zones and observe the area before committing to the change of zones. Time to take my first long-distance travel into the blue nothingness of the future.

Chapter 28

Earth Standard Year 2452

Within the veiled curtain of the flowing blue zone, I arrive at the proper location in EST 2452. From what I can make out there are two odd-looking vehicles along with that Poo thing and several other humans. They were all dressed alike, in some sort of uniform, apparently waiting around for my arrival. There is nothing else visible. There are no trees, buildings, or anything. This was a desolate location right in the middle of nowhere, Mexico. Gradually I maneuver the blue zone to an area just to the rear of the awaiting group where no one can see me, and step to the ground.

“Hello,” I say nonchalantly as I walk up to them. My sudden appearance surprised the humans but apparently not Pu-illeo.

“*You are on time,*” She sends with no real emotion and my head feels a small piece of discomfort.

“Yes... well, I’m here, wherever *here* is, so what now?”

“*Please, we will travel the remaining distance within the skycars. It will be more comfortable for us and we can talk.*”

Motioning me to follow, Miss Poo steps inside one of, what I now know as a skycar. The group of uniformed humans climbed into the other. I get in with Poo and wait for the next barrage of head pain to begin.

The skycar rises straight up about twenty feet, turns to the left, then leans slightly forward and begins to progressively increase its speed until we are swiftly zooming along the desert floor.

As Poo and I are traveling along, I might as well take the opportunity to obtain a better understanding of her and this new time-space.

“What made you come to Earth?” I ask.

“*The changes you and Vienna Pitts made using the factum-terminal made it possible.*”

“What do you mean?”

“*Your planet’s future is now on its proper course.*”

“I still don’t understand.”

“*Before you made the required modification we had no contact with your species.*”

“So when the past changed, that made it possible for future Earth to meet other beings?”

“*Yes, the alteration also changed the political and social conceptions so our arrival would not be misconceived and our cultures could maintain affable co-existence.*”

“When did all this occur?”

“We were exploring this sector of space to find minerals or develop trade for needed resources. In your era, 2539 we contacted Earth’s only outer perimeter colony on the Moon you call Europa. They, in turn, contacted the leaders of your planet. Beginning with that event we have engaged a suitable trade of technology and resources.”

“Did you give Earth the technology for deep space travel?”

“No, we traded a portion of our technology for needed resources.”

“What resources did Earth have that you needed?”

“What you call, coal.”

“Coal?”

“Yes, coal. It is a food staple for the Kr’galmaan.”

“You eat Coal?”

“In your understanding, you might say we “eat” coal. Although in reality, we absorb the organic minerals you call vitrinite and inertinite from the coal as nutritional substance.”

“And the technology you traded helped Earth’s space travel.”

“The technology we traded was the core for the development of a divergent of your previously possessed technology. My friend Dr. Jyotti Rabbet, whom you will soon meet, used some of that technology to grow your craft. It is the only craft in existence with this new technology.”

I’m really getting worried now, “You mean my craft has never been tested?”

“That is correct. You are the only human who can “test” the craft”

“What do you mean? I’ve never been in space and never flown anything. I’m sure it’s not like flying a Piper Cub on Earth,” I said skeptically.

After that bit of knowledge, I sat quietly for the rest of the short trip, wondering what the hell I’d gotten myself into now. Did she just say, “grow” my craft?

Within a short time, the skycar floated over an impossibly large area with obvious intense security and began to descend. Surveying the surroundings out the window there are what looks like numerous weapons towers encircling the huge compound’s exterior.

Slowly skycar landed just outside the largest of the group of buildings. When the door of the skycar opens Pu-illeo exits, with me following along like a wet puppy. I scan the area, holding back the urge to run. In the back of my mind, I mull over how my mundane life has changed since getting the bracelet and ring. How my ingrown stupidity has gotten me into a death spiral of odd space creatures and flight-testing an experimental spaceship.

When we entered the building, I was stunned at what I saw. This would not be believed by anyone in my time-space. There was a huge flowing sphere-like bubble of black liquid metal taking up half the space of the room. It was large, about eighty feet long and half that in width, and oval-shaped. Apparently, it was made of some type of metallic material. It had a dull sheen to it that made it appear more fluid than solid but not a liquid. More like a huge glistening drop of black mercury. There were no wings, like an airplane or a shuttle, and there were no visible creases in the hull where normal components would begin and

end. Nor could I make out any windows or even an entrance. The entire surface was smooth. And it wasn't touching the floor. It was floating three feet off the ground.

Still awestruck, I followed Pu-illeo toward a laboratory-like control room that took up the other half of the building's interior. We made our way toward a cluster of beings of both humans and what looked like beings from Pu-illeo's planet. It was obvious they were deep in conversational thought. They glanced back and forth at each other, then pointed and shrugged. No words were spoken with the exception of one human whom I assumed was this Dr. Rabbet fellow.

He was of average height with dark black hair cut very short everywhere except for a braided ponytail that began just behind his left ear and hung down to his shoulder. He was wearing a tight blue jumpsuit that had an odd dullness to it. His facial features and skin complexion gave the impression he was of Indian descent. As we got closer the group turned, saw us approaching and the human promptly introduced himself.

"Hello, Mr. Comstock, I'm so glad you are here," sticking out his hand for a cordial handshake. "I'm Dr. Jyotti Rabbet, you can call me Jyotti. Please, come with me. We must get started as soon as possible," he says. He placed his arm on my shoulder and tried to move me faster.

Politely jerking away I stand my ground and say, "Hold on there Doc. I have a few questions that need answers before I go jumping into something I'm unprepared for."

The feeling of Pu-illeo's calming communication enters my thoughts, "*Do not fear C.W. no harm will come to you.*" Either I'm getting used to the pain or she was whispering.

"Very well," Jyotti says, stopping and crossing his arms across his chest. "I will answer any question you have," he promises.

"Good. My first question is.... err, where's the bathroom?"

The doctor smiles, then points toward a door with the universally known picture of a two-legged being located just across the room.

"Right over there. We can wait."

"Thanks," I said and walked in that direction.

Inside I made my bladder flatter, then washed my hands. I removed my constant companion, a bottle of painkillers, and downed four, drinking tap water cupped in my hand afterward. Looking up, I stare at my reflection in the mirror hanging over the sink.

The hollow-eyed reflection of a tired old man stared back. "CW, you are an ass," I say to my reflection. "Why don't you touch the red stone right now and this entire BS would be nothing but a memory... But you did say you would help... So what, it's my life, I can do what I want with it... And break your word? Yeah, that's a problem, but I could learn to live with it, and probably longer than I'll live if I continue. Enough... go do what you promised and get it over with..." Now that my flurry of brooding schizoid comments with myself was over, I turned around and left.

When I returned I smiled and nodded at the group and said, "Doc..."

"Please, call me Jyotti," the doctor interrupts.

“Okay... Jyotti, first, what is this ship made of.”

Doctor Jyotti smiles and bluntly states, “You.”

Stunned at such a ridiculous answer I asked, “Yeah... right... okay... can you explain that a little more?”

Jyotti smiled again and continued, “This craft’s source material is a genetic permutation using your DNA as its core structure. Within that structure, we incorporated light-absorbing shape-altering multi-walled graphene nanotubes interwoven with Samarium and Promethium infused nano-fibers.”

“And just how did you get my DNA?” I asked with a questioning tone.

“That is an interesting story. First, we mined the Wälti and Wirtz DNA registry database and found your DNA sequence. But the composition of one of the nucleotide bases was corrupt and the craft organism had several uncontrolled mutations. It finally had to be destroyed. After an intense investigation, we eventually obtained a viable plasma sample with a stable DNA neuronal balance. Utilizing that sample we were successful in stimulating a suitable growth configuration for your craft.”

That made no sense to me. I haven’t given any blood. No, wait a minute. I gave a blood sample to that nurse practitioner. So, that’s where they got my DNA. Then I asked another question that I was sure I wouldn’t understand, “And, what kind of power source does this thing have?”

Again, the doctor breaks out with a wide smile, only this time you could see his chest bulge with pride. “The propulsion system is designed to modify the Interplanetary Magnetic Field as needed. It uses an electromagnetic convergence ionized gluon plasmic drive capable of varying and equalizing the frequency oscillations of the IMF from 10-29 to 1036 OOM. I call it the MagNIP drive.”

Well, that was clear as mud. “What?”

“Your ship is safe and fast and it will do anything you request. In fact, I believe you will be pleasantly surprised with its capabilities,” Dr. Rabbet replies with an encouraging tone.

“Can it make me younger?” I ask with a sneer.

“Yes, it can, in a way. Because you have the bracelet and ring, and the craft is constructed using your DNA, it can travel through time just as you do. Of course, piloting the craft will require the proper assimilation by you. This assimilation will be harmless and quite easy and will not take any effort on your part.”

Trying to understand all this technical talk is making my headache worse. Or was it all the communication I had with Pu-illeo, I can’t tell. The permanent pain in my head and the downing of painkillers are becoming a constant part of my life.

“We will begin your training in just a few minutes. Until then, you should try to relax. Also during this time, we will prepare the craft for its final evaluation and your flight,” commands Dr. Rabbet.

“Great,” I say, turning and walking for the exit.

“*There is an area this way that you can use C.W.*” Pu-illeo communicates.

“Not for me,” I say as I continue to walk. “I need a cigarette and some fresh air.”

“Do you require a companion?”

“No, I prefer to be alone for a while.”

“As you wish.”

Reaching the exit door, I step outside and close the door behind me. I light a cigarette and take in the hazardous fumes with a pleasure that bestows an overwhelmingly relaxed feeling. As I stand there looking around at the blank-walled buildings, I can't help but notice how warm the weather is. It's not as hot as I had thought the desert would be, and it's obviously desert country because there wasn't a tree or a bush, or even any sagebrush. The sky is a nice blue with only a few small clouds clumsily floating in no particular direction. There is a mild dry breeze blowing across my face, causing me to blink more often than normal.

With each drag, I became more relaxed and began to examine the full scope of my involvement with the U.O.H., and these mind-numbing Kr'galmaan creatures from another planet. What will I, a simple writer of stories, a minstrel of sorts, be able to do against the obvious powers of the rogue writer? I'm still unsure of how much power this Sanduval Mule creature has. If I find him, will he be able to read my mind and act before I can? He obviously has more experience in time travel and the blueness of my newly discovered zone. There is still a lot I don't know. How this new power can help me, I have no idea. The Mule also carries a laser gun and seems to have no qualms about using it to get what he wants. Maybe this Dr. Rabbet fellow will have laser guns or other weapons for me.

I have yet to experiment further with my bracelet and ring theories, and I'm not so sure I'm ready to pilot an untested spaceship. Yet here I am. When I think of what my future might be I'm getting a little worried and enthused at the same time.

Oh well, I might as well go back and see how all this technology works. I feel I'm on the edge of something new and exciting, and more than likely very dangerous. Then again, if I don't like the circumstances, I can always touch the red stone and return to my now.

This is going to make another interesting story. If I live!

Chapter 29

Sanduval knows. He had anticipated the inevitable challenge that would come from the U.O.H. He knew that a mere human would be involved. What he did not know is why there was more than one human at the data source.

Sanduval knows because he has been a time traveler for eighty-three of his now cycles. During those cycles, he has journeyed to countless time zones on numerous worlds. This experience helped him evolve into a prolific writer under a myriad of pseudonyms. Many of his celebrated tomes are exalted works that are considered sheer genius and forever chronicled in the archives of the U.O.H.

Now he has but one ambition, one obsession. To renovate, reorient and influence all known societies to advance on the proper course. In order to accomplish this objective, he has cultivated a plan to achieve the impossible. Nothing he has learned during his many time journeys had ever taught him that getting what he wanted was impossible. So, if it wasn't impossible, that only left possible. He also had to admit the possibility that an unexpected provocateur could intervene.

Overall, his strategy was progressing nicely. The human is finally involved. Societies will now change. The yanosecond blip was the tell-tale sign. It was not unexpected, although the exact instant in time was unforeseen and thus, minimally problematic.

Sanduval knows there is only one instrument in the universe that could coerce such a yanosecond alteration in time. He knows because when he was much younger he invented the instrument. The factum-terminal is one of a number of inventions that promoted his reputation for creativity.

This brought to mind a memory. When he was a member of the U.O.H. board, he recalls being well respected but underestimated. Sanduval had recognized the political struggles playing out within the board, as well as the results their conclusions had on universal historic events.

The board oversees the documentation of history and thus the progression and direction of trillions of beings on thousands of planets. Yet, in Sanduval's eyes, they had failed to make the necessary adjustments required for the ever-evolving masses. For Sanduval, the U.O.H.'s sociological psychohistory module of individualism, where each individual's existence was a unique series of events determined by themselves, had become outdated as the number of beings increased. Mathematically the numbers alone have made multiple doppelgangers a certainty.

Sanduval's statistical computations confirmed the premise that cluster categorizations would prompt the activation of the plurality aggregate principle of psychohistory. And the beings involved would have a natural acceptance of these classifications. The exact principle was first theorized by Kingsbry and ultimately observed and authenticated by Sanduval Mule himself.

Unlike the cautious U.O.H., Sanduval has learned to use universal history to achieve his ultimate objective, the transformation of the societies on all occupied planets into a singularly dependent state. He has no use for societies that empower individuals to better themselves, independent of a centralized authority. Personal enrichment and improvement of one's means without assistance from a dominant power are diametrically opposed to his philosophy and reasoning.

The U.O.H. had unwittingly provided him with the final tools required to validate his rationale. They had assumed he would use these tools to record historic events with a truth determined by their sociological psychohistory module of individualism, and he did, for a while.

However, the combination of his intellect, composition abilities, time instruments, and his patrimonial shape-shifting abilities was all that was needed for Sanduval to begin to correct the past and make the future his.

Different times have different values and beings invariably judge past times using present values. As these interchange data points increase, the plurality aggregate principle reaches its zenith. At that exact moment, Sanduval melds precise modifications of historic times into his ideal design of the future.

Sanduval's only concern is the unexpected. However, the irrational concept that the unexpected cannot be foreseen is an algorithmic misinterpretation of the statistical influences of transcendental equations. With the proper resolve, equipment, and deductive intellect, the only reasonable metric for him is that nothing is impossible.

Even so, Sanduval could see the residue of his once peaceful valley below as it gradually changed. His serenity was transforming in front of him. He watched as the green pasture turned to a dull brown and began to die. The once-tall, lush trees that had colored the valley with their flourishing greenery were now bent, broken, and left without leaves. Many were felled by the changing of time, visibly decaying. Sanduval used to enjoy a morning dip in the clear naturally replenishing spring that ran by his lodging. That stream was now a dry bed of rocks and cracked ground. The sky was grey and getting darker. It would be nice, he thought, to hear the birds sing again.

It was obvious the yanosecond blip in time had caused this transformation. Sanduval had made a miscalculation and the effect of its expected time adjustment is manifesting itself right before his eyes. A reasonable reaction, Sanduval explains to himself. With slight pressure at the proper point on the device in his hand, he slowly fades out of this reality.

Sitting at his oaken desk, Sanduval scans the images on his Vi, looking for the correct blip in time. There, there it is, he thought as he focused on the point. The position was an unanticipated location.

He has always believed if you want to peer into the future, look at the past. He mapped the exact position in the past and made the needed corrections to the psychohistory module.

Sanduval sets his sights on the next phase of his plan knowing that further adjustments will be necessary. And if this new intruder is to be prevented from any further interference, he has the power to stop him.

Chapter 30

When I re-enter the building I was mumbling under my breath about my stupidity. I chuckled at myself and mumbled, “What a stack of buffalo chips.”

“*What are buffalo chips?*” Pu-illeo asks inquisitively.

This Pu-illeo creature either had super-hearing or was reading my mind. Either way, it was a little annoying.

“An item used by early humans as fuel for fire,” I say with a quip.

Pu-illeo did not respond, but the quizzical look on her face was priceless. I’m sure she thought, ‘This human is insane’.

“Mr. Comstock, we are ready,” announces Dr. Jyotti Rabbet.

“Great,” I say, knowing full well I wasn’t as ready as I might seem. But only Pu-illeo, if she were actually reading my mind, would have noticed.

“CW I would like to make sure you understand certain aspects of your Craft. First, and most importantly, you are the only being in the universe that can pilot this Craft. And second, you are the only being that can enter,” Jyotti explains.

“Right. Is that supposed to mean something? I’m the only C.W. Comstock in the universe and that hasn’t got me much,” I state flatly.

“I only wanted to make sure you understood,” Jyotti clarifies. “Since apparently, you do, the first thing that must be completed is for you to enter the Craft. To do this, simply walk towards the Craft and an opening will appear. Once you are inside, find the control chair and be seated. Place your hands into the armrests and relax. When you are connected to the Craft you will be in total control.”

“That’s all?” I say with a nonchalant twist of my head. I then calmly turned and started walking toward the ship.

“Just stay relaxed,” Dr. Jyotti recommends as I pass by him.

As I moved closer, I noticed a small opening begin to expand. At first, it was a small finger-sized hole in the side. The closer I got the hole got larger and larger. The opening continues growing until it reaches about three feet wide and seven feet tall. The opening was large enough for me to gain access, but because it was floating, I had to step up to step in. Once inside I could feel the Craft floating and it took a moment for me to get my sea legs.

The inside looked exactly like the outside. To the left was a dimly lit hallway so I turned and followed Jyotti’s instructions, walking down the hall until it opened into a small room about twenty feet square. Somewhat off-center of the room and facing away from the hallway was one seat. The seat looked like it was made of the same material as the rest of the Craft. I cautiously walked to the seat and carefully sat down with my hands in my lap. At first, the seat was a little hard but little by little, I felt it soften as it melds itself to the curves of my body.

“Okay, so here I am,” I say aloud, looking around the room. The whole interior is exactly like the exterior. There were no buttons, lights, meters, or screens. There was nothing that would presumably control the Craft or require power.

Following Jyotti’s instructions, I slowly place my right arm onto the armrest. Gradually my hand slides into the armrest until it is immersed up to my wrist. With my wrist slightly bent the flowing warm silverish goo surrounded my hand. It felt like I was wearing a warm glove. There was no pain or harmful sensations, so I placed my left arm on the armrest and it too submerged.

Suddenly, I am everywhere. I am the Craft. I can feel everything about it. Unexpected sensations were bombarding my mind. In my mind’s eye, I can see everything in all directions at the same time. Surprised, I jerk both hands out of the armrests.

“That’s going to be hard getting used to,” I say aloud. Taking a deep breath, I gradually exhaled in an effort to relax.

Trying again, I slowly place both elbows on the armrest and slowly lower my arms until my hands sink into the strange material. This time, and with much effort, I’m able to control the new visual perception and focus more narrowly. I directed my visualization toward Dr. Jyotti and the group as they stood quietly watching.

“Wow!” I almost shout. I focus my thoughts until my visual sensitivity is more controllable, first looking in one direction then another, then in all directions at the same time.

“Unbelievable!” I proclaim. I wasn’t seeing with just my eyes, I was receiving images in my mind. The strange thing is, my eyes can also see the interior of the ship at the same time. My mind was swirling trying to comprehend the barrage of different and conflicting senses.

All at once, I hear or sense all the mechanical sounds around me. Then I sense a very large door opening. My focus changes to straight up toward the noise. The roof, really two large metal doors that make up the roof, was slowly opening.

“I guess I’m going to fly this thing,” I say aloud.

Concentrating on flight, I can feel the Craft begin to move. It inched slowly forward then stopped.

“Oops! Wrong direction,” I say to myself.

I focus my thoughts and the Craft begins to inch up a little at a time, then faster, then straight up as fast as I can think. When I finally sent the thought to stop, I was nearly seventy miles straight up from the desert floor. I knew the distance because the Craft had calculated it and told me. No, ‘told me’ is the wrong term. It’s like I knew the absolute distance instantaneously.

Physically my body is relaxed in the warmth of the seat. The Craft was feeding my brain data with alarming speed. More data than I could consciously comprehend at one time. It was a strange feeling but not uncomfortable. And oddly, it didn’t cause any brain pain, even though there were millions of unfamiliar sensations bombarding my senses.

From this perspective, I can see how being able to see in all directions would be useful. I practice controlling the Craft with the power of thought. The Craft responded with the speed of every thought. Once I got the hang of controlling it and using the Crafts' external visual optics as sight, it became quite easy.

I decide to dive straight down; stopping about a mile above the building I had just left. The ship is fast, as fast as thought. And I feel no jerking or anti-gravity response like in a speeding car or jet propulsion aircraft. Obviously, it has the ability to hover in place against gravity, so I hover there for a while, taking in the circular view.

"Okay, let's really test this thing," I say to myself. A few quick mental commands and my Craft zoomed into action. It accelerated along the desert floor at tremendous speed with no ill effects, then instantly turned right at a ninety-degree angle. I then shot straight up thirty-five hundred miles and hovered in place, then back and forth, up and down, and in virtually any direction, instantly.

Again, I relax and take in the view. From this height, I can see the entire North American continent and the northern third of the South American continent.

"Interesting view," I say to myself.

The whiteness of the glacial ice from the North Pole had moved south and was covering more than half of Canada. You could see that cooler weather had made its way south almost to the Mexican border. I slowly glide toward the east-southeast and around the curvature of the planet. The South Pole had also grown, now covering most of southern Chile and Argentina. I remove both hands from the seat and the Craft continues to hover in place. I retrieve my iJotter from my front pocket and take notes of what I'm seeing. This could make an interesting story, I think to myself.

Placing both hands back into the chair arms, I begin to glide north, then drop down to seven hundred miles and catch sight of the great lakes to the northeast. I quickly move in that direction flying lower, just above the surface, until I reach the southern tip of Lake Michigan. Slowing to get a better view, the lake looked cold and windy. Gliding more to the north the lake began to show signs of frozen ice floating with the currents. I continue down the center of the lake, following it as it curved slightly to the northeast

"I wonder?" I said aloud, and a millisecond later I was diving into the lake headed toward the bottom, stopping just before touching the lakebed.

"Exciting," I say aloud. With the Craft still in deep waters, I command it to slowly move upward, taking my time while wondering what other powers my new self-driving Craft may have.

Back on the surface, I stop and hover about thirty feet from the churning water below. Gradually I move to the river's edge where the water was calmer. When I look down, I can see the reflective image of the Craft.

The ship looks like it had changed... yes; I can see a slight change in its shape. It still appears to have no discernible power source, but it's no longer the shape of a bubble, now it has a definite elongated end. I think a command for the

Craft to change its shape, picturing in my mind a sleeker form, one that I preferred. It was amazing how fast it changed shape, almost instantly.

“Change is a good thing...” I quip. “I wonder?” and give the Craft a mental command for it to become transparent. Suddenly the Craft has no reflection in the lake waters below.

“Well, now I am truly amazed.”

Here I am floating in the air, silently and invisibly. I relaxed and let the Craft drift like a fallen leaf along with the flow of the wind. The moment I thought the command it instantly shot into outer space.

“I think I like this,” I say aloud, looking down at the glowing blue-white splendor that is planet Earth, three thousand miles below.

I command the Craft to return to my original take-off point and I’m there within seconds, effortlessly floating above the same building from where I had begun. It seemed like hours ago but the Crafts sensors tell me it was really only about thirty minutes. My new awareness tells me in that short period of time I had traveled over ten thousand miles. I command the Craft to touch down inside the building and gradually feel the change of gravity as it stops, still floating two feet from the ground. I removed my hands from the armrest and place them in my lap. Since I only have one left, I just sat there gathering my lone wit.

Several minutes later, I finally stand and do an all-embracing stretch that lifts my entire six-foot-four-inch frame up on my toes, with both arms extended trying to touch the ceiling. Either those painkillers are doing their magic or my constant body pain is not as intense as usual.

“Good, these guys have made me a personal massage chair that relieves the pain of my aging body,” I say with a smile.

When I stride back down the hall the opening again expands and I step out onto the floor of the building. By the satisfied look in the eyes of Jyotti, Pu-illeo, and the others, I must have had a big grin on my face.

“I see you were able to alter the dimensions. Did you have any difficulties or do you have any questions,” Jyotti asks.

“Yes, I have a difficulty. You have no idea what you have just produced,” I say plainly.

“That’s not entirely true,” proclaims Jyotti.

“Why is that?”

“We have been growing experimental Craft for the length of fourteen generations. Your Craft is the most advanced and the only one that will ever be produced,” Jyotti explains. “Do you have any further questions?”

“Yeah, how the hell does the thing work?”

Jyotti give me that all-knowing smile again as he began to explain, “Neurons in your brain fire rhythmically, sending pulses outward through your body and into the Crafts material. These pulses of electrical energy are also accompanied by pulses of DNA-specific chemicals, which, when released, activate the Crafts sensors. The Craft then stimulates its internal cortex that links all subsystems into meaningful packages of activity that deliver images of their activity to your consciousness. Cortical neurons then return those signals. That cortical activity can be regarded as a looping system.”

“Well, that explains it then,” I quip, not understanding any of the technical mumbo jumbo.

“Do you have any other questions?” Jyotti asks.

“Not at this time,” I say, turning to walk toward the bathroom.

“Before you go take this and try it on,” Jyotti says, handing me a small folded piece of material, “it’s a protective suit I made that should protect you from any space radiation you might be exposed to.”

“Thanks,” I said, not knowing exactly how to respond to the idea of exposing myself to another unknown like dangerous radiation. But at least Jyotti had thought about it.

Once in the bathroom, I stripped naked and unfolded the material Jyotti had given me. It was a one-piece jumpsuit with an attached hood and one long ankle-to-armpit zipper. When I put it on the suit automatically tightened and clung to my body shape like a second skin. It was easily worn under my other clothing.

When I returned from my pee break, I looked at Pu-illeo and ask. “How long does it take to get to your planet?”

“In our interstellar ships, it takes thirty of our cycles which is forty-five of your cycles, days as you call them. I do not know how long it will take in your Craft.”

“And what do you expect me to do once I’m there?” I quizzed.

“You must examine the archive of our historical records and determine if there have been alterations that may change the culture of our populace.”

“How will I do that? I can’t read your language or communicate mentally as you do.”

“That is not a hindrance. This instrument, the Kiise-imitáwa, will translate our recorded documentation into seventy-four of your languages,” she says, handing me a small flat tablet-shaped object. *“Its operation is quite simple.”*

“Great, more computer stuff,” I grumble. I’m not a computer person and don’t have the patience or desire to understand them. For me, they are nothing more than investigative and writing tools.

My inner psyche was sounding the alarm. “Look, I know what my abilities are, and computers are not one of them. Anyway, how can I compete with the unknown, this rogue writer?”

“He is not completely unknown. Sanduval Mule has been chronicled for eons. His tomes are stored in the Kiise-imitáwa,” Pu-illeo explains.

“That’s great. I’m not much of a record collector,” I say bluntly. “What does this *Kissy I’m a whatever* means in a language I can understand.”

“I believe it would sound like ‘Coyote’ in your language.”

“Coyote? Now there’s an odd name for a device,” I say teasingly.

“You know Pu-illeo, I’ve never needed an assistant or a co-author. Nevertheless, time changes.”

“What do you mean?” Pu-illeo asks.

“This Craft and these new powers and sensations can be overwhelming when integrated into my simple human mind. I will have a hard enough time controlling them on my own. I think I need some help.”

“What type of help?”

“I believe that Vienna Pitts would be a helpful addition. She has superb technical knowledge that could be useful.”

“That is your decision,” Pu-illeo sends bluntly. “My friends would like to make sure the performance of the Craft is acceptable. They have but one question for you C.W. Comstock, how would you describe the Craft?”

“The Ship? I’d describe it with one word... inspiring.”

Chapter 31

I need to test my theories. But first... Vienna. Floating in my Craft at five thousand miles above Earth in EST 2452, I dial my bracelet to 2126. I have no idea where she is, but I'm sure I can find her. The ship's sensors will recognize the energy pattern of her jewelry. A little secret Pu-illeo was kind enough to reveal. I also command the Craft to create a sleeping area and bathroom. If the trip is long, we're going to need both.

As usual, when I try to relax, I take a deep breath and touch the green stone. I feel nothing. I was still floating in space. Yet, when I look at the Earth, I can see that the planet has changed. The slow-moving ice was still much closer to the poles. The mass of the glaciers hadn't traveled as far south as they were in 2452.

"Now that... is impressive," I proclaim.

If my memory's correct, she lives in Washington DC, and works for a news agency. What was it called, oh yeah, the Fairfax Evening Star? "That wasn't too hard," I say aloud.

Unsure of the current defenses of Earth in this time-space I needed to be cautious. I descend to seventy thousand feet and command the Craft to become transparent. I quickly increase my speed and am over Washington DC in just a few seconds. Lowering to five hundred feet I slow and abruptly have to wrestle control of the Craft against the blowing winds. A quick thought and I regain control. I then intensify the breadth of my scan and increase the search grid. Suddenly the data from my Craft overwhelm my senses with the swarming sensation from thousands of beings and millions of energy sources.

"Easy..." I moan as I narrow the Craft's search to the exact energy pattern of the jewelry.

"There it is."

Looking around for a place to land I decide to touch down in a vacant area just down the street from the signal of Vienna's bracelet. I glide the Craft down and come to a stop, floating just off the surface.

The weather was extremely cold. There was a steady wind blowing along with the occasional heavy gust. I'm dressed well enough for the exterior so I head toward the slowly expanding exit port. One step and I'm again on solid ground.

"Ah, Mother Earth," I quip.

It takes me a moment to stand straight against the cold blowing wind. I look around and it's hard to distinguish any landmarks through the blowing snow. Walking slowly I headed toward what, I am fairly sure, is the location of the jewelry's energy source.

The house was a modest building made of brick and mortar. What a New Englander might call a brownstone or row house. I walked directly to the front door and knocked.

Knock... Knock...

Vienna was in the process of fixing a leaky faucet in her kitchen. She had a wrench in her hand and was about half finished with the job when she hears the knock.

“I hope that isn’t another one of those out-of-luck salesmen,” She complains. “I’ve already had two visits today that interrupted my fix-it time.”

Knock... Knock...

“All right, I’m coming,” she shouts at the door. Putting down her wrench, she wipes her hands on the legs of her grey overalls and walks to the door. When she opens it she has to hold it against the intruding wind.

“Come in, quick,” she said, fighting to push the door closed.

I hurriedly stepped inside and stood looking at her; she looked even better than I remembered.

With her hand still clutching the doorknob, she says, “I’m not buying anything but I think my neighbor has been looking for something new.”

Her voice wasn’t at all like I remember. The tone conveyed surprising confidence.

“I’m not selling anything, but I do have an incredible offer,” I replied in a gentle, trusting voice.

She stood quiet for a moment just staring at me with a puzzled look on her face.

“Do I know you?” she asks, her head tilted slightly to one side.

Vienna continued looking at me for a long time. Then gradually a small twitching movement of her upper lip indicated something had crossed her mind.

“My name is C.W. Comstock. We met at the Library of Congress. You’re a reporter for the Fairfax Evening Star and I would like to offer you an exceptional story if you are interested,” I said in a calm voice.

Vienna continued to stare. Her thoughts were jumbled and confused. She knows this man’s face. She knows she’s seen him before. Strangely, she doesn’t feel threatened by him. Still, she reminds herself of her self-defense training. Her mind continued trying to recall why he looked so familiar. Trying hard to remember her mind reels, probing deep into her memories until finally ending up on the initials CW. Then she smiles.

Vienna wanted to run up and hug him, so she did. She rushed into his arms. The warmth of their reunion surprised CW. It even surpassed his anticipation of seeing her again.

Lately, Vienna’s life had acquired a blandness that gave her a lonely feeling. She felt disconnected with no sense of accomplishment. Her work had grown mundane, she had no relatives or close friends and her life had become

empty of meaning. Yet suddenly, as if he knew of her blight, here was CW precisely when she needed him.

“What a grand surprise,” she said, remaining cuddled in his arms.

She had finally dredged from the shadow of her memories where she had seen this man with his scruffy whiskers and disheveled tawny hair. She fondly remembered those soft but piercing deep blue eyes that seemed to look deep into her soul.

She finally remembers the details of the first time she saw his face when she was a child. Then again fighting the rogue writer, and yet again when they had used the factum-terminal to restore the future. She felt a unique sensation she had never felt before, the feelings of delight and liberation and a connection. When she was with CW, she felt alive, in a place where she would always be accepted as an equal. She knew this is where she belonged and sighed a contented sigh. Vienna stayed in his arms with her head on his chest, embracing him as hard as she could.

I finally pushed her back to half arm's length, kissing her on the cheek in the process, and smiled, “I’m glad to see you too.”

“Your arrival is an unexpected pleasure. How did you find my time and location?” Vienna asked.

“I remembered what you told me about yourself. But how I got here is a surprise. In fact, the only way you will believe me is to see it.”

“See what?”

“I have a new ride and thought you might want to join me on a little journey,” I say with a smile.

She looks at me with a questioning look; her head tilted to one side, smiling that crooked smile, then asks, “Will it be a long trip? What do I need to pack?”

“Yes, the trip will probably take some time. You will need two or three changes of clothes and whatever toiletries you might need. I will supply everything else.”

“In that case, give me a few moments to pack and I’ll be ready.”

Within minutes, Vienna had changed into some jeans and a warm shirt and packed a medium-sized suitcase.

Not three minutes later, she appeared with her belongings ready to go. That was fast, I thought. It was almost as if she had been expecting to go somewhere.

“My new ride’s sitting in the field down the street,” I said.

“What? In a field?” Vienna asked with a sudden jerk of her head.

“You’ll see.”

“Okay, but I don’t like too much suspense.”

“Are you ready?”

“Yep, got everything I need,” She says while putting on her heavy coat. Dragging her rolling suitcase behind her, we head for the door.

We step out into the cold blowing snow and Vienna closes and locks the door behind us, both of us standing on the stoop of her house. When I turn to leave, I see something I’d seen before. There in the middle of the street, stepping

out of nothingness was a black boot and then the creature, Sanduval Mule. He boldly stood in front of us pointing something our way. I wasn't quick enough to react except to put up my hands out in a vain attempt to protect myself. Just then, I feel a sudden blow to my entire body.

Vienna had also turned just in time to see Sanduval Mule standing in the street discharging his weapon. She was quick enough to duck into a bent knee curled position. Both of her hands covered her head just as the force of his weapon struck.

The millisecond blast completely misses Vienna. The brunt of it sideswipes her suitcase but hits me straight on, causing me to exhale a loud grunt and the suitcase to fly straight up. When the suitcase lands on the ground about ten feet away it bursts open, the wind strewing its contents in all directions.

My body abruptly stiffens then I slump to my knees, suddenly finding it difficult to breathe. My upper body feels like it is getting tighter as if my skin was shrinking against my muscles and bones. The feeling quickly claws its way around my entire body. I'm still conscious and able to reason, but unable to move.

I must do something, I tell myself. I can't give up this easily. I grab at the rail of the steps and with all my might struggle to pull myself to a wobbly standing position. I was still dizzy but cognizant of my surroundings.

Vienna looked up with a shocked expression and sees Sanduval just as he was stepping back into nothingness and disappeared. She turns her head to see what had happened to CW, stands, and grabs his arm as he slumps to her for support.

Time seems to be passing slowly as we stumbled our way along the walkway and down the street trying to get to my ship as fast as possible.

"How do you feel?" Vienna asks.

"Like I'm back from the dead," I mumble somewhat coherently.

Holding on to each other, we stagger down the snow-flurried street until we arrive at the vacant lot. Vienna stops suddenly and stares wide-eyed at the seemingly empty space.

"It's gone," she proclaims loudly, yelling over the sound of the blowing wind.

"Keep walking this way," I say, my arm tugging at her shoulder.

While we headed for my Craft, the reality of what had just happened was finally dawning on me. My clothes were nearly gone and what was left had large smoldering holes. I'd just absorbed a stunning blow of energy from some kind of force field weapon. Luckily, the suit Jyotti had given me protected me from worse injury. From that point on I dubbed it the Jyotti suit.

I craned my neck to the left and see Vienna trying to carry nearly half my body's one-hundred ninety pounds of weight. I stopped to try and relieve her from the load but can only manage to stand on my own for a fraction of a second. I again had to slump on her for support. We both leaned forward into the wind and started to quickly move toward the ship.

As we get closer the ship's entrance started to become more apparent. Turning my head to see Vienna's reaction, I could tell by her expression she can't believe what she is seeing, or what she is not seeing.

The opening of the ship is the only thing visible in the vacant lot. I had set the Craft down so the direction of the blowing wind would hit a building next to the empty lot to make it less visible. The blowing snow would strike the building and cause a vortex at the corners, forcing the snow to blow away from the ship. Even so, if someone looked close enough they could see an obvious and eerie distortion.

We battled the blowing snow until finally entered the ship. Once inside I moved as quickly as I could to the seat and sat down, connected, and instantly command it to get us as far away from this location as possible. When I turned to the left to check on Vienna, she was sitting quietly in a seat beside me. I got up, went to her, and looked into her eyes. She was beautiful, I thought. Her eyes smiled back and I hugged her tight. When we separated, I asked as calmly as possible, "Are you all right?"

"Yes, are we going to take off?"

"Take off? What do you mean?"

Glancing around, I realized she couldn't see anything except the smooth walls of the inside of the ship. She doesn't know where we are. I sat down and connected with the Craft, this time I commanded the Craft to make the front transparent. This would provide Vienna with a panoramic, one-hundred-and-eighty-degree view of the space around the Craft.

"We *have* taken off," I say, as the portal opens and the stars become visible.

"I can see that now," she says, standing and looking out at the star-strewn cosmos.

"What kind of *ride* is this?"

"Well, that's hard to explain. I guess the best way to describe it would be... very adjustable."

"Adjustable? What does that mean?" Vienna asks, turning her head slightly to one side.

"Yes, well... it's in communication with my mind and I can adjust its shape on command. In fact, some things happen unconsciously. Like that seat, you're sitting in."

Where the hell did that come from? I ask myself.

I felt an inner alarm sounding that gave me an uncomfortable and nervous feeling. When I check the Craft's senses, they're telling me we are moving rapidly toward tomorrow. Well, maybe not that fast, but we were traveling at a very high velocity. I requested a status update and realize we are passing Jupiter. According to the Craft's calculations, we are moving near the speed of light at 185,276.472056 miles per second.

"Huh...?" I said in shock, and the Craft immediately stops.

We floated silently in spaces as I reviewed the recent events. That's when I recognize one thing for sure. The difficulties ahead are getting more perilous

than I first thought. It made me realize just how shrewd and vicious this rogue writer is and how out of my league this pursuit may very well turn out to be.

Turning again to Vienna I say in a calm voice, "This may be a good time for us both to have the same information. The U.O.H. has proposed an assignment and I have accepted. A new friend of mine needs help. Her name is Pu-illeo, and this rogue writer Sanduval Mule is influencing the beings of her planet."

"Her?" Vienna smiles a question.

"Yes, it's a her."

"Is she pretty and shapely?"

"I wouldn't say she was pretty, but she does have a shape," I say with a broad smile.

Vienna chuckles and says, "Exactly how are we going to help?"

"We are going to her planet and try to reverse what Sanduval Mule has done."

"And exactly how do you plan we to do that? Remember, that's the same guy that just shot you with... something and almost killed you. We know he also has a laser gun and he's not afraid to use it. There's no telling what other advanced weapons he has."

"Yeah, all that's true. But Pu-illeo did give me this." I say showing her the Coyote. "It's some sort of computer device. I'm not very good with computers, but you are."

"A computer up against lasers? Do you trust this female Poo person or thing? It isn't the one being targeted you know. And if we don't help, then what?"

"If we can make the needed changes, we can stay together. But, I'm afraid it may be dangerous. I'm serious now. If you don't want to come with me, I will take you back. Either way, I am going, and I hope you will come with me. I need your computer expertise and we make a good team."

"So, it's my computer expertise you need, not me personally."

"Did you miss the 'we can stay together' part?" I say with a humorous quip.

"No, I didn't miss it, I just wanted to hear it again." Vienna returns with an amused smile.

"Then we must go right now. First to the year 2452, then on to Pu-illeo's."

My expression turning increasingly grave I command the Craft to return to Earth. Within moments, we are hovering five thousand miles above the surface. I turn the dials of my bracelet to 2452 and touch the green stone.

Vienna and I are now in EST 2452. I turn and smile at Vienna, "Are you sure you're ready for this?"

"I'm ready if you are." She says confidently.

"I have no idea how long this trip will take," I confess.

"It will take as long as it takes," Vienna says unruffled.

Pu-illeo had implanted the exact course to follow so I command my Craft toward the planet Kr'galmaan.

Chapter 32

Suddenly I was wide awake from a deep slumber and somewhat perplexed. I had to look around my surroundings to eventually realize where I was. Vienna and I had both been exhausted and fallen asleep in our seats. Standing, I stretch and twist trying to use some of those stiff, unused muscles, then sat back down. After connecting to the ship, I review the sensors for an update on our travel time.

“Two and a half days. That was a long nap,” I confirm to myself. Querying for the distance we had traveled, it was over forty billion miles. “Huh!” I exclaim.

“Wow, how far it is to our final destination?” I say aloud. The sensors tell me we were 38 minutes away or about 20 million miles, so I open a viewing port.

We were hastily approaching the brilliance of the nebula where Pu-illeo’s star was located, and the sight was awe-inspiring. The Craft was rapidly plunging into and passing through the glowing gaseous space clouds of various shades of red, pink, blue, and green, heading on our meteoric way straight for Kr’galmaan.

I guess me talking to myself awakened Vienna because she began to stir.

“Good morning, I think,” I say with a smile.

“Is it morning already?” Vienna asks and then yawns, “How long did I sleep?”

“I’m sure it’s morning somewhere. I think we both slept for a couple of days”

“Days? I knew I was tired but that is a long time to sleep. I need to go to the bathroom again.”

“Again? What do you mean again?”

“You went to sleep and I was still awake, so I walked around your ship until I found the bathroom just down the hall. It’s nice and has everything I needed. I was going to use your bed but thought I’d stay with you instead.”

“That was nice of you. I need to use the bathroom too, but you go first.”

“How gentlemanly of you,” Vienna says with that crooked, attractive smile. She then hurriedly walks away.

After we had both finished freshening up and relieving nature’s call we sat in our seats and watched as we sped through space. I had widened the viewing port to cover the entire front of the Craft. The viewing port now wrapped around to just behind us. This gave us the perception of moving rapidly through space while seated in warm comfortable chairs.

The orange Star in this galaxy was much larger, just over twice the size of Earth’s Sun, and Kr’galmaan was the fourth planet in orbit. It is impossible to accurately describe the massive size and enormity of Pu-illeo’s planet. It was

more than three times the size of Earth. With its dual moons, it was an amazing sight. Yet according to Pu-illeo, the population was comparatively smaller than Earth, with less than one billion beings.

From this distance, both poles of the planet were visible and both had sheets of greenish luminescent ice. They glowed like an ocean full of plankton and were undoubtedly colder than the equator. I slowed my Craft and as we gradually approached you could see the planet's surface was made up of more fluid than land, about sixty percent was a murky pea-green-colored fluid. The remainder was solid ground composed of various odd shades of slate grey and dark brown. As we got closer it was easier to distinguish the terrain. There were huge mountainous areas topped with more murky green ice as well as high plateaus and wide-open plains. There were even a few visible impact craters.

Vienna exclaims, "What an astonishing sight. I really like this new ride of yours."

I dove to one thousand feet and slowed the Craft until we were swiftly gliding over the green ocean. As we quickly approached a landmass, I turned the Craft and crept higher, then turned again to follow a wide river. It too was murky green and was obviously fast-moving. Lined on both sides of the river were peculiar-looking tall plants and dense flora in various shades of greyish brown. To the left, I could see the flash of bright red lightning from within an atmospheric wave of bluish-purple clouds. Apparently, there was a storm ripping its way over the mountains.

Pu-illeo had given me the exact location to touch down, which was outside of one of the planet's space terminals. She had also assured me the atmosphere was not harmful. I had already reasoned as much because none of the Kr'galmaan beings I had seen on Earth were using any noticeable breathing apparatus. She informed me of the major compounds in the atmosphere: N₂ 62%; O₂ 37%; Ar 0.6%; CO₂ 0.11%; He 0.00054%; H₂ 0.00036% and some other minor gases. It was not far from Earth's atmosphere, but the temperature here was quite warm.

I was surprised when I receive a mental communication from Pu-illeo.

"Welcome, C.W. Comstock and Vienna Pitts. Please stay aboard your ship until I can offer you a set of clothing sent from Dr. Rabbet. This clothing will provide you with better comfort while you are here. It will equalize gravity, which is much stronger on Kr'galmaan than on Earth."

Vienna turned her head and looked my way, then asks, "Did you just get that?"

"Yeah. That was Pu-illeo."

"That didn't hurt as much as some communications I've had with the U.O.H." Vienna related.

"Apparently she realizes the pain that telepathic communication has on us humans and is mentally whispering," I explained.

As we continue I made a turn to the right, away from the river, and navigated lower. We glided over sparse structures that looked more like farming, or mining locations. There was an obvious infrastructure of roads that connected the small towns to the larger more populated region. We proceeded past them

and out into the plains territory then finally down into a remote concave-shaped valley. Some distance away we could see steep bluffed mountains surrounding the valley. Coming to a stop, I quietly hovered over our rendezvous point. From this commanding view, I thoroughly surveyed the immediate area and had the Craft scan for any possible aggressive weapons. Everything seemed okay.

Scattered around the floor of the valley below were hundreds of stubby-bodied plants that looked to be about six feet wide. Each plant had six or seven enormous gray-colored fanlike fronds growing from the center. The tips on a few of the fronds were bright red. These fronds were so large they towered over some of the smaller buildings. There were also large randomly spaced cylindrical crystalline pillars sticking up out of the ground outside of the building area. There was intense activity below. Multiple small vehicles hovering several feet off the ground were quickly scurrying from building to building.

Far off in the distance, I could see a vast array of high walls and tall rectangular structures of the brightly lit space terminal. There were four large Kr'galmaan spaceships floating off the ground docked to an even larger building. These buildings were cylindrical in shape and looked to be over half a mile tall where the ships connected at the top.

I look over to Vienna and ask, "Are you ready to land on an alien planet?"

She looks at me with a sober expression and replies, "Do we have a choice? If we want to be together in the future, we must continue. Anyway, I haven't got any better places to be."

This is another reason I admire and have strong feelings for this woman. Even though it may take her a while, she recognizes and understands reality.

Chapter 33

It had been forty Kr'galmaan revolutions, or over two and a half months Earth time, since Vienna and I had successfully touched down. The first Earth month of our time living on the planet was spent hard at work studying the history of the planet. More recently, we spent our time in the intense examination of the history of its inhabitants. The longer days were very difficult to get accustomed to. Our natural circadian rhythm was almost half that of the Kr'galmaan. We had learned very early to take precautions and time ourselves or collapse from exhaustion.

While there, Jyotti had sent each of us a new Jyotti suit. They were a Godsend. The new suits had two cargo pockets on the front of each thigh. The quilted material was dark brown, almost black. When examined closely, they had the look of wood grain, like the grain seen in Burlled Maple tree, but the grain was made up of microscopic hair-like material. They weren't overly tight, but they did make Vienna's body look invitingly seductive.

The outfits not only allowed full-body movement but amazingly, they helped relieve some of the powerful force of the stronger gravity on Kr'galmaan. Jyotti's instructions for the new suits also speculated they had some additional defensive characteristics. Supposedly, they were not only resistant to energy force attacks but *possibly* laser fire. However, he wasn't sure how resistant. After my last encounter, I wasn't ready to test his assumptions.

Since the Kr'galmaan consumed minerals for sustenance, they prepared food for us from some of the local vegetation, with no protein from any meat, because there was no meat. Even though the Iioeniwaa tasted a little like spicy Kung Pao Chicken, most of the food tasted like tart seaweed. There was the rare occasion when we were offered the delicacy of what they called a Puffaloo, which was a thick tan-colored leaf whose juice was slightly acidic, but the firm meat within the leaf was fruity and sweet like a nectarine.

The Kr'galmaan history began ninety million cosmic cycles ago and was chronicled in an underground archive managed by a relatively small Kr'galmaan named Jevotull. He wasn't a tall Stovian like Pu-illeo, he was much shorter and from the Nirandal sect. This keeper of the records was aptly titled Aamareis or Custodian of the Past. He was one of only two Kr'galmaan capable of preserving and processing the thought records. He was also the only one who could translate, or decode, the annals of these informational patterns into a digital format that Vienna and I could examine.

Beginning thousands of cosmic cycles in the past, the archives were the personal historic records of each and every Kr'galmaan's mind from puberty on. Because the Kr'galmaan communicated telepathically, when a Kr'galmaan matured into puberty there was a grand ceremony. A celebration of the exact point in their lives the neural-transmitting gene became active. During the

celebration, they lose consciousness for just a short time. When they awake their conscious and unconscious thoughts were automatically linked and instantly recorded into the archiving database preserved by Aamareis. Every young Kr'galmaan looked forward to the time they are allowed to contribute their thoughts to the database of history.

Their history was quite interesting. The beings on Kr'galmaan had evolved much like life on Earth, except for the diversity of creatures. According to their scientific studies, hundreds of billions of revolutions prior to the evolution of the beings, and biological organisms were delivered from meteor and asteroid collisions hitting the planet. Ultimately the organisms mutated to establish the fauna, then swimming creatures and other living things in the goo and murky green fluid of the planet. They eventually evolved into land creatures. Their studies of planetary evolution had found nothing like a dinosaur age. The current beings mutated from the first land life form to become the only living mammal-like creatures that currently live on the surface of the planet.

For thousands of cosmic cycles, generation after generation, the Kr'galmaan beings advanced and flourished. They were vegetarian, gaining their sustenance from the foliage, seeds, and the fruits of plant life growing wild on the planet. In due course, their civilization progressed and ultimately produced early space travel. That is until sixteen thousand cosmic cycles ago when an asteroid struck the planet. It was one of the craters I saw on our descent in. The strike killed all other life and almost ended their civilization.

That was the first of two asteroids to hit Kr'galmaan within a few thousand cosmic cycles. The devastation of the first strike eradicated billions of Kr'galmaan beings and drove the remainder underground. They were able to save the majority of their scientific records and some vegetation spores and emerged several hundred revolutions later to begin the process of rebuilding, only to have another asteroid strike two thousand cosmic cycles later. This time, because of the changes to their environment, their only chance for survival was to adapt and evolve into beings that absorbed minerals rather than consume vegetation.

They absorb the minerals by bathing in a mixture of the green fluid from the rivers and oceans warmed and mixed with the processed minerals from the available bituminous coal. The bathing or nourishing routine is needed only once every planetary revolution. Reproduction was like most mammals, done by physical joining between the two genders. The normal Kr'galmaan lifespan was about two hundred fifty-four cosmic cycles.

Their population grew slowly. But after another several hundred cosmic cycles, the Kr'galmaan had nearly depleted their planet's supply of life-giving minerals and began to mine the sparse minerals from surrounding planets and asteroids. As those sources of nourishment again became increasingly scarce, it forced them further and further into space exploration. Their bold scientific ingenuity helped proliferate their technologies for more efficient space travel and mineral mining.

Working with Jevotull and using the Coyote device, Vienna was able to decipher the Kr'galmaan language and translate it into a language we could

understand. While I studied social and technological history, Vienna concentrated on the inherent political aspects that are natural in any complex society. Vienna used AI backtrace analysis, which became our invaluable methodological tool. By tracing the data input process backward, it is possible to pinpoint potential manipulation points. This comprehensive approach not only highlights the critical stages where social integrity can be compromised but also reinforces the need for a deep understanding of societal influencing mechanics.

As a political reporter, she had become accustomed to identifying how the powerful and their staff of linguistic embroiders of truth would use their power. They would convince the populace that a particular issue was important and only by their wisdom and expertise could the problem be solved. The naive would fall for this ploy every time. And as with most governing bodies, their need for power was all-encompassing.

Still, we have not yet found what we seek. In the beginning, the beings of Kr'galmaan were free thinkers that would help each other survive. They made trade pacts and traded minerals and supplies freely on the barter system, trading and sharing the fruits of their labor with others. Then, as advanced beings do, they needed structure and rules for everyone to follow and live by.

“How are you doing today Vienna?” I asked with interest as I entered the large room we were using for our studies.

“Well, I’m tired and cranky and need some rest. But last night, I think it’s supposed to be night, I got interested in this,” holding up the Coyote over her shoulder to show me a digital record.

“What am I looking at?” I asked.

With a smile that showed her strength in a difficult situation, she calmly says. “Right here, I think I’ve discovered something.”

I inspected the data more closely and said, “I just don’t see it.”

As I spoke, I stepped forward and laid my hands on her shoulders caressing them with a slow massaging motion.

Vienna sighed, lowers her head, and relaxed, deciding to enjoy the massage for a while.

As she relaxes, Vienna slides deep into self-reflection, finding herself caught between her plans for herself, CW, and the plans the U.O.H. has made for them. Plans that could have an effect not only on their future but the future of all beings. She had been pensive and introspective for some time now. Maybe it was because she had been working so closely with nothing but mental communication, or maybe because this was very arduous work and lately she was always tired. The time and gravity changes seemed to be taking their toll.

She wanted to stay with CW and she would do anything to make that happen. CW wasn’t a handsome man by thespian standards. He was tall and well built for his age with broad shoulders and a slim waist. The new jumpsuits made him look even more attractive. He walked with a quirky gate that, according to him, was caused by a knee injury he received during a journey to 14th-century France. Recently, she had read some of his previous works. He had a sharp, dry yet droll wit and his writings of history were vivid, realistic, and well-detailed with a flair for the zany and unexpected. She really did care for him.

As she returns to reality she says, “Thanks, I needed that.” Giving CW that smile he found so attractive.

Hesitating for a second Vienna says, “Please, listen to me for a moment. I’ve been plotting Kr’galmaan political history on the assumption that various change points would move the perceptions of the Kr’galmaan individuals from singular self-realization to the groupthink of the masses. I may have found the origin of a tradition that, I believe, is the time location we have been searching for. It is the zero-zero-zero coordinates in psycho-historical time.”

“What do you mean, tradition? How can that be the time point?”

“Traditions are organized beliefs and are a wonderful method for controlling the thoughts, minds, and actions of masses of beings. Once it reaches a certain maturity in ancestral certainty, it self-propagates and self-regulates.”

“Yeah, so?” I say, silently mulling over what Vienna had just said, and then went on, “Wait... I think I understand what you described. Sure, carry it far enough and the words of the dominant ones within the traditional belief become divine and infallible. Where any dissenting opinions would be labeled as blasphemous and all the negative implications that entail. I think you’re right. Even a semi-rational tradition is far more likely to slip under the radar and be accepted more often than it is challenged. Throughout the history I’ve seen on Earth, the application of semi-rational traditions has always produced a consistent outcome; like bigotry and prejudice.”

Vienna’s eyes raise and meet CW’s, “See what I mean?” She states bluntly. “The tradition grows into both a custom and a habit; it is then expected and demanded by the followers to be solidified into legislative actions.”

“Okay, I can accept that. Well done. Do you have any idea why it began?”

Scanning the records on the Coyote as she spoke, “According to my calculations, someone named Wah-kumees was the first to place the blame on others for what he did not have. For generations, this belief had only a narrow following. Then eight hundred revolutions later a being by the name of Picpileep enhanced the idea as a theological position by declaring another group inferior because they were not as tall nor had the same shaped head. He was able to accrue some minimal following. Over time though, these attached differences became a stigma to that group and caused some beings to look for more differences in others. Over the centuries, this cultural state of mind continued to develop and separated the beings into social classes, almost tribalistic. Thus, the tradition of jealousy and blame was established and the power-hungry used those emotions to gain even more power.”

“Yes,” CW continues this thought; “it looks like the beings, at first, voluntarily clustered themselves together by their likes and beliefs. They expected societal leaders to make laws to support their viewpoints. The political foundations would whip up the supporting mobs and that allowed them the increased governing power they needed for more control. As time went by more and more of the beings were dependent on the central planning and support from their leaders.”

Vienna interjected, “And each cluster has evolved its beliefs into each-against-each which separates society even more into tribes and communes,

removing the idea of the individual. In this case, the more prevalent separations are those beings that are taller and are supposedly better off than ones who are smaller. And beings that have a darker outward appearance are superior to ones that are lighter. When this happened on Earth, it was called racism.”

“You have found it,” CW says as he holds Vienna’s head in his hands, giving her a kiss on the cheek.

“We must inform Pu-illeo to determine what she or they want us to do about this. But first, I have to do something to make sure we aren’t undermined by the U.O.H.” I said.

“You really don’t trust them do you?” Vienna asked.

“I don’t trust anyone or any group that has the power to limit the liberties of the individual.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I have a small amount of material from my ship that I need to install inside the Coyote. I have already installed such a microdot in my iJotter. This will allow me to connect, via the Coyote, to my craft. Also, we must back up the data from the Coyote to my iJotter.”

Using a small plastic tool, I carefully opened the back of the Coyote’s case. With a small needle, I placed the half-centimeter microdot of material on the control board and closed the case afterward. I test the connection by placing my hand palm down on the touch screen of the Coyote. I was instantly connected to my craft and sensed the data flooding into my head.

“Did it work?” Vienna quizzes.

“Yes, perfectly.” Still firmly holding the Coyote I concentrated for a moment, “I have backed up the pertinent data to my iJotter and removed it from the Coyote. I think we can now contact Pu-illeo.”

Together Vienna and I walk down the long hall to another room to find Pu-illeo communicating with a small group of Kr’galmaan beings. As we approached she turned and whispered,

“Welcome C.W. and Vienna. You both look very tired. Is there something we can do or something you need?” She whispered as we approached.

“We have some interesting news and need your opinion,” I say candidly.

“Then we must have complete privacy. Come with me.”

With that, Vienna and I followed Pu-illeo down a corridor and into a smaller room several yards away.

“Now, what do you have to tell me?”

“Vienna has discovered that a Kr’galmaan named Wah-kumees, was the first to blame others for not having what others had. He was a young town leader in the village of Zr’cunaal some eight hundred cosmic cycles ago. Those in his village quickly denounced this notion and he was promptly removed from his leadership position. Then five hundred cosmic cycles later, a being named Picpileep enhanced the concept in his quest for a major political position. He used this idea of envy to declare an opposing political group inferior because of their physical appearance. This time, the idea stuck and he won the position and continued to use the same tactic to be a leader for many cycles. Seeing the positive effect of gaining power by accusing others of being different, other

groups began to imitate this idea and use the same method. Over time, these claims of differences remained in the minds of some and the attached stigma was used repeatedly and successfully. Power-hungry politicians would look for any differences in others to criticize. In most cases, they invented an unprovable disparity. These myths continued to grow as a cultural state of mind. Over time it separated the individual beings and divided your world into victims and exploiters. This is when and how the tradition of jealousy and blame was established on Kr'galmaan.”

“Why would that be the cause of our current situation? It does not explain why my fellow Kr'galmaan are so dependent on our leaders for their daily survival.”

Vienna explained. “According to your records, before the psychological interference of jealousy and blame entered into their psyche the Kr'galmaan were strong-willed individuals, independent, and respected each other as equals. The tactic, perfected by those who want the power to control others, is to use jealousy and blame to create a victim class. They would then promise these new victims that if they supported them they would equalize every perceived disparity as long as they follow their rules. Rules that were proclaimed to be fair and for the good of all.”

I interrupted, turned to look at Pu-illeo directly, eye to eye, and asked, “Do you agree that an individual is a sovereign entity who recognizes the inalienable rights of individual beings, including his own and those of others? And that this right is derived from his nature as a rational being?”

“Yes, I will agree with that hypothesis of the individual.”

“Would you also agree that the individual is driven by self-knowledge and independent thought?”

“Yes, of course.”

“That these traits also permit and enhance the continuous growth of society?”

“Yes.” She affirmed, her eyes showing a touch of annoyance.

“Your leaders created victims then control them through resource regulation and allotment of life-giving minerals and materials. This is done in the name of the common good, and thus controls the sustenance of life, which stifles individual growth. Over time the Kr'galmaan society grew weaker and began the practice of mob scapegoating because there was less sustenance to distribute. Is that a true description of your society today?”

“Yes, I see your point. I accept your hypothesis as reality.” Pu-illeo admits, with sadness in her response. *“Was Sanduval Mule involved?”*

“Yes,” Vienna says bluntly. “I found that Sanduval Mule had written a tome titled “Silent Summer” under the pseudonym Ongiaahra. That tome described using the natural variations in beings to gain power. According to the implanted data recorders, both Zr'cunaal and Picpileep consumed that tome. They both recorded reading it in their chronicled journals. Today that tome is used at all levels of your education system.”

“How do you know it was Sanduval Mule that chronicled the tome?”

“Through the process of human reasoning. I’ve studied his works and that tome has his eloquence, his form, his expressions, and the precision with which he constructs his thoughts. They are like markers on a trail in the forest.” Vienna exclaimed proudly.

“If this is true, and I now believe it to be so, how can this situation be rectified? Can we eliminate the invasive tome?”

“It can’t be changed by one simple action. It will take several generations to make the change properly without causing extreme damage to your civilization,” I explain.

“What damage could occur with swift and direct action?”

“If the current leaders used jealousy and racism to gain power, then they would not be in power if the change was made with one bold stroke. From an individual liberty point of view, that would be the correct action, but there is no way to predict what path your society would take. It may very well mean that your technological advances would not have occurred. It could also mean that with a change of Kr’galmaan past, Earth may never have become a trading partner and we most assuredly would not be here.”

“Then what do you suggest?”

I looked at Vienna, and she nods her head for me to continue, “I suggest we make a change to the historical teaching in your educational curriculum and allow your citizens to gradually, within two or three generations, move back to the wisdom and responsibility of individualism.”

I agree, but we must discuss this with Kr’galmaan leaders to receive their support and approval.”

Shaking my head in disagreement, “They will not agree, for it is they who have the most to lose. Do you believe they will sacrifice some if not all of their power over Kr’galmaan society? Their egos will not allow this to happen. It must be done without their knowledge or not at all.”

“C.W., are you requesting that I make this decision? That responsibility is too momentous for me. I cannot make such a decision alone. I must at a minimum, confer with the U.O.H.”

“Then let’s go see what they have to say.”

“Agreed, come, stand close to me.”

Vienna and I stand shoulder to shoulder in a small circle, both facing Pu-illeo as she closes her eyes, and touches something on her left shoulder. Suddenly the three of us are standing in the U.O.H. chamber. I can see oojavan and several other creatures sitting around in quiet communication. They turned to face us as if Pu-illeo had called to them.

“Welcome,” strikes my brain with a slap. I see Vienna grimace.

Pu-illeo began to explain the situation in a somewhat defensive fashion.

As you are aware, C.W. was asked to assist in our struggle against the possibility of the rogue writer’s intrusion. With Vienna’s assistance, he has done as we asked and found the cause of our concern. They have recommended a long-term solution that, according to their calculations, will maintain a stable Kr’galmaan society. For this, I am sure their intentions are noble. Yet, if swift action is not taken, further decimation of individual liberties will continue or

worsen. C.W. and Vienna's recommendations do not involve the leaders of Kr'galmaan. This is a reasonable request considering the sociological psychohistory previously observed and employed by the board. We would like your judgment on which action should be taken."

Oojavan appears to be in conversation with the other members of the board, including Pu-illeo, whose facial features seem to occasionally change. This went on for several minutes before there was a response.

"It is obvious that a modification is necessary to interrupt Sanduval Mule's continued intervention. An immediate maneuver is required," oojavan sends.

"That would be a very big mistake for the lives of the Kr'galmaan and for the lives of all beings who have been in contact with Kr'galmaan beings for hundreds of cycles. The modifications must be done in stages," I scold.

"The board has considered the consequences. They are minimal when comparing the damage of continued intrusions."

"I think the board is more concerned with denying Sanduval Mule any advantage than for the beings affected by such a drastic action."

"The Board has the power to make the needed changes if necessary C.W." Pu-illeo communicates.

"They may have the means, and at times I doubt they actually do, but they do not have the knowledge or the courage and neither I nor Vienna will give them that knowledge."

"The necessary information is in the Küise-Imitáwa and TicTic can use the factum-terminal to make the changes," Pu-illeo sends, disturbed by my comments.

"No, the information is not stored in the Coyote. I have removed all relative data. Only Vienna and I have the associated knowledge and we will not allow a change that will harm the Kr'galmaan beings or any other beings."

You could tell by their reactions that this did not sit well with the U.O.H. As we watched it was obvious Pu-illeo, oojavan, and the other board members were arguing amongst themselves. When I looked at Vienna, she had a look of dismay on her face.

"Are you all right?" I asked quietly.

"Yes, so far. Maybe we should return to your ship while they figure this out."

"Not just yet. Stay close, I have my dials set if necessary."

Vienna nods and smiles in agreement as she moves a little closer.

Suddenly Pu-illeo's head jerked to look in our direction.

"We have just received information that an explosion has occurred at the space terminal on Kr'galmaan. One ship has been destroyed and another damaged."

"Was it an accident?"

"It does not appear to be accidental. The official reports indicate sabotage."

"Has anything happened back at your location?"

"Yes, we have major damage, and have increased our security."

"And my craft?"

“It is safe at this point.”

“It would appear there is a spy within this board,” I say bluntly looking at oojavan and the rest of the U.O.H. board.

“We know exactly where and what Sanduval Mule is doing,” oojavan sends coldly, including with it a stinging pain.

“Then you should have anticipated this attack on Kr’galmaan. Maybe I should be dealing with Sanduval Mule. At least he can make a decision and has a direction.”

“You must make the required changes,” oojavan demands.

“I’ll make the changes, but they will be done how I want them done. Even if it means dying in the process.”

“We must return immediately.” Vienna proclaims, squeezing my hand.

“Yes, now,” I say, looking directly at Pu-illeo.

“Stand close to me, we will return,” Pu-illeo says, holding her arms open wide.

Chapter 34

When we returned I had a gut feeling things weren't going the way Pu-illeo would have liked. There was chaos in all directions. The tail section of one of the spaceships docked at the tower had struck the outer perimeter and large broken pieces of debris from the rest of the ship continued to fall around the entire compound. There was damage and death everywhere you looked. Structures were damaged and many Kr'galmaan beings were hurt or dead. Mangled blood-spattered steel and countless body parts lay everywhere.

Pu-illeo was obviously giving orders and summoning others mentally because when she began to leave the area other Kr'galmaan immediately fell in behind her. With her growing followers in tow, they all ran to give aid to those who were hurt.

Through the confusion and mayhem, Vienna and I had to dodge sharp-edged debris as we swiftly made our way to my Craft. Once seated, I was immediately connected and commanded the Craft into stealth mode, then took off. Climbing higher, I had to maneuver the Craft through the falling rubble and wreckage of the damaged ship. I gained altitude as fast as possible until finally reaching open air, then shot up five thousand miles. Stopping the Craft, we floated in the relative safety of space as we tried to calm our nerves.

Turning to Vienna I asked, "Well, what do you think of our little adventure so far?"

"I don't like all that death and destruction nor what the U.O.H. has planned, but we can't do anything about it now. What do you think happened with that ship?"

"From what I saw on our way up, it looks like a Kr'galmaan space transport exploded right behind its nose section. Right where it was connected to the terminal. The explosion caused it to become untethered from the dock and crash."

With a thought command to my Craft, I made a transparent viewing port for Vienna. "We're not alone up here. My sensors are telling me there's an interstellar spaceship just over the horizon to the east. I'll back up a little and keep it in sight. The Craft senses a faint glow from its energy source. Look for a black spot."

"Yes... I see it over there. What is it?" Vienna asked.

"I'll let you know in a moment. Let's take a look around the neighborhood." At near light speed, I dive directly south, then up the other side of the planet and slightly east, hugging 50 miles above the planet's surface. Rapidly flying up the other side of the planet I slow my velocity until I was just under the strange spaceship. It obviously had a stealth mode because it looked as if there was actually nothing there. You had to look at what was not there to see it, the empty blackness where the stars couldn't be seen. It was shaped as if two

pyramids had been stuck together bottom to bottom, maybe half a mile from tip to tip.

“It looks quite mystical doesn’t it?” Vienna exclaims.

“Yeah, mystical and most likely very dangerous.”

“Apparently some of the neighbors are nose-y,” quips Vienna.

“I think it’s about time we misbehaved a little, but first, we’ll need some time. Much lies ahead and we are going to need every weapon at our disposal. To do that, I need to find out if one of my ideas is accurate.”

I command my Craft to retreat further south and west. We quickly zoom away from the strange spaceship and head to the far side of Kr’galmaan. There I found an isolated location in what looked like a barren, flat desert area. There was nothing around but large boulders and a few dried-up plants.

“This looks like a nice secluded spot,” I say, setting down next to a large greenish-gray boulder about twice the size of my Craft.

“CW, I wonder if that was Sanduval Mule’s ship,” Vienna questioned as we walk to the exit.

“I don’t think so,” I reply.

“Why not? I didn’t see any markings.”

“Yeah, me either, but something big has been stirred up on Kr’galmaan. I don’t think he would involve himself in an outright attack. However, I do think what happened back there was planned. I think it was supposed to look like a spaceship accident that would also take out Pu-illeo’s base.”

“I see what you mean. It’s likely a spy in the U.O.H. told the leaders of Kr’galmaan that their power was about to be challenged, and they reacted.”

“That’s another reason I need to test my bracelet and ring theory.”

“Theory? What theory is that?”

“I have a theory that the ring and bracelet have the power to become a weapon. And we need as many weapons as possible. Of course, my theory is still unproven.”

“Okay, but first explain your theory before we do something that may be hazardous for us both,” Vienna requests in a concerned tone. I looked at her and she had an uneasy look on her face.

I put my arm around her shoulder and said, “Don’t worry, I wouldn’t do anything that might harm you. You know that don’t you?”

Vienna smiles, “Yeah, but sometimes things can happen unexpectedly.”

“Okay look, I think there is a power, a different kind of power when the ring and bracelet are worn on the same hand. I have been studying the carvings on the ring for a long time. I found an obscure group of stick figures, a group of planets, a Sunburst, along with some odd-shaped buildings. I don’t understand it all yet and the hieroglyphics aren’t simple instructions or an understandable message, but I think I’ve been able to make sense of their meaning.”

I slide the ring off the middle finger of my right hand and show Vienna the ring's carvings. “See right here, one of the stick figures is holding his arm out and it looks like there is a line from his arm to the Sunburst.”

“Yes, but that could mean anything.”

“You’re right, but I must know for sure. And I think now is the best time to find out.” I say, sliding the ring back on my middle finger.

Vienna removes her ring and closely inspected it, “I have the same markings on my ring. Are you sure about this?”

“As sure as I *can* be.”

“OK, then I’m with you. We need to know all we can about the power of these things,” Vienna agrees.

“Then let’s find out just what happens with this theory of mine,” I say. We exited the Craft and walked along the desert floor, stopping about two hundred yards away.

“Vienna, you should move away, just in case.”

“Why?”

“If something unpleasant happens when I try this, I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“That’s nice of you,” Vienna says with an impish grin, “but if you’re hurt, how will I ever get away from here. I can’t fly your Craft and it is a long walk back to Pu-illeo’s place. In fact, I don’t even know which direction to start walking.”

I smile, shrug, and say, “At least you’d be alive.”

“Yeah, alive to slowly die in this desolate place. I’d rather stay close to you and whatever happens, happens.”

“Okay then... here we go.”

I slide the ring off the middle finger of my right hand, and gradually slide it onto the middle finger of my left hand with the bracelet on my left wrist. As the ring slides up my finger, I begin to feel a slight tingling sensation in my hand. The tingling sensation slowly moves up to my wrist and stops. At first, the bracelet emits a faint glow, After about a second the glowing stops. I have no feeling of discomfort or pain. Slowly my hand begins to feel warmer. The warmth begins in my hand, then my wrist, then my arm, then all the way up to my elbow. My hand and arm feel hotter, not burning or uncomfortably hot, just hotter than normal. I turn my arm over to inspect it. There are no discolorations or distortions, nothing unusual. Suddenly I feel an unnatural sensation of power beginning to increase in my wrist and hand. I raise my arm and at the same time, I concentrate on the ring and bracelet.

With my arm outstretched and the palm of my hand open, the bracelet begins to glow. My whole body feels warm and I feel an unfamiliar wave of power growing inside me. The feeling concentrates on my shoulder then travels down my arm, then to my hand. Suddenly a concentrated bolt of energy spews out of the palm of my hand. The energy explodes from my hand into a flowing beam of celestially bright brilliance. It was so bright I had to squint my eyes. The beam formed into a straight line from my hand until it strikes a tall round rock about twenty yards away. When the beam strikes the rock it begins to glow red-hot. I don’t feel any heat or pain from the energy emitting from my hand, although the bracelet is beginning to feel warmer and the glow is deepening. I close my hand and the beam instantly stops.

When I turn and look at Vienna, her eyes were wide open with an astonished expression on her face.

“Did that hurt?” she asked.

“No, not really. My arm just feels a little warmer, that’s all.”

Vienna reaches out and touches my arm, “It doesn’t feel warmer than normal and it’s not hot to the touch.”

“Maybe it’s just on the inside. Anyway, it didn’t hurt me but it did hurt that rock. I’ll have to do a lot more practice to be able to better control it.”

“Is it a laser beam?”

“No, I don’t think so, more like an energy or electron beam.”

“I wonder.” I open my hand and I can focus the energy with a pointed finger into a smaller, narrower beam at the rock. The harder I concentrate the stronger the intensity of the beam. When I stop concentrating, the beam stops, my finger still pointing at the rock.

“I wonder how long I can maintain a strong beam of energy?”

“Let’s see what happened to the rock,” Vienna suggests.

We walked over to the still glowing rock to inspect the damage.

“It would appear the beam disrupts the molecular structure on an atomic level.” Vienna decides.

“I don’t have to understand the physics of it to use it.” I said bluntly.

Vienna gave CW a dismissive look then smiled, “I know what you mean but I like to try to understand these things.”

The center of the rock where the beam had collided had disappeared completely. Around the edges of the hole, the stone was still white-hot and melting. Portions of the outer ring of the hole had crumbled and fallen leaving hot shards of stone strewn on the ground. The beam had continued through the rock hitting another one some thirty feet behind it, into and out of that rock, and hit the next one. I couldn’t tell where it had stopped.

“I need to try one more thing,” I explain. I touched the blue stone of the ring with the thumb of my left hand and nothing happened.

“That could be a problem,” I said.

“What did you do?” Vienna asked

“I can’t stop time with the ring and bracelet on the same hand.”

“That is curious,” Vienna admits, then smiles, “but you *can* blow holes in rocks.”

Suddenly I sense the beginning of a bad headache followed by Pu-illeo’s communication pushing its way into my consciousness.

“C.W., you are in danger. There are two vessels from the Kr’galmaan Security Force intruding on your area. They will arrive in 24 of your seconds.”

“What’s going on?” I say aloud.

“Your premise was correct. The influence of power is not easily resolved and individualism is not easily preserved. If you are able, we will meet here. Be careful C.W., evil is on the march.”

I feel a sharp pain as Pu-illeo stamps the location into my consciousness.

“Ouch, I’ll never get used to that,” I complain aloud.

“Get used to what?” Vienna asks.

“We have to move quickly,” I command. “Pu-illeo just sent me a message. There’s danger on the way.”

Just as we start to return to the Craft the faint reflection of two small flying ships catches my eye as they crest the ridge a few miles to the northeast. After coming over the ridge, they drop lower into the desert. Flying several hundred feet above the ground they headed straight for us. I put my hand in my pocket, grasp the iJotter and command my Craft to become transparent.

Looking back at Vienna I blurt, “This way quick,” then turned and started running.

“Right with you,” she replies, already jogging next to me.

We ran away from the Craft’s location toward several large boulders just as the two ships fired their weapons. Two white-hot laser blasts hit the ground about thirty feet to our left, causing a fiery explosion that kicked up a brownish-green cloud of dust. The force of the impact knocked us both to the ground. Lying on the ground, I turn and looked up just as the ships zoomed by above us. They were dark grey and shaped like small catamarans. There was a clear round bubble in the middle of two cylinder-shaped wings on each side. I could vaguely make out a single figure as the pilot inside the bubble, but couldn’t quite make out what type of being it was. In tight formation they make a controlled turn upward and to our right, circling to prepare for a return run.

Rolling onto my back, I turn my head to find Vienna.

“Are you OK?” I yell.

“Yeah, I’m okay.”

“When I give the word, stop time.”

She nods in agreement and continues to lie still, watching me intently. I lay unmoving; my attention riveted on the attacking ships and waited for the right moment. I track them closely as they made their high turn and head back in our direction.

Still, in formation, they dove lower, and just as they leveled off ready to fire again, I yell, “Now.”

When Vienna touched the blue stone of her ring, time stopped. The ships are suddenly dead still in mid-flight. Raising my left arm, I take careful aim. Concentrating hard, I fire two sharp bolts of blue-white energy streams. The beams leave my hand like a torrent of molten liquid following my line of sight. The first beam hits the ship on the left; the second beam strikes the one on the right. When the beam strikes them they both began to turn a bright crimson red. A few seconds later time restarts. Just as it does both ships instantly explode, peppering the desert floor with fiery debris.

I immediately jump up and quickly move toward Vienna, who had also leaped to her feet.

“Let’s get to the Craft quick,” I say as we hurriedly run hand in hand toward my craft.

While we ran, I place my hand on the iJotter in my pocket and command the ship to become visible. As we approach, the entrance becomes obvious and grew wider the closer we get. We quickly boarded and I immediately sat down and connect to the Craft. After giving the command, we were instantly floating

five hundred feet above the ground. Turning to point the Craft in the direction the attacking ships had come I again send the command to become transparent. At near light speed, we streak away following the route of the unknown attackers.

Chapter 35

Striding from the blue nothingness into the large darkened room, Sanduval Mule takes two more long strides and quickly morphs into the Nirandal, Siin-shaka.

His official title in this time space is Legitimate Authority of Bureaucratic Manifesto. He is an advisor to O'czardaa, the selected sovereign ruler of Kr'galmaan. He has advised O'czardaa for the last four choice periods with successful results. From the very first selection cycle, Siin-shaka's guidance had insured that O'czardaa would be victorious. His success continued through the following two selection cycles.

Siin-shaka had convinced O'czardaa, also a Nirandal, to blame the Stovians for all of Kr'galmaan's ills. In O'czardaa prepared monologues to the populous, he referred to them as inferior and blamed them for the ongoing restrictions of the essential elements of life. Siin-shaka's composed narratives, along with his control of the Stovian scribes, assured the populace that O'czardaa's solutions were right for all Kr'galmaan. His cleverly worded publicity messages convinced the majority of the selectors that their every desire would be provided for, funded by the more affluent Nirandal and Stovians. This tactic assured O'czardaa of winning the choice time after time.

Siin-shaka was successful because he had been proficient at altering and revising all informational data composed within the realm. He was skillful at ensuring all accounts of O'czardaa's policy actions and family life would make him appear humble and humane. If O'czardaa did not deliver on a promise, Siin-shaka would make certain the blame would fall on those that had opposed him.

During the last three choice terms, O'czardaa and his group of Principals and loyalists had reshaped the opinions of more Kr'galmaan beings than at any time in Kr'galmaan history. They were converted from advocating for the liberty of the individual to a dependence on the O'czardaa regime. The power of O'czardaa and his Principals was undeniable, and their goal of absolute control over the lives of all Kr'galmaan was nearly complete.

As Siin-shaka leaves his transfer room he walks down the long ornate corridor knowing his strategy is working as originally conceived. Still, there were unexpected intrusions that had forced a minor change in his plan. Even so, he was confident the minimal adjustments required would further guarantee his plan would prevail.

When he enters the familiar Principals Hall the Vi monitor-filled room displayed views of various locations around the six orbs under Kr'galmaan authority. The current events were paramount in the minds of the Principals and there was a heated discussion in progress.

Lii-tubul, Overseer of Orb Harmony, was giving O'czardaa and the other Principals an update.

“The demolition of the freighter was successful. The base of the opposition has been damaged beyond reconstruction. The resistance has retaliated with violent attacks on the magistracy post on Aooiyitii and is organizing clusters of rebels on other orbs in the realm.”

“We have transmitted to the commons that unrighteous radicals are responsible for the attack that destroyed the space freighter and killed many innocent Kr’galmaan. Their actions are described as a movement to destroy our society, our way of life, and the benevolent O’czardaa’s plan to aid the citizens of Kr’galmaan.” Siin-shaka immediately communicates.

“Well done Siin-shaka,” O’czardaa sends approvingly. *“How long can you keep the commons entertained with such accounts?”*

“If we act quickly I can guarantee no contrary information will be available.” Siin-shaka proclaims, glancing around the assembled group.

Gul’boom, Local Security Authority, states, *“However, if the commons observe regime Security Forces moving against these extremists, will your scribes continue being accepted?”*

“The only way to assure the proper outcome is to end this upheaval immediately. We must act decisively and quickly.” Siin-shaka demands.

“If innocent commons are within range and are harmed, our actions may change their mindset,” Gul’boom advises.

“That has not prohibited us from acting in the past,” Lii-tubul recognizes.

“We reduced the maintenance crew staff to ensure that number be the least possible,” Gul’boom reminds the group.

“Siin-shaka, your recommended actions may not be effortless. There are reports of gathering clusters of commons, and they have assistance from some off-worlders. Reports indicate one of the intruders possesses tremendous powers.” Lii-tubul communicates.

“Yes, I have observed those reports and taken steps to eliminate this intruder in the Helouwe Sector. He is irrelevant.” Siin-shaka states without a doubt.

“This ‘intruder’, what do we know of it?” O’czardaa asks.

“I have heard he is a friend of the Stovian challenger Pu-illeo,” Gul’boom informs the others.

“Pu-illeo has been an obstacle to our purpose for far too long. We must destroy her and her followers now,” Kiimshi, Farming and Mining Principal, bluntly interjects.

“That may well be too drastic a step to take. If the commons become aware, they may unify with the radicals,” O’czardaa comments uneasily.

“The commons will not become aware. I have dominance over the data connections to all Kr’galmaan through the Stovian scribe and his recording instruments,” Siin-shaka exclaims.

“Can he be trusted?” O’czardaa questioned.

“His life, as well as the life of his family, is in my hands,” Siin-shaka explains. *“When we take action I will inform the commons those actions are to protect the innocent.”*

“As I expected,” O’czardaa agrees. “This intruder, what power does he possess? Do we know where he is from?”

“We do not know his origin, but it is said his powers are numerous and fearsome,” reports Lii-tubul.

“If we act quickly we can stop any opposition. We should gather our forces and strike without trepidation at the heart of these radicals. If that is Pu-illeo and her followers, then so be it. If we do not, there is a possibility of this revolt developing,” Siin-shaka insists.

“Do you think a full revolt is possible?” Asks Lii-tubul.

“An armed revolt is not possible. If you recall, all weapons for any Kr’galmaan other than government officials have been outlawed,” Kiimshi reminds them.

“A progressive measure taken for our protection,” O’czardaa explains with pride. “I was correct in making such a brilliant ruling.”

“An example of your excellent judgment,” Kiimshi gushes.

“Exceptional, your eminence,” Lii-tubul agrees

Gul’boom holds up his hand, indicating he was receiving incoming communication.

“I have just received information that the intruder has attacked the post in the Helowe Sector. The twelve Security Force fighter ships and the command post have been destroyed.”

“I am not convinced this intruder is as irrelevant as Siin-shaka proclaims,” Lii-tubul exclaims.

“What is your explanation Siin-shaka?” Siin-shaka feels the sting of concern from O’czardaa.

“There is no explanation your eminence,” Siin-shaka sends. With your permission, I can eliminate this intruder. Meanwhile, we must use our Security Forces to strike at Pu-illeo and her followers.”

“Yes, they must be eradicated,” Kiimshi immediately interjects.

“Do we know Pu-illeo’s location?” Asks O’czardaa.

“Our last report specifies she has returned to her village to gather support and supplies. Also, there are rumors that the uprising on the other orbs is awaiting further communications from Pu-illeo and her group,” Lii-tubul knowingly sends.

“How many follow her?” O’czardaa asks.

“My information indicates small groups of multiple thousands on all six orbs. At present, they are unorganized,” reports Gul’boom.

“Pu-illeo must not become a symbol for the commons to rally around,” Lii-tubul infers.

“Now is the time to strike, before they gather strength,” Siin-shaka again demands.

“I agree,” Kiimshi immediately states.

“As do I,” Lii-tubul agrees.

Hesitating for the slightest moment, Gul’boom says, “And I.”

O’czardaa is quiet for several moments, then decrees, “Siin-shaka, take what forces you require to permanently remove this intruder. Kiimshi will take

the essential forces and assault Pu-illeo's village. There will be no survivors. Gul'boom will ensure our Security Forces on the outer orbs demolish any commons that may rise up. Let this be the last we hear from these noncompliant dissenters."

Their course agreed upon, the Principals press forward to follow through on their assignments. Siin-shaka slowly walks down the long corridor accompanied by Kiimshi.

"Your actions at the space tower were well executed. Did O'czardaa sanction them?" Siin-shaka asks.

"Yes, of course. He was easily convinced it was the correct action to take to eliminate any challengers. He is naïve and easily led," replies Kiimshi.

"That is the reason we supported his choice, his narcissism makes him ideal for the position. But Pu-illeo escaped unharmed," Siin-shaka complains.

"That is true, although, with the destruction of her stronghold and many of her followers killed, it should disillusion them from any further rebellious actions," Kiimshi exclaims.

"Do you have the necessary forces and material to accomplish your assignment?"

"It began before the meeting. It was clear O'czardaa would follow our recommendations."

"Then continue your mission. I will contact you at a later time. Pu-illeo must not become an apostle for these heretics to rally around. She must be stopped," Siin-shaka conveys.

"It will be done," Kiimshi agrees.

Now back in the darkened room from which he had begun, Siin-shaka visualizes his next move. In the dim light, he dials his bracelet, touches the blue stone of his ring to the green stone of the bracelet, and steps into the command center of his ship as Sanduval Mule.

Chapter 36

Sanduval's command post is located in the center of his ship floating in the vacuum of space one hundred miles above Kr'galmaan. The scalene-ellipsoid-shaped ship was almost impossible to see against the galactic sky. At two hundred feet at center diameter and a full quarter-mile long, it is an impressive spacecraft. Encircling the ship was a blurry gray protective light-defusing membrane made of chromo-eluding sol-gel nanoparticles. Powering the ship was an Alcubierre drive. The drive manipulated dark energy by expanding space-time behind the ship while shrinking space-time in front. This manipulation of space-time required an enormous amount of energy. By using the meta-stable isotope Element 240n in its core reactor, the ship was quite capable of interstellar travel. This power source also supported an arsenal of pulse lasers, proton beams, and antimatter cannons. Even though close maneuvering was somewhat sluggish - because it rotated on its median axis - it was still a formidable opponent when fighting from a distance.

When Sanduval slides his hand into the plasma surface of the oaken desk the control Vi instantly appears. As he glides through the projection, he ponders his modifications. All his analyses show they are working perfectly. However, the randomness of some modular bits was still elusive.

Sanduval's goal has always been to banish the evils of individual thought filled with disillusion and irrational beliefs. To accomplish this objective required absolute control of the messages of history. He fully understands that different times have always required different sociological modules to revise the proper values. The algorithmic equations used in his psychohistory modules identify the exact ideals beings invariably use to judge historic times using present values.

Even so, each of Sanduval's last four algorithmic ciphering had continued to return to the undesirable module of individualism. This module depicts each individual being's existence as a unique story. The same psychohistory module computation that, in Sanduval's assessment, had become archaic as the cumulative number of beings increased.

This disturbed Sanduval. Why would the algorithms consistently show a future return to individualism given the constant increase of the collective and the continued clustering of individuals? Why would the being clusters revert to individualism after their dominant guardian had met all their needs and desires?

Sanduval needed to further analyze the modular data and the resulting consequences before determining his next modification.

Chapter 37

Arriving long after the setting of the orange Kr'galmaan sun, I sat my Craft down several miles from Pu-illeo's village, Kirtahtiin. Just as the U.O.H usually does, Pu-illeo had stamped the coordinates into my memory.

The weather reminded me of one of my time travels on Earth when I endured the hot summer nights in southern Virginia during the Civil War. It was very warm and the humidity was high.

The dim light of Kr'galmaan's dual moons, both in late phases, gave the gray shadowy sky a menacing feel. It was in this eerie darkness that Vienna and I began making our way through the unusual terrain towards the village. With each step, the dismal fog, rolling low across the ground, swirled around our legs. The foliage was not at all like Earth's tall skinny Pines, or broad wide foliage of Maples, nor the fullness of an Evergreen. The Kr'galmaan landscape was an odd forest of bulbous trunked plants about six feet tall and four feet wide. Growing straight up out of the center were several thirty-foot-tall fronds. Randomly strewn dry fallen fronds covered the ground around its base. Just as on Earth, there were insects in the air noisily dancing and flitting around then tailing off in all directions. The occasional dry gust of wind caused a rustling sound as it brushed through the tall fronds.

We were on the outskirts of the village passing through the frond forest when we came upon a pile of Kr'galmaan Security Force corpses. Through the floating haze, we could faintly make out a dozen or more partially covered bodies. They had been stripped of their battle gear and thrown into a hole, one on top of the other like sacks of flour, with a few fronds thrown over them.

Rat-like creatures were nibbling on the remains of their newly discovered bounty. Covering our noses and mouths was useless. The rancid stench was the worst I had ever smelled, causing me to gag. Even that was less disgusting than the insects. Maggot-like worms, some as long as a foot, wiggled their way in and out of bloody wounds and open cavities. When certain insects touched a dead body, they exploded into a cloud of wet bug juice followed by a buzzing green liquid flame. We paused to consider whether we should continue our trek past this foul sight. There was no visible way around it and we had promised to meet Pu-illeo. It was risky, but we decided to proceed with caution.

Clearly, we had to be careful so the pungent bug flames didn't hit our skin or eyes. Moving as quickly as possible we hurried past this squirming, squirting, exploding heap of death on a steady course to the village.

At first, we heard the occasional loud explosions. Then as we got closer, we saw more rockets falling out of the night sky and heard them detonate as they struck their target. We must be getting close, I thought. Obviously, the village was being pounded by high-flying battleships.

We heard the sound of rolling thunder to the east of us. Looking skyward, the dim moonlight was just bright enough for us to see a storm of bluish-purple clouds moving our way. The violent electrical energy of the storm caused intense red lightning to slice through the night sky. As it rolled toward us, the rain began. The heavy thick drops that tumbled down stung with a sharp pain when they struck our bare skin. Vienna and I had to use the hood of our Jyotti suits to protect our heads. Hopefully, the storm would give Pu-illeo's warriors a short respite from the barrage of rockets coming from the battleships. With any luck, they wouldn't be able to identify a viable target through the magnetic energy provoked by the storm.

Through the rainy murkiness, we recognized the marching sounds of beings on the move. Vienna and I hid in the shadows behind one of the chubby plants where we had a good view to observe. Just down the hill from our vantage point, we watched as a line of soldiers stumbled past. They wore the red shoulder patch of Pu-illeo's forces. These battered defenders of Pu-illeo's hometown were snaking their way deeper into the rubble of the town's damaged structures.

We slogged our way through the sticky Kr'galmaan mud down the small hill and into the midst of the village. The pummeling from above had forced most of the inhabitants inside. Carefully making our way through the desolate village, we came upon a couple of heavily armed and battle-suited guards. Luckily, they recognized us as humans and not scouts for O'czardaa's army and escorted us into the caverns below.

In the bowels below the Kr'galmaan village was a large well-lit subterranean area supported by sculptured columns. The cave was filled with advanced communication and processing equipment. It was an extraordinarily contradictory sight. These odd cave creatures living in archaic caverns had developed an impressive and innovative system. Vienna and I stood back out of the way quietly watching and waiting, unsure of how to proceed.

Pu-illeo was surrounded by a small group of what appeared to be advisors and military commanders apparently in silent communication. Surprisingly, TicTic was also there, dressed in full battle garb and fully involved in their strategic planning.

We learned later that Pu-illeo and TicTic had fought side-by-side against O'czardaa's ground forces attacking the village, saving it from complete and total destruction. But not before taking a beating and losing many brave Kr'galmaan and Otos fighters in the process.

After the defeat of the ground forces, the barrage from above began to smash into the small village. The blitz had killed many innocent Kr'galmaan beings and struck fear in the hearts of the survivors. The strikes from above had started as a sporadic bombardment becoming almost continuous, driving them further into their long-vacant underground caverns.

I noticed Pu-illeo shaking her head in an affirmative movement. She looked as if she were about to ask a question when we were suddenly included in the mental communication.

"What is our situation?" Pu-illeo quizzes.

"We have been weakened from the ground attack and now the constant barrage. O'czardaa's military offensive in Miminii, Ubr'lall, Phuntowii, and Solmanwa have fallen to our forces. We have also been successful on the outer orbs. On Aooytiia many Kr'galmaan have died, but it has finally fallen to our militia. O'czardaa's Security Force blockade has been breached on Dr'bal and we are on our way to victory on Isosseliis and Gaan."

I don't know which Kr'galmaan was sending this information, or how we were receiving it, but I did recognize that Pu-illeo was making the translation.

"The cruel regime of O'czardaa is ending," Pu-illeo sends. *"I must meet with the humans for a moment."*

Turning to face us we felt, *"Welcome C.W. and Vienna."*

"It's nice to see you again," I say aloud.

"Yes, it is good that you are safe. Thank you for your help at Helouwe."

"It was more like self-defense. Anyway, I've never been a fan of those who misuse their power."

"If I may, we again require your assistance."

"How can I, ...we help?"

"We are restrained here. With each occasion to move forward and join forces, even under the cover of darkness, we are attacked from above. This storm has been of assistance but there are ground forces still impeding our advancement. We must hold our position."

"Do you know what is firing at you?" Vienna asked.

"We know there are two Security Force battle cruisers twenty miles above. Is there a way you can assist us?"

"I can try," I say aloud. "My Craft is fast and agile, with all the weapons I need. I may be able to damage them or at the very least distract them away from your village for a short time."

"If you can do that it would allow us to join our other forces. We could then move on to the Capital with enough strength to vanquish these merciless tyrants," TicTic exclaims aloud.

"What do you mean move on the Capital?" Vienna asks. "What are you planning?"

"We have no choice, our revolution has begun!" Pu-illeo sends bluntly.

Pu-illeo then turned to face those assembled. It was plain she was in telepathic communication with all her friends, commanders, and soldiers gathered around. Her message was also somehow being sent via the communications network to others on the outer orbs. It was somewhat painful, but she included Vienna and me.

"My brothers and sisters, we discovered how our historic claim to freedom of thought and freedom of individualism has been altered by O'czardaa and his Principals. The effect has reduced our rightful liberties. They used deceit to divide us into quarreling tribes, reducing our individual liberties in the process. They did this by intentionally distorting our history with malevolent lies and claiming themselves as saviors. They have indoctrinated our young into dependence on their vision of society. We, as private citizens of the realm, are being cruelly attacked for challenging the tyrannical regime that has stolen our

freedom and killed and imprisoned the innocent. The time has come to take action to restore our past, restore our liberty, and secure our future. We must defend ourselves from O'czardaa's tyranny.

The restoration of our liberty will come with a severe price. Many of us will not return from battle. Yet, we are not acting alone. Others who value individual liberty support us. They fight alongside us. They provide our militia with a deadly arsenal of weapons that will make us formidable in combat.

Among the many Nirandals and Stovians of note who fight with us are our friends from Otos led by TicTic R'gneraq as well as agents from Earth. With their influence and our own strength, courage, and resolve, we will reclaim our rightful heritage of personal liberty and assure our victory.

We are fully armed and our preparations are complete. Now we must take time to rest, nourish ourselves, and prepare for the battles to come."

Pu-illeo returned to us and sent, "You will need weapons. TicTic will supply you with our best weapons and give you training."

"We..." Vienna began.

"Yes, thank you." I abruptly butted in, "Show us where they are and how they operate."

We followed TicTic over to a long table filled with firearms supplied by Otos. TicTic picked up a small pistol-like instrument and began our instructions.

"This is a laser pistol," he said. "It is effective and accurate within short range, however, it is somewhat slow to recharge. There are five hundred laser blasts in each charged clip, here,"

He then demonstrated how the clip ejected. He unloaded and reloaded the pistol several times then continued, "This is a mechanical rifle that fires a proton-tipped projectile. It is faster and more effective against the Security Force armament than the laser pistol. It is more precise when fired in short bursts of three or four projectiles at a time. Be careful, it can overheat with continuous fire. Each charging clip holds three thousand rounds."

TicTic again demonstrates how to release the projectile clips and reload the weapon. "We have body armor available, but I understand from Dr. Rabbet that with your suits, you will not need body armor."

"Oh really?" Vienna says in surprise.

"Yes, didn't he inform you?" replies TicTic.

"What did the good doctor tell you?" I asked.

"He said your suits are fortified to protect from energy force strikes and its transfective nano-particles disperse laser strikes," TicTic explains.

"Well, that's good to know. Did he say they had been tested?" I cynically mock.

"He did not indicate a test was performed."

"Great," I say aloud, smothering a smirk.

"Here, these are your weapons," TicTic says handing Vienna and I each a pistol, rifle, and ammo bag. "You should fire a few rounds to practice. You can do that in the firing range, that way," pointing to a room down the hall with a sign with a picture of a rifle on it.

Vienna and I gathered up our new weapons and started walking. When we were alone she asked, "Why did you break in back there?"

"The less we tell others of our powers the more effective we will be," I explain.

"But, I always tell the truth," Vienna proclaims.

"If asked, telling the truth is always the best. Volunteering unrequested information is not the same thing. It is not a lie."

Vienna looks at me and smiles, "You know, I learn more about you every day, and I like what I learn. You are right, some things should not be volunteered."

I put my arm around her shoulders as we walked, holding her close.

At the firing range, we each fired about a hundred rounds from each weapon, then practiced unloading and reloading them several times.

Out of nowhere, Vienna says, "I'm getting hungry."

"Yeah, me too, let's go get some of that wonderful homemade Kr'galmaan salad," I quipped.

We made our way back to the large cavern and looked around for some food. Pu-illeo and the other Kr'galmaan had retired to their nourishing chambers, immersing themselves in their soaking pods. We found TicTic just as he was also heading for the food and he showed us the way.

Vienna, TicTic, and I were given our typical meal of mixed foliage, along with numerous Puffaloo leaves. The Puffaloo leaves were also used to brew a bittersweet fluid for drinking. We ate our fill, which wasn't much. Kr'galmaan salads were not that tasty but they did fill you enough to lessen your hunger. With our hunger temporarily satisfied, we relaxed and drank numerous rounds of Puffaloo juice.

Without warning TicTic stood, faced his troops from Otos, held his three-fingered hand high in the air holding a goblet of Puffaloo juice, and made a toast, "In our fight for freedom, we are free. It is our time to strike. Strike like the whirlwinds that shake the Puffaloo plants and dislodge its fruitful leaves."

The other Otos fighters roared in agreement as they ate and drank.

"I think this Puffaloo juice is an intoxicant for the likes of TicTic," I whispered to Vienna.

"This may be his last taste of the succulent Puffaloo, so his toast was a good one," Vienna remarked sadly.

I could see wetness seeping into her eyes. She suddenly looked down, then back up at me, and smiled that crooked smile of hers.

"It may be our last too," Vienna said in a distressed tone.

"Not if I have anything to say about it," I replied.

Chapter 38

It was daybreak and the protective storm had pushed its way further west. Just as the rumblings of the storm ended, the siege on the village got underway. Even far below ground, it was obvious when the bombardment was about to start. We first heard the muted sounds of a battle cruiser approaching, soaring high above the village. We felt the first blast hit above us, and three hundred yards to our left. We could hear the proton rockets as they came whizzing and screaming down from space. Not in single strikes as before, but one after another. It was a throbbing attack, continuous and deafening, causing the ground under our feet to tremble and move as if giant earthworms were wriggling under the ground.

Inside the cavern headquarters, there were clouds of greenish-brown dust floating in the air, stirred up from the bombardment. I didn't like being buried before my time or being immobile, unable to strike back at our attackers. I strolled over to Pu-illeo, TicTic and the others congregated around their planning table.

"We will be leaving," I announced,

"It is not safe for you. The bombings will continue for some time before it will be safe to leave," Pu-illeo explains, somewhat surprised by my announcement.

"We can't help if we stay here. I must get to my Craft if going to distract the ships above."

"In twenty-four seconds there will be a pause while they rotate. It will not last long," one of the Kr'galmaan informs me.

"Then that's when we leave," I reply.

"Please be safe my friend," Pu-illeo warns.

I put my hand in my pocket, touched the iJotter, and mentally gave the command to my Craft to track my location and then meet us at the exact moment we reached the cave entrance.

Quickly returning to inform Vienna I found her flinching with each strike of the attack.

"My Craft will be at that exit by the time we get there," I say, putting my arm around her, indicating with a look toward the cave where we had entered.

"Grab your weapons and be ready."

"I'm ready now," Vienna said looking at me wide-eyed.

"Then let's go."

Turning to our left we quickly crossed the room and started climbing the steps leading into the long cave toward the outside. The dust inside the cave made it hard to see. Ducking and dodging the falling rocks loosened after each blast, we made our way towards the surface.

“We should make it to the exit just before they pause for rotation of their next barrage,” I tell Vienna.

We continued moving upward, rapidly approaching the cave entrance. Just as we arrived, there was a brief pause from the constant roar of the bombs. Seconds later we reach the access just as the Craft arrives, hovering just off the surface. As we got closer, the entrance to the Craft quickly burst open and we hurriedly entered. Swiftly moving to my chair I immediately gave my Craft a command.

It instantly shot straight up, stopping fifty miles above the planet. I opened a transparent portal on the front one-third of the Craft to allow Vienna to observe. Lumbering slowly across the valley below were two blimp-shaped battleships floating ten miles above the village. I boldly dove to two hundred feet from the starboard surface of the front ship and concentrated on the bracelet and ring on my left hand.

Streaking out of the Craft bursts a bright beam of bluish-white energy. The beam bored its way into the exterior of the ship all the way through the other side. The ship lurches slightly towards me so I retreat, immediately hovering six miles above the enemy battle cruiser. We watch as the fatal blow causes it to fracture in the middle triggering an eruption of smoke and flame. More explosions from its interior followed and it suddenly broke into millions of pieces. Balls of fire began falling to the ground below while flaming pieces of debris rocketed further into space. Dodging the passing debris, the Craft’s senses tell me the other ship had begun to increase its speed while continuing to fire its proton rockets on the village.

“That was a perfect shot. You’re getting pretty good with your new power. How did you know where to hit it?” Vienna asks.

“The senses from my Craft can perceive their power source. I targeted it with that blast of energy.”

Suddenly I sense an incoming attack from the other battle cruiser below me. Reacting quickly, I whirled the Craft to the left and dove to the southwest as the blasts narrowly miss their mark. Turning quickly I maneuver my Craft lower, within one mile of the surface and out of range of the cruiser’s probes then zoom further southeast until again turning north.

Now two hundred miles from the cruiser’s persistent attack on the village, I return to the fight coming in low from the northeast. Holding that position for the slightest moment, I observe the battle cruiser’s movements. It was increasingly picking up speed and moving toward me while continuing to deliver its wrath on Pu-illeo’s village.

Gradually I make my way toward the cruiser looking for an opening to attack, hoping to distract or damage it with another shot. Without warning, my Craft is struck. The force of the strike causes me to lose control and the Craft plunges toward the surface. Just as I regain control I get an alert from the Craft that another strike was incoming. This time I was able to dodge the blast and immediately command my Craft into stealth mode. The battlecruiser suddenly slows. The Craft’s sensors indicate it was sending out probes, trying to locate the source of the attacks.

Immediately I start moving closer just as my Craft tells me twenty-five fighter ships were rocketing out of an open bay in the cruiser. The fighters grouped together into what looked like an attack formation. Again, I sense their probes striking my Craft but my invisibility was confusing them. That was just enough uncertainty for me to launch an assault.

Concentrating on the bracelet and ring again I direct the Craft to target each fighter. As fast as my eyes can move from one fighter to the next, my Craft fires a one-foot long bolt of energy through their shields, striking their main drive. One-by-one the fighters explode in a fiery blaze, destroying them all within seconds.

I again sense the battle cruiser probes as it began to rapidly move toward me. Moving as fast as possible, I speed directly at it, stopping one hundred feet from its upper surface. As before, I bore a hole directly into the cruiser's power drive, this time with an energy field three feet in diameter. Breaking off my attack, I quickly accelerate away as the battlecruiser bursts into a million blazing pieces. Most of the pieces were thrown further into space, away from the planet.

As we watched, the Craft's sensors identified another ship's energy source. The ship was in some sort of concealment mode holding a stationary position one hundred miles from the surface. Turning the Craft in the direction of the ship and with intense focus, I was able to visually make out an elliptical shape. Oddly, it emitted no probes and took no threatening actions. Since this strange ship was not hostile, I assumed it was an unknown ally.

Anyway, this wasn't the time to go off investigating. I must fulfill my pledge and join Pu-illeo and TicTic. I then directed my Craft toward the Capital City of Gal-yaan.

Chapter 39

Vienna and I had flown to the outskirts of Gal-yaan. When we arrived, I stopped the Craft for a moment to get my bearings. At the same time, I gave the thought command for the Craft to change into stealth mode.

“We should be getting close to the rendezvous point,” I say to Vienna.

“I can see flashes of explosions over that way,” Vienna says, pointing to the left of our location.

“Well, according to Pu-illeo’s directions, that is where we’re headed.”

“Oh, good,” Vienna snidely replies.

Piloting the Craft lower, I cautiously follow along a thoroughfare as we move into the heart of Gal-yaan. We floated slowly above the wide avenue until we reach the middle of the city, a valley surrounded by tall round buildings. The strange structures are of various heights and looked to be made of solid rock thrust out of the ground. There were windows in the structures that looked like gleaming crystal inlays spaced at unusual intervals. Like polished diamonds, the various facets of the windows gave off vibrant sparkles when hit by the light.

Soaring at one hundred feet above the surface of the road, below us we could see crowds of non-fighting Kr’galmaan hurriedly leaving the city. They clutched what few possessions they could carry as they ran from the cleansing taking place around them.

As we got closer to the combat, we watched a group of lightly armed Kr’galmaan militia overpower a Security Force bunker. Several of the Security Force members tried to find shelter under a large pile of debris and bodies. Others started running from the rage about to descend on them. From our vantage point, it was obvious there was hysterical shrieking from those suffering beings as they were unmercifully slain.

“It would seem that the Kr’galmaan populace has chosen sides and risen up to fight for their personal liberty,” Vienna states bluntly.

“I think we’ll park over there,” I say, using the slight breeze to glide toward a natural area of tall fronds. This secluded location hidden away from the fighting was an ideal place for the Craft to stay hidden.

After leaving the Craft, I placed my hand on the iJotter and concentrate, and watched as my Craft changed to mirror the surroundings, blending in with the background of the native forest.

We cautiously made our way through the crumbling structures watchful for Security Force fighters until finally reaching the meeting place. Staying out of sight, it wasn’t long before we saw a group of well-armed fighters patrolling the streets. We waited in hiding and watched to make sure they weren’t from O’czardaa’s Security Force. As they got closer, we could barely make out the crimson patch on the left shoulder of their armor designating them to be Pu-illeo fighters. After they passed our location, we silently followed.

We had gone about a block when four guards at the rear of the patrol suddenly stopped, turned and looked in our direction, then began walking towards us.

Almost immediately we feel, *“Welcome C.W. and Vienna. I will inform the sentries you are welcome. They will escort you to the preparation site.”*

After our meeting, they wasted no time getting out of the area. They took us over a short causeway, down a mangled alleyway filled with debris, until finally reaching a collapsed building. Well inside the heavily damaged structure, we again made our way down into an ancient cavern.

Inside the dimly lit cavern, the air was stifflingly warm and carried an odd scent. The floors inside were made of black rock. There were ornate tapestries evenly hanging on the walls with Vi monitors taking up the space between them.

In a corner of the cavern was one Kr’galmaan of Nirandel lineage, whom we later learned was a retired Military Commander named Ga’flawy, giving his report. Pu-illeo was kind enough to mentally transmit his report to us.

Even though no words were spoken, he was extremely animated while giving his report. Obviously, he was very passionate in his devotion to the intricacies of battle. His descriptions focused on the successful events surrounding how his rebel forces had engaged and ultimately occupied most of Gal-yaan.

He described how the first wave of Pu-illeo’s militia, about a mile outside of town, had overpowered and slaughtered the demoralized O’czardaa Security Forces guarding the southwest outskirts. Even after Security Force reinforcements arrived, which made them three or four times the number of Pu-illeo’s militia, Pu-illeo infantry took the offensive and penetrated their lines. The Security Force was driven back and ultimately crushed. Ga’flawy’s forces captured the garrisons as well as the few Security Force members still alive.

His next account was of the occupation of the city and the weeding out of O’czardaa’s remaining army. During the building-by-building combat that ensued, some of Pu-illeo’s warriors found and captured the wounded O’czardaa. He was found trying to conceal himself in an underground bunker room just off the grounds of the capitol buildings. When confronted by the citizen militia his guards, feeling a kinsman-ship with those fighting for freedom, hesitated to fire upon their own kind. They were easily overwhelmed and taken captive. Several lieutenants of Pu-illeo’s warriors had detained and transported O’czardaa to an off-world holding prison, where he would receive medical care. His next stop was to stand trial for his tyrannical ways.

Pu-illeo was a courageous being with a powerful inner moral strength. Her fortitude and self-reliance in a time of difficulty had led her to do what few beings would have ventured. She stood up for the welfare and freedom of her fellow Kr’galmaan. Her strength held back the waves of collectivism like a line of cliffs against the violent tides. She had a rock-hard dedication to the freedom that accompanies individualism and had successfully marshaled the passions of liberty in Kr’galmaan society.

Ga’flawy, gazing steadfastly at the Vi monitor moved his hands and magnified the image until it filled the entire screen. Pointing to various locations

on the map, he explained his plan for the next assault. It was to be made up of small groups searching the Capital Building to find any remainder of O'czardaa's Principals.

"We would be pleased if you would join us," Pu-illeo comments to us.

I looked at Vienna and she nods her approval then says, "We are ready to do what is necessary my friend."

Chapter 40

Twilight on Kr'galmaan had just begun as we advanced on the bridge crossing the green fluid-filled mote that flowed around the Capital Building complex. Crushing the remainder of the enemy was the only result that would guarantee victory. We continued our merciless pursuit searching for any missing members of O'czardaa's Council of Principals.

When we dashed across the bridge, our group smashed through an enemy barrage and overpowered their lines. Most of the Capital Guards we came upon died in their hurried retreat. They were too weak in numbers to hold their ground or regroup for a renewed assault, so they died the death of pawns in a war of the powerful.

After crossing the bridge, we turned left down the long pathway leading to the pentagonal-shaped building that was the Supreme Office building housing the offices of O'czardaa's Principals. The monolithic building appeared to have been carved from a single large stone that jutted straight out from the ground. Towering some twenty stories high, its five sides are adorned with engraved graphical figures of Kr'galmaan's historic past.

Penetrating the interior of the building Pu-illeo, TicTic, Vienna, and I, along with three additional Otos fighters, callously fought our way through the faithful armed guards protecting the chambers of the Principals, bringing them a cruel hard death. As we continued cautiously walking down one of the long corridors connecting the advisors' offices to the Principals Hall, I suddenly felt a different kind of throbbing buzz of brain pain.

"Do you feel that?" I quietly asked Vienna. She gave me a quick nod of agreement.

Pu-illeo stood a few feet away and responded, "*That is Siin-shaka, one of O'czardaa's Principals.*"

Attempting to avoid capture by escaping the building, Siin-shaka and Kiimshi were quickly but discreetly making their way to a concealed exit a short distance from the Principals Hall. Suddenly sensing other beings, Siin-shaka came to a complete stop. Kiimshi then heard the noise of footsteps moving toward them. Waiting for the threat to pass they stood unmoving and vigilant.

Continuing our thorough search of the area, we turned a corner and there stood Siin-shaka and Kiimshi; seemingly unsurprised at our presence.

"*So we met, face to face,*" Siin-shaka sends with a spiteful pitch.

"*It was a certainty,*" responds Pu-illeo.

"*This will be your end,*" Siin-shaka sends.

"Do not move," Vienna demands loudly.

"*Why would you try to enslave your own?*" questions Pu-illeo.

"*The Kr'galmaan need structure in their lives. It is best for them to have a humble leader; one that makes their lives easier,*" Siin-shaka exclaims.

“The loss of individual liberty does not make life easier. It decays everyone in our society,” Pu-illeo explains.

“You are wrong,” Siin-shaka proclaims. *“The Kr’galmaan long for an easy life. They crave less responsibility. Society can no longer trust the freethinking of the individual. Society must instead trust its leaders to regulate their behavior for the good of all commoners. To this end, they deserve a strong benevolent master,”* Siin-shaka boasts.

“O’czardaa promised to be a good master, but he still meant to be our master. Masters cannot legislate the truth of liberty out of existence. You helped O’czardaa enslave your own kind,” Pu-illeo sends with a twinge of pain that caused Kiimshi’s face to flinch.

Abruptly Kiimshi made a faint move with his left hand. Without warning, a bright flash of light occurred from just right of me. I reflexively ducked then quickly turned to look toward Vienna. She stood straight and tall, her eyes glued on Siin-shaka like a cat-watching movement, her right arm out straight. There was a blue-white energy force encircling her right hand.

Kiimshi stood motionless with a blank stare on his face. Burned through the center of his chest was a glowing crimson hole the size of Vienna’s fist. As his knees buckled, his body glowed yellow and disintegrated. Every atom of his body collected on the floor in a blazing mound of mustard-colored dust.

“The Kr’galmaan are not my kind,” Siin-shaka sends. Gradually he lifts the veil of his shape-shifting and transforms from the Kr’galmaan Nirandal into Sanduval Mule.

“Sanduval Mule!” TicTic exclaims loudly, surprised by the transformation.

“We’ve been looking for you,” I say bluntly, raising my left arm and taking aim. *“You are a disgusting being and I will eliminate you.”*

“That is not possible, you do not have the power.”

“You are a malicious corrupter of the independence of all beings and...”

Instantly I feel a piercing pain in my brain as if a hot poker had been jabbed deep into my consciousness. Doubling over in pain I grunt, *“I can’t allow you to disrupt the future of Kr’galmaan.”*

“It matters not what you believe. In a mere two hundred and thirty-eight Kr’galmaan cycles, this society will again be at this point. For I control the past, and thus the future.”

“I have stopped you before,” I say, grimacing as I try to fight back the pain.

“Do you honestly believe that?” Sanduval sniggered.

“We stopped you from changing the future of Earth and we will stop you here.”

“Change Earth’s future? Your weak attempts have changed nothing. Earth is the seed of life and thus the creation of history and the prophesy of the future. I am the sole possessor of this truth.”

“I don’t think so, I have read the history of Kr’galmaan. Their evolution was normal, seeded by the cosmos.”

"Like most beings, you learn nothing from history. A wise being would believe nothing they read and little of what they see. I possess the truth and the future."

Still smiling, Sanduval Mule stands perfectly still, glaring at Vienna so hard you could see a slight glow in his penetrating green eyes. Unexpectedly I felt the ricochet from a mental strike directed at her.

"Your mental hijinks don't bother me. You will die and we will live. That is the truth of your future." Vienna says quietly.

"I will no longer waste my time with you." Sanduval Mule sends. He touches his bracelet just as Vienna and I open fire. Vienna sends a one-inch thread of energy flowing from her hand at Sanduval's head. I send a three-foot-wide paper-thin blaze of energy breast-high.

Sanduval Mule grinned to himself then instantly disappears, just as the energy forces strike. Both blasts pass through the nothingness of his location and hit the wall, making it glow a ruby red.

"Damn!" Vienna says with a sneer, "I hope we never see *him* again."

"I hope your hope comes true," I quip. "You know, I never did like that guy. He was really an ugly one."

"Yeah and spooky too," Vienna says with a knowing smile.

"He may be defeated today, but he was not destroyed," TicTic says. He turned to Vienna with a questioning twist of his head and asks, "Who taught you that?"

Vienna grins looks toward CW and says with a nod, "he did."

We search the remainder of the Capital building for the next few hours and found none of the remaining Principals. They were either dead or had escaped. Gal-yaan was now firmly in the hands of Pu-illeo and her forces.

Chapter 41

When Sanduval Mule materialized into the reality of his spaceship, he quickly became infuriated. What he found was a severely damaged ship and a crew in chaos. It immediately became obvious that without his direct leadership, the crew was incapable of making decisions. Rather than reposition the ship they had maintained the same orbiting attitude.

Without a course position adjustment, his ship was in the direct trajectory of a massive amount of debris from the destruction of the Kr'galmaan battle cruisers orbiting the planet. Multiple collisions with the debris resulted in the total loss of all protective shield systems. With the shields down, several levels of the ship, including the entire main drive level, had been demolished. The aftermath of which was a total loss of power to all defensive and offensive weapons systems including the ship's life support systems. The only remaining operative energy source was the emergency electrical system in his cabin.

Limping along on auxiliary power was limiting the ship's maneuvering capability. There wasn't enough power capacity to drive the ship into a different trajectory.

Floating helplessly through the weightless vacuum of space, his ship continued to slide on an uncontrollable course and further collisions were imminent.

Moving quickly Sanduval made his way to his cabin where he secured various devices to the bulkhead, then himself to his leather chair. When he glided his right hand into the surface of his desk, the Vi hologram became visible.

Sanduval touches a switch on the Vi screen that forced the separation and ejection of his cabin from the main body of the ship.

Hurriedly he touched another switch. After a minuscule pause, the secondary Alcubierre drive came online. The drive immediately flared into maximum power mode and his cabin quickly sped away into deep space just before the expected collisions.

The damaged ship continued its unstoppable drift through space until finally slamming into several large sections of wreckage. At that precise moment, Sanduval Mule's ship erupted into an inferno of blazing brilliance and was irrevocably destroyed.

The rebellion led by Pu-illeo and her militia had finally ended, and order was again being established. There were many Stovian and Nirandal Kr'galmaan heavily involved in the establishment of a new governing body. A limited authority based on the sovereignty of the individual and a society built on uniform liberties.

Now that the primitive and barbaric ideals of collectivism had been demolished, the self-confidence of Kr'galmaan society was higher than ever. As they sowed the seeds of independence, their society was repairing the material damage, salvaging what they could, and beginning the process of rebuilding. A revolution in self-reliance, liberty of thought, and action had become the foundation of innovation and success for many Kr'galmaan. Economies within the realm were on the rise. Intergalactic trade with Earth and Otos was projected to increase. Those who worked succeeded; those that were unable to work were helped by the voluntary actions of others.

Many more cycles of Kr'galmaan hospitality have passed. Vienna and I had made countless friends both Kr'galmaan and Otos. We also answered hundreds of hard questions to answer about Earth, its history, and what it was like being a human.

After much discussion, Vienna and I had finally decided our mission here was successful and it was time to return to Earth. Together, we visited Pu-illeo's new home in the Kr'galmaan capital of Gal-yaan.

After the typical pleasantries, it was time to tell Pu-illeo of our decision.

"Our time here is finished and we must say goodbye. But first, I want to return this to you," handing Pu-illeo the Coyote. "It was very helpful. I've loaded a small file on it that may be useful in the coming cycles. It contains the early history of one of my favorite places, the United States of America.

"I am aware of your America and the number of what you on Earth call countries," Pu-illeo explains.

"I thought you were. However, what you may not be aware of is how the governing body of America was established.

"That is true," Pu-illeo confesses.

"The file I loaded on the Coyote contains documents that explain the American people's drive for liberty and freedom. They explain how at the conclusion of the War for Independence our Founders determined the new nation needed a more suitable alliance among the various sovereign states. After much deliberation, they proposed the U.S. Constitution. It was, and is, the guiding principle of the nation. All of those documents are in the file. However, the most important documents are the Federalist Papers, which chronicle the deliberation process of the Founders. All are contained on the Coyote for your pleasure."

“Thank you, my friend. I will study them with interest. May I ask you both a personal question?”

“An answer would depend on how personnel the question is,” I respond.

“Only if we can ask you one in return,” Vienna says.

“That is fair,” Pu-illeo agrees. “C.W., we risked our lives fighting side-by-side in many battles. Why did you decide to risk your life fighting for us? Why did you kill our enemies with such passion?”

I considered my answer for a long moment as I thought about my many travels to so many times and so many places.

“First, that’s two questions,” I say with a smile, “Both have complex answers. I guess the reason I fought for you is that you and the Kr’galmaan beings have become my friends. As my friend, I found your situation unacceptable. I believe all beings must be free. My experiences have revealed that diplomacy is for the weak and those who mistakenly deceive themselves into believing that evil has a good heart. As for my passion for fighting, it is my belief that if you decide to fight a war, then war must be an empathetic slaughter of the enemy. You must make sure the enemy is completely destroyed and their ideas incapable of being reborn. You must fight to win or you do not fight.”

“I see. Thank you for your honesty and frankness my friend, Vienna, why have you offered your life for others?”

Vienna keeps her eyes on Pu-illeo as she ponders her answer then says, “Each individual being is a point of view in the mind of God through which he sees. Without the liberty of individual thought, God is blind to his creations. I offered my life so that God can continue to see. Now, if I may ask you, why did you rebel with such determination?”

“The revolution was inevitable. The deposed Kr’galmaan leaders believed they could control reality by denying the existence of the liberty of the individual. That could not continue. When you fight for your own liberty, it justifiably must be fought with ferociousness,” Pu-illeo reveals without pause or hesitation.

“I agree,” I say aloud.

“Pu-illeo my friend, I want to thank you for your help and training with my cerebral exercises. Without them, it’s very possible there would have been a different outcome,” Vienna adds.

“The voyage may have been dissimilar but the outcome would be identical,” Pu-illeo sends.

“What ‘exercises’ are you talking about?” I ask, looking at Vienna questioningly.

“Pu-illeo and I have been practicing cerebral communication abilities ever since we arrived on Kr’galmaan. I’m not very good yet, but I have learned to block others,” Vienna says with pride.

“So, when were you going to let me in on your little secret?” I asked with a smile.

“I’ve learned from a very wise person that information unrequested should not be volunteered,” Vienna says with a wink and that crooked smile.

“I wish to provide you a departing festivity, beginning tonight. Many would offer their friendship and appreciation. I know TicTic to be one.”

“That is not necessary. We...”

“Yes, it will be fun,” Vienna interrupts.

“Okay,” I concede after a quick look at Vienna, “it will be nice to see TicTic and everyone one more time before we leave.”

“There is one issue I would like you to consider.”

“Who, me?” I asked.

“Yes. C.W., I wish you to consider becoming a member of the U.O.H. Board. Now that I am no longer a member, your experience would be beneficial. They will need your logical reasoning and historical insights.”

“While I respect their devotion to individualism, I dislike the manner in which they influence history and the future.”

“That is why you are needed.”

I hesitated for a full minute before answering, “I’ll think about it.”

“That is all I ask,” Pu-illeo proclaims.

“Then we’ll see you at the festivities.”

Returning to Vienna I say, “Let’s get out of here. We have to prepare for our trip back to Earth.”

Chapter 43

Pu-illeo knows how to have a *festivity*. There were plenty of jovial Kr'galmaan friends, Puffaloo leaf salads, and kegs and kegs of Puffaloo juice. The festivity lasted longer than we expected, two full cycles. Afterward, we finished saying our goodbyes, stocked up on more Kr'galmaan salad for nourishment and headed on our way. For the last two and a half days, Vienna and I have been relaxed in my Craft enjoying the solitude and each other on our return to Earth in Standard Time 2452.

We arrived on the daylight side of Earth with our star behind us. I had the front of the Craft transparent for viewing, and it was a beautiful sight. The circling white and gray clouds occasionally interrupted the vibrant deep blueness of the oceans. There was a brilliant glow coming from the blue-white snow-covered glaciers covering the northern and southern poles. Planet Earth was a stunning contradiction to the deep blackness of space. Stopping the craft at one hundred thousand miles, we floated quietly in the weightless vacuum of space and just admired its beauty.

"It's good to be back to Earth," Vienna exclaims.

"I agree."

"Earth certainly is a beautiful planet."

"Hey, if we are going to take some time off shouldn't we have a destination?" I asked.

"Do you mean a new time venture or a vacation, of sorts?"

"A vacation in a different time is a good idea. When would you like to go?"

"There are so many choices, so many Earth times I have never experienced."

"I have an idea," I said. "If it's okay with you, I have visited a place several times before that you might like. It's quiet and has a scenic view. Does that sound appealing?"

"After our recent venture, it would be nice to have some quiet time as long as it's on Earth"

"It is."

"Well then, it's okay with me." Vienna agrees.

"In that case," I say, as I dial my bracelet and then touch the green stone. Still hovering one hundred thousand miles above Earth's equator, we were now in Earth Standard Year 3022.

Earth looked even colder in this time-space. Its northern glaciers now extended further south to the top of the US continent. To the south, there were glaciers covering the southern tip of the South American continent.

I dove straight toward the surface. A moment later, we hovered at 500 feet. The Atlantic Ocean is dark blue with huge rolling waves sixty feet high,

occasionally topped with white foam from the blowing winds. Flying north over the natural rage of the ocean, I gradually increase my altitude until I'm at eight thousand feet, then level off and stop.

"That's really beautiful. That glacier must be a mile high." Vienna says in an amazed tone.

"1.348 miles to be exact." I gradually turn the Craft to the west and follow the glacier's edge. After tracking the glacier for several moments, we then turn south. A few minutes later I slow my Craft.

"There's the lake," I say pointing.

"That's a beautiful sight, it looks like a great location, but I don't see any places to stay."

"There on that island on the southern tip."

"I see it now," Vienna says, as we got closer. "It's a log cabin. A very large log cabin."

"This is Yellowstone Lake and that is Molly Island. The glaciers are 463.1 miles to the north of us, 43 miles south of the Canadian border into Montana."

Diving for the island, I level off then slowly glide over a heavily wood area and hover just above a circular stone-landing site some ninety feet north of the cabin. There is a long rock walkway heading from the landing site to the entrance of the cabin. I then slowly land my Craft.

"We're here," I say, standing and walking toward the exit. As we get closer the exit snapped open and we stepped out onto solid rock. The weather is cool with a crisp wind blowing from the west. Unhurried, we walk toward the staircase cut from the rock, then down to the lower level and the entrance to the cabin.

The cabin is two stories high and made of Red Cedar logs three feet in diameter. The logs were stacked eight high. The cabin had a tall peaked roof covered with Cypress shingles. Two massive solid Cypress doors made up the entrance.

I swung one door open and we entered the living quarters. Inside the cabin has a huge open living space. One-foot-wide planked hardwood floors covered the area. There were four large area rugs breaking the room into sections. The rugs were topped with couches and chairs positioned in casual order.

Straight ahead to the south was a soaring stone fireplace flowing from the hardwood floor, up the center of the wall all the way to the ceiling. On each side of the fireplace were tall ceiling-to-floor windows that offered a spectacular view of the lake. Across the lake, we could see rolling hills stretching all the way to the distant snow-covered peaks of the Teton Mountains. It was still chilly inside so I went to the fireplace, turned a knob protruding from the rock wall, and the fireplace flared up. Moments later the warmth from the crackling logs began to fill the room.

Directly across from the towering windows was the kitchen area. That's where we found some real Earth food. We rummaged through a pantry area and found a block of cheese, some roasted peanuts and chestnuts, and a burlap bag filled with potatoes. Stored in a large refrigerator where slabs of beef and filets

of fish. Using a natural gas-fueled range, I put some of the potatoes on to boil with garlic and other spices thrown in, then started cooking some white fish.

Vienna found the dishes and began setting the table. She placed plates and eating utensils and then lit several candles. After poking around, she located the wine locker under one of the cabinets and poured two glasses of red wine.

It wasn't long before the meal was ready so I placed the cooked fish and potatoes on the table. After filling our plates, I was ready to dig into this long-awaited meal.

“Wait,” Vienna demands, “we must give thanks for what we have.”

Not being a religious person the thought of giving thanks to an ambiguous deity normally never crosses my mind. But if Vienna felt the need, I had no problem following her lead.

She clasped her hands together, lowered her head, and said, “Thank you God for our lives, the lives of our friends, this fine meal, and for allowing us to be together to enjoy it. Amen.”

“I agree,” I said quietly.

We dined slowly and in silence, savoring each bite with muted sounds of pleasure. The taste of our meal was a pleasant surprise to our taste buds after growing accustomed to months of alien salads.

After our meal, we leisurely stood and began to stretch. We laughed together as we realized the difference in gravity and oxygen levels was making our bodies expand as we again grew accustomed to Earth. Afterward, we stood quietly for a moment in the center of the large room sipping the wine while admiring the dancing flame of the fire.

“What is the date today?” Vienna asks.

“Today is June 22, 3022. It's the longest day of the year and the last day of this cold cycle on Earth. Tomorrow the glaciers will no longer grow and will begin their gradual retreat.”

“Is the water level in the lake going to rise?” Vienna asked with a smile, pretending to be concerned.

“According to my calculations, the lake will rise six feet within the next seven hundred years.”

“That means we still have some time,” She says with a smile.

“All the time we need,” I agreed.

The shimmer of the setting sun through the windows glistened off Vienna's beauty and I felt the rise of intense desire. She turned her head and looked at me and I could see the aroused anticipation in her alluring green eyes. Lovingly I ran my hand along her cheek. When I cup her face in my hand, she tilted her head into my hand and dreamily smiled. Bringing her close, I held her face in my hands and kissed her – her lips, eyes, cheeks, forehead, and lips again. We both nervously chuckled then our lips eagerly touched in a passionate yet sensitive kiss.

In the warmth of the flaming fireplace, our kisses became more urgent. Gripped with the physical excitement growing within each of us we move in harmony disrobing each other as if annoyed by having to wear clothes. Bare-

skinned we step close, bodies touching, hands roaming, enjoying the tender erotic touch of each other, soothing and stimulating our senses.

I put my hand on her naked thigh slowly moving it up her side while affectionately nuzzling and kissing her neck with a slight nibble. She moans in emotional ecstasy.

Vienna looks up at me and quietly whispers, "Is this the end of our story?"

Without answering, I tenderly trace her lips with my tongue then gently kiss her waiting mouth and she lovingly kisses me back.

Vienna's senses blossom into a tidal wave of intimate bonding. His lips are soft, she thinks, as she moans and clutches CW tighter. Her breath is stuck in her throat; she feels nothing outside of her throbbing heartbeat and growing passion.

Vienna broke our kiss to reposition herself, moving her head back; she had a distressed expression on her face. At first, she bit her lower lip, and then she smiled.

I had seen her crooked smiles many times and thought I knew the meaning of them all, but this one was deeper, more mysterious than I'd seen before. Obviously, she was concerned about my internal conflict with her question. Finally, her eyes met mine and we knew what was to come.

Still holding each other close, we touch each other's green stone to the blue stone of the other's ring. Instantly we are sheathed in blue nothingness.

Vienna leaned her head back and tousled her hair, then wrapped her arms around me and pushed her body close. Floating without gravity our arms and legs entangled, we pressed tighter and rotated around an invisible center mass within the blue nothingness. When she wrapped her legs around my hips, I could feel her tremble with passion.

Intoxicated with desire our lips met again and we kissed with tender passion. I thread my arms around her and pull her tight. Our aroused warmth flooded into and around each other as we floated in the timeless continuity of the bluish aether. Together we became a singular dynamic vessel with the warmth of emotion and love flowing in and out, transcending time and space.

Looking into Vienna's loving green eyes, I finally answered her question.

"Only time will tell."



A strange twist of fate provides C. W. Comstock powers he never could have imagined and responsibilities he never wanted. But the pompous overseers of time and history could care less. They will use him as their problem solving pawn even if he doesn't like it.

After he meets the lovely Vienna Pitts, her life becomes more important to him than his own. The overseers will use his feelings for her as another bargaining chip to control him.

The overseers gave him the device to travel through time, he acquired the machine to travel through space. But they don't control him, they only think they do.

Traveling through time and space can be very complicated. Making trustworthy friends on unfamiliar worlds can be dubious. Figuring out who the shape-shifting villain is will be mysterious. Discovering what he has planned will be perplexing. Battling bizarre looking aliens with powerful weapons is always deadly.

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