

# CHILDREN OF THE WHITE SUN



A NEAR  
FUTURE  
MYSTERY

ALAN ROBBINS

**Children of the  
White Sun**

Alan Robbins

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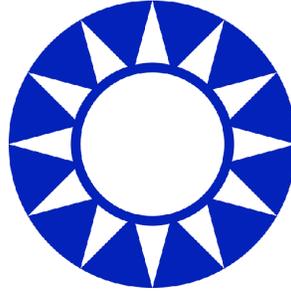
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## CHAPTER ONE



### **Huck Fun**

“I want your spit!”

Adam read that quote and felt his mouth get all goopy. The word conjured the fact, just as the focus group said it would. But whether that automatic response translated into action was another matter.

It did not for Adam who, too cynical to believe that the spit of the country would somehow save it, had not contributed his own. The ad was using that classic recruitment poster showing Uncle Sam in top hat and beard, pointing right at you. Simple, patriotic, convincing. But this was a video ad and the actor in it was now explaining how to order your own spit kit, how easy it was to drool into the tube and mail it back to GenUsa. Then the usual pitch about how all that would bring about a brave new world free of disease.

It was the latest campaign by the company to collect DNA samples from the whole population. Huck Fun, Drool Is Cool, Dribble is Destiny...they had tried them all but appealing to patriotism worked best. Fun was fun and being cool was hot. But wave the flag and every idiot got in line, Adam thought. It was working too; according to the media 70% of the adult population had already participated. Universal salivation was at hand.

Adam swallowed and assumed that was the end of it but, sadly, the chubby woman with a perky manner and orange hair standing next to him was a believer.

“Have you spit yet?” she asked him.

“I have a cold,” Adam rasped, hoping it would both answer and repel her.

“No, no. They can filter for that. We need everyone to participate, you know,” she said tapping a button on her lapel that read: Spit for Life. One of the earlier campaigns.

As they were pressed together on a crowded crosstown bus, Adam had no evasive room so he simply nodded and turned away. It was no use. All the video ads on the bus were from GenUsa, all pleading for his saliva – Captain America over there, Neil Armstrong further on – all making a case for a utopian future free of worry.

Fat chance, Adam thought as he got off the bus. The world was going down, nothing would save it. Even if all the germs were spayed and the viruses zapped, there would still be human beings around to screw things up. By the time he walked the two blocks from the bus stop on Broadway to his houseboat at the 79<sup>th</sup> Street boat basin, he had worked up enough scorn to huck some slaver into the street. His little act of defiance.

### **To Paradise**

Imagine the ideal beach.

You know it. The one in your dreams of getting away from it all. That beach they batter you with in every ad for every product meant to cure your jittery life. The sandy sand and the palm trees all tall in the shimmering sun that glints in a baby blue sky stretching from here to there. Colors of a good laser print on fancy paper and so serene. Silent as a snapshot. A perfect sun, a dream beach, damn lovely, you better believe it. There it is before you, calling, whispering, winking.

Until the raggyman goes flying right through it.

Wham.

His speed was comical and like a loony toon he even punched a raggyman hole in the scene. Also like the cartoon, he never got wet since, in fact, there was no water, no sand, sun or sky. It was all just a big fat megaphoto for some old travel billboard. Once perched in midtown and now discarded, it was propped in front of the entrance to an alleyway between two industrial buildings in the Red Hook section of Brooklyn. It had been sitting there for months, ignored and forgotten, until the raggyman saw it as his only way into the building and flew through.

On the other side of it, he looked back through the hole he made but saw no sign of his killer. Yet he knew in the dread center of the brain that this meant nothing. The thought twisted his face into a grim mask. Sign or not, the killer was out there. No doubt about it. Nothing was going to stop him. No fake beach and no silly billboard.

Gasping and shaky, the raggyman raced down the alleyway. His clothes stuck to his sweat like unwashed laundry as he panted and ran. But the end was a dead end. There was no exit and nowhere to go. Just a rusting refrigerator and some dented trashcans against the wall of the building. No way out.

With one last look back at the billboard, he could see the hole he made slowly repairing itself. It was self-healing paper, very cool stuff. If only he could do the same, he thought.

### **Still Marissa**

By chance, if you believed in that sort of thing, Marissa Blumenau was looking at that exact same beachscape at that precise moment. It was a stock photo of paradise that the ad agency had used for the billboard and that she had picked for the wallscreen in her apartment on the East Side of Manhattan. It was there to replace the view out her window of the buildings across the street. Much more soothing than watching her gawky neighbor cook dinner. She had been sitting before this scene for quite a while but it still was not working for her. It was supposed to be a meditation aid and she was indeed on a mat with her legs crossed, her shoulders squared, her chakras aligned. All of that. She was toning as she sat, her humming filling the space of her apartment, the beach erasing one wall of it, and the air low and slow. Centering, toning, breathe in breathe out.

Om.

To anyone watching, she would have seemed perfectly still and Marissa was perfect in her stillness. She was nude there and her long blond hair was in a braid that draped precisely down her fine spine. Her smooth shoulders sat exactly on the back plane of the body. The shapely legs and toned arms would be perfect to anyone with any sense of the ideal. Even her face was flawless in the pose, with cheekbones and skin from her Swedish mom, sensuous lips and green eyes from her Brazilian dad. The classic nose from Dr. Pena.

All just right.

But inside, she was anything but still. She could not calm herself no matter how hard she tried. What was it that kept wrenching her off center? Not hunger, at least not in the stomach. No itch, not on the skin. Hunger for being wanted perhaps or itching to be held. That was it, that yearning for intimacy along with the abject fear of it. That was the way desire worked, she thought...push and pull at the same time.

Three months had passed since she ditched that rat she thought she loved. She had walked right out of Africa like a novel and left him behind like a short story. Bad affairs are tough on metaphors too. She had allowed herself to be duped by his medical degree, the good work he was doing, his compassion for the needy. But none of that spilled over into being faithful or devoting himself to her as she had to him.

Three months was not enough time. Obviously. She was guarded now, wary of involvement, too careful for her own good. She did not like herself that way but all the meditation in the world was not helping her overcome the sense that her longings had betrayed her. She tried to see herself alone again in a warm light but she simply could not hold onto it.

Suddenly the sun shining at the upper edge of that beach – a pure white disk shimmering in the blue – began to annoy her. Far from calming, it now seemed more like an alarm. A white sun that could burn you, tan your hide, sizzle your passions. Impossible to relax with that thought in mind.

Om?

## **Houseboat**

By the time he got home, Adam Sapolsky was also focusing on the sun at that same moment. But this one was a kind of sun symbol, a white circle surrounded by twelve white triangles inside a round blue border. It had popped up suddenly on the screen over the bed. He was wondering where it came from when the same image appeared on the screen in the kitchen, then the tablet on the table, then the big screen across from the couch.

It was a world of screens, even on his houseboat. Screens everywhere...tapscreens, smart phones, flexiscreens, mist-screens. Windows to an alternate reality of ever-present

images more real than the world behind them. But every screen was also a camera; every person always watching was always being watched. The final triumph of the eyeball over the brain, the visual cortex over the cerebrum. Marketing over privacy.

Adam knew that if this sun symbol was on his screens, somebody, some company, knew it and was already using it to profile him. He tried to change the image, then to turn off the screen, but they were all frozen. It was creepy, some kind of sunny assault, and so he poured a glass of wine and went up to the roof deck to get away from it.

Topside, the real sun had already set and the buildings to the west were turning into a plum cutout against an apricot sky. He watched two tugs chugging a barge towards the George Washington Bridge and noticed the cables glinting like a diamond necklace in the waning light. A jet on the way to Newark Airport left a sharp hot trail in the navy sky above.

One of his neighbors having a cookout on the deck of a nearby boat, waved and Adam waved back. He tried to look dramatic there – man alone atop his boat, lord of his domain, captain of his fate – but he was really more of a castaway. The depression this time had lasted for months and he was only now coming out of it, his sense of dread receding. No idea what had triggered it but triggers are nothing more than excuses, as they say in the self-help biz. You still have to get your life in order. And he had been doing just that: letting go of his bitterness, adjusting his expectations, and so on. The Gladivil helped too.

But all those thoughts – alluring and sad in equal parts to someone who broods too much – were erased when that sun appeared again. Not the real one but the circle with the triangles. This time it was hovering in the Western sky, somewhere over the condos on River Road in Jersey. It was a sudden, floating version of that same symbol, like the Batman sign minus the bat, tracking him, stalking him.

Adam considered adding paranoia to his list of concerns.

## **nexus**

Dr. Marta Grace Delavogue was a commanding woman who knew how to use her presence to impress. She was six feet tall, perfectly attired in a blue pinstriped suit with a long jacket nipped at the waist, dazzling of smile and mind. In her late sixties, she still

had the cool manner of the magna cum laude graduate from Harvard. But she had also somehow been able to hoard a kind of energy and exude it at a time when most women her generation were only telling tales.

She used this skill to make her age work for her. Her short hair seemed efficient rather than frail. Her skin folds were crisp and crinkly, not antique but classic, like an expensive leather couch. Her eyes were greener than the Caribbean, a result of laser therapy not genes. Her deep ebony skin was glossy not shiny. And she tossed around brilliance the way silly girlies flip their hair.

With modest bags in her breasts, a titanium pin in her knee, the Lasik eyes, the Melanized spots, and a cochlear replant, she was the new mature bionetic black woman. Confident and better than ever. As she led her visitors on a tour of the offices of the nexxus Corporation, what impressed was less the stunning views of midtown or the breathtaking cost of the interior design, but Dr. Marta herself.

This was all part of the marketing strategy. With a PhD in Human Factors Computing, she knew very well that people trusted people not stuff. The world of 2025 was overrun with tech but what everyone craved was a real person to believe in. And she knew this would surely be the case for the guests taking her tour that day...the board members of Chian Gyu, China's largest industrial corporation. Like most corporations that heard about it, they were considering what nexxus had to offer. Of course they were. They needed it if they wanted to stay competitive and she used her persona the way exterminators use peanut butter. Pure lure.

Mr. Chen, leader of the group, was an affable man with a wide face. But this was deceiving. He had not become one of the richest industrialists by being coochy. His smile was carefully honed. He was shadowed throughout the tour by a young Chinese woman serving as his translator, and they were followed quietly by five assistant directors. They all wore the official dark suits of international business, spoke the international language of Business English, and were all business.

Dr. Marta, for her part, had done her homework. She knew all about them, their corporate structure, their duties, social rules and more. She knew not to stare, to keep an extra foot of distance, to smile, walk fast, speak in short sentences. She tilted her head to the right when he spoke to show deference. She made jokes and laughed at them herself

to prove her amiability. But contrary to advice, she never let her voice rise at the end of a sentence. Too frilly. As adept as she was at making people feel comfortable, she also never took any shit from anyone anytime ever.

The translator translated but this was really just a ploy since Chen spoke perfect English. His MBA was from The London School of Economics and he had worked for nine years at Interbank. But as an extra bit of seduction, Dr. Marta pretended not to know this. Instead she spoke distinctly, paused for the translator, waited to make sure he understood, and grinned her dazzling billion-watt, full-implant supertooth grin for him at just the right moments.

And Chen for his part, pretended not to know that she knew.

Business, as they were both aware, was the art of the deal and the deal was almost always the art of bullcrap.

### **Leap of Faith**

Sucking from a hidden pit of energy, the raggyman grabbed the lower rungs of a steel ladder hanging off a fire escape at the end of the alley. Somehow he found the strength to climb. His fingers were slippy and that made the effort doubly hard. Twice he fell back and had to stop, hugging the rungs close like a life jacket. Through his tears he could only see a blurry image as he tried to focus back on the opening to the alley, down near that billboard. Still no one. No movement.

A billion years later by his reckoning, he reached the roof. It was a beautiful evening, clear and gentle, but he did not see it. For him, everything was already dark all around. Across the expanse of tar there was a square box covered with bird droppings. All aches, hands shaking and tongue swelling, he yanked the lid aside to reveal an opening through the roof. He looked around, saw nothing. He looked down into the hole, saw nothing. With the sun set, the amber of the city turned to hazel; lights began to flick on; Manhattan twinkled into the nightlife. A jet etched a line of white into the deepening sky. A regular Kodak moment. But for the raggyman there was only the pall above and the pit below.

He had no choice and so, as a leap of faith, he stepped into the hole. The idea was to fall straight down and magically land on his feet again on the third floor of the

building. Like they do in the movies. A fool's dream. Instead, he snagged his baggy trouser on the rim, tumbled, and went flying off kilter for twenty feet. When he thudded onto the concrete, he knew immediately that he had broken something and sprained something else. Luckily panic numbed the pain, a medical fact well known to the Inquisition. On pure terror like octane, he pushed on.

The building was a relic with cracked concrete floors, peeling walls, and broken fixtures on rusty chains. No life there; no breath except for his own deep panting. Ghosts of punch clocks and carding tables haunted it now. A dying building in a drear neighborhood in a dead section of Brooklyn. This is precisely why he had taken up residence there. Because no one looked twice; the place was forgotten; they would never find him. Or so he thought until he saw the man with the gray hat and coat standing by the subway stop. And when he saw that man see him, the raggyman knew that he had been wrong. He was not safe at all, they did find him, and the end was near.

With this in mind and fighting the urge to puke, he touched a square Band Aid on his forehead to make sure his brain was not leaking and limped slowly across the vast room. He was not a brave man. Never been a hero. Saving the world had not entered his mind. Death did. His own death. Here. Today. Still, he could have run anywhere. But he chose to come back and do this one last thing. His penance? Maybe.

If only there was still time to do it.

### **An Interruption**

The phone call ended Marissa's attempts at meditation for good.

Suddenly the beach on her wallscreen was gone and in its place was the face of Eleander Tarnow, research director of Medtrics, the company she worked for. It was late for a call but Marissa decided to take it anyway. Unfortunately she let it through before realizing that she was sitting in front of the screen completely nude. Tarnow, an old soul with the heart of a teen, looked at her with eyes like coins. Ka-CHING! She was as lovely as always but now he could see that she also had the most shapely breasts he had ever seen, even in 3DPorn of which he was a fan. He was speechless before them.

Marissa did not gasp or twitch even though the thought of him eyeing her was gassy and twitchy. Instead, with full composure from years of yoga, she slowly and

gracefully slipped her silk kimono back over her shoulders and closed it in front, all the while looking right into the camera as a kind of deflection. This worked fine because Tarnow also thought she had the most amazing eyes he had ever seen.

“Am I getting you at a bad time,” he choked.

“Not the best,” she said although he heard *breast* and blanched. “What do you want?”

“Wondering how much longer you’re going to be on loan?”

“Don’t know,” she said getting up and walking to the counter to get a drink of water.

Amazing ankles too, he thought.

“We need you back,” he moaned. “We’re finishing up the stuff from Africa.”

“I told you, El, I’ll be back when I’m done. You’re the one who loaned me out in the first place.”

“I know but they made a persuasive case,”

She knew he meant money and replied: “How come I’m not seeing any of that persuasion in my salary?”

What followed was a long, sad tale of how the company needed her expertise and could barely function without it. It was all just a sorry mask for the fact that Tarnow was in some kind of love with her. That, of course, did not change the fact that they really did need her. Marissa was a data analyst who had gone to medical school and was therefore perfect for making sense of world health information. Like the details coming out of Africa about education, infant mortality, clean water. Make sense of the numbers and the facts made sense; she believed that slogan and liked the work too because it was making a real difference in real lives. But the new assignment, the one she was on loan for, was mysterious and intriguing and so, despite the importance of the work for Medtrics, she was not all that anxious to get back to her day job.

“What do they have you doing out there anyway?” Tarnow asked, turning brotherly.

“You know I can’t talk about that. Part of the contract.”

“I know but...”

“A few more weeks, that’s all. Then I’ll be back. You can do the summary without me.”

I miss you. That was what he wanted to say but he was sharp enough to know how bad that would sound.

“Well, we all miss you here, Marissa.”

“Very sweet. Bye,” she said.

“Oh, just one more thing...”

### **The Tour**

The tour started in the main lobby with its forest of potted trees and the three-story waterfall over a marble cliff. Dr. Marta met her visitors there by way of showing off. Then she led the group into the slate and titanium elevators and up to the 27th floor and the main conference room with its twenty-foot long oak table with cedar inlay and crystal water service. Flaunting was one of Dr. Marta’s hobbies.

She had already explained that nexxus was the top mining company in the world. They extracted the world’s greatest treasure, refined it, and sold it to companies shrewd enough to see its value. A value that no corporation could afford to ignore. Now she added that the resource they mined was not gold or oil or wind or geothermal energy. It was information. nexxus traded in data, big big data. With sixty offices worldwide, 1,200 employees, 92% of whom had advanced degrees, and earnings last year of \$30 billion, nexxus was the leading infocorp on an infoplanet.

“Mr. Chen respectfully asks how this is accomplished,” said the translator.

In reply, Dr. Marta motioned behind her to a frosted glass wall and announced: “Delora helps us do just that.”

There was some mumbling among the entourage.

“Delora is a person?” the translator asked.

“Delora is our computer system,” Dr. Marta replied. “A predictive system.”

Chen whispered something to the translator.

“Mr. Chen wishes to ask if they may see the computer?” the translator said.

“Absolutely,” Dr. Marta replied as she pressed a pad and turned the wall clear. On the other side was what appeared to be a vast hall of mirrors filled with floating images,

charts, obscure patterns and scores of people interacting with them like kids in a fun house. It was a glittery array of tech and bioware designed by Hollywood via NASA, with a burst of Barnum. Not the dull line of whirring cabinets Chen was expecting.

“With apologies, Mr. Chen was asking to see your mainframe computer.”

“This is it,” Dr. Marta said proudly. “Our computing system is in the cloud, distributed throughout millions of computers all across the planet. This is how we can guarantee a steady flow of data. Even during blackouts and thunderstorms and God forbid, a nuclear attack. Anything. Even if the entire city goes down, we still operate. Delora still predicts.”

Her visitors seemed impressed, not by the fact but by her confidence. Chen nodded to his directors to take note of that ploy.

“Delora is the gateway to our success,” she said as the entire glass wall slid up to provide an entrance. “But the key to her is this collection of remarkable people who interpret her predictions. Let’s step inside for a closer look.”

## **Pesky Sun**

The sun symbol was becoming annoying. It was hovering there in the sky, taunting Adam. An insult of some kind. The floating image was obviously being projected from somewhere but there was no beam of light and, to his knowledge, no way to project an image into open space like that. How were they doing it, he wondered, and more to the point, who was doing it? And why?

Through the windows of other boats nearby, he could see screens filled with the usual stuff: evening news, movies, video games. Not a sun in sight. So this was a private mirage, he thought, or maybe he was being hacked by Ra, the Egyptian sun god. When his cell phone rang, Adam jumped and almost dropped it in the river. There was a text message on it that got his attention right away. It read: “White Sun.”

Adam texted back “yes?”

“Let’s talk.”

“OK.”

“nexus. 9am Wednesday.”

“Who are you?” he typed but nothing came back.

“Where are you?” he typed.

No reply.

“Where do we meet?”

“Just follow the sun.”

“To the west?”

“To the office.”

“???” he typed.

But at that moment, the connection ended and the sun vanished from the night sky and from all the screens of his formerly ordinary life.

### **The Cage**

A huge cage, the size of a handball court, filled the middle of the empty factory floor. The top and bottom were made of metal pipes bolted to the floor and ceiling. Vertical ones defined the four corners of its walls. The walls themselves were made of chain link, the kind you see in schoolyards and just as dismal. In the far corner of this mesh box was a door also made of chain link but locked with a padlock. Light from the street sputtered into this space through the large dusty factory windows that ran all along the outer wall and cast a shadowy grid on the floor. This was the kind of room in which madmen were kept awaiting the next worst treatment.

The cage had been used once upon a time to keep livestock penned, back when the building was a wool factory. Later on, drug dealers locked themselves inside of it and did their thing. Dancers once used it for a performance piece about prison. Not a happy history. Yet this solitary half-cracked Bosnian computer genius, who now saw it as his last sanctuary, called it home.

His name was Oto Selik and he was now at the point of collapse from this flight. But he had one thing on his mind and it was in that cage. Right there, behind the rusty rack of old clothes, the tiny refrigerator held together with duct tape, the bucket that served as a toilet, and the junked mattress.

Hands shaking, lips bibbling, he tried his key over and over but to no effect. It was absurd. Death approaching, stalking, inexorable...and the damn key would not open the damn lock! He shut his eyes and seemed to pray for a moment. That worked and the

lock popped open. More fumbling as his sleeve caught on a loose wire, his leg refused to work, his vision was going foggy. He thought he heard footsteps down on the main floor.

Inside the cage, he realized that the chain link walls provided no safety at all. The cage was not a haven, it was a snare. Why had he run here? Why had he led his own executioner back to this dead end? The answer, which did not hit him at the time, was that like most computer geniuses, he was great at coding but dumb at life. He had planned, stupidly, to put the chip into the FedEx envelope that was lying on the mattress, and mail it off. But he could never figure out who to send it to.

Now he was out of time and ideas.

What a damned stupid fool! he thought, but in Bosnian this idiom sounded much more lyrical.

### **Invitation**

“...you got an invitation,” Tarnow said. “Very high-class. Way above my pay scale.”

“What invitation?” Marissa asked. “I didn’t see anything?”

“No, it came to you here at the office. It was hand-delivered actually. You know, by a real person. It’s on paper.”

“Paper?” Marissa said, as though the word already had must on it.

Nothing came on paper anymore. Paper was a relic, a museum piece, except in the toilet where it had yet to be replaced by virtual wipes. Tarnow held the invitation up to the screen so that she could see it. He was right. It was a simple piece of card stock...very stark, very ritzy. Neat gray letters on a solid black background. Far too elegant for Tarnow’s crude style.

It read:

To Marissa Blumenau  
For a gathering of colleagues  
Plaza Tower Tuesday night 8pm  
Formal attire

At the bottom were three letters in a thin font, widely spaced. Marissa read them out loud to make sense of them.

“CIA? Is this some kind of joke, El?”

“No joke. It’s above my humor scale too.”

Marissa went over to one of her tapscreens and keyed the invitation into her calendar.

“Do you need a date for it? I’m available,” Tarnow said. “I just checked.”

He smiled like a dopey kid before the prom but only the dope part came across and Marissa ended the call with a flick of her finger.

### **The Future Sort of**

“These people,” Dr. Marta said waving her hand across the floor, “are the real power behind nexxus. They take the material generated by Delora and make sense of it. Sense your business cannot afford to ignore.”

The floor was no normal office space. No desks, no cubicles, no desktops. Instead it looked like an ad for the future of glass. People were sitting, standing, lounging in the midst of a frenzy of screens on tabletops, tablets, and movable glass walls. Some of the images seemed to be floating free in space. The room was bustling with the energy of figuring, discussing, decoding, simmering in Brownian heat.

“To accomplish what precisely?” Chen asked in perfectly fine English.

“To do just what we promised you to do. What you need us to do so that you can stay competitive.”

“Deliver us the future, you said,” Chen replied.

“Yes, precisely,” Dr. Marta said. “To predict the future...sort of.”

Mr. Chen uttered a long complex sentence in Chinese that required a polite wait until the translator could begin. Dr. Marta caught only one word in the middle of it and guessed what the question was going to be.

“Yes, nexus. The word means *hub*,” she explained, jumping the gun. But there seemed to be no good translation for that and so she swept all her fingers together to a single point.

“Yes,” Chen said.

“We spell our company name with two x’s so that it will stand out from the common usage. Ah. Here we are.”

Two young men arrived with black tea and a cart of cakes and pastries. They were accompanied by a young woman named Erika, Dr. Marta's assistant, sharp as a pin. The moment was perfectly timed to give Dr. Marta a chance to step back from her pitch. She was well aware that her own energy could be overwhelming. And everyone loved a good sugar boost.

"Why don't we conclude with a little snack? It is getting late after all."

There were smiles all around as her guests were too professional and far too polite to admit that they were exhausted.

"Yes, you are right," Chen said. "We have plenty to inhale..."

"I believe you mean to say *absorb*, sir," the translator said.

"Indeed."

"Then I would invite you to return first thing in the morning," Dr. Marta said. "And we can continue our discussions. At say..."

"Ten o'clock," Erika said, consulting a very smart watch.

More smiles, followed by bows.

As Dr. Marta withdrew, she turned to Erika and asked quietly: "Tell me about Adam Sapolsky."

Erika poked some of the icons on her wrist. "They completed the demo and just sent the invitation. Expect he'll be here in the morning on Wednesday. I'll keep on top of it."

"Let him talk to Marko first, but then call me. I'd like to meet him in person. He may be just what we are looking for."

"As a consultant?" Erika asked.

"No. Full Intag," Dr. Marta said.

Erika seemed impressed.

## **White Sun**

Back inside the houseboat, Adam quickly did some research on the sun image. It was a symbol from the national flag of China. Very nice, he thought, very bold. But why had it suddenly appeared on all his screens? And why had it popped up over Jersey? Beijing maybe...but Hoboken? And what did it have to do with the word *nexus*?

Adam searched for a while to find the answer but he eventually gave up. There was simply no information online anywhere in any form about the word. Was it a place, a theory, a nickname? There was a hair products company and that was about it. Was he being hounded because his hair needed conditioning? It was a mystifying hole in the age of Too Much Information and it struck him that it was only possible by a complex effort to conceal. nexxus was secretive, that much was clear. And tricky, with its floating nighttime sun and all.

The houseboat was a loft built on top of a square barge and Adam's bed was on a raised platform under one of the skylights. Lying there, he rocked gently from the wakes on the river, swayed slowly to the rhythm of the wind, and watched the stars peek in and out of view. The small card he had put on his pillow as a reminder suddenly stuck him in the ear. It arrived by messenger that morning in a delicate frosted envelope. He picked it up and studied it under the starlight.

It read:

To Adam Sapolsky  
For a gathering of colleagues  
Plaza Tower Tuesday night 8pm  
Formal attire  
CIA

Adam belonged to any number of professional organizations...but the CIA was not one of them. Still, the card was inviting: a thick linen stock, glossy gray letters in Goudy type, elegant with its narrow serifs. Understated, expensive. Formal attire? Did he still even have the tuxedo he wore to his own wedding or had he trashed it to celebrate the divorce?

Mysteries, he thought as he drifted off. Strange events with concealed meanings. Anonymous invitations; suns in the night. But his dreams were not of fancy parties or rising suns but of heat and fire, visions of hell actually, premonitions that were not very pleasant at all.

## **Belgrade**

Oto Selik collapsed onto the mattress and thought about Belgrade and his honors at the Academia, drinking Grappa at the café with the other hackers down by the Danube, mornings designing viruses to break into corporate mainframes. He could have sold these on the black market and become a rich Cloud pirate, own an apartment on the Tal. Bury his face in Lilliana's thighs and hum Handel.

But no.

He had taken the short cut through the Russian mob, Platinum Meth, night flight to America...one rotten choice after another down to the raggyman life. Here he had convinced those lunatics that he had a religious conversion. That he wanted to do their holyholy work. In fact, he had seen the Light all right but it did not come from on high. It was glinting off a no-limit credit fund. He told them he would help them change the world. Bring Paradise to this mortal slime pit. Why not? He would work on the code they wanted, take their money, then return to Lilliana the man she longed for and deserved.

But all he had really done was become a rat in a cage of his own making, now in the final moments of his ratdom. He had helped design the most revolutionary wormcode of the century. And not just a worm but a werewolf. An intentional program that could transmute and destroy. He was king of the hacks. But no one would ever know about it. Instead, he would die alone in bad clothes in a crappy old building.

Another sound on a floor below jolted him into action. Fingers ajitter, he took the chain holding the pendant from around his neck, fumbled with the pendant for what seemed like an eternity, then pressed the Band Aid on his head to make sure it was still sticking. He dropped the chain and pendant into the FedEx envelope. In a fog, he puzzled over what to put on the mailing label...FBI, Interpol, Scientific American? The program, the cage, Lilliana's thighs, and the steps of the assassin who was now surely up to the third floor, blurred his mind.

Perhaps he could jump out the window, he thought. Yes! Climb across the overhang, jump down, and run to safety. This was a fine movie playing in his head, real as life. He could feel himself running, the air against his skin, the music booming. He

could tell the *New York Times* what he had done and appear on Heroes being too too modest.

But he did not budge. His leg hurt like hell. There were only moments left. Not nearly enough to get to the window. Besides, the one thing that life had taught him thus far was that the one thing he could not trust was himself. Then, in the wide entryway at the stairwell across from his cage, a tall thin charcoal shadow loomed.

## CHAPTER TWO

# Re:creation

### NeHaHa

When Chen and his associates returned the next morning, Dr. Marta was ready to close the deal even if they were still wary.

“You may find this interesting,” Dr. Marta said. “It will explain better than I can precisely what we can offer you.”

Instantly a razor-thin film of ultrafine mist rose from the far end of the room. It formed a spectral curtain onto which the video could be projected. The promo was snap and slick, with narration by the guy from the *Our Amazing Universe* series. It was usually the deal closer, as convincing as television.

“Information,” he baritoned, “is a great resource. Like any resource, it can be collected, hoarded, traded, bought, and sold. This makes data a global commodity.”

Nice images of lines of data swirling the globe.

“Imagine all that Big Data flowing through pipelines and all those pipelines coming together into a single channel. Now put a meter at the convergence point to tell you all about that flow. Such a point was called a nexus, the Latin for connection, for centerpoint.”

Lights pinpoint white hot like a supernova.

“Here at nexxus, we have created just such a hub within the vast flow of information sweeping around the planet day and night. Our computers analyze and mine this flow for trends and possibilities. We do not just evaluate current data states, we project them, we potentialize them.”

Succession of images of 3D graphs and grids, all very sci-fi.

“In short, we predict the future. Your future. What would you pay to have that power over your competitors?”

The promo went on to explain the complexity of the system everyone called Delora, which was short for Delphic Oracle. The program it ran was a neuronetic heuristic analysis holistic algorithm. A mouthful they nicknamed NeHaHa in the

hallways. This ganglion of neuronets monitored output from everywhere on the planet through cables, satellite signals, wires and compressed all this into a series of virtual digital pipelines. It studied this flow for patterns and anomalies, oddities, strange attractors, blips, woggles, curiosities, business as unusual. Like those geeks obsessed with sports stats or gambling charts, the NeHaHa program poured over abstract strings of bits – quadrills of them every nano – and searched for secret information about life on earth.

The program was bogglingly complex with its minimaxing subnetic universes, recursive Jensian ranktestings, quantum logic illfilters, hierarchical enfolding of massively dense grid volumes...other crap that only a handful of other computer systems really understood. Nonetheless, day and night, beat by beat and bit by bit, it searched for changes in the flow of data from digital communications and made note of what it found. Reported the results. It was relentless, tireless, and purposive.

The patterns it studied meant nothing to the program itself. Podcast on a drought in Ethiopia or rerun of *Sex and the City* or annotated text of *As You Like It* on a university website, the program had no clue. It could not understand or evaluate, get a sense of, or know or worry or see or think or feel or expect. It simply noted distortions and connections in the cold hard flow and reported it. It was ingeniously dumb but relentless. Fabulous and idiotic. It left figuring out what it all meant to the less fabulous but not quite so dumb humans of nexxus.

Her guests seemed duly impressed by all that, but just how much of it was clear to them was not at all clear to Dr. Marta. Hell, no one really understood it all. This was crystal smarts, beyond the ken of mere people with their squishy brains.

“Confirm Dr. Sapolsky @9am Wed,” read the incoming text on her wrist.

Wednesday, she thought, tomorrow. Maybe he could help them get to the bottom of this particular anomaly. If not, then she would have him erased. But she smiled knowing that was a private joke and began to mutter the lyrics to the song from Annie: “Bet your bottom dollar that tomorrow, there'll be sun...”

### **Shot in the Dank**

Oto Selik screamed when he saw the shadow move.

He had fallen asleep and the morning sun was now streaking in through the windows. Had the assassin waited in the dark all night or had time itself warped around his own terror? He glanced at the window and thought again that there might be time to escape. He might make it.

He did not make it.

The bullet slipped neatly through an opening in the chain link and caught him expertly in the forearm. He blanched as he watched his own arm fly away in recoil, out of control, blood following like a streamer. In his fog, he wondered what the celebration was all about, then collapsed on the mattress, dropping the envelope on the floor.

Nothing happened for an eternity as he lay there, during which Oto Selik thought nothing, hoped nothing. He had heard that when you die your whole life rushes before you. But that was not the case and so he guessed he was not. Dying, that is.

He was wrong about that too.

The man with the gun opened the gate to the cage and walked slowly over. For a moment, Oto Selik thought it was a shadow pretending to be a man. Is that what death was? he wondered. But this was only because the light was bad and the man was dressed all in gray: overcoat, pants, shoes, short-brimmed hat. He was not just in gray, he was gray in every way. Eyes like ashes, skin like a corpse, lips without blood. If he had been reanimated, which looked possible, they forgot to add the spark of life.

Even as he came closer, he still kept the shadow. It was better that way. Had Selik been able to make out the face, it would not have gentled him. The face was worn and full of crags, the mouth blank, the expression daunt. The man in gray seemed to have no soul. His eyes were windows into the darkness Oto Selik was about to enter.

Standing over the cringing, bleeding figure, the man in gray held the gun lightly at his side. In a departure from the typical script, this was a small gun and unlike the movie fantasy, this gun did not wallop or recoil. It was not instantly lethal. In fact, that was the entire reason he used it. Quiet gun, hidden and discreet. Painful.

“Who...how...how...” Oto Selik moaned, unable to find the words to match his horror.

The man in gray exhaled through his nose before answering. It sounded like a whistle in a mortuary. Asthmatic perhaps. Undead for sure.

“Did you think, Oto, that we would not find you? Both of you?”

“No.”

“We will find Frayn as easily as we found you. Tell me, Oto Selik, where is it? Where is yours?”

He spoke in a flat kind of English that was searing to hear. Clipped, sharp, level. No humanity in his voice. He could have been an icebox reciting a pledge.

“I don’t have it,” Oto Selik whined, trying for the last lie, one final gesture to top off a miserable mess of a life.

“No?” the flat voice said.

With thick unkind fingers he felt Oto Selik’s chest but found no necklace.

“It’s gone. I already sent it off. *Jebem ti mamu na bananu!*”

This last was a curse in Bosnian that suggested something on the order of fucking his mother with a banana. The man in gray did not understand it but he caught the tone and quickly fired a second bullet that ripped into his victim’s other arm. Oto Selik squealed in agony. Blood was now pouring down both hands like a suicide and he thought for a moment that, without planning it, that is just what he had accomplished for himself.

“Where is it?” the shooter asked calmly.

“Please!” Oto Selik begged, wiping his forehead and leaving a smear of blood like the mark of Cain on the Band Aid there. “I don’t...”

Wrong answer and for even thinking of it, he got another expertly placed bullet. This one ripped into his ankle, the good one. That bullet split the bone and the pain was so intense that Oto Selik began to gag on his own spittle.

## **Unmet Yet**

No one has to leave this universe to find a parallel world. Nor read science fiction or even believe in string theory. The evidence is all around that we live in intersecting planes of existence. Adam believed it on some vague level and Marissa trusted it overtly, although neither of them was aware that they were proving the theory the next morning.

Sitting at the kitchen counter screen on his houseboat and going over some work for a client, Adam was mirroring precisely what Marissa was doing at the counter screen

in her apartment on the other side of the city. In fact, if their dimensions could have been squished, they would have looked like a couple that had been married for so long their routines melded into one.

Marissa was reviewing some of the stats from Africa that clearly showed the westward trend of dysentery across the continent, facts that could help Medtrics get a jump on setting up mobile clinics. She was also looking at an odd word she had come across on her new assignment. The word was Re:creation. It meant something but she was having no luck figuring out just what. Finally, she did a quick scan through her virtual closet to decide what to wear that night to the mysterious party.

Just as intently, Adam was looking at an empty screen and drawing random sketches on it. It was part of a visual code he had developed called PicKey that was being beta tested as a security system. The results so far were promising. He also made some notes on the sun symbol and what his first set of questions would be when he met this nexxus person. Eventually he did a quick skip through his virtual wardrobe to figure out what to wear to the strange event he had been invited to that evening.

Then they both stood up at the same moment, stretched in the same way, looked out the window with the same expression of doubt; all of which would have made Dr. Marta chuckle with joy had she not been too busy at that moment to be watching them.

### **The Einstein Ploy**

There were more questions from the Chinese contingent but answers from Dr. Marta were dwindling. nexxus was built on discretion not disclosure. In any case, it was impossible to explain the process by which they predicted the future. Delora found patterns but it was no Nostradamus on a chip. There were no profound pronouncements or poetic decrees. The report was not even in English but in a web of peculiar images. Folks with graduate degrees had to figure out what it all meant by methods that were more art than logic. And making that usable to their clients was more politics than art. The reports nexxus produced included observations about the world that were invisible, expectations about events that were intangible, and predictions about the future that were unpredictable.

Examples: the collapse of the Asian financial markets if neoceramics were used in sufficient quantity in computer chips before the end of the year; the explosion of the nuclear weapon in the South China Sea by either Malaysia or the Philippines based on a ratio of soccer scores to worldwide population. That one came out three days before the blast was picked up by the GPS satellites. Or the patenting of the DNA chip before it was reported in *Science* and whatever the heck that had to do with recorded deaths from landmines in the Balkans. But it had something to do with it because Delora found a link.

Something unseen was happening or about to happen in boiling life and the program picked it up, based solely on currents in the flow of data through the communications pipelines. What more was there to say? About the Flux Compression, MiniMastering, Code Desimulation, Hyperdiagnostics, Nonvirtual Assessment, Client Inpointing? All far too complicated to go into.

But these were executives and Dr. Marta knew well that they also had a natural distrust in blind faith. People needed explanations; businessmen needed guarantees. Insight sold better than magic, which sold much better than guesswork. So she hit them with the Einstein ploy.

“Is the idea behind nexxus,” she suggested, “any stranger than the notion that a professor making chalk scribbles on a blackboard in Princeton, New Jersey could come up with space/time, light waves bending, black holes, and the energy locked inside the atom? Of course not. If math and the structure of the universe can connect, what is so strange about what we do?”

That seemed to work. Not because it made sense but because everyone went mute when you mentioned Einstein. There was nothing else to say. So she quoted him again – that thing about imagination being more important than knowledge – and quickly ushered her new Chinese clients into the conference room to sign a contract.

## **Bear Shit**

Kneeling down, as one might with a child, the man in gray held Oto Selik’s chin in his hand, brushed the hair away from the bloody Band Aid on his forehead, and looked directly into his eyes. Lead eyes they were, blank as death.

“Where is it, my brother?” he asked coolly.

“No, no.”

“This is not the right time to lie. I can save you. I can lead you home to Paradise. But you must tell me where it is.”

Oto Selik did not mean to tell – did not want to – but the pain was too much. Rolling in misery, he accidentally let his eyes flick in the direction of the envelope on the floor.

“Yes, I see. FedEx. Very good, my brother.”

Oto Selik moaned, knowing that all was lost. And not just for him but for the world as well. The man in gray slid the necklace out of the envelope onto his thick hand and examined the pendant. It was a small square of silver with two figures engraved on the front that looked like the number 64. It did not seem like much to him but this was not his concern. He had the first one and only needed one more to gain his freedom. He pulled off the chain and put the pendant into his pocket.

By that point, Oto Selik’s wounds had triggered a complex neurological reaction that released natural opiates onto receptors in the cortex and that relieved the raggyman from his physical agony. He lay on the floor completely inert, paralyzed, out of body and floating on a sea of organic morphine.

“It is over now, my brother. I will help you. I will release you. The time of your disgrace is gone. Rejoice. Paradise awaits. Come my brother, let us pray together.”

Oto Selik could say nothing. Nor move, nor sigh, nor dream. The light dimmed further, the sounds drifted, the pain was a cloud all soft and nuzzly. He had no idea where he was any more, and only wondered why the dust looked like stars.

The man in gray bowed his head and without emotion or any feeling at all began to speak in a rhythmic cadence, like the beginning of a chant.

“*Bear shit...*” he said, intoning.

Oto Selik, slipping fast, groaned.

“*...bar a ella him,*” the man in gray continued in a kind of stiff song.

Shafts of bluish light broke through the dusty windows on the wall, like the buttresses of a cathedral made of pure luminosity. Had he been able to see them, they might have soothed the man lying on the floor, even though they were only caused by the

sunlight bouncing off the abandoned building across the street. But it was all too far away and in any case his eyes did not move. Nor did his arms or head. Nor anything at all. Not even the still air. The cage was now a tomb in which he was laid. The floor was cold. The air timeless. The spirits watching.

*“Et hasha my hymn,”* the man in gray said. *“Vuh hah arts high tattoo.”*

Oto Selik had once known all about the nothingness of which the world was made. Vast empty realms of time and space. Now that theory seemed to have become his epitaph. Yet he was no longer frightened, no longer struggling. In the end it was all as he imagined that it had begun. Still and formless, dark all around, nothing waiting for nothing. The light shifted up the spectrum. Old wooden beams creaked in the coming moist air. A rat scurried across the floor. Smell of trash from the street. But all that was in another dimension, out there where his one and only life once was.

Inside the cage there was no need for details.

When he was done with his words, the man in gray touched Oto Selik once on the head. It was the touch of some kind of netherworld priest, nudging the ghost out of the body. Silence filled the void.

And that was the end of that.

## **Reception**

The reception suite at the Plaza Tower that night was only for the rich or at least the rich in attitude. And for good reason. It cost a fortune to create the space, which was literally dropped from the sky on top of the landmark hotel. You could not even get close to the place without a trust or a foundation in your portfolio. Unless you had a free pass, like the card Adam handed to the guard outside the door. Inside, wealthy, trendy types lounged in space station luxury overlooking Central Park. Nice place for a Bar Mitzvah, Adam thought, if your son was next in line to be the king of the hedge fund.

It took a while for Adam to think that this may all have been just an expensive joke. Hosting the party was not the Central Intelligence Agency as he thought...it was the Communications Institute of America. Perhaps he had joined it a long time ago and forgotten. Or perhaps they were trying to get him to join. Either way, one thing was

clear...whoever they were, they must have gotten a serious endowment to afford a bash like this.

Not knowing anyone there, Adam stood by the window, put his champagne glass down on a table, and scanned Central Park for entertainment. A horse-drawn carriage was just entering near the fountain. A taxi was stopping for a woman with a jittery kid with ice cream. A screen near the subway stop was showing George Washington spitting into a tube and giving a thumbs up. Some guy was drumming on an empty plastic trashcan on the bench inside the park.

Adam reached over to get his glass of champagne and bumped hands with...well, her. Her. That was the word that came to his mind at that moment. And it came in full of artistry...botanical calligraphy with a scroll underneath. It also came with seductive jazz in the background. It came in lovely and hot, in other words.

“That’s my drink I think,” she said.

“It’s mine, I drink,” he replied. “I mean I think.”

*Farblondjet* is what he was and he knew it. That was the Old World word for acting like an idiot. Dazzled, stunned, dumbstruck also fit because this “her” was dazzling, stunning, dumbstriking. Maybe the most beautiful woman he had ever seen outside of advertising. She was trim and shapely and blond, check, check, check. Lovely face. Check. She was wearing a bluestone blue backless dress that hugged her so tight it could have been red.

Marissa was more composed but only as a ploy. She instantly saw this attraction in his eyes and she was equally drawn in. He was tall, dark, and handsome, she thought and then winced at her own lack of imagination. She tried fit and lean with wavy dark hair, large eyes, and a strong jaw and felt better about that. His face was both open and guarded, soft and firm at the same time. Sensuous and distant. Just enough contradiction to create intrigue. But what difference did all that make? The very last thing she needed right now was another affair, another trust broken, another punch to the heart. She should have smiled politely and walked away. But instead she just smiled.

Play all the word games you want, women and men both know in the core of their sex who is attractive and who is not. Who is worth flirting with and who not. Who

might become a lover or not. Is this love at first sight, or lightning lust, or chemistry? Who knows, who cares? It happens when it does. It happened now.

“Are you with the CIA?” Adam asked.

His voice had a nice melodic tone that pulsed.

“Never heard of them before this,” Marissa admitted.

Hers was soft and light and tickled the hairs on his inner ear.

“Me either,” he said. “What do they do?”

“Bring people together, I guess.”

He clinked her glass.

“I just joined,” he said.

Love, lust, chemistry, karma...no matter. They both felt it and knew it. The fact that they both had the same amount of champagne left in their glasses – which led to the confusion in the first place – was an example of how matched they were. Naturally that brought fate into the equation; that fate which no one can fight. As though they had been brought to this place at this moment for this purpose alone. It was all very swoony, nicely poetic. But it also happened to be true.

The fact is that they were both there by design. No chance at all. It was a blind date; they simply did not know this. And that made it a kind of double blind date. Double blind. Like those experiments of the same name that test out hypotheses. This was just such a test and they were as blind to it as rats getting injections in a lab fail to grasp the big picture while squirming as the needle looms.

### **The Trip**

Back in the bedroom of her apartment, Marissa was online with her sister as she packed her bag for a trip. She had switched the call from the wallscreen to the pad on the bed so that her sister seemed to be lying down on it staring at the ceiling just like she used to do in high school. It was cozier that way.

“When do you leave,” Claudia asked.

“Tomorrow morning,” Marissa said, folding her underwear carefully.

“And are you going to tell me where this time?”

“I told you,” she said.

“No you didn’t.”

“I mean I told you that I can’t tell you.”

“I think you have a boyfriend. I think you are going to see him. I think...”

“Keep thinking, sis. It’s good for you.”

“Well, who is he? Is he as handsome as Dr. Alfredo was? Does he do the thing with the...”

“*Doctor* Alfredo cheated on me with anything that walked upright. Mostly. He lied about being in love with me and he stole my report...”

“Which is why you need to get over him with someone new. Pack your thong.”

“You’re on the wrong track,” Marissa said flatly.

But she was slightly smiling when she said this. Her sister could not see this with the camera on the pad pointing straight up, but she could hear it in her voice. Years of disclosing secrets had turned their chatter into a game of intrigue.

“You just met someone, I know it. You may know about data, but I know *you*.”

“Maybe,” Marissa said.

“I knew it! And you’re already going away with him? That’s fast, Mariss.”

“No, this trip is business. He won’t be there.”

“And who exactly is this *he*?”

“Just someone I met at a party I went to tonight. I only spent a few minutes with him. It’s nothing.”

“Yet. Nothing is anything until it is.”

“Very deep.”

“Suppose I need to get in touch with you?”

“I have my phone.”

“But you turn it off.”

“No I don’t. There’s no cell reception where I’m going.”

“Tilt me up so I can see what you’re packing. Take the violet minidress.”

“No.”

“Give me a hint so I can stop guessing.”

Claudia turned away to stop her son from soaking the dog with a water cannon, which had the reverse effect. The dog yelped.

“Sorry,” she said, turning back. “Well?”

“It’s an island, Claud. That’s all I can say.”

“Ooh...tropical?”

“Sort of.”

“Caribbean?”

“Not exactly.”

“A sort of tropical island not in the Caribbean. A spa?”

“No, a church.”

“Very funny.”

“Not really,” Marissa said honestly but also not explaining why that was no joke.

It was not. Where she was going, there would be no lying in the sun, no drinks by the pool, no massages before dinner, no snorkeling in the lagoon. Just your average gathering of religious lunatics trying to save the world from the rest of us.

“Don’t forget sunblock,” Claudia said.

Sun block, Marissa thought. Yes, that is just what she needed.

Exactly.

### **Morning Ritual**

When Adam woke up the next morning, he was surprised to find himself instantly thinking about Marissa. Not the usual lusty stuff – at least not right away – but first and foremost the way her neck smoothly curved from ear to shoulder. There was something especially luscious about that. Earlobe, collarbone, the slope down to the breasts...these kinds of impressions persisted through the morning ritual of brushing with the Sonic, coffee from the Sana, hair shpritzed with Soma, and smart toilet by American Standard. In fact, he could still imagine the satiny texture of her skin as he put on his ready-to-do-business outfit...charcoal suit, black silk T-shirt, leatherette shoes.

On the one wall on the boat without windows, there was a thick piece of memory foam with a target on it and a stapler sticking out of the bull’s-eye. Most visitors took this to be work of art, some kind of statement about art or life or commerce or staplers or who knows what. But they were wrong; this actually *was* a target.

Adam gathered up his keys, phone, and other tools of modern life and stood still for a moment. Then, in a bizarre, kinetic – even spasmodic – move, he leapt over to a glass on the counter and whammed it at the target, then jumped to the couch where he had left a shoe and kicked it towards the target as well. Both items got buried in the foam next to the stapler. Bam!

Pleased by this, he left the boat and stepped onto the rocking dock, bending his knees to balance himself. A duck honked; he honked back. From the boat basin, he walked up through Riverside Park to the street level. He had no destination in mind but was simply preparing to head towards Broadway because it was eastwards. East to follow the rising sun, according to his reading of the text message. But when he got to the edge of the park he saw a black limo parked on the street and stopped in his tracks. The driver was standing next to the car holding a sign, like at the airport, but this one did not have his name on it. Instead it had that sun symbol again, which was starting to get deeply annoying.

Adam got in without a word.

The driver closed his door, went around to get behind the wheel, and then drove off, also without a word.

## **Journey South**

At Newark Airport, Marissa boarded the flight to North Carolina. The Carolina coast was lovely this time of year, less buggy than Florida, breezier, which is why the airport had been expanded recently. Lots of parks and things to do in the area. But Marissa would not get to see or do any of that. The stop was simply the closest one that commercial airlines could get her to her destination. From there she would take a chartered flight to the island.

At the Coastal Carolina Regional Airport in New Bern, there were no signs, no announcements, no notices of any kind marking her connection. She followed a hand-drawn map through the maze of walkways and found the gate for the private flight. She waited at the unmarked area at the end of a long hallway in the East terminal with a small group of passengers, silently, as though waiting to see a dentist. Eventually an

attendant came out and led Marissa and seven others onto the tarmac to a waiting helicopter.

The helicopter was a surprise; she had envisioned a small plane. More proof of how little she knew about where she was headed. The puzzled looks on the faces of her fellow travelers suggested that they knew the same...not much. Only that the island they were going to was called Eden II. That it was floating miraculously 20 miles off the North Carolina coast. And that they were all special guests of a man known as Thomas Wright. That was all.

Marissa met him at a fundraising dinner and he seemed taken with her right away, as most men were. She was taken with him as well. He was quite charming and intriguing, in a Midwestern sort of way. But that alone would not have been enough for her, given her current aversion to romance. No, there was more.

She knew from his dossier that he was also ruthless, stubborn, and fanatical in his cause. A cause that he, no doubt, thought might become her cause as well. That must have been part of her appeal to him and she made no attempt to dissuade him about this. In fact, she played into it to get this personal invitation to his island.

After all, that is what she was being paid to do.

## **Hush & Posh**

Standing in the lobby of the building at Park and 46<sup>th</sup>, Adam looked like a model in a brochure for the address. Not because of the custom-fitted suit, which was fine, but because of the surround. The lobby was green, glass, and glam, filled with light and marble and giant trees, all imported at great cost. Dazzling birds flew through the treetops and chirped brightly. Or was that pre-recorded? Strikingly ritzy bystanders dressed just so, lolled and loitered around the lobby. Even the elevator manager at his console seemed to be a scion in disguise.

A young woman dashing out of the elevator, suitably suited too and with power red heels, instantly picked Adam out of the crowd and walked over. She introduced herself as Erika, shook his hand firmly, and then escorted him up to the 27th floor. Here at last was a hint to his mysterious new contact but a very restrained one. On the wall the word “nexxus” appeared in small silver letters widely spaced. No snazzy logo, Adam thought.

No brassy message; no fancy design. These people were going for posh but with a healthy dose of hush hush.

Erika offered him a cup of foamy cappuccino in a china cup and left him in the waiting vestibule by the wall window. The spot was pure PR with views that seemed to stretch all the way downtown towards the tip of Manhattan, Hudson Bay, Virginia, Barbados, Rio, Tierra del Fuego. The tall titanium lights and the low latte-colored couches suggested that the world was at his feet. Across the street, tiny people peppered glass offices and on the street way down below, cars slid up and down the avenue. From this angle, nexxus seemed like some kind of Olympus, above and beyond it all. Meddling but not struggling.

What the hell am I doing here? he wondered at that moment.

He was an expert in semiotics, often hired for his knowledge of the way symbols and images are used to communicate, but mostly by ad agencies and media companies looking to manipulate the public. He was also invited to speak at the occasional conference, where he was lucky to get a glass of water and a view of the parking lot. He had agreed to make a presentation on the subject at the 92<sup>nd</sup> Street Y in a few weeks where he might even get reimbursed for a taxi.

Yes, this was indeed something special.

But somehow that thought made him more anxious not less.

## **Eden II**

Imagine the screen filled top to bottom, side to side, with a wall of shimmering blue water. Now imagine a choppy spray forming an arc at the bottom of the screen. The chop advances into the frame followed quickly by the shadow tip of spinning blades on the surface. Then the familiar *whoop whoop* of rotors getting louder as the helicopter looms up and in. Now the camera angle drops as the helicopter fills the lower half of the screen and the horizon comes into view at the top. Cue the thumping music, muffle the rotors; the helicopter streams ahead of its reflection on the water, the camera pursues it, the horizon dips down, the sun glints in. You can feel the power and speed. Sudden dip to the right to change course and to create a bit of vertigo in order to put you right there in the action.

It works too; you are woozy with the thrill of flight.

Now cut to the interior of the helicopter and the contrast of an extreme close-up on Marissa in a plush seat watching the horizon intently. She liked adventure, being swept away – it was her weakness – but she tried not to lose her judgment over it. Sometimes that worked. The guest sitting next to her was a fund manager from Tucson who loved making money but hated flying, let alone swooping over an endless sea. Slightly green, she leaned towards the window, then collapsed back into her seat and closed her eyes.

“I don’t see anything. You sure it’s out there?” she said to no one in particular.

“Me either,” Marissa replied.

“A few minutes,” the pilot shouted back. “It comes up fast.”

A brochure Marissa had in hand said that Eden II was anchored off the coast of North Carolina because the weather was balmy most of the year, the ocean temp made it possible to tap the deep water for energy, and the steady breeze of the trade winds made wind power possible. All very eco, very green. But she also knew that the location put it in international waters, away from prying eyes and outside the jurisdiction of the legal world. Eden II may have been the perfect getaway but it was also the perfect fortress.

“There it is,” the pilot shouted.

The helicopter dropped; the fund manager gagged; Marissa wondered, unexpectedly, what Adam Sapolsky was doing at that exact moment.

## **Clusters**

Erika returned to usher Adam into the main workspace at nexxus, that vast floor of screens displaying morphing graphs, dancing patterns, and marching codes. It was all a secret language that meant nothing to Adam except that it was a dizzying complexity of visualized information.

“Wow,” Adam said. “So this is nexxus.”

“Any communications hub is a nexus,” Erika explained as they walked, “the town pub, Google, CIA headquarters in Langley, the local barber shop.”

“The neighborhood yenta,” Adam added.

But he got back the dim look of one who did not grow up in Flatbush in Brooklyn. Oh well.

“And of course, nexxus. Us. The corporation,” Erika added.

“So you’re what...some kind of monitoring agency?”

“No. We are in the business of data mining. We sell information to countries, corporations, intel agencies.”

“What kind of information?” Adam asked.

As he said this, he walked right through a mistscreen so that he seemed to be merging with an image of a human body filled with red points of light.

“Oops, sorry,” Erika said to the group who had been studying it. She grabbed Adam’s arm and guided him more carefully the rest of the way. “Trends,” she added somewhat cagily. “Ah! Here is the man we need to see. Hello Marko.”

She stopped before a slim fellow with a hawkish nose and an air blown sheaf of hair who was sitting in a high-tech wheelchair with several screens attached. He was set up like a drummer in a futuristic Nihil rock band.

“Dr. Marko Andreyev this is Dr. Adam Sapolsky. I’ll leave you two doctors to discuss things. Call me if you need anything,” she said and walked off.

The man in the wheelchair studied Erika walking away like a horny physiologist.

“Let’s ditch the degrees and get down to beeswax,” Andreyev said. “Did Erika explain what we do here?”

“I guess.”

“Okay well, Delora, our system, analyses the flow of digital information and points out strange attractors, but in a very abstract form. “

“Sorry?”

“It finds patterns that stand out from the ordinary flow and that attract data points. Clusters. But it doesn’t know why. We have to figure that out. So we’re constantly playing catch up and trying to figure out why something seems to be important to Delora.”

“Delora?”

“Delphic Oracle. Del-Ora. See?”

Andreyev spun around on his chair so that Adam could see the output on some of his screens. It was an impressive amount of information rendered into floating geofoms and complex charts, but totally unknowable to anyone normal.

“This is what we see,” Andreyev said. “The system is tying together snippets and trying to find patterns. We have to figure out what those snippets mean.”

“We meaning you,” Adam said, indicating everyone else.

“We meaning us,” Andreyev said, connecting the two of them with an invisible thread.

## **Arrival**

Eden II was a tiny island when you consider that Australia is one too.

But compared to the islands dotting the Caribbean it was merely small at 15 square miles, about half the size of Manhattan. From the helicopter as it approached, Marissa could see the entire shape of it. Like a kidney floating in the waters of the Atlantic. It looked just like the picture on the cover of the brochure, which meant tropical and idyllic, filled with vegetation and surrounded by blue water.

On the other hand there were some immense buildings on it and construction was in progress everywhere. Heading for the landing strip at the far edge of the island, the helicopter passed over what looked like a vast glass atrium that glinted in the sun like a jewel, then a series of villages with houses and roads and more bustle than she expected, and then a monumental white structure, like a modernist museum in some urban center.

More than its namesake – the biblical Eden – the overall effect was of a city and its suburbs designed by some Imagineers whistling Disney. It seemed endless and edgeless and bustling as they flew over it, all movement and motion and constant restructuring. But lower to the ground it also seemed phony in some way, all front and façade. If there was an underside or any interior, it was hidden and yet to reveal itself.

Las Vegas came to mind too. Despite the combustion within, from the air Eden II was still a mere dot in the vast landscape, a pip of land in the wide sea. But there was a big distinction between the two, something Marissa only vaguely understood at the time. Las Vegas was designed to keep the world away so that you would keep betting and losing. Eden II was designed to keep the world away for a very separate reason...to repopulate the earth.

Yes, a rather big difference there.

## Voodoo

“Can’t the program itself be programmed to do the analysis?” Adam said, hoping for help.

“Do you know what a Turing machine is?”

“A theoretical computer,” Adam said.

“Boom. A thought experiment by Alan Turing to prove the feasibility of a computation machine. It could only read a one or a zero, erase a one or a zero, write a one or a zero, and move to the next space. But Turing showed that even with those simple four steps, it could manipulate binary information in very complex ways. Delora is just an awesome Turing machine. It only looks for patterns in the flow of 1s and 0s. That’s it. It’s a sequence hunter. It compares the sequences, then it uses AI programming to find what we call Patterns of Nominal Interference.”

“Very interesting,” Adam said, “but I still don’t understand why I’m here. I’m not a data analyst. In fact, I can even stand...”

“Me either,” Andreyev said, pointing to the wheelchair and grinning.

“I mean I can’t stand numbers or coding or anything like that. I work with images and signs.”

“You worked on the Pickey system,” Andreyev said.

“How could you know that? It’s still in beta.”

“We know things.”

“So then you know that I’m not a data analyst.”

“I was told you were a very good one.”

“Then I’m afraid...”

“Maybe you should be.”

Andreyev brought up a floating 3D model of the human brain over one of his screens. “That’s you,” he said to Adam, poking the floating image with his finger. “Eyes and a brain. You scoop up scattered photons bouncing off of 2D surfaces, record their frequencies, cohere them into perceptions of shape and color, interpret these as representations of reality, and store the results for further analysis. Right?”

“Okay.”

“Well that makes you a data analyst. A really good one.”

“I guess that’s true but then so is your average chimp.”

“Monkeys don’t ponder. Delora used to present us with code but now she has evolved to communicate through images. Your field, right? That’s why Dr. Marta recruited you.”

“Recruited me? I’m only here to…” but Adam stopped abruptly realizing he had no way to finish that sentence. “Why *am* I here?”

“Because this place is rad and Delora rocks Big Data and nexxus can do amazing things. But it simply cannot do that voodoo that you do so well.”

He sang that last part by way of making Adam feel more special.

It did not work.

## CHAPTER THREE



### Strange Attractor

That sun again.

Andreyev brought it up in thin air so that he and Adam could study it, like astrologers. It was floating just like the one he had seen on his houseboat and as he moved around to study it, the image adjusted to face him.

“This is like the sun I saw at my boat,” Adam said. “How do you do that?”

“Fixed range holo with tracking,” Andreyev said flatly.

“I mean how did you take over all my screens?”

“A little hack. No big deal.”

Not for you, Adam thought as he poked the image: “It’s not projected onto anything?”

“Fixed range,” Andreyev repeated. “What do you make of it?”

“Pretty cool,” Adam said, swirling his finger through it for no effect because, in effect, there was nothing there.

“I mean the image itself,” Andreyev said. “It is our hub of the day.”

“Hub?”

“The focus, the thing in the middle. The object of interest. Strange attractor.”

Adam squinted instead of bobbling his head like a moron.

“It attracts connections but no one knows why,” Andreyev said, taking pity. “Delora found a number of events – data points – that all connect to it.”

To demonstrate, he brought up a large floating 3D diagram in the same space.

It consisted of tiny geometrics shapes connected by laser thin lines, like a scattergraph, a network of shiny points. Adam touched one of the shapes and it enlarged to become a visible object, a word or image, as the entire diagram rearranged and adjusted itself.

This was an interactive LinkMap, a way Delora had of showing the connections she found in the vast sea of data. A living, morphing 3D grid; quite beautiful actually, a virtual Tinkertoy in bright lights. There were dozens of points on it but a few of them were much larger than the others, more significant, more important. And at the center of it all was that sun.

“You see?” Andreyev said. “Everything is connected to that sun image.”

“That’s why you sent it to me?”

“A little calling card,” Andreyev said.

“So why is it the hub?”

“You tell me. I looked it up. It’s called the Blue Sky with a White Sun. It was used in the 1911 revolution that led to the Republic of China.”

“Not to mention Merrill’s Marauders, who fought in Asia during World War II,” Adam said. “I looked it up too. So all this has something to do with China? Asia? The Second World War? Or what?”

While Andreyev did a great imitation of a dunce in a dunce cap, Adam kept looking through the LinkMap. There were six larger images connected to the sun; when he touched them, each one moved forward for examination and the whole LinkMap readjusted itself.

A symbol with wings and twisting snakes.

The letters EWN in capital letters.

The number 64 from an old manuscript.

A scribble in black ink.

The word Re:creation from a typewriter.

A drawing of a dog biting a man.

Adam started to take a photo of the map with his phone but Andreyev waved him away.

“I sent those seven images to you already,” he said.

“Medical symbol, EWN, sixty-four, scribble, recreation, dog bites man,” Adam recited. “What does it all mean?”

“Dunno yet,” Andreyev said. “That’s what we’re trying to find out.”

“I thought Delora was a – well – oracle.”

“It only finds anomalies and hubs. It doesn’t say why. Hell, *it* doesn’t know why. We can identify these things easily enough, but we don’t know their significance. See the symbol with the wings?”

“It’s called a caduceus.”

“Right. It’s part of the logo for the New York City Department of Transportation, for example.”

“Which means?”

“Beats me.

“And EWN?”

“Anagram? Weather alert system? Investment company? You tell me.”

“And recreation?”

“No clue about that.”

“Something to do with vacations?”

“Maybe, but notice the way it appears. Re:creation...with that colon in there. As in ‘referring to’ creation. That matters. Delora is very specific.”

“Can’t you just ask the computer what the connection is?”

“For a doctor you’re not very doctoral,” Andreyev said, displaying a degree of superiority even though he knew as little as Adam about the whole thing. “I told you, the system only finds patterns in the binary code streaming through the Cloud. Something at each of those locations – all connected to that sun – had a pattern that it picked up as unusual, anomalistic, strange. So it told us by showing us this LinkMap. Now we have to find out what it all means.”

“Okay,” Adam said blankly. “Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why do we have to find out?”

Andreyev looked at him the way one would at a goat, not worth an explanation. But the answer came from a voice behind them.

“Because it could be a significant pattern for the companies that hire us. That’s what they pay us for and that is what we will pay you for. Handsomely.”

The voice was that of Dr. Marta Delavogue entering with irresistible force.

## **The Town**

From the landing strip, Marissa and her fellow travelers were driven in zippy electric carts through a complex set of roadways to the town at the center of the island. It was called Paradise, more in expectation than fact since there was construction everywhere. Heavy equipment and workers shipped in from the mainland were building it fast. The planners were aiming for the ideal town, for Anytown or Everytown, with a zip code and a mini-mall and a Starbucks and more. Yet at the same time, there was a certain blandness to the design that made it all feel calculated rather than welcoming. A Hollywood set, perhaps, for a sci-fi movie about clones named Timmy and Becky taking over the world.

Marissa's room in the hotel was similarly neat and clean and mechanical. It was also very high-tech. The bed had a carved wooden backboard with stone inlay, but the mattress was BrightSprings that responded to her hope for sleep. The toilet had a porcelain pull handle but it also had a blinking red light inside the bowl. Porous glass kept the mirror with its engraved border streakless.

Once she settled in, Marissa sat on the windowsill looking out at the green landscape of perfect grass and specimen palm trees and thought about texting Adam to say hello. But the fact that this occurred to her made her queasy. Clearly there was something appealing about him, although she would barely let herself think that way. She had explained that she would be away for a few days and out of reach. But did he trust that or think it was an evasion? No way to tell. A simple text poke would have helped but there was no outside communication at all from the island. It would just have to wait. Much better that way, she thought, since it might give her time to get over him.

Those contrary thoughts ended when she noticed that a screen set into the oaken desk at the corner was flashing. On it was an invitation for Marissa to attend a service at the temple that night. Marissa believed in yoga and in recycling and in the sanctity of life and in Gaia and karma but the words service and temple did not resonate. She was a believer but not in any organized belief. On the other hand, she knew that Thomas Wright would be there, and so she tapped the icon that said "will attend," and went to take a SonarRub bath in the claw-foot tub.

## The Caspian Effect

Dr. Marta shook Adam's hand and held it for longer than necessary as a kind of double-edged test. The first was to make him slightly uncomfortable. A test of his mettle. But Adam knew this trick from other interviews and held her hand without any apparent sense of unease. The second test was of interpersonal measures and this too he passed. He was neatly put together, handsome but not snooty about it, seductive in a good way, thoughtful without judging. He looked like that actor in CSI: Lunar Colony and so was instantly familiar. All this Dr. Marta picked up from the long handshake. She knew her business.

"Don't let me interrupt," she said, sitting on a tall chair and brandishing her legs.

"Last month," Andreyev explained, "we predicted the destruction of the caviar industry in the Caspian Sea. Saved some of our clients billions of dollars. Came from nowhere."

"We call that the Caspian Effect," Dr. Marta interjected. "Bread and butter around here. Cloud forecasting. Data synergy. Tell him, Marko."

"Yes, very what-the fuck-is-that-all-about."

"What *is* it all about?" Adam asked.

"Delora tagged imported car prices, Euro values, weather patterns in the South Pacific, and some other stuff and suggested that overfishing by Russia, Kazakhstan, and the other nations bordering the sea would deplete supply. We estimated that catches would fall by 84.3% and we were damn close. We reported a rise of beluga to \$75 ounce, which was right on the money."

To demo this, Andreyev brought up another of his complex LinkMaps.

"Great. I guess," Adam said.

"No. The great thing – as in take-that-poker-out-of-my-ass and talk to me – is that because of this, Delora predicted the discovery of a billion barrel oil field in the middle of the Caspian Sea."

"You're losing me."

"It saw a connection between two different data sets and linked caviar-producing fish and oil deposits. Presto! A brand new way to locate hidden oil! NeHaHa...ha! You gotta love this system."

“So you’re saying that you can find oil by fishing for caviar?” Adam asked.

“No,” Dr. Marta said, curtly. “The system found that overfishing for caviar coincided with conditions for new oil discoveries at that time. We don’t understand why, but there it was.”

“But it doesn’t help find oil,” Adam protested, “so why does it matter?”

“Because it helped companies that invested in oil in that moment. And those were our clients. Marko,” Dr. Marta concluded, standing up, “why don’t you discuss the White Sun situation with Dr. Sapolsky and let’s see where we end up.”

Again she shook his hand and again held it longer than normal, but this time to create a sense of dominance.

“Thank you very much for helping us,” she said.

“I’m not sure I can,” Adam insisted.

He was thinking that they had all the computing power they needed.

“I’m sure you can,” Dr. Marta replied, knowing that they did not.

### **Lord’s Work**

The man in gray felt lighter than before. His mood improved. Some color may even have come into his face, though not much. He hated the stalking part, loved the resolution. Now, another assignment completed, he felt uplifted, closer to something pure and clean. Had he not just done the Lord’s work? Had he not liberated a poor wanderer from his burden?

With nowhere else to go and no reason to go there, he spent the entire day sitting on a broken bench outside the abandoned building. Sitting, waiting, thinking about Oto Selik and his last moments. The man in gray had never known fear himself – he had been born without that curse – but he could still see it in others. He saw it in Oto Selik’s eyes. Of course he had been afraid, he thought. Humans are small whereas the Father is great. And now was the time to celebrate, for the door was opened and the way to Paradise revealed. Surely, he thought, he would find his own reward in this work. His own salvation.

He took out the pendant he had retrieved and studied it. It was small, slightly bigger than a stamp, with a number engraved on the front. But all this meant nothing to

him. He had no idea why it mattered; he was no jeweler and certainly no scholar; he barely had a thought in his head. He was not a thinker; he was a doer. He did not ask questions, he was a soldier in the army of the Light, a warrior for the Setheria. He did what he was told and was grateful to be told. And if that meant helping one of his brothers into Paradise, it was his honor to do it. His pride.

Now, with only one more item to retrieve, the end of his mission was in sight. With a last glance up at the third floor of the building, he put the pendant back into his pocket, stood stiffly, and then began to walk towards the subway station.

“All glory to Elohim,” he said rising. “Thank you father for believing in me.”

### **Congregation**

Temple, as it turned out, was a wimpy word for the temple itself.

What Marissa arrived at that evening was more of a mega-cathedral. The architecture was bent and twisted to represent souls on fire; a gothic extravaganza if they had only had steel and concrete and UV glass and structural software back in the day. It was equal parts Mayan monolith, Middle Ages church, and computer-designed superstructure. The congregation entering it through a massive diagonal gash in its front façade seemed to be walking right into a slit in the skin of eternity itself.

The interior was a series of massive concrete forms all sheared and angled to each other in an intense counterbalance. Razor thin windows, like slashes along the walls, let ribbons of light in from outside. At the front of the temple was a purple alcove almost five stories tall, painted with a substance that did not bounce photons and at the top of this a single halogen bulb beamed like a supernova at the center of a big bang.

Walking in you knew from sheer volume that you were inside the universe and that it was vast and that the light had come. And that the creator was there, watching and waiting and listening to you and your fellow worshippers. That was what the designers hoped, that in that grand monument your doubting and selfish self would be crushed into dust and stirred into rapture.

The congregants, hundreds of them, seemed sparse in the space, which was built to accommodate many more. But it was early in the planning. Attendance was limited to the first wave of believers and the temple was still unfinished. No seats, for example, so

they had to stand. No elaborate inlay on the floor representing the calendar of the First Days, just a taped outline. No fig tree, although the empty alcove was ready for it. The podium at the front beneath the arty star was not the immense granite slab on the drawing boards but a temporary concrete one to hold the Eternal Flame, the Sacred Word, the Sign of Seth.

Like the other congregants, Marissa had already replaced her street clothes with the fitted cream tunic, giving the gathering the look of a rather chic brotherhood. They stood as solemnly and silently as an army waiting for orders to march. The room was so large that moist air had formed at the upper edges and birds trapped in the structure were treating it as a cloud.

There was a hushed anticipation as two tall slender aluminum doors opened. A thrill passed through the crowd as their leader, Adama Thomas Wright, looking luminous in white, walked in followed by two female attendants. The trio marched over to the concrete table and stood there soaking up the attention.

The sunstar brightened, the lights dimmed.

Then with great slow effort the Adama lit the Flame, and then opened the Book, and then touched the Sign for all to see.

## **Intags**

When Adam returned to nexxus the next morning, Andreyev already had the LinkMap and the sun symbol floating and they quickly resumed their analysis of the connections. Unknown to either of them, Dr. Marta was paying close attention too as she watched their conversation on a small screen on her desk. But she was less interested in the details of their discussion than in Adam himself.

Delora was an amazing system but it was imprecise, noting coarse patterns in the oceans of data. To truly know what was happening, a more exact and detailed picture was needed and that was something that only a person – an actual human being – could supply. Observers, reporters, actual bodies had to be sent out into the real world to see things for themselves, to make the judgments no NeHaHa system could. Such people would be undercover infiltrators or corporate spies in another time and place. At nexxus they were called Intelligence Agents or simply Intags.

Intags were a special group of people who could function in key ways and Dr. Marta had to carefully screen and select them. For one thing, they had to be people who could fit in and be accepted in social situations. Her psychometric studies showed that they had to be tall but not too tall in order to give them an air of authority but not oddity. They had to be fit and trim because too bony or too fat or too muscular were off-putting. Intags had to be attractive but not exotic in order to seem approachable but not intimidating. They had to have good memories for recalling facts but not total recall that would cloud their judgment. They each had a specialization in some area of information or communication because, after all, this was the arena in which nexxus worked. They had to have cross-cultural appeal and so on.

This was not Dr. Marta's assessment; it was all based solidly in psychometric science, human factors computing, and cultural ethnography. Life charts and biographs of Adam Sapolsky filled another of her screens and it all looked good to her because his numbers were good. Sevens and higher in all social categories; good numbers in physiology too...low body fat index, cholesterol 190, PSA 2, IQ 170, BP under stress 180/70, lung capacity 32, muscle strength 18. All fine.

Sure, he was prone to depression, had seen a shrink and been taking Gladimere, but that just proved that he was sensitive. Intags had to be human. More importantly, the metrics showed that he was the perfect match for her, which meant they could be a formidable team. Couples that would protect each other made much better Intags than singles only out for themselves. The lonesome cowpoke was a male fantasy; in the real world stubborn couples won the West.

According to his file, Adam had even studied a martial art known as Chotch-Ka so that he could defend himself. This was another factor that mattered. Of course here, even the system with its vast command of data and Dr. Marta with her advanced degree did not realize that this was just a joke. But computers were dim wits, they had no sense of humor, and did not pick this up. Dr. Marta had her own challenges in this area.

### **There Was Light**

A deeper hush settled on the gathering as the Adama stepped to the front of the table. He was shiny as a movie star yet somehow he exuded humility too as he waited

with head bowed, then put out his right hand, flat and open. The rest of the crowd did the same. With his arm straight, he raised his palm until it pointed to the ceiling high above and the crowd raised theirs in the same direction. Marissa thought for a moment that he might spread his fingers into the Vulcan gesture but instead, the Adama closed his eyes and the others followed. He spoke with great tone and reverence, souped up by a 5,000-megawatt sound system:

*“Vayomer elohim.”*

*“Vayomer elohim,”* the crowd repeated.

*“Yehior vayehior,”* he pronounced.

And the crowd solemnly repeated the words.

They lowered their arms and the Adama suddenly seemed jerked into the spasm of life by a hidden force and he began to chant.

*“And God said: ‘Let there be light.’“*

*“Let there be light.”*

*“Let there be light, let there be light!”*

*“The Light! The Light!”*

*“And there was light.”*

The words echoed throughout the twisty cavern, the star over the altar went nuclear white, thumping sounds of deep drums rose up and pounded the air. The crowd caught the rhythm and the birds took flight. The Adama charged out of his trance like a raging saint; he was shouting, exhorting, cajoling, prancing, dancing. A sight to behold, the center of his own maelstrom.

Then the crowd began to move too, creating a waveform of off-white like a roiling sea in the hall of a mountain king.

*“Brothers and sisters, children of the one true Lord, Our Father who made us, babes of the Garden, do you feel his presence? Do you feel the presence of the Breath?”*

*“We feel it, Brother. We feel the Breath!”*

*“Do you feel it in your body? Do you feel it in your soul? Do you?”*

*“We feel it! We feel it in our marrow!”*

*“And my brothers and sisters, Children of Seth, have you seen the light?”*

*“We have seen the light!”*

“You have seen the light?”

“Yes, we have seen the light?”

“I mean the Light of Creation, the light of life, the light of Universe unending.”

“Take us to the Light!”

“The Pure Light, the One Light, the White Light!”

“Yes, the Light of the White Sun.”

“We have seen it, Brother.”

“I mean the first light, the light of new life, the gift of our light. Have you seen it?

Do you feel it?”

”We feel it! We have seen it!”

“The Light! The Light!”

“The Light of the Garden to which we were born!”

“The Garden of Adam and Eve! The one true garden!”

“Yes, the Garden and the Light!”

“And the Lord said, behold this is man and the Garden is his and he shall live in this Garden for all his days and he shall dwell there for all time as the breath of my Breath and the rib of my Rib.”

“Dwell for all time. Breath of my Breath! *Praise Elohim!*”

## **No One Meaning**

Imagine a universe of suns.

Suns and suns and more suns. Rising suns, waning suns, eclipses, sun storms, solar flares, kiddie scribbles, Tarot suns, alchemical ones, you name it. Hundreds, maybe thousands, of these images flashed by Adam’s droopy eyes. One blending into another like a slow-running but highly sunny flipbook.

He and Andreyev had already gone through the history of China, the design of flags, the story of circles and triangles. It was mind numbing and put Adam into a state of not quite awake, not yet sleep. Once upon a time, he dreamed, there was a sun that came down from the heavens and seduced a young woman by the lake, telling her that...

“So?” said a voice that startled Adam out of his snooze. “What do you think?”

It was Andreyev in his chair, eye to eye with Adam.

“No think,” Adam said, still groggy.

“What does that mean?” Andreyev insisted.

Adam gathered his wits and woke himself up.

“I was thinking that the image was just an example. That Delores...”

“Delora!” Andreyev snapped.

“...picked it to show us a sun image.”

“To mean what?”

“There’s no one answer to that,” Adam said. “Pictures mean a lot of things. Signs have meanings depending on the context and use. That’s semiotics.”

Andreyev rolled back in his chair to allow space for a better explanation.

“Look,” Adam said, “a photograph of the sun brings to mind the sun we see in the sky because it looks like it, right?”

“Right.”

“But a drawing of the sun is different. That doesn’t look like the sun because the actual sun is just radiant light. So a drawing brings to mind the idea of the sun...the idea of rays of light, the idea that it is round, and so on. Different kinds of meaning. You focus on different things. The physical reality versus various concepts defining it.”

“Okay. So?”

“A stylized image like this symbol is different again...if you know its use, then it brings to mind other things. The sun itself maybe or just the idea of a sun. But if it was a logo for a heating company, then it would bring to mind warmth; for a lighting company, then brightness. On the Chinese flag, the circle could stand for unity and the triangles for the parts coming together. See?”

“No.”

“Images have multiple meanings depending on how they show things and how they are used.”

“So where does that leave us?”

“Nowhere. Without knowing why it was created or how it was used, we’re just guessing. How did this image, I mean *this particular one*, get picked?”

“Dunno. Delora just picked it.”

“Based on what?”

“Dunno. On some pattern it found in the flow in the Cloud that it thought was significantly related to those other things on the LinkMap.”

“Related in what way?”

“Dunno.”

“Can’t you ask it?”

Andreyev tapped his shoulder and made a clucking sound with his tongue: “Hello, Delora. This is Captain Kirk. Why’d you pick this image?”

No answer. Andreyev looked at Adam sadly.

“You say it searches for patterns in the flow of binary data, right?” Adam asked.

“Right.”

“Does that mean the binary data of *this particular* image or of sun images in general or the idea of a sun that is white? Dunno, right?”

“Right, dunno.”

“And this one has a name. It is called the Blue Sky with White Sun, right?”

“Right.”

“So maybe it’s trying to direct us toward White Suns. Not just the concept of a sun or unity or warmth, but to the idea of a white sun. In other words, the name associated with this specific image. In Alchemy, the White Sun refers to part of the process of turning base metals into gold.”

“So this is about what...The Invasion of the Mutant Alchemists?”

“Maybe. Or maybe there is another way in which the term “white sun” is used to mean something. Besides alchemy, besides China. Maybe your oracle is not suggesting that this particular arrangement of circles and triangles is significant. It is just pointing us to some use of that term.”

“Okay, fine with me,” Andreyev said. “Now what?”

“Dunno,” Adam said brightly, smiling like a kid who just got even.

### **Blessed Brother**

Back out on the street in Manhattan, the man in gray tilted his head up to the firmament, then down to his feet in their sullen shoes. Sneakers, heels, flats, and Oxfords stepped by at a rapid pace, but the lack of style and motion of his own feet seemed to

comfort him. How many more steps would any of those evil-footers have once the Re:creation began, he wondered. Yet the hope of his own walk to the Garden seemed assured if he completed this last task.

At noon precisely, he took out his phone and made the call. The voice that answered was rich and assured, like a muffled trumpet.

“Yes?” the voice said.

“I am done,” the man in gray said. “By the Breath of our Lord.”

“Are you certain?”

“Yes. Oto Selik is in Paradise.”

“So you have it with you?”

“I do have it,” he said and tapped his coat pocket just to make sure the pendant was still there.

“Then you too are blessed, Brother Hansen.”

“I want to thank you for your faith in me, Brother Leeds. When all the lost souls had given up on me, you and the Adama took me in. And gave me this sacred trust.”

“Yes, Brother. I speak for the Adama as well. You have our trust.”

Those words hit him like a blessing and the man in gray was suddenly filled with gratitude. Was it not a miracle that a man like him might come to such a point? For what had he been...a thief and a murderer? He had taken what was not his to take, lived in confinement and on the run. But then in the greatest blessing of all he had seen the Light. He had opened his heart to the Garden and everything suddenly made sense. Was that not a miracle? That a man like him, cast out and down, could receive the Breath? That he could be a vessel for the Setheria? It was too much to hope for. But it *had* happened. Happened to *him*. And that alone secured his faith in the Father.

“Eat, rest, and wait,” the voice said. “I will contact you tomorrow afternoon with the other name. You have done well. Pray for guidance. As will I.”

“I am your Brother in Adam and Seth,” he said.

“And I am yours,” said the voice.

It was all right, the man in gray thought. He had seen that, just as the truth was revealed to him. He had seen through his own path of death and destruction all the way to the shining Word at the center of time. He had seen all of it...the tidal wave of evil,

the yearning, and the end of the world. And now the coming of the Light. The Return to the Garden and the Re:creation. And the saving of the Children of the Rape. And above all the truth of the White Sun. This was the last thing he saw at night, his first wish in the morning. It was a dream of purity and rebirth. Of salvation.

*“Ella him kit of,”* the man in gray said and the voice at the other end repeated it with great depth and woe: *“Elohim kitov.”*

He put the phone away and did not budge even a single inch from where he stood for a long time, until the rapture passed.

### **Children of the Rape**

The frenzy mounted for twenty minutes, by which time the chanting and the palsy had created a heat wave and the congregants were pouring with sweat. Many of them had thrown their tunics to the floor and were naked. The Adama, who had been snaking through the crowd during all this, returned to the front. Holosound mikes picked up his voice from anywhere in the temple, but at the front he could stand on the raised platform and be seen as well as heard. He stretched out his arms as if to hug the entire crowd.

“I want to speak to you today of the Lord of our Garden. The one who gives.”

“Speak to us, Brother. Speak of the Lord!”

“Man was born in the center of the world, pure and without sin. As he walked, so walked our Lord with him.”

“The First Man walked with the Lord. We walk with the Lord.”

“But his children were betrayed by the Serpent and his children’s children are lost to the Light!”

“Woe to the Children of the Serpent, of the Rape. Woe to those lost to the Light!”

“And they descended into the Araphel and wore that darkness in their souls.”

“Woe to the darkness of the soul!”

“Woe to the dark souls!”

“And these are the lost children of our Lord. All around us and lost to him. Do you see them? Do you love them?”

“We love them. We see them.”

“Will you save them? Will you take them to Paradise?”

“We love all brothers and sisters.”

“We will save them.”

“Will you bring them back to our Lord? Back to Paradise?”

“We will!”

“We will!”

“And will you dwell in the Garden of our Lord?”

“We will!”

“And will you follow the Light!”

“We will! We will!”

“Oh my Brothers and Sisters! He has touched us with his Breath!”

“The Breath and the Light!”

*“Vayomer elohim yishretsu hamayim sherets nefesh khayave of yeofef alha arets  
alpeni rekia hasha mayim!”*

“Elohim! Elohim!”

And the Adama jumped and threw himself into the crowd where a dozen hands caught him and scurried him across the throng on a flying carpet of upraised arms all surrendered and sweaty and mighty in their lust and longing. Like the final mosh pit in the last rock concert at the end of the end of the world.

There were cries and chants and all manner of outbursts and outflow as the crowd swarmed round and round with their leader aloft and their feet trodden and bruised.

*Alleluiah!* echoed and reverberated throughout the vast hall.

## **GenUsa**

The open office space at nexxus was a marvel of patterns of information made physical. Walking through it, as Adam did on the way to the bathroom, was like window-shopping in someone’s visual cortex. Floating images and fixed ones, 2D and 3D, opaque or see-through, large and tiny as maps, charts, movie clips, photos, commercials, old woodcuts, you name it. Too much to manage. All of rocking and rolling life recorded as data, pressed and pruned into a series of images that can be misunderstood by anyone with half a brain. Adam knew that you could marvel at it, but

you could not rely on it. The images did not present the truth; they were just tidbits for the hungry mind. They could mean anything.

Puzzling over all of that made it possible for Adam to pass by a news story on one of the screens that, had he noticed it, would have proved very useful. But he did not notice it. It was a report on CNNEarth about Thurston Walden and his huge investment in GenUsa and its global disease initiative. Walden was a familiar crank character on the American scene...curt and charming, snooty and folksy, brilliant and dumb all at the same time. He looked like a big loud boy having a bad hair day. He was in his early forties but had the eyes of someone who had seen too much. He made a fortune in tech and was using his billions to fund causes that appealed to him. GenUsa was one of these.

Once all the spit kits were in, he was saying in his usual bombast, the company would have a complete genome of every single individual American citizen. Then they could begin the process of creating artisan drugs to eliminate disease and create the America we all deserved. The future is nothing to spit at, he concluded; the latest campaign tag.

The story was still running when Adam emerged from the bathroom but from behind the screen he could only see it in reverse and missed the most important part. Walden's signature was being called the "billion dollar scrawl" because that was the amount of money he had signed over to purchase GenUsa. The signature was nothing but a short scribble but it was the precise one on Andreyev's LinkMap.

Instead of paying attention to it as he might have, Adam dialed the phone number he had for Marissa one more time. One more time there was no answer. The bland message he left, not wanting to seem too pushy, sounded idiotic even to himself. He might even have used the absurd "no pressure" deflection. If she was avoiding him, he thought, she had good reason.

### **Children of Seth**

Just when it might have been possible to collapse from strain, the drums came back, joined by some kind of electro-magneto blast wave of music. Then the cloud from on high descended like a fog and laser lights dazzled the crowd below. The ceremony had become a club rave sweat orgy juiced by faith and heat. The Adama began to roam

through the crowd, hugging and clutching and rubbing, his presence creating circles of attention, his voiced picked up and blasted by the sound system.

“Oh what a day brothers and sisters. What a day!”

“The Final Day. The Day of Salvation!”

“But wait! Can you hear it? Can you hear that voice?”

“We hear it, we hear it!”

“That sound of the river and the storm, that sound of the thunder and the Light.”

“We hear it.”

“That silence of the Garden. That great and wonderful sound!”

“We hear it! What is it oh Brother? What is that sound?”

The Adama grabbed people at random and shook them hard: heads, arms, breasts, genitals, and shoulders. The congregants were in various states of exaltation or exhaustion. Crying, laughing, chanting. Some doing jigs, some saluting the sun, some having sex, some near coma.

“It is the glorious, the great, the grand sound of our Father calling us back. Calling us, his children. Back to his Garden.”

“Calling us!”

“His wanderers, His wayfarers. Back to his Garden. Back to Paradise. Back to the world he made for us.”

“Back to the Garden!”

“Back to Paradise!”

“The voice of our Father! The Light of the First Day!”

“*Elohim kitov!*”

“We are His children and He wants us back. We, the true sons and daughters, the pure ones, the first ones. Children of the White Sun!”

“The Pure Ones!”

“The holy White Sun!”

“We, whom our Lord made from the sweetness of His Breath.”

“Made Him us!”

“My brothers, my sisters! We are the ones, the first ones, the blessed ones. Elohim!”

“*Elohim kitov!*”

“*Alha arets alpenei rekia hashamayim!*”

“Sons of the Breath. Daughters of the Rib. Children of Seth.”

“We are the lovers of Seth, whom the Lord loved.”

“Save us our Father!”

“Take us back to the Garden!”

“Deliver us from The Serpent.”

“The Serpent who lay down with Eve.”

“And the descendants of the Serpent. Those who bear his mark.”.

“The mark of Cain!”

“We will save them too.”

“We will save ourselves and save them too!”

“Even the dark ones, the children of the Serpent.”

“Help us save the dark ones!”

“Help us, Father!”

“Lord of the Light and the First Day.”

“*Elohim! Elohim!*”

## **Frayn**

There were references all over the web to the idea of a white sun. Historical ones like the process of purification outlined in the alchemical text *Splendor Solis*; spiritual ones like the idea of a conscious awakening in Kundalini yoga; astronomical ones like the rising of the midnight sun at the North Pole; commercial ones like the reference to a stage of intense heat in steel production.

But the one that finally caught the attention of Adam and Andreyev was an obscure self-published book called *The Hidden Truth*. It only sold a few copies and was rotting in the graveyard of the web where loony books never die. The book was one of those paranoid, fringe screeds of crackpot faith about the true identity of God, the hidden meaning of life, and the secret nature of man. It referred to a religious movement that the author called the Re:creation. Since this was another element of the LinkMap, Adam and Andreyev paid more attention to the book than it deserved. The writing was abysmal, the

concepts muddy. Spelling unchecked. There was one paragraph break in the entire manifesto. It all seemed to have something to do with Genesis and God's will and the fate of the earth. All religions, it claimed, were heresies against the Word. Except, of course, this one. Holy hell, loving damnation, fateful rebirth. In other words, page after page of unreadable blather. Yet there in the midst was the idea of the White Sun as the blazing search for truth, the fiery spirit of the seeker, the divine spark of man. And the final test of the worthy.

The author was listed as Lorenzo Dow.

"That's a pen name," Andreyev said.

"How do you know?" Adam asked.

"Lorenzo Dow was a famous preacher in the 1800s during the time of the Second Great Awakening. Big Protestant religious revival."

"Never heard of it."

"Upstate New York was called the "burned-over district" because it was so heavily evangelized there was no more fuel to burn...in other words, no more people to convert. Whoever wrote this must have minored in religion like I did."

"Can we find him?"

"Sure, easy," Andreyev said and traced the book's original upload back to its self-published author. "His name is Milo Frayn. You'll have to go see him,"

"Me?" Adam replied.

"You're the Intag."

"The what?"

Realizing he had jumped the gun on that, Andreyev tapped the wheel of his chair and quickly added: "Well I can't go very easily."

"I'm just here to help figure out your LinkMap," Adam said.

No you're not, Andreyev thought.

Not at all, thought Dr. Marta who was still monitoring their conversation.

Or am I? Adam himself thought, with some concern.

## **Frenzy**

On an unseen signal, a kind of mega-pandemonium erupted.

The drumming burst into a calamity of shockwaves. The Adama was no longer leading but had now vanished into the crowd, which had splintered into a hundred deliriums. People cried, shouted, fell down. The spectacle had become a holy-rolling, foot-pounding, chest-thumping, earthshaking, bone-rattling, faithfest. It made the Pentecostals look like Quakers, and the Quakers like the deceased.

The Adama might actually have been having sex with one of his assistants but it was very hard to tell in the frenzy.

Twenty minutes later, soaking wet, brains of mush, heads spinning and hearts pounding, the congregation began to wind down. The fallen stood up. The dizzy righted. The overwrought pulled themselves together. The naked found their tunics. Marissa felt like she had just evolved from crud. And slowly, like a swarm finding its shape again, they reassembled into a formal crowd of individuals.

The Adama, with perfect timing and staging, had arrived at the front podium. With his assistants now on either side, he stood perfectly still and waited for silence. Due to the vastness of the hall, the energy took a long time to dissipate. But he waited and waited. When the time was right the Adama again took his pose with right arm extended, palm open, head bowed. The others did the same.

*“Vayar elohim etkol asher...”* he said.

And the crowd solemnly repeated this.

*“... asa vehinetov meod.”*

“And the Lord saw every thing that He had made, and, behold, it was very good.”

“It was very very good!”

“Very good!”

“Elohim!”

“Praise Elohim!”

*“Elohim kitov!”*

And in a breath the Flame was out, in a wink the Book was gone, in a flash the Sign vanished. And the Adama was back through the rear doors. People mulled around for a while, still trying to return to something like normality but this was tough. The fury was hard to defuse. Towels were handed out for sweat, water for dehydration, and moist cloths for orgasmic fluids.

Eventually, the tunics were returned to the shelves near the opening and street clothes were put back on. The normal rhythm of life returned. Soon the crowd was back outside on the street, back in the world and with little hint of their recent passion. Other than a faraway, blissful look in their eyes, they looked mostly like tourists waiting for lunch after an unexpected mishap on the bus.

## CHAPTER FOUR



### Tiny

In the steam room at the Equinox health club on Broadway, Adam sat on his towel with his eyes closed, letting moist air fill his lungs. The room was empty; no dumb conversations to ignore. The air was cloudy; no waiting for the steam to build. It was hot and silent and dense. Lovely. No thoughts allowed.

Until the two thugs came in.

He first noticed the sound of the door, then the sucking of the air. He knew someone had entered the steam room but did not even open his eyes. Then he felt a presence nearby as though someone was standing too close. Annoying but still not worth peeking for. He continued to breathe deeply. When he felt a nudge against his right shoulder from thick fingers, he perked up and slowly opened his eyes to find himself staring into a wall of flesh.

Adam was physically fit but lean. Now he quickly felt like a geek since the man looming over him was not so much manly as a comic villain made of pure sinew. His neck was the girth of Adam's thigh; the kind of guy they call Tiny in prison because he is anything but. He was stark naked and standing right in front of Adam, staring down at him with his eyes and his meat.

“You,” Tiny said.

“Can’t be,” Adam said. “You’ve got the wrong me.”

“Wise fucking guy.”

“I mean, I don’t know you so you can’t possibly have a problem...”

“No but we know about you.”

It was only then that Adam noticed the other guy, the one blocking the entire door with his body. If Tiny was huge, the other guy was Teeny, which is to say monstrous.

Godzilla with a bad body wax. Even though visibility was low in the steam, Adam could see him leaning back against the door, arms folded, so that no one else could enter. Adam suddenly realized he could be both homo and claustrophobic.

“Who exactly do you think I am?” he asked politely.

“Sapolsky, the doctor guy. Right?”

“Actually...”

“Fuck actually,” Tiny said and Teeny grunted in agreement.

Adam calmly explained that there had to be some kind of mistake, that he had already paid his dues, that he was not really that kind of doctor, and on and on. All of this was just a play for time while he slowly and methodically rolled his towel into a long tight cone. When he was done talking and rolling, Adam grabbed the thick end in his right hand and casually dipped the tip of the towel at the other end into a pool of water at his feet.

The two thugs must have thought he was scared fidgety because they did not stop him. But when Adam made a move to leave, Tiny pushed him back down. He was so big that he simply had to exert the force of pushing a doorbell and Adam went crashing. His hand was like the paw of some extinct animal. A carnivore.

“Look,” Adam said plainly, getting fed up with them and with himself, “I am going to get up and I am going to leave. So, if you would move aside, we can go talk about this upstairs at the juice bar.”

“Or I break your fucking jaw,” Tiny said.

“Sorry, there’s no talking to you,” Adam said.

Towel in hand, Adam made a quick thrust directly in front of his chin. It was lightning fast, one of the moves he had practiced on his boat, and Tiny never saw it coming. Like most steroidoids, massive as he was, Tiny had an ordinary set of genitals. The towel in his hand gave Adam a much wider area of impact, which he knew would take longer to hurt but which would hurt longer. It only partially worked. Tiny stepped back, grabbed his balls, barely groaned, and seemed ready to pounce way too soon.

Uh-oh, Adam thought.

## Back to Business

Back in his office after the ceremony, Wright quickly slipped into his business suit in both body and mind. He had that amazing ability of true leaders to leap from the grand cosmos to the mundane moment in an instant. He was a hands-on manager but his visionary vision never left him. So when the call from Thurston Walden came through, he was more than ready to talk golden dreams and brass tacks in the same breath.

“Secure line?” Walden said right off the bat.

“Of course. This is the *only* line on the island.”

“The GenUsa people tell me we are getting close to our goals for this year. They expect full compliance in two more years. But what about you?”

“We are almost ready.”

“Almost? What is almost?”

“We have the Sequence worked out. Just tweaking it.”

“Tweaking? I guess that is code for recovering.”

“I’m sorry?”

“You’re a terrible liar, Tom. I know that the two programmers you hired stole the program from you.”

“Well...that’s not precisely true,” Wright said, trying not to sputter over the lie.

“I know that they both had copies of it and were planning to go public with it. Or maybe tell Homeland Security,” Walden said plainly. “Or maybe sell it back to you for a ransom. I know that you need both copies back to move forward.”

“How the hell do you know all this?”

“I have my sources, Tom. “

Wright knew that he was talking about Bill Leeds, the security chief on the island. It was Walden who had recommended him and although he seemed to be earnest in his belief in the Re:creation, he did not test for the Sequence. That meant he could never be chosen. If he still believed, he might become a follower. If not, he was merely a supporter, someone working for them as a hired hand. Wright suspected that Leeds still reported back to Walden. Now he knew this to be the case for sure.

“I should never have let that happen,” Wright admitted.

“You didn’t bring them to the island and test them?”

“So your sources don’t know everything then,” Wright said, pleased.

“Well did you?”

“Yes, they both worked here for a while. One of them was chosen, the other just a follower. We hire people all the time who are not part of the movement. In this case, I was wrong to trust them.”

“My sources also tell me you have retrieved one copy of the program and are still looking for the other.”

“Which we will do very soon, All Glory to Elohim,” Wright said. “So we are still on schedule with our side of the arrangement.”

“Unless you have another security breach, of course.”

Wright thought of telling Walden where to stuff his opinions about Eden II but knew he could not say it. The island and much of the research on it depended on Walden’s money. So instead of speaking his mind, he simply mustered up a snort and left it at that.

### **Towel Trick**

With Tiny ready to pounce, Adam took two steps to the left, swung the towel around the left side of his body, and snapped it like a whip. He had not practiced that particular move since college but it came back quickly. And, of course, he knew exactly where to aim. Chotch-ka Point #19...the eyeball. Like the other kind of balls, all giants had them and they were tender.

The wet tip of the towel snapped into the hulk’s right eye at the speed of sound. He grabbed his face and went down whimpering like a wimp. The half million man-hours spent building every single muscle in his body could not protect one of his weak points. Adam only hoped that he had not burst it completely. But he had little time to worry about that as the other guy, the really big one, unfolded his arms.

Without the element of surprise, Adam knew the whip would not work a second time. He instinctively began looking around for a weapon. But it was a steam room and there was nothing. He was naked. Then through the fog he noticed the gold chain around Tiny’s neck. He was on his knees and blood was pouring through his fingers; Adam grabbed the chain and yanked. The move pulled the hulk’s head forward and

released it when the chain broke. His skull recoiled and crashed into the tile, knocking him out. Unintended but useful.

A Caspian Effect!

The chain had a heavy metal cross on the end that seemed useable. Adam was weighing it for balance when the huge man lunged. With a quick flip and snap of his hand, Adam flicked the cross at the onrushing thug and caught him in the throat. Teeny gasped, slipped in some water, went down hard and howled in pain. Adam felt bad for him but nimbly stepped over the heap of muscle on the floor and left just as two innocents walked in for a nice steam and chat. Seeing the pile of bodies and the draining blood, Adam wiped his brow to suggest that the heat was up too high. But under his breath, he thanked his old man.

Adam's father had died young and, like most boys, he felt the loss of the big lessons about money, success, women, or power. Boys assume their fathers know all this, which of course, they do not. But there was one thing he could always point to as a true legacy and that was the martial art of Chotch-ka.

The family legend was that Si Sapolsky learned it when he served in the Mossad, the Israeli spy agency. But this was myth. In fact, the name was a gag and the practice a joke. Chotch-ka was Yiddish for trinket or knick-knack and his father simply invented the whole idea to amuse his young son.

You can talk about *krav maga* with its close-in jabs and twists or the hand-grappling of *hwa rang do*. The strikes and punches of *kuk sool*. Or from Aikido, the *atemi waza* or striking methods. Economy of movement from the Philippino practice of *kali*. And above all Wing Chun, the Chinese martial art named for the delicate woman who developed it 300 years ago, with its famous 40 points of vulnerability. But this was all reading, not doing, his father said.

Chotch-ka ignored all of that. It was simply the art of using whatever knick-knack – comb, pen, bar of soap, towel – was at hand to hurt the other guy faster than he could hurt you. In this way an empty glass became a grenade that could break a collarbone and a well-thrust key could crack the sternum and stop breathing in seconds. A pen thrust with accuracy could collapse a voice box; a belt – or wet towel – became a deadly whip

against the eyes. To a boy trying to be strong in the world, this was no joke. Adam took it to heart and practiced it on his boat each day with his foam target.

Thanks to his Dad, joke or not, Adam had grown up self-protected. But perhaps not suspicious enough. Or else he would have made the connection between the two thugs and his new employers over at nexxus.

## **Salvation**

The man in gray was in Times Square when the call came.

His years on the lam had taught him stillness and the years in prison had taught him to be a contained man, a patient man. More time spent in the cradle of the Re:creation had taught him that his patience was being rewarded. Contemplating the meaning of the Father's grand plan for all of mankind, he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that his reward of eternity in the Garden was well worth everything he was being asked to do.

So as all the little people twittered around him in their twittering lives, he took out his phone slowly and with great humility. There on the screen was the next name. Elohim be praised! He felt cleansed and purified seeing it there and this he experienced as a deep desire, a longing, almost erotic. A shudder all the way down to his groin. The name was like a whisper directly from on high.

“Thank you heavenly Father, thank you Brother, thank you for this Light,” he muttered.

If people on the street heard him, they did not let on. Everyone walking had something to say to someone...on a phone, in their heads, to imaginary friends or enemies. What difference did one more nattering voice make?

Moving like someone who had won something, the man in gray put the device away and headed for the subway. He had no bags, nothing to take, nothing to forget. His immortal soul was his only possession and with this in hand, he barged through all the taxis, cars, sightseers, denizens, models, dentists and barely noticed them as he looked straight ahead towards the future. He was focused, like a predator, on the next series of moves he had to make to bring him into striking range of his next assignment. The next poor soul that he would save with a bullet and a prayer. The next name on the blessed list.

The one at 58 West Street, Apt 6.

The one named Milo Frayn.

### **No Sweat**

Without the tunic as unisex uniform, Marissa cut a more striking figure as she stood at the edge of the beach and looked at the curve of the earth at the horizon. It was a picture postcard. She stood strong but also languid and gave the appearance of seeming both familiar and exotic at the same time. The man standing behind her noticed.

“Very beautiful,” he said, walking towards her.

“Yes it is,” she said without turning.

“The view as well,” he said smoothly, stepping close enough to smell her hair.

Still she did not turn. She was used to her effect on certain types of men. After all, she looked like a model, not runway but lingerie. Lovely but only gorgeous with the right makeup; alluring but only sultry with appropriate lighting; curvy but only voluptuous with the right underwire bra. Enticing but approachable, in other words. Of course she was; that was one of the reasons she had been selected in the first place.

When Marissa finally turned to face him, she was somehow not surprised to find that it was Thomas Wright, the Adama of the Temple. But he was standing too close and so she stepped back.

“You are afraid of me,” he suggested with a smile.

“No,” she said, and then thought twice. “Well, not as much as I should be.”

“Which is not at all, I hope,” he said.

His voice was friendly, none of the volume of the morning’s prayer. And he was dressed casually in tan khakis and a black Polo shirt, which also brought him back down to earth.

“Outside of the Temple, you know, I’m really just a man,” he said in a syrupy voice.

Thomas Wright was an attractive man and he knew it. He was also more muscular in his features and physique than anyone would have guessed from the tunic. He had the open face and bland appeal of a Midwestern banker, which is precisely what he was in

his other life. But a banker who worked out, who took care of his skin, and who liked the company of women.

“A very powerful man,” she corrected.

“I believe in the Light and in the truth, if that’s what you mean” he said, “but I also live here now. I have feelings just like everyone else. Desires. I’m just a person.”

He had noticed Marissa the moment he first saw her at the fundraiser. She seemed to stand out without trying to and this intrigued him. He immediately picked her out at the congregation that morning, seen her passion, sensed the depth of her faith. Seen the way she moved and held herself. With dignity, with strength. She had honey skin and long light hair and her eyes were a color for which there were no words. He wanted to pray with her, to experience the Light with her, to find the Garden with her.

Moreover, he had seen her tunic soaked with sweat clinging to her naked body underneath and what he really really wanted above all was to get into her pants and repopulate with her. There was an uncomfortable silence as the sun began to set.

## **Thugs**

“Why exactly am I looking at a threatening email from an attorney and a bill for Emergency Room services?” Dr. Marta demanded.

“Dunno,” Andreyev said. “Is your lawyer sick?”

“It says that two men who were working for us ended up in the hospital. And somehow, Marko, I immediately thought of you.”

“I’m just a humble worker bee.”

“What is this all about?” she said in a way that erased coyness from the equation.

“Well...they were operatives we hired for a little test assignment.”

“We?”

“I hired.”

“Yes?”

“For the Adam Sapolsky file.”

“I’m not following you, Marko.”

“You said we needed to test our assumptions in the real world. To make sure the Human Factors predictions were accurate.”

“I know what I said. What I’m having trouble with is what *you did*.”

“Followed your directive. I got these two guys to...test his self-defense. That Chotch-ka stuff.”

“Let me understand this. You hired two thugs to beat him up?”

“That’s a tough way of putting it.”

“I meant test the data. Assess the numbers. Cross-check. Run it through statistics. Not assault anyone. What were you thinking?”

“Real world analysis.”

“We’re not the mob, Marko. How did you even know who to hire for this kind of thing?”

“A cousin in garbage. It worked too. He kicked the shit out of them.”

“I can see that. But there must be a better way to find this out. I don’t like lawyers, Marko, or lawsuits. Don’t do this kind of thing again.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Andreyev said, not really meaning it because he thought she did not really mean it either. Just saying it for the record, he figured.

Dr. Marta broke the connection, hoping that he understood that she was just saying all this for the record and did not really mean it. In fact, it was a good test of one of the Human Factors...ability to take care of oneself when threatened. She wondered what other real world tests he could come up with without her permission and Andreyev, of course, had the exact same thought.

### **Like a Kiss**

“Your name is Marissa,” Wright said.

“That’s right. You remember.”

“A beautiful name. Like a kiss. And it is certainly right for you.”

“And Wright is right for you.”

“Marissa Blumenau? That sounds...”

“It’s a city in Brazil my father came from. Founded by German immigrants in the 1800s. Do you always know everything about all your followers?”

“No. Just the ones that impress me. And not mine...we are all just followers of the Light.”

“Of course.”

“And I don’t know everything, Marissa. I don’t know enough about you. For instance, where do you live?”

She pointed out across the expanse of water that was now turning gold from the low sun and followed her own finger with a steady gaze as though trying to see her home on the other side of the ocean.

“Washington?”

“New York,” she said.

“New York! What a coincidence. I live there now too. That is, when I’m not here. But of course here is where I find myself more and more of the time as we get closer to completion of the island.”

“When will that be?”

“Are you thinking of moving here?”

“I don’t know.”

“We should be ready for permanent housing in two years. Although in my business you learn not to totally count on plans.”

“Which business is that?”

“The Lord’s Work,” he said, grinning. “And my other work too.”

“Which is?”

“Back on the mainland, I’m in international banking.”

“Are you?”

“Although I must say finance and the Work are not in conflict. Nor good food, nor romance for that matter.”

She smiled.

In person he was a lot less intimidating than he seemed to be when he was whipping the congregation into a frenzy. His energy there could bowl you over. But standing there at the shore, he seemed like any other guy trying to get lucky with any other gal.

“When are you going back?” he asked.

“Tomorrow night,” she said.

“So soon? That’s a shame. Can’t you stay on for a few more days? I’d like to show you some of the things we’re doing here. It’s really amazing.”

“I have to get back to my own work. A whole week is more than my company usually allows.”

“What kind of work do you do?”

“I’m a medical data analyst.”

“A skill we very much need here in Eden II. I hope you will explain to me exactly what experience you have at dinner tomorrow.”

“Job interview?”

“Maybe.”

“I won’t have time. Sorry.”

With the sun at the right angle as it was now, her eyes became opaline disks mounted carefully into large almond settings. Again, he moved a bit closer than he should but this time she did not move back. Standing her ground seemed a better tactic than retreat, she thought. Too bad he read it as surrender.

“Then how about coming with me on a little tour of our slice of heaven. I think you’ll find it interesting. Tomorrow at noon, let’s say? That will give you plenty of time to pack. We can have lunch. I’ll stop by the hotel. And perhaps we can also...”

“You’re very persistent.”

“...discuss the Word, I was going to say.”

“Well,” she said, but too late she knew that it came out weak.

“Great,” he said, “I’ll pick you up at noon then. Nice seeing you again, Marissa like a kiss.”

He put his hand on her back and with the fingers of his other hand lightly touched her hair, then turned and walked away feeling as though he had won something. His sexuality surged from it. He was a man of great influence and he knew this feeling very well. Loved it, in fact. Loved himself when he felt it.

In this case, however, he was wrong.

Watching him walk away with some swagger, Marissa’s main question was not whether she could be faithful to her beliefs and still give in to his power. Rather it was whether she could shoulder him into the Atlantic Ocean and get away with it.

Back at her hotel, Marissa found that the room was pristine again. Not just neatened up but sanitized in some way, re-groomed to within an inch of itself. Every crease straightened, every stray hair removed, every item back on its spot. If she did not know better, Marissa would have assumed that they were looking for something. But, of course, that was crazy. What could she possibly have that would interest them?

**Re: Frayn**

The building at 58 West Street was a grungy walkup with yellowy light bulbs in the halls and sleaze in the stairwells. Adam knocked on the door of apartment #6 for a long time before the door cracked open a few inches. At first he thought that the object sticking through the gap was a pair of binoculars and that he was being observed. It took him a moment to realize that he was facing the two barrels of a shotgun and that he was actually a target.

“Who sent you?” said a voice on the other side of them.

“Milo Frayn?”

“Who the fuck sent you!”

“Um...my name is Adam Sapolsky and I...”

“Fuck all that. Do you know what this is?” He wiggled the barrels. “This is a fucking double aught 12-gauge thermo-fucking-nuclear shotgun fella. You know what it will do to your head at this distance?”

“Take it easy, Milo. I just want to ask you a few...”

“Fuck fuck fuck! I said who the fuck sent you. Did *they* send you?”

“A mutual friend.”

“I don’t have mutual friends.”

“Marko Andreyev,” Adam said, stabbing in the dark.

“Never fucking heard of him.”

“Lorenzo Dow?”

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

“I want to talk to you about your book, *The Hidden Truth*. Great book.”

“Oh yeah? Well that fucking book is going to get me dead dead dead.”

“Can we talk about this inside?” Adam asked gently.

At the glacial pace of terror ebbing, the barrels pulled back and the door opened. The apartment inside was long deceased, Frayn himself barely vital. In person he was a short pudgy of a man with no personal hygiene and a shotgun that turned out to be two pieces of black PVC pipe taped together with duct tape. After dancing around the issue long enough to decide that Adam was not with “them” – whoever that was – Frayn began to pace the room and talk. Adam dared not touch the sofa with its layers of dust and mites and so leaned against the windowsill, arms folded.

“Re:creation?” Adam began.

“Fuck yes. I thought it was the beginning of the beginning. A new start. I thought God came down from fucking on high to save us from this shit hole. That’s what I thought. Well fuck me fuck me fuck me. Right?”

“So according to your book...”

“Book? What book? Who the fuck are you and how the fuck did you get in here?”

“According to *The Hidden Truth*, Milo, this is some kind of new religious movement...”

“Oh. Yeah, right. New. Fucking right. Real new.”

“That has something to do with...creation?”

“Re:creation. The colon in there...the two dots. They stand for Adam and Eve. Shit yes.”

“What is the meaning of a white sun?”

“Purity.”

“A religious movement based on purity?”

“Whoa!” Frayn said, jumping in place. He ran over to the window, shoved Adam aside, and stuck his sham gun through the blinds. “Purity, man. If you don’t have the right Sequence, you better fucking run for cover.”

“The sequence? What sequence, Milo?”

“The White Sun Sequence. I had it. A lot of good it’s done me. Fucked up my mind is what.”

“What is it?”

“Fuck if I know, or care. I’m the dead guy, right?”

“How do you know about all this?”

“They hired me to work on the program. Ask the Boz, he’ll tell you. He was the evil genius, not me. I just worked for him.”

“The Boss?”

“The Bosnian. Selik. I’d heard of him from the echoes.”

“Is that so?”

“Yeah. The echoes in Cyberia, man. Are you following me? He was a ghost hacker. They hired him for some deep coding shit. But he didn’t have the fucking Sequence, so he wasn’t chosen. See? Not like me.”

“They hired this guy named Selik...”

“To figure out who the fuck is who and who isn’t. The chosen, not just followers. Before the goddamn Coming of Araphel. God’s work or some bullshit. I got hooked on it. Real neofaith stuff. Very deep. I joined them, man. I was fucking in it; I believed in it. I wrote the book to spread the Word. But they didn’t see it that way.”

With Frayn still scoping the window for unnamed assassins, Adam noticed all the debris on the floor for the first time: empty potato chip bags, asylum notations, pills, candy bar wrappers. Paranoid hoarding. One slip of paper had a hand-drawn version of a LinkMap on it. It was similar to the one Andreyev had shown him but this one had the word ‘RE:CREATION’ in the middle, at the hub.

“What exactly is the Re:creation?” Adam asked.

“It’s them, man. The Church,” Frayn sputtered. “It all comes down to the fucking Church. Not God, not salvation. But the fucking Church with their fucking Sequence and their fucking chosen. How the fuck in hell was I supposed to know what the plan was?”

“The Catholic Church?”

Slowly Frayn turned away from the window and faced Adam, pointing the barrels directly at him. They suddenly seemed lethal though empty. It was clear that Frayn had reached a kind of psycho-tipping point and was more than ready to blow Adam away for his ignorance alone.

“Do you. Have. Any. Fucking. Idea...” he said as slow as seeping psychosis, “...what. The goddamn fuck. Is going on here, man?”

## **The Tour**

As arranged, Thomas Wright – Adama of the Church, Notarian of the Setheria, Guide to the Re:creation, MBA in International Finance – met Marissa in front of her hotel. Dressed casually in slacks and shirt and jacket, he looked like any eligible bachelor out for an afternoon date. Marissa in her shorts and sandals, looked like just the summer date anyone would have wished for.

He was waiting for her in a small electric cart, a kind of bubble on wheels from a sci-fi golf course. He had a thermos of coffee and a picnic lunch packed. Puffy clouds were hanging in a blue sky as they headed off, looking like a picturesque couple testing the waters of romance in a tropical paradise. Except that he was no catch, she was no deb, and this was no ordinary island.

“I thought I’d take you on a little tour of Eden II,” he said, “then we could have lunch overlooking the ocean. I know a really beautiful spot.”

“This whole place is beautiful.”

“Yes. We expect to be finished within two years but there’s still an incredible amount of construction in progress.”

Wright guided the cart, which could reach impressive speeds on a flat surface, around the small lanes and streets of the main concourse, all illuminated from below. They passed by two restaurants, a movie theater, shops, benches, residences, the health club, a few other people in carts, bicyclists, some drifting along on some kind of small rolling platform, strollers and joggers. It was all like the Village from some old TV show Marissa once saw, but with much cooler technology.

“There are only a few hundred folks staying here right now,” he said. “The rest are just visitors like you. But that’s going to change drastically.”

“I read in your brochure that this island is artificial. Is that true?”

“Amazing isn’t it. A kind of terraforming. This is the largest artificial island in the world. It cost 6 billion dollars just to create the floating scaffold. Somewhere down below us there is a vast web of steel tubes covered with airfoam concrete that is tethered down to the ocean floor.”

Amazing was right, she thought, but creepy too. A fake island with buildings that were all too spanking new to have any charm or history. Like some control freak’s idea

of an idyll rather than a real one. Mayberry meets Vegas? Everything built from a master plan and neat and clean as a scout's belt buckle.

They were on one of the roads leading out of the town when Marissa noticed glints of light in the distance that dazzled even on a bright day. As they approached it, she realized that this was another building, a huge one, some kind of Crystal Palace. A fantastic glass structure that glittered like Oz ahead.

“Shall we go to the Garden?” Wright asked, knowing she would nod and she did.

Wright pressed the pedal and raced forward, throwing them both back into the contour seats. He liked giving people a thrill.

“The Temple on the other side of town, as you've seen, is the largest house of worship anywhere on earth. Bigger than that one in Texas. But even that is dwarfed by the Garden.”

The structure looming before them looked like a glass miniworld or perhaps a wet dream for botanists. It was a complex architecture of clear panels and aluminum struts that could have enclosed all of ancient Alexandria yet looked as though some giant kid might have made it out of a construction set. They sped inside through an airlock and were soon tooling around in Nature with a big fat N.

Inside the building, the entire ecosystem of the primordial earth was thriving. Ancient plants with leaves like flying carpets waved in an artificial breeze. Full forests displayed a dense jangle of foliage and vegetation. Thick vines, wild orchids, towering trees all vied for room under the glass enclosure. An inner lake, blue as the first day on earth, was big enough to windsurf on. Take all the Botanical Gardens in all the big cities of the world and throw them together for a tiny hint at the vastness of this terrarium on super supplements.

Wright parked the cart and led Marissa on a thin metal walkway through the middle of the Garden. There were not only plants in this full-scale Garden of Eden. It seemed to be also stocked with the beasts of the field and the birds of the air, the fish of the sea. There were crawly insects underfoot, a massive snake dangled from a branch, some kind of macaw was cawing. Enough animals to make Noah wheeze.

“It replicates the way our scientists believe the earth looked back on the Seventh Day of the Light.”

“Good Lord,” Marissa exclaimed.

“Amen,” said the Adama, gazing in awe. “A-men.”

## **Orbital**

Adam spent the rest of the afternoon trying to both calm Frayn down enough to talk and rev him up enough to explain. Nice afternoon...like a stint in an asylum. Frayn was a psycho on a high flame and it was hard to tell the facts from the fission. As near as Adam could figure it, Frayn had been hired by some kind of religious cult to work with a master programmer, some Bosnian hacker. But Frayn became a follower. He called it the Church or the Setheria or sometimes just *them*. Precision was not his strong suit. They believed in something called the Re:creation and were obsessed with something else that he called the White Sun Sequence.

He wrote a crackpot book about it but as he started to understand just what they were up to, he changed his tune and went loony. When he and the Bosnian were exiled, they stole the program and copied it onto two computer chips hidden on pendants. They were trying to figure out what to do with the information they had but they waited too long. Frayn was convinced that the Bosnian was dead and that a mysterious man in gray was coming to kill him too. It had been a long strange trip...and he had gone completely nutsy-fagen in the process. Adam had no idea what was true and what was figment.

Certi fiable, he thought as he finally left Frayn standing at the window, toy gun in hand, mumbling to himself.

Back at Dr. Marta’s office at nexxus later that day, Adam sat on the other side of a huge onyx desk that could serve as a surgical slab, as he tried to explain all his to her and to Marko Andreyev doing a slow rotation in his chair in the corner. The desk, of course, was also a large screen currently serving up charts and graphs. She had been comparing Adam’s stats with Marissa’s to make sure her intuition about them was right and it was.

Marissa was afraid of being used and he was not a user. He was prone to depression and she was not an enabler. They were both good looking; they had the right nose-to-eye ratio across cultural samples. They had similar scores on the Weissman Sociability Scale. Even the height measures were right. Marissa was five-ten, which was tall enough to be regal not gawky. In four-inch heels, they would be almost the same

height if he had shoes on. In other words, equals. Four-inch heels, according to the research, meant drama. Five-inch heels meant sex. Six-inch heels meant expensive sex. The height formula worked for them like a charm. So did all the other metrics.

“Okay,” Dr. Marta said, closing that screen. “You were saying?”

“That the guy is Plutonic,” Andreyev summed.

“Platonic?” Dr. Marta misheard. “Friendly?”

“He lives on Pluto,” Andreyev explained. “Spaceball. Orbital.”

“What is he talking about?” Dr. Marta said, turning to Adam for help.

“That Frayn is crazy. And paranoid. Sputtering a lot of nonsense. But he did refer to a bunch of things on your LinkMap. The White Sun for example. He said that it is some kind of search for purity in a movement they call the Re:creation...”

“Recreation?”

“You have to put a colon in there,” Adam said, poking the air twice to demonstrate.

“The two dots represent Adam and Eve he said.”

“Orbital, like I said,” Andreyev repeated.

“And this movement,” Adam went on, “is somehow connected to the Church.”

“The Church? The Catholic Church?”

“He didn’t take too kindly to that idea.”

“The Church of the Demented Mind,” Andreyev said. “Lots of members.”

“Church of the White Sun?” Adam suggested.

“Let’s look into that,” Dr. Marta said to Andreyev. “Get Roxie involved. She’s good on this kind of fringe.”

“What about asking Frayn? Bring him in for an interview,” Andreyev suggested.

“He’s not exactly operating on full neurons,” Adam replied.

“Can’t anyway,” Dr. Marta said.

She had been studying one of her screens and now brought it up on a floating mist over the desk so they could all see it. It was a report on a police blog about a death being investigated at 58 West Street, Apt 6.

“I just saw him a few hours ago,” Adam said. “Nice of him to wait to kill himself until I left.”

Andreyev and Dr. Marta looked at each other with concern that Adam had not picked up on the obvious fact that Frayn was too far gone to kill himself and that someone was closing in. Fast.

## **Picnic**

It took half an hour to ride through the Garden on a winding pathway. All around them the earth – or at least a healthy sampling – seemed to be breathing and sweating and growing and decaying. There was rain in the tropical forest and a tide at the ocean, two primates vying for a female in the jungle, sunlight waning in the canopy where moths lived. The whole First Earth stuffed and crunched into a model you could shoot into space to restart the planet, with a big enough booster rocket.

“This is unbelievable,” Marissa said, as they stopped to admire a complex wasp nest the size of a lung.

There were more pathways through the foliage that he wanted her to explore but she chose not to. It was humid and dense there. Crickets chattered. An exotic bird with a long orange beak landed abruptly on the leaf in front of her. It looked like a cross between a raptor and a pigeon and eyed her suspiciously as though she were in the wrong epoch. Wright put his hand out but the bird turned down his gesture and flapped off. He smiled at her and for a moment Marissa thought he was going to call her Jane but in fact he had Eve on his mind.

“Only the beginning,” he said. “When this is complete, we are going to start all over again. Under the guidance of our Lord. But this time, we’re going to do it right!”

“How did all this get here? We’re out in the middle of the ocean.”

“The airstrip and boat dock were built first, so everything is either flown or shipped in by tanker. All the workers you see too. They’re not really believers, just helpers. Temporary. How did you come in?”

“Helicopter.”

“We’ll have our hovercraft running very soon.”

“This is really hard to fathom,” she said. “Where does the energy come from?”

“Geothermal and wave conduction for heat and cooling. Sun, wind, and tide for electricity. We get fresh water by nuclear enhanced seawater condensation. We are

completely self-sustaining here. Plus, we can move the whole island if we need to. The world may perish but we would survive.”

“That’s awfully handy,” she said but he did not pick up the barb in her voice.

Outside again, they emerged onto a lawn that ran all the way to a sandy beach at the edge of the land mass. Wright stopped the cart, took out a silver case and escorted Marissa onto the beach. She took off her shoes and felt the sand squeeze through her toes. Ordinary sand, grainy and warm. There was a lovely wind but the sun was too bright and so Wright, ever attentive, opened the case, took out a fabric disk and shook it. It sprung open like a spinnaker into a protective shield that he anchored into the sand. Their own private sunshade. They nestled inside of it and had sandwiches and a salad and some wine. Behind them the leaves of the Garden seemed ready to burst through the glass.

“May I?” Wright asked as he took something out of his pocket.

He was holding a thin silver chain with a small pendant and motioning to put it around her neck. She hesitated at first but Wright was hard to resist simply because he was so attentive. She pulled up her hair and as he reached around to close the clasp, his lips came terribly close to hers. But then he moved back to admire the necklace on her.

“Yes, perfect. This is one of the symbols of the Re:creation and it looks perfect on you.”

She had tested positive for the Sequence and Wright knew that she would submit to the movement, to him. It was written inside of her. The pendant was simply a gesture, a sign of commitment. He was accurate, in a way. Marissa was a believer, not in him and his faith but in the possibility of goodness, the promise of trust. And despite painful lessons to the contrary, she still believed. That was what was written inside.

She took the pendant in hand and saw the two strange characters on it. They looked like the number 64. Did this mean that she was now branded by him? Or going steady with him? Or simply going deeper undercover?

“*Elohim kitov*,” he said, raising his glass in a toast.

“Yes,” she said and brought the glass to her lips.

He was drinking her in, swooning at the romance of it all, and therefore did not notice that she did not actually take a sip.

## **Walden**

“There’s another thing too,” Andreyev said to Dr. Marta as he and Adam were starting to leave her office.

“What is it?”

“That scribble on the LinkMap refers to Thurston Walden. It’s his signature.”

“Then why not show his picture?” Adam asked.

“Because his face is not important to Delora. The signature is. It’s in the news now because he signed papers to buy GenUsa for a billion dollars.”

“The spit people?”

“Yes. It’s that purchase that Delora must think matters in connection to all this.”

“Why?” Adam asked but instantly knew it was a dumb question. They had no idea why and were expecting him to find out.

“GenUsa is trying to record the full genome for every single human being in the country,” Dr. Marta mused. “For designer drugs, for risk testing, for personalized medicine, for genetic enhancement. Walden must think it is the next growth industry.”

“But that also means that Walden and GenUsa are somehow connected to this Re:creation thing Frayn was talking about.”

“And a dog biting a man in the ass,” Adam added. “And the Sanitation department.”

“Keep working on all that,” Dr Marta said. Then, turning to Andreyev, she added: “But Marko, let’s try to stay on this side of the law, okay?”

“You got it,” he said.

Was there a tic, a twitch, a blink, she wondered. A hint of a wink? Impossible to say.

## **The Labs**

“These buildings might interest you professionally,” Wright said.

There were heading back to the town of Paradise by a different route after their picnic by the sea and reached a complex of structures. Wright had just brushed his hand

against hers. She did not pull it away but she did not move closer either. Wright was exactly the kind of man who took that for total submission.

“We have some of the most advanced labs in the world here,” he added.

“Labs?” Marissa repeated.

“Cutting edge research in a variety of areas.”

The science enclave included seven buildings designed to resemble the stele of some ancient civilization, made of brick that had been warped and bent into cylindrical, curvy shapes. The place reminded Marissa of 15<sup>th</sup> century Persian astronomical towers she had once visited on a tour. They stopped the cart in a plaza at the center of the buildings where a large metal sculpture representing the earth was gushing with water that fell like a tidal wave into a reflecting pool.

“These buildings house our various science facilities,” Wright said, pointing in a circle around them. “That one is Earth Science...”

“You study Earth Science?”

“Yes, we have located the original Garden of Eden. Eden I, so to speak. In the United States.”

“Not in the Middle East?”

“Middle West. The Garden of Eden was in the area we now call Missouri. Jefferson City to be exact. Our paleo-geologists have found evidence that four ancient rivers came together right there, as it says in Genesis. The Missouri river is the remnant of two of them. America is the home of humanity. Isn't that comforting?”

Marissa nodded her head instead of shaking it. He was speaking plainly, as though explaining currency exchange rates to an investor. He really believed this crap, she thought. The buildings all around them had heavy iron doors that were either for architectural impact or security. Or both. As Wright drove the cart in a circle around the fountain, Marissa noticed symbols engraved on each door.

“Fascinating,” she said. “And the other labs?”

“Let's see,” he said. “There's patapsychology, mystical studies, teleoastronomy, thanatology, biogenics, metalinguistics. We still have some facilities back on the mainland too. But we're hoping to move it all here by the end of Phase One.”

“An interesting selection.”

“We are interested, of course, in any of the sciences that relate to the Truth. And we are rather well financed, as I’m sure you realize. So we have creation labs working on new theories of evolution and descendency. Biogenics dealing with...”

“It’s the new word for eugenics, isn’t it? The improvement of the human race.”

“Exactly. But based on purely scientific principles.”

“And what exactly are they hoping to discover there?”

“I’m a banker remember? I really couldn’t tell you to the degree that would interest someone of your knowledge. All I can say is that we are doing the Work of the Lord here. We are looking into scientific support for the Word. The Great Setheria. Probing into the physical universe to uncover more mysteries of our Truth.”

“I’d love to see inside one of them,” Marissa said.

Wright indulged her. He stopped the cart and led her to one of the doors that had a symbol of a winged staff with two twisting snakes on it. On a small screen next to the door, he tapped a series of blank keys and the door opened. But before they could go in, Wright got a call on his cell and stepped away to take it. Marissa waited but when he came back, his mood had turned impatient.

“I’m sorry, my dear, but I must go back to the office to take care of something. An important conference is coming up. We will have to continue the tour some other time.”

“This is all very myster...”

“Impressive, I know. Some day this island will be the place where, with the help of the Lord, we will wipe the name of Cain from the face of the earth. We will begin his grand Work again. The right way this time. With the Children of the Breath and true knowledge as our guide not our downfall.”

“Yes,” she said softly.

“I know you’re leaving tomorrow but I wonder, can I see you after the evening prayer?”

“I have to pack.”

“After you pack then?”

“I have to sleep.”

“Certainly not all night.”

He was smiling and pushing and hoping for the best. And she was smiling and pushing back and hoping for an emergency call. But her phone was silent.

“All right,” he said, getting the hint. As the Adama of the movement, he had trained himself to know when to let certain things unfold in their own time. “Then can I call on you in New York? We have the conference here on Thursday. But I should be back in the city next week. May I? Call you that is?”

“Sure, Tom,” she said.

In her head she was saying that he could call because he could do anything he wanted to do. He was an adult. It did not mean that she would answer. But in his head it meant she was all his and forever would be, amen.

Words are a terrific way to dupe yourself.

## CHAPTER FIVE



### **Kidnapped**

On his way home from the offices of nexxus two days later, Adam was walking through the Boat Basin underground garage when a car tooled around the driveway and pulled up right behind him. He paid no attention at first; taxis stopped there frequently. By the time he realized that the driver had jumped out and was almost on top of him, it was too late. The driver was a burly man and had the momentum so that in one smooth move he pushed Adam to the car, opened the back door, and shoved him onto the seat. Then he slammed the door and raced back to the driver's seat.

Instantly the door was locked and the car was moving fast out of the garage and up onto the street. Adam struggled with the handle, punched at the window, pounded on the plexi wall between the seats but it was no use. He was going wherever he was being taken and soon the car was speeding through the streets across town, swerving and weaving at a frantic pace.

“Where are you going?” he shouted.

No answer.

“Who the hell are you?” he demanded.

No answer.

“Do you have orders to kill me?” Adam yelled.

No answer, but he could see the intense glare in the driver's eyes in the rearview which was an answer of sorts.

The car sped across town at breakneck speed through red lights, around taxis, just missing pedestrians. Adam was searching for something he could use as a weapon – the seatbelt? – when the car came to a screeching halt. On the sidewalk waiting was another man in a business suit who opened the door, then grabbed Adam's arm and yanked him out. Adam was reaching into his pocket to use his keys as brass knuckles when he suddenly recognized the building they were standing in front of. It was the 92<sup>nd</sup> Street Y.

“At last,” his escort said, “we were worried you weren’t going to make it.”

“Make it? Make what?” Adam asked.

“Yes well, we have quite a crowd tonight.”

“Crowd of who?”

“They’re getting a bit anxious just waiting, you see?”

“Waiting for what?”

“Haha. Your lecture of course. How amusing.”

“My lecture?”

“We’re a bit tardy, so let’s pick up the pace, shall we?” the man said, guiding Adam rather brusquely by the elbow to the front door. “You really like to cut it close I see, Dr. Sapolsky.”

“Dr. Who?” Adam said, still rocking and reeling.

“Haha. Yes, well very amusing,” he replied, speeding along. “Let’s hurry up, shall we? Quite a crowd.”

## **The Conference**

The Conference took place in the second floor conference room of the mall in the Town Square. There were 23 participants, men and women from all over the country. They had been flown in at great expense, first class all the way, and had been treated royally at the island. They were the Adamas, the leaders of what they all hoped would become the final religion. They had all tested for the Sequence and represented thousands of worshippers, believers who might yet hope to enter Paradise. It was a tiny group by religious standards but an expanding one. A committed one.

A fanatical one.

Dressed in ordinary clothes – this was a staff meeting not a ritual – they sat around an immense oak conference table. A glass wall along the length of the room looked out, like all the buildings on the island, onto the sea. It was a cloudy day but the view was brilliant and seemed to stretch forever. It would have been hard even for a skeptic to deny that there was some kind of divine blessing over all this.

Officially there was no leader but by consensus Adama Thomas Wright, as the host, took it upon himself to organize the meeting. Naturally he began with a prayer.

*“Vayomer elohim yehi meorot birkia hashamayim,”* he intoned and the others joined in for the rest, *“lehavdil bein hayom uvein halaila vehayu leotot ulemoadim uleyamim veshanim.”*

One of the attendants used an electronic fire starter to ignite a bowl of oil sitting in a recess in the middle of the table. The delicate flame representing the Light of the First Day flickered gently. The Adamas all took their seats: high-backed chairs reminiscent of Medieval thronery but with sensi-touch heat and massage.

“My Brothers and Sisters,” Wright began, “thank you all for coming from such great distances to be here today.”

“Always easier in First Class,” said Adama William Kendrick, a lawyer from Wisconsin.

They laughed.

“I was going to say...and for making the necessary sacrifices,” Adama Thomas Wright said, “but I suppose leg room is not one of them.”

“Amen,” said a number of the participants.

“Thomas, I hate to sound like an accountant, but I am one,” said Adama Dina Ross of Ross & Lane from Ohio. “Where exactly are we regarding the Re:creation?”

“Yes, thank you, I was planning to start with just that information. I know that each of you was given a tablet when you arrived. It’s not stone or gold but, of course, we are the religion of information not poppycock. If you would access your tablets now, we can all look at the timeline together.”

The participants followed Wright’s directions and were soon scrolling through a massive document on their screens. Pages and pages of projections and specs and computer renderings and mobile charts and morphing graphs. All outlining in minute detail the progress of the Sequence and the computer program that would implement it, the unfolding of the Re:creation and how it was all expected to play out over the next two to five years until Eden II became the final destination for humanity.

### **Damn Lecture**

The damn lecture, of course!

He had completely forgotten about that. Adam made them periodically around town as a way of picking up some extra cash, and explaining just what his area of expertise was to those who had no idea, which was pretty much everyone.

Inside the hall, the crowd was restless from waiting, the lights had become annoying and the sound irritating. It was like one of those nightmares Adam occasionally had about speaking to an unruly crowd, forgotten notes, a failing PA system, and that maddening need to find a bathroom. Yet there he was, alone at a podium facing a rowdy audience, the mike wavering, without notes. And he really did have to go.

Unprepared, unnerved, he started his talk, barely listening to himself. Semiotics, he said, was the study of sign systems. It was about how the things we make – like sounds or marks or objects – are imbued with meaning. Things matter because they mean something and this mattering relies on codes of communication. Letters forming words, colors and shapes forming images, body movements expressing feelings, clothes showing attitudes. Any thing in the world can become a sign rich with meaning; semiotics studies the rules of that process.

The audience had settled down but the blank stares became a different kind of nightmare...the one where you cannot form words anyone can understand. He tried again. Because we have the power to inject meaning into a meaningless world, there are infinite signs out there that lead to signs in the mind then to more signs in the world and in the mind through countless generations of association, connection, linkage. The universe itself may not have any meaning or purpose; it certainly did not for Adam. But there was an endless universe of meaning, or semiosis, created by us with our compulsive thinking.

He kept at it but the talk was so dim and vague that he was already losing the room and some folks were leaving in a grump. It was time for an example, he thought, something concrete to light the way. He found a photo of an apple on his phone and projected it onto the big screen behind him.

Any object can be a sign, he explained, whether it is audible or visible or tangible, or even something we just think of. An apple is just a certain arrangement of atoms; indifferent to the cosmos. But it becomes a sign for us when we give it meaning – something to eat or throw or observe. An image of an apple is a sign too. Images are just

gobs of color but they become signs when we take them to be more than that. A photo of an apple brings to mind the object and any associations we have to it like tastiness if you like them, nastiness if you don't. Not to mention keeping the doctor away, original sin, the laws of gravity and so on. An icon of an apple – like that familiar one showing a contour with a bite missing and a single leaf – brings to mind not apples or bites or leaves but a company of the same name that makes cool products. A kid's drawing of an apple brings to mind talent if it is your kid, cliché if it is someone else's. Cezanne's apple is about art and light and technique; Magritte's apple about irony and mystery...

More people began to leave until the auditorium began to echo from the lack of bodies to absorb the sound.

For our sign making minds, Adam trudged on, there is no difference between an actual apple and the vast sea of images of it. We perceive them with the same eyes and brain and imbue them with meaning through the same process of thinking. That is the reason that images are so important to us. They are all around us everywhere but evanescent, vaporous, transient. Yet we pack them with significance based on our needs to understand, know, communicate, record, make sense of.

In this way, images have become the world to us. We have to search for reality, for the physical objects we live with, in between them. Atoms retreating behind the tidal wave of pixels. Screens everywhere creating a fake reality more real than anything touchable. Images on the march and so on.

More departures until there were only stragglers left: a man with a toupee in the front too tired to get up; an older woman on the right with her chin on her chest, asleep and snoring; another woman in the back, mouth wide open, dreaming, perhaps, of apples more appealing than Adam's.

Any image, in other words, was a sign in an endless web of semiosis, with multiple meanings on many levels depending on cultural use, personal history, perceptual implication, and more. Understanding the meaning of any sign or image was therefore never concluded. Instead it was a journey, a quest, a thesis...

Finally accepting defeat, Adam went back to his phone to erase the apple. But as he did so, the LinkMap came up on the big screen. Front and center on the map was the EWN image. A logo like this, he announced, although he was the only one listening,

could mean many things. Many things. Some obvious – the last letters of the word *handsewn*? Some obscure – the acronym for the Endless Wanderers Network? Some tricky – the top half of a compass showing east, west, and north? Some hidden – a sign itself in some other code system?

Code system.

Like maritime letters. Or the NATO phonetic alphabet. Airports were designated by codes. Three-letter ones. LaGuardia was LGA. Was EWN an airport?

By the time he was done babbling, all the attendees had left to get some air, some peace of mind. Something tangible like a snack. Adam knew he had screwed up but one of the side effects of Gladivil was a certain numbness to being an ass. In any case, that feeling was instantly erased when the one person left waiting in the auditorium turned out to be Marissa Blumenau.

“That was a very interesting lecture,” she said. “A bit incoherent...but interesting.”

“I was hoping to see you again,” Adam said. “I called a few times but there was no answer.”

“I was away on that trip I told you about. There was no cell service.”

“Is there really a place on earth like that?” he asked.

“I’m not sure it’s actually on earth, but I was there,” she said.

Up close, they made lingering eye contact. Adam’s eyes were amber; hers were a sort of blue that was also green but with purple specks. Somewhere in the middle, the colors seemed to merge into an unnamed hue that caught them both off guard. Semiotics in action.

“I’ve never actually seen a color like this,” he said, moving in for a deeper look. “Colors are an area of mine.”

“I gathered that from what I could gather from your talk.”

She looked too and even closer, his eyes struck her as the color of caramel, melted...on vanilla ice cream.

“You think so?” he said, as though reading her thoughts.

“About the caramel?”

“About the lecture. That you gathered something from it. Because I thought I made no sense at all.”

“Oh that. Yes. No, you did.”

“How did you happen to come here tonight?”

“The CIA sent a notice about it,” she lied. “I’m on the emailing list.”

“Why? What exactly do you do?”

“Medical data analysis. I was working in Africa for a while helping a humanitarian effort there.”

“You’re a doctor?”

“I went to medical school but I never practiced. I realized that I could be of more help studying overall health patterns than treating individuals.”

“Patterns?”

“Data patterns. We tracked the flow of refugees from South Sudan fleeing violence and food shortages, for example. The map we made helped us to figure out where to most effectively put mobile clinics. We were also able to control the spread of cholera by pinpointing outbreak locations. It’s humanitarian metrics.”

“So you’re kind of a gorgeous, geeky doctor,” he summed.

“If you say so.”

“It’s perfect. My mother would be happy.”

“Is she a doctor?”

“No, she was a Jewish mother.”

## **Homeward**

With the new prize in hand, it was time for the man in gray to return home.

Not to that scuzzy apartment on the Lower East Side with the rats and the roaches that they rented for him. He had only stayed there once. No, home meant to his new home on Eden II island. In fact, there was no need to return to the apartment at all. It was completely vacant anyway. He had long since renounced all his belongings, left his earthly goods, and abandoned his past. He was like a monk who had traded his material life for piety, minus the piety and any trace of compassion. Besides the clothes he wore, the man in gray had nothing but his phone, his gun, and the two pendants he had taken from Oto Selik in the warehouse in Brooklyn and now from Milo Frayn in downtown Manhattan. The pendants were so small that they could be mistaken for debris but he

kept them safe in a hidden pocket of his coat.

His instructions were simple...to get himself down to the port in North Carolina by any means and then take the hovercraft to the island. As he headed to the train station, a slight sprizzle of rain felt good against his face. His work was done and he felt buoyant. Liberated. There would be no more holding cells, jails, prisons, penitentiaries. Now he could look ahead to a life of silence and solace in the Garden, in the presence of Elohim and in the shadow of Seth.

Unless, of course, there was someone else they wanted him to assassinate, in which case he would happily follow his calling to the next murder.

## **Loyalty**

It took hours for Wright to guide his guests through the material, including stopping for clarifications, explanations, and implications. Wright was a natural leader, charming and focused, and more than willing to answer every question. After all, the Adamas were the generals of the holy war. They had to understand the plan and support it or else their triumph was doomed.

“Shall we have lunch now?” he asked as he signaled to some aides to roll in the moveable feast. Unlike most other movements trying to fix the world, the Re:creation was not particular about diet. The bounty of food, as they saw it, was a big part of God’s plan for man. So was sex for that matter. Money too. The Lord of the Garden, in their view, had serious appetites. The Adamas filled their plates from the grand buffet of appetizers and entrees and desserts, then returned to their seats trying not to slop food on the hardware or the shiny tabletop.

“Is this timeline you have here really reasonable?” asked Adama Harlan West from Maryland.

“We believe it is, Harlan. Or we would not have committed it to paper.”

“But it isn’t paper, is it? It’s pixels. Very slippery of you, Tom.”

“I think Harlan’s asking an important question. The third phase and Salvation...in only five years?”

“We think so,” Wright insisted.

“Depends on the work achieved with your little computer program. And there’s no mention in here about how that is progressing. Not that I can find.”

“Of course not,” Wright said. “What I need from you today is your understanding of – and your commitment to – the broad strategy so that we can move forward.”

“How can we commit to all this without a sense of whether or not you can actually implement the White Sun sequence on a nationwide scale?”

“I see my plans for getting out of here today without having to answer that question just went down the tubes. But this is not something that I can discuss with you.”

“Why not? I’m sure you discuss it with Walden.”

“For the very reason that you are so concerned about it. It is absolutely central to the evolution of the Work. As you all understand I’m sure, we cannot risk any information about this leaking out to the world. It must remain top secret.”

“But everything else is laid out in excruciating detail.”

“I am telling you that we cannot under any circumstances afford to have this specific piece of information leak out. Our progress is too precious to us.”

“Surely you don’t suspect that any of *us* would let that happen, Tom.”

“Not on purpose, no. But information finds a way. A snippet here, a detail there. A rumor, a hint. And pretty soon a report on 60 MinutesCloud.”

“Can you at least tell us how far we have progressed then?”

“That information *is* in the document. There are three phases to the Re:creation. We have established the truth of the White Sun sequence and we have begun construction of Eden II. We will continue with this and finish our work. Then we will implement it in Phase Three. But that is all I can say.”

“And you still think...”

“This involves complex computer analysis, Dave. It takes time. We are moving along according to plans, with the help of our friend Mr. Walden. You all know how this works. If our Father wanted us to do this quickly He would have put silicon chips in our brains.”

“I’m not worried that the timeline is too optimistic; I’m concerned that it’s too long,” said Adama Loren Crane from Florida. “The Children of the Rape continue to gain power everywhere.”

“I agree. My people also want to be reassured. They want to know when we can hope to...”

“I understand all this,” Wright said. “Believe me I do. But there’s nothing more I can say about it. Are you impressed by all that we have done so far? The work on the island? The research facilities? The infrastructure? Then you simply must have faith in me and in our organization. And of course in the Father who set us on this path. It is after all in our Lord’s hands. Isn’t it?”

And that was that, simply because Wright knew what all leaders know. That you can always shut people up by challenging their loyalty. But he also knew, along with every leader throughout history, that that loyalty was as fragile as the next blunder.

### **Mousse**

Dinner at Season of Bewitched seemed right. Not too fancy, not too casual. Not too pricey, not that cheap. Not too this, not too that. And on and on.

Two years after his divorce, Adam was still out of dating practice and sitting nervously at the bar waiting for her. Was this place “not too” to the point of utter boredom? Was this even a date? he asked himself. Of course it was you idiot, he answered. What do you do on a date? You try not to make a damn fool of yourself, was the sharp reply.

Marissa saw him having this chat with himself at the bar, turned away for a moment, caught her breath, turned back and smiled with confidence. Only then did she walk over. Beautiful women are not as composed as you might think. She too had been out of a relationship long enough to be nervous, and in one for long enough to be cautious. Her fear of being used again almost pushed her out the door but Adam looked so distracted sitting there that he seemed incapable of guile.

None of this was an accident either. They had both scored high on the Insecurity under Desire scale. Match point!

Idle chat, gentle questions, soft banter, look into her eyes, pay attention...Adam rehearsed the rules of simple seduction. Luckily Marissa read the same article, memorized the same tricks, did the same. Above all, say the rules, do not under any

circumstances suggest that this is a relationship or might become one. Back off, play it warm but cool, stay gentle. No pressure.

Meanwhile, down in the grit, Adam felt himself longing to feel the skin on her neck and Marissa wondered what his shoulders were like to grasp.

At the table after ordering – fish for her, to avoid the thought of the farm; chicken for him to avoid the scent of the sea – they leaned forward towards each other. This was a sign, even to the waiter, who could not have cared less, that something was happening. But they tried to fight it like good soldiers in the war on sudden intimacy.

“What’s up with the CIA thing?” she asked.

“I’m sorry?”

“Communications Institute of America? It’s where we met.”

“Oh that. No clue. Never heard of them,” he said. “I got a nice looking invitation.”

“So did I,” she said. “Very elegant.”

“Right. It looked fancy and so I thought...why not.”

“But at least you’re in the field of communications. I think I got that much from your lecture.”

“Well I am a semiotician,” he said, like an apology. “But I hate to use that word.”

“Why?”

“Nobody knows what it is. I don’t think my presentation helped.”

“What is it?”

“See what I mean?”

“Really...what is a semiotician?”

“Who knows?”

“You must.”

“A kind of plumber, I guess.”

“You have a Phd in copper tubing?”

“Plumbing for meaning. Semiotics is the study of communication as mediated by stuff. Words, signs, symbols. And images. How we use them to make meaning, make sense of the world.”

“It’s philosophy.”

“Yes, but practical.”

“You mean as in an actual job?”

“Sometimes. As a consultant. I work for companies that want to make sure their communications work. That the images they put out carry the message that they need them to. I worked for the NYPD once.”

“They have a semiotics division?”

“They should. You know the police sketches you used to see all the time? Victims of crimes are asked to remember the faces of their attackers and describe them to a police artist. Sometimes they use an Ident-A-Kit with sample features to help the process.”

“Sure.”

“Ever notice how they all tend to look the same? All the faces look like what people imagine criminals look like. Minorities mostly and mean. That’s the problem with it. When you ask people to visualize their attackers they draw on their imagination, which can be biased. People in cities think minorities or the latest immigrant groups commit all the crimes. This influences the drawings and the drawings then communicate our ideas about crime rather than the memory of an event. The drawings take on a different kind of meaning...implying not identifying.”

“You consulted on that?”

“I suggested changing the procedure by creating sets of faces of different types based on visual characteristics. Square jaws, small eyes, thick lips. Now victims look at a set of six faces and pick the closest one. That leads to a new set of six and so on. Features, expressions, and race are all mixed up together. They keep picking that way until they get a face that they think works. Comparing and choosing, not creating based on biases. That works better. In other words, images are signs with various types of meaning. Semiotics in action.”

### **Aleph-Lamed**

Aware that he was probably talking too much, Adam saw that Marissa was leaning over the table and creating a soft cleavage. Very yummy; the coded meaning of the female bosom to the American male. You could write a dissertation about that. Then he noticed the tiny pendant she was wearing around her neck on a thin chain. It was a small

square piece of brushed silver with the number 64 etched onto it. He stared at it for a few moments, which Marissa took to be ardor. She was wrong. The pendant posed a real problem.

“What’s that?” he asked, pointing. “It’s very nice.”

“This? Oh, just a gift someone gave me recently. I forgot that I was still wearing it.”

She took it off and held it by the chain to prove that it was temporary. It occurred to her that Adam might assume she had a boyfriend but, not sure if jealousy was a good ploy or not, she added: “Just an admirer. No big deal.”

Adam studied the pendant carefully to make sure that he was right. He was. It was another version of the same number that appeared on the LinkMap back at nexxus.

“What does 64 mean?” he asked coldly. “What’s the significance?”

“It’s not the number 64. I was told that it is actually a word in Paleo-Hebrew.”

“A Hebrew word? What does it mean?”

“They are the letters Aleph and Lamed, reading right to left. Aleph refers to power or strength.”

“Oh yes. The original first letter of the alphabet. It was first drawn as an ox head.”

“Lamed is based on a shepherd’s staff and represents authority. So together I guess it means powerful leader.”

“Like a king?”

“Not exactly. Aleph and Lamed also form the word *El*, which refers to God. El as in Elohim. *Ohim* is added to mean...of all or over all.”

Adam recalled that God had many names in Hebrew and each one pointed to a different characteristic. Yahweh referred to the god who had a personal or ethical relationship with his people. Elohim indicated the creator of the universe, the source of all life. Amazing what Bar Mitzvah studies could do for you.

“You’re a believer in Elohim?” he asked.

“I am a believer in nice jewelry,” she said, tossing the necklace into her handbag and snapping it closed. “What about you?”

“No, I don’t believe in anything I can’t buy on Amazon.”

It was true. He had no faith, no trust in anything except irony. He did not struggle with the greater meaning, the deeper truth, the reason for being, simply because, as he knew so well, there was none. No purpose to life, no eternal goal, no being here to learn something. You were born, you bebopped around, you died. Simple. This was it, all there was. To most folks that sounded terribly depressing but to Adam it was pure liberation. He did not have to find, search, delve, probe, seek. He was what he was and that was that. The only meaning in the universe was what we injected into it with our thoughts and actions. The only signs were the ones we imbued with meaning. Semiotics was the study of that. So was scorn, but that was another matter.

Adam wanted to continue the discussion but he was afraid to. Was she a follower of the Re:creation, a fellow traveler with that lunatic Frayn? Did she know about Walden and the White Sun Sequence? But he did not ask her any of these questions because, to the same degree, he did not want to know.

For her part, Marissa was disappointed at the shift in mood, in his sudden interest in the pendant, in the loss of the momentum of romance. She thought to ask him why this was and why he suddenly seemed so concerned about it. But she too kept silent, not wanting to know, not wanting to believe that he believed in the one thing she was trying to destroy.

Dessert was chocolate mousse with raspberry drippings – which as any lover knows is basically oral foreplay – and it was deep and rich and sweet, and they did share it. But without any of the sensual delight that it implied.

## **Genesisism**

“Welcome to Conspira: the Capital of Nutball Nation,” Andreyev said triumphantly.

He had been scouring the web for information about cults and churches and white suns and mentions of Elohim and all manner of fringe faith and was proudly showing Adam his greatest hits. It was a mini-exhibit on the hidden truthers, the God knowers, the apocalyptic, the end timers. The stuff of summer reading, fickle fiction, pure entertainment.

Frayn fit right in to all of that but he was a minor player, a wandering soul with no writing talent. In any case, he was not the problem as far as Adam was concerned. In his view, the scariest people were not the ranters or the ravers or the psycho-scribblers. They were too self-absorbed to cause real damage. The real threat came from the purists, the rational ones who knew the truth beyond a shadow of a doubt in this doubtful world. The literal readers of the text, the ones who had heard God as clear as day, the ideologues. The ones for whom the war was the word and the word was the way and the world. The ones who were more than willing to sacrifice everyone else on earth for what they alone knew to be true. These were the people who would destroy us, Adam thought.

Was Marissa really part of this? Could she possibly, possibly be one of them?

“I think I have your Church,” said someone walking in.

Roxie Marion was young and neopunk and wore plum lipstick. Her hair had an orange sheaf. Nitro pierces through the lip; tattoo of a kiss on the cheek. She wore all black. Yet in spite of the costume, she was a talented researcher for nexxus and therefore an important team member. For the sake of the problem at hand, she had turned herself into some kind of expert on this one little corner of the great cracked pot that Adam was about to step on.

“Adam,” Adam said by way of introduction.

“CIS, Charmed I’m Sure,” she said, sitting on a tall stool and bringing up a screen. “Been working on a report that The Marta thinks intersects with yours. It pointed to this guy...”

Onscreen the image of a handsome, healthy fellow with sandy hair and the smile of a bank president came into view. Floating in front of the image, which was itself floating in front of Roxie, were the words: Adama Thomas Wright, the Genesisist Church.

“There’s a Church of Genetics?” Adam asked, misreading.

“Gen-e-sists,” Roxie enunciated. “Officially they tag themselves the First Genesisist Church. But they use a lot of names...keeps folks on their toesies. Genesisists or Adamites or the Setherians. Sometimes the Children of the White Sun.”

“A Christian cult?” Marko asked.

“Nope. Not one bit. But they do believe in the literal truth of the Bible.”

“So do a lot of people.”

“Not like this, Fester” she said and her slide show began, the images floating in the space between them, overlapping, drifting, warping, shifting. As hard to pin down as the Re:creation itself.

“Get ready for this, it’s neuro-nuclear. All about the first four chapters of the Book of Genesis.”

“You mean the Pentateuch?” Adam asked.

“No, that’s the Five Books of Moses. I mean the four first *chapters* in Genesis. All 3,000 words of it, depending on the translation. They call it the Quadrature. These people think that the first four chapters of Genesis were dictated by God. And that the rest of the Bible – all of it, everything after that – is a big fat crapheap.”

“How did they decide on that?”

“Their theory? A hypolinguistic meta-analysis of the Bible shows a dramatic shift in the semantic intertextuality after Genesis, Chapter Four.”

“What does all that mean?”

“IDK.”

“What?”

“I Don’t Know. These people have their own private language. Are you okay with all this? Do you older guys need a nappy-poo?”

“And your theory about this Quadrature stuff?” Adam asked.

“That they’re off-the-tarmac whacko.”

“So they’re literalists,” Adam said. “Logomaniacs. Slaves to the word. They pick the words they want to believe and toss the rest.”

“Yup,” Roxie agreed. “The same kind of people who slobber over the Second Amendment except for the well-regulated militia part.”

“And the crackpot reading of the Koran. The part in the Bible about spilling your seed but not the part about stoning your neighbor. The Law of Elvis Presley’s laundry list,” Andreyev added.

“Bingo. They obsess about some text they think speaks to them alone. ICRUT.”

“Would you mind ditching the acronyms, Roxie? What we’re doing here is called talking.”

“ICRUT...I Can Really Use That. They pick the parts they can use, that support their ideas.”

“Use it for what?”

Roxie paused here either for dramatic emphasis or to make sure that Adam was the kind of guy who could handle a short vacation to the far side of sanity.

“CainAbelism,” she said.

When he looked back at her through a fog, she repeated the word so that he would not confuse it with cannibalism, which was barely worse to her way of thinking.

“I’ve a feeling something weird this way cometh,” Andreyev said.

“Oh yeah. Fasten your straightjackets boys. Bumps are coming.”

## **Boss**

“What have you found out?” said the voice on the phone.

It was ominous in tone, gritty in texture. Marissa had been sending text updates periodically but this time she called in. She was only using the audio, no image. It was a private call – secret was a better word – and she wanted to keep it small and unnoticed. At least that is what she told herself. The deeper truth was that she did not want to have to look at the face onscreen.

“Eden II is an artificial island, just as we thought,” she said. “There is massive building going on there. I don’t know who is funding it but there is a lot of money behind it.”

“Did you take pictures? We still can’t see anything on satellite imaging. It’s masked somehow.”

“I did. But on the ground it just looks like a really big new city being built.”

“And Wright himself?”

“He’s charismatic. A nice guy really but very committed. He had some kind of big conference there a few days ago.”

“With his backers?”

“Probably. Or maybe with other members of the Church. I think he was presenting some big plan. He seemed nervous about it.”

“Okay then. Here’s a question...just what exactly is the plan?”

“I don’t know yet.”

“What do you suspect?”

“This island is self-sustaining, off the grid, shielded from the Cloud. A complete bio and technosphere unto itself. Maybe a sanctuary.”

“From what?”

“Yes, from what. Good question. My guess is that the answer is in the research facility.”

“Research facility? We have no record of that. What is it?”

“A bunch of labs where they are doing what he calls research. It’s standard millennial stuff about evolution, biogenics, all of that. But I’d have to get back there and snoop around to know more.”

“Can you get back there without arousing suspicion?”

“I think so.”

“Then do it. But be careful. Do what you have to do, but no more than that.”

No more than what? Marissa thought to ask. No more than get herself killed or no more than trust someone she should never have trusted in the first place? No more than betray someone’s trust or no more than fall in love with another skunk? No more than...but the voice on the phone was gone before she could get any of those words out and she was relieved not to have to deal with him anymore.

## **Sethera**

“Bear Shit,” Roxie announced.

“How’s that?” Adam asked.

“*Bereshith*,” she said more carefully. “It’s the Hebrew term for ‘in the beginning.’ The first words of Genesis. These guys are all kilowatt with it.”

“With Genesis?”

“With Bereshith, with Genesis, with the whole Adam and Eve in the Garden story. You know the story, right?”

“Of course.”

“Well you’ve got it all binky according to them,” Roxie said.

“I do?”

“We all do because we’re not reading the story properly. But they know The Truth. The whole serpent and Tree of Knowledge thing? It’s all about sex.”

“I thought it was all about knowledge,” Andreyev suggested.

“Knowledge of sex,” Roxie said and brought up a whole slew of Adam and Eve images. “Adam and Eve were innocent before, meaning they were virgins. They were not born of sex and they didn’t do it. When the Serpent convinces Eve to eat of the tree, he’s seducing her. He has sex with her. She likes it so much, she turns around and gives Adam the fruit. You know, screws him.”

“What about the knowledge of good and evil?”

“In ancient Aramaic, good is *taba*, which means ripe. Evil is *bisa*, unripe. The Tree bore the knowledge of what was ripe and unripe. In other words, fruitful or not. You know...sex.”

They looked at her with baffled brows.

“Good and evil is sex. Depending on who you have it with, right? I’m a case history, boys. Anyway, that’s why Adam and Eve are suddenly embarrassed about being naked.”

Onscreen: *And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together.*

“See? They’re x-rated now that they have had sex. Their peepees mean something else now.”

“So you’re saying these Genesisists think that sex is evil?”

“No. Not at all. To them discovering it is just another step in the great and grand unfolding. But it sure as hell ticked off God and as punishment, he turned the Serpent into a slithery snake...”

*Upon thy belly shalt thou go and dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life.*

“And he forced Eve to give birth...”

*In sorrow thou shalt bring forth children.*

“The dude is uberpissed at this. Sex was *not* part of his plan. I mean, it’s sour grapes right? God is alone, he doesn’t have sex so why should they, made in his image and all that. He’s so ragged out about it that he makes Adam work for his food...”

*To till the ground from whence he was taken.*

“And that’s not even enough. He brings death into their lives...”

*For dust thou art and unto dust shalt thou return.*

Roxie enhanced the whole show with pictures from the history books, from museums, from ancient texts, all floating willowy in the air. The whole thing had the look and feel of a magic lantern show for the faint of faith.

“But here’s the kickass part,” Roxie continued. “After they are expelled from the Garden for inventing sex, Eve gives birth to Cain, right?”

*And she conceived, and bare Cain, and said, I have gotten a man from the Lord.*

“So?”

“So according to the Genesisists, she’s wrong. She screwed the Serpent first, remember? So Cain must be the child of her union with the Serpent.”

“But she doesn’t say that.”

“Because she doesn’t know the connection between sex in the Garden and having a kid later on. She never had sex before. She’s a babe in the woods. She thinks it comes directly from the Lord. In Greek Cain is called “of the evil one.” In other words, Cain is the son of the Serpent.”

“And what about Abel?”

“Eve keeps fucking, so Abel is her son with Adam. Abel is the good son, the white son...that’s the way he is usually depicted. Cain is evil and dark and bears a mark and all that.”

More images to prove the point.

“This is all the Genesisists care about. This is their foundational myth. All the rest of the begettings and the flood and the Israelites and Christ and anything after Genesis are part of what they call the false Bible. Do you boys see what this little loony reading of Genesis does for you?”

“Gets you committed?”

“This ripsaws the world into two groups: the Children of the Light and the Children of the Rape. The former are the descendants of Adam and Eve; they are beloved of God. The latter are the descendants of Eve and the Serpent through Cain; they represent pure evil in the world. Re:creation is about starting the world all over again.”

“Okay fine,” Adam said, trying to follow the logic of the story. “But there is one problem with this little tale. Cain kills Abel. So how are the Children of the Light descendants of Adam and Eve and God and all that if Abel was killed and never had a kid himself?”

“NP, doctor. Nobo problomo. And we now turn, my friends, to the last few lines of Genesis, Chapter Four...”

*And Adam knew his wife again; and she bare a son, and called his name Seth: For God, said she, hath appointed me another seed instead of Abel, whom Cain slew.*

“So they think they are the descendants of Seth?”

“Bingorama! Descendants of Adam and Eve through Seth. That’s why they also call themselves the Setheria...the Children of Seth. Everyone else – and by that I mean all the rest of us – is a child of the Serpent and Eve and Cain and therefore Pure Evil.”

Face of a menacing devil floating.

“And here’s where Adama Thomas Wright and your Church come in. They believe that they, the Setheria, carry the seed of God within themselves. They call this seed the White Sun.”

“What kind of seed is this exactly?”

“Divine seed.”

“You’re right, Roxie,” Andreyev said. “We’re dealing in kilowattage here.”

“Yes, cracked but not lonely,” she replied. “There’s precedent for all this. The Sethians were a Gnostic sect before Christianity. They venerated Seth too and saw him as a divine incarnation. And there were the Knights of Seth in the 19<sup>th</sup> century...a bunch of wealthy Englishmen who worshipped Seth as the true descendent of God. The *Ordo Equester Sethiani* they were called.”

Roxie brought some of this up on the screen but having precedents – even in tasteful etchings – did not make it any easier to swallow.

## **Onyx Phoenix**

Back on the real island of Manhattan, built on rock and verve, Marissa thought herself safe from the Garden and the Children of Seth. But as any single girl knows, you are always only one call away from the last date. Good or bad. And Thomas Wright,

who thought in cosmic terms, was not the kind of man to let time or space interfere with his plans.

It was therefore no surprise to her when his face suddenly appeared on her wallscreen. He was sitting in exactly the kind of office a bank president would have. Lots of dark wood and frosted glass, a huge abstract painting on the wall, and what appeared to be a small statue of a bird flapping its wings over a fire. There he looked more ordinary, more common, than in the temple, which in some ways made him seem more ominous. Banality of evil? She evaded all proposals for dinner but his next ploy was one she could not refuse.

“We’re having a large gala next week on Eden II,” Wright said as a grand gesture. “Why don’t you come as my guest?”

“A gala for what?”

“We’re celebrating a new round of very successful fundraising. It’s going to be quite an event. I think you’ll enjoy it.”

“That does sound interesting. Will I have some time to explore the island? I was really fascinated by the place.”

“I’ll make it my business.”

“I mean on my own. I’d really like to get a feeling for it separate from the official tour.”

“Understandable. I’ll make sure you do. So you’ll come then?”

“Yes I will.”

“Great. I’ll have my people send you the details. And no more hotel. You can stay as my guest at the manor.”

“But I liked the hotel. It was very cozy,” she said. “As you may have guessed, I like being independent.”

“I can see that,” he said. “As you wish. I’ll make the arrangements and see you next week.”

He signed off full of confidence, full of promise, full mostly of himself.

A phoenix, Marissa thought. That was the statue behind him. Bird rising from the ashes of its predecessor. Symbol of resurrection, renewal, eternal life. The promise of the Setheria. Wright may have been a banker, but he was putting his faith in something

much darker than free market capitalism.

### **The Life Force**

“So this is a cult,” Adam concluded.

“MBP,” she said.

“Missing the Big Picture,” Andreyev translated.

“Cult is a few nuts nutbutting around in secret,” Roxie explained. “What’s tens of thousands of nuts meeting in public?”

“Election Day,” Andreyev suggested.

“This is beyond cult. It’s waybig, sahib. Part of the whole millennial movement.”

“Like those folks years ago who committed mass suicide so they could go to the heavenly spaceship hiding behind the Hale Bopp comet?”

“Yup. Or the Aum Shinri Kyo group that set off sarin gas in the Tokyo subway in the early century. All of that. There are thousands of groups like this that the public doesn’t even know about. Bingbingbing...trolley to the asylum.”

“You think they’re that dangerous?” Adam asked.

“Sure. It’s apocalyptic thinking, yearning for something beyond this miserable existence. God steps in and sets things right. All religions have it.”

“Not mine,” Adam said defensively.

“Oh yeah? You’re a Jew, right? Read the Book of Daniel, then talk to me. Christianity has the Book of Revelation. Islam has the coming of Mahdi. Zoroastrians have their countdown to the coming of the third son of Zoroaster.”

More images and quotes and references appeared until Adam’s head was spinning with the flotsam of lunatic rapture.

“Okay, enough,” Andreyev said and collapsed the images into a pinpoint. “But why are the Genesisists and the Re:creation apocalyptic?”

“Because,” Roxie explained, “if you’re the Child of the Light with the White Sun and all that then it is your sacred duty to destroy the Children of the Rape. That’s everyone else, BTW. It’s all about the great unifier of the human life force...”

“The search for truth?”

“No...the love of hate. Hate is a stronger bond than gluons, baby.”

“Like the Protocols of the Elders of Zion. That kind of thing,” Adam added.

“The Secret Masters, the Nine Old Men,” Roxie said, “the world drug trade controlled by Queen Elizabeth and the former kings of Bavaria. The Bilderberg Group, the Trilateral Commission, the Synarchists, The Thule Society.”

“What did you study in college exactly?”

“And of course, the Biblicists. Wars and rumors of wars. Famines and pestilences, and earthquakes in diverse places. Readers of this crap think they’re God’s last stand against evil. Ever read that book by the guy who says the Illuminati control the government and are trying to mindfuck us from a transmitter in the world’s biggest statue of Buddha in India.”

Adam shook his head to stop the swimming, which Roxie took – incorrectly – for disbelief.

“Hey, read the Rappenhams Report if you can find a copy. A new translation just appeared that’s revved up the nuts all over again. It had positive, conclusive proof – scientific proof! – that the US Government was systematically murdering anyone who believed in the Book of Revelation. The only hope is a cartel of the righteous known as the CBA...Christian's Bearing Arms, the lion of the Lord.”

“Oh boy,” Adam said.

“YCSTA!” she said.

“Oh boy,” Adam said again, just to show that he knew the acronym.

## **Ducks**

The next date that Adam had in mind was a walk along the Hudson River. He was well aware of their joint hesitation to get involved and a stroll struck him as less intense than another full-blown dinner. No pressure, no expectations. No scuzz in the teeth.

The notion that she was part of the whole White Sun movement was still echoing in his mind but given everything that Roxie had said, it simply did not seem possible. She was too smart and too savvy for all that. In any case, his passions were drowning all that out and this was the fiction he invented to make the facts work for him, so that seeing her again as he waited by the railing on the promenade gave him a familiar feeling inside.

Not doubt but butterflies. Not suspicion as much as normal heebie-jeebies. Maybe even the stirrings of an erection.

Marissa saw him before he saw her. He created a nice cutout against the river from hair to toe. She admired how calm he looked waiting, an illusion of the angle, and that calmed her because she too was getting a familiar feeling...heart beating, stomach throbbing, an oily wetness in her groin. She too decided to cloister her doubts about him. Feelings trump thoughts too easily. She knew this all too well. But that did not stop it from happening again.

Adam turned, simply by the pull of her presence, to see that she was wearing a sundress that made her look sunny and a hat that added a touch of shadiness. He made his own little noir film about it but when a quick wind almost blew her hat off, she held it with one hand and was suddenly in a French comedy.

Kiss? No kiss? Hug? Handshake? Hard to decide. Adam took her hand in both of his and rubbed microscopically.

“You look...well...beautiful,” he stumbled.

“Nice to see you again too.”

With that over, the jitters settled in both of them. But the genital pique stayed. They walked down along the promenade tickling the tips of the decorative grass and breathing the aroma of the water, as though the landscape was some kind of substitute for their own bodies. A strolling seduction.

“New York is perfect right now,” Adam said.

“I know. I love it.”

“Are you back to stay for a while?”

“Actually I have to go on another trip next week,” she said.

“You travel a lot for your job. Where to?”

They stopped abruptly to watch some ducks waddle on the rocks at the water’s edge. Adam identified with them; they seemed to be hungry but did not quite know what to do about it.

“It’s a place called Eden II,” she explained, thinking it sounded so implausible that it would end the discussion.

“Eden II? Where is that?”

“It’s an island off the coast of North Carolina. But closer than Bermuda.”

“That sounds idyllic.”

“I’ve been invited to a gala there next week. But there’s also a science complex I need to see.”

“They have science in Eden?”

“Or something like it. I’m checking out a technical facility. I’ll be back the week after,” she explained, knowing that this relied on not getting trapped by Wright first.

“An island with a technical facility? Sounds like that old TV series *Lost*.”

She knew the show, but *Lost* was *Lassie* compared to this, she thought. Instead she said: “I hope I get back to my real life faster than they did.”

They stopped to look over the railing as Adam studied her contours from brow down the nose to the chin, the long neck, the bust. He would have preferred to be touching it. One of the ducks plopped into the water and shook its head and for some reason Adam suddenly felt all wet and webby too.

## **Sovereign**

Adam’s houseboat was his refuge from the world, his safe place. It was isolated from the pitch of the city by a gate and a dock yet he could still look out and enjoy the hubbub from afar. But with nexxus there was no such thing as isolation. The world was flux, one big databank to be accessed anytime, anywhere. So that by the time he left Marissa and got back on the boat, his screen was already filled with the team at nexxus online for a full video confo. Adam did not recall connecting or hooking up, but somehow they were in anyway and he blamed Andreyev for that.

“Remember Thurston Walden from our LinkMap?” Dr. Marta, looking tiny in the window, was saying. “He’s going on a little trip.”

“To visit his pal Adama Thomas Wright, the leader of the Genesisists,” Andreyev added.

“How do you know that?” Adam asked. “Delora picked that up?”

“Not so much,” Roxie said. “It was more that we hacked into his schedule.”

“I thought you people only dealt with large-scale data flow.”

“We do a little eavesdropping now and then,” Andreyev said but Dr. Marta quickly corrected him: “We do a little *pinpointing* sometimes.”

“Like pinpointing the screens on my boat! Isn’t that illegal?”

“It would be awesome to get Adam over there,” Roxie added, ignoring him. “Find out what the dudes are up to.”

“That would be good,” Dr. Marta agreed.

“Where exactly is over there?” Adam asked.

“It’s the main temple of the Genesisists. We think Walden is part of the Re:creation movement and probably the force behind their finances. It would be nice to get you there to snoop around and see what’s going on.”

“I’m feeling less like a consultant and more and more like some kind of spy,” Adam said, not meaning it in a good way.

“Are you now?” Dr. Marta said, meaning it in the best way.

“Yes but how does he get there?” Andreyev asked. “I guess he could pose as a seeker. Someone interested in joining them.”

“He would need to be vouched for by a member,” Roxie cautioned. “Or be working there. They don’t just let anyone in.”

“We’ve got that covered,” Dr. Marta said. “Adam worked on a visual security system that the contractors are testing out on the island.”

“Island?” Adam said.

“The temple is on an island called Eden II.”

There it was again. The connection. That was the island Marissa said she was going to the following week. Damn! It was true then. She really was all caught up with Wright and with the Genesisists. Could his intuitions about her have been so wrong? They had been before; his divorce was proof of that.

But still...

Here was a moment of decision. One of those choices that define character, that create the future. Cut and run or jump right in. Trust your impulses or listen to reason. Big moment. Yet the answer was swift, surprising even Adam himself. It had nothing to do with the White Sun and nexxus and the Genesisists; he needed to find out about Marissa.

“We don’t know exactly where it is but...”

“It’s an island off the coast of North Carolina,” Adam said.

“How do you know that?”

“I happen to know someone who is going there next week,” he said.

“How is that possible? That’s impossible.”

“I do. It’s a woman I know. She’s going there.”

“Ah!” Dr. Marta said suddenly seeing the link. “That’s perfect!”

“They invited her back? She didn’t tell us that,” Andreyev slipped and again Dr. Marta had to jump in.

“He’s being funny,” she snapped. “Very funny Marko. Woman? What woman?”

“Just someone I met recently,” Adam explained. “There’s some kind of gala on the island that she’s been invited to. Maybe she can get me invited.”

“I never heard of this island,” Dr. Marta said.

“Fake as a great boob,” Andreyev explained, bringing up the details on one of his screens. “There is a process called islandeering, a kind of bioarchitecture. The structure itself is an accretional matrix tethered with nanoribbons to the ocean bed. They run a slight electric current through the structure that attracts coral, so slowly over time it is becoming a man-made floating coral reef. Then on top of that there is a 100-foot deep foundation of neoceramic hexagons. Then twenty feet of bioengineered soil...”

“Fine,” Dr. Marta interrupted, “but just where is it exactly?”

“Close to the Coastal Carolina Regional Airport,” Adam said.

“Very funny.”

“No, he’s right. That’s why EWN is on the LinkMap,” Andreyev said. “Adam realized that EWN are the code letters for that airport. See?”

A power grid map of the area showed an intense amount of energy there.

“Way more activity than normal for a regional hub. That must be the anomaly Delora picked up. And the link. All the materials going to Eden II.”

“So I’ll ask her then?” Adam said.

“There is one problem,” Roxie warned. “They might be a sovereign by then. He could get picked up as an illegal alien.”

Adam looked at Roxie on the screen as though *she* were the alien.

“They’re making a case for micronation status,” she said, showing a document.

“You mean like a small country...like Monaco?”

“No, that’s a microstate. I’m talking cybernation, counternation, whatever. Usually a bunch of outcasts that claim a place, call themselves something, make up some rules, write some documents, and say they are free of all ties and taxes.”

She brought up examples onscreen: the Cocos Islands, Sarawak, the Kingdom of Araucania and Patagonia, the Kingdom of Sedang. Then an image of some old rusty turret in the middle of the ocean.

“Sealand. Founded in 1967 on an abandoned World War II gun platform in the North Sea. They have their own stamps. The Mormons had one on Beaver Island in Lake Michigan in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.”

“All right, Roxie. We get the point,” Dr. Marta said.

“My personal favorite: April 1, 1977, Englishman Richard Booth, declares the town of Hay-on-Wye an independent republic with himself as King Richard. His scepter was a recycled toilet plunger.”

“You’re obsessed with this kind of stuff. Let’s move on,” Dr. Marta interrupted.

“It’s really cool. Para-geology. Very murky.”

“Move on!”

“INALB...”

“What?” Dr. Marta asked.

“I’m Not A Lawyer But...if they have their own sovereign nation then the normal rules don’t apply. They could detain Adam as a spy and no one would be able to get him back. Not even us.”

Worth the risk, everyone instantly thought.

Everyone, that is, but Adam himself.

## CHAPTER SIX



### Colossus

When the man in gray arrived on Eden II, he went straight to the temple to pray. In that vast white space, he seemed like a small irrelevant speck, a gray hole in space that was shaped like a man. This pleased him. It was just what he had come to think humans were, nothing more than holes in the fabric of the eternal. In fact, he wanted to be lost in that, invisible inside the Great Work, a mere gang of molecules in the cosmos of the Lord's intention. He wanted, in other words, to lose his humanity which had been so painful to him, and instead meld with some kind of infinity. Any kind.

This is precisely the reason that he had tested positive for the Sequence, which made no distinction between longing and lunacy.

Thomas Wright saw him there on one of the screens in his office and felt a sense of pride. He had taken this lost soul, this serial murderer, this hood, and turned him into a weapon in the final battle against evil. He knew watching him in the temple that the man in gray had the recovered pendants in his possession. No doubt the man in gray thought he had simply collected signs of faith from the faithless, which was true in a sense. But more importantly, the chips on those pendants meant that Wright had his program back and could proceed with the grand plan. Naturally that was true...it was all God's will in any case, even betrayal, even the struggle to overcome it. Did those genius dupes Selik and Frayn think they would get away with stealing the program? Who did they think they were dealing with?

His musing about all this was interrupted as Thurston Walden walked into the room, ego first. Not wanting to seem too suspicious, Wright vanished the images from

the security cameras that were running and replaced them with bucolic pictures of the Garden.

“Don’t worry,” Walden said. “I know about all the cams.”

“Impossible,” Wright said, slightly coy. “They are beautifully hidden.”

“Only to civilians.”

Walden plopped down in a lush leather armchair opposite the desk and clasped his hands behind his neck. Despite his bulk, he moved like a teenager, loose and lazy; his determination, however, was the exact opposite.

“How was your trip to the island?” Wright asked.

“Faster than I thought it would be.”

“And do you like what you see so far?”

“Things seem to be moving along.”

“Is there a question you have for me, Thurston?”

“Yeah. Where are we at? I heard you were pretty cagey with the other Adamas at the conference.”

“Oh really. So then we have a leak already?”

“Look Tom,” Walden said sitting up straight, “I haven’t pumped ten billion dollars into this just to be dicked around. I am in the results business and I want to know our time frame. And spare me the servants of Seth speech. Seth had no money.”

Seeing that there was no way out of it, Wright laid it all out for Walden. How the two copies of the program had been recovered and how that would allow them to begin implementing the White Sun Sequence once GenUsa’s genome project was complete. In other words, Re:creation in two to five years. Back on track.

Because Walden was only in his early forties, this time frame did not seem long. He had been blessed with health and wealth, and patience was therefore just another luxury for him. Wright on the other hand was a bit older and poorer and saw the future as something he needed right away. His desire to recreate the earth in his own image would not wait. He would push the scientists towards a faster schedule, push his followers to greater loyalty, the Adamas to unquestioning support. He was ambitious, not for himself, surely not for that, but only for his God and the legacy of the Word.

Still, he crossed his arms and spread his legs as he stood in front of the window, like a colossus before the sea. Walden meanwhile scratched an itch on the inside of his nostril and tried not to snort at the sight.

## **Archons**

Lying in bed unable to sleep, Adam held his tablet overhead and settled on some light surfing to lull him. He tapped the screen gently, making idle connections to vague topics in a random way. But our choices are guided, of course, by our moods and soon – link, link, link – he was deep into the arcane world of the followers of Seth.

The original Sethians were a Gnostic sect with secret knowledge of the world and all that crap. They had an entire mythology about the cosmos before Genesis. An unknown God, through a series of emanations, expanded into generations of paired male and female beings called *Aeons*. They comprised a spiritual, immaterial universe known as the *Pleroma*. A being named Sophia emanated from this and her presence led to the appearance of the *Yaldabaoth*, also known as the demiurge, who escaped and stole divine power from Sophia to create a material world. For help, the demiurge created the *Archons*, the craftsmen of this new physical world. The demiurge declared himself to be the only god and then in an instant...let there be light!

It was pretty radball stuff, Adam thought, filled with arcane names and endless drama as beings vied for power. The Barbelo and Three Steles and the Light-Givers of the Autogenes: Harmozel, Oroiael, Daveithe, Eleleth, and so on. But the very idea that there was a story before the beginning changed the whole idea of Genesis. It was not the beginning of the world according to the Sethians, but just the next chapter in a story of existence. The demiurge was masculine and Sophia feminine and all of creation therefore resulted from the shudderings of their conflict. In making Adam and Eve, the demiurge transferred the divine power stolen from Sophia into the human body. To regain that power, he banished them from the garden by creating the serpent to tempt them with the Tree of Knowledge where Sophia's spirit lived.

In this view, the Fall was not a tale of human weakness; it was about the inevitable step towards human freedom. God was not omnipotent, just another being struggling to be. Adam and Eve's banishment from paradise was about liberation from the Archons

and their cruel, oppressive powers. But with that freedom came the truth of evil and good, the Children of the Rape and of the White Light. And the whole idea of Re:creation, to get things back in order again.

Adam, who thought the universe had no purpose at all and spent zero mind time in the realm of the spiritual, found it as amusing as any great epic with its silly myths. But the Genesisists believed it and they had money and they were building an island and doing research in it and they had some plan about it. For the sake of all the rationalists in the world, as he drifted off, Adam decided to become some kind of adventure hero, or at least some kind of witness.

### **Agreement**

“This is an unusual place to live,” Marissa said, shouting from the dock next to Adam’s boat.

“What a nice surprise!” Adam said, bounding down the stairs lips first.

It was their fourth date and Adam felt good enough about it to kiss her hello. It was not a romantic kiss exactly, but a promising one. You have to be careful; lips matter so much and the impression they make lasts. Her lips were soft and responsive, adding to his confusion. He had excellent lip tone, she thought. Not hurried, not limp. Just right. Damn, she thought.

But why did he say it was a nice surprise? After all, he had left the text message inviting her to the boat in the first place. And here she was. Adam, for his part, was surprised that she had left that text message saying she was coming over. Was she there to confess? To deny? To seduce?

“It’s in the city and isn’t,” Adam said.

He was holding her hand as she shifted her weight off the outer steps and onto the boat and he liked that. Firm grip but soft hand. Good balance. And willing to be helped but not relying on it. The shapely legs helped too.

“What’s the target for?” she asked, pointing to the Chotch-ka board once inside.

“Art,” he lied. “Let me show you topside.”

Adam had turned the top of the houseboat into a deck with some nice plantings, seats, a wet bar...and a stunning view of the river and both shores. He made a drink,

toasted to their new whatever-this-was, and pointed out some yachts on the river. He stalled, in other words, as long as possible before asking the question he had in mind.

“You said you were going to that island, Eden II, in a few days,” he said as casually as possible.

“Yes,” she replied.

“I’d love to go with you.”

“You would? Why?”

“It just so happens that I know all about it. About the Church, I mean.”

“You do?” Her expression dropped like a punch: “So then you are a Genesisist?”

He paused.

The moment of truth had arrived. He could lie and risk either impressing or distressing her. Or tell the truth and risk disturbing or comforting her. There was no way to know which led to what outcome. Or he could forget all that strategy and just go with his gut, which was usually right but rarely when it really mattered.

“Are you?” he asked instead.

Marissa went through the same quick calculation. If he was part of it and knew that she was not, then her cover could be blown to smithereens. If he was not a follower but thought that she was one, then he might become a liability. But she really liked him and if he thought that she thought that he thought....

In the end, it was all too exhausting to work out and so she simply said:

“No.”

“No?” he said. “You’re not a part of it? That’s great news because I’m not either.”

“You’re not?”

“No, I think people like this are dangerous.”

“So do I.”

“It’s what terrorists have in common...the willingness to sacrifice someone else’s life for their cause. The true believers are going to kill us all.”

“Then what is your interest in all this? Why go to the island?”

“I’ve done some work for people connected to the Re:creation movement.”

“What kind of work is that?”

“They are testing a security system I worked on called Pickey.”

“Picky? As in finicky?”

“As in picture key. It’s a blank keypad.”

“You invented an empty keypad?”

“Sort of. I worked with a programmer to create it as a security screen. Instead of a normal keypad, you write or draw an image on it and that becomes your password. You can write letters or numbers or draw a picture or even a squiggle.”

“Like the game Pictionary.”

“Yes. The system uses image recognition to know what you draw but it also knows how you draw it. Pressure, speed, even the angle of your finger. Impossible to crack. We had to teach the program to understand those signs and signals. That’s semiotics in action. What about you?”

“My password?”

“No, why are you going? To the island.”

“I know the leader of the movement, Richard Wright. He invited me. I think he may have a crush on me.”

“Are you sure you want me along then?”

Marissa made some quick calculations: distance from Wright but possible jealousy, company but potential risk, more involvement but more lies.

“The feeling’s not mutual. Yes, having company would be nice,” she said.

“Do you think they would let me come with you?” he asked. “I’ve heard it’s tricky to get on and off the island.”

“I’ll find out,” she said.

## **Very Wrong**

Despite his challenges, or maybe thanks to them, Andreyev was a master of multi-tasking. ADD, ADHD, EE...he had them all and the screens all around him gave him an outlet for compulsions that might otherwise have destroyed him. Here were his stock options being evaluated in real time and over there a soccer game between Georgia and Italy; on the wrist the LinkMap was morphing continually and on the lapscreen Adam and Marissa were on audio only so that he could concentrate visually on a fifth screen searching databases about the port in North Carolina.

In one of those moments that only a techie could love: his stock was up, a goal was kicked, Walden's signature moved to the middle, silence of a kiss filled the air, the port at night lit up like a nova, and he found his second programmer. Beaming to himself, he brought Dr. Marta up on yet another screen.

"Got 'em," he said proudly.

"Got what?"

"The cracker."

"Very nice," Dr. Marta said like a grandma with a dull grandkid. "Have a snack and go back to work."

"I am working. I'm talking about the guy Frayn mentioned, the Bosnian. The cracker."

"You mean hacker?" Dr. Marta asked, trying and failing to sound hip.

"Hackers call black hatters crackers."

"What the hell are you rambling about Marko? I'm busy."

Andreyev took a deep breath.

"Computer experts are white hatters. Good guys. They call the people who illegally break into systems black hatters or crackers. Milo Frayn was a minor player but he worked for a real cracker genius named Oto Selik, who was Bosnian. They were both paid by Wright through money transfers from his own offshore bank on Eden II."

"He has his own bank on the island?"

"It's a tax haven like the Cayman Islands."

"Okay..."

"So I got into Frayn's account and found a transfer of a million dollars. Fuck'n hell, right? Then I tracked the transfer routes back and back to the source, which was one of Walden's companies. Then I time-forwarded along the backchannel..."

"Marko!"

"...to another bank account that got two million on the same day. Bada-boom...the second cracker."

"Oh. Very good work. And the upshot?"

"They're dead. Both of them."

"I was afraid of that."

“Frayn we know about. Selik showed up on a police report a few days ago. No body but he’s pretty much dead anyway. They were both working on a program for the Re:creation folks and both paid very nicely for it.”

“I guess something went wrong.”

“Very wrong,” he said but there was no time for a moment of silence. Other data coming in through his earpiece drowned out the bad news. Andreyev seemed to trance out over it but then clapped his hands in tiny glee and started wheeling towards Dr. Marta’s office to deliver the latest development in person.

### **Connection**

Lust is instant and so is yearning.

Love too, when the time is right.

Forget what the poets say, they only write poems. You do not need the slow boat through desire to know when you have arrived. Sometimes you just have to step ashore.

When that happens, the moment you see someone, you know instantly if there is attraction. The look in the eyes, the shape of the frame, the timbre of the voice. Marissa had already logged all that. Adam was tall enough, trim enough, melodic enough. Same for him in terms of the posture, the carriage, the smells and sounds. All the externals worked just as nexxus predicted they would.

Spending some time, you know instantly if there is chemistry. The odor of the body, the manner of gesturing, the way of saying. This all worked fine too. He smelled clean and sure, his moves were graceful and subtle, he spoke with a warm irony. She smelled fresh to him and the heat she radiated was just right, not scorching, never cool. In other words, the metrics were correct again.

If her reticence seemed safe to him, his cynicism seemed refreshing to her. More proof that when the chemistry is there, nothing else matters.

With the issues of trust settled for the time being, not candidly but at least comfortably, it was time to move closer, when you know instantly if there is magic. The texture of the skin, the topology of the curves, the taste of the tongue. There was and they were kissing on the deck at this point, smells intermingling, her hand was on his neck, his nestled in the valley at the small of her back. This too was all just right. His

skin was thick but cool, his muscles hard but not bulgy. He tasted like plums. She was firm but soft soft soft; an impossible mix but there it was.

Soon they were downstairs and topless and touching each other on the couch. She slid her nails along his back; he ran his fingertips up her waist and around to her breast but he did not caress it. Not yet, too soon. He kissed her neck and her hair tickled his eyes. She felt his lips on her and swooned. They moved slowly, no rush. This was a moment to linger in, that giddy moment when desire, which is always one longing beyond our reach, suddenly pauses for us to catch up.

And then they were undressed on the bed, her hair like waves rippling against the sheets. Her eyes embracing him, pulling him in. Adam stopped to look at her, trying to impress the moment in his mind – this perfect image lying below him – sear it in his cortex. She spread her legs beneath him, tugging him, pulling him in. He could feel her thighs around him as she could his hips between them.

Then that moment of the first touch.

So intense; so sweet.

Making love, you know in an instant if there is a match. It has nothing to do with the size or shape. It is all about the fit. Marissa knew the moment he entered her that it was right. The bulb parting her lips felt gentle and firm. The head entering was just wide enough and the shaft pushing through just snug enough. She felt not tickled, not pierced, but filled. Filled up. Full. He knew the same thing, that moist caress, not gripping or flapping but slipping. She might have come in her excitement then – not so much because it had been so long since her last lover but because it had been too many lovers since her last sense of snugness – but she held back. She would not let herself go so easily.

He ran his hand up her side, the outer thigh, the hip, the belly, the ribs, the nipple, shoulder, neck, ear. She closed her eyes and hugged him closer. And kept him inside of her for a very long time.

No one will admit it but this is the actual quantum moment of falling in love. It sounds too crass to say it, or too mundane. Surely romance is greater than sex and love greater than that. No doubt this is all true. But when you find the right fit – shoes, hat, job, lover – you just know it and that is that.

End of story.

Beginning of story.

Ah and amen.

## **Preparation**

“Houston, we have life-off!” Andreyev exclaimed, rolling into Dr. Marta’s office like a kid on a go-kart.

“I thought we were talking about crackers.”

“Yes but this is much cooler.”

“What is?”

“The deal is sealed. We have an Intag team.”

“I hope you did not reveal information about them to each other. You know you can’t do that, Marko.”

“I urged them along,” he said melodically.

”What does that mean?”

“I pushed them together. Sort of. Set them up.”

“You tricked them into a date?”

“It’s only a trick if you don’t know how it works.”

“I told you this before. They have to discover the connection on their own or it won’t stick. They can’t know this has all been arranged. Bad for trust all the way around.”

“They discovered the connection, all righty. Like big time.”

“No!” she said with audible disgust. “Marko Andreyev, do not tell me that you were spying on them during an intimate moment. I don’t want to hear that.”

“You said we should...”

“Stop right there! I am not running a sex club here.”

“You want the Intag teams to bond, right? The research shows that it improves their performance.”

“Bond, yes. It heightens their awareness to watch out for each other. Like soldiers in the field, cops on patrol. The Spartan army. Very well established.”

“Well, Adam and Marissa had a really really good bond...”

Dr. Marta, very unusually, dropped her head into her hands.

“What am I going to do with you?” she said. “How many ethical rules are you going to violate? Tell me right now.”

“Well, if you don’t like that one, I’ve got another,” he said, completely unabashed. “I hacked into the infostream for our friend Thurston Walden...”

“He could sue us for that you know.”

“...seems he is in pretty heavy touch with Adama Wright. Lots of back and forth and increasing in frequency by 20 percent in the last few days.”

“So you’re saying?”

“Something is ramping up. The working relationship between them, between the Re:creation and GenUsa. Between the Genesisists and the genome project. It’s building to a head. Should I add this to Delora’s input? See what predictions she comes up with?”

“Not yet. Let’s see what our Intags find out.”

Although it annoyed her that Andreyev had interfered, she knew that this was good news. Connections were the core of nexxus; their bread and butter. Every next link meant more information for Delora, which in turn meant more predictions they could monetize. The intimacy between Adam and Marissa was an advantage too. It would make them a better team out there in the cold world, better able to provide information useful for clients. All of which was lucky for Andreyev because the dollar signs that filled Dr. Marta’s imagination pushed out the handcuffs she originally had in mind for him.

## **Posh and Sheen**

The island from the sea looked like Shangri-la in the ocean mist to Adam. Oahu, St. Croix, Bali...the stuff that vacation dreams are made of. He and Marissa were on a hovercraft they had boarded on the Carolina coast and approaching Eden II slowly. The craft was kicking up a spray that gave the island an even more mythic shimmer in the sunlight. Or mystifying. Kong Island?

But just as Marissa suggested, once on the ground it began to look more like some kind of clever forgery. A pre-planned mini-tropolis with snappy architecture that was possibly all façade, all for the eye and nothing for the gut. His impression was that if you

shoved too hard against one wall, it might all come tumbling down. In other words, it was image mostly, designed to impress rather than function. A grand illusion posing as life. As fake as that replica Alamo they built in Texas that quickly became a bigger tourist attraction than the real one because it was shinier.

As they stepped off the hovercraft at the marina, Adama Wright bounded towards them, welcoming them both a bit too cheerfully. He was a thickset man, muscular, and squeezed Adam's hand rather than shaking it. Wright's energy made him seem bigger than life and this made Adam uneasy; he had a skeptic's natural distrust of verve. What registered more was a sense of impending threat...or was it imminent danger? Looming disaster? Maybe all of the above.

The marina was bustling with arrivals for the gala. Private helicopters were landing, personal yachts docking, and the hovercraft delivering more guests. It was as though the one-percenters had all decided on the same tropical holiday at the same time. Rich folks and celebs and pols plus wannabees and all manner of the hip and high. Some were believers in the Re:creation, some were simply invited for their PR value. But most were part of the jet-setting, island-hopping crowd Adam had only seen on TV at the Oscars, full of poses, posh, and sheen.

At the hotel in the town of Paradise, Adam and Marissa were escorted to separate rooms down the hall from each other. More suspicions. Everything was too neat, he thought. Too clean, devoid of actual weight and heft. A horror movie just waiting for the first scream. In that sense, the room seemed more like a cell than a suite, but it was a nice prison in any case.

Back in the lobby of the hotel, Wright was standing next to someone sitting in a thick lounge chair near the holographic fireplace.

"Did you see him?" Wright asked.

"I saw."

"That is Dr. Adam Sapolsky. He is the one you told us about. Yes?"

"Yes. He visited Milo Frayn before his release from this life," the man in gray said.

"Are you sure?"

"That is the name he gave me. And the description."

“Then he knows something.”

“He knows about Milo Frayn.”

“In that case, he already knows too much. I think you may have to do something about our Dr. Sapolsky. But not yet. Wait for my instructions.”

“As you wish,” the man in gray said with no heart in his tone.

## **Gala**

The gala that was planned for that evening was meant to stun the unstuntable, strike awe into those who could not be awestruck. Nothing had been spared in décor or food or music or glint and glam. The entire central square of the town was turned into a glitterplatz, champagne flowing from a faux arts fountain, exotic animals on parade. Performers and fashion shows. Cameras everywhere so that the seen could feel themselves being watched, which was their passion.

The Genesisists were Biblical in their religious fervor but they lived in the modern world and well understood that life for most people was what happened onscreen, in the media, in the Cloud. They knew all about marketing their brand as the new faith of hope and money and sex and product placement. They knew, in other words, how to lie to the world and make it feel like entertainment.

When Adam appeared at Marissa’s room wearing the tux he had not worn in years, he found her in a jaw-dropping midnight dress, baring one shoulder, bias cut from thigh to ankle. It was hard for him to connect her brain – she was a doctor for crap’s sake – with her body at that point. But he was trying hard.

“We only have about an hour before we’ll be missed,” she said, stringing a small purse around her shoulder.

Adam, misunderstanding completely, said: “Ah yes. That’s enough time to...”

“Slip in and slip out,” she said.

“I like your thinking,” he said with an oily smile.

“Then let’s go.”

“You mean, not here?”

She paused in front of him as she headed towards the door.

“The labs,” she said sharply.

“You want to fool around in the labs?” he asked dumbly.

“I’m not fooling around.”

“Oh. You mean we’re on a spy mission?”

He was trying to sound suave but it oozed past her.

“Can you find the way there in the dark?”

“I doubt it.”

“We passed the science complex as we came to the town from the hoverport. Do you remember where it was?”

“No.”

“I thought you had a photographic memory.”

“Not at all.”

“You said in your talk that you recall images.”

“My memory is not photographic...it’s xerographic.”

“Pardon?”

“A photographic memory means remembering everything you see as though you took a photo of it. What I remember is every image I see as though I took a Xerox of it. I have to see it as an image first.”

“Okay then, look at this quickly,” she said and handed him a map.

It was a cartoon map, like the ones they give you at theme parks; it seemed too goofy for the task at hand but Adam studied it anyway.

“Okay got it,” he said.

“Then let’s go,” she said. “Wright is going to be looking for me.”

## **Caduceus**

Under a full moon that cast long soft shadows across the ground, they slipped behind the hotel and found one of the carts that were used for transport on the island. Marissa drove with Adam in the passenger seat to navigate. The high side of the dress Marissa was wearing revealed her perfectly formed thigh, knee, calf, and ankle that all shimmered in the moonlight. She frowned when she noticed him noticing her.

“Sorry. This is all very O O,” he said, covering.

“Oh oh what?”

“007”

“Are we on track?”

“Make a right here.”

In a few more turns they came upon the collection of buildings that held the various science labs. Marissa drove the cart to each door in turn and pointed out the symbols etched on each one. There was a microscope for Setherian biology. A beaker for neochemistry. A telescope for teleoastronomy. The image at one door showed a winged staff and two twisting snakes.

“Medical lab,” Marissa said as she got out of the cart. “Let’s go in.”

“No,” Adam said, but she was already at the security panel next to the door, which displayed a screen with nothing on it.

“This is your security system thing, yes?” Marissa asked.

“It is,” Adam replied. “The contractor is using this as one of the test sites.”

“Can you break into it?”

“No,” Adam said. “That’s the whole point. No one can crack the code, not even a computer.”

But as he said this, he was running his finger across the screen in some kind of doodly pattern and in a few moments the lock clicked and the door popped open.

“Back door,” he said proudly. “We built it in to allow us to...”

But Marissa was already inside.

The vast lab was filled with equipment, screens, and devices that Adam had never seen before, a space lab designed for Victor Frankenstein. Marissa immediately went over to one of the transparent screens and began to work her way through the program that was running on it.

“They must be doing some kind of medical research here,” she replied. “Testing, experimenting, gathering data. Something. I need to find out what it is.”

“I don’t think so,” Adam said.

“That’s why we’re here. To find medical data.”

“No,” he said, “that’s what I keep trying to tell you. That’s not really medicine.”

He was pointing back at the symbol on the door.

“It’s the medical symbol,” Marissa said.

“Most people think so,” he said. “But it’s not really. The actual medical symbol is called an Asklepian.”

“You’re right, it’s a club with a single worm twisting around it.”

“And no wings. Asclepius was a Greek half-mortal with power to heal the dead and worms were used in healing. That’s the real symbol for medicine.”

Marissa looked at the image again and noticed the wings and two twisting snakes.

“This is called a Caduceus,” he went on. “It shows the wand of Hermes – he had wings on his feet – with two snakes twisting around each other.”

“What would it be used for?”

“Historically it represents commerce. Business.”

“So I’m looking for...business files?”

“It’s also the logo for the New York City Department of Sanitation.”

“Garbage?”

“Maybe. But people use signs for what they suggest too. What they imply. Nowadays because of the entwining snakes, this one could represent...”

Adam moved his hands through the air into a familiar interweaving spiral pattern.

“The double helix,” she blurted. “This is a DNA lab!”

“There’s a connection between the Genesisists and GenUsa, between Wright and Thurston Walden, who owns GenUsa.”

“They’re doing gene research,” Marissa said. “Then that’s what I’m looking for. You guard the front door.”

## **Surveillance**

Wright was the perfect host at the gala, meeting and greeting and grinning.

In his mind he was welcoming people not just to a party on an island, but also to Day One of the New Day. Some of them, he knew, would survive the judgment; some would not. But in the end, all would be saved even if it meant a nasty doom. In the end, you were either returning to Eden or being turned back into cosmic confetti. But as he played his part, Wright was also carefully scanning the guests to find Marissa. He had a special place for her in his heart, a vision of her at his side as they moved towards the

Re:creation. She was one in ten thousand; she had passed the test. She had the Sequence. His own private Eve. But she was nowhere to be seen.

When he was sure that she was not anywhere on the grounds, he called on Leeds to find her. This was not just yearning on his part, it was outright jealousy. He had agreed to let her bring a guest when he heard that the man's name was Adam but the fellow who showed up at Marissa's side was too cautious to be innocent and when Wright thought he detected an attraction between them, he grew testy. When the man in gray confirmed Adam's connection to Frayn, his irritation turned to suspicion. Did this mean that Marissa could not be trusted either? Perish the thought, he thought.

That was something he had to find out.

### **The Sequence**

It was perfectly quiet in the lab, nothing more than Marissa tapping lightly at the screen and the sound of their breathing. The low hum of air conditioners. It was also dark but for the glow of the pixels. Adam was standing at the door to make sure no one interrupted them but he could not shake the sense that they were being watched. Not in the casual way everyone was all the time, but as though being inspected. Or judged.

Marissa pressed through some of the files onscreen and eventually came to a long list of names. She compared it to other files she had opened and seemed to reach a conclusion. A striking one, since her own name was on that list.

"I think I know what's going on here," she finally said, her voice uneven.

Adam looked at the scatter of data she was examining but grasped nothing. When he saw her name on the one screen, he understood the quaver in her voice. Whatever they were up to, she was somehow involved.

"They are working on something called the White Sun Sequence," she said. "Wright mentioned it. I assumed it was some kind of medical procedure. But now I see what it is."

"Frayn talked about it too. The Sequence. Ranted actually."

"Who is Frayn?"

"Never mind. What is it...a sequence of events?"

"No. It's a sequencing. Of information. As in sequencing DNA."

“I’m not following you.”

“Do you know what junk DNA is?”

“Is it crappola DNA? That’s just a guess.”

But Marissa was not in the mood.

“The DNA material in chromosomes is composed of ‘coding’ and ‘noncoding’ regions. The coding regions are known as genes and contain the information necessary for a cell to make proteins. Blueprint for the body.

“DNA. The genetic code.”

“There are maybe about 25,000 protein coding genes. But that’s only about 1% of the DNA we have. The non-protein coding regions – 99% of the genome - are not related directly to making proteins. They know what some of that does, but no idea what most of it is for. So they refer to it as *junk* DNA.”

“Ah, but one person’s junk is another’s treasure.”

“Yes. Mutations in DNA sequences that don't code for anything – like all the junk – are not affected by natural and sexual selection. They are not selected for or against. They’re passed down, generation to generation.”

“Pure, in other words. Beyond evolution. Very appealing to our Genesisist friends, I’m sure.”

“Exactly. This lab is searching through junk DNA to find a sequence they believe is the bloodline legacy of God.”

“The whatline legacy of who?”

“They are trying to establish a gene sequence that will prove that they are the direct descendants of Adam who was made in God’s image and who passed his divine DNA...”

“Down to his surviving son with Eve...Seth,” Adam said.

Marissa look at him suspiciously: “You know about that? How do you know that?”

“I’ve done my homework,” he said. “What I know is that these people are oingo-boingo.”

She turned back to the screen.

“They call this DNA sequence the White Sun. They think that all the descendants of Seth must have it...a particular gene sequence hiding in the junk DNA. And if they do have it then it proves they are the Children of the Light.”

“And I thought my people were the chosen.”

“Everybody thinks they are.”

“So what is it exactly?”

“It’s a complex gene sequence that no normal researcher thinks makes a difference. But these people do.”

“Do these genes actually do anything?”

“Maybe they affect some particular amino acid encoding or some fifth element we don’t know about yet. Maybe a spectral powder that glows on Lent. Maybe they’re just a leftover from an evolutionary dead end. Who knows? What’s important is that Wright and his followers think it is the sign of God.”

“And without it you’re...”

“Screwed.”

“A Child of the Rape. Son of Cain. Descendent of the Serpent.”

“Pure evil.”

“*Mazel Tov*,” Adam concluded.

## **The Return**

In spite of the technical cocoon he lived in, the armor of his bionic chair, Andreyev still had a keen sense of proximity. He could tell when someone was standing too close, gazing too long, waiting too intently. Feeling all of that, he whirled around and looked up from his work to find a man standing before him. The figure was so still that he might have been an apparition from another dimension. He was definitely not a nexxus employee; they were all buzzing with activity. Not a client either; his clothes were all grungy. Not a deliveryman. Every one of his limbs had bandages except for his right foot which had a cast on the ankle. There was a bloody Band Aid on his forehead that Andreyev tried not to focus on.

“Can I help you?” Andreyev asked.

“I help you,” he said.

“I don’t think so.”

“Yes, so.”

“Help me with what? Accident insurance?”

“I am Selik. Oto Selik.”

Andreyev gasped.

“Oto Selik? But you’re dead!” he said.

“Yes, I know. So sad. Yet here I stand,” he replied, standing his ground on the issue.

“You mean you’re not dead?”

“Man who murder me was not – how you say – success.”

“The man who murdered you was after a program you stole.”

“Yes. I copy this onto NAND chip. You know what is, yes?”

“Yeah,” Andreyev said and made a small square in the air with his fingers.

“Two copies. For me and for Milo Frayn who work for me. You find him?”

“Just before he was killed.”

“Terrible. Not so lucky Frayn. And sick in head too. Sad.”

“Who killed him?”

“Same people who kill me. Or try to. Church of course.”

“Because they wanted the program back?”

“Hidden on back of Elohim pendant,” Selik said and made the same small square in the air with the fingers that were still working.

“On a pendant,” Andreyev repeated. “Did they get yours?”

“Yes.”

“So then they have the chip.”

“No.”

“Then you still have the pendant.”

“No.”

“So who has it?”

“They do.”

They went round and round like this more times than you would expect for two people with doctorates until Dr. Marta, fed up, stormed into the room.

“Oto! Where the fuck is the chip,” she demanded.

Oto Selik, startled by her sudden appearance and tone, physically recoiled as though he had been pushed. Given all his injuries, it looked painful.

“Dr. Marta,” he said, steadying himself.

“Hello Oto. Nice to see you again and all that. Now stop playing games and tell us where the chip is.”

“You know him?” Andreyev asked.

“Mr. Selik has worked for us in the past as a consultant on AI systems. Mr. Selik no longer works for us. Mr. Selik is not very reliable. As you can tell.”

“I prefer my freedom,” Selik said sadly.

Trying to help, Andreyev began a narrative that Selik might be able to finish.

“You and Frayn worked on this program for the Genesis Church; you stole it and put it on a NAND chip that you stuck to the back of a pendant that you were each given. You left the island with it. Frayn was killed and his copy recovered. What were you planning to do exactly?”

“Here is gap in plan. Perhaps to sell back to them for a...what do you say...”

“Ransom,” Dr. Marta said.

“Yes. Ransom. Or perhaps to turn over to police. Oto is genius programmer not mastermind crook.”

“The Church sent someone after the chips,” Dr. Marta said.

“Yes. Terrible man. Dark man. No color. Like ghost. He murder both of us.”

“But not you.”

“Not me.”

“And he took the pendant and the chip.”

“Yes but not to worry because Oto keep another copy.”

“You have a copy of it?”

“Yes. Hidden by me, by Oto. Oto Selik do not trust no one. Lucky for me they send idiot murderer.”

“So where is it?” Dr. Marta said speaking slowly and clearly.

“Oto Selik is no idiot also. I hide it in plain sight.”

“Where?”

“If I say...how this is help to Oto Selik?”

“I’m sure we’ll come up with something,” she said.

She had in mind keeping him out of prison but quickly saw that he had not actually

broken any law she could think of. No matter. Selik assumed she meant paying him off, which was fine with him, and so, with more flair than anyone would guess was in him, he dramatically peeled the Band Aid from his forehead to reveal the hidden chip.

## **Security**

Once Leeds tracked down Marissa in the lab, he called Wright into the office to show him. It took longer than it should have for Wright to recognize that he was actually seeing her on the screen there. What was she doing in the gene lab? The very idea of her betrayal was still hard to formulate in his mind and he stared for a long time before believing what he saw. She had tested positive for the Sequence; she was one of them. How could this be happening?

“I know that guy,” Leeds said, pointing to Adam on another camera.

“You do?”

“He was involved with the security pads we installed. I saw him at the presentation.”

“He came with her and he is way too involved with what is going on here. Can you tell what she is doing?”

Leeds studied her for a few moments and realized that she was going through their records on the White Sun Sequence. It took much longer for Wright to accept that she was snooping rather than swooning. She had lied about her interest in the Re:creation and faked her interest in him. To a man who saw himself as a spiritual leader for the eons, dipped in Almighty DNA, this was an especially difficult pill to swallow. But a slap on his back jolted him out of himself. When he turned, it was Walden standing behind him like a cop.

“Who are they working for?” Walden asked.

“We don’t know yet,” Wright said flatly.

“Another security problem?”

“Do you want me to take care of them,” asked Leeds.

He made a move to do just that but Wright signaled him quietly to stay put.

“I’ll handle it.”

“I’m going back down to the gala,” Walden announced, “I have an impression to make. I assume that you can take care of this situation. Yes?”

“Of course we can,” Wright said, insulted.

“Don’t screw this up,” Walden snapped.

“Don’t give me orders,” Wright snapped back.

“I have invested too much in all this, and in you, to let two trespassers interfere with our plans now,” Walden said, and then, turning to Leeds: “Keep me posted.”

Wright watched as the billionaire in his satinate tux and silly hair stepped into the glass elevator and made his descent. The phrase that came to Wright’s mind at that moment was “useful fool,” although he probably meant “tool.”

Useful because he was rich and famous and could afford to pay for the coming judgment day. A fool because beyond his money, they did not need him. He had failed the test and was, at best, a follower not one of the chosen. He would be weighed in the balance and found wanting.

Walden, descending in the glass elevator that he knew he had paid for, thought of one thing as he looked back up at Wright standing in his office and that was the phrase “useful tool,” although he no doubt meant “fool.”

Maybe there was a White Sun and a Truth and even an Elohim over all of it and maybe not. This was not his concern. In the end it was economics not genetics that would change the world. Whether or not Wright was right or wrong was irrelevant. He might succeed or fail...either way Walden would make money, gain influence, expand his empire. Win, win, win, he grinned.

As the elevator stopped in the Grand Hall, the two men exchanged last glances at the same moment and nodded in the same way, each thinking the other the biggest asshole they ever met. Each was correct.

## CHAPTER SEVEN



### Two Phases

“So the White Sun is a sequence in the junk DNA that Wright has, along with lots of other folks, that proves their divine nature,” Adam summed.

“How do you know Wright has it? His name is not on this list.”

“Because it’s a given. He’s the leader. The whole thing doesn’t make sense if he doesn’t have the sequence.”

“Good point,” she said.

“You’ve got it too,” Adam said, pointing to her name and photo. “Looks like you’re saved. But I guess I didn’t make the grade. How do they know?”

”They must test everyone on the island. That’s why the rooms at the hotel are so neat. They must get groomed for DNA samples...hair, skin cells, urine. Maybe even saliva, the best source.”

“Can you copy the sequence?” Adam asked. “Maybe we can have someone check it out.”

“It’s millions of lines of code. Hundreds of gigabytes. And they’re running some kind of complex formula to test for it. I don’t understand that.”

“So how do they know it’s the legacy of Seth. I mean, how do they know what Seth’s DNA was like?”

“Beats me. But they’re convinced of it.”

“Maybe its like a Bible code.”

“Which is?”

“People who become obsessed with hidden messages in sequences can find them if they try hard enough, if they tweak it this way, or evaluate it that way. Signs are ambiguous, open to interpretation. Especially written language.”

“Like the Bible.”

“Right. There are enough letters to show hidden sequences if you look for them. Set the text up in a matrix, use only selected letters, and you find hidden words, secret messages. You could discover Daffy Duck’s diary if you wanted to.”

“That could be the case here. They could take the DNA data, run some formula on it that has a variable they can change, and presto...it can reveal anything they want. Like that their own followers are blessed.”

“A self-fulfilling test. Like a marksman who never misses because he decides what the target is *after* he hits something.”

“We’d better get out of here. We’re going to be missed once Wright realizes...”

But sounds of activity at the front of building drowned out the end of her warning.

## **The Werewolf**

“So the program is a test of some kind?” Dr. Marta asked.

“Yes. Test DNA. Look for White Sun sequence, hidden code for God.”

“And they’re planning to run this program through the DNA files on everyone that are being collected by GenUsa.”

“Yes,” Selik said.

“Okay,” Dr. Marta added, taking a deep breath. “So they’re looking for a pattern in the DNA codes being collected by GenUsa. But why? What’s the point?”

“Re:creation. To recreate world. In image of God,” Selik said as though the answer were obvious.

“How? What do they do once they know who has it?”

“Ascend to heaven,” Andreyev said casually.

“But Selik stop this. Selik create werewolf! *Awoooooo!*”

Something clicked in Andreyev’s mind at that moment and he brought the LinkMap up on a screen. As he tapped some of the icons, images came forward and

enlarged and the entire map rearranged itself. Soon he had one of those larger images – an old etching of a dog biting a man – front and center.

“So that’s a werewolf,” he said. “Not a dog.”

“Werewolf,” Selik repeated. “Werewolf bites, you become werewolf. Blood is changed.”

“What are you talking about?” Dr. Marta asked. “Are you saying that these people are werewolves?”

“My program is werewolf. Virus, vampire, zombie, werewolf. All same. The program test every file for correct sequence, yes? Who has right DNA sequence? Maybe they kill everyone else.”

“How?”

“Maybe with teensy Ebola drone. Only attack programmed victim. You see?”

“Is that even possible?”

“No matter. My werewolf program save everyone.”

“How does it do that?”

“It test for Sequence but also insert Sequence. Like bite from werewolf. It alter files so everyone has Sequence. No way to kill bad guys. Salvation for all.”

Selik took a small bow as he said that, but it seemed to compress his ankle and he howled again but this time like a victim not a wolf.

## **Demented**

Outside the lab, the plaza in the center of the science complex was filled with guests. The gala had spread out and visitors were wandering all over the island with drinks, other partygoers were playing in the fountain, and a couple was groping behind the bushes. Adam and Marissa easily slipped out of the lab and into the crowd and, to their minds, disappeared. They decided to split up and head back to the hotel separately to avoid suspicion but just as Adam walked away, Wright suddenly appeared next to Marissa. It looked as though he had been waiting for the chance to confront her, which he had. He was a good enough salesman to hide his deepest suspicions about her but not quite good enough to mask the strain in his voice.

“So here you are,” he said stiffly. “Back at the labs that fascinated you so much.”

“No, just exploring the grounds and following the fun.”

“And your friend?”

“Around here somewhere.”

“So what do you think of all this?” he asked flatly.

“Impressive,” she said. “But why would you be so interested in science? That seems rather far from faith.”

“On the contrary, my dear. Knowledge is the tool for faith. We are trying to understand the world our Lord has given us. What it was, what it is, and where it is going. What are you searching for?”

“Answers too.”

“I see. And Mr. Sapolsky?”

Wright put a cold stress on the name that was chilling to Marissa.

“He has his own questions to answer.”

Some of the guests seeing Wright came over to chat and mingle.

“This is something we must discuss soon,” Wright said. “But I think for now, my guests demand my attention.”

As Wright returned to his quests, Marissa made her way back to the hotel. Adam had seen their exchange but chose not to intervene. Marissa could clearly handle herself and he sensed that Wright was suspicious of him. Two people had already been killed for their interference and he did not want to become the third.

As he walked through the complex on his way back to the hotel, he noted the symbols on some of the other doors and realized that the Genesisists were into serious demented science. Too much, he thought. There was too much at stake to end with the DNA test. Too much investment, too much research. Something else was being planned. The Re:creation was more than sorting DNA into lights and darks. But what it was exactly – and precisely how demented – remained a mystery.

## **Floating**

In his room at the hotel, Adam waited in the dark for over an hour deciding what to do next. His casual consultation for nexxus had turned into some kind of high-stakes spy game, well out of his comfort zone. He eventually settled on the idea of getting back to

New York as soon as possible and forgetting the whole affair. He changed clothes, decided to leave everything else behind, and stood before the door. The knock came as a jolt. As he jumped and opened it a crack, Marissa slipped in, out of breath.

“We’ve got to get off this island,” she said.

“Just what I was thinking.”

“Wright is suspicious. He’s asking a lot of questions. I don’t think we’re safe here.”

“Me either,” Adam agreed. “But how do we do it?”

“The hovercraft doesn’t leave until nine in the morning. I checked.”

“Can you by any chance fly a helicopter?”

“No, but maybe we can borrow one of the yachts at the port. You can get us out of here on that.”

“Me can?”

“You live on a boat. You must know how to pilot one of those.”

“It’s a houseboat. I know how to float.”

“Then we’re floating,” she said and went back to her room to get ready.

Adam waited in the dark growing increasingly nervous. The timing seemed wrong. Things were building to a head too quickly. Naturally cautious, he was inclined not to act rashly. He avoided risks. But sitting in that room and waiting for something else to happen was too much to ask. When he heard a sound in the hallway, without thinking too clearly, he opened the sliding door in the room and climbed out onto the small terrace. The hotel overlooked a main street in town and that made him visible to any of the guests who might happen to look up. He didn’t care. Moving was better than waiting. He climbed over two more terraces to find Marissa just walking out the door.

Damn!

He climbed the terraces again all the way back to his own room and this time was seen by some revelers on the ground who saluted him for bravery. He saluted back. Inside, the handle to the front door was turning slowly but something about it, the way it creaked, told him that Marissa was not on the other side. And so, back across again waving to his fans, as he slipped into her room and out the door, down the hall, and onto the street where he found her waiting.

“Where were you? What are you doing? Why are you out of breath?” she asked.

“I’ll tell you on the cruise. Let’s go.”

### **Dreams Denied**

Quietly and slowly, like a ghost haunting, the man in gray stood at the door to Adam’s room in the hotel, very slowly turning the handle on the door. It was open and the creaking sound, like a coffin, was comforting to him. With the door finally ajar, silence filled the space. Relying on years of bad intentions, he stood at the open door and listened...for movement, breathing, any hint of his prey. But there was nothing.

He was a patient man and waited there for a moment, not moving, not stirring. Then he took out his gun and slowly moved into the room where he might have been mistaken for dust. After a small eternity, he moved to the light panel and passed his hand across it and the room lights slowly came up.

In the movies, he would swing his gun around, holding with both hands and stiff arms. But he did not go the movies and so, instead, he held the gun at his side and waited quietly for something to move. When nothing did, he turned the lights fully on and looked around the room. There was nothing there except Adam’s small travelling case with the arm of a tuxedo sticking out. Nothing to shoot at, no one to kill. The man in gray put the gun away with a true sense of sadness, of chances lost. Dreams denied.

### **Cuckoo**

The moon was still bright enough to showcase their figures as Adam and Marissa made their way to the port. Because it was on the far side of the island, they had to take the long road around the immense Garden structure. This added another hour so that by the time they reached the port it was already almost dawn.

Besides the hovercraft, there were a number of charter boats and private yachts still moored there. Some of the guests were sleeping on their boats but a number of them were completely empty. They had their pick of some fine pleasure craft but settled on one that seemed big enough to escape on but small enough to hide in the open sea. It was sleek and slick, a real dreamboat, and they untied the ropes and shoved off. Adam went to the front cabin to figure out how to start the motors but quickly saw that plan dissolve.

The controls looked like a starship console. He had no clue how to even find the ignition key, which of course did not exist in any case.

So instead of a good blockbuster run, they simply drifted. Luckily the current managed to carry them away from the dock rather than into it. But at a glacial speed. The flight of the flotsam. Helpless, they stood together at the helm watching the water slowly drift by, like captains of a raft going nowhere fast.

“What’s next?” Marissa wondered aloud.

“At this rate...old age.”

“No, I mean for them. Now that they have the White Sun Sequence and can test for it. Then what?”

“Test everyone,” Adam said. “Test everyone in the country through GenUsa to see if they are Children of the Light or of the Rape. Setherians or Cainians. Good or evil. That’s Thurston Walden’s money. He’s part of this cuckoo-bin.”

“It’s got to be a rare sequence. One in ten thousand, let’s say. So that’s maybe thirty-five thousand people who have it in the whole country. If they have it, they get an invitation to Eden II. And if they don’t?”

“Kill them all, that’s what I’d do,” he said, but he took her look as a reprimand. “I mean if I were them.”

“Let’s say you’re right. That they plan to kill, basically, most of the people in the United States. How? What are they preparing to do after they find out exactly who their enemy is?”

“Not sure I want to know,” Adam said. “But if we don’t do something fast, we’ll find out the hard way.”

“Then let’s get this boat on the road already.”

## **Synbio**

Feeling disappointed, the man in gray reported back to Leeds, his handler, that Adam and the woman were both gone. Leeds was nervous about reporting this to Wright but surprised to find that the Adama was not as disturbed by the news as he expected. It was an island after all, Wright said, and although there were places to hide, there was

nowhere to run. He instructed Leeds to organize a search on the ground, but a quiet one so as not to disturb any of the remaining guests.

Leeds the former sergeant did as he was told to such a perfect degree that he failed to think about searching the water. On the monitors and through every building he and his team found nothing, of course. But his mistake hardly mattered because after twenty minutes, the yacht had barely moved more than a quarter of a mile. The open sea was still vast and distant ahead of them; the shores of the Carolinas were still unreachable. And Eden II was still there, off the stern, looming.

It occurred to Marissa that even though they had not gotten very far, they might still be beyond the electronic shield that was cloaking the island. She went down to one of the computers on the yacht's great room and tried to connect. When Adam heard another voice, he knew she had succeeded and followed her down. There was a man's face on the screen but it was someone Adam did not know; another nexxus contact he had not yet met. Marissa was already explaining their situation.

"There's probably an identity lock on the motor; you won't be able to override it," the man was saying. "But we've pinpointed you. We'll send a boat."

"Hurry up. They're going to find us eventually."

"Tell me what you know so far."

Marissa explained about the White Sun sequence and the potential to test people through the spit kit project controlled by GenUsa, backed by Thurston Walden. But the question about what came next was something she could not answer. Neither could he.

"What do they want?" the man asked. "What is their master plan?"

"The Coming of Araphel," Adam said, surprising himself.

This was a phrase he had read in the book by Frayn. It did not make sense at the time but it sounded creepy and so he remembered it and looked it up. Now it took on a dire meaning.

"What is that?" Marissa asked.

"An ancient Hebrew word for darkness," he said.

"The coming of the night?" the man on screen asked.

"More like a holy darkness," he said.

"Like the Angel of Darkness?" Marissa suggested.

“I don’t think so,” Adam said. “I think they mean the coming of the end. Really dark. That kind of darkness. The Bible says the Lord appears in an araphel. It could mean the coming of judgment.”

“In which case, Eden II isn’t a resort...it’s the *last* resort. A refuge for the survivors of the Re:creation,” the man on screen said.

“But how?” Marissa asked.

“We’re thinking gene hack,” he said. “The Genesisists and GenUsa aren’t working on the genome project to help humanity. They are going to wipe it out.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” Marissa said. “They can test the DNA files and maybe even alter them in some way, but that’s just data. They would not actually be changing anyone’s real DNA.”

“Synbio,” he said.

“Which is?” Adam asked.

“Designer viruses,” the man explained. “Synbio is synthetic biology, the creation of new organisms. They could genetically alter all sorts of nasty stuff to infect the population, or resist vaccines, or be more lethal. Airborne Ebola is everyone’s go-to plague, very lethal, kills in days. Or use anthrax, Venezuelan encephalitis, smallpox, you name it. Assemble a bug that wipes everyone out but that gets blocked only by people with the White Sun Sequence.”

“Assemble a bug?” Adam asked.

“Easier than you think,” Marissa said. “They find out the genetic sequence of some virus then combine small, tailor-made DNA sequences to create a new viral genome. He’s saying they could create one that is only blocked by the White Sun.”

“Listen,” said the man on the screen. “We don’t know exactly what they are up to and it doesn’t really matter anyway. You don’t want anyone having access to the gene codes for everyone in the country.”

Adam had more questions for him, – and for Marko and for Roxie, for Dr. Marta, and even for Marissa – but in an instant, the image vanished and the voice was replaced with another one coming through a megaphone from the sea outside. Through the portal windows of the craft they saw three patrol boats floating. These were not inflatables with engines; they were well-equipped, high-tech cruisers with uniformed personnel on board.

The Genesisists apparently now had a navy.

### **Bull's-Eye**

What came next was something less than a high seas chase. In fact, it took one of Wright's sailors to get the yacht started at all as the cruisers slowly guided the stolen boat back to the marina. Adam and Marissa were met there by more uniformed guards, suggesting that there was a police force also. The guards led them to an office at the heliport and locked them inside. Were they being detained? Kidnapped? Placed under arrest? No answers. And no sign of Wright to address them. The two guards posted outside the door simply underscored the fact that they could not leave.

It was an odd detention since the entire port was bustling with guests leaving. Through the windows of the office they could see all the activity at the dock, but they could not signal to anyone for help. Too far away and too busy. Not that any of them would have helped anyway. They had been wined and dined on a tropical island by a charming host hoping to improve the world and spread the Word. What could possibly be wrong with that?

"Now what?" Adam said to no one.

"We wait," Marissa said.

"For what?"

"For the right moment."

"What if it passed already?"

"You don't have much faith, do you," she asked.

The question sounded sorry not curious.

"None, I'm proud to say."

"Not in God. I've noticed that."

"God is a pretend friend for grown-ups. Very nice, if you need that."

"You don't believe in the future either?"

"There isn't any. All our thoughts about the future are fantasies we are having right now. It's now or never."

"So then you don't really believe in anything?"

"Sure I do," he said.

This would have been the right moment to say that he believed in her, but that moment passed too. And in any case, as a matter of fact, he did not. Not yet.

“I believe in a random universe,” he went on, “in the onslaught of time, being aware of our own misery, and how completely screwed up the world is. I’m bursting with belief.”

“Doesn’t all that get exhausting?”

“You bet.”

To his surprise, Marissa just smiled. Maybe, he thought, she was amused by his cynicism. Or maybe she thought she could convince him otherwise. Or maybe in some way, she agreed. In fact it was none of these. She had simply noticed someone out on the dock who was worth noticing.

“Isn’t that Thurston Walden?” she asked, tapping the pane.

Walden was heading towards his private helicopter and signing autographs on the way. He waved to admirers as the wind puffed his hair into an airfoil. Seeing this distraction as their way out, Marissa began banging on the locked door. The first guard to come in put his hand on her arm to restrain her but that, it seemed, was a big mistake. Marissa slapped her hand over his to pin it to her arm, then swept her foot under his to topple him. The move was so fast and smooth she could have simply been dancing the rumba. The guard was dazed but quickly started to get up, as though he had tripped on something. Adam, even quicker, grabbed a tape dispenser that was on the desk and flipped it in his direction. Bull’s-eye! The guard went down.

Hearing this, the other guard came in like the FBI with a gun drawn. That was an even bigger mistake since it gave Marissa the chance to clutch the gun, sweep her leg, and both topple and disarm him at the same time. Adam used the door to conk him on the head as they left the office.

## **The Chase**

The plan, crafted on the spot, was to move through the crowds to get to the hovercraft, which was already leaving at that moment. A dramatic leap from the dock would have looked just right cinematically, but as they started to run, they could see more guards coming in their direction. Without any strategy, they veered off and ran in the

other direction. And ran and ran, guards in pursuit all the way. Eventually they found themselves at one of the airlocks into the immense glass building called the Garden.

In they went.

With the dull logic of henchmen everywhere – not to mention action movie directors – the guards chased them into the building for the simple reason that guards chase people. That is what they do rather than simply waiting for them to come out again through one of the other doors. No matter. Soon they were in a mad scramble through every eco-system and chase cliché known to fiction.

In the jungle, they tore, pushed, hacked and stumbled their way through monstrous leaves and clingy vines, the moist heat bearing down, creepy critters watching them sternly. One of the guards slipped on a root and went careening down a muddy slope into a lagoon. In the savannah, they raced across dirt-dry terrain and avoided a herd of wildebeests. One of the guards was not so lucky. In the forest, they wove through thick trees and jumped over dead ones. Wild turkeys scrambled out of their way. Adam took another guard out with a well-thrown stone.

Tundra, ocean, steppe, desert...they raced through them all eventually arriving at another door leading outside. Panting and puffing in the morning air, they were immediately met by a new security team led by Leeds. The thought of escaping back through the same door was too exhausting to consider and so they let the patrol surround them. Soon they were back in the main office in the town where Wright had been watching the whole chase on his screen like a man in his man cave playing a video game. He seemed entertained by the adventure.

## **Nemo**

Without saying anything, and without revealing his deep disappointment in Marissa, Wright escorted them to the conference room with the grand view of the sea. It was really more for effect than anything else and it worked as Wright stood at the window looking majestic. A decent cabal in that room, Adam thought, would look at that far horizon and feel their schemes emanating like gamma into the ether. He did not know that precisely that had already happened.

Wright took a seat with his back to the sea and motioned for Adam and Marissa to sit opposite him. Leeds stood at the wall and soon they were joined by the man in gray who solemnly clasped his hands and bowed his head and blocked the door.

“Where did you think you were going?” Wright asked, amused by the whole chase.

“Are we prisoners here?” Marissa asked.

“Prisoners?” he sputtered. “Nonsense. You are our guests.”

“Yes, but guests who can leave whenever they want to?”

“Not quite yet.”

“So more like prisoners then,” Adam suggested.

“I would love for you to take some time here and be inspired,” Wright said, looking directly at Marissa. “You have the Sequence within you.”

“How do you know that?” she asked.

“We extract samples from everything you come in contact with on the island. The toilet in your hotel room collects urine, although that is not a great source. Too contaminated, I’m told. But we can amplify and purify it. The blue cup in our restaurants is a special plastic that absorbs and preserves saliva, a much better source. Of course, the spit kit is best...but that’s voluntary and it would be asking a lot of visitors to Eden II.”

“And not so tricky either,” Adam suggested.

“So I have the Sequence,” Marissa said. “So what does that mean?”

“I am still hoping that it means you are one of us. You simply need time for it to manifest itself in your awareness.”

“Manifest itself in what way exactly?” Marissa asked.

“To show you to the Light,” Wright said.

“Your light is pretty murky,” Adam said and Wright truly seemed hurt by that.

“You will see the truth in time. The country will. The world will.”

“Your White Sun test just proves to you that your followers are worthy of being your followers.”

“You’ve got it backwards, my dear. Our test tests for our divine descendance.”

“In junk DNA?” Adam scoffed.

But Wright was not insulted by this at all and instead turned to Adam sympathetically.

“God did not make junk.”

“He sure made baloney though.”

### **God’s Plan**

“You know, we were willing to give you the benefit of the doubt because of your name, Adam. It is a name of special importance to us. The name Adam means man. And so you are a man, yes?”

“Yours is Wright but that doesn’t make you...”

“Do you have desires, Adam?”

Adam tried not to glance at Marissa at that instant but he probably did anyway, clearly enough at least for Wright to pick up on.

“I know,” Wright said. “As do I. As do all people. We have desires for love, for sex, for truth. And for spiritual completion. Where do you think these urges come from? From Zeus? From the moon? No, they emerge from what God has written into your DNA, just like everything else. Just as your eye color is determined by your genes, so too is the way you see the world.”

“What are you talking about?” Adam asked.

“What we have done is locate the source codes of faith and belief, the yearning for something greater than ourselves. The longing for God is built into our very genetic code, but in the parts of the genome that other scientists think are useless. The ones who come to us, who have the faith, who believe in the Light, are guided by that code. They feel for the soul, the love of God, the quest for the spirit. The White Sun Sequence is precisely what sends them to us. This was God’s plan...to design us to search for Him.”

“So the White Sun Sequence makes your chosen seek you out,” Marissa said.

“No, it makes them seek out Elohim. As our scientists have found, the DNA that is in the news, that has the world’s attention, is only the tiniest part of the story. That is just the somatic DNA, the DNA that codes for proteins, that builds our bodies. Disease, health, longevity...all part of that. But this is much more. This is the DNA of

consciousness itself, of feelings and drives, desires and needs. This DNA codes for the mind, for the soul, for thoughts of the eternal.”

“In the junk?”

“In the vast portion of the genome that is not just about bodies but about spirits. The unchanging in us. That which is beyond evolution. We are more than bodies and most of our DNA is for the rest of that. All people have this. Even you, Adam. You may or may not believe in God, but I know you have urges that drive you.”

Sure. Depression mostly, Adam thought. Was that in the DNA too? He wanted to laugh at the idea but it suddenly made sense to him. His moods, his unease – even his distrust – often seemed like something he could not control, something as internally driven as his own sweat. Wright might actually be on to something there but Adam refused to give him the satisfaction.

“And you think the White Sun Sequence will tell you this,” Marissa said.

“Yes it will. Many people search for truth but only a very few seek out Elohim in just this way. Dark skin or light, young and old, male or female...we are searching for the Children of God.”

“And what happens to everyone once your search is complete?”

“Re:creation. We will begin again in a new paradise.”

“And the others?”

“They will find their place in the araphel, the eternal night.”

“You’ll help them get there of course.”

“We won’t stop them,” Wright said.

With that, he seemed to lose his focus as he turned around and let his thoughts settle on the vastness of the idea and his gaze on the distant horizon outside the window.

### **Tell Delora**

“It’s God gene stuff,” Roxie Marion said.

She was on a screen, joining the nexxus group from home where she sometimes worked. Behind her was a weird guitar and a wall full of books; a small statue of Anat, the Canaanite warrior goddess. She was either in her pajamas or not, it was hard to tell the difference.

“There’s a god named Gene?” Andreyev asked.

He was not so much joking as losing his mind. This whole affair was starting to derange him as the facts and the cracks merged into some kind of great cosmic factcracking reality. From his seat in the bionic chair, he was starting to wonder if humanity was actually worth saving.

“Ha,” Roxie said, not meaning it. “The God gene is supposedly a specific gene called VMAT2 that predisposes people to spiritual experience. Something to do with monoamines and neurotransmitter levels.”

“Okay.”

“Maybe it’s the same kind of thing here. The Genesisists are talking about a very complex sequence in the junk DNA that they share with Seth and that proves their connection to God, right? But maybe it’s real.”

“Not you too!”

“I mean, maybe it is a real sequence that influences someone’s need to belong, to believe, to have faith in something.”

“Fine,” Dr. Marta concluded. “All very interesting. But our problem is what to do next. With the program, with this werewolf thing, with Mr. Selik here.”

“Pay Selik for help and Selik disappear,” Selik suggested.

“I say we do nothing,” Andreyev offered. “The Church has the program back but that program includes Oto’s werewolf, so it won’t work anyway. They’ll test the genomes and find that everyone has the Sequence. End of plan, whatever it is.”

“NGE!” Roxie insisted.

“Why is that Not Good Enough?”

“Because eventually, they’ll figure out what is going on and start all over. We have to do something to prevent that.”

“How is that our problem?” Andreyev asked.

“How it is Selik problem?” Selik added.

“Because we live in the world,” Roxie shot back.

“Enough!” Dr. Marta said. “The question for us is how all this effects the future. The future is our business. We need to tell Delora that the genome files could be changed

in this way and see what she makes of it. All right, Oto, it looks like you're back on payroll for now. Try not to screw up again."

"Oto Selik does not screw," Selik said sadly.

But the others had already gone back to work.

"Oto Selik is genius," he added quietly.

But Dr. Marta and Roxie were gone and he was standing alone next to Andreyev, who was back in his cyberworld.

"Oto Selik need glass of water," he muttered. "Anyone? Hello?"

### **Silence**

For a long time nothing was said as there was little to discuss.

Wright knew what he knew about Elohim and Genesis and Seth and the White Sun and The Children of the Rape. Marissa sat silently with her own thoughts about gene sequences and viral programs and the fate of the earth. Adam, to his own shock, found himself thinking that Wright was right.

Not about the Sequence and the Re:creation...maybe they had discovered the genetic code for desire and maybe not. Adam could not assess that. What struck him at that moment was just how right Wright was about the weight of wanting. It was the same for everyone, this deep yearning, this insatiable need. Longer than hunger, wider than thirst. Everyone wanted to be wanted. For something, by someone.

Perhaps this code – if it truly existed – simply determined the need in some general way, then your own unique personality worked out the particulars. Same need, different intentions. For one person it became a need for attention and in another a desire for a loving lover. The admiration of the masses, the envy of your peers, or the urge for God Almighty to stop in his tracks and notice you for good or ill. We were born alone inside our own skins, died alone in our own brains, and spent the time in between hankering to feel that we mattered in some way, one way, any way, to someone, anyone besides that stern and demeaning judge inside our own heads.

Cure that, Adam thought, and you cure misery at its source. We would all become needless. Free of all wanting. But cure that and you cure the world of humanity, leaving nothing but the bugs chuckling. Was that their plan?

## **The False Truth**

“I am disappointed in you Marissa,” Wright said, swiveling back on his chair to face them. “I was hoping you understood what we are trying to do here since you yourself have the Sequence. I can only ask that you stay and discover your true nature.”

“Which, of course, you know better than I do,” she shot back.

“It is in your code,” Wright said. “I am certain that you are a believer.”

“Not in your God,” she said.

“There is only one Father in Heaven,” Wright replied.

“Really?” Adam jumped in. “It seems to me that there is one for every nut in the bag.”

“This cynical nature of yours is part of your being,” Wright observed. “Perhaps we will find the sequence for that too.”

“What exactly do you have in mind for people without the Sequence?” Marissa asked. “A nice little plague maybe. Some kind of mega-virus?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“A flood? Altered fish that destroy the polar caps?”

Wright winced.

“Please tell me this does not lead the Zombie Apocalypse,” Adam said. “I beg you.”

Wright laughed at all that. A deep belly laugh, really fun.

“You people have been watching too many summer movies. Why not a crop fungus to cause worldwide famine, while we’re at it?”

“Is that the plan?”

“Flood? Plague? Famine? All of that is in what we call the False Bible, the undivine sections added on later by faulty human beings. The Lord of the Garden, the author of Genesis, would never resort to that nonsense.”

“Then why are you working with Walden and GenUsa?”

“You know about that?” Wright said, looking sternly at Leeds. “We really must do something about leaks. It is a real problem around here.”

“Why do you want to find out who has the Sequence? Why not just test the people who seem motivated to join you?”

“Because some folks will not open themselves to the desire. Like you Marissa. Some are believers but not chosen to follow. Some people are blind to their true natures.”

“So after you find this out, just how do you plan to get rid of the Children of the Rape, the Descendants of Cain, the bad seed?” Adam asked.

“Naturally,” Wright said rather pleasantly. “As God intended.”

## CHAPTER EIGHT



### The End Game

“We don’t plan to do anything,” Wright continued. “Elohim will take care of that.”

“How exactly?”

“That is not our concern. Look around you. Look at what the world has become...”

And here Wright, ever the salesman, brought up a screen and filled the air over the desk with images from the daily news. Scenes of destruction, disruption, and violence. Riots in Europe, mass shootings in the US, slaughters in Africa. The unending flow of refugees leaving nowhere to arrive at nothing, the depthless mire of poverty. Biblical retributions all, except that they were nothing but humanity at its most familiar.

“Do we really need to *do* anything at all to insure that this world is ending? Another war in the Middle East may consume the planet. A new mega-virus created by some splinter group could kill billions. A dirty bomb may very well contaminate the atmosphere. Do you think this is what God, Elohim, intended for his creation? This is humanity’s work.”

“Then why all the labs and research?” Marissa asked.

“Options, you might call them. Scenarios. We study possibilities to be prepared for them. Just like secular governments. When the end comes, and it *will* come sooner or later, we want to be ready for it. Whatever end Elohim has in mind, we will survive it. Once we identify the Children of Seth, we will invite them to Eden II to wait out the Re:creation. However and whenever it occurs. And they will come because they have the desire within them.”

“So Eden II is an ark. And the Sequence is the admissions test,” Adam snapped, but Wright was unfazed.

“Yes, the ultimate admissions test. Admission to Paradise. Better than an interview, more complete than an essay.”

“You plan to survive the end here on Eden II,” Marissa said. “But GenUSA is only testing people in the United States. Maybe fifty thousand people who could fit on this island. Is Elohim only interested in America?”

Wright, with great style in his gesture, like a conductor, swept his hand across the screen and switched from images of hell on earth to a map of the globe with glowing green dots along the edges of the continents. Maybe a hundred of them.

“Eden II is just the first. Eden III through Eden CII will make that possible,” he said proudly.

Despite himself, Adam was impressed. This was recreation on a much grander scale than anyone back at nexxus was considering. Delora saw the pattern but missed the scope. The LinkMap was pretty but also pretty wimpy compared to this. Yet something was still missing. Could it really be the ultimate plan of the Children of the White Sun to set this up so completely and then do nothing...just sit by and wait for fate or time to run its course? It was too ordinary to imagine. Somehow, not creating a final cataclysm seemed even loonier than creating one.

But when Wright turned back in their direction with a calm look on his face. He seemed just ordinary enough, just familiar enough, and just bland enough to be capable of it.

## **Transformation**

A call came in that required Wright’s immediate attention.

More guests were leaving. Among them, by the laws of probability, were one or two who had the Sequence and these Wright always made a special effort to see off with great fanfare. These, after all, were people who would someday become part of the new world. A few others were impressed by what they saw and heard, but would remain only followers and these Wright paid polite but distant attention to. Many had neither the White Sun nor any interest in the movement but instead had skills that were useful until the Re:creation and these Wright had his assistants attend to. Most, of course, were none of these, mere guests and partygoers who found their own way off the island.

“I have to attend to something,” Wright said tersely. And then turning to the man in gray and to Leeds, he added: “Come with me.”

The man in gray hesitated, then seemed embarrassed to be questioning orders.

“Leave them,” Wright said. “They can’t go anywhere.”

Alone in the room, Marissa went to the table and sat on it. She had arrived on the island with an overnight case but to make their escape, she had taken only a small handbag she wore on a strap. She now dumped the contents of this on the table and started to sort them neatly, the way you would lay out Tarot cards.

“I don’t believe him,” she said as she did this.

“No kidding.”

“I mean this doesn’t make any sense.”

“You’re looking for sense?”

“These people may be nuts but they are consistent. Their crazy little mythology has to hold together. Why go to all this trouble to just let things unfold as they will? Why test everyone if Elohim is going to kill the evil ones anyway?”

“I was thinking the same thing.”

Lipstick, compact, eyeliner, skin lotion. Adam was surprised to see that she had all the basic supplies of a supermodel and could not get why she was sorting them out now. Did she expect to glamour them into submission?

“There must be more to it than that.”

Adam took out his phone and looked at the images from the LinkMap that were stored there. Most of them made sense at this point...the White Sun, Walden, EWN, Re:creation, the caduceus. But one last one was still a mystery. It was an old woodcut showing a vicious dog attacking a man.

“Dog bites man, man bites dog,” he said aloud.

“Are you all right?”

He turned the phone so that she could see it.

“This is an image that means something in connection with all this. Maybe they are working on a program to turn our pets against us. Could DNA do that?”

“You said that images can be used not just to show something directly but to imply, to suggest. As signs for ideas. So what could that picture suggest?”

“Attack? Defense? Training? Bad dog or mad dog?”

“Weird dog,” she said. “Weird 18<sup>th</sup> century dog.”

“Why 18<sup>th</sup> century?”

“It looks like an old woodcut.”

That was true but Adam had not focused on it before. He had been trying to figure out what it showed, not paying attention to the way it looked. That was part of its meaning too. In this case, a historical meaning. Marissa was right, the image seemed to be an old woodcut from the 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> century. Then maybe it was not a dog at all. Maybe it was a wolf. People back then would have been afraid of wolves not dogs. That was the source for the idea of werewolves.

“Maybe it’s a werewolf,” he said out loud. “If one bit you, you were transformed. It could refer to transformation. Or maybe alteration.”

“A werewolf is also a kind of computer worm or virus that alters sequences when it finds them.”

“So then maybe the program...”

“...not only tests for the White Sun sequence but changes any genome file that doesn’t have it.”

“Changes it in what way?”

“I don’t know,” she said, still sorting and fussing. “In a bad way.”

“What’s the point of that? Changing it would not actually change anything.”

“Yes, it would.”

“It’s just the genome on file in a databank. Not the actual one in the body. Just data, not reality. That guy on the boat was talking about synbio...but that’s changing real genomes not files.”

Carefully, Marissa took all the casual items from her handbag and twisted, turned, unscrewed, shoved and clicked them together into position. Somehow they all fit together into one handy little unit. That was odd.

“But the reality *is* the data,” she said. “Changing those files could change the real world.”

“How?” he asked.

“Suppose I went into every single book in existence and changed the word ‘door’ to the word ‘goob.’ How long do you think it would take for doors to become goobs?”

“You’re losing me.”

“Change the data that air traffic controllers see and you cause real world crashes, right? Change the genomes on file and all sorts of decisions become based on faulty facts. Suppose they found that people with a certain gene sequence were immune to cholera say. They could engineer a vaccine based on that sequence. But if the information was false, the vaccine could do more harm than good. With the right combination of the wrong circumstances, it could lead to a disaster...”

“...of Biblical proportions.”

“Right.”

When she was done assembling the stuff from her purse, she did not have a superduper mascara brush as Adam expected. Instead, she had a small gun.

“nexus gave you that?” he asked, slightly envious.

“I don’t work for nexus,” she said. “They think I do, but they’re wrong.”

She held the gun behind her back and turned to the door to wait for Wright and the others to return to the room.

### **Cosa Nostra**

Before returning to the conference room, Wright turned to Leeds in the hallway and confronted him. Leeds was a big man and a former soldier and would not normally be intimidated by a smaller civilian but Wright had his own aura of power and that pressed Leeds back against the wall.

“What exactly did your man do to get the chips back?”

“What do you mean?” Leeds asked.

“You know what I mean.”

“I told him to do what he had to do.”

“He killed them, didn’t he? Your man,” he said, nodding towards the man in gray, “killed Frayn and Selik to get the pendants.”

“So what if he did. You have your program back. The Re:creation is back on track.”

“Are you insane? Killing people? We don’t kill people! This is the Genesisist Church not the Cosa Nostra.”

“I had my orders and I followed them,” Leeds said cruelly.

“I never told you to...”

Wright’s voice trailed off as he began to realize that what he was claiming was as obvious as it was irrelevant. Of course he never told Leeds to do it...Walden did. The man in gray was working for Leeds but Leeds was still taking orders from Walden.

“I think you’re getting your two masters mixed up.”

Masters? Leeds moved forward on that word, ready to prove that he had none.

“What about them?” he demanded, pointed back towards the conference room.

“They are nothing.”

“They know enough to blow this whole operation.”

“This is not an operation,” Wright said. “This is the future of humanity.”

“I don’t work for God,” Leeds said. “I have my orders. If you don’t deal with them, I will.”

As he said this, Leeds nodded motioned to the man in gray who was standing like some kind of colorless stain at the end of the hall. Wright, with careful timing, signaled for Leeds to wait, then pushed past him and went back into the conference room. Leeds motioned for the man in gray to follow Wright back into the room.

## **MSF**

When Wright returned his mood had changed. Where he was engaging before, he now seemed determined. Intent. In no mood for discussion. Leeds was still in the hallway talking to Walden on the phone but the man in gray returned and went back to his position by the door. He stood there with his feet wide apart, like an unbouncer not letting anyone out. Wright went back to the far side of the desk, posing again before the panorama of the ocean.

“It seems that we have a bit of a problem,” Wright said as politely as possible.

“You sure do,” Marissa said.

She had both hands behind her back, the gun in one of them, a posture that Wright read as defensive. Wrong.

“You have learned a bit too much about our Sequence, my dear. Some people are not quite as flexible as I am...”

“Walden, for example,” Adam said.

This did seem to bother Wright who did not like the idea that he was not in charge. He made the mistake then of looking at the man in gray with some doubt in his gaze.

“I’ve heard enough of this crap,” Marissa said and pointed the gun right at him.

Seeing that, the man in gray quickly pulled out his own gun and aimed it at Adam. It was a sudden standoff but an absurd one. Unlike the scripts, both guns were small, almost like pea-shooters. A kid’s version of the old cowboy shows, Adam thought. Whoopee-ti-yi-yay. Still, they seemed lethal enough that a deadly silence filled the room.

“You continue to surprise me, my dear,” Wright said after a while.

“That’s nice to know coming from someone who thinks they have all eternity mapped out,” she said.

Adam, staring into the dead barrel and the deader eyes of the man in gray, tried to mediate.

“Maybe we should all just take a deep breath,” he suggested.

He breathed in and out but realized that no one else was joining him.

“All this just to sit and wait. I don’t buy it,” she said. “We’re leaving.”

“I can’t let you do that, my dear Marissa,” Wright said. “You might feel the need to inform the wrong authorities.”

“Like nexxus.” Adam said.

“Whose sis?” Wright asked.

“I don’t work for them. I told you,” Marissa said, speaking to Adam but not turning away from Wright for one second.

“Then who the hell...”

She reached into her pocket and slid her phone onto the desk. Some kind of ID was floating on the surface. Wright looked at it, read it, then read it again. Adam twisted his head and read it too. His high school French was a little rusty but the logo on it – a negative figure within orange lines – was familiar. Still, it took him a few moments to put it all together and more moments than that to get over the incongruity of it. A joke?

No. The ID looked real and he knew that the agency was real and that meant that Marissa was for real.

“*Medecin Sans Frontiers*,” she announced.

The dead silence in the room got a good deal deader.

### **The Shot**

“Let me get this straight,” Adam said and for an instant almost seemed to share an incredulous laugh with Wright. “You’re an undercover agent for Doctor’s Without Borders? I thought they gave kids shots for malaria in Africa.”

“We do.”

“Then what are you doing here?” Wright asked.

“I don’t work for them as a doctor.”

“Publicity agent then?”

“I’m in intelligence.”

“You mean to say,” Wright snorted, “that Doctors Without Borders has secret agents?”

“Someone’s got to make sure that medical science isn’t abused. The police can’t do it. The governments are in on it. The corporations fund it.”

Adam rubbed his forehead to make the pounding go away. Was he really on a fake tropical island with a phony pope and a pseudo spy? Or was he being punked? Was the fate of humanity really at stake or just some nutjobs playing out a real-life fantasy game? There was no way to tell what made sense and what did not, but at least his depression was gone. It had been displaced by perplexity. Something to keep in mind.

Wright, for his part, just smiled and nodded his head. Now it all made perfect sense. Her suspicion of the lab, her knowledge of the genome, her reason for inviting Adam. Wright felt hurt that she had faked an interest in him, disappointed that her own Sequence was being denied. He felt a lot of things but above all, he felt disgusted with the whole sham, more than ready to walk out and leave them all to themselves to work things out.

That is just when Leeds entered the room.

“This is taking too long,” he said before realizing that he was walking into the middle of a duel. “Whoa! What the hell is going on here?”

“Tell this idiot to put his gun down before he gets us all shot,” Wright demanded.

“Good plan,” Adam said.

Leeds, with strategy on his mind, calculated the odds of Wright or Marissa or Adam or the man in the gray – or even himself – getting shot and quickly decided that the odds were not worth working out. On the other hand, he had his own orders to follow and so he followed them. As he was still holding the door open, he simply turned on his heel and went for his own gun. Seeing that, Wright took a step forward around the desk to leave, but Marissa moved closer to him, almost touching his belly with the gun. The man in gray hesitated, then took a step closer to Adam. Then nothing happened. Then more nothing. It was a classic spaghetti Western standoff minus the music and the hats and the extreme close-ups. Perfectly ridiculous, of course.

And when the shots finally rang out, it was not instantly clear who had pulled the trigger and who was going down.

### **Another MSF**

“Any word from them?” Dr. Marta asked.

She was used to having all the information she needed at the tip of her fingertips and did not like not knowing what she had to know. So she gathered the team again to give her some sense of perspective.

“Nothing,” Andreyev answered. “I’m getting worried.”

“Leaving island is not easy,” Selik added.

“We can’t wait for them.”

“Nice. I’ll keep that in mind when I get kidnapped,” Roxie said.

“They are Intags, this is their job, their problem,” Dr. Marta snapped. “What does Delora make of the idea that the DNA files could be altered?”

“Some new datapoints have been added but they’re not very clear.”

“What, for example?”

He brought up one of the larger new images on the LinkMap...it was a small picture of some thick red lines that seemed to define a figure.

“It’s the logo for MSF,” he said.

“Which is what?”

“*Medecin Sans Frontiers*,” he explained.

“Which means what?”

“Dunno. Maybe the organization itself is somehow involved. But Adam showed us that Delora can use these images as signs too. You know, metaphorically. So maybe something about health or medicine. I’d need more connections to figure it out.”

“Maybe it’s about genetics,” Roxie said.

She made this statement casually, as though inadvertently voicing a private thought, and surely not knowing how right she was.

“Why do you say that?”

“Huh? IDK. Oh wait, because MSF is a kind of gene they’ve been doing a lot of research on lately.”

“How do you know this crap?” Andreyev asked.

“Brother, you don’t want to know how I know what I know.”

“This makes sense,” Dr. Marta jumped in. “It could be Delora telling us to focus on the medicine not the religion. Maybe the genome project is really at the center of this. Not the White Sun and the Genesisists...but GenUsa.”

“Walden is involved with both,” Roxie said.

“But he’s no Genesisist,” Andreyev added. “Can’t be. He’s too damned...normal.”

“So then what does he want? To help humanity?”

“You’ve seen him. Do you really believe that?”

“Maybe he wants to patent the DNA sequences. Own everyone’s genetic code.”

“No,” Roxie replied. “The DNA is naturally occurring. He couldn’t own it. But he might be able to patent the werewolf. Selik’s program is basically an invention.”

“Selik could make fortune on patent, yes?”

“That could be his connection to all this. To have access to the genome files for everyone in America and a werewolf program to manipulate them. That sounds like our Walden. But why? For what purpose?”

“Suppose he could alter everyone’s DNA to send him money?”

“No, you’re thinking reality. Remember, the werewolf just changes the records that are on file with GenUsa.”

“Maybe he alters the genomes to manipulate research so he can make a fortune on new designer drugs. Control the genome on file, control the market?”

“Or maybe use the changes to create something that changes the real thing....some kind of reverse spit kit. Designer people!”

“Okay,” Dr. Marta said. “In other words, we have no clue. So put some of this into play with Delora and let her tell us what might happen.”

“What about our Intags?”

“Let’s hope they work things out for themselves. It’s better for our business if they don’t get killed.”

“MSF!” Roxie said. But this time she meant Mothersuckingfucker or something along those lines.

## **Turn Around**

They were kissing lusciously in the kitchen.

It had taken a week to get to that point, to forget about the island and remember their own tropical heat. Their exit from the island escorted by Leeds, flight home courtesy of Wright, cab to the city paid for by nexxus...had all been fraught with tension. Sexual tension, building all the time, had taken a back seat to the mission for too long. They almost felt like strangers and the dinner on top of the boat was a way to slowly reintroduce themselves. But it was not working that way. Not slowly as planned. Every forkful that she placed between her lips sent shivers through Adam; every piece of bread that he tore from the loaf was like a twist in her lust.

When neither of them could stand it for one more distant moment, they went down to the kitchen and lunged at each other over the dishes. Then wet, deep, massaging kisses at the counter. Then shirts pulled off, they rubbed nipples and ran fingers over arms. Marissa dropped her pants and did not bother to kick them away. Adam did the same with his. It was not pretty, no awards for elegance there, but there was too much fever for that.

As he nuzzled the fold beneath her breasts, Marissa opened her eyes for an instant and noticed a strange message appearing on the screen on the counter below her. Adam moved to lick her nipple and she felt a shudder and clenched her eyelids. But when she peeked again, the message was still there. It read: “turn around.”

Dizzy with the feeling of excitement and without thinking, she actually followed the instruction and turned around. Now he was pressed up against her from the back and she could feel his stomach and hips and groin against her behind. She reached up to grab his hair with her right hand and steadied herself against the sink with her left.

From this position, Adam reached around to place his hand on her breast and with a deep breath – almost a gasp – she filled his hand and could feel her nipples blooming, almost to the point of discomfort. But not quite.

He was hard behind her and firm, ready in other words, and she was just the opposite and therefore ready too. He ran his fingers along the smooth skin on her lower back, sliding down to the soft mounds of her behind. This sent a shudder through her that echoed all the way up to her cortex and down again.

When he lightly nibbled on her neck, a flood of moisture filled her up. She waited. It seemed like forever but was only one instant in anticipation. Then he moved in. The tip spreading, the crown slipping, the shaft sliding. She moaned when she was full and he gasped to be there. So soft, so wet, so delectable. His thrusts were slow and steady, not the kind of ramming you see in the videos. This was all meant to savor, inch by inch, in and out and in and out.

She was tall and so the position was fine but with pants around their legs they were unsteady and so to get better movement, Adam shifted just enough to notice a new message on the counter screen. It read: “clutch pubis.” He knew he had a smart kitchen, but this was something new. The notion that his kitchen counter was advising him on erotic technique, at that moment, did not even seem so odd. Some toilets knew if you weren’t drinking enough water, so why not this? Obliging, he reached around and placed his hand on her in front and pressed into her pleasure core, thrusting from behind with also slowly pulsing in front. And so...deep in, deep out, pulse and rest, pulse and rest. Hair like silk, skin like satin, muscles and skin, salt and sugar, cream, a short cry. Until

the delight center in the brain, which is in the heart anyway, expanded, swelled, shot up, then exploded. They were laughing after that, though neither knew exactly why.

Except that they did.

### **All Data**

Marko Andreyev might have felt a bit sleazy if he had thought twice about it.

But he was not prone to second thoughts.

In his view, he was a data maven and all of life was data. Data was truth, truth was data. Data was love, sex, you name it. He had seen the Human Factors report about women of Marissa's psychometric profile and understood her reticence to get involved. In his mind this meant a certain sexual self-protection or unwillingness to let go.

And although he himself had never actually had sex, in order to be thorough he researched the data about clitoral stimulation and which positions worked best to achieve orgasm fastest for a woman of her size, weight, and body type. Erotic metrics, the newest fad. The position he found was standing and leaning forward slightly, man entering from behind with fingers pressing back against the pubis, assuming they were matched in height. He dubbed this position the Werewolf in honor of the mission and for the way, in his juvenile fantasy, it would make the female partner howl.

Then, running his own little oracular program he pieced all this together and came up with his strategy. Monitoring Adam's boat and commandeering the cameras, he saw them in the kitchen and sent the text message to get them into the right position, the most promising position, at the right moment. Naturally, Dr. Marta did not have to know that he was involved. Or helping for that matter. No doubt it was illegal in some way. Certainly weird. But he did because it was all part of the big data game. Intag teams had to bond and sex was bonding and it had to work and he was bored and had no sense whatsoever of boundaries. Thus pleased with his effort, Andreyev, a virgin himself, filed all this under a private folder he was keeping and told no one, admitted nothing, pretended to know little.

Certainly not the secrets of satisfaction that everyone else who actually had sex was desperately searching for.

## A New Client

“So what now?” Adam asked.

They had collapsed on the kitchen floor in a tangle of arms and legs and clothes that were now a bundle of laundry not yet collected. Lusty laundry in fact.

“You mean us?” she asked.

“I mean them,” he replied.

“Once I send my report to MSF, I’m done. Back to my real life.”

“They told me that nexxus is going to let it all unfold. Not report anything, not expose anything. GenUsa will keep collecting genome information, the Genesists will run their test *with* Selik’s werewolf embedded in it. Everyone will have the White Sun Sequence, amen.”

“So then this was all for nothing?”

“I guess so.”

“We have to do something about that.”

“Why?”

“This is too important to ignore. A religious cult with access to private files on everyone in the country? That can’t be good.”

“Sorry to interrupt there,” said a voice coming in from on high.

They jumped and jolted, gathered their clothes and wits, threw on what they could, and tried to compose themselves. But to no effect. It took a few moments to realize that the voice was Marko Andreyev, and that he was not actually in the room with them. Not in person anyway, just on the big screen near the couch.

“How the hell do you do that?” Adam shouted. “And how do I stop you?”

He had not let a call through, not accepted any connection; yet there was Andreyev bigger than life. Adam wondered just how long Andreyev had been there watching and listening, but that thought was just too icky to stick with.

“Hi folks, just checking in,” Andreyev said cheerfully. “Wanna make sure you two are making a good...”

“Shut up, Marko,” said Dr. Marta, replacing his face on screen.

“No one else will be hearing about this,” she said with authority. “Privileged information. It’s in your contracts.”

“What contracts?”

“This is not going anywhere but back to us as a useable resource.”

“Resource for what?” Marissa asked.

“Our clients of course. We are not in business to fix the future of the world. Just to profit from it.”

“You have a buyer for the Genesisist Church?”

“No. But everything you uncovered gets fed back to Delora – before it happens – and we see what she comes up with. That is information we can sell.”

“Who could you sell it too...another millennial cult?”

“We have clients who can benefit from predictions in this arena.”

The expression on her face hinted at an irony that was too ironic to ignore.

“It’s Walden isn’t it,” Adam guessed. “Your new client is Thurston Walden.”

“Actually it is. And why not? After all, he saved your lives.”

“How did he do that?”

“By telling his man Leeds to protect you. That’s why Leeds shot his own hired gun, the man in the gray suit. Better to kill a killer than two folks with graduate degrees.”

“Another reason to stay in school and get that diploma,” Adam suggested.

“What does Walden want?” Marissa asked. “What was he after?”

“Not Elohim, that’s for sure,” Roxie Marion interjected.

Suddenly the whole nexxus team was in the same boat. Adam groaned.

“True,” Dr. Marta said. “He was only investing in the Re:creation so the labs on Eden II could do the research into the genome about the White Sun Sequence. Smart move. They came up with a whopper.”

“The secret code of the Setheria?”

“No. The genetic code for yearnings, for desires. Maybe for belief or faith itself. It’s not clear yet. Marko...explain?”

“This non-coding DNA that everyone thought was useless may contain the blueprints for consciousness itself,” he said. “For our tendency to certain kinds of thoughts, concepts, beliefs. The basic genome defines the body but these folks may have uncovered the hidden code of the mind. Who knows what effects – Caspian or otherwise – this could lead to. Imagine what corporations will be able to with marketing,

advertising, even product creation if they can pinpoint the desire pattern in each individual. Or tap into our consciousness. It's way edge."

"What it is, is priceless," Dr. Marta added. "But we'll find a price."

"But if this turns out to be true – the genetic code for desire – it could be used to completely control people," Marissa protested.

"Not our problem," Dr. Marta said. "We're in the infobiz and this is info."

"Delora has already made some useful predictions," Andreyev interjected. "Some connection between all this and the price of neodymium on the world market."

"Okay, Marko, that's enough," Dr. Marta shot back.

"It's mined in China and another one of our clients..."

"That's enough! You both did great. Everybody wins. We're all very pleased."

With that, the entire nexxus team vanished from the boat, leaving Adam, pants up but fly wide open, and Marissa, pants on backwards and wearing Adam's shirt badly buttoned, standing before the blank screen speechless.

### **Another Guy**

When the call came on her phone, Marissa hesitated, thinking it was nexxus again. Or her former lover at MSF. Or Wright refusing to give up. But she answered when it turned out to be her sister, a lifelong pest, who knew she would have some explaining to do and that the truth was only one option.

"Please tell me that this guy was not your guy," Claudia pleaded.

She ran an inset video of Wright that she had pulled from the news report. He was wearing a suit, sitting at the conference desk on Eden II giving an interview, looking tanned and relaxed. The sound was off but he was clearly enjoying himself. She could see in his gestures that he was deflecting questions, denying allegations, and flicking away any buzzing rumors that may have recently surfaced.

"What on earth makes you think that?" Marissa asked.

"A secret island off the coast? You disappear for days, then come back and suddenly he is on the news? They think he runs a church of some kind."

"Actually it's more of a cult."

"How could you fall for someone like that, Mariss? What's wrong with you?"

“I didn’t fall for him. I was investigating him.”

“Investigating what?”

“It’s a long story. Read the book when it comes out.”

“There’s something funny going on here. I know you and I know that look. And I know that tone in your voice. You’re in love with someone. But you’re telling me that it is not that guy?”

“Not that guy.”

“Promise me that it is another guy.”

“Yes. Another guy,” she said, looking at Adam zipping up.

“Not a member of this cult.”

“Not a member.”

“But you’re not going to tell me who it is.”

“Right.”

“But it’s not Wright??”

“No, that’s right...”

And so on.

## **Action**

Arctic Char is a comforting fish.

It is salmon, of course, and therefore familiar and common. Loaded with omega oils. But it is unusual too and therefore exotic. Not your run of the mill salmon that gets smoked and packaged. And it is lighter than sockeye, for example, because it lives in colder water further north. Good fish. And with a braised honey sauce, it is sweet and succulent. A seductive fish that is to say, a fish for lovers.

They were at Marissa’s apartment this time, sitting at the small table overlooking the street, the sounds of the East Side in the background, the sounds of Dave Brubeck in the fore. In other words, a mutual agreement to take their time and savor. One smell, one taste, one note at a time.

Marissa had written her report on the entire series of events and sent it to her contact at Doctors Without Borders. She wanted nothing more to do with him since their wretched affair in Africa and therefore sent it cold and formal, no note, no call, no

explanation. What he would do with it was anyone's guess. She was done with it and, more importantly, with him.

No matter. There was no stopping technology. Someone somewhere would explore the genome for its secrets, come up with alterations, test out hypotheses, use the information for good or ill with a new twist or slant or protocol or obsession. No stopping craziness either.

Adam, for his part, suddenly realized that he had not taken Gladivil in weeks and did not feel depressed anyway, or even especially pessimistic. The adventure had cured the mood. The opposite of depression, he saw, was not elation. It was action. Having something to do and doing it. No time to regret the past, dread the future, or wallow in the misery of the here and now. Good thing to know.

The fish was almost ready and Adam was watching Marissa watch it and thinking that she looked beautiful in a short apron. When his phone rang, he decided not to answer it. But of course in the age of nexxus, that had no meaning and when he looked there was already something on the screen.

It was a new LinkMap floating gently in 3Space. Very pretty with its laser lines and glowing icons. No doubt Andreyev was already studying it, Roxie already obsessed with it, Dr. Marta already monetizing it. In the end, it was still all about the tickled eye.

More images of news or entertainment – was there even a difference any more? – to fill the screens and jitter the brain. The dither of pixels, the ocean of data, the scurry of atoms...all stirred together in a great cosmic gumbo of facts, fictions, and targeted marketing. The endless semiosis.

Adam tried to get rid of the LinkMap and failed of course. Instead, he looked back at Marissa and tried to hold on to the moment, the real moment, but he could already feel it slipping away like a dream in the dawning light. As she served the dish, he touched her hip to reconnect to something tangible and sensual. Something real in a lost sense of the word. She touched his hand as if to agree that they would not look at the screen, not get pulled in, not get trapped in its allure.

And this worked perfectly.

Right until the very moment that they looked.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Alan Robbins is an award-winning writer, designer, and educator.

He is the author of 35 books in the areas of mystery, puzzles, and creative non-fiction, with work appearing in *The New York Times* and *Newsweek* magazine. He is also a designer of games and puzzles and a frequent contributor to *Games* magazine. His 25 mystery jigsaw puzzles have millions of fans and his YouTube channel has over 9 million hits.

Mr. Robbins is currently a professor of visual communications at Kean University in New Jersey, where he directs The Design Center, producing innovative products, publications, and online exhibitions. Articles about his unique work with students have appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *The Star Ledger*, and other newspapers.

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