

In the beginning, there wasn't much. Just a spec. And then there was a megaload and it happened quickly. Everything sprawling out in different directions at insane speeds. There was a whole lot of dust and a whole lot of heat, then it gelled. It became stars, planets and other hokey things floating around in our gigantic universe.

Our universe wasn't alone, though. There were others. Many of them springing up before ours and others taking form afterward. We were all like methane bubbles rising from the deep sediment of the ocean floor, each believing we might alone, none of us having any method to see past our own circumstance. Spirits devoid of atomic housing journeyed, intermingled, and became curious. They had all this matter to work with and they shaped our many worlds. In our universe, they built large atoms from a hydrogen building-base. They created carbon, oxygen, iron, argon, mercury, uranium, and everything else. They were like children with a kazillion Lego pieces and all of the time to mess around. In other universes, there were different physical laws and different building blocks. Our guys were out here with Lego while out there in the near-infinite beyond there were Tinker Toys, Erector Sets and Lincoln Logs. Each universe formed with its own unique qualities. In the modern world of planet Earth, only elite minds having studied quantum mechanics for many, many years could understand a fraction of what was actual in the largest of pictures.

In a similar way that universes formed differently with their own special qualities, the spirits shaping the components of these universes had their own distinct methods and mannerisms. These spirits had their own personalities and it showed in the work they crafted and molded. In our universe, there came about spiral, lenticular and elliptical galaxies. Some of these with many curved arms of stars spinning away from the center and others with just a couple. There were irregular formations, nebulae, pulsars, black holes and a lot of dark matter. The spirits had propensities to behave selflessly or selfishly. There were malicious spirits and there were benevolent ones. There were spirits prone towards intelligence, prudence and logic while others reveled in haphazard whims and chaotic toilings. Some spirits had the power of Apollo while others were no more harmful than ordinary pixies. Some spirits had the audacity, brashness and vanity of Chicago brownstone graffiti artists with brand new Krylon spray paint cans. Look at me! I exist! I have a purpose! I have a message! You can't ignore me! Other spirits were more humble and prone to seclusion. A set of eyes peering from the dense woods reluctant to make contact. Some spirits were total hermits and couldn't be contacted unless sought out.

The early solar system was a chaotic mess of bullshit. There were more than twenty planets early on but collisions here and there changed the face of everything. Theia was one of the early planets, about as big as Mars, and it grazed Earth. There's no such thing as a fender bender when bodies this big hit each other, though, and as Theia

traveled along, a chunk of it stayed behind and became our Moon. The spirits seized on this lump and formed it. Like clay, they molded its size to be identical to that of the Sun when seen from the Earth's surface. They struggled with its rotation but managed to fix it so that the same face was always directed at the Earth. The spirits couldn't control everything, though, and some of them didn't want to. Modern astronomers and physicists would become acute enough to predict every coming eclipse. They would create machines which could travel to Mars and successfully land rovers on the surface. They would design satellites which could cruise past Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune and Pluto. Their studies of the cosmos became quite remarkable since the time of Galileo and Newton. One scientist in 1766, Johann Elert Bode, discovered a pattern of planetary orbits. Together with Johann Daniel Titius, they concluded that each planet away from the Sun resided at $a=4+x$ with Earth's semi-major axis being ten and x doubling from zero to three to six to twelve to twenty-four to forty-eight to ninety-six and so on. Later known as Bode's Law, this equation proposed that a planet should exist in the orbit between Mars and Jupiter. Why, in modern times, was there no observable planet there?

The common twenty-first century American became no smarter than a potato. Specifically, a couch potato. It was a de-evolution of collective intelligence. Earlier Americans set a goal to reach the Moon within a ten-year timeframe and accomplished the goal using hand-held slide rulers. The common twenty-first century American holding an iPhone had more computing power in his pocket than NASA had in Houston with their dinosaur computers of the sixties but the modern guy was more concerned about who Khloe Kardashian was banging or what app could successfully download Paris Hilton's sex tape without attracting a destructive virus. In the eighties, even a Commodore 64 had much more power than the two K machines of the lunar modules. The answer to Bode's Law was a simple one, the evidence visible and clear. There's an asteroid belt where there should be a full-sized planet. An imbecile might ask, what could this mean? There should be a single massive spherical body there but instead there are a whole lot of oblong rocks floating around everywhere! How weird! It turns out there was a planet in that particular orbit long ago. Just like Earth getting slammed by Theia, this planet had its own reckoning. Before being destroyed, it was Tiamat though some would know it as Phaeton. In elite circles, there would be dispute about how the disaster happened. Zecharia Sitchin in 1976, having studied ancient Sumerian literature, believed there was a brown dwarf which traveled around the Sun in a comet-like elliptical orbit roughly every 26,000 years. This brown dwarf was gaseous, not quite large enough to be called a true star yet it was larger than Jupiter. One of its moons, according to Sitchin, struck Tiamat/ Phaeton and pummeled it into complete oblivion. The result became the asteroid belt, solid evidence for anyone with a strong and open mind, one detached from mass media television propaganda, not to mention bland "one size fits all" public education.

Sitchin didn't have the only theory. Pragmatists figured there were two planets in the same orbit and they were destined to smash each other into smithereens. Years later there would be a budding American financial tycoon, Donovan Cobb, who speculated that there was a single planet there and no, it didn't get hit by one of Nibiru's moons. He didn't refer to the planet as Tiamat or Phaeton but rather Alderaan. Since the time he was a child, he adamantly collected an array of comic books, cherished them and studied them up and down. He knew about metaphors and allegories and a lot of times, he simply enjoyed comics for their basic intrinsic existence. He saw parallels, though,

and he liked to study the symbolism and inspiration of comic writers. He loved to crack codes and he loved to peg where people got their ideas from. Having heard about Tiamat/ Phaeton, when he watched Star Wars as a seventeen-year-old in 1977, he knew it. In his gut, he knew it. George Lucas had also known about Tiamat/ Phaeton and considered it when he created the Princess Leia character. Leia and Theia were close in name and Tiamat was in the same ball field. The dots connected in Donovan's mind but it went a further. This planet which had been situated in an orbit between Mars and Jupiter was an advanced one. Before dinosaurs began chewing one another up on Earth, there was an sophisticated civilization on Alderaan with flying machines, electricity, cities and nuclear power. Six years later in 1983, while smoking a whole lot of marijuana at a friend's house in the hills of Hollywood, Donovan told his buddy, "I think they nuked each other!" It was one of the greatest highs Donovan could remember, his mouth was parched, and he feared he might puke out the Charbay brandy he had just chugged. "They were advanced! All the signs are there for us to see!" He stumbled to a living room couch and held his head to keep it from exploding. His brain was throbbing. "I need water! Get me some water?"

They had just watched the third Star Wars installment, Return of the Jedi, at Grauman's Chinese Theatre and come back to Preston Bancroft's quaint home off Mullholand. "Luke, I am your father!" Preston started cracking up mercilessly. He slammed his thigh a few times then held his stomach and kept laughing. When he thought he was done, he laughed a little more then apologized to Donovan. "I'll get you some water." Preston walked to his kitchen and reached for glasses from a cabinet. "I didn't see that coming! Mother of all twists! What the fuck?! Luke was kissing his sister!" Preston chuckled a little more, poured Donovan's water from the sink tap and took it to him. "That was good weed, Don! Where'd you get that shit?!"

Donovan took the water from Preston and gulped it quickly. He handed the glass back, "I need more. Now!" Preston came back with two glasses. Donovan slammed the first and sipped from the second. "Your dad gave you this place? No questions? No conditions?" Donovan looked around. The ceiling was high and sloped. The back sliding-glass door opened to a patio which held a modest view of the Los Angeles valley.

Preston Bancroft was a few years older than Donovan Cobb. His thirtieth birthday was coming up and he was starting to feel like an old guy. "We're a rich family. The movies have been good for us. Dad wants me to grow up quick. He wants me to mature. He wants me to start producing my own movies." Preston poured himself a half glass of brandy, swirled it under his nose, then drank. "I want to grow up... but I don't know how." Part of Preston wanted to cry like a child but he held it back. He figured it was the marijuana toying with his emotions. "I want to go to Mexico. That's my dream. I need my family to finance me. I want to build a set out there and make it my home." Preston walked to his sliding-glass door and cracked it open. A light breeze brushed his over skin. "Those guys down there along Santa Monica? I have no clue what they're in to! You into that stuff, Donovan? Tell me you're not! They give me the willies!"

"The fags?" Donovan rubbed his temples. The water seemed to help with his throbbing head. "They're some of the best actors, you know? They've made your family a lot of money! You can't hate 'em! Just make sure they don't squeeze your ass and we can all co-exist." Donovan almost thought to ask for more brandy but shook it off. Any slight thing could bring back the nausea.

"It's all ending, you know? Our kingdom here. My dad told me. That's why he moved to France. You know what next year is, right?" Preston stepped onto his patio. "Come on out here, Don! It's a great sight! The air will do you good! Come on!"

Donovan mustered the strength to get off the couch and he walked to where Preston was. "1984? You on that kick again? Big Brother? Orwell?" Donovan inhaled deeply and slowly through his nose with his eyes shut. "I know it's changing but I don't think it'll be over night." They talked.

The Earth was a mess in the early days. There were numerous collisions with celestial bodies, the atmosphere was devoid of oxygen, and molten lava was prevalent everywhere. Eventually, things cooled down metaphorically and literally. Anaerobic bacteria thrived, prokaryotes came about, then eventually cells with true organelles, membranes and nuclei. In human history, great minds would arise and present breakthrough concepts in science. Nicolaus Copernicus presented the idea of a Sun-centered model in 1543. Did the populous jump up and down in joy over his discovery? Far from it. Galileo Galilei was one of the few who believed in the thesis of Copernicus. He published "Sidereus Nuncius" in 1610 describing movements observed of Venus and Jupiter but he was condemned. In 1616, the Catholic Church declared heliocentrism to be heretical. Galileo was defiant, held on to heliocentrism, and published "Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems" in 1632. The next year, he was sentenced to house arrest for heresy. It wasn't just heliocentrism which was challenged. The idea of a spherical Earth came about in the sixth century before Christ by Greek mathematician, Pythagoras of Samos. In spite of his insights, masses believed the Earth was flat until Portuguese explorers, Ferdinand Magellan and Juan Sebastian Elcano, set to sail around the world in the early sixteenth century. Science had its share of hits and misses. In 1929, seventy years after Charles Darwin published "Origin of Species", British biologist JBS Haldane published "Primordial Soup Theory" which proposed abiogenesis was the way that life came about. God did not magically create the universe over the course of six days and opt to nap on the seventh day. No, according to Haldane, an open Marxist, man created God and not the other way around. Together with contemporary Alexander Oparin, a Russian biochemist, they presented the Oparin-Haldane Hypothesis. By 1952, the Miller-Urey experiment would simulate conditions similar to early Earth and they were able to produce amino acids from non-living material. Many postulated this as proof that living organic matter sprung from non-living building blocks. Atheists celebrated. Many fence-sitters and agnostics converted to a form of atheism or secular humanism. The world paradigm polarized. Fundamentalist Christians held the seven-day Creation Theory as literal and atheist biologists would attempt to remove supernatural elements from public classrooms. The peculiar thing about science over the ages was that perceptions hardly remained stagnant for too long and, at the end of the day, politics would influence what was passed down and taught as much as anything else. The polar opposite beliefs were both dead wrong. Was the Universe younger than ten thousand years old? No! Did an omnipotent Creator really need to rest on the seventh day of creation? Silly! On the other end, did a bunch of junk blow up from a pinhead into many, many parsecs in the span of a few milliseconds? Possibly, but the shape of everything to come was influenced by innumerable amounts of spirits.

Single-celled organisms swam around our oceans long, long ago. These organisms learned to photosynthesize and they learned to live in colonies. Life didn't only come from Earth's oceans, though. The notion of panspermia was rooted in ancient

Greece through Anaxagoras and resurfaced through French philosopher Benoit De Maillet in the seventeen hundreds. The idea was that germs fell from outer space, down into our vast waters, and was the basis for life. Comets, asteroids and other invasive debris carried extremophiles which somehow withstood the rigors of interplanetary travel. Organisms crawled to our shores and learned to live on land. In the 1971 movie *Vanishing Point*, DJ Super Soul broadcasts, "If the evil spirit arms the tiger with claws, Brahman provided wings for the dove." Nothing in the essence of life could be closer to the truth. Every living organic creature on Earth has been guided by spirits, good and bad. These spirits have prompted some to be predatory and seek mates with gnashing teeth while others have steered away from danger and sought mates to develop shells for protection. The human lineage was nowhere near straight and simple and, similar to "Creationists versus Atheists" debates, it wasn't a dichotomy in thinking. Very few people understood the true history of humans. Were they a supernatural creation six thousand years ago in the Garden of Eden? No, not quite. Was it as simple as fish crawls to shore; fish becomes mammal and lives freely as an ape-like creature in the African savanna; then that early primate begins to walk upright and becomes our human-like ancestor? No. There is a major portion to the story that hasn't been told.

The Earth has gone through cycles of warmth and coldness. During ice ages, a lot of water becomes locked up in polar caps and glaciers. This immense water would be sloshing around in vast oceans so levels are lower and there are land bridges where there wouldn't otherwise be. The Bering Land Bridge allowed people and horses to cross from Asia into North America without need for seafaring vessels. Mauritia allowed for travel between India and Madagascar. The Kerguelen Plateau was to Australia's southwest and Zealandia to Australia's southeast. Most important, there were places called Sundaland and Sahulland. Sundaland stretched from China to Indonesia while Sahulland completed the link from Indonesia to Australia. Modern America was marred and blinded by their Judeo-Christian heritage and incorrectly believed for a long time that humanity's rise came from the Middle East and Northern Africa. In fact it came from the Sahulland area specifically around northern Australia, Papua New Guinea, through the Flores Islands and out toward Siberia. The key is to understand what humans are and what they are not. Humans are not descendants of apes. Their history is circular, not linear. Sure, fish came from the seas then evolved into mammals. Some of these mammals returned to the oceans and became dolphins and whales. Other mammals managed to thrive throughout the land and some became primates. The ocean levels were dropping then rising then dropping then rising. There would be eras when primates were compelled to remain in the savanna and they became baboons, gorillas, bonobos, chimpanzees, orangutans and apes. Another set of primates learned to love the water. They re-engaged with their ancestral home. Proboscis monkeys made it to Borneo in semi-aquatic marsh environments and behaved differently than apes left behind in the savanna. They walked upright in the water and they carried their young in front instead of on the back. Snow monkeys in Japan, known as macaque, showed similar qualities around hot spring waters in the high altitudes of the frosty mountains. Human ancestors came from the ocean waters and learned to live on land. Then? They decided to return to water and evolved in wet environments. When compared to apes, there are similarities. Five digits on each appendage and a few other obvious things. There is a rift at a certain point when comparing humans to apes rather than humans to dolphins. Like dolphins, we have lost our body hair. Like dolphins, humans have skin-bonded fat deposits to deal with the

coldness of the sea. There is the presence of the hymen, diminution of apocrine glands, eccrine thermoregulation, a descended larynx, loss of vibrissae, volitional breath control, psychic tears and enlarged sebaceous glands. These are things, similar to the dolphin and other aquatic mammals, which allow for an easier life living in the water. Humans have these things and African apes do not.

Preston and Donovan conversed throughout the night. There was weed involved.

The turbulence of the early Earth never quite ended. A bit more than two million years ago, the Yellowstone supervolcano erupted with a force six thousand times greater than the force of the 1980 Mount Saint Helens blast. A bit more than a million years ago, it blew again like a strong Earth sneeze. As recent as a half million years ago, it was still belching crap into the atmosphere on levels modern humans are not used to seeing. Two hundred thousand years ago, Homo Dravida swarmed the southern tip of India. These people, known as Tamilians, produced Earth's first real identifiable culture. They understood the land but, more importantly, they had a first grasp on the nature of the Divinity. Shit was created, it was preserved, then it was destroyed. There were three major gods which were responsible for these actions: Brahma the creator, Vishnu the preserver, and Shiva the destroyer. The Tamil civilization prodded along until seventy thousand years ago when Sinabung, a Sumatra supervolcano, blew crap into the air which killed ninety percent of all humans. It's gunk and filth blocked sunlight for a five-year volcanic winter. The humans that survived were the strongest of the strong. They were strong in the mind and body. Fifty thousand years ago, after the Sumatra dust settled, the Kumari Kandam civilization of southwest India thrived. The oceans started to rise as the ice age ended and Kumari Kandam was buried under water. It's ruins would be found thousands of years later. Twenty thousand years ago, the Tamil people constructed the statues of Easter Island but they would suffer an unfortunate fate. Fifteen thousand years ago, the continent of Mu in the Pacific Ocean was swallowed by rising ocean waters. Ten thousand years ago, the continent of Atlantis was the victim of ocean waters which had no mercy and held no prisoners. Twenty-five hundred years ago, the great Egyptian pyramids of Giza were started. Thirteen hundred years ago, the last notable mega-eruption from Yellowstone happened. Seventy-nine years after the birth of Christ, Mount Vesuvius spit soot into the air and demolished the villages which resided around it in present-day Italy.

Earth's history wasn't only about chaos and volcanic belchings. There was beauty in people, early civilized structures, and fossilized remnants of the past. The Chinese were some of the first people to develop a monetary system. Cowry sea shells were found in Sri Lanka, Borneo, Mozambique, the Maldives and all around the Indian Ocean. Around four thousand years ago from the Shang dynasty through the Zhou dynasty, they served as currency. Later known as "shell money", only kings could pay to import them from distant lands so their quantity could be regulated and they were difficult to counterfeit. It was so effective as a currency that it lasted until the twentieth century.

"What are these things?" Donovan Cobb felt the smoothness of a cowry shell between his fingers. He stayed up all night talking to Preston Bancroft about world issues and his high was nearly gone. In the distance beyond Preston's patio, the first peak of dawn was noticed through a dim amber haze. Donovan stared at the cowry, rubbed it some more, then put it back into a bucket of cowries in front of him.

"My dad left behind a lot of stuff." Preston handed a couple of fat d-ring binders to Donovan. "Crazy stuff in here! The mermaids I was telling you about! The whole aquatic ape history of humankind! Next year? They're making a movie about it, *Splash*. He knows the script writer, Brian Grazer. Of all this stuff that I find so fascinating, they laugh off! It's a romantic comedy about a mermaid making her way through New York City! Wow, right?" Preston wiped his mouth with his sleeve, looked to the empty brandy bottle in front of him, and hoped a hangover wasn't part of his upcoming day. "I got a new Jerrold box. You know those ones you can watch free HBO on? We can turn something on."

"Tron? The Howling? I could go for Excalibur if it's on." Donovan massaged his scalp then scratched the stubble of his face. Lately, he opted for a gruffy look and wasn't sure if he was getting too lazy too shave or if he was discovering he was truly a beard man. "Nah. Don't put it on. Gotta sleep. I can maybe go for Atari later but my eyes are getting heavy."

"Atari? I heard they secured the rights to make ET the Extra-Terrestrial into a video game! That should be good!" Preston yawned and stretched. He watched Donovan lay out on the couch and close his eyes. "Hey! Before you go to sleep! I'm nominating you for the Council of Nine. The Contrarians. You know the gig, right?" Donovan nodded and rubbed his eyes. Preston went on, "You have to learn a little more about the family history before we meet in December." Preston reached for a cowry shell. "Not a whole lot more but they'll grill ya'. Once you're in, they let you do whatever you want, though." Preston walked to his bedroom.

"Good morning, Preston!" Donovan laughed. "I mean, good night or whatever. I'm sleeping for a few hours then we can play Atari."

In the beginning, the world was chaotic and it needed order. The original deities were known as Kotoamatsukami. There was a bridge, Amenoukihashi, between Heaven and Earth where Izanagi no Mikoto (the exalted male) and Izanami no Mikoto (the exalted female) were provided a special jeweled spear and they created the Japanese archipelago. Izanami and Izanagi descended from Amenoukihashi and decided to mate. They circled a pillar, Izanami said something, Izanagi felt a tiny bit miffed but they had a couple of children. Awashima and Hiruko were born but they had defects and were not considered to be gods so they were put in a boat and sent out to sea. Izanami and Izanagi pled to the gods about what they did wrong in order to deserve imperfect children. The woman, Izanami, spoke first when they initially met. That was the reason for their cursed children so Izanagi spoke first the next time they mated. This time, the union was perfect and Izanami gave birth to the Oyashima—the eight great islands of Awaji, Yamoto, Tsushima, Sado, Oki, Iki, Tsushima, and Iyo. Izanami then gave birth to Kagutsuchi, the incarnation of fire, but she died during the process due to insane burns. She was buried at Mount Hiba. Izanagi became enraged with anger due to the loss of his love so he killed Kagutsuchi. In turn, Kagutsuchi's death spawned the creation of more deities.

Time moved along. Roughly twenty-five hundred years ago, Confucius was traveling to and fro in mainland China. He was a philosopher and some took him so seriously that they credit him for forming a new religion while others thought he said simply neat things. Others thought his teachings were neat but the thoughts weren't profound enough to convey outside of a tiny paper message packed inside of dessert cookies. Meanwhile, as Confucius traveled around China, a guy named Gautama Buddha rebelled against the Hindu caste system he was born into and provided the foundation for

a new religion beginning around eastern India. To the west, Moses led his people from Egyptian slavery to Mount Nebo where he died not far from the Dead Sea and Jericho. Hundreds of years later, a child would be born about twenty miles southwest of Jericho in Bethlehem. His name was Jesus. His existence was profound and it changed the world around him. Martyrs would die in his name.

The Chinese used cowry shells for currency. Far away, around the time that Jesus walked the lands of Galilee and Judea, Romans minted coins and distributed them. They were round, flat metal coins. On the head's side, a side profile of Augustus Caesar facing right with the inscription "IMP CEASAR" underneath. On the back, a wreath surrounding a bird in flight with the inscription "AVGVSTVS" below it. The Roman governor in Judea who sentenced Jesus to death was Pontius Pilate. The Sanhedrin had accused Jesus of blasphemy and had him arrested. Jesus was crucified. Three hundred years later, Roman emperor Constantine I enacted the first council of Nicaea and Rome was converted to Christianity. Constantine I also created a new gold coin known as the solidus and it would become standardized currency in Byzantine and European countries for more than a thousand years.

For hundreds of years, lending practices were regulated by the Catholic Church. Usury was not allowed but, of course, it only applied to Christians. Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jews co-existed in Europe and were not bound by edicts and teachings of the Pope. They were able to loan money and expect interest in return, often at exorbitant rates. This gave them a leg up in banking and, in particular, one family rose more than any other. The Rothschilds. This family proclaimed itself as Jewish but there came about a complicating circumstance. They weren't Sephardic but rather Ashkenazic. In a nutshell in the year 740 the king of Khazaria converted to the Jewish faith. He ruled land between the Black and Caspian Seas and Khazars wound up emigrating to eastern Europe. They became known as Ashkenazis but they were not ethnically Jewish like Sephardic settlers around northern Africa, Portugal and Spain. In the year 1776, a lot of commotion was going around the western world. The Americans declared independence across the Atlantic from Europe. Scottish economist, Adam Smith, released "The Wealth of Nations" and it would serve as the cornerstone for public capitalism. Meanwhile, in a much more discrete fashion in Bavaria, Johann Adam Weishaupt formally established the Illuminati. For the next couple of hundred of years, the organization would slither behind the scenes. It would be the mysterious eyes peering from the dark woods. It would live in the abyss and not advertise itself to the world in any traditional sense. It would attempt to be sophisticated and it would gather together elite minds in banking, thinking, military action, and anything that could be of use to maintain and grow power. The Rothschilds family would be heavily involved and they would eventually work side-by-side with DuPonts, Bundys, Reynolds, Rockefellers, Astors, Kennedys, Lis, Russells, Collins, Onassis, Freemans, and Van Duyns. They would conspire to gain power. They would buy politicians and judges. They would gain power and they would use their new power to gain more power.

Just because you're the strongest on planet Earth doesn't mean everything goes your way. There's infighting and even Rockefellers in all their material wealth are mortal. They die. They can't beat disease forever and they can't beat Father Time. Every single one of them has a date with Grim Reaper when all is said and done. In the early twentieth century, there was a financial scare known as the "Panic of 1907". It was a run at the banks. Everyone wanted their money at the same time so JP Morgan decided to

lock his most trusted bankers in a library over night. The United States had opened and closed two central banks over the decades and Morgan didn't want a third, and neither did Rhode Island senator Nelson Aldrich. The bankers came up with a band-aid solution, the Aldrich-Vreeland Act of 1908, which created a national monetary commission but they knew it was just temporary.

In life, there is always shadow world. There are people perpetually in the spotlight and others that design movie sets but are unheard of for the most part. The 1927 Yankees are considered one of baseball's best teams ever. Their lineup featured tenacious hitters. The first six were known as "Murderers' Row" but even an avid baseball fan might only be able to name two off the top of his head. A casual fan might name Babe Ruth in a stab in the dark then maybe get lucky with Lou Gehrig. The first two hitters were Earle Combs and Mark Koenig. Only a die-hard would know that. The last of the six were Bob Meusel and Tony Lazzeri. In 1956, Elvis Presley had the top two singles of the year, "Heartbreak Hotel" at number one and "Don't Be Cruel" at number two. Only a nerd, family member, or person studying for Jeopardy would know who had the number three or four single that year. Three was "Lisbon Antigua" by Nelson Riddle followed by "My Prayer" by the Platters at four. The bottom line is that history books and mass media treat people differently even though they are near one another in a moment in time. JP Morgan, Charles Rothschild and John Rockefeller Jr were bigwigs in 1910. Lesser-known families included the Cobbs, Callypsos and Hydes. As individuals, Irwin Cobb, Benedict "Silver" Callypso and Jacob Hyde held their own. They were a tight group. Whereas "better bankers" typically graduated from Yale and Harvard, these "lesser guys" attended Cornell, Dartmouth and Brown, also known as the "lesser" Ivy League schools. Their thoughts were great, their hearts in the right place, and they succeeded in banking. They also invested well in the budding enterprises. Whereas the Rockefellers loved to mingle in New York high-society circles, the Cobbs, Callypsos and Hydes found themselves gravitating toward lesser-known, less-prestigious places. Three years after the Panic of 1907, the Cobbs, Callypsos and Hydes found themselves at Diggers Rest near Melbourne, Australia. Harry Houdini, who was known as an escape artist and performing regularly at the Opera House, had purchased a French flying machine. It was a 60-horsepower Voisin and Harry intended to be Australia's first aviator. Bad weather delayed his flight but he eventually made it into the air and flew for three and a half minutes on March 18, 1910. Irwin Cobb got to know Harry Houdini on some level. After the historic flight, Irwin approached Harry, "You are truly a man of many wonders! I was hoping to pay for some of your time and maybe you can appreciate the magnitude of adventure involved."

On November 22, 1910, the most powerful bankers, industrialists, politicians, lawyers and tacticians were invited to Jekyll Island, Georgia under the auspice of a duck hunt. They represented one quarter of the world's wealth. It was a quite mysterious rendezvous. They were brought blindfolded, given code names, and delivered by secret rail car. JP Morgan arranged an intelligent, eclectic group to meet. Senator Nelson Aldrich's daughter was married to John Rockefeller Jr. It was an exclusive group that didn't only include iconic names although there were more than enough to go around: Charles Norton, president of the First Bank of New York; Benjamin Strong, head of Bankers Trust; Frank Vanderlip, president of National City Bank; Benedict "Silver" Callypso, proprietor of Nevada silver mines; Henry Davidson, business partner of JP Morgan; Irwin Cobb, general industrialist; Jacob Hyde, logistics expert; Harry Houdini,

escape artist; Paul Warburg, partner in Kuhn, Loeb and Co; Abram Piatt Andrew, economist. There were others but not too many. Three years later, the Federal Reserve Act was passed. A year after that, the Great War (later known as World War I) began.

In 1915, the Cobb, Callypso and Hyde families returned to Australia near Cairns, Queensland and camped at Mount Whitfield. They were dismayed at how they were treated while on Jekyll Island. They believed they were there to rubber stamp anything that JP Morgan put in front of them. His buddy, Benjamin Strong, became the Fed's first chairman. Their solutions seemed to favor heavy-handed techniques over pure diplomacy. The Cobbs, Callypsos and Hydes knew they were still part of a powerful elite but they felt treated like step-children within the system. They created a splinter group from the Establishment within the Illuminati. They called themselves the Heuristic Order of Lachrymose Contrarians, or simply Contrarians. Their attitude was laissez-faire moreso than authoritative. They tended to the arts. They believed in hierarchy insofar as it was pragmatic and fair. They courted tycoons from around the world to join them. They began meeting voluntarily every year at different spots in mid-December and were more strict about meetings every fifth year around Cairns. They created the Council of Nine as the closest thing to a ruling body. Every year on November 22, a new member would join the Council of Nine and someone else would exit after his nine-year tenure. The leader was always the person entering his fifth year. It was a perfect social conveyor belt.

Donovan Cobb was groggy when his turn came around in late November, 1983. He hadn't slept well and had a few shots of Jack Daniels. "What the fuck is this place?" he asked Preston Bancroft. His head was swimming. He sat in the back seat of a convertible Rolls Royce and looked at the driver's eyes through the rearview mirror. *Phoebe Cates. Could that be Phoebe Cates? I mean, the real Phoebe Cates?* The driver made eye contact with Donovan and winked. She wore a red bikini top but otherwise dressed as a female chauffer all the way to the hat. "Preston?" *Am I dreaming?* Donovan wondered. "What's going on?"

"My buddy!" Preston turned from the passenger's seat to talk. "You are about to enter into one of the top ten secret societies in the world! You keep your instincts, your heart, and remember the playbook! I gave you all the answers, and the rest? You'll know what to say!" It was a gloomy autumn day in Georgia and dark clouds loomed. "I hope rain doesn't fuck things up!" Preston added.

In five minutes, they arrived at a secluded warehouse. Preston Bancroft opened the luxury car door for his buddy and watched the Rolls Royce drive away when it was over. He took Donovan by the arm and took him to a huge vertical sliding door. "Give me a minute," Preston said. He took keys from his slacks, opened a lock and slid the door upward. He pulled a red handkerchief from his sport coat. "Put this on. We need you blindfolded."

Donovan took it. He was dressed in a white three-piece suit and had been told they were flying to a Caribbean island. He realized it, though. "We're going to Jekyll Island, aren't we?" He blindfolded himself and let Preston lead him inside.

They walked for a few seconds in silence then stopped. "Right in front of you is a box car. I want you to reach for it then jump in. It's the same kind of box car they used in Nevada silver mines." Preston guided Donovan a bit then added. "What did you think of Phoebe back there?" Preston smiled but Donovan couldn't see it.

"I'll never understand the symbolism of all these secret worlds," Donovan said.

Preston guided him through the warehouse. After a hundred yards and couple of turns here and there, they came to a stop. "This is the beginning of Heaven, Donovan." Preston knocked his knuckles a couple of times on Donovan's head. "Take off your blindfold."

Donovan did as he was told then climbed out of the box car. There was another warehouse door and Donovan wasn't completely sure if it was the original one they had come in through. He stretched. "What is this?" He felt anxiety. "Let's go. Let's go. Let's do this thing." Before long, they were shuttled to a marina dock on an amusement park tram. There was a boat waiting for them. Donovan read the inscription, "Monkey Business. I like it!" They climbed aboard and headed out to sea.

Sure enough they arrived to Jekyll Island and scurried to a hotel. Preston led Donovan past the check in desk to a modest suite. "We don't have a lot of time to get this done." There was a suitcase already opened on a king-size bed. The Sun hinted that the rainy gloom was over by shining bright rays through the curtains. Preston took a brown Celtic cloak from the suitcase. "Dress in this. Don't wear anything underneath." On the way out of the room, "My room is next door. I'm changing into mine. We meet here in two minutes. Get going!" In ten minutes, they were in circus tent pitched behind the hotel. There were nine white plastic folding chairs behind a couple of extended folding tables. Twenty feet across facing the chairs, there were three other chairs. Preston instructed Donovan, "You sit in the middle one." Within a couple of minutes, strangers made their way into the tent and filled the rest of the seats. Preston sat on the eighth chair from the left across from Donovan.

When everyone was settled, an attractive lady spoke from the left-most seat. Jet black straight hair, straight bangs. "We are the Council of Nine and this is our induction meeting for the year 1983." She stood up. "Everyone rise." Everybody stood up. "I introduce our leader, the Decider!" She did a ceremonial triple wave of her right hand and bowed her head. There were claps and subtle chuckles. "Leader? Please speak." She giggled.

"Sit down, please," the guy said. Everyone sat except for him. He spoke from the center chair. "We are the Heuristic Order of Lachrymose Contrarians!" Joyous screaming and applause. "Founded in 1915!" His Celtic cloak was burgundy distinguishing himself from all others dressed in dirty brown. "Today, we will say goodbye to one of our members and say hello to a new member." Traditionally, there were three new nominees every years. The Contrarian in his fifth year was the default leader of the group. The three senior-most members each nominated a new candidate to replace the ninth-year member who had to leave. "I will turn to our ninth-year member sitting on the far end to my left, your right." He gestured. "My name is Dennis Heydrich, by the way. If you've spent any time watching UHF television, you might recognize me. I'm consistently a top selling author amongst evangelicals. Maybe you have heard of my recent book, *The God Mystery*. Basically, I'm here to justify your actions. This includes war, infidelity, cheating and the list goes on." He sat down.

"Hi!" The guy on the right stood up. "My name is senator Gary Hart. If you live in Colorado, you might've heard my name but even if you live on the other side of the planet, you might know that Walter Mondale is getting nervous about my presidential campaign." There were a couple of chuckles from the Council of Nine. "My foreign policy is strong and I have a particular interest in Japan. We can win the trade war and we don't have to ruin our partners and allies in the process!" He studied the faces of the

three nominees sitting in front of him. “The Contrarians have a policy to get rid of you after you’ve served nine years on the board. But I get to select a replacement. Ultimately it is the choice of the Decider, Dennis Heydrich, who replaces me. It’s been this way since 1915. My choice is a lovely lady. Like Phyllis Horner, seated the third from your left, she is in fashion design. I believe she can be the next Gloria Vanderbilt! Say hello to my friend, Donna Rice!” The board clapped then Gary sat down.

To his right, Preston Bancroft stood up. “Most people don’t recognize me on the street but they sure know about my family’s legacy in motion pictures. My name is Preston Bancroft. We define Hollywood. I’m here to give the Heuristic Order of Lachrymose Contrarians a member who is the heart of what we all stand for.” Preston waved his arm to the members sitting around him. With a smirk, he continued, “Donovan Cobb is the great-grandson of this group’s co-founder, Irwin Cobb! Donovan is beyond loyal. He is what we are all loyal to!” Preston shook his head up and down in confidence. “He is my friend.” Preston sat.

To Preston’s right on the seventh seat a large black man stood up. “Let’s not kid ourselves. You’re looking at me and you’re looking at everyone else. Token black guy, right? Don’t worry. I’ve heard it before. I made it to the San Francisco Forty-niners in 1975 as a free agent. Before John Elway, I was a stud two-sport star. Never made it to the Super Bowl—my career was cut short by an knee injury in 1979—but I learned a lot of life lessons. And I majored in economics. I hit four oh eight during my senior season at Stanford, by the way. I can help you guys. I know everyone wants the darling of the group, Donovan Cobb, to replace senator Gary Hart and some see my nominee as a formality—someone to make sure the rules and customs were followed. He’s a software designer and he’s going places. He’s shopped his operating system to IBM and Xerox but no one has quite seen the light yet. I played football around the Bay for many years and I’ve lived with these so-called Silicon Valley geeks. They are our future and they will move mountains.” He paused then pointed to his nominee. “My name is Morris Taft. I present to you Bill Gates.” Morris sat down.

From the center of the Nine, Dennis Heydrich spoke, “The questions will begin. We start with our newest members on my right, your left, and make our way across the board here.” Dennis looked to Thelma Rhett. “Thelma? What do you have?”

She didn’t stand. “To the geek, Morris Taft’s guy.” She watched him squirm. “You look like a total doofus. Why should we pick you over Donovan? Let’s face it. Just like the pencil neck said, these questions are just a formality. Donovan’s family started this organization and you’re here just in case he got struck by lightning on the way over.” She turned her eyes to Gary Hart on the opposite end. “You should be ashamed of yourself, senator! Are you trying to get laid that bad? We already have a fashion designer on our panel! What kind of favor system are you running?”

Donna responded, “I really design clothes. It’s a hobby.”

Thelma ignored her. “Geek boy. Answer my question! Why should we pick you over Donovan? Do you even know who I am? That’s important, you know?” The geek was scared and at a loss for words. “My name is Thelma Rhett and I need to drill into your head who we are. We are not Coke, we are not Pepsi, but we’re good. We are RC Cola. We are the step-children of your dreams. When you buy a board game you think of Milton Bradley or Parker Brothers. My family sold the third most games during the seventies. Has anyone heard of Atherton Games? A subdivision of Circus Echelon Toys? Hardly.” Thelma relaxed and felt as though she let a lot off her chest. “Geek

boy? You got a tongue?"

"I make the best computer systems in the world. In five years my company, Microsoft, will be a bigger household name than Atari. I promise you that." The geek adjusted his glasses.

Thelma waved him off. "Donovan? Do you have anything to say?"

"ET sucks as a game!" The Council of Nine laughed nearly in unison. "I hear the 2600 is on its last leg and we can expect big things from Coleco and Mattel." Donovan wore nothing under his cloak as he was directed but he managed to sneak the bottle of Jack Daniels he had been working on. He produced it then offered some to Dennis Heydrich, "You drink pastor?"

Dennis took a swig. "Roger? I believe you're next." Dennis drank some more then jubilantly said to Donovan, "Sir! I'll take this as bribery!" He smiled, "But I'll still take it!"

"My name is Roger Corliss, motivational speaker." He looked at the three across from him dressed in cloaks. "I have no questions at this time."

Dennis Heydrich started laughing. "I was eight years sober! Wow! This is good stuff!" Dennis drank more from the Jack Daniels bottle. "Phyllis? You have any questions for our nominees?"

Phyllis Horner was personal friends with Donatella Versace and Amancio Ortega. "We are not a charity but nor are we the Hall of Doom. Donna, what makes you believe you belong with us?" Before she could answer, Phyllis shrugged her off. "Donovan? How's your father doing? I haven't seen Delbert in such a long time! How is he?"

Without queue, the fourth from the left began speaking. "My name is Clive Klauber, attorney." He looked at the three nominees. "This is a formality, yes, but we don't need to make fools of one another. You will notice, if you stick around long enough, that there is always a lawyer on this board. Just a coincidence? Not sure. It's not in the bylaws. I guarantee that when my ninth year has passed and I'm on my way out, there will be a new lawyer magically nominated. Just always works that way." He was sitting to Dennis Heydrich's right and took the Jack Daniels. He drank what was remaining. "We can go through the formalities of asking questions but I think we all know where this is heading." Clive looked over to Donovan. "Congratulations, Donovan. It's not official but I'm sure you're the next guy joining us."

Dennis Heydrich, the fifth in line, said, "I have no questions." He turned to his right, "Well said, Clive." He added, "I have some documents for you to work on if you have spare time?"

The sixth in line was Tanner Doyle. He was a tall blonde man with powder blue eyes. "I'm Tanner Doyle. You'll want to remember me in the future! I build yachts. You want to live in luxury? You get on my good side! You need a bug out shelter? Got that covered. I work on island dredging and oil platforms. If it's in the middle of the sea, I do it!" He paused then congratulated Donovan, "I knew you'd be part of the group one day, Don!" He blew a joke kiss.

Morris Taft was taken back a bit, "I believe we all get to ask questions and make a case!" He shook his head in frustration. "My guy, Bill, even though he isn't entrenched with family ties still deserves consideration and respect! I know at the end of the day it's the decision for Dennis to make, but still! Come on, guys! A computer expert! This is not the stone age, no offense to you Donovan."

“Get off it,” Dennis said to Morris. “This is a formality and if this wraps up soon, I can get eighteen holes in. Pretty sure I know where this is headed but still, Preston? It’s your turn?”

Preston Bancroft stood, “Bill Gates? I respect you. Donna Rice? You seem like a neat, willing and quite capable member. This Council of Nine has never gone more than three years without a Hyde, Callypso or Cobb sitting. It’s now losing it’s meaning. We select people based on talent, yes, but we also choose based off who they were born to be. The Dalai Lama got nothing on us!” The Council of Nine cheered in unison and even Morris Taft ceded to a slow clap.

“Well guys,” Gary Hart said. “I might be elected president in 1984 or 1988.” He turned to the board. “Without you, I’d be nothing, just a random politician from a small state.” He fought tears. “I have insights and convictions now that I otherwise wouldn’t have.” He looked at Donna Rice, “Thank you for your friendship. I want you to see the circles I hang out in.”

It wasn’t a difficult decision. It didn’t take a full sixty seconds for Dennis Heydrich to say a few things, “Without further adieu I would like to welcome Donovan Cobb as our newest incoming member. As of January first, you will officially be on the Contrarian Council of Nine and, mister Hart, you will be thrown to the winds of fate. I want to thank Bill Gates and Donna Rice for their participation. Believe it or not, some years there is actually a debate about who will join. And? Clive? As of January 1, 1984 you will be in your fifth year, ergo, you will be the new Decider.” Flanking the tables in front of the Council were metal ice buckets. “We have Dom Perignon for everyone! The sooner we crack these bottles open, the sooner we will feel good about life!” There was a great party that night. Most attendees celebrated until dawn.

In December of that year, the Contrarians held a larger informal meeting on the Caribbean island of Anguilla. Donovan Cobb was trying to take it all in. He had come to these winter meetings before but never as a member of the Council. He felt like a novice magician who was let in to secrets of a grand esoteric trade. He was starting to understand what life was like behind the theatre curtain instead of sitting out front as a spectator. Preston told him details about the Cobb and Contrarian role of the Bretton Woods gathering of 1944 in New Hampshire when the International Monetary Fund was formed. “Listen, Donovan,” Preston said. “On May 6, 1937 the Hindenburg was lit up in front of a world audience and everyone knows about it today. Did you know that wasn’t the biggest zeppelin disaster in history? The airship USS Akron was crushed during a thunderstorm in 1933, seventy-three people died, and no one cares! No one even knows! There weren’t cameras everywhere! That’s why! In 1930, British R101 crashed and forty-eight died because it was at two in the morning. No one was there to pay attention. There were only thirty-six—*thirty-six*—that died on the Hindenburg but it happened in the middle of the day during a popular radio broadcast.” Preston could tell that Donovan was becoming weary and laden with the blitz of information. “The IMF was created behind closed doors. That’s the lesson of history.” They were in the Caribbean at the groundbreaking of a new hotel. People were coming and going, most of them dressed in tropical attire. “Let’s get ourselves a pina colada!”

“I’m with you!” Donovan was happy. “Was that really Phoebe Cates? The gal that drove us to the warehouse before we went to Jekyll?” There was a luau that was starting to attract attention. One person was instructing another how to properly prepare the imu pit and then how to arrange mesquite briquettes. The smell of sea salt was

strong. Gulls hovered above.

"You have started the journey down the rabbit hole, my friend! I have one full year left on the Council. You know what happens to us afterward? They leave us in the dark. Wild goose chases if you try to stick around. They're afraid of megalomaniacs ruining everything. That's what our competition does. The public refers to filthy rich tycoons as the Establishment but we split hairs here. Those guys, the non-Contrarian Establishment guys, are true power-trippers. They like power for the sake of power. They don't care if they're not the most qualified to lead. They want it forever. Back in the early days of the Contrarians, we called them the Scoundrels. Not sure if the term is totally outdated but I'm sure there are still old timers that still use it." There was a large marble fountain of yellow liquid which overflowed from one tier to the next. It was full of pina colada. Preston took a ladle and poured himself and Donovan drinks into carved-out coconuts. He added toothpick umbrellas then toasted. "Here's to not knowing shit!" After drinking he mused, "Phoebe Cates? That's the beauty of being part of our group. It's a nine-year mind fuck. You'll never even know! There's a lot of misdirection that goes on here! People will deliberately try to trick you! It's to prevent leaks, they say."

"Plausible deniability, huh?" Donovan smiled and looked out to the ocean. "I get it!" He felt warm. "I really get it!"

A burly man approached. He was the only one in sight not wearing tropical clothing. He was dressed in camouflaged army fatigues and dark sunglasses. He looked at Preston and sternly grunted, "Sir!"

"Yes sir!" Preston reciprocated.

"Have you taught this newcomer the ropes? How's he coming along?" The army guy stood at six-three and studied Donovan. "He looks stupid, Preston! Did you make the right choice?"

Silence.

"Sir?" Donovan muttered. "Excuse me?" He waited for the tension to subside.

"Kidding ya'! Come here!" He bear-hugged Donovan Cobb then let him go after a few seconds. "Your family and mine go waaaaaaay back! Do you have any idea who general Smedley Darlington Butler is?! If I had an hour..." He grinned then his original stern face returned. "I'm Julian Garret. This isn't my island officially but I control a lot of what goes on here! Spent most of my life with Northrup Grumman after the marines then fell into some black money. Drug smuggling. Laundering. That sort of thing. You have any idea what that is?"

"Yes sir," Donovan said. "I've been around. I just don't believe half of what I hear because..."

Julian cut him off, "I operate a secret branch called RMI, stands for Rossum Machinery International. AI! You know what that is? Artificial intelligence and it's real!" He looked to Preston then back at Donovan. "I spend a lot of time with his father! Tell him all the crazy things we go through behind the scenes. *War Games*. Did you watch that movie? That was from our conversation. Told him about our autonomous tank androids. He says he's working on a script for it. *Short Circuit*. That's what he's calling it. We bounce stuff off each other all night!"

"Wow! Great movie! I thought the world was gonna blow up!" Donovan was impressed. "What are you building here?" There were stakes around leveled land not far away defining the boundaries where something was to be built.

"Officially, it's a hotel. But we have secrets for that place! You'll have to stick

around.” Julian looked to the pina colada bowl. “I’d like to stick around and party with you guys but I have construction people I’ve gotta be directing here and there.” To Preston, “Tell your father hello! Maybe I’ll wind up in France if this place doesn’t pan out!” He laughed then marched away.

When Julian was gone Preston warned Donovan, “Listen. These guys have incredible egos and they have amazing projects going on. The key to sticking around this Council is balance. His friend, Titus Clemons, is an international arms trader. *I’m saying illegal arms, here.* There were hostages held by Hezbollah in Lebanon, for example, and these guys started making deals with each other. Usually, there’s someone from the CIA involved. One thing leads to another and, before you know it, a covert sect of the US government is freeing American hostages from Iran and it has something to do with rebel fighters in Central or South America. Can’t remember the details.” Preston looked around. “He’ll come up to you and try to recruit you into one of these illegal schemes. So watch out. Especially a year from now when I’m not around. Stick to the fun stuff for a while.” Not far away, two men were carrying an eyeless pig to the imu pit. “I can get you onto movie sets. *Red Dawn.* It’s a movie coming out this year. I was an extra. My dad has great ties.” A lady walked around offering ham and pineapple kabobs. Preston took one, “One of our buddies here is developing an awesome role-playing game. *Wizard’s Crown.* You’ll love it! You get to be a game tester for these companies before the stuff hits the stores. You get to give them feedback and shape what comes out.” Preston ate. “It’s a great front, man. For all the crap that you’ll ever experience with the Contrarians, it’s the perfect thing to be part of. If you ever slip up and start talking about sensitive information to a stranger, you just tell him, ‘Oh! You thought that was real? No! I’m a game tester!’”

“Or in your case, you just tell the person you’re in the movies. Right?” Donovan was in love with his food. He felt great. “I’m starting to get a better grasp of how everything works. Very neat.” He took a good whiff. The pig was being hoisted onto a cooking mechanism and there were other grilled meats tempting people. “Categorically deny, right? If anything went wrong?”

“You got it!” Preston relaxed. “We’ll take it easy for now but there are some stunners coming your way soon enough! Enjoy this while you can!”

A couple of days later, it was New Year’s Eve. “Tomorrow will be 1984 and I’ll officially be a member.” Donovan spent a lot of time going between shore and an anchored mega-yacht via jet ski. He had a sense of vertigo.

Preston walked along the pristine coast with his friend. “I have a few more people I need you to meet before we take off to South America.” In the distance there were families playing volleyball. “These guys are our connection to the Central Intelligence Agency. If shit hits the fan when we’re away, we’ll want to contact them. I have to tell you now not to mention anything around the kids. They don’t know shit. Their parents have fronts and they keep them pretty good. Horace Streets? The guy serving the ball up there? He runs an art gallery in Miami and he moves around a lot. He’s put up displays for the Smithsonian, the Gettys and so forth. Talk about art. His wife, Becky, is actually a good golfer. She’s a few years older than him but you couldn’t tell by looking at her.”

“The kids?” Donovan’s skin was chapped. “Do you have any lotion by the way?”

Preston reached for suntan oil in his pocket and handed it over. “Horace’s dad

was in Army intelligence and lived in Japan after World War II. Pretty sure his mother was Japanese but I never asked. It's his squinty eyes, you know? And his daughter has the straightest dark, silky hair. You know?" He stopped in his tracks maintained conversation. "The guys sitting on the side watching the game? Look at them. See the guy in the middle? Kind of looks like Mister Roper from *Three's a Company*? That's Cornelius Stuart, CIA. He knows everything about chemicals because the guy to his left is Fabian Lynch, pharmaceutical mogul. That's his front, lucrative as it is. He produces special drugs, and not just ones you've heard of like LSD. Designer drugs like Astral Chicken, Rabbit Hole, Synthehol, Jenkem and Happy Trails. Some of these make it to movies because he's good buds with my dad then my dad runs to script writers and they include versions of them. *They're real*. Don't forget it."

"Who's the guy sitting to the right of Cornelius?" Donovan asked.

"Herman Eichelberger. NSA. Purely a numbers guy. Very good with logistics. Pretty quiet most the time, then one of us gets a harebrained idea to do something zany like build a floating island or covertly invade a foreign country. 'Not gonna work!' he'll say out of nowhere. 'Not enough tanks!' Stuff like that. Great guy, lot of patience, but he has limits." Preston watched the volleyball game for a few seconds then added, "The thing with Fabian is vital, though. He goes around the world looking for drugs, especially medicinal stuff from natives. Mescaline, mekoha, iboga, peyote, psilocybin. He needs people to test his crap on! See? He has stuff that is simple, like a possible cure for cancer. He can't make money from selling plants. He has to make money from breaking them apart and selling remanufactured versions of junk that makes them tick. You don't have cancer, but you have a mind! You have your brain!"

"Yeah?" Donovan looked from the crashing waves on the beach to the family playing volleyball then to Preston. "What did he do to you? He did something, right? What was it?"

"My first year on the Contrarian Council was his last. He was leaving and he wanted to impart his knowledge on me, so to say. I got tied up in a shack outside of Cairns, Australia like the guy in *Clockwork Orange*. He gave me a drug he called hyperdrene. *Hallucinations was the kicker there*. In front of me were projected images. *War stuff*. World War II, some simulated Civil War. One still photo of Confederate soldiers in a pose holding a giant, dead pterodactyl. No screen though, just beamed straight onto the wall, and the projector was loud and choppy. Right below the images, there was a suspended shelf." Preston looked over at Fabian, Cornelius and Herman. He noticed that they stopped watching volleyball and were waving him over. Preston felt anxious but finished his thought, "The fucker brings out a tarsier and puts it on the shelf. You know those monkeys that have humongous eyes? Fabian walks behind me and duct tapes my mouth shut so I start squirming. He whispers in my ear, 'Control him now. Tell him where to go.' He leaves the room, my mouth is sealed and I expect he's gonna come back into the room with a shot gun to finish me off because of a strange power trip." Preston waved over to the volleyball group. "Listen, Don. I stare at the tarsier then I understand what Fabian wants me to experience. Trust me, I didn't shake my head because it was strapped. I thought to the tarsier, *Move to the left...* then it started to move. *Come back to the center*. It returned. *Wave!* Wouldn't you know it, Don? The fuckers have telepathic abilities! I had this drug in me but... Hey. We better get going. Ask the guy about the sunken continent, Mu. He knows all about it." He patted Donovan Cobb on his burnt back and the two jogged toward the volleyball players.

“Welcome to our island!” Cornelius Stuart stood and shook Donovan’s hand. “I’ve heard *soooooo* much about you!”

The family stopped hitting the ball around. Horace Streets was the first to reach Donovan. “Welcome!” Behind him, there was a lanky teenager. “This is my thirteen-year-old son, James! The beautiful lady ducking under the net is my gorgeous wife, Becky! The wonderful prize waddling in the sand behind her is the pride of my life, my daughter Vivian!”

When Vivian Streets reached Donovan, he bent down and touched her nose with his forefinger. “You’re a cute one! How old are you?”

Vivian put up four fingers. “I’m this many.” She ran off.

“How much have you told him?” Horace asked Preston. “Does he have the whole run down?”

“Nah. Not even half. His head is exploding right now. He’s getting it, but slowly.” Preston smirked to Donovan. “You probably don’t believe half of it anyway, right?” Preston laughed.

“Dad?” the lanky teen asked. “Are you talking about art stuff again?”

“Art stuff?” Horace drew back. “Art stuff? Yeah. Like that.” He told Preston, “I have an Andy Warhol for you! A zebra, but it’s painted different colors!” His wife rubbed lotion on his nose while he spoke. “Your dad’s done me some good favors and it’s a payback.”

The group played volleyball. When it got dark, there were offshore fireworks launched from the yacht. It was nearly midnight. The year 1984 was closer and closer. Preston drilled Donovan as much as he could. If there was such a thing as good cops and bad cops in police, the CIA had the same situation. Horace Streets was the good guy. Jovial. Favored diplomacy over confrontation. Waited to know someone before judging. Cornelius Stuart, on the other hand, had a murky streak. His closest friends were involved in chemicals, pharmaceuticals and agribusiness. He knew everything about Zyklon B and the rainbow herbicides, especially Agent Orange. He learned these things from Lyle Garman who built his wealth in pesticides and genetic engineering of crops. Cornelius knew the chemical makeup of sarin like any bartender would know the ingredients of Long Island Iced Tea. $C_4H_{10}FO_2P$ was no different than $\frac{1}{2}$ oz vodka, $\frac{1}{2}$ oz gin, $\frac{1}{2}$ oz white rum, $\frac{1}{2}$ oz tequila, 1 oz lime juice, $\frac{1}{2}$ oz gomme syrup, little Coke, $\frac{1}{2}$ oz Cointreau, lemon slice, and ice. He knew the people to talk to in Alcoa just in case he had to get some fluoride to make his own homemade sarin bomb! He learned from Fabian Lynch that the chemical formula for lysergic acid diethylamide was $C_{20}H_{25}N_3O$. He knew 5-MeO-DMT was really just $C_{13}H_{18}N_2O$. He experimented with his share of ayahuasca but, when all was said and done, he became partial to bananadine as his drug of choice.

Five minutes before midnight, Preston and Donovan were near the Anguilla shoreline by their jet skis, each of them with half-full clay jugs of pina colada. A small man walked up to them. He wore a furry costume. “My name is Spencer Lafayette, Donovan! I’m glad to meet you!” He was a seventeen-year-old but stood at three foot two. “I’m here to freak you out! 1984, you know? Year of Big Brother?”

“Yes!” Donovan chuckled and felt numb from the alcohol. “Yes, yes, yes!” He smiled.

“I was an Ewok in the latest Star Wars movie. You were a fan?”

“Yes! Yes, yes!” Donovan smiled until it hurt. He was unable to say anything

else, “Yes! Yes!”

“May I have some of that? Preston?” Spencer took the jug from Preston. “Big Brother really sent me, Donovan. I’m comic relief, but I know things. I know a *lot* of things!”

Before long, they were counting down from ten. Early the next morning, they boarded a G3 private jet. It was New Year’s Day and Donovan Cobb’s first official day on the Council of Nine. A few from Anguilla joined to head south. Horace Streets was one of them but he left behind his wife, Becky, and his children, James and Vivian. Cornelius Stuart came along as did Herman Eichelberger and Fabian Lynch. Spencer Lafayette, the short guy who had been an Ewok, provided entertainment by doing card tricks. Preston maintained his banter with Donovan. “You have to think of me as a general manager of a football team. This is like a draft, in a lot of ways. *Your talent*. That’s what we’re after. You know it. You’re a high profile dude coming out of college. That’s the analogy here. Of course, me and you are friends. We are friends and we will always be friends no matter how this turns out. There is danger. Like football, you can blow out your knee and never return to a football field. You can get coked up and ruin your career with off-the-field problems. A lot can go wrong, but a lot can also go right.” It was tough for Preston to talk to Donovan in a condescending way. *Demeaning*. The truth was that they were friends. Preston was seven years older, but they still thought very much alike. They had similar tastes. They had a strong history together. “People become zombies out here. There are no guarantees no matter how much you may prepare.”

“What are we doing?” Donovan asked. They were seated face-to-face and zooming in a G3 ten thousand feet above the Caribbean. “The larger picture? What is this? I’m not sure I get it.” Donovan knew, though. It was “us against them” in a perpetual battle of who people deemed to be heroes and who they deemed to be villains. “You would think that after all these years, one side would’ve won but I know it’s never come to this.” He thought about high school biology. “The predator/ prey population fluctuates over time. Wolves can’t kill all the deer because they don’t want to eat each other and they don’t want to nibble on plants. They *need* deer to be alive.”

“The same is true with police and criminals. This is why they work closely together. If police eliminated crime over night, they wouldn’t have jobs for long. They *need* people to deal drugs. They *need* violent people. It ensures their survival. Or? They have to take jobs as crossing guards. That kind of stuff.” Preston drank the same brandy as he drank on the night they talked about the cosmos when they watched Return of the Jedi with Donovan. He swirled his glass and admired ice cubes. “We’re off the subject. We fly here above a nation, Donovan. You have to know that. We are wealthy. We are rich. We are privileged. The Caribbean is a *country* and it has been for centuries. The Mediterranean is a *country*. The Pacific is a continent. Boy! If the sheeple of the world only understood life the way I have come to know it!” Preston slapped his forehead then wiped it with a red handkerchief.

“*Sheeple!*” Donovan giggled. “I like that!” He hadn’t heard the term before but presumed it was a mashup between sheep and people. “Did you make that up?”

“No! You’ll have a whole new and distinct vocabulary by the time you’re finished with this place!” Preston leaned back. “You know where we’re going?” *Pause. A few seconds*. “Eotwawki!” He waited for Donovan to respond but witnessed a blank stare. “*Eotwawki, Donovan!* Don’t you get it?”

“No! Is that Polynesian? It sounds Polynesian but we’re in the Caribbean. What gives?”

“Acronym! Lot of acronyms in our group! *End of the world as we know it!* That’s our secret island! And now that you know of it? You have to be killed if you ever tell an outsider about it!” Preston laughed. And laughed. He drank some brandy. He laughed more. Then? He started feeling the effects of drinking the night before. He was fatigued. His head slumped to the side and he nearly passed out.

“Hey! HEEEEYYYYY!!!” Donovan clapped his hands. “Hey! Preston!” Donovan was frustrated and near anger but he was closer to curiosity. “Hey! Tell me! What the heck!”

Preston Bancroft snapped into consciousness and attention. Adrenaline seeped into his belly. “Don! I apologize. I can speak to you for a hundred hours and only deliver one percent of what you really need to know!” He took ice cubes from his glass and rubbed them on his forehead. “In 1961, the Russians snuck an atomic bomb into their Washington, DC embassy. How many people knew about that? JFK did and very few others. *We are a special group.*” He rubbed ice cubes onto his neck and upper chest. “Eotwawki? It’s an uncharted dredged island right between Grenada and Saint Vincent. Tanner Doyle made it! Created it out of nothing! *That’s where Adolf Hitler is staying, Donovan!* We have secrets and we’ve protected people...” Preston’s forearm wiped his face of ice water and sweat beads. “He has a black girlfriend. *Cutinga.* That’s her name!” Preston was exhausted but found strength. “Adolf Eichmann. Adolf Leipzig. That’s what he goes by.” He smiled and closed his eyes. “*Nossa Senhora do Livramento.* That’s what the Brazilians call him.” He felt relieved. “Of course, you wouldn’t believe this unless you saw it. And? Even then? Your brain would tell you it’s a hoax or a dream!” Preston Bancroft thought about stories his father had told him in the mid-seventies as he joined the Council of Nine. “Elvis? He’s alive and well.” Preston opened his eyes and poked his head outside of seat. “Horace Streets? He’s sleeping now, Donovan, but he’s a specialist at disappearing people. He won’t do it if it’s sinister, but we have other people for that.” Donovan looked hypnotized and perplexed so Preston clarified, “Some people *hate* fame, you know? It’s a prison. And if they’ve helped the Contrarians, we’ll help you change your identity. We’ll convince the *sheeple* that you’re dead. Then? You move to France or Siberia. You move to a place that is manageable and maybe appealing.”

“So Adolf Hitler is alive?” Donovan Cobb ran his fingers through his hair starting at his premature receding hairline.

“In your ninth year with the Council, you’ll have fuckers convince you that all of this is fake. Phony. *All of this is a hoax.* Your memory is betraying you. You’re conflating memory with fantasy.” Preston rubbed his cheeks. “They need you to be on the top of your game now, though. Meet Adolf. You’ll be convinced.” He changed subjects. “Connor Milton. He was on the Council for a couple of years as I joined. *Exotic animals.* That’s what he’s all about! You see Michael Jackson with a chimp? It came from Connor! *Any Which Way But Loose* with Clint Eastwood? Clyde the orangutan? Came from Connor. Milton. Clyde’s the monkey’s real name. He was beaten. Connor was sad.” Preston got up then knelt before Donovan. Their plane zoomed above islands below. “Clyde? Do you know the only Pac Man ghost not rhyming with Inky? It’s Clyde. *Those are our guys.* You have to listen because your concept of exotic animals is limited like mine was when I was in my first year here.”

Preston clamped his hands together in a praying motion then sat down again. “The Loch Ness monster and Bigfoot? You’ve heard of them because they’re all over television. But? There’s truth to it!” Instead of rubbing ice cubes on his face, Preston dipped his fingers into his brandy and smeared liquor onto his face. “I need you to understand this as much as anything else, my friend!” He got up and grabbed Donovan by the collar. “Misinformation and disinformation!” He sat down. “Misinformation is the junk that sheeple start spreading around. *We intend for stories to get screwed up.* A few years ago, *That’s Incredible* thrived on misinformation. And it’s based on disinformation. We put out stuff that is erroneous. *Deliberately wrong.* Hitler is dead. Jim Morrison overdosed on LSD! Do you know how hard that is to do? Elvis died on a toilet! That is what people *want* to believe!” He calmed down. “Do you know what the Grenada invasion was all about last year?” Preston felt bad for Don Cobb because his ignorance of “the bigger picture” was continually exposed. “Medical students, Donovan! We had six hundred people studying and practicing medicine on that piece-of-crap island when a coup took place! We told the media that Russians were building an airplane landing strip. *That’s what the public wants to hear.* There’s a morsel of truth to it, yeah, but we were saving our elitist friends. The guys that could afford to go to Yale and Harvard then attempt some bleeding heart fantasy of helping humanity!” Preston finally finished his brandy. “The Average Joe doesn’t relate to that kind of story! They relate to Russians trying to kill us! So the news runs with it!”

“I knew this,” Donovan calmly said. “I didn’t know the specifics, but I knew it worked that way.” There was a miniature fridge near by. Donovan took out Southern Comfort whiskey. “Pathetic. That was my reaction when I heard about the Grenada invasion. Here we are, one of the two super powers, and we’re picking on an island nation.”

“In the bigger picture, it doesn’t matter.” Preston leaned forward and rubbed Donovan’s thigh. “That’s the magic of who we are. We make things up. *The sheeple are required to believe it.* Or? They’re crazy! They are tar-and-feathered then sent into the public to fend for themselves!” Preston, all of a sudden, didn’t feel like disclosing more secrets. “We’re going to Yucatán next, Don!” He grinned. “My love is there! Tabitha! That’s her name!” He gleamed.

“You’re in love, fucker!” Donovan drank straight from the bottle.

Preston Bancroft fessed up. “Last year, right before we watched Jedi together, my dad took me to a set of his new movie. It’s a front, you see? A façade! I couldn’t explain it. I’m surprised I’m talking about it now. The place we’re flying over used to be Atlantis. Believe it or don’t, I don’t really care. A meteor slammed into Yucatán years ago. Fucked up the area, created the Gulf of Mexico. Pyramids were built.” Preston was tired and could see inward into his imagination more than his physical eyes. He was dazed. “The most beautiful person I could ever imagine!” He chewed on melted ice cubes. “Tabitha took the lead role of a movie about aliens and nephilim building of pyramids! Lovely lady! My dad always let me on these sets and that’s the last time I saw him.” He was embarrassed. “Somehow, I knew it would be her. The whole movie set was a ruse. Machines everywhere and my dad genuinely believed aliens had specialized technology. Stuff that could lift megalithic boulders. He excavated, he searched, and he filmed. The movie was horrible, by the way, but Tabitha played along. She’s my true love.” Preston’s dreamlike trance ended. “I’m gonna rendezvous with her. Our first stop is at the Yucatán peninsula where the filming was.”

"Those are my favorite movies, Preston!" Donovan was happy. "Porky's! Meatballs!" He handed his Southern Comfort across. "You don't have to think too hard about the message! Tits! Ass! A little bush once in a while! Stupid villain! Kids making things right!" Donovan wanted to pinch himself.

Before long, they were fast approaching the Cancún runway. As they descended, Preston prepped Donovan, "I'm going to leave you until later in our journey."

"*What?*" Donovan felt somewhat insecure. "What? I thought we were doing this all together!"

"No! I take off with Tabitha. You have *initiatiiion* coming up. That's why Fabian and the rest came along. Trust me, you don't want me around." Preston reached for a brief case at his side, opened it and started rummaging. "*Hazing, Donovan, but don't think of it that way.*" He had a "lucky tie" that he pulled out. He put it around his neck and secured it over his t-shirt. "I'm taking off with Tabitha because that's my destiny."

"Fuck me!" Donovan laughed. "Lotta surprises, but I guess that's the way."

"Just remember. You're Reggie Hammond and I'm Jack Cates! We're buddies! We're living a real-life buddy film!" He smiled. "On a serious note, Don. The safe word is '*Kiribati*' but don't use it unless you're way past your limit. Don't sell yourself short. Don't be afraid of death. *Never ever, ever, ever be afriad of physical death.* They're going to take you to the tops of amazing water falls. They're going to have you scale down wacky mountain sides. Don't be a coward. We all make it through."

"*Kiribati?*" Donovan asked. "Kiribati? That simple?"

"No! They ask you what you're talking about. *Protocol.*" Preston had the urge to write the instuctitons down. "*The Dero have arrived. You got that? The Dero have arrived.*"

"Dero?" Donovan Cobb shook his head. "I suppose. Who are the Dero?"

"Doesn't matter, Don. They are devil-like beings from inner Earth. You understand?" Preston waited for Donovan to show comprehension. "Third thing. *Agartha is exploding.*"

"Agartha is exploding?" Donovan understood the need for coded language but wasn't sure he'd remember the sequence in an emergency.

"Yes. Kiribati opens a door. Dero arrived then Agartha is exploding. We're always around outsiders. Tell them it's a dream you had. Say it's a story you're working on. *Fake it.* Your life depends on it. Soon? Someone whisks you to a safe house. There, someone tries to find out if you're rattled or if you really need to get out." Preston closed his brief case and put it on his lap. The plane touched down and started to slow.

"Don't be afraid of death. What more is there to be afraid of?" Donovan only had a duffle bag full of a few articles of clothing. He put it in front of him.

"*Dignity, Don.*" Preston didn't like to be overly serious too often but this was an exception. "They are here to test your limits. Porn. Sex trade. Lumber. Politics. Ministry." Preston wanted to name every industry they would encounter. "Fashion, drugs, stock cars, aerospace and computers. Don, they will test your limits. You will hurt. But don't let pain affect you. We're talking about *trauma*, Don. We don't want you to be injured beyond belief. Our brain is like a muscle. We work out, we feel pain, we get stronger. We want the pain. No pain, no gain. We don't want irreparable damage."

“Got it!” A somber feeling washed through Donovan. “I hope you hit it off with Tabitha.” Concerned, he asked, “Can you give me a mantra? A beakon? What can I focus on?”

The question struck Preston by surprise. “*Epitome*. If I have to give you something on the spot, *epitome*. We want to reach the epitome of whatever we’re capable of. But we want to live to see another day. Ninety-nine percent of the time, we want to live to see another day.” The plane came to a complete stop. “I say ninety-nine percent because there are things any of us would die for. *Mars*. I would be the first person to walk on Mars if given the chance... even if it meant risking my life.”

“Got it.” Donovan got up and embraced Preston. “Good luck!”

“Me? Luck?” Preston laughed. “You have no clue which one of us needs it!” He smiled.

“I have balls of steel, Preston!” Donovan smirked.

The passengers exited the G3. There were two big brown UPS trucks waiting on the tarmac. Preston and some others were diverted toward one, and Donovan with others were directed toward the other. Every person came in through the rear. When Donovan was seated, Fabian Lynch spoke to him. “What’s your drug of choice, Donovan?”

“Drug?” All of a sudden, Donovan Cobb felt disoriented. “Caffiene, I guess. Alcohol a close second.” There were eight people in the back now being driven away.

“What do you think of rhubarb upsidedown cake? These are the finer things in life.” Fabian was dressed in an all-white three-piece suit completed with a fine white gangster’s hat. Only a black stripe along the hat, a black tie, and black Oxford shoes contrasted his get up. “Or do you still prefer vanilla and chocolate cake like you were a three-year-old child?”

“I don’t mind chocolate cake. Give me lemon meringue pie! That’s what I’m craving!” Donovan looked around. He recognized Horace Streets, Cornelius Stuart, and Herman Eichelberger but they were silent. A couple of others were new to him.

“Now you’re talking! I like you! Your tastes are cheap but diversified.” Fabian reached into his sport coat and pulled out a baggie. “This is marijuana. You’re used to it?” He could tell it tempted Donovan. “Fine stuff. Colombian. Alcohol is vanilla, caffiene is chocolate, and this is maybe sherbet. You like sherbet ice cream?” Fabian grimaced. “I’m the *31 Flavors* of drugs, Donovan.” He pondered his situation. “You don’t believe we were meant to be limited in our choices of what we can do on this great planet?” He handed his baggie over. “Don? I want you to tell what you’ve ever heard of. We’ll put the pieces together later.” The ride became bumpy. There weren’t any windows in the back but it was clear that they had reached a rugged dirt road. “Salvia divinorum. Peyote. Blue sunshine. Gingold. Promicin. Bogart. Gateway. Ketamine. Ibogaine. Soma. Spank. Saturn. Ayahuasca. Psilocybin. Gleemonex. Melange. Mescaline.” He waited. “How deep are you? What layer?”

“I’m clean, guy. Weed.” Donovan grew up around Hollywood. Geeks didn’t consider weed to be clean but nearly everyone else did. “Skunk. Colombian. Cheeba. Dagga. Boom.” He felt like a teenage virgin walking into a porn studio looking for work. “My vocabulary is all about Mary Jane. Fuzz is cops. That’s why. Even with my family connection in the United States, I’m not immune. Never wanted to fuck with the big boys, but I guess that’s no longer in play.”

Fabian Lynch pulled out another baggie from a pocket in his slacks. “White

girls.” He handed it over. “You will be trained. This is fine powder cocaine.”

“White girls,” Donovan mused. He licked his pinky then dipped it in. He tasted. “Never did cocaine. Never wanted to.” He felt confused. “White girls. I get it. My head has a million things going on, but I get it. White girls. No paper trail.”

“Do you have pretty white girls in this club?” Fabian Lynch pitied Donovan Cobb. “You walk into a club, that’s what you ask.” The growing pains were the hardest to watch. “Maybe it’s not your thing.” Fabian Lynch was a Contrarian because, during the nineteen eighties, there was a strong purge within the traditional Scoundrals. During the seventies, especially when disco peaked, cocaine and other drugs were widely accepted. With the election of Ronald Reagan, a house-cleaning of sorts began. Private enterprise still mattered so long as it didn’t involve illicit drugs. “I’m not here to push anything on you, Donovan. No matter my reputaion, I am not a drug pusher. I am here to give you options. I want you to reach your human potential. You go tonight to your lodge. You like the weed, you smoke the weed. You’re curious about the coke? You try the coke. Or you flush it down the toilet.”

Donovan Cobb was truly embarrassed. He felt like an eight-year-old. He remembered rummaging through one of his mother’s drawers and finding Playgirl magazines. He remembered feeling inept when thinking of his pre-puberty micro-penis and comparing it to large dongs pictured inside centerfolds. “This is the adult world. I get it.”

“I would pass on the coke, Donovan. There is so much to see! Let’s say you win an all-expense-paid trip to France. What the first thing you do? Head to the Eiffel Tower? No! That’s the last thing you want to do! Hang out with clueless tourists? No! You go to Valras-Plage, one of the world’s best beaches!” Fabian knew time was of the essence. “Not long from now, we’re reaching our first contact. Ayahuasca. He’s making a special tea and you’re on your way!”

“I’m ready!” Donovan thought about Buzz Aldrin, Neil Armstrong and Michael Collins. Humankind had it’s different kinds of voyagers. There were the fuckers that came across the Atlantic to settle America’s east coast. There were pioneers that set across the Midwest. There were the bastards that went to the Moon. Donovan thought about different *physical* travelers. Lewis and Clark. Others. He thought about *psychological* travelers. Timothy Leary, Jim Morrison, John Lennon. He was ready for a tirp but his heart pounded inside his chest. “The road less traveled, right?”

An hour later, the group was inside a large, mechanic’s shop. There were classic fifties Cheverolet trucks and cars, most of them with cherry paint jobs. There were a couple of small airplanes and rafters that were three stories high.

Donovan Cobb was trapped.

The group had stopped for a tea break. Only Donovan’s was prepared with ayahuasca, a pschedelic prepared from the Banisteriopsis caapi vine.

Donovan’s head and wrists were poking through wooden stocks. His pants were pulled down to his ankles behind him.

Fabian Lynch was now dressed in a Hugo Boss Nazi uniform. He marched back and forth while a television was wheeled in by midget, Spencer Lafeyette. He was dressed like a tiny Abraham Lincoln. Flanking Donovan on the left and right, Disney characters came into view. Mickey and Minnie Mouse. Pluto. Goofy. Cinderella. Snow White. Fabian spoke, “Do you know the name of the device you’re in? *A pillory*. Maybe you’ve heard of the Salem witch trials?” Fabian continued, “You are not on trail,

though. You are here for an experience!” He turned the television on. “You will watch *Casablanca* for the next couple of hours until your trip kicks in.” He pressed play on a VCR. “My friends are here.” He pulled something from his pocket. “This is Vaseline petroleum jelly. If you get testy, I stick my finger in this then I stick my finger inside your asshole.” A couple of his friends laughed. One of them was Cornelius Stuart. Fabian said, “In all my years with the Contrarians, Cornelius is only one to try the safe word.”

“True enough, sir,” Cornelius responded.

“His trip was different unlike anyone else’s. Why? There is a man waiting in the other room. John Hargrave. Eleven-inch cock. Gay porn, boned more than three thousand butt holes in his life.” Fabian kept along as if nothing strange was happening. “You don’t want stage two, Donovan.”

“Yes. But?” It didn’t feel real. It felt like staged drama. “What are you getting at?” He looked at the Disney characters dressed in their costumes. They all seemed calm.

“I have to give you your first experience, Donovan. I have to let you know what we have all gone through. Take it as you will.” Fabian motioned to the people around him. They walked out together and Donovan Cobb was left to watch a classic movie.

A couple of hours later, the movie was over. Fabian returned with Spencer and an eclectic gypsy-looking lady. Donovan told Fabian, “I had a lot to drink.” There was a puddle below him. “Pissed on your pillory. Sorry, sort of.” His drug-induced mystic experience was picking up. “You really should check back for restroom breaks.”

“Enough,” Fabian said. “You know Spencer but you haven’t met Madam Cassandra.”

She waved and curtsied.

Spencer wheeled the television out of the room. As he left, three men came in. They tugged a twelve-by-twelve-by-twelve foot cage.

Fabian explained, “These men are Contrarians, Donovan. Connor Milton is our exotic animals guy and Norman Whittaker owns the sixth largest trucking company in the United States. *WC Yorkshire*. He moves most of our legal and illegal stuff. The third guy is Barry Pierce, lumber industry.” Inside the cage, there was a wild animal. “That, my friend, is a chupacabra.” Fabian walked around the cage. “We don’t know where it came from. Cross breed? Pacific island near nuclear testing? The gates of Hell?” The animal snarled and restlessly moved about. No hair, feathers or fur. Large alien-like eyes. Scales along its back. Three-pronged talons along its hands. Sometimes walking about on two legs in an awkward side-by-side wobble and other times slouched, dragging its knuckles and pushing along on its wrists. “I have something I need you to witness.” Fabian whistled. Spencer Lafayette returned pulling a smaller cage. “They call it chupacabra, Spanish for goat sucker. Loves their blood but all we have here is racoon.” Spencer connected the two cages and pulled out a protective barrier. In seconds, the chupacabra seized upon the racoon and bit into his neck. “Just like a vampire! Amazing, isn’t it?”

Donovan Cobb didn’t care one bit. Drugs were working on his mind and he started having hallucinations of spirits, one of them being Abraham Lincoln. *It has to be Spencer’s costume*, he thought. He tried to shake it. “Will you let me out, now? I think I understand.”

“No!” Fabian said. “You have one more lesson.” He clapped at Spencer.

"*Yes sir!*" Spencer ran out and returned with a potted fern.

"You will stare at this fucker and make it move. If it moves, you are destined to be what we are!" Fabian looked at the chupacabra. It still moved about with anxiety. The racoon no longer looked like an animal. Instead, it resembled a Davey Crockett hat.

Donovan's mental state was hindered. Without hesitation, he stared at the fern.

It danced, moved and wiggled.

"There is no breeze in this place, Donovan! You are making that plant move because it believes in you! There are few people that the plant kingdom responds to! Every Contrarian, with the exception of Cornelius Stuart, have been able to make this connection!" Fabian approached Donovan until their foreheads touched. "Your third eye is alive! Your telekenetic abilities have been woken up!" Fabian snapped and motioned to Spencer.

Spencer brought a ring of keys. He unlocked Donovan. "Don't take this personally, Don." He almost expected to be smacked. "This is the way it has to be."

Donovan pulled up his pants. "I'm truly at a loss for words." He thought about Preston. Miles away, he was at the Chichen Itza hitting it off really well with Tabitha.

Spencer took Donovan's forearm. "You have a few more scheduled engagements. Let's go." He led him outside to a waiting UPS truck. "Get in the back like before."

Donovan did as he was instructed. No one was in the back except for a large, scrubby man wearing overalls and a Confederate cowboy hat. "Welcome! I'm Clint Roth!" He helped Donovan inside. "Pleased to meet you! I'm so fascinated by the Council of Nine."

"Living the dream!" Donovan said. There was sarcasm in his voice. "I'm not so sure why I idealized this process."

"Don't let it get you down!" the man said. The doors closed behind them and soon they were traveling on another rocky road. "Cancún is such a beautiful place! There's a Hilton golf course. Playa Ballena is amazing! Plaza de Toros still has bullfights," Clint Roth marvelled. He pulled out a pint of Jack Daniels. "I understand you like whiskey!"

"I'm still tripping from drugs. Medicinal stuff." Donovan reconsidered. "I'll have a sip." He drank a small amount, enough to wet his parched mouth. "What the fuck is going on?" he politely asked.

"I'm here to give you the racist bullshit you were always told to not listen to." Clint Roth believed his job was tough but only at the beginning. "Our numbers are dwindling. World wide, one in three people were white in the sixties. Somehow, that's changing. Some of it I can explain and some I really can't. In another generation, less than ten percent of the world's population will be white."

"That's understandable. Mexicans fuck like rabbits. They start sooner and they don't stop having kids until their station wagons can't hold anymore." Preston laughed and felt ashamed. He clarified, "It's the drugs, Clint. Ayahuasca. I'm not in my right mind."

"Not in your right mind?" Clint Roth was taken back. "Maybe? Just maybe? Nah! Maybe, because the drugs, you're in your right mind for the first time ever!" He took the Jack Daniels from Donovan. "I was nominated by Fabian Lynch years ago to be on the Council of Nine. They didn't take to me." He was saddened. "I stayed friends with Fabian. *He likes me.* I'm from Georgia and I know all about the Guidestones. I

know a lot of things that aren't taught in schools. It's the way I was raised." The Georgia Guidestones were three huge monumental granite rectangular verticle pillars put up in 1980 in Elbert County. There were inscriptions chizzled in Greek, Egyptian, Babylonian, Sanskrit, Chinese and a few others. There were ten messages. One was to maintain a human population at five hundred million around the globe; another was to rule passion, faith and tradition with tempered reason; and another was to avoid petty laws and useless officials. Clint thought to explain the Guidestones but skipped it. "Jefferson Davis said to never be haughty to the humble or humble to the haughty. You seem decent." Clint drank more whiskey. "I wish I was on drugs like you."

"I'm not sure you would've traded places with me this past hour! I was clamped inside a pillory with my pants pulled down!" Donovan felt a dilerious surge. "Maybe this is living!"

"I've gotta cut to the chase because we're short on time." Traveling along in the back of a delivery truck wasn't the optimal circumstance for such a conversation but Clint had to make the most of it. "We're not out to kill anyone. *That's other people.* We're out to save our own skins. We're out to make the most out of life. When we stop, you're going to be taken by one of Preston's dad's pals. *Oliver Stone.* He's a young producer you've probably never heard of but he has a strong interest in Latin America. His first movie, *Seizure*, was a dark comedy about a horror writer. Not important. It was financed by Michael Thevis, a known gangster. *That's what has to sink in.* Stone has connections to the CIA, you see? You ask Horace Streets about him when you get a chance! And that midget that escorted you outside of that mechanic hangar? Spencer Lafayette? He's friends with Hervé Villechaize, also known as Tattoo from Fantasy Island. Those short guys run together! Hervé was called Spider in *Seizure*. Stone's other movie was *The Hand*. A comic book artist who's hand is lopped off then takes on a life of its own."

"I love comics," Donovan said. "You've been told?"

"Not sure. Chichen Itza is where all the tourists go. *Great pyramid.* Stone is going to take you to other ruins. The Mayans were amazing, I've gotta admit. Dzibilchaltum, Mayapan, Loltun, Xlapac, Balanchen, Xtampak and Hochob. You'll be traveling from north to south on mopeds to visit different sites. Tomorrow? You hook up with me on Isla Cozumel and later I'm your guide to Eotwawki on a G3. Right now, I give you the lowdown on Hitler and the Nazis. He made it out of Germany alive, obviously. Pilot by the name Peter Baumgart took him out on April 28, 1945. There was loads of help from the Red Cross and the Catholic Church through Pope Pius XII. Eva Peron from Argentina was paid by Germany. The KLM, *Koninklijke Luchtvaart Maatschappij*, flew him where he needed to go. In English, it's the Dutch Royal Airlines. He wound up in Patagonia, a Bavarian province on the Argentine/ Chilean border. Everything American school kids have been taught is a pure fantasy. The Hitler suicide myth was concocted by HR Trever-Roper who wrote *The Last Days of Hitler*. The public wanted closure. The suicide myth gave them what they psychologically wanted. The truth is that he lived in the province of Patagonia, *San Carlos de Bariloche specifically.* He married Eva Braun. They lived many happy years."

"Then what happened? Why do more people not know about this?" Donovan felt queasy.

"IBM built the machines that tallied Jewish concentration camp prisoners. They tallied the gypsies and others. Henry Ford was a Nazi advocate and so was Walt Disney.

Siemens, ITT and others made huge profits off the war. They played both sides. Have you ever heard of hedging your bet in a game of craps?" Clint Roth thought briefly about a fun time in Las Vegas then pushed it out of his mind. "The Establishment wanted it this way. Thyssen Krupp Steel created more than seven hundred dummy companies and all of them were headed by former Nazis. It's just the way it happened."

"Why am I going there?" Something was off. Donovan believed he might be getting set up.

"This is just a piece of the puzzle, Donovan!" Clint polished off the pint of Jack. "The Contrarians are the greatest group on the face of the planet as far as I'm concerned. But? They have their own secrets and myths. The first group of Contrarians? 1915, they had to draw straws for seeded slots except for Teddy Roosevelt. That's right! Teddy Roosevelt was the first Decider slotted in the fifth-seeded year. The rest? Benedict Callypso, year one; Jeanie MacPherson, year two; Irwin Cobb, your great-grandfather, seeded in year three; Elsa Schiaparelli, year four; Teddy Roosevelt, year five; Jacob Hyde, year six; Hugo Junkers, year seven; Harry Houdini, year eight; Nikola Tesla, year nine. Some fuckin' group if you asked me! But there are myths, of course, and this organization has no paper trail!"

"How does this concern me? What does it mean?" Donovan was experiencing internal physical pain. He believed the ayahuasca was now making him sick.

"During the Red Scare from 1917 through 1920, the Scoundrels—*our adversaries*—tagged us as communists. They convinced the government to work against us! We had to go into hiding and the first few years of the Contrarians was quite bumpy." Clint laughed then made a bad joke. "Just like the road we're on!" He loved his own joke and gleamed. "Then a second wave of communist hounding lasted from 1947 until 1956. Senator Joseph McCarthy grabbed Truman's Executive Order 9835 like it was a dagger! He went after us and other groups. Once again, depicting us as communists. The Scoundrels love fuckers to lay down and shut up! That's what it's really about!"

"*The Scoundrels!*" Donovan chuckled. "Such an outdated term and Preston was sure that someone out there was still using it!"

"I have a great story for you about the real life Hatfields and McCoys! Feud started in the late nineteenth century at Tug Fork of the Big Sandy River at the Kentucky/West Virginia border! We're short on time so it'll have to wait until we're on a jet tomorrow." Clint Roth took off his cowboy hat and set it at his feet. "We have the biggest ongoing hidden feud on planet Earth today. The Scoundrels, once in a while, go for the knock out punch. *They really hate us*. So we duck and jab. Soon, you're going to take off with that young producer, Preston's dad's buddy. You'll take pictures with him. I want you to notice some of these group photos you're in the middle of. For the next nine years, count. Is there nine people with you? It matters! Someone is creating a myth. Someone needs the Scoundrels to believe that the standing Council of Nine is something different than it actually is. During the McCarthy witch hunt, there were three different Councils of Nine, each of them not knowing who the real one was. Your family knows, though, Donovan. Your grandfather, Hatcher, took over for your great-grandfather. Did an excellent job. His son, Delbert, is your father. He did well enough. Now? We're all confused to some degree but we continue on. The Contrarians created an early form of COG, or continuation of government. *Shady style*. The two fake Councils of Nine kept about even after they weren't needed. That's where I come in.

My family is part of the Iconoclasts. The other group is known as the Resistance. We're jokes, really, but if the Scoundrels or another group were to bomb you? We'd take over like we were running things all along."

"Jealousy is a human thing. All of us feel it. *Envy is eternal*. We're to believe that the Scoundrels are megalomaniacs but what's to stop the Iconoclasts or Resistance from taking us out and framing them?" Donovan now believed he was having an out-of-body experience. He didn't feel like quite himself.

"Why? Why do wolves not eat each other for food? We are indebted to you. Over the course of the next nine years, you will see what you've meant to the world. You did not conquer it. Instead, you created pockets. *You created places*. I can be the person I want to be. I'm not even a gung ho Confederate Southerner. You can tell, right? But I wear the symbol of the flag to know I have the freedom to do so. I get no lecture from you." Clint Roth thought about Napoleon's military. "Do you know who Nicolas Chauvin is? First Army of the French Republic under Napoleon. Some say his existence is apocryphal but I beg to differ. This guy? *Flags were more important than people!* The term 'chauvinism' came from him! Ever hear of a male chauvinistic pig? Came from Nicolas Chauvin." He thought for a few seconds. "In America, the Scoundrels are disciples of his doctrine! It defeats the purpose, but you'll never get that across to them. *The American flag is supposed to stand for freedom*. It's a symbol. When you test your freedom, the Scoundrels get very fidgety. In one breath, they'll tell you that you have freedom and in the same sentence, they'll tell you to shut up and stand in line. Then? They'll make international business deals with foreign powers and sell out common American people."

"So in some ways, it's not so much that people support us? The Contrarians? It's much ado that people don't want the Scoundrels to be running everything?"

"Yes!" Clint's internal clock suggested that they were near their destination. "The Nazis were created by American bankers and industrialists. I have to tell you about the Bush family before we part. Prescott Bush, the vice-president's father, was admonished by Congress for financing the Nazis. His friend, Allen Dulles, headed the CIA from the get go in the late forties. George Herbert Walker Bush eventually headed the Agency but there is a side story here. He was in Dallas on the day JFK was killed. So was Richard Nixon! What's the chances that a future president and a future vice-president would both be at Dealey Plaza on November 22, 1963? November 22, 1910 is when the Jekyll Island meeting which created the Federal Reserve took place! Coincidence? JFK vowed to take down the Fed and he was killed on that particular day?" Clint Roth now spoke as if there was a game show timer on him. "A couple of years ago, March of 1981, John Hinckley Jr shoots Ronald Reagan. The media pretends he's a mentally disturbed dude trying to impress Jodie Foster. John Hinckley Sr, the father of the shooter, was the head of Venderbilt Energy. The Bush family is involved in oil, see? Well, the brother of the shooter, Scott Hinckley, was supposed to dine with Neil Bush, the vice-president's son! Obviously, their dinner date was called off but what the heck do you think was going on?"

"Fishy stuff," Donovan said. "Sounds like the Scoundrels wanted to knock off Reagan to put Bush in charge of things. Fishy. Very fishy."

"You got it!" Clint Roth was fine where the conversation stood. "We'll have hours to talk about this tomorrow." He felt claustrophobic in the back of the UPS truck. "You go out there and you try to enjoy some of these amazing sites!"

Donovan Cobb later spent the day with Oliver Stone and the next morning he was on a flight to Barbados with Clint Roth. Eotwawki wasn't too far to the west. They boarded a speedy thirty-eight foot yacht named Zeppelin and were on their way. It was a mystery to Donovan. Why all the secrecy? It seemed like there was so much to be proud of! Deep down, he knew why. There were dark elements in the world. It wasn't just their competitors, the Scoundrels. It was society as a whole. It was a lot of things. International governments. Demons. Aliens. It didn't matter. Donovan thought about "You've Got To Hide Your Love Away" by the Beatles and he thought about his situation. Envy. As old as mankind. Jealousy. Hatred. Sabotage. You can't brag too often about what you hold most dear. Life has a way of tearing it apart. The Universe has a way of keeping people humble, even financial tycoons. TPTB (The Powers That Be) weren't always human. He talked about it with Preston months before and currently contemplated it as the yacht skipped along dicey Caribbean waters.

Clint Roth read Donovan Cobb's mind. He blurted out names, dates and numbers that seemed random. "Fourteen airmen, TBF Avengers. December, 1945. Six crew, twenty-five passengers, Star Tiger, January, 1948. Three crew, twenty-nine passengers, NC16002, December, 1948. Seven crew, thirteen passengers, Star Ariel, January, 1949. That's just the flying craft. There were sea vessels in 1918, 1921, 1925, 1941 a couple of times, and 1963." Clint handed Donovan a cold bottle of Samuel Adams. "Your dad is friends with a guy named Jim Koch. This is his beer. Launching it publicly later this year. Great stuff." Sea mist sprayed their faces. Dark clouds swirled above. "The Bermuda Triangle is far north of us but its legend is real enough. These waters? They're controlled by something Contrarians call the Element. It's everywhere. Land. Houses. Cars. Your brain. Your guts. Everywhere." Clint drank quickly from his twelve-ounce brown bottle then pulled out another from a nearby ice chest. "Your hazing. That thing you went through in Yucatán. It's something all of us have to see. It's not enough to hear about. I can tell you all the anomalies of aircraft and sea vessels that went missing near the Bermuda Triangle and you might think there is a sliver of truth to it. Then? You go about your regular life and you ignore the supernatural forces that affect us all." Clint believed he was scaring Donovan. "My house creaks, you know? My house in Georgia. It creaks, and it knows what I'm thinking. *Literally*. The curtains and the shades. They move when the windows are completely closed. No draft in the house. Any ordinary person would believe I'm crazy but I know you've seen it. They wouldn't let you get this far unless you did."

"Preston said it would be a nine-year mind fuck." Donovan fidgeted. "He said my mind would play tricks on me and make me believe all the things aren't real. Denial. Suppression. Psychological defense. Fear."

"It feels personal. It does. The Element. As if it only follows Contrarians, something like a cloud. I know it's much more than that, though. In the Philippines, they call it Rammasun, the god of thunder. I'm sure. In Japan, Kami. Preston told me you two've discussed Shinto, by the way. Inari and Kitsune. Right? Fox spirits that effect tea, sake, rice. Fertility. And in Hawaii, I know it's Pele, goddess of volcanoes. China? Huli Jing. You know? Also fox-like deity but with nine fuckin' tails. The Element shows itself in many different forms, Donovan. The Vikings knew it as Valhalla; the Hindus as Brahman; the Christians knew it as the Holy Ghost." Speaking frankly and soberly of spirits was uncomfortable for Clint. He polished off his second beer then pulled out a third. "There is always a supernatural force that guides vital groups

throughout history. We are that! A vital group, but the clerics, priests and theologians most often get it totally wrong. When it comes time to write things down, they make stuff up or just get things wrong. I don't really know why. The Holy Ghost, for example, and the Devil. They are the same thing, I'm pretty much convinced. The same exact thing, but with different moods. These spirits will push your boat along. They will help you. They will guide you. Blow your stinkin' sails. Direct you. The stars will twinkle and the breeze will caress your skin like a gentle companion. Gusts of wind will literally be at your back. Then? You do something wrong. Fall out of favor. The thing will fuck with you! The Element will ride you like a hard-ass boss! I believe it's characteristics are much more like Loki, the Norse spirit, than anything I've ever seen! The fucker's mischievous! We grew up in a country where nine out of ten citizens claim to be Christian. We're taught at early ages that only our perception of the supernatural is the correct one! All others are false! Idiots! Morons! Mythology! But nothing could be further from the truth I tell you."

"Have you considered that maybe it's balancing its constituents? I mean, our adversaries in life are the Scoundrels. Surely they worship the thing too. Maybe the thing is like a dad and we are like the children. Sometimes dad might side with one sibling and not the other. Makes sense, doesn't it?" Donovan wasn't sure what he was talking about. "We all think we're so perfect. We're all put here for a reason. Somehow, we're always shocked when things don't go our ways. Especially when we prepare for so long and we struggle against what we're trying to tackle."

"Montego turns to monsoon." All of a sudden, Clint Roth didn't feel like drinking. *Somber*. He looked across the ocean and a pod of porpoises jetted above the surface in poetic motion. "Mind fuck, huh? That's what Preston calls this thing?" There was something in his bones. Almost danger. He could sense a form of danger. He couldn't put a finger on it.

Eotawwki was a six-acre dredged island. On the northeast, there was a humble straw hut. In the northwest, there was a quaint three-story red brick building. Nothing fancy. Square. In the southwest, there was a wooden pier which led to a cosmetic oil platform. It didn't work, only for looks.

When the yacht docked into a modest harbor, Clint Roth told Donovan Cobb, "This is where we split ways. It won't be the last time we see each other, though. You go in that hut and you tell me who you think you see! He's in poor health, they say. *Searching for treasure, of all things!* That's his hobby! Doctors have been here off and on for the past few weeks and eventually they'll take him to Brazil. Not sure where, right now. Cuiaba? Can't really remember. People come here to get away from the heat! *Snoopers, you know?* I'll for sure see you in Tiwanaku down in Bolivia. We'll meet at Pumapunku! You'll love the place! Watch *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* if ya' get the chance! Great movie! We'll have that to talk about!"

"It's so serene here!" Don scanned the horizon in all directions and took a breath in. "I like the trees!" The palms were set in perfect lines. There were a few exotic berry bushes. The place seemed somewhat concocted but in a resort kind of way.

"Make your way into that brick building before you do anything else," Clint said. "You have a guide, there." Donovan looked befuddled so Clint consoled him, "This is the way it'll be for the next few weeks, maybe even few months. You'll feel like a baton if you don't already."

"I'm getting used to it I think," Donovan said. "In some other way, I know I'll

never be at ease with the bizarre behaviors of these secret societies.” The dim clouds began to clear and the Sun made its way out. “I’ll talk to you later!”

“See ya’!” Clint patted Donovan’s shoulders then hugged him. “It’s a special thing we have going on!” He let go. “I’m afraid at any moment it’s going to end.”

“Don’t worry. I’ve become a believer in destiny. I don’t feel it at all. Something tells me we still have miles on this strange journey!” With that, he turned from Clint Roth and headed away. He sized up the building before entering. He thought to knock but didn’t. His father was inside the building. So was Horace Streets, Fabian Lynch and Barry Pierce. Preston’s father, Hale Bancroft, was surprisingly there. Coming down the second-story stairs came Connor Milton. The group had been chatting around something resembling a picnic table.

When Donovan’s father saw him, he stood and started to sing, “*George, George, George of the Jungle... strong as he can be... Watch out for that Tree!*” Horace and Fabian joined in, “*George, George, George of the Jungle... lives a life that’s free... Watch out for that tree!*” The rest joined, “*When he gets in a scrape, he makes his escape, with the help of his friend, an ape named Ape...*”

They stopped singing.

Donovan believed it was his cue to sing but he could only recite the next line, “Then away he’ll schlep on his elephant Shep, while Fella and Ursula stay in step.” He wiped his forehead. “What gives?” He felt like a six-year-old.

His dad motioned to the table. “Come, son! Sit!” When Donovan was seated, Delbert Cobb asked, “Son? Who are Fella and Ursula?” He gleamed. There were bowls of mixed fruit on the table. Delbert picked out a few grapes. “Well?”

“It was my favorite cartoon as a kid! You know that! Fella and Ursula were George’s friends, twins I think!” There was a small window on each of the four walls. Through the back wall, Donovan could see children playing. He recognized Vivian, Horace’s daughter, but wasn’t sure of the rest. It looked like they were in the middle of a food fight with cake and donuts. They ran around from the building’s rear to the ocean shore.

“Wrong answer!” Delbert felt warmth. “Ursula? They call her Uschi out here sometimes. *Eva Braun’s daughter*. She left Adolf in 1954. Took off from Bariloche and moved about two hundred and fifty miles north to Neuquén, Argentina. Her other daughter isn’t Fella. The creators of *George of the Jungle* weren’t that stupid or brash. Her other daughter is Brigitte, also known as Gitta. Evita Peron watched after them.”

Donovan sang, “*When he gets in a scrape, he makes his escape, with the help of his friend, an ape named Ape...*” He asked, “Is this Hitler? Making his escape to the jungles of South America?”

“Yes, son! Yes!” The Contrarians were quite fond of drinking from coconut shells. Delbert walked to a counter and served horchata for Donovan. “We’ve lost track of them. Could you help find them?” When Donovan had his horchata, they toasted to health. “*Salud! Prost! Gan bei! Cheers! A sua saúde! Na zdorovje!*”

“Yes! I feel soooooooo good!” Donovan could taste a hint of alcohol. “Is this bourbon?” He shook it off.

“Son? None of us here have ever believed the popular tale that Adolf Hitler killed himself in a bunker in 1945! It’s not until you become a Contrarian that you get to go beyond believing something and you get to know it. First-hand accounts put the mind to rest better than anything else. Somehow, the American public trusted the Soviet side

of the story. The Reds were there first to the bunker and they supposedly found burnt remains and part of a skull. So what! Hitler had six body-doubles. He had an elaborate system physically and psychologically. Stalin didn't believe his own soldiers found the Führer! The FBI didn't believe it! No one did! And? Juan Peron was one of us!" Delbert slammed his fist to the table.

"A Contrarian?" Donovan had never seen his father in this light. It was like living inside a cartoon.

"From 1956, the year after the coup, until 1964! We had better intelligence than any international organization on the planet! The Germans were intimately interlinked with the Argentines. There were reports that Hitler died in 1958, 1962, and 1965. Bogus. We knew it. No one else did. Death at the Eden Hotel? Nah! Then they said he got to Paraguay and died there in 1971! Nope. Maybe one of his body doubles! But not him!" Delbert Cobb laughed. "You know why I know, Donovan?"

"Grandpa Hatcher?" Donovan now felt like a brave thirteen-year-old instead of a clueless six-year-old. "I'm sure he let you in! Just like you're doing right now!"

"Yes, your grand dad told me a lot but..." He looked around the table. "Each of us has a secret. *We have many secrets.* There is a time and place to let people know what we guard. Now? Yes. Now's the time to tell you. I started my stint with the Council of Nine in 1955. Rock 'n' roll was just getting off the ground. Great time to be alive. In Argentina, there was a coup against Juan Peron. He came to us for help. I nominated him to the Council and they took him in, 1956. The year after me. He was quite bitter about the death of his beloved wife, Evita Peron." Delbert slipped into a mild trance as he remembered his early life. He snapped out, "Germans run our world even now! Time magazine had a front page article about Nixon's Germans. HR Haldeman and John Ehrlichman. Some spilled over into Ronald Reagan's White House. Henry Kissenger. Alexander Haig. George Shultz. NASA? The National Aeronautics and Space Administration? They are full of Germans! Not just ordinary Germans! Nazis! The three main groups that launched NASA are Masons, Nazis and Magicians!"

"Magicians?" Donovan shook his head. "Uri Geller? Project Stargate? Preston prepped me on a lot of things. The CIA really believed Geller was doing real magic with real telepathy and telekinesis. Not illusions. Magic."

"First of all, Horace here was linked to Project Stargate." Delbert turned to Horace. "You want to cut in?"

"Nah. I'll have my say when you're done." Horace had a calm demeanor about him in most circumstances. It didn't matter if the subject was pop music or top secret government information.

Delbert told Donovan, "Second of all, you're in the middle of it right now. The hazing was to get you oriented. We all go through it. We give you what your mind can handle in bite-sized chunks. Third of all, yes. Like Uri Geller, NASA had a guy. He was a Contrarian, but he was aloof even by our standards. Jacob Hyde founded the Contrarians with Silver Callypso and your great-grandfather, Irwin, back in 1915. Australia. We all know the story. Jacob's son, John, took a liking to rocketry. In 1941, he was admitted to the Council of Nine and he moved to Pasadena, California where he befriended a pioneer of aerospace. Marvel Parsons! That was his birth name but they later called him Jack. This genius invented castable, composite rocket propellants! He was big at Caltech and was one of JPL's founders. Junior college dropout and Stanford dropout. But? He was weird. He was smart too! When I say weird, *I mean*

weeeeeeeeeiiiiird. Occultist. John Hyde liked that about him. He gravitated toward eccentric people, especially fuckers that were staring at the stars. Well? John Hyde pulls Jack Parsons into the Council in 1942 then shit really hit the fan! First of all, Jack had been entangled in Marxism since 1939 but ditched it for one of Aleister Crowley's cults! You know Ozzy Osborne, don't you? Mr Crowley, the song? This is the guy that talked to spirits. Unabashed. And?" Delbert looked around the table to gauge whether or not he was straying into the bizarre too much. He felt fine. "And? You know vice-president, George Bush? His wife is the daughter of Aleister! That's right! A rumor that just doesn't go away! They're Scoundrels, of course, so we don't know the absolute truth on it. Public believes she's the daughter of Marvin Pierce, publisher of Redbook and McCall's."

"Mr Crowley, what went on in your head?" Donovan sang. "Oh, Mr Crowley, did you talk to the dead? Your lifestyle to me seemed so tragic with the thrill of it all... You fooled all the people with magic, yeah, you waited on Satan's call..." He stopped then asked, "So? What about Jack Parsons and John Hyde?"

"Jack had a beautiful mansion on Orange Grove in Pasadena. A lot went on there. He wasn't so flung by what other Contrarians were doing. He had his own gig going on. Converted to Thelema. Funniest religious symbol I can remember seeing called a Unicursal Hexagram. Looked like someone grabbed the Star of David, bent it out of shape, then stamped a pretty flower on it! Ha! Ha, ha! Part New Age but also affiliated with Egyptian deities from long ago. Osiris. That stuff. When Jack Parsons joined the Contrarians in 1942, the Americans had just joined World War II. Jack? Seemed oblivious to it in so many ways. He and his wife, Helen Northrup..."

Donovan interrupted, "Northrup? Like from Northrop Grumman?"

"I doubt it for some reason." Delbert explained, "Jack and Helen had just joined the Agape Lodge, a California sect of the Thelemites! Well, regular scientists really don't like to mingle with occultists. It's been true since the beginning of modern science! Einstein contributed a lot to physics but he never jumped on board with quantum mechanics. He debated people about entanglement theory and called it spooky action. He is quoted as saying that God does not play dice with the Universe. Well? We have since done experiments and confirmed strange behaviors of sub-atomic particles. Someone told me that Stephen Hawking said God plays dice. He just throws them where they can't be seen."

"Wow! Sounds intelligent!" Donovan scratched his chin.

"This is who we are, Donovan!" Delbert scooted his chair and grabbed Donovan's forearm. "We are not pure scientists! We are not power-driven politicians! Well? We are, but not as bad as other people. We are not telling people how they better live. We live and we learn. *Heuristic*. That's what the word means. We have a lot of trial and error, hit and miss. We don't care. We don't have the *pride* to care."

"So was Jack Parsons a failure?" Donovan patted his father's hand. Delbert released his grip. "Did he become a great leader? What happened?"

"Jack was kicked out of the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in 1944, the place he helped found. *Too much magical thinking for their scientific brains*. Then his wife, Helen, left him the next year. Why? Well, he got busy with her sister, Sara, who then dumped Jack for L Ron Hubbard! If it sounds like a psycho circus, it is. Once in a while, truth is stranger than fiction. *Never forget that*. L Ron Hubbard! Science fiction writer who turned into the founder of a new religion, Scientology! Author of the infamous

Dianetics!” Delbert Cobb cleared his throat. “Jack Parsons is ticked off about how life has dealt him some crushing blows so what does he do? Don’t answer. He invokes the goddess, Babalon, to Earth! Sara, his former wife’s sister, and Hubbard take all of his savings.”

“This is while he was on the Contrarian Council of Nine?” For a brief moment, Donovan thought he might be dreaming. *What the fuck is this shit?* he asked himself. *I knew life outside my bubble was nuts, but geeeeeeeze!* “Couldn’t you protect him?”

“That’s the beauty of freedom, Donovan!” Delbert believed excess pride was bad for the group but he felt a tinge of it. “The Scoundrels? They are led by a strict stratified oligarchy. You do as the leadership says or you hit the road. Us? We don’t like members bashing one another but we don’t tell them to stop unless they’re on the verge of permanently traumatizing someone else.” Delbert looked out the rear window. The kids had stopped their food fight and were now joined in hands and running along the shore line. “Jack Parsons is now broke. You can’t help someone unless they want to help themselves, right? I can’t decide for him what to do next. He’s a mess. He turns to the Israelis and tries to help them with their rocket system. This is when McCarthyism was rampant. He had already been associated with Marxists. He was a target. Never look on the surface, though. He was accused of espionage. His last year with the Contrarians was 1950. In 1952, he was only thirty-seven years old. Had his whole life in front of him. He was killed.”

“Wow! The Scoundrels?” Donovan was genuinely shocked at the story’s end.

“Yes!” his father said. Delbert fought the swelling of a sad emotion. “Yep! They got him!”

“He was suicided.” Horace finally decided to jump in. “It was a home explosion. Cops actually ruled it as an accident but this guy was a trained rocket scientist. *He defined what rocket science would be.* He had enemies. We all have enemies. They blew him up.” Now that he had the floor, Horace Streets decided it was time to spill the beans. “By now, you know I’m in the Central Intelligence Agency. So is Cornelius Stuart who was with us back in Anguilla. The Element didn’t take to him. You’ve been prepped about the Element? We had a list of items we wanted Preston and Clint to discuss with you.” Horace felt assured that Donovan understood enough. “The Element didn’t take to Cornelius. He serves a different role in the CIA than I do. He is very military-minded. Wants to blow everything up with tanks!” Horace chuckled. “You think I’m exaggerating! I’m not!” Horace tried to compose himself. “We’ve all done drugs here. You? You smoked weed with Preston on the night that he told you about your nomination for the Council. We knew this. I cut no corners. So when you got to Yucatán, the next logical step for a psychedelic was ayahuasca. We could’ve gone with a few others instead, but ayahuasca it was. And you tripped. And you contemplated what the Universe might be. And you wondered what your place is in the grand scheme of things.”

“Cornelius? He’s never done ayahuasca, has he?” Donovan wondered.

“I was born in 1949. That was John Hyde’s last year on the Nine.” Horace avoided Donovan’s question for the moment. “He is my godfather from baptism. *Catholic Church.* I heard also that you and Preston were wondering if I was Japanese. The walls have ears, you know?” He smiled. “John Hyde wiggled out really bad about what his nominee, Jack Parsons, was going through. You’ll see this many times in your life. Friends grow apart. One becomes overly wild so the other becomes ultra-

conservative. *They get scared.* John Hyde's family wasn't too religious but they went on Easter egg hunts when the time was appropriate and they'd go to Midnight Mass during Christmas. This is why they got along with the Kennedys. During John's stint on the Nine, he tried to mend fences between the United States and Japan. My father was a US soldier and my mother was from Okinawa." Horace looked outside the rear window. His daughter, Vivian, was playing tag and looked to be enjoying herself. "I don't tell my kids anything. It's a treacherous life. They shouldn't know the things I know. Little Vivian thinks we're in Hawaii right now. That's what I told her." Horace became choked up. He believed drinking horchata would help him speak. "The Vatican and the Red Cross paved the way for Adolf Hitler to be in South America. What am I to do? They gave him a treasure map to keep him busy. Before he got sick and was brought to Eotwawki, that's what he was doing. Even at the age of ninety-five, he's ploughing around looking for gold bars. He believes South American countries literally hid their gold underground when they believed Americans would come looking for it." Horace realized he had strayed off the subject. "Cornelius? Ayahuasca? He joined the Contrarians in 1964. Clean cut guy and a reflection of times he lived in. JFK had just been assassinated. He had never smoked pot and he wasn't a heavy drinker. When they hazed him, they gave him marijuana. Didn't do much. The Element stayed away from him." Horace watched the kids play outside. "My daughter is shy sometimes. She'll dance like a ballerina for some people. Others? I bring 'em over and she hides in her room. I don't know why but I know the Element is like this. You had smoked pot, a mild hallucinogenic, so we all figured you're ready for the next step. You took a strong hallucinogenic and you did well." Horace spilled the beans the best he could. "We would send you on an eighteen-day sailing trip right now. Tristan Da Cunha is an archipelago two thousand miles east of Argentina. No airports. Closest continent is fifteen hundred miles to South Africa. Three hundred people live there. You've heard of Skylab? Those astronauts were only a hundred and fifty miles above Earth's surface! That means if you were at Tristan Da Cunha in the mid-seventies, you were closer to men in orbit than you were to anyone on Earth, at least when they were over head."

"That's putting things in perspective!" Donovan pondered an eighteen-day sailing trip. "So it's not a penalty? You're not treating people like they failed a test."

"With me? No. You're not ready for the next step. I'm not saying you, specifically. I mean Cornelius and people like him. The Element hid itself from him. Quite rare for a Contrarian. I began my stint in 1969, the Summer of Love. Cornelius Stuart was the Decider the year before in sixty-eight and he didn't do well. I wouldn't wish for his circumstance. Vietnam was going on, hippies were burning their bras in the streets, and America was divided. I not only smoked pot, I dropped many tabs of LSD. Fabian Lynch was in his second year and, as fate would have it, would wind up heading one of the world's top pharmaceutical firms in the world. In many ways, I was one of his first true guinea pigs. We would go to these islands and talk to the natives. We'd go into the rainforest. I had done the LSD so they figured I was ready for the hardest stuff out there. In a lot of ways, the way you were hazed was refined from experiments they did on me."

"Thank you?" It was a question. Donovan was glad to be admitted but didn't like the idea of his trousers being pulled down during the process.

"Vivian is my world. My son? James? He's much older, starting to show signs of teen rebellion, and he's his own person. I almost think he's ready to go out into the

world and live on his own at the young age of thirteen! Vivian? I have to protect her from what I know. Have you heard of Rex84? It's short for Readiness Excercise 1984."

"No. Have not," Donovan said.

"They're getting ready. The US military has developed plans for concentration camps in America! Here we are somehow aiming to allow Adolf Hitler to die with a shred of dignity. In our grade school history text books back in the States, we're teaching kids that he's the most vile, evil person that ever lived. And? We teach them that our leaders are practical saints! Who doesn't do that, though? All the while, I'm in the Central Intelligence Agency and I'm tipped off about Rex84. The end of the innocence. Cornelius Stuart has volunteered to help implement it. He's been tasked with finding mock locations for camps. Closed schools, unused warehouses, decommissioned train stations. Where would the United States send folks during a mass insurrection? Do I tell my kids this? Even if I had clearance to do so?" Horace felt the coming of heartburn. "This is a special year, 1984. Some of it is because of Orwell and his book. A good business man can plan five years into the future. The Scoundrels and Contrarians are the elite of the world's minds. Our plans go fifteen, twenty-five, fifty, a hundred years! This Rex84 was seen coming long, long ago! Orwell was tipping people off! Me? I'm in the arts! I love the arts! This brick building was my idea. I have a makeshift museum on the second floor and we can check it out when we're done here. Andy Warhol? I'm a big fan of him! Most people don't understand what true art is about!" Horace's speaking style was usually to beat around the bush in order to make a point. Every now and then, he would hit the nail on the head. "The Twin Towers? They were made to be destroyed. The World Trade Center? You've seen that pair of skyscrapers in New York City? We'll go upstairs and look at the album cover of Supertramp's *Breakfast In America*. I can show you signs. The disco group called the Trammmps have a music video for *Disco Inferno* and I could show you the signs there as well. You can't take any one of these indicators in isolation and know it. You look at patterns. Certain intel. You look at the direction everything is pointing at." Horace Streets felt nuts when he discussed his more intuitive subjects. "We are Contrarians and sometimes Scoundrels defect. They want to join our group. They leak things."

"I can't pretend to understand this all but I trust you." Donovan assured Horace that he didn't believe he was off his rocker. "It's a hit and miss world, isn't it dad?" Delbert didn't answer.

"I'm half Japanese, as I've said. My mother taught me about the arts when I was a child. The Japanese have a different perspective on painting than traditional Westerners. They paint *between* the leaves before they paint the leaf, for example. And the engineers? They design the walking paths before they design the buildings built around them. Westerners map their houses different. They think first of their street name and number. In Japan? The streets don't have names at all. The neighborhoods do! That's how they get from here to there. The *machi*. The subdivisions. My perspective on life is unique compared to those I've grown up around."

Donovan felt anxious. He wanted to get on with his quest. "You're saying you're different and that's what makes us all strong. *Diversity*. The vibe I've had about the Contrarians has always been the same, strength in diversity. My dad let me know as a kid but he told me there would be things I'd have to wait for. This junk, I suppose. You're going to protect your daughter from all the garbage we go through. I admire you. I think she'll miss out, but it's a tough planet we live on."

“The next sequence begins in 1999, Donovan,” Horace explained.

This is ominous, Donovan thought.

“Two thousand zero zero, party over, out of time!” Horace said. “The Scoundrels are shutting everything down! This feeling of vertigo you have right now? It’ll go away over the years but you need to remember this moment in time! When you feel this way, it’s happening again. These are special years! They are landmarks. This is the first week of 1984 and 1999 is the next important time marker. We have agents that sort the real stuff from the hype. After that, it will be 2012 under the auspice of a Mayan prophesy. Then in 2029, an asteroid named Apophis will make a close brush with Earth. Doesn’t matter if scientists know it won’t make contact. Pay attention to the frenzy, though. The elite powers will take advantage of the hysteria. They will feed the flames. They will re-position themselves. They will make excuses to suppress rights and steal everyone’s wealth. That’s the way it’s always been.”

“Thank you, sir!” Donovan Cobb was genuinely grateful.

“Hey, son!” Delbert sensed that he might not see Donovan for quite a while. “This might be out of the blue and maybe a little blunt. Our family? We are not Cobbs. I mean, we are but your great-grandfather was a first-generation American. His father was born in Bremen, Germany in 1868. Came to America when he was twelve. When the family naturalized, they changed the family name. Your great-great-grandfather was Franz Kobec.”

“Thanks, dad!” Donovan felt overwhelmed.

Just then, a man barged through the door. “Der alte Mann schläft.” It was John Leonard, a Broadway actor and close pal of Hale Bancroft’s. “Hello, Donovan! Great to meet you! Your father has shown me many family photos!”

“Hello!” Donovan got to his feet to shake hands but John Leonard hugged him instead.

“Versteht er deutsch?” John asked Delbert.

“No. I didn’t teach him,” Delbert answered. “Sollten wir morgen abreisen?” he asked.

“Morgen früh ist gut,” John said. He turned his attention to Donovan. He put his arm around his shoulder and led him out of the room. “I apologize for the language barrier. Long term, it makes no difference.” The earlier gloom was gone. The Sun was beating down hard. “I’m a great friend of Hale’s. I’m a classically trained thespian and I’ve done my share of live Shakespeare. John Leonard is the name. My favorite roles delve in psychiatry. I have played both Sigmund Freud and his protégé, Carl Jung. I have read Erikson, Piaget and Pavlov extensively. I have also read fringe material. Timothy Leary, Mike Barnsworth, Henry Slade, Robert Hare, Edgar Cayce and so on. What we have going on here is highly unusual!” John Leonard clamped his hands onto Donovan’s shoulder’s. “I don’t have so much as one college unit completed. I have studied for roles and have become an expert in the ways of the mind. *The Contrarians trust me*. They wouldn’t touch an accredited PhD psychiatrist with a ten-foot pole. Why? They employ them as weapons! They discredit people and make them feel crazy when they’re perfectly sane.”

“Okay. Sir? I’ve been through some zany episodes over these past few days. Am I supposed to tell you about my mother? Are you going to tell me about anal or oral fixations I might still have that linger from childhood behaviors?” Donovan was almost joking. He could sense that there was something useful that John Leonard was about to

tell him. “What is it?”

Most Contrarians were content to lurk in the shadows. Being an actor, John felt drawn into vanity more than most. “I auditioned for *Ryan’s Hope* a couple of months ago. You ever hear of that? The morning soap opera? I was going to play the role of Fritz Holmstrom, an anti-cult deprogramming specialist. Do you have any idea what’s going on here?”

“We’re on the verge,” Donovan answered. “We know we’re close to something great or something devastating. I can feel it in my bones that we’re about to meet our makers. We don’t know who they are, though. Evil? Benevolent? My best friend in the world is Preston, Hale’s son. We talk about this all night. Nuclear war, the formation of the Universe, why women pick you out when you least need them. We talk about everything.”

“Yes. You’re on to something. I’m here to give Contrarians objectivity. The best I can. I’m here to tell them why they feel collective comfort or rage. I’m here to explain why they don’t feel the need to throw Adolf Hitler into the Caribbean waters. Many ordinary people would do that if they were plopped here out of a teleportation door.” The laughter of children could be heard from the other side of the brick building. “These guys want to be normal.” He let that set in. “Just not all the time.”

“I’m here to see the old man.” In Donovan’s gut, he could feel something acidic. “I’m as ready as I’ll ever be.”

They walked toward the straw hut. “From Berlin, he got to Tonder, Denmark. Came back to Germany, Travemunde. Then Reus, Spain then the Canary Islands then eventually Mar Del Plata, Argentina.” When they reached the entrance, John Leonard stopped. “April of 1945, there were eleven Soviet soldiers involved in the burial of the burnt remains of the bodies allegedly belonging to Eva Braun and Adolf Hitler. Most to them were shot to death fighting over the next couple of days. A couple survived and one of them wound up in a Siberian gulag where Stalin supposedly had him seized to return to the burial site. That’s how we got the bones. The story of Adolf’s death is way too far-fetched to believe.”

John Leonard was almost ready to open the door but added, “Years ago, I was staying in Asunción, Paraguay. Met a guy from *Proctor and Gamble*. That’s when I had my first real contact. We hear so much about last hurrahs. This is your first hurrah. Whatever’s in your head, you need to throw it out. Preconceived notions? Clear it out.” He gave it a couple of seconds then pushed the door open.

An old man was sleeping peacefully across the room.

It looks like Hitler, Donovan thought. *I couldn’t tell any difference.* Seated near him was a large, black lady. *That must be Cutinga.* She turned her attention from the sleeping man to Donovan but didn’t say a word. After a few seconds, she gazed outside of the hut’s far window. *He looks tranquil*, Donovan observed. *If I had to bet my life, I would say it was him.*

On a bamboo nightstand, there was a half-eaten mango and a dimly-lit lantern.

“I’ll give you a minute to let this sink in,” John told Donovan. He walked back toward the brick building.

Donovan stood there. He stared. He didn’t want to stay too long. He wished he could be a fly on the wall. Staying too long could change the vibration in the room. It could have a ripple effect and dampen the island’s mood. Then the world’s. It could become hectic. It could become strange. It could become unwelcoming *I have maybe*

ten seconds, Donovan thought. *I need to let this sink in. Is it really him? I can't be haunted with doubts the rest of my life.* He let a few seconds pass. *It's him. I know it is.* He watched his breathing. *This is plenty good for me.* He watched the lady seated near him. *If she turns around again, I'll smile or at least wave.* A few seconds passed and he tore himself away. He exited the hut.

The children that had been playing on the far end of the brick building were now running around the front near its front door. One of them was talking to John Leonard, "I want to go kayaking again! Please, please!"

"We can do some snorkeling later!" he told the tike. He took his two front fingers and affixed them to the kid's face. "I got your nose!" The kid laughed.

Donovan was at a loss. *Where do I go from here? What does a person do when their reality is blown?* He watched the kids running around, tagging each other, and scurrying every which way. *What a blessing it would be to be that age again. Not a care in the world.* Donovan headed toward the building but wasn't sure what to say once inside.

When he opened the door, there was a lady standing in front of him, waiting. "What did you think?" she asked. Her hair was pale blonde, almost white. Short curls. High cheeks.

Donovan recognized her. "You cut your hair, permed and dyed it!" It was Thelma Rhett, the one who grilled the geek during initiation. "Where did you come from?"

"I was upstairs. I like your style. I watched you in Yucatán. Quite impressive. Handled yourself well." She played with her curls. "I change a lot. Maybe next week I'm a redhead."

"What do you mean? I was drugged but I know you weren't there. I would've remembered!" Donovan scratched his head. His dad and the rest of the men were seated at the table behind Thelma.

"Minnie Mouse? Do you remember Minnie Mouse?" She pirouetted. "I'm quite the performer, aren't I? Did you believe it was the real Minnie Mouse from the cartoons?" She laughed. "Have you not heard of costumes?"

"Pardon me. I've yet to understand the subtle nuances of this eclectic organization." Donovan walked to where his father was. "Where do we go from here?"

"Thelma inherited her father's toy company. She has a brilliant mind and developed this game." In the middle of the table, there was an open box. "It's about rock stars. Remember Hasbro's *Game of Life* we used to play as a family? *Candyland*? *Chutes and Ladders*? Sit down!" Delbert felt giddy and pulled items out of the box. A felt game board. Mock heroine needles. Guitar picks. Backstage passes. Concert wrist bands. Different colored spiral forty-five RPM snap adapters. *Blue, white, black, green, yellow and red.* Miniature Grammy awards. "This game takes the best elements of the things we used to play, combines them, and gives them a rock 'n' roll attitude!" He was happy. "It's a drinking game. We have shots of tequila."

"Wow! I can go for this!" Donovan forgot all about the mysterious sleeping man in the hut. "Are we test-marketing? Is this going to the stores?" He sat near Horace Streets.

Thelma Rhett came and sat to Donovan's left. "I hated my father. That's no secret. He was quite puritan. Yes, he ran a successful company but he lost touch. Maybe he was never in touch to begin with. His games had morals. That's why we

never reached the level of Hasbro or Mattel. People don't like to be preached to. Circus Echelon Toys were made for simple children. They never strayed into anything controversial. *They weren't edgy*. And Atherton Games? Completely sugar-coated! The Brady Bunch of board games! Sherwood Schwartz had a great opportunity to interject issues of the Vietnam War into the series but passed it! My game takes the riffraff into account! It gives a bigger picture of life than anything out there! Life has potholes and so do the things I produce!" She poured shots for everyone. "It's a six-player game and there are eight of us here. Two of you are going to have to sit out or share."

Barry Pierce, the lumber tycoon, said that he'd take the shot of tequila then head upstairs for rest. On the top floor, there were stiff bunk beds. Nothing fancy. Connor Milton took a shot and joined him.

Delbert Cobb explained the game to his son. "You start the game by choosing from one of three life predicaments. You're born dirt poor as the child of rock 'n' roll groupies on the back of a tour bus; you're born into some nondescript middle-class suburban family; or you're born with a silver spoon in your mouth and raised in parochial schools. You roll the dice and you try to attain talent and connections. Obviously, you want to avoid rock's pitfalls. *The STDs, psychotic stalkers, bad agents, killer drugs, financial ruin, bad press.*"

"What about mental illness?" Donovan asked. "Peter Green. Syd Barrett. Sid Vicious. It's an industry that makes you snap!"

Thelma was the same age as Donovan, both born in 1960. She was starting to become romantically attracted to him. "We have that covered, lover boy." She examined the stubble on his face and wanted to rub against it with her cheek. She held off. "We have all sorts of mental illnesses covered! Psychotic vanity, delusions of grandeur, sexual neurosis, extreme mania, depression, apathy, Tourettes, and the list goes on!" She put her hand on Donovan's thigh. "John Leonard talked to you outside? Did he tell you he's a TV shrink?"

"He said he likes Broadway but didn't make it on to *Ryan's Hope*." Donovan put his hand over Thelma's. None of the rest of the group took notice.

"Scopaesthesia is when you think you're being watched even when no one else is around. I like that as a mental problem! Cotard delusion is when you think you're a dead person. Stendhal syndrome happens when a person freaks out at seeing amazing art! The Florence Nightingale effect happens when a nurse falls in love with her patient! Do you know the difference between neurosis and a syndrome?" Thelma thought about the Florence Nightingale effect. She was prone to it and mildly aware of her patterns. She loved people like Donovan. He was struggling. He was a strong man but in a new situation. He was changing. It was a metamorphosis like a caterpillar turning into a butterfly. "Obsession" by Animotion was Thelma's favorite song. *Like a butterfly, a wild butterfly... I will collect you and capture you*, she sang in her mind.

"No, I don't. I know apathy, though. I've seen it, almost touched it myself. I have my own term for it. *Charlie Brown Syndrome*. You know how Lucy always pulls the football from him before he tries to kick it? Well? I've had it happen. I've been in love." Donovan removed Thelma's hand from his thigh. "You try and try and try again. One day, you give up. But? You still think maybe, just maybe, you'll get to kick the ball."

Thelma scooted a couple of inches toward Donovan. "Neurosis is individual.

It's when your brain is breaking down. Everyone else is fine, though. A syndrome? Something happened to the world around you. The craziness seeps in. In 1973, there was a bank robbery in Stockholm, Sweden. There were hostages and they started to like their captors! I mean really, really like them! They defended them! They wouldn't testify against the robbers in court! Ergo, we have the term Stockholm Syndrome. It's a collective craziness, you understand?" Thelma took the game felt and spread it across the table. "I know mental illness in that particular way. Beatlemania was a collective mental illness, you know?"

Donovan laughed. "You're joking!" He was starting to have his own romantic feelings toward Thelma. When he first saw her, she had dark hair. *Bangs*. He liked her bangs.

Thelma passed out the game pieces. Instead of irons, thimbles, hats, cars and shoes, there were little rock stars. Different poses, different instruments. A guitar, drum sticks, microphone, keyboard, saxophone and piano. "Do you know the difference between hypochondria and Munchausen syndrome? A hypochondriac believes he is really sick when he is not. On the other hand, someone with Munchausen syndrome knows he is not sick. This person needs attention, though, and is pretending to be sick." She set cards onto the felt in their appropriate places. "When you get a card that says to snort a line of cocaine or inject heroine, don't do it. Take a shot of tequila."

"And weed? Is that a shot of tequila as well?"

"Yes. Anything drug related, take a shot." Thelma spent a couple of minutes explaining the game to everyone. You had to receive five RPM snap adaptors to show you had reached mastery of your instrument. Once you reached mastery, you had to collect five backstage passes by performing at different kick ass small venues: CBGB's in New York; the House of Blues in Chicago; the Whisky a Go Go, the Roxy, and Gazzari's in Hollywood. Then you had to collect five Grammys by performing raving stadium shows around the country. Unwanted pregnancies, overzealous paparazzi and drug overdoses could set things back a bit before the ultimate goal: Retiring with five multi-platinum records in lovely Beverly Hills. Once the game began, the others chatted amongst themselves while Thelma and Donovan continued their conversation. Thelma said, "Capgras delusion is when a person believes a loved-one has been replaced by an identical-looking imposter! Isn't that neat? Let's say you believed you saw Adolf Hitler sleeping in the hut outside, right? But it was really a body double this whole time! Ha ha, ha! Wouldn't that be funny?!"

"Shut up, Thelma!" Donovan had taken a couple of shots of tequila even though the playing cards hadn't instructed him to do so yet. "You're trying to make me crazy, aren't you?" He smirked.

"That would be gaslighting! We do that here! The Contrarians are quite good at it! The Scoundrels? They like to rely on bombs and bullets! They push people around. Quite effective, but only for a limited time. *People run from them, if you haven't noticed*. We are in the 'psychological fuck' category as it pertains to our arsenal. Do you know that you can shoot an enraged person and, if he isn't mortally wounded, he will still come after you! But crazy? You fuck with a person's mind good enough and they feel it until death. *Never, ever, ever, ever, ever screw with a legitimately crazy person!* Not someone with talent, at least!" It was Thelma's turn so she rolled the dice and moved her drummer game piece. "Gaslighting comes from a movie called *Gaslight*. Nineteen-forties, Ingrid Bergman, Joseph Cotton. The husband drove his wife to insanity on purpose!"

“That’s devious!” Donovan rolled and moved his guitar game piece. “Fucked up! I would hate to be driven insane!”

Thelma returned her hand to Donovan’s thigh and gently rubbed. “The opposite of Capgras delusion is Fregoli delusion. Paranoia of sorts. It’s when you believe a loved-one is multiple people. You might go to the butcher, for example, and believe he’s your favorite uncle! Then you go to the bank and you believe the manager is that same favorite uncle! Then you pick up pizza on the way back and the cashier is that same favorite uncle!” She laughed and turned to Hale Bancroft. “Hale? Have you told Donovan about your experiments?”

Hale Bancroft was a great movie producer. He didn’t shy from lowbrow art. His father was Walden Bancroft who was eleven-years-old when Universal Studios opened. He became involved in cinema as a youngster and helped expand the Hollywood lot. Walden did his time on the Council of Nine from 1923 until 1931. He became friends with Hatcher Cobb, Donovan’s grandfather. Hatcher was the only Contrarian to attend the Bretton Woods meeting in July of 1944 which created the International Monetary Fund. Bigwigs from around the planet got together at the Mount Washington Hotel in New Hampshire and determined that the United States dollar ought to become the world’s default reserve currency. Walden Bancroft stayed at the Washington Hotel with Hatcher Cobb as his guest. They did more than discuss international monetary policy. They discussed becoming the greatest movie producers anywhere around. Hatcher did not have the vision as an artist as much as Walden but he was good with the accounting ledger. He agreed to finance Bancroft Marconi Entertainment. He helped build a modest production studio in Santa Barbara, California. He never screwed with the process. He let Walden take full reins and choose all the projects. He was there to sign the checks and to mingle with an interesting crowd. “My experiments?” Hale Bancroft was startled. “Oh! You’re talking about what we did with actors during the sixties!” He turned to Donovan. “The year after I left the Council of Nine, your father Delbert joined. That was 1955. We had our meeting in Cairns, as we always do every fifth year, and grandpa Walden was out swimming. He had got to know Jack LaLanne and wanted to show how fit he was! He’s out there splashing around and quite proud of himself—we *sadly have this on film*—and out of nowhere, a great white shark comes and bites into his side! How horrific! All the kids in the shallow end run for the shore and grandpa Walden starts slamming the water with his arms flailing! Didn’t last another minute. One of the most tragic moments in Contrarian history.”

“Get on with the experiments,” Thelma urged.

“Yeah. Right! So I’m thirty years old and now I’m running my dad’s production company. I had great ambitions! I figured I could buy MGM or one of the competing studios! But? I never had the penchant for making the true blockbuster. *Colossal Kathleen* was the first movie I produced all on my own. That was 1959. Drive ins were the rage and I didn’t take it too seriously. I gave the teenagers what they wanted to see. I regret that, in a way. They liked mindless movies about rock music, scantily dressed women, and space aliens! Kathleen, in my story, was given two potions by a martian. One was a love potion so she could win over her high school’s football team captain, and the other one was for growth. Her dad was about to lose his farm. So you can guess she mixed the potions up, right?”

“Get on with it, Hale!” Thelma prodded, “You’re going to lose him!”

“Okay. We did experiments. Just like Thelma said. Intentional experiments.

These came in sixties. I had enemies. *The Contrarians had enemies*. The experiments weren't meant to do any permanent harm. We took actors—ones that didn't make the cuts to be in the movies—and we used them in social situations. *Induced psychosis. Gaslighting. Fucking with people.*" Hale was poked by Horace. It was his turn to roll so he did. After moving his saxophone piece, "We had twins and triplets that would audition. I have one of the best casting agencies in Los Angeles today, by the way. We'd take these twins and triplets and we'd put them in different locations around the city. The Scoundrels had kids that wanted to be in the movies but we couldn't let them. They were there as moles even if they didn't know it or realize it so we'd make the experience as uncomfortable as possible. We owned apartments they stayed in. We'd have one triplet be the apartment manager, another would operate the A&W Root Beer store on the corner, and another would pop up at random destinations further along."

"Sounds like a long way to go to make a small point," Donovan commented. "Did it work? Inducing Fregoli delusion?"

"Do you believe tight rope walking is difficult?" Hale asked. "I mean, you probably haven't tried it, but do you believe professionals find it difficult?"

"They do it with such grace! I'd imagine it's acquired. Nerves of steel. Acquired." Donovan found himself now holding Thelma's hand. She used her index finger to gently stroke his palm.

"Right! You don't wake up one day and say, 'I'm going walk on a rope across the Grand Canyon!' No, you learn to walk on short plank over foot-high bricks. Weeks later, you're walking on a two-by-four ten feet off the ground. And you work your way up until you're fifty feet in the air. Same as us!" Hale realized he was holding up the game. He had to draw a card which claimed his booking agent died so he developed a drinking problem. He had to take a shot of tequila as the result. After sucking on a lime wedge he said, "By the end of the sixties, Rod Serling, Fabian and Horace were on the Council."

Fabian Lynch had kept quiet for most of the time since Donovan arrived at Eotwawki. He said, "I can attest for these things. I was one of the biggest LSD producers in California and I was delving into other psychedelics. Horace, here, would tell me how to use them. Which way to direct it all."

"We tried to get Timothy Leary to join us but he wouldn't have any part of it," Horace added. "I think he would've been a fantastic Contrarian."

Hale wrapped up his story. "I designed movie sets. One percent of anything I worked on made it into the movies. The scripts, the miniatures, the actors. They were all employed for personal reasons. We had the money to blow. We had contacts in the CIA. Operation Mockingbird was going on. Agents were infiltrating newspaper publishers and movie producers. We had our own thing going on and in our best day, we learned to acquire intelligence better than the official CIA. Keep in mind, this is the late sixties now and everyone is stoned out of their minds. One project or operation would overlap with another. MK-Ultra was going on and we learned techniques of mind bending. And we taught some of our own techniques back to our contacts. This is all leading up to the Stargate Project in 1978! *Remote viewing*. We had guys doing ayahuasca and other psychedelics! That same stuff you tried in Yucatán! And these guys could see things on the other side of the world! Before satellites, verifying this phenomenon was impossible. They could see with clarity into an agent's room in Moscow, for example. They could draw things with precision. Places they've never been. And that's what you're

becoming. A seer.”

Donovan laughed. “I sure hope so!” He wasn’t sure if Hale was serious.

“Tell him about the monks,” Thelma said.

“It’s not all about drugs, Donovan.” Hale Bancroft thought about his son. He missed him and wished he was with the group. Hale was sure that Preston was hitting it off with Tabitha, his girlfriend. “We did studies with Buddhist monks who’d meditated around the Himalayas for most of their lives. They had a similar ability. Nuns, too. Not all, but we’ve come across many who could see into far distances.”

“And this is because the Element? I talked with Clint Roth on the way over here. He said the Contrarians have a deity that follows them around. *The Element*.” Donovan waited for an answer.

“We have months to talk about it all. I just wanted to let you know about scopæsthesia. It’s just like Thelma said. You will feel like you’re being watched even when no one is in the room. It was vital that we gave you ayahuasca when we did. You had visions and you perceived some of the telekinetic properties we’re capable of. The best CIA agent is like Horace, here, and comes out to gain intelligence on his own. The worst of them sit in their Washington, DC offices most of their lives. They learn exclusively through text books. They do their remote viewing and think they’re helping out. In actuality, they wig everyone out really bad! Fuckers like you and me!”

“John Leonard mentioned something like this when we stepped out before I went into the hut. It sounds like a bunch of psychological warfare.” Donovan believed the rock ‘n’ roll board game was a great touch. He wanted to get to know Thelma a little more.

“Let’s take surveillance techniques, for example,” Hale said. “Federal agents are trained to follow people discreetly. In theory, you follow someone you suspect of wrongdoing to find out if your suspicions are correct. In theory, they never even know they were watched. I’ve been involved in movie production for a while now. The best action plots involve protagonists when they realize they’ve been tailed. You get all these high speed car chases and the movie goes love it. Well? It’s a weapon. In real life, it’s a psychological weapon that the Scoundrels use in DC. We co-exist with the fuckers. It doesn’t mean we like it. They are deliberately heavy-handed and reckless. *They want you to know you’re being followed*. They get off on it. Perverted. They hate us. I had the pleasure of riding a bike with Evel Knievel a few years ago before his jump in Mexico. The typical Soundrel is a square. He does not take any real chances. He would not be caught swimming in Australian shark-infested waters. He would not jump into a water tank wearing chains, locks and a straitjacket. He would not jump three school busses like I did! Evel Knievel gave me the courage! I faced my fear and I tasted true liberation!”

“Good for you!” Donovan took the tequila bottle and poured everyone a shot. “We should toast to conquering our fears!”

A few seconds later, they all did a shot together. “When you get scopæsthesia, Donovan, it’s because they are watching. They have other methods, of course, but they really like that one. I’m telling you so you don’t feel crazy when it happens.”

“Thank you, Hale!” He remembered the night being in Hale’s Hollywood Hills home before he had taken off to live in France. “*If the evil spirit arms the tiger with claws, Brahman provided wings for the dove*” He remembered talking about the Universe and the movie, Vanishing Point. He had been friends with Hale’s son, Preston,

for quite some time but he had never talked to Hale this deeply or this much during all those years.

"You guys are good kids!" Hale said. "I hope you win!" He thought about the Scoundrels. "We'll have to battle them at some point. Maybe 2000? Maybe 2012? Who knows?"

"This town ain't big enough for the two of us!" Donovan imitated John Wayne the best he could. He laughed heartily and felt great to be alive.

It wasn't that Donovan felt overshadowed by his father. *He didn't*. He grew up in a strange environment. In some ways, he believed it must be how the middle goat felt in the *Three Billy Goats Gruff*. The Contrarians were a powerful group. They didn't seek ultimate power, though. They generally believed it was too ruthless and it stole dignity. Anyone needing a real international hitman was going to turn to the Scoundrels first. They had the physical weapons and they had a strange type of cunning. *This is the way life was supposed to turn out*, Donovan thought. He was upstairs laying next to Thelma Rhett. *I'm supposed to realize certain things but, at the same time, no one really knows how things are going to turn out*. The board game was over and Thelma was asleep. *What am I doing next to this lady?* he wondered. The children were taken away on the yacht, *Zeppelin*, to the island of Saint Vincent. They were part of a unique education program that many Contrarian children went through. It was called *Epsilon University*. It focused on hands-on learning. Saint Vincent had a volcano the children would visit. Some of them were supposedly home schooled but *Epsilon University* was the reality. To call it "home schooling" was a heavy misnomer because the travelling was intensive. Some Contrarian parents only involved their children during summer and winter breaks. Horace Streets was like this with his son, James, and now with his daughter, Vivian. He took off to Saint Vincent with the kids.

Thelma Rhett was sleeping peacefully but Donovan Cobb was wide awake. He had intimacy issues. Having grown up in a peculiar setting, he developed peculiar thoughts. He believed he was crazy sometimes but most of the time, he believed he was sane and simply living in a crazy world. He wanted to wake Thelma and talk about life. Where was everything going? Not physically. *Psychologically*. He knew they would head to Venezuela the next day on the *Lucky Dragon 6*, a vessel too large to be called a yacht but too small to be classified as a cruise liner. They would skirt around South America until they reached the Falklands. There was plenty of sleeping space on the *Lucky Dragon 6* and sometimes they would sleep while traveling on sea. Once in a while, they would take refuge in a coastal city. There were plans to slink by Snake Island, uninhabited and full of slithering creatures not far from Rio de Janeiro. Before the group wrapped up for the night, Connor Milton told them a story about a two-hundred-foot snake found in the Congo. There were legends of five-hundred-foot anacondas wriggling around the Amazon rivers. Borneo's Baleh River had a hundred-foot Nabu waddling through it. Officially, the Guinness Book of World Records claimed the longest snake was about thirty-two feet. That was captivity, though. Connor explained the wild disparity between "official records" meant for the public in the USA and "unofficial records" of thrill seekers and folks who lived in feral lands.

It wasn't so much a romantic feeling Donovan felt toward Thelma. She was the sea floor and the emotion he felt was the thick chain which anchored itself to her heart. Life became turbulent and wasn't slowing down. He felt the urge to cling to her for sanity's sake. It was a thrill. He wanted stability. She provided parameters that most

people didn't.

The next night, he was on the Lucky Dragon 6 headed toward Caracas. He decided to start a journal.

The past few days have been crazy. I'm on an ocean liner but it's not huge by industry standards. This past March, I was talking to my best friend in the world, Preston. We were talking about all kinds of things. He brought out a few d-ring binders that his father left behind. There were all kinds of notes about movies. Splash. That was one. It was funny because he made a point to leave out the best information when it was made for a movie. I spent time with him while on the island, Eotwawki. I learned the reasons. It doesn't make money. People don't want to know what is actual. They want to watch a movie that is believable and exciting. They don't want to think too hard. Not the average American.

I did the math. The common person watches at least four hours of TV every day. That's about thirty hours per week, rounded off, and at least a hundred every month which makes it at least a thousand a year. Over ten years, you've watched ten thousand hours of programming. Preston told me never to get subsumed in it. More than a quarter of what's on TV is advertisements. Over ten years, you've watched twenty-five hundred hours of ads. They play on you. TV can be a supplement but not a substitute for life. That's on a good day.

I hit it off really well with Thelma Rhett. I hated her when I first met her during my initiation this past November. Pretentious dyke. That's how she came across. Driven to hate men. All men. No matter how much you try, you're never going to make her happy. She has a soft side, though. You have to be lucky to see it. Her father was quite Puritan. She says it over and over. He died and left her the toy company. Before he died, he started making Dungeons and Dragons figurines. Thelma believes he might've died early by betraying his earlier beliefs. He was friends with the Hanna-Barbera guys and made a killing from Jetsons and Flintstones figurines. Thelma? Well, she has connections with all these third world manufacturers. Plastics, electronics, paper. She knows where she's going with the company. Dildos. This is no joke! Adult toys. Blow up dolls. That sort of thing. I slept with her last night on a bunk. Didn't touch each other, really. We kissed a few times but it was junior high kind of stuff. She thinks that if she can implement all of her ideas, profits will skyrocket. She was never into "lame toys" as she put it.

Hale Bancroft, Preston's father, had read Nicomachean Ethics while at college, Brown University. Aristotle wrote about Politics, Rhetoric, Art and more. They were consumed with absolutism, at a time. When the Illuminati formed in the eighteenth century, they believed they could find perfect answers. The problem is that corruption sets in. People lose focus, collectively. People forget why they're part of an organization, especially ones that are secret and rely on symbolism to pass along important information. The Contrarians were an answer to the Establishment at the time. Hale wrote his notes with many capital letters. Aristotle explained that Wisdom, Goodness and Justice when written with capitals were the epitome and essence of what the word was. You can see a blue jay land on a tree but when you're talking about Lloyd Moseby who plays for a professional baseball team in Toronto, you're talking about a Blue Jay. You can be a scoundrel by selling imitation Rolex watches in back alleys of New York and you can be a Scoundrel, capital S, by being part of the ruling elite. These are the Rothschilds and Rockefellers who rose to power without remorse. We are the

Contrarians, capital C. We are the most powerful thing out there that could slow the machine that devours the human spirit.

Hale Bancroft, when he was in college, bought himself an alphabetized address book. He didn't store names and numbers in there. He created a personal glossary inspired by Abrose Bierce's "Devil's Dictionary" which I find hilarious.

love, n. a temporary insanity curable by marriage or by removal of the patient from the influences under which he incurred the disorder.

rabble, n. in a republic, those who exercise a supreme authority tempered by fraudulent elections.

war, n. a by-product of the arts of peace.

These examples are from Bierce. I now carry the Devil's Dictionary wherever I go. Preston let me borrow his father's black book.

corruption, n. the reality of affairs when dealing with persons whom have attained large amounts of money.

seduction, n. the behavior expected of sultry females when they realize you're on to something very important.

These are funny and they hold grains of truth. Hale, when he was in college, also included actual definitions of words which aren't part of every-day talk. Stuff that makes a person seem more enlightened and sophisticated.

amensalism, n. a relationship between two species in which the individuals of one species adversely affects those of the other and are unaffected themselves.

apathy, n. lack of concern, enthusiasm, or interest.

apophenia, n. the human tendency to perceive meaningful patterns within random events.

bellicose, adj. warlike or hostile attitude.

capitulate, v. surrender; cease to resist an opponent or an unwelcome demand.

The address book was full from A to Z. The last entry:

zenith, n. this is the top and where I need to be.

Preston continued his dad's tradition but he did it with three by five cards kept in a Rolodex. He figured it was easier to insert and remove things. I like that style.

folly, n. when you're a Contrarian, you have the benefit of directly watching the world's comedy of errors and this is part of your daily life.

This was my favorite thing to read. Preston's a sharp guy but he doesn't take the Contrarian experience too seriously. I'll start my own dictionary, I'm sure. I'll start an encyclopedia if I have to.

I didn't expect to fall in love with Thelma Rhett. I can't say that it's love, to tell you the truth. It's fascination for sure. I am intrigued. She has layers. I like that. I'll start my personal dictionary right now.

irony, n. just when you think you have everything figured out, life slaps you in the face.

I wanted to mention something about this mini cruise liner that we're on. It has a laboratory. It's not a traditional one with flasks and tubes everywhere like you see in the movies. It's a social one, so far as I know. There are three on the ship and later, I've agreed to participate in one of their experiments. I've come across some amazing individuals over the past few days. One of them is a behaviorist named Roger Corliss. Officially, he's a motivational speaker. That's how the public knows him, but he does these behind-the-scenes experiments on people. Fabian Lynch provides trial drugs,

Julian Garrett has connections to advanced computers, and a guy named Lyle Garman is involved somehow. I think Lyle's primary income is from pesticides and dangerous chemicals. Anyhow, they've developed a machine. This device steers your dreams! You get into this tube like you're going to take an MRI but it's not situated to take digital pictures of the brain. No, there are electrodes and other body sensors hooked up. A kind voice talks to you when in REM. Guess who mine is? It's Thelma. She volunteered. I take Somnacin, a drug developed by Fabian, and it puts me to sleep and acts on the body's cortisol production, a glucocorticoid. Soon, it screws with a neurotransmitter, gamma-aminobutyric acid. There's a blancing that goes on. The medium, Thelma in this case, must be keen and trustworthy. It is believed that dreams in the proper state transport your spirit to another dimension. Everyone has had lucid dreams. This device, called the Wormhole, has an eighty-percent success rate at moving a person to the lucid state. Initial reports are that dreams become more vivid than the reality we experience day in and day out. The medium must know when rapid eye movement begins and observes the test subject through video feed. Sensors know when the subject is stressed or at ease. Ambient music and sounds are played in a dialogue between man and machine. The medium guides the subject through scenarios. Do you see the beach? she might ask. Head toward the water. A gradient display from green on the left to red on the right indicates success of the dream journey. Head toward the water, she might say. Can you hear gulls in the sky? The Wormhole might queue the sound of sea gulls. It's an exploration of the mind. I don't have every detail, but that's the gist of how it goes. Tonight, the medium will be given her own drug, Saturn, which is really a mix of glint, cordazine and something else I can't remember.

An hour later, it was a go. The Wormhole was in a room called Lab One. Sterile place and mostly white. Donovan was given his drug then slipped into a silver tube. Thelma was in a nearby room and licked greenish blue paste from a wooden tongue depressor. That was Saturn. In thirty minutes, Donovan was in deep sleep and started to squirm. The sound of ocean waves subtly began to play on speakers around him. Thelma was slightly out of her mind. She had gone through weird things before with the Contrarians and she had tried her share of psychedelic drugs but she wasn't ready for the effects of Saturn. Her heartbeat sped up and she could see rainbow colors in front of the monitor focused on Donovan. She spoke into a microphone, "Donovan? I am Astral. I am above you in the clouds."

Gulls gawked through the speakers.

Donovan struggled a little then became calm.

"Donovan?" Thelma waited until he was at rest. "I am in the clouds and if you look closely, you can see my face." There was fidgeting then calm again. "Donovan? Look down into your right palm. There is a red rubber ball. Squeeze it." Donovan's hand made a gripping motion. "In your left hand, there is a blue ball. It looks like a racquetball but it is special. It is a stress ball and when you squeeze it, a small amount of magic comes out. Use it when you don't agree with the path you're on. Squeeze it now so I know you understand." Donovan complied. "I have been living in you for fifty thousand years, Donovan. Can you believe that? Squeeze the red ball if you know it to be true." Donovan agreed and his right hand clinched into a fist then relaxed. "I have been here for a long time. And I have a message for you. It's almost over. All the pain and misunderstanding? It's almost over." Thelma waited for a response but nothing was given. "I love you, Donovan. I have watched over you for a long time. I was there at

your side when you were fighting for Alexander's kingdom. I was there. I kept you safe. I was there when you told Constantine I to convert his kingdom to Christianity. Do you remember that?" Donovan squeezed the red ball. "I told you to break away from the British when their oppression was too much to handle. Do you remember talking to Benjamin Franklin? Do you remember giving him advice?" Donovan squeezed and tears rolled down the side of his face. "You think of yourself as a nobody. I know you do. I live in your id—*your instinctive drive*—Donovan. I am part of your pre-conscious thinking. I have led you here to South America." Donovan squirmed but did not squeeze. "You have a special mission, but you are not to fret. You have friends. You have people who know what they are doing. Your instincts are incredible. Your charisma is as good as it gets. Humans have been hypnotized to quit. There is a power out there that suppresses them, but you are our freedom fighter, Donovan. You will not let them down."

At that point, Thelma could not think of anything else to say. There were a few observers. Besides Roger Corliss and Fabian Lynch, there were a few lab people in white coats Thelma was unfamiliar with. She almost decided to walk away. She said one final thing, "Donovan? Look over to your left. See the dunes?" He squeezed his right hand. "There is a peculiar palm tree. It is dancing, but there is no wind. It knows your name. Every dolphin in the world's oceans knows who you are. They root for your strength. Every hippopotamus in every marsh prays for you. Every gull in the sky above knows you mean well. You will bring us all together, Donovan. You will not squash our enemies." Donovan was troubled and squeezed the blue ball on his left. "You will change them. You will show them the error in their ways with living compassion. Do you understand?" Donovan squeezed red.

The Lucky Dragon 6 sailed past Aruba and docked in Curaçao, an island about fifty miles north of mainland Venezuela. Dutch Antilles Express provided a helicopter flight to Coro, a quaint Spanish town two hundred miles northwest of the capital, Caracas. On the flight to Coro, Thelma asked Donovan, "Do you remember much from the Wormhole? It gets easier, I understand."

"I remember talking to you. I remember the dancing palm tree. Besides that, not much." Others from the group stayed behind. "I thought the Council of Nine would be staying tight together like a bad tourist group. Not the case."

"A few of them have business with Royal Dutch Shell. Venezuela was one of the five founding OPEC countries in 1960. The others were Iraq, Iran, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Some guys just wanted to stay on the boat." Thelma felt nervous. "I have to get you up to speed on what's going on. First of all, we're going to rendezvous with Horace in Caracas. From there, we'll fly to la Ciudad de Bolivar near the Colombian border. Horace wants his children to get into the petroleum industry. It's a cover, though. We're going to wind up Cúcuta. That's across the border. Drugs. Horace oversees one of the main black ops wings of the CIA. Cocaine, you know? Funding secret programs."

Donovan shook his head. *This is nuts*. He looked forward to the pilot and pointed behind his palm. "Can he hear us?"

She said no. "He has a helmet on with head phones. I'll teach you all the secret codes before long. He's on our side, anyway. But don't tell him anything." When they landed, a black Cadillac limousine was waiting. A chauffeur escorted them in. They traveled alone. It would be a three hour trip to Playa Grande Caribe Hotel. "You and Preston talked about Illuminati roots of Contrarians, right? I don't think you guys have

the whole picture. What do you know about Freemasons?"

"George Washington. He was one. Not much besides that. The words get bounced around the house. Freemasons, Illuminati, New World Order, Bilderbergs, Scoundrels. A couple of weeks before my initiation, my dad told me about Bohemian Grove and the *Cremation of Care*. Spooky stuff involving former presidents and corporate honchos." *Am I in the Twilight Zone?* Donovan wondered. The limo drove along a coastal road. Donovan loved the beach. He admired the sea through dark tinted windows.

Three thousand years ago, Solomon's Temple was being built to house the Ten Commandments and other treasures. The master architect was Hiram Abiff, also known as the Widow's Son. It was a time when secrecy was valued. Three junior masons grew jealous of Hiram and demanded a secret word which would give them status. Hiram told them they'd receive the word when the job was done so they slashed his throat and bludgeoned him. As he died he cried out, "Who will help the Widow's Son?" Time went on. By the year 1118, after the first Crusades, a mosque had been built where Solomon's Temple had stood called Al-Aqsa. Nine dedicated men over nine years excavated the mosque and discovered sacred writings of the Essenes and other valubles. Pope Innocent II was quite pleased with them and soon, after the Council of Troyes, they were part of a twelve-hundred-man personal army called the Knights Templar. The Knights employed stone masons to build epic stone cathedrals and monuments. They developed shipping routes and banking systems. Their power grew and, ironically, threatened the papacy. In 1307 on Friday the Thirteenth of October, Pope Clement V together with France's King Philip IV arrested the Templars for heresy and many were burnt at the stake. Surviving members scattered and went into hiding. They had been accused of devil worship with Baphomet as their idol; a winged hermaphrodite with a goat's head, a flaming torch between its two large horns, two serpents rising from its loose trousers, a pentagram inscribed on its forehead, and "Coagula" sketched on its left forearm. In 1312, the Church considered them disbanded by papal decree but they found refuge with their stone mason compatriots. In Scotland in 1446, they built Rosslyn Chapel, a scaled-down version of Solomon's Temple, and it was headed by William Sinclair. His grandfather Henry Sinclair had traveled to the New World more than fifty years before Columbus but the Templars were secretive people and much of their history was passed down in symbolic carvings and statues. The voyage wasn't known to the rest of the world. The stone masons formed a trade union in 1599 and, during the Enlightenment period, it became more of a thinking gentleman's club. During this era, the Church felt threatened by great thinkers. In 1649, King Charles I was beheaded. Secrecy was the way to go. Sir Isaac Newton was ahead of his time in regards to physics but he became fascinated by the story of Solomon's Temple. As rational as he was, he was an alchemist and sought to develop the Philosopher's Stone to achieve immortality. In 1717 one of Newton's chums, John Desaguliers, founded the first Freemason lodge in London. Religious freedom was emphasized as well as other freedoms of thought and travel. The leaders were elected in a democratic process. It was a cultural revolution and it spread to the Americas. Benjamin Franklin became a Freemason in Philadelphia in 1731. By 1738, Pope Clement XII felt threatened and condemned the Freemasons as being depraved and perverted. He admonished them and prohibited Catholics from joining their ranks.

A generation after Benjamin Franklin joined the Freemasons, the Colonies were ripe for change. By then, George Washington, Paul Revere, Joseph Warren and John

Hancock were Freemasons. They met at the Green Dragon Tavern in Boston and plotted the Boston Tea Party. America, as a country, was their personal masonic project. The stone masons of the Medieval ages were replaced by a new kind of builder. These guys were social builders. America fought the British for independence. Masonic lodges were placed in army camps. For a while, things looked bleak but Benjamin Franklin was a member of Les Neuf Sœurs in Paris, or the Lodge of Nine Sisters. He was friends with François-Marie Arouet, also known as Voltaire, and he also convinced King Louis XVI to join the Revolutionary War on America's behalf. European Freemasons gave the Continental Army a couple of their best commanders, Frenchman Marquis de Lafayette and German Baron von Steuben.

America, as a young country, loved its newly acquired freedoms. George Washington and Thomas Jefferson were involved in laying out the new capital, a ten-mile by ten-mile square between Virginia and Maryland. In 1793, George Washington was present laying the cornerstone of the new Capitol building and he ceremonially dispensed traditional corn, oil and wine. Adam Smith was a Freemason and so was Mozart, David Hume and James Monroe. In the same year that the Declaration of Independence was signed, 1776, Adam Smith released "Wealth of Nations". That year in Bavaria, Johann Adam Weishaupt founded a secret society called the Illuminati. Officially, they were disbanded nine years later but the legend was something people couldn't control. They were accused of starting the French Revolution in 1789. Secret societies were supposedly outlawed but rumors persisted that Illuminati members infiltrated the Freemasons. In 1797 a physicist in the Royal Society of Edinburgh, John Robison, published literature called "Proofs of Conspiracy" which explaining how it happened.

Even though Washington had been popular, public suspicion grew. The secrecy was more than what citizens wanted to handle. In 1826, William Morgan was prepared to publish a book about the secrets of Freemasons. He was arrested on an obscure charge and then four Freemasons took him out of jail. People suspected he was killed by them. Most definitely, he disappeared not to be seen again. By 1832, there was an Anti-Mason party in America. Andrew Jackson, a Freemason, won the presidency with fifty-four percent of the vote but William Wirt, the Anti-Mason, managed eight percent. By 1871, Albert Pike was heading the Masons and, like the Templars of 1307, accusations of Luciferian devil worship was spewed around.

The Masons had incredible success. Besides nine signers of the Declaration of Independence, there were eventually thirteen presidents. Winston Churchill, Herbert Hoover, Douglas McArthur, Duke Ellington, Henry Ford, Harry Truman and Gerald Ford were Masons. Thelma Rhett explained as much as she could to Donovan Cobb. Their limo sped along. "The Catholic Church has a formal way of indoctrination which includes baptising infants. There is a paper trail anyone can follow. The Protestants came along and changed the rules. It's possible to be a Christian in secret. Much of the theology concerns a personal relationship with God. Our secret organizations are like this. The mafia is like this. Much of the CIA is like this. No paper trail. It's hard to know heads and tails."

"So the Hyde family is rooted in Knights Templar you say?" Donovan thought about the hotel they would stay at. He looked forward to leisure. "And Spencer Lafayette, our midget friend, is a descendant of Marquis de Lafayette from Washington's army? And Cornelius Stuart's family was involved in the British East India shipping?"

"You need to understand that there's been a schism. Okay? A schism, but you

need to know some of the rituals. The noose around the neck, blindfolded, knife at the chest. Mock killing. The Washington Monument is placed in front of the Capitol like the Egyptian obelisk in front of Saint Peter's. They worship Virgo. The star Arcturus is directly above the Washington Monument in mid-August at the same time Regulus is over the White House and Spica is over the Capitol. They're in the Virgo constellation." Thelma ran her foot up Donovan's shin. "If this is too much, you let me know." She added, "There are fifty-three zodiac signs around Washington, DC today. This is more than any other capital. They were star gazers, okay?"

Donovan studied the constellations, not just of the northern hemisphere but the southern half as well. *Tucana, Dorado, Pavo, Indus, Crux, Vela, Chamaeleon, and Lupus*. He eventually grew fond of "Southern Cross" by Crosby, Stills and Nash and it would be his favorite song whenever he was in Australia. January of 1984 was Donovan's favorite month ever. There was a certain apex he reached in terms of intellectual comprehension, emotional warmth and spiritual fulfillment. He adored the entire world. He was grateful to be "let in" to the Contrarian hidden system. He liked Thelma Rhett. They married in February. It wasn't romantic, at least not too much. She was a sister figure sometimes and a mother figure at other times. Seldom did he feel like he was imparting knowledge onto her that she didn't already know. She was a good friend. At a time when Preston Bancroft was becoming more distant physically and in the heart, Thelma was always there. Preston was off in Budapest, Hungary starting a family of his own with Tabitha while Donovan was sailing away from South America on the Lucky Dragon 6. Before getting to French Polynesia, Donovan checked out Pumapunku, the Falklands, the Galápagos Islands and more exotic places. Callao, Peru was the last mainland city he stayed in before months of island hopping throughout the Pacific and Southeast Asia.

Years went by. It was December 31, 1999. The Sun was setting west of Caroline Island, the eastern-most point of land on planet Earth in regards to the International Date Line. Donovan Cobb was on the starboard side of the Lucky Dragon 8 and was pacing himself pretty well with lime margaritas. His new lover was with him, Sakata Tara. She was young and Japanese. Thelma was still married to Donovan but she was an ocean away from him in San Diego celebrating New Year's Eve at a yacht club. There was an arrangement between them. Donovan's time on the Council of Nine went relatively smooth. In 1985, his second year, it was traditional to seek a quest. This could be climbing Everest or it could be traveling around the world in a submarine. It could be anything. Donovan chose a three-week sailing trip to Tristan Da Cunha, the most remote place known to the public. He spent a month and half there in solitude and reflection. Then he travelled another three weeks to return to the mainland of Argentina. In 1991, it was Thelma's last year on the Council of Nine and Donovan's second-to-last. She gave him a strange gift. Her family had a private island in Fiji inside the Lau archipelago between Mago and Cicia called Lailai Degei. Years before *Survivor* on CBS and the *Bachelor* on ABC were hit shows on TV, Thelma set up a circumstance for Donovan. She put him up on her family's quaint island in seclusion with twenty women. He had access to minimal staff members who would cook, provide certain recreation, and explain local culture, customs, politics, history and art. There were nightly dancers, musicians and other exciting performers. Thelma was running Atherton Games which she inherited from her father and never stopped developing great games even if they weren't marketed. Circus Echelon Toys spawned Banana Bin Novelties and she turned a modest profit

producing some of the world's most coveted dildo vibrators. Did Yoko Ono break up the Beatles? Thelma didn't care about the answer was but she pondered it. She knew that during John Lennon's marriage to Yoko, she allowed him to party with a mistress, her assistant May Pang. He went on to have "reckless debauchery" during a "lost weekend" which actually lasted a year and a half. Donovan's time on Lailai Degei was like that. For a few nights, he schmoozed twenty beautiful women of different ages, ethnicities, personalities, tastes and body types. Sakata Tara was a fifteen-year-old ball of energy and an aspiring J-Pop singer. Thelma screened everyone before leaving to Gladstone, Australia. Sakata was accompanied by her singer friends, Yoshiya Kadiri, Sawa Honoka and Onishi Natsumi. On the fifth night, Donovan was given fifteen invitation slips to give to the women to remain. Five had to leave. The numbers dwindled over the nights until it was just Sakata, her friends and a couple of others. One was a redhead, Rosemary Ross, who was quite sultry and could play the cello. The other was a Hawaiian, Kapuni Lono, who liked to walk around topless in a grass skirt all day with only her long, black hair covering her breasts.

The "game" ended at that point. Donovan didn't have the heart to send anyone else away. He became close to the six finalists, most especially Sakata Tara. On the evening before world calendars would flip from 1999 to 2000, he spent his time with her. There was no greater reason to celebrate in a long, long time. Las Vegas, New York, Paris, Berlin, Moscow and every major city braced for the new millennium. Parties galore. Donovan couldn't think of a better place to be and made sure the Lukcy Dragon 8 was on the eastern side of the island. Profound. He couldn't think of a better circumstance. There was a costume motif going on. He was dressed as Sinbad the Sailor and Sakata was dressed as Jeanie, the character played splendidly by Barbara Eden. Somewhere or another, Yoshiya, Sawa, Onishi, Rosemary and Kapuni roamed around getting drunk. Donovan held Sakata next to him. "When the clock says 2000, we enter a new era." He was buzzed.

"You're a silly man!" She smiled and kissed him under the chin. "Japan celebrates Heisei eleven going to Heisei twelve!" She laughed because of the wrinkles on Donovan's forehead. He was so confused. "Half the world don't follow the Western calendar!" She laughed.

"Yeah. I know." He was almost offended but her face told a story. She was innocent and that's why he stayed with her. Thelma was hardened when he met her sixteen years before. "Muslims. Buddhists. I know. Jews. They all have their own thing going, I'm sure." Donovan held Sakata tighter. She didn't begin learning English until she was six. Her accent was cute. Donovan kissed her on the lips and wanted to propose marriage. *I have no fuckin' clue what's going on*, he thought. He watched fireworks go off. There were sailboats and yachts in all directions. There were stars in the sky. *Will you marry me?* Donovan wondered as he looked into Sakata's eyes. "I have a feeling the world is ending," he finally said.

"It's not ending!" Sakata slapped Donovan's shoulder. "It's beginning!"

I knew you'd say that for some reason, Donovan thought. *I need to cling on to you for a while.* He tried to brush the deeper thoughts out of his mind. "Shuffleboard? Maybe we can catch up with the gals?" He was scared and his emotions weren't stable. The millennium loomed and he didn't know what to make of it. It was like a horserace to him. He could feel social groups jockeying and vying for position. His time with the Council of Nine was gone and he didn't contact Contrarians as often as he used to but he

knew the battle was still going on. Somewhere out there, maybe on a nearby yacht, the Scoundrels were having a party of their own all the while plotting to conquer the world. It was a scary time and Donovan wanted to be at ease. "On second thought," he told Sakata, "Maybe we can stay out here longer. And you can tell me anything. Talk until my ears fall off. I want to hear your voice. Can you do that?"

"Yes master!" Sakata laughed. She imitated Barbara Eden as Jeanie, nodded and blinked like she was granting a wish. "Tonight is yours!" She was a positive person but started to feel some of the fears Donovan had. She held him. She stood at a little more than five feet. The top of her head rested underneath Donovan's chin. She was fifteen when she met him and was now twenty-four. Somehow, she didn't feel like she aged. She looked out across the ocean and admired the colored lights from all the boats. It was one of those moments. She joked about the calendar. It was undeniable that people would have memories imprinted in their brains for whatever was to happen on this night. She wanted to be remembered well. She liked Donovan. She knew he had a special connection to Thelma and it was called a marriage but it functioned more like a friendly partnership. Thelma wanted Donovan to be happy. She couldn't make him happy the way that Sakata could.

"I have plans to travel all the islands of Kiribati when this night is over." The kicker on December 31, 1999 was that the Moon was full and it was Friday. *Too many things are lining up*, Donovan pondered. "I want you with me when I leave."

"Can we go to Nikumaroro first? I want to see Amelia's wreckage! Can we do that?" Sakata liked to suck the stubble from Donovan's chin. "Please?"

"Yes! Anything you want!" He was happy. The next day was January 1, 2000. They flew west in a vintage modified eight-passenger Dutch Fokker F.VII, the same seaplane that Amelia Earhart flew across the Atlantic in 1928. Kiribati was the greatest nation on the planet Earth according to Donovan. It consisted of three island chains across the Pacific: Gilbert Islands in the west, Phoenix Islands in the middle, and the Line Islands in the east. It stretched the same distance horizontally as the continental United States yet its thirty-two atolls and single reef had the collective land size of New York City. "Last year, 1999, two islands disappeared forever," Donovan told Sakata as they flew over the deep blue ocean.

"Where did they go?" Sakata laughed then poked Donovan's tummy. "Did aliens take them?" She laughed more. She was a fan of Trivial Pursuit and brought cards. "Pick a category! Geology? Entertainment? Come on!"

"Arts and leissure." Flying across the Pacific over the years was never an easy thing for Donovan. His butterflies squirmed inside.

"It's *art and literature*," she corrected subtly. "What former ward attendant in a mental hospital wrote *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*?" She kissed Donovan's neck.

"Ken Kersey." He ran his finger's through her syled shoulder-length black hair. "I have one for you. Name the two Kiribait islands that are now gone from our planet." He hardly ever used cards to ask his own questions. They never played with the actual board and colored pies.

"From this place?" Sakata asked. She thought about it. "Humpty and Dumpty?" She giggled.

"Tebua Tarawa and Abunuea. Gone. *Probably forever*." There was no alcohol on the plane. Donovan wanted a drink.

"Probably forever? What the hell do you mean?" Sakata was giddy by nature

and smiled. “Are they coming back like Jason Vorhees?”

“Funny. Funny, funny, funny.” Donovan chuckled. “Seas rise and recede over thousands of years. The continent of Mu might return. We’re flying over it right now.” He believed Sakata thought he was joking. “There are roads, honey. Historic roads. They lead in one direction toward another island and drop off right into the sea. Miles away, there are other roads pointed toward the other island. You see? There are super-swells everywhere. Basically, you can walk further into the ocean around these places and the water is shallow.”

“What if the oceans aren’t rising, darling? What if the islands are sinking? Agartha is the world inside the middle of the Earth. What if our hollow planet is caving in?” She leaned over and nibbled on Donovan’s nose.

“Silly, silly girl! I am developing a few different comic book worlds. Being a Contrarian, I had the privilege of meeting icons like Stan Lee, Neal Adams, Terrell Wilder, Sumadera Anzai and Bazel Mare. I spent time with them and they taught me everything I know. Agartha is legendary, but it’s only real in my comics.” Donovan reached for Sakata and held her. “Without you, I’d be nothing. I have the weight of the world on my shoulders. The comics help me cope. And so do you.”

“Weight of the world? I don’t understand you, Donovan.” She rarely referred to him by name. Her smile was gone and she was concerned. “You are an individual. You are a guppy in a large, large, large ocean. Please realize that. You scare me when I think you’re serious about saving the world.” She rested her head on his chest.

Donovan pushed her away and reached for a sketchbook. “I worked on this when you were sleeping.” He opened an eighteen-by-twelve-inch notebook of drawings. “Here. Metaphors with speculative science.” He flipped through a few pages. “This is real, by the way. Our Sun is this tiny dot, a mere pin point.” He put his forefinger near it. “If our Sun is a grain of dirt, Acturus is a BB. See?” He moved his finger along. “Huge! Yes?” He kissed Sakata’s forehead. “This is Rigel, still larger, and Aldebaran, even bigger. We’re talking ping pong now compared to our Sun, the spec of dirt.” All of a sudden, Donovan became aroused. The pilot flew them and was seated a few feet away. Donovan held his emotions in check. He wanted to make love to Sakata. She listened without judgement. “Betelgeuse dwarfs Aldebaran. Now we’re talking about a basketball.” Donovan felt an unnatural urge to put his tongue into Sakata’s left nostril and did so. He almost quit with his presentation in favor of making out. “Anteres? That’s the largest star known to scientists on Earth! It’s a medicine ball. We’re still revolving around a spec of dirt and somewhere out there, a medicine ball exists!” Donovan felt Sakata’s left breast over her white ruffled shirt. He peeked toward the pilot to make sure he wasn’t paying attention. After, he constrained himself and asked, “What does intuition tell you?”

“There’s something larger, baby doll! Something a few times bigger? In the great distance out there? Yes?” Sakata French kissed Donovan. “I want to be queen. Can you make me queen in a comic? I am deserving! I know I can be a good ruler.”

“Yes, honey! Somewhere beyond our grasp to detect and comprehend, there is a star called Ziggy!” Donovan flipped his page. “Look! I sketched this less than an hour after midnight! Your head was resting on my stomach.” It was a huge star that Donovan sketched with a number two pencil. His finger trace the elliptical outline of tine dots. “These are all Earth-sized planets, some smaller and some larger. Two hundred? I don’t know. I need to meditate on it. Five hundred? I don’t know. It’s like our asteroid belt,

see? Somewhere out there is huge star, the biggest physics would allow. And there are planets that have a billion-year headstart on us. They are advanced and they hop around like we travel on subways. See?"

"You are a genius," Sakata told her lover. "Why does this matter? I know it kills boredom to create your comics. What does this matter? Will it save our planet?" She was almost serious. "We all believe we can do it at some point in our lives. Are you there now?"

"No. Far from it. I'm developing a comic where two of the planets are destined to collide. They're in the same orbit as many others. What are the emotions involved? How do people respond?" He flipped past a few more pages. There were descriptions of humanoid aliens and their ships. Finally he settled on a page which featured Ziggy's outer rim. "Instead of gas giants like we have, Ziggy has three hundred stars revolving around it. See? They are the same size as our Sun but to Ziggy, they look like nothing at all. Each star has its own potential to be a new world for a new comic. Get it?"

"Yes. I want to name them! Can you involve me? If you think I can't do it, you're wrong! I can add the women's touch! People need it! *Electra*! I want one to be named Electra! Maybe some worlds have unisex humanoid organisms and others have elaborate systems of reproduction involving five or six different sexes. I can do this!" Sakata thought of herself as intelligent but believed her greatest attribute was humility. So far as Donovan's ego was not threatened, she was willing to assert her ideas. "I'm not that bad at drawing! Anime! I can do anime quite well! I can help! I want to be part of this."

"My ambitions go beyond comics, Sakata my dear. We are going through a technological revolution. I want these worlds and characters to be real and accessible! Virtual reality! I want paper comics as a matter of tradition, but why not let our friends experience these places?" He flipped some more. A teenage boy had a machine strapped across his eyes. "Virtual reality, Sakata."

"Will you marry me, Donovan? I want you to tell Thelma that your arrangement doesn't work in this new millennium! Don't do this to me!" She kissed his left clavicle. A few tears streamed down her cheek then she apologized. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I know we all have an agreement."

"It all takes care of itself in time." Donovan set his palms on Sakata's temples and brought her forehead to his. "We have a political agreement. We must exist together. You know that. We have enemies trying to kill us. They want to rip us apart. We are all friends. We support each other. See?" Donovan took another notebook and thumbed to its final pages. "She is here." He pointed at a drawing of Thelma wearing space-age alien headgear. "She is the queen of one planet." He slid his finger down. "You are the democratically-elected president of another. Your planets are destined to crash into each other! Metaphors. Okay?"

"You do whatever you want," Sakata said. She was skeptical. She had doubts. "Don't leave me in the cold. Don't abandon me!" *I know you love her for some reason or another*, she thought. "It's not fair, Donovan! You lead us along! Not just you! Every bigwig out there with your numerous mistresses! Every one of us has lives! I want a real chance! Can you assure me that I will be part of this?"

"Yes, darling! Yes!" Beyond Donovan's sketch pads, there was a traditional beat box. He reached for it and pressed play. "My best friend is Preston Bancroft. Everything I am right now is rooted in our friendship. We talked for hours and hours and

hours about life's mysteries." Music started to play. The song was "Baby, Come to Me", a duet by James Ingram and Patti Austin. "There was a night in 1983 when I had an epiphany. I knew I was going to make it. We talked in Hollywood from dusk until dawn. I had this beat box, here. This cassette. And we played it over and over. Fifteen times? Twenty times? I don't know. We talked about planets and distant worlds. We just watched *Return of the Jedi*. Our minds were in that zone. But I realized something. You can't chase your dreams, not all the time. You have to let it come to you! Understand this!" Donovan held Sakata's forehead at his lips then let go. "Gravity. We have a certain gravity, my lover! We are like the stars and planets out there! We are destined for one another! Don't fight it! The spirit has natural laws like the celestial bodies! We are with each other for a reason!" Donovan laid back and held Sakata. When the song was over, he leaned to the beat box, rewinded the cassette, then said, "I could have bought this on CD when the technology was available. When I need to be creative, my beautiful honey, I play this beat box. I play this very cassette I listened to in 1983. The juices flow. I believe I can conquer the world!"

"I will marry you, Donovan. And if you have six wives, I will fit in with everyone. You don't leave me!" She smacked his chest with her palms. "You motherfucker, you don't leave me!" Sakata Tara listened to the eighties soul ballad and felt at peace for the first time in her adult life.

"Leave you?" Donovan scratched his head. "You are my spark, Sakata." He considered how he would speak of it. "Thelma is my anchor. She is my sanity. Sixteen years ago today, I was on my way to a remote island near Venezuela to a hut where Adolf Hitler was holed up. He died later that year in Brazil. Thelma was with me. We knew a guy who dived in exotic animals. I came face to face with okapis, camahuets, jackalopes, an ucu and a huay chivo!"

"Okapis are the giraffe/ zebra/ horse mixes? They are beautiful?" There was strong turbulence and the seaplane was jolted. Sakata squeezed Donovan's thigh. "Do we have parachuettes by the way?"

"No parachuettes. It'll pass." When the plane steadied, Donovan answered. "Yes. Okapis are great creatures. Stripes on the hinde legs and bottom of forelegs. Dark amber hyde on top. Face of a giraffe." He licked his lips and rubbed his hands together. Excited, he said, "The huay chivo? Humanoid. Granted, it was night under a full Moon when we met him. South America has sloths the size of elephants, you understand? They dig tunnels deep into the Earth. Originally, they say huay chivos lived near the Mayan pyramids in Yucatán. Closest thing to a werewolf you can imagine. Dark and furry from head to toe. The huay chivos migrated south to the Andes right around Tiwanaku, Bolivia. The aliens from outer space helped construct the Chichen Itza. They also made the Pumapunku fortress! Experts say its existence is way more mind-boggling than the Pyramids of Giza! The huay chivos were flushed out from their Mayan home and took refuge in the sloth caves. The Pumapunku stones are more than a hundred tons. They were delivered from quarries more than fifty miles away and precision cut! Modern technology can't duplicate this! The huay chivos are near-magical and seclusive but not always. They speak perfect Spanish. Our guide translated for us. I dabble in Spanish, but not fluent. There is a method to connecting with the huay chivos! The rendezvous is like a dance."

"Drugs, Donovan! Was this a real thing? Was it hallucination?" Sakata pulled out a Trivial Pursuit card. "Category?" she asked and studied his face.

“Art and literature! I’m in the mood!” Donovan responded to the drug question. “Iboga? It’s more of an herb than a drug but, yes, we were definitely on another plane. You have to understand when truckers are traveling throughout the long highways of the United States, they have CB radios. They have different frequencies! There’s invisible conversation going on all over but you have to be tuned in to the right place. From channel thirty-seven through forty-two, you have CB megahertz twenty-seven point three-seven-five to twenty-seven four-two-five. Beyond that, you have something called freeband radio. Bunch of preppers and survivalists talking to each other. Coded stuff.”

Sakata asked her question, “Who was Becky Thatcher’s boyfriend?”

“Becky Thatcher? Couldn’t tell you!” Donovan grinned. It was on the tip of his tongue.

“Tom Sawyer!” Sakata threw the card at Donovan. “I thought you would know!”

Donovan asked his own question, “What is the Kiribati national bird?”

“Bokikokiko! You thought I would forget already?” Caroline Island was a wonderful place. Sakata and her friends were given a rundown and she remembered the bird. She loved the name. Nikumaroro was in the Phoenix chain seventeen hundred miles west. They still had seven hours of flight.

Donovan returned to his point. “The huay chivo is the ultimate survivalist of the animal world. It’s telepathic. You can’t just luck out on a survivalist freeband channel, by the way, and start talking about doomsday scenarios to preppers. There’s a method. A path. You gain trust. Iboga allows you to be on the same channel as some of these wonderful, exotic creatures. But that’s not enough! Government agents are always trying to infiltrate these survivalist groups claiming that they’re some kind of threat to national security! Trust is an issue. I was born into an exclusive organization called the Contrarians. The huay chivos trust us and will come out from their underground dwellings. Our rivals are the Scoundrels. They have a different mentality and different method to go about life. If they came across a huay chivo, they would shoot or capture it. *They have a different vibration than us.* It’s like the CB bands. Get it?”

“I know this!” Sakata felt embarrassed. “I want to see for myself!”

“We’ll get there! In time, I’ll return to Pumapunku and Atacama. Did I tell you about Atacama? Six-inch humans found in the desert of Chile! Look like aliens. Me and Thelma. And Horace Streets and Connor Milton. A few others. Craziest shit I’ve seen in my life! I saw Adolf Hitler alive decades after the world believed he shot himself! This takes the cake, though. But it gets weirder. Turns out there’re tiny humans about the same size found in ice at the South Pole! University of Cambridge claimed they’ve been there six hundred million years! According to public school textbooks, humans have only been around a million years!” Donovan and Sakata were sitting on the floor. Donovan got up and peeked out the window. “Such an amazing ocean!”

“There are huge holes in the different versions of what life is. Should we care?” Sakata joined Donovan. “I’m trying to make heads and tails out of it.”

“My mind is scrambled. Once you go through experiences like I’ve been through, there’s no way to go back home and pretend to be like everyone else. I lived much of my life in Hollywood. This was all movie stuff to me at a time.”

“You are telepathic, honey. You told me. The initiation in Yucatán with the chupacabra. You can sense thoughts and emotions. *An empath.* And you have

telekinesis. You can move small items like loose strings hanging from curtains. You can control the strength of light bulbs at times. Candle flames flicker for you. Your power is a marvelous gift.” She rubbed Donovan’s back.

“Our adversaries are always trying to kill us. When I was a kid, I loved this TV cartoon. Sam Sheepdog and Ralph Wolf would walk along and have friendly conversation until they reached a time clock where they would punch in to work. From there, they were at each other’s throats for the entire episode. Ralph’s job was to steal sheep and Sam would always foil and pummel him. When all was said and done, Ralph Wolf would be beaten to smithereens then a horn would sound in order to signal the end of the shift. Sam and Ralph would walk along together toward the time clock, punch out, wish each other the best and say see ya’ tomorrow.” Donovan pulled himself from the plane’s window and looked to Sakata. “The Scoundrels are like this with us. Sometimes our feud seems so trivial and benign. *They’re friendly people if you catch them at the right place and time.* But it gets real. It gets so real that I’m terrified. They have weapons. The best I can tell you is they are the Tyrannosaurus Rex and we are the Triceratops. They are meat-eaters thrashing about but we’re no saints. We learned to fight. We learned to defend. When it gets real there’s no telling who will win. They attack our psychic abilities. We used to be united early in the twentieth century before the creation of the Federal Reserve. We splintered and, in our secret societies, they call it the Great Rift. A schism of the world’s controlling elites. The Scoundrels run a program called the Agenda. It’s a basic plan for world domination. They somehow believe they are endowed to run every single thing. You’ve heard of the New World Order? That’s them. Now, if you screw with the Agenda you’re all of a sudden on the Radar. Understand this? *The Radar?* It’s a system for them to know who’s not standing in line. They know there’s gonna be a lot of resistance. They can’t catch everyone. They can scare the crap out of a lot, a lot, a lot of people. They want you to back down. They’ll peg a few people, though. Three out of a thousand? From all the radicals trying to screw them, they can maybe manage to do the business on three out of a thousand. I was one of them. I abhor George Herbert Walker Bush. In 1988, I was the Decider on the Contrarian Council of Nine. Clive Klauber was in his final year and nominated Tim Burton who released *Beetlejuice* that year. The American grade school history books will tell you that George was simply a nerd who made it big, reneged on promises not to raise taxes, and became a humiliated one-term. As a Contrarian, I had privileged information. George Bush was in on the JFK assassination. I never respected him once I knew that. By my fifth year with the Council, I tried to get my friend Gary Hart elected but the Scoundrels already worked that angle and framed him in a smutty relationship with Donna Rice. Basically, George Bush ran against a pinhead, Mike Dukakis, in 1988. His Scoundrel buddies in the media repeatedly showed the Willie Horton ad and issues didn’t matter. George got his shot at president and decided to steal Iraq’s oil. *Remind me to tell you more about Hill and Knowlton later.* Nayirah al-Sabah. April Glaspie. Shatt al Arab. Skittles theory. Rumaila oil field. George Bush lasted one term and projected himself as a war hero. I had my own connections in the media and in 1992 we did the deed. It was my last year on the Council and I went out with a huge bang. Bill Clinton. At the time, he was just some piece-of-shit governor from a small state. What more of an insult could there be? We put shit in motion they’ll be talking about for a long, long, long time. Within the Republican party, we got Pat Buchanan to run against George in the primaries which is rare for an incumbent president. We got Ross Perot to run as an

independent and we made Bill Clinton look awesomely cool by featuring him on Arsenio playing rock 'n' roll saxophone! MTV and that stuff. Needless to say, I got on the Scoundrel Radar! Hah! They chase you around with their wild FBI agents pretending you're doing something criminal when, in actuality, it's simple political retaliation."

"But you hate Bill Clinton now!" Sakata took her forehead and rubbed it against Donovan's chin stubble.

"I don't hate him! He's a broken person and he's no longer useful in the capacity he used to be. He's a shell of himself. The Scoundrels did their job. They chased him around, threatened him with impeachment, and in order to return the Contrarian insult, they have one of their own. Turns out George Herbert Walker Bush has a son! Barely been a governor for less than five years and they're running him for president! He was a draft dodger, cocaine addict, college flunky, and didn't play sports. He was a cheerleader, literally! *Fuck you democracy!* That's the Scoundrel message this time around. *We have friends at Time Magazine that're running with this!* That's what's going on! *Fox News will elect the next president!* Kakistocracy! You know what that means? A nation led by the least competent individuals! They think they have the tools in the Council of Foreign Relations to feed lines to speech writers! The president will be the ultimate puppet! A total nobody without his teleprompters!"

"You seem bitter, Donovan!" By now, Sakata was rubbing his shoulders while facing him. "Transcend this experience! You tell me to take a step back. You should do that now."

"That's why we're in Kiribati, honey. The United States of America is a cesspool by now and in a matter of years, it will be the largest prison Earth has ever known. The Scoundrels played their hand well. The Contrarians needed the public to have a backbone. We needed the public's support. Cretins. They are fuckin' cretins!" Donovan cried and set his face next to Sakata's. "Lambs to a slaughter. All they needed was courage and they opted out."

"You're disappointed?" Sakata lifted Donovan's head with her finger. "You are not one of them! We go on the run for a few years! Singapore! Japan! Korea! We stay in the Orient! We don't go back!"

"Thank you!" Donovan held Sakata's hands. It felt right to be with her. "We stay out here. We stay away." He composed himself. "George Washington was a Freemason, in one of the legendary secret societies of the world. We all intersect here and there. My wife was a good friend to me, not just a casual lover. She let me know things I would never know, otherwise. She taught me about initiations to the point I couldn't tell you what reality is. For example, is the Contrarian experience just a gateway to the Masons? Maybe vice versa? She taught me about Hiram Abiff, and I went through a mock ceremony. Was it real? I wondered for years. The Contrarian Great Rift began in 1913 with the Scoundrels. We have our own mythological founder. His name is Giordano Bruno. Burned at the stake in 1600. Follower of Copernicus. Died for believing the planets did not revolve around the Earth."

"I was wondering about these airplanes." Her focus shifted. "Cocaine. You could hide a lot of cocaine and other controlled drugs in the floating things?"

"These airplanes? They call 'em seaplanes. Some call 'em pontoons, some float planes, and others amphibious aircraft. Yeah, they've been the instrument of many smugglers. Horace Streets is our guy. I would never, ever, ever call Horace a smuggler, though. *He's a financier.* He knows how to get desired goods from one place to another.

Drugs, arms, art and so on. Very good at his job. The floating things underneath us? Quite ingenious, actually. In the front ya' have a bumper. The parts on the bottom that land in the water are the chine, sister keelson, keel, step and skeg. Above that you have bulkheads. They separate compartments. Yes. Drugs like cocaine have been known to be put in these spaces."

"And people? Could you put a person there?" Sakata wanted privacy. The pilot up front seemed oblivious to their talk but she would have felt better if they were alone.

"Jim Morrison? Is that what you want to know? Could we hide people down there and take them away from extradition? Yes. I've heard stories but I've never seen it. Oxygen tanks. Tight squeeze, but the Contrarians have contingency programs. If the shit hits the fan, we might find ourselves in one!" Donovan laughed. "Somehow, I think Jim got out some other way."

"Tell me about the United States Football League." Sakata put her hand under Donovan's shirt and rubbed his tummy.

"We have all the time in the world. I'll tell you all I can until we reach Nikumaroro." Donovan became quite drunk the night before and just before midnight, he puked many of his margaritas into the ocean over the rail of the Lucky Dragon 8. He barely remembered bringing up the USFL. "The league was the brainchild of a few Contrarians. Donald Trump was probably the best-known and he started the New Jersey Generals who signed Hershel Walker. *Quite a steal*. He still holds the pro record for rushing yards in a single season. When I joined the Council of Nine in 1984, it had already been running a couple of years. My good friend, Morris Taft, was on the Council and lobbied for his own team in Seattle. *The Gremlins*. That's what he wanted to call them. All the paperwork was in order and the future seemed bright. He brought me along thinking I had good people skills. I don't know crap about recruiting but I held my own. It was an alternative league and we had alternative methods to coaching. On July 14, 1985, the Baltimore Stars beat the Oakland Invaders in the championship game in the Meadowlands. Great day in my life. I could feel it. This league was going to last and I was going to be a great general manager. We started immediately trying to get the brightest minds to join our staff. You know who we hired?"

"Who honey? I want to know! Last night, we got distracted by the countdown and you stopped your story! Last thing you said was that the Invaders started a season by losing their first nine games but they won their final nine games. Nothing like that will ever be seen anywhere again except maybe Little League Baseball! Tell me! I hate sports but it had a people component! Tell me!" Sakata unbuttoned Donovan's shirt and kissed his chest.

"Fedoseyev Olegovich! He coached Soviet synchronized swimming in 1980 for the Moscow Olympics but he quit when Russia boycotted the 1984 Los Angeles games. It wasn't a medal sport yet in 1980 so no one's really heard of him. He's no Béla Károlyi, in other words, but he was great at what he did. Eventually, he defected. Morris Taft was a great running back at Stanford. Studied economics. He hit four oh eight for the baseball team and rushed for five point eight yards per carry for the football team. Returned kicks, too. Joined the Council in 1977. He had been at Stanford because of Ernest Johnson. Almost a full century before USC's Sam Cunningham clashed with Alabama's all-white Crimson Tide in 1970, Stanford had its own notable black running back in their first year of existence, 1891. Ernest Johnson was just another guy, though.

Jane Stanford was the school's founder and was friends with Beverly Johnson, Ernest's dad. California was not involved in the Civil War so race relations have always been different on the West Coast." Donovan realized he was getting off subject. "Morris Taft majored in economics, blew out his knee in 1979 after playing with the San Francisco Forty-Niners, and ended his stint on the Council of Nine in 1985, the year after I joined. He decides he wants to own a football team, but not in the NFL. He gets everything together, recruits me, and goes after Fedoseyev Olegovich!"

"I think I know why, but you tell me." Sakata buttoned Donovan's shirt. She didn't want to become overly-aroused on the flight.

"He figures Fedoseyev could teach sports unity. Too often, you see a group of individuals playing side-by-side but they're not really a team. *Not a cohesive unit.* In baseball, coaches will tell you to play for the name on the front of your jersey instead of the name on the back. No I in team. The best example I can tell you is when the Cowboys traded Hershel Walker to the Vikings for a load of picks and players. He was a great player but no one was on the same page in Minnesota. The general manager and head coach had philosophical differences and it matters. Fedoseyev Olegovich was a marvel and created beauty, some of the greatest swimmers in world history. Took his act on the road in western Europe after Morris Taft's Seattle Gremlins failed to materialize. The USFL folded after its third year after they sued the NFL for anti-trust violations. The USFL actually won the lawsuit but was granted only one dollar in damages. True story." Donovan thought about the synchronized swimmers. "It was the water version of the Ice Capades except that it featured trained bears and other circus elements. Trapeze artists twirling and landing in pools together. Clowns. That sort of thing."

"You would be the general manager of the Seattle Gremlins right now! And you wouldn't be with me! I'm happy the league folded!" Sakata pulled out a few Trivial Pursuit cards but didn't quiz Donovan. "Do you know why I bring these? I want to be smart like you."

"It's not about memorized data and information, Sakata. You're doing well, but if you don't know how to connect dots, it does no good. I've watched many Jeopardy episodes and felt sorry for the winners. They seem like lonely people." He returned to the USFL subject. "Morris didn't only want to bring over Fedoseyev. By the way, Fedoseyev's first love was hockey, a common thing in Russia. Do you know how they substitute players in hockey? They do it in sets called lines. He wanted to bring that to professional football. I wondered how it would've turned out. Anyhow, Morris had talks with psychological profilers from the CIA. Too many teams pay attention to pure numbers like forty-yard dash speed or bench press reps. Do you know what kills teams? Not lack of athleticism, at least not most the time. Cowards. Cowards kill teams. It's viral. *You need to have psychologically-strong people.* You have a guy break down during the playoffs and you're done for. Morris knew this. I looked forward to the project. Seemed the sky was the limit."

"When we land at Nikumaroro, I want to fry fish! I want to go fishing, and I want to fry it ourselves. No help from anyone!" Sakata's stomach started sending her hunger pains. "I'm not sure if I can wait. Can we land on the water and fish out here? Wouldn't that be beautiful?"

"Salmon. I can go for some salmon right now, but I don't know that we'll find any here. Maybe shark? We could land and try to reel in a shark? Maybe a blue whale?" Donovan laughed. He reached for a duffle bag and unzipped it. "Cheese and

crackers.” He handed a couple of packs to Sakata. “Or else we won’t have much daylight when we finally reach our destination.” He peeled open one of his packs and spread artificial cheese onto a cracker. “We have juice boxes, too.” He reached in for a couple and handed one over.

“Donovan! I want our son to be named Nikumaroro! I like the name! We will call him Niku for short and we can start his conception when we reach the island!” She smiled. “He will be a bastard, of course, and the entire Western world will disdain him! Church groups especially! But teenagers will love him everywhere because he’ll be a great rock star! All of the music will nearly die when the fascists take over America, but not our son!” She grinned. “Our love child, Donovan! Think about it!” She kissed his lips. “If you think I am kidding, you’ve got another thing coming!”

“I was thinking about these islands.” Donovan brushed off her suggestion, though it was intriguing. “Kiribati as a night club. Thelma suggested it a year or two ago. We’re all sinking, Sakata. Figuratively, we’re all disappearing. In fifty years, all of these islands will be gone! Thirty-three left and they’ll be gone. So will the Contrarians if the Scoundrels have their way.”

“Nikumaroro will be our first son. Abanuea or Caroline if it’s a girl. And she will not rock! She will be a medical doctor! We need more female medical doctors!” She smiled, drank cherry-flavored drink from her juice box, then set her head on Donovan’s lap. “I’ll save the cheese and crackers for later. I need rest more than food right now.”

Donovan rubbed her head. “Sleep, honey. Sleep.” Five minutes later, Sakata was snoring. Donovan reached for his sketchbook careful not to wake her. He drew a basilisk. It was a scaly creature he remembered from the eighties. Reptilian, eight legs, long snout and a horn on the tip of its nose. Thelma got him a gig with TRS Hobbies in the autumn of 1984. He was subsumed in *Dungeons and Dragons* and became familiar with mythical monsters. Being friends with Connor Milton, he happened to know lines blur between myth and reality. Next to the basilisk he drew a gorgon, a type of fierce bull with metal scales. Both of these beasts had the ability to turn enemies into stone. Donovan drew Medusa and watched Sakata sleep. His job with TRS led to a stint with Strategic Simulations, creators of computerized *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons* games. Donovan sketched a wraith, troglodyte, peryton, golem, and cyclops. He reflected on his time helping to develop and test *Pool of Radiance*, one of the best role-playing video games ever released for the Commodore 64. He was grateful for Thelma because she was able to put him in magical situations. She had a knack for it. Donovan flipped his sketchbook page and drew a medieval castle. He drew a manticore, satyr and griffin.

A half hour later, Sakata was jolted awake by more turbulence. “What the fuck?!” She was startled. She looked around not sure where she was. After a few moments she told Donovan, “I had the nightmare again. The thing you told me. They’re bringing down the Twin Towers and it’s no joke. Dick Cheney was cackling. Next, his face was painted like Two-Face from Batman. He was toying with a marionette and it was George W Bush. Then there was smoke coming from all directions, Brad Pitt was speaking to me and he said Fight Club was the real thing. We were in Manhattan and all the buildings were coming down in perfect freefall. The Twin Towers and everything else.”

“I didn’t mean to alarm you when I showed you Cheney’s *Project for the New*

American Century. The Scoundrels are planning another Pearl Harbor. Horace Streets passed on the details to me. That's not the scariest thing. There's another document being circulated called *Project for the New American Millennium*. Concentration camps. In America. If Pee Knack takes hold..."

"*Pee Knack*?" Sakata interrupted.

"P-N-A-C." Donovan drew the letters vertically down the side of a paper. "Project," he said and wrote it next to the P. "For the New American Century. It's an acronym. We call it Pee Knack." He wrote it out.

"Oh. Go on." Sakata lifted herself up and faced Donovan.

"Project for the New American Millennium will involve putting regular Americans into concentration camps. And dissenters from other countries." Donovan shook it off. "They want Contrarians there, and our supporters. Plus anyone that's not contributing to their common good, for whatever that means." He flipped his sketchbook to the page with the cyclops. "I made my New Year's resolution. I think you're going to like it."

"Tell me!" She smiled and clapped. "I want good news! Tell me!"

"You're going to like it because I'm involving you. I'm going to start my own comic publication. Listen. I have a friend, Robert Hyde. He runs an ad agency but he's straying more and more into comics to get his messages across. And Preston? He's done amazing things with his father's production company. He went from doing nothing but silly teen romantic comedies to delving into serious stuff. *Nanking Cyclone*. Nominated last year for a Golden Globe. He's created a time machine!"

"A time machine! What? Are you serious?" Sakata frowned.

"It's based on a few things. Existential philosophy, mild psychedelics, and a machine called the Wormhole. Remember the boat we were on last night? The Lucky Dragon 8? In 1984, I traveled around South America on the Lucky Dragon 6 where the first prototype of the Wormhole was tested. Long story short, at some point you wake up in a different place in a different time. One day in 1985 I fell asleep and when I woke, it was 1882. I had gold pieces in my pocket, a few buffalo nickels, and a couple of greenbacks. I walked across the dirt road into a saloon. There was a scrappy guy playing a vaudeville tune on the piano. I walked up to the bar and ordered a whiskey. I looked around at voluptuous women walking up and down the stairs and realized a brothel was nearby. I must've roamed around for three hours before I realized it wasn't a dream. There was a note in my pocket from my girlfriend. I wasn't Donovan Cobb. I was Zachary Bradley."

"I don't get it." Sakata was at a loss for words. She wanted to joke but didn't understand anything she was told. "I don't get it," she said again.

"I played along. I told one person that first night that I was Donovan Cobb and I had been traveling around on a cruise liner. The reaction I got was bad. Very bad. So I started telling people I was Zachary Bradley. Where could I find my lover, Eloise Denney? I got a job there. I lived there. First I worked in a general store then I worked for blacksmith. I made and set horseshoes. Three months passed and I enjoyed the place I was at but I started questioning my sanity. Nearest town was at least twenty miles in either direction. So far as I knew, I was in Warpsnag in unincorporated territory. I bought a map. Grave Cliff was twenty-five miles to the north. Rough terrain. Lots of skulls and bones insinuated. Balk River was indicated with a note that said the bridge was shattered. Willowdune was to the west and Thinroost to the east. I headed west on a

horse named Hassie. When I got there, I was greeted by the mayor. Abner Statler was his name. He knew me. He unrolled a large sepia poster. Wouldn't you know? It was a picture of my best friend, Preston Bancroft! Underneath his picture was a 'wanted dead or alive' caption with a reward of five hundred dollars. And his name wasn't Preston. It was Tobert Farrens! The mayor hands me five hundred dollars and tells me I'm a legend. The town loves me. They heard about how I gunned him down north of Warpsnag near Balk River! So they celebrate me. I'm in a saloon and a few women are swooning as I tell them a fake story of how it went down. Then? Ally Sheedy walks in. Then Steve McQueen then Donald Sutherland. And everyone's dressed like cowboys and cowgirls and talking the talk. I look past the swinging doors and there's a camera crew gliding from my right to my left. They're filming. I look in the corner near the stairs. A stationary camera. I realize I'm in the middle of a movie. Everyone is living their part, though. If I tell anyone I'm Donovan Cobb from 1985, the sheriff is going to come and throw me in jail. I can feel it in my bones. I have to remain Zachary Bradley. I have to look for my lost love, Eloise. She's here somewhere. I have to start working setting horseshoes, find another trade or I have to leave town."

"A time machine?" Sakata asked. "That's what you call a time machine?" She wasn't mean-spirited but she didn't grasp the magnitude of Preston's movie set.

"Preston Bancroft bought huge tracks of land. He's paranoid like any Contrarian is. At any given moment, the Scoundrels might snap and we'll need bug out locations. What better than a movie set? You create your world and you control every part of it. The set is ingenious. Forty-five miles east of Acapulco, Mexico, there's a small town called San Marcos. That's where Preston got his footing. He bought large tracts of land further east and started building movie sets for westerns. Willowdune, Warpsnag and Thinroost are all real. The further you travel from Acapulco, the more real it gets. There are less cameras. People aren't in character. *They are characters*. They live their lives. On a whim, I chose Willowdune when I was ready for something else. If I would've headed east to Thinroost, I might still be there. It's cult-like. It's not a whole lot different than Amish living in Pennsylvania. The real act, according to Preston, is to return to the United States and pretend that you care anything about modern life. The TV dinners and reruns of *I Love Lucy*. I was an extra in a cowboy movie that Preston was filming. Do you know how they make these movies look so real? Because we're not acting. We become convinced that 1882 is the year we're in. The cameras look freakish in Willowdune but you get used to them like suburban citizens in America get used to police copters hovering over their heads. You go about your life and you don't do anything special when they're filming because you don't know what's going to get cut after editing. They have thousands of hours of film in the can for any given project."

"So you improvise all your lines and some mysterious writer gets credit for all your ad lib?" Sakata shook her head. "*Hmmmmmm*. Sign me up, I guess."

"It's not that sinister. The writers do their jobs. They publish the town newspaper, the Willowdune Gazette. This is how anyone knows what's going on. Is there a railroad being built somewhere near? Is Billy the Kid still alive and coming to town? Because everyone thinks he was shot dead last year at Fort Sumner but it could just be bull crap. Is the legend of the skinwalker real? The Navajo Indians sure believe it's true. I happen to know Connor Milton who trades exotic and rare animals. Maybe Grave Cliff is a real place. No one's gone there because of all the map deterrents. Connor has a few exclusive zoos. Chupacabras. Boraros. Naguals. Celebrities love this

stuff. Steve McQueen? He went as Tom Horn and never broke character. Donald Sutherland was William Clayton. Ally Sheedy was Vera Sandridge. They love to be in these places. The movie with Ally reached pre-production but was never released. You have to understand that all sets are not made to be shared with the public. Not all the time. What good is the money from fame unless you can control some of the elements around you? These guys feel places out. Sometimes they need experiences for personal reasons and sometimes they want the spotlight on. They want to divulge and disclose.”

“I think it’s a trip but I understand. I think I do.” Sakata finally opened her packet of cheese and crackers. “This will hold me over.” She ate.

“I was drugged, Sakata. That’s the scary part of being a Contrarian. At least while I was on the Council of Nine. Once in a while, someone thinks they know what’s best for you. I was on the cruise liner having a drink and I woke up in that Western town. Scary. It worked out, but it’s still weird when you think about it.”

“Why are you slamming me with all this information, darling? Are you preparing me for the Council of Nine? Is it because you just need to get it off your chest? Why, honey? Why?” Sakata reached for Donovan’s sketchbook and thumbed away.

“We have limited time together. Alone, I mean. Tomorrow, your friends are meeting us on Nikumaroro. That’s why there’s urgency. I know you’re not going to retain it all.” Donovan found that drinking from the juice boxes made his mouth sticky. He had a canteen full of warm water. He filled his mouth and let it slosh. He swallowed. His mouth felt better. “I need to get this crap off my chest, Sakata. It drives me crazy to keep it inside. Not too many people would believe what I’m telling you.” He looked into her eyes. “You would be perfect for the Council of Nine but there’s a caveat. The system is designed so that people like me no longer have influence. There was a Mexican band called Menudo. You hear of them? *La Vida Loca*? Ricky Martin? He came from Menudo. Once you’re a certain age, they kick you out. They replace you with a young kid and the band goes along like nothing ever happened. Stephen King wrote a short story that appeared in *Night Shift*. Ever hear of *Children of the Corn*? Same idea. It was a group of kids in Nebraska that took control of a small farm village. Once you reached a certain age, they killed you. It’s just the way it was. In America’s bicentennial, there was a movie called *Logan’s Run* that was released. Aside from Star Wars, that flick moved me more than any other during my teenage years. The year is 2274. The law of the land is that all people over thirty are killed.”

“You’re an old man, Donovan. I know this. I accept it. You are from a youth culture in America. In Japan? We regard our elders in a different way.” She paused, then joked, “What are you? Fifty? Sixty? I can’t remember.”

“I am thirty-nine! You are twenty-three! This is not an outrageous relationship!” Donovan rarely felt confused since his departure from the Council of Nine but he felt confused discussing the age issue. He was ashamed of himself for his lack of confidence. “Fabian Lynch is our connection into the pharmaceutical industry. In the mid eighties, his team develops Minoxidil.” Donovan took his palm and slowly dragged the front of his scalp backwards. “What does this look like? A toupee? It’s not! It’s real hair! Minoxidil is the chemical base for the public drug Rogaine. What the hell am I supposed to do? I want to be an idealist! I want to believe people care about my personality! My character!”

“Don’t cry, Donovan.” Sakata was distressed by his emotions. “You are given choices in life. You’re the one that taught me about picking your poison and choosing

the path of least resistance. The public is full of cretins, right? They don't care about you but I do! You shave your head and I will be at your side! But don't leave me for Thelma because I couldn't stand the loneliness. You understand?"

"The middle of our teeth have pulp tissue. Very sensitive and can give pain. Outside of the pulp is dentin, a yellow substance. Outside of the dentin, is enamel. It's white." Donovan rarely cared where conversations roamed. He was about to disclose information about his friend, Preston. He was careful not to say things in a judgmental way. "Preston, my best friend, was born with something called inherited enamel defect. His baby teeth grew in normal but his adult teeth had patches where the enamel was thin or non-existent. He went to experts and they said what had was hypoplasia. Some other guy said it was hypomineralization and another guy said it was amelogenesis imperfecta. Either way, it wasn't his fault but we grew up in Hollywood, the greatest image-conscious city on Earth. Your top right front tooth hangs down slightly below the other. I noticed this about you when I met you on Lailai Degei many years ago. I love the confidence in your face. I love the brightness of your smile and how natural it is. I like the way you look into my eyes when you talk to me. You have beauty and you have something I'll never put a finger on. Hollywood? It's Hitler's wet dream. Bunch of fuckers walking around with perfect bodies, perfect tits, perfect posture, perfect smiles, and perfect walks. Of course they throw in people like my friend, Spencer Lafayette, and parade them around to show it's not a eugenics system! Hollywood is king of the photo op! They are masters of crafting image. They pretend to care but they don't."

"So Preston caved in? He tried to be an idealist like you. He wanted people to care about him as a person but they wouldn't do it. He got veneers, right?" Sakata cupped the undersides of her breasts over her white ruffled shirt. "B-cup, Donovan. And you never cared."

"We're all freaks. In some ways, none of us can be called perfect. Preston tried whitening gels but dentin is yellow. That was showing through. Bleach doesn't change it. He'd go to parties and we'd hear weird innuendos. With me there was abnormal talk about Mount Baldy, a place less than an hour drive from Los Angeles. Snotty people. For Preston, they would talk irregularly about discoloration. Propensity, understand? Someone took their Mercedes for a paint job and there were fucked up spots here and there. They'd nod their heads toward Preston. They'd emphasize unnecessary qualities of products. Redundancies. *Can you get me the yellow mustard?* Stupid shit like that. Stuff meant to make him boil." Donovan calmed down. "I took the Rogaine and Preston got veneers. That was the late eighties. We believe we got a gift, though. Superficial people? We know how to spot them quicker than most."

"I'm proud of you and your band of freaks." Sometimes, Sakata didn't like to face Donovan. Even though he complimented her eye contact, there were moments when she didn't like to speak face-to-face. When she felt shame, she would rest her forehead on his chin. "I can't win in America. It's not my B-cup breasts. I am Japanese. Some people love us but too many people are xenophobes. I am a freak. Hollywood hates me. I know what you're talking about. There are exceptions to the rule and they want to look diversified but they shut us out." Sakata rubbed Donovan's cheeks. She backed up so they were face-to-face again. She asked, "Do you know what a banana is?"

"Haaaaa!" Donovan laughed from his belly. "Thelma? Is that what this is?"

Sakata was caught off guard. She slapped Donovan's chest. "No! Banana Bin Novelties? No! Her dildo company? No!" She shook her head then explained,

“Banana? It’s a code. *A euphemism*. It’s innuendo language your were talking about. Barbs. A real banana is yellow on the outside and white on the inside. We Asians talk about sellouts. *Whitewashed*. These people worship Uncle Sam. They leave cultures and forget about their roots. I was born in Japan and I have enough memories of my country that I don’t know how to believe the United States is the great beacon on the hill they pretend to be.”

“Yeah. I get it,” Donovan said. “Oreos. That’s the black equivalent. The Scoundrels, even Hollywood, rely on whitewashed black people. Colin Powell, Will Smith, Michael Jackson. Black on the outside but white in the middle. If you’re lucky, you see the light. I believe Whitney Houston did this. Uncle Toms. That’s what they call them.”

“Are the Indian sellouts called apples? That would make sense! And the Chicanos? Peanuts? That’s the closest I can think of!” Sakata giggled.

“Chicanos? I pretend I can speak fluent Spanish when I’m in Latin America but it’s truthfully too fast for me. I know definitions. I can translate if I’m given simple text. *Tío Tomás*. That’s the translation of Uncle Tom. Do you know why our world has gone to shit? The Scoundrels rely on cronies. These guys are their cronies!” Donovan took his sketchbook from Sakata and drew a couple of squares on the cover. In the first, he drew a twenty-nine in the upper-right. Below it, he wrote “Cu” then he wrote a fifty-two in the upper-right of the other. Below, he wrote “Te” then suggested, “I believe you are copper and tellurium, honey!” He combined the chemical symbols underneath. “Because you are CuTe!”

She laughed.

“The war is real between us and the Scoundrels. We have learned their methods and they try to emulate some of ours. We both know about astral projection. We know how to get under each other’s nerves. Here’s what’s going on as it relates to modern life in the year 2000. They are using computers in conjunction with psychics. They call it *remote neural monitoring*. Like I said, Horace Streets is our prime CIA contact and he has amazing abilities to keep Contrarians up to date. The first thing Thelma taught me about was scopesthesia. That’s when you know you’re being watched but you can’t really prove it. You might believe your fire alarm has a hidden camera implanted inside it. You might believe Scoundrel operatives are using remote viewing. *That’s the ability to see things far away using psychic powers*. You might believe you’re being tailed on the streets. Scopesthesia, you see? In my early days on the Council of Nine, they taught me how to screw with people. *Psychic means only*. I am a ghost and my spirit leaves my body. I travel to people and induce them to leave their homes. That kind of thing. We film people I am focused on and I can see in real time that I have influence. Well? They have the same weapons. The end goal is inducing insanity. The Scoundrels drive you crazy. They can get away with twenty-five or so pure hits per year. Celebrities they hate and aren’t falling in line. Drug overdoses. Mysterious car crashes. We all know they murder but the media plays along. They say they’re accidents. Beyond straight murders, they can render you useless by tagging you as crazy. Ninety-five percent of all psychiatrists work for the Scoundrels. They know the effectiveness of remote viewing. *They know people aren’t paranoid*. They’ll turn you into a zombie, though. They have ways. Gaslighting is the term. Thelma was more than helpful in filling me in. We have a contact, John Leonard, who has studied psychiatrists for numerous movie parts. He knows their methods without ever becoming a silent killer. *Obsessive-compulsive*

disorder. That's the Scoundrel weapon of choice as of late. No paper trail, just like us. It's killed more individuals than bullets over the past five or ten years. They want you to know you're followed and they want you to feel helpless about it. The United States is a large prison at this point."

"They sound like sick bastards. How did they ever attain this power?" Sakata asked.

"Stupidity. The common person in America is stupid. They watch mass media, believe everything the nightly news says, and is more than happy to rat out anyone that's not a sheep." Donovan reached into his duffle bag. "I started a personal dictionary when I joined the Council. It's also part journal. *Esoteric*. I didn't know what the word meant at the beginning of 1984 but I learned. *Adjective. Intended for or likely to be understood by only a small number of people with specialized knowledge or interest.*" He closed his book. "That's what we are. We're an elite group who understands what's really going. The sheeple? They watch the Simpsons faithfully ever Sunday night and pretend they know anything important. Every night, they put their heads on their pillows and they feel clueless. They feel run down." Donovan held Sakata's hand. "Obsessive-compulsive disorder is OCD. When you read my notes, I write it as OCD. That's how they got me in 1996, a few years after I no longer had Council of Nine protection." He began to ramble. "Connor Milton told me dragons exist in six different dimensions. *Earth, water, fire, air, death and life*. We have shakras, you see? Humans have shakras. *Raja, yantra, mantra, bhakti, karma, jhana, and tantra*. Planet Earth has shakras and Agartha is real! In a spiritual dimension! These spirits come from under the Earth's surface and they're called dero. *Devils*. They obey the Scoundrels as of late but they're persuaded at times to flip. They have no moral character!" He composed himself. "I knew I was being watched in late 1995. By the beginning of 1996, they had me roped in. They followed me in unmarked cars and screwed with my periphery sensations. I became crazy. It was revenge on their part."

"My first real memory in politics was when Korean Airlines flight 007 was shot down by the Soviets over the Sea of Japan. It wasn't long afterward that my family moved to California. I knew nothing about America besides Disneyland and the rock band, Kiss. I'm not trying to compete with your life experience but I know things get strange and real." She waited for him to respond. When there was silence, she added, "I was seven years old. Do you know how that effects the way a person sees the world? Reality?"

"I was in a small apartment off of Melrose in 1996, Sakata. I had money. After working for Strategic Simulations, I started my own software company. We designed games. We designed useful software. It's a Contrarian goal to make it on your own. Kennedy kids don't have to work. JFK Junior? He tried. He flunked the bar exam a few times, but he tried and tried and tried. He rode a ten-speed around New York City and was close to the people like his uncle, Robert. Eventually, he became the editor of satirical newly-created magazine, *George*. That was his fate. *His destiny*. The Scoundrels despise the Kennedys. They believe it's their duty to eliminate them. They killed JFK, RFK and JFK Junior." Donovan knew he was trying to make a point but couldn't remember what it was. He took a couple of seconds to gather himself. "The Kennedys have an endowment. The kids don't have to work if they don't want to. *JFK Junior wanted to work*. I created a software company, Donovan Nebula Incorporated, and it worked. I don't have to live off the Cobb endowment. My distant cousin, Tyrus,

was the last Major League Baseball player to hit over four hundred in a baseball season. Some of us hold our own. But we ruffle feathers. The dominant weirdos of the world would rather have it that they attain their goals unopposed. So they attacked me when they knew they could get away with it. I was in a modest apartment and I could feel them. Hidden cameras and psychic spies. I would be at the kitchen faucet and I would have to shut it off three or four times. *Obsessive-compulsive disorder*. They did their job on me. If I went about life as a normal person, I could feel them plotting revenge. Conniving. They were going to take out my loved ones. I could hear them speaking inside my head as foreign voices. I could see them in my brain chatting in AOL chat rooms about how to rough me up and handle me.”

“This is how they rendered you ineffective?” Sakata ran her forefinger down Donovan’s nose. “You are lucky to have me. Ninety-nine percent of the people in America would truly believe you are crazy or bullshitting.”

“Horace Streets graced me with much of his knowledge and insights. His mother was Japanese. When Thelma chose you for the Fiji island rendezvous, she believed Horace’s mother was a relative of your grandmother. She believed she could trust you. In January of 1984, Horace flashed cards in front of me. It was like Freudian free association but the white square cards didn’t have blotches. *They had unusual symbols*.” Donovan reached into his duffle bag and pulled a few of them out. “Do you recognize this?” It was a sailor’s compass situated over measuring square. The letter G was in the middle.

“Freemasons. That’s their symbol. Hiram Abiff was the founder.” She was puzzled. “We’ve gone through this at some point or another.”

Donovan flipped the card. It was the Egyptian Eye of Horus.

“Eye of Horus,” Sakata said. “It’s the all-seeing eye. It relates to our brain’s pituitary gland. This is what gives us astral vision.”

“I’ve gone over this before?” Donovan couldn’t remember.

“You drink a lot, sweetie. You tell me some weird shit. I remember because I’m sober half the time.” Sakata took the cards from Donovan and flipped. “Baphomet. Skull and Bones. Zener wave card. Mark of the Beast. Anarchy. Vril Society. Kiribati national flag.” She paused and studied. “What’s this?” It was the letter C. There was a number seven on top and an upside down seven underneath.

“That’s your ticket, my doll. We can’t really know what’s going on within the Council of Nine once we’re gone. They invited us places. They bring us to events. It’s with a grain of salt. The newbies need to have veterans teach them the ropes. They don’t need their hands held through the whole process. There is only one way to know what’s going on. You have to maintain your contacts. In the years after I joined, Danny Elfman, Robert Hyde, Johnny Vatos and Tim Burton came along. In my final year, 1992, Ben Shephard from Soundgarden came along. I don’t know him well and this is his final year. Once he’s gone, I have to rely on rumors about who’s actually in. I know Tim Burton, though. Good guy. I can get you into the Council of Nine but you have to know social landmines. The pitfalls. The traps.” Donovan took the card from Sakata. “This is the realist symbol we have for the Contrarians. There are a lot of decoys and dupes. We happen to like the nineteenth century French clown, Ubu Roi. *Anti-hero*. He embodied our group when we were founded in 1915. You see a picture with his face and the letter C underneath? Flattering, but fraudulent. I’m talking about getting past the first few layers. There is a black letter G with a red circle and red diagonal bar crossing it out.

Not ours. Fraudulent. Mythical. No harm to carry a picture of it around but no one will believe you're one with us."

"Tim Burton will get me in?" Sakata asked.

"He's gone, but he can talk to Ben Shepherd. Only members in their final three years can nominate. I'm sure Tim knows the other two guys. I couldn't tell you. I've lost touch." He thought of something else. "They'll ask what the four forces of human nature are."

"Id, Ego, Superego. I know three of them," Sakata guessed.

"Not what they're looking for. Internally, we have our head and heart. Externally, we have an angel and devil on opposite shoulders. Seems cliché but that's what they're looking for."

"Can we talk about Mark of the Beast? Because you said it takes different forms and it becomes important to understand here and there. The Nike Swoosh. The IBM UPC code. Others. The digital symbols on the Police album, *Ghost in the Machine*. The snake on Metallica's black album. Both backwards and subtly disguised." Sakata took a pencil and grabbed Donovan's sketchbook. She took it for a few seconds. "See this lady? Her flowing hair? I heard a legend about elite billionaire parties and travel arrangements." She thumped the bottom of the lady's hair with the pencil's eraser. "This is actually a bar code. See how clever? I didn't draw it perfect, but I heard rumors that tattooed strands of hair do the job. They get you many places. There are other forms, but that was a neat one as crazy life goes."

"The Nike Swoosh isn't so much a typical form of the Mark of the Beast in its inherent explicit design so far as I know. It's the attitude. Corporations are branding people left and right all day. It's not different than cattle ranchers in the nineteenth century. They want you to feel like you're a beast and they want to corral you any which way. Kids are shooting each other for Nike shoes. Other kids in China and the third world are being paid slave wages to make them. What do *you* think is going on? If there's a single modern Mark of the Beast, that one has my nomination." Donovan took back his sketchbook and drew the snake from Metallica's black album. "Three backward sixes on top of each other right here, made to look like a coiled snake." He drew more. "The is my best Walt Disney signature." He took a red pen and outlined a few parts of it. "The left half of the W is a six. The dot on the I is a six. The top half of the Y is a six." He looked at Sakata. "Hidden in plain sight." He wrote Kleenex and Kellogg's in cursive with a pencil. He circled the first three letters after the K from both with a red pen. "When these are mirrored vertically, they form the six-six-six." Sakata quite often was giddy but Donovan noticed she was mildly fascinated. "No big deal," he said.

Sakata began singing lightly in French. "*Dites-moi, pourquoi, la vie est belle... Dies-moi, pourquoi, la vie est gai... Dites-moi, pourquoi, Chere Mad'moiselle... Est-ce que, parce que, vous m'aimez?*" She opened Donovan's shirt around the tummy and blew a zerbert. "I'm your Liat. Do you understand? You are Joe Cable. This airplane is the Bouncing Belch and we are flying to Bali Ha'i right now. We will drink Cognac under the banyan trees and eat mangos. Lush forests all around, crystal blue water, and warm sand between our toes. Can you sing with me?"

He sang a different song. "You've got to be taught to hate and fear, you've got to be taught from year to year... It's got to be drummed in your little ear, you've got to be carefully taught..."

Sakata sang with him. "You've got to be taught to be afraid of people whose

eyes are oddly made, and people whose skin is a different shade, you've got to be carefully taught... You've got to be taught before it's too late, before you are six or seven or eight, to hate all the people your relatives hate, you've got to be carefully taught..." When they were done Sakata said, "When we get to Nikumaroro, we can create our own version of South Pacific. *A modern adaptation*. An un-authorized sequel. Me and you!"

Donovan laughed. "My goal in life, Sakata?" He kissed her and made sure their tongues touched for a few seconds. "I want to meet my maker. *Not a human*. I've had the chances to do many things in life. I chased Oklahoma tornados in 1986. I've developed an immunity to three or four killer viruses just in case our government goes ballistic and tries to kill us with some psycho plague. I've done a lot of things. In the end, I believe it's here in these islands. I believe it's in Fiji or the Philippines or Borneo. I want to be there during a tropical storm. I want to sit on a mountain top and look into the clouds. I want to see the face of God in the eye of the storm. I know he'll wink at me." He shifted. "The Contrarians call him the Element. I want to be out there. Cowards run from God, but I want to meet him. *Shake his hand*. Ask him why he allowed us to develop nukes. Ask him why he allows innocent children to be ripped to shit during wars. I have a lot of questions for the guy."

"Or girl?" Sakata suggested.

A couple of hours passed and Nikumaroro was finally in sight. Donovan and Sakata joined the pilot up front. Donovan said, "It looks like a paramecium. Have you ever seen one under a microscope?"

"No," she responded. She was fascinated by the atoll.

"Circle around, Larry," Donovan told the pilot. "Do it a few times."

"Yes sir." The pilot was Larry Warrick. He was a Contrarian travel expert and operated motor boats and yachts quite well. He prided himself on trivial facts about volcanoes around the Pacific Ocean Rim of Fire. Quiet and loyal. That's how he saw himself.

"What's a paramecium?" Sakata asked.

"Single cell organism. Moves in water through twisting motions. Has an opening on the side. Pushes along with cilia." He pointed down. Kiribati atolls were typically vertically oblong and C-shaped. Nikumaroro was diagonal when looking at it on a map with the thicker end being in the northwest and becoming thinner as it sloped toward the southeast. Four miles from one tip to the other. Clear water lagoon encased inside of thin, low-lying forested land. "Amelia crashed right there." Donovan pointed down. "Horace is meeting us at the Tatiman passage." Larry Warrick handed Donovan a map with diagrams. "This is where salt water sloshes with fresh water." Donovan showed Sakata a northwest point on the map. "Airplane plexiglass was found walking distance away." His finger traced the rim along the northern end. "Nutiran is across the passage. Horace has a barge there." He continued. "Wreckage was found here and here." His finger traveled from Nutiran to Taraia and kept going. "This is Aukairame North and then we get to the southwest corner. Ameriki." There were denoted skull and bones just north of Ameriki.

"Is this where she died?" Sakata rubbed Donovan's back.

"Definitely. Years ago, they found telegrams, camping stuff and a skeleton. Do you know they did DNA tests on the skull fragment found in Hitler's bunker? The one that supposedly proved his suicide?"

"No. What are you saying?" Sakata asked.

Larry Warrick wanted to interject information he knew about but kept quiet. It wasn't his place. If neither one of them knew what they were talking about, he would have enlightened them. He knew a story about the SS Norwich City that became beached in 1929 in Nutiran near some Amelia Earhart wreckage.

"I saw Hitler my first year with the Contrarians at Eotwawki. For years, Thelma fucked with my head and pretended it was an initiation joke. I know what my eyes saw and over the years, forensics became sharper and sharper in regards to DNA testing. They never knew it was Amelia Earhart's skeleton that was found on this island until recently. She was destined for Howland Island four hundred miles north of where we're at. Her navigator was a drunk, Fred Noonan. They ditched a lot of their equipment in Papua New Guinea to make their plane lighter and more fuel-efficient. They radioed Howland and were received but, somehow, they couldn't hear the Navy squids on the ground. They flew around. Back then, Nikumaroro was known as Gardner Island and no one lived there."

Larry finally interjected. "People have come and gone. It's like Gilligan's Island. There was a village and government station in Ritiati for a while. That's just south of the Tatiman passage." He was ashamed of himself for speaking yet he felt he contributed helpful information.

"As the years went by, it became clear that Amelia survived. The camps have turned up remnants of turtles and shellfish. They used their remaining airplane fuel to charge their radio batteries and they sent distress calls day after day. Her landing gear was found. Her pocket knife." Donovan tapped Larry's shoulder. "Take us down."

"Yes sir!" Larry began their descent.

"You would think the world would know about this. Why do people not know?" Sakata pulled Donovan's shirt. "We should brace ourselves."

Donovan followed Sakata back and they fastened themselves down. "The media doesn't give a shit. People like secrets. Every now and then, there's a pretense that they care. Do you remember when Geraldo Rivera opened Al Capone's secret vault on live television?"

Sakata shook her head no.

"Those fuckers won't tell you when nuclear missiles are coming when those dark days finally reach us. I'm convinced of it. They pretend *now* that they give vital information as fast as it's available but there's a false reality they need to adhere to. Hitler died of a self-inflicted wound in 1945. That kind of thing."

"*Ten seconds!*" Larry called out. "Nine, eight, seven..." He stopped counting and a few seconds later, their seaplane was skidding along the ocean surface and approaching Nikumaroro from the west.

"Yes!" Sakata was happy and relieved. "Yes! I want to run the four-mile-length of the island!" She unfastened her safety belt.

They exited the seaplane on the northern-most point. There was a barge anchored about thirty yards off shore. A mid-aged man in sunglasses and open Hawaiian shirt waved then jumped into the water. He started to swim. Behind him, there was a teenaged, long-haired guy also wearing sunglasses but no shirt. He jumped overboard and swam to the shore. "Horace! Horace!" Donovan greeted his old buddy. "Sakata? You've met Horace."

Sakata bowed toward him then said. "It's a pleasure. I always love listening to your stories." The young kid walked up behind Horace. "Hello!" Sakata shook his

hand.

“Donovan? I’d like you to meet Vivian’s boyfriend.” Horace put his arm around the teenager’s neck and patted his stomach with the other hand. “Fletcher!”

Fletcher was polite. “Glad to meet you, sir! I’ve heard a lot about you!” He bowed first toward Donovan then toward Sakata. He told Donovan, “Your girlfriend is as lovely as the sky on a breezy summer afternoon with the essence of tulip when it’s full in bloom.”

“You gotta be kidding me!” Donovan belched out with laughter. “I like it! Somehow, I like it!”

“I’ve got pressing issues,” Horace told Donovan. “You don’t mind if we walk ahead?”

“No problem!” Donovan looked over at his seaplane. Larry stared over and waited for a sign. Donovan waved over and yelled, “We’ll be back in three hours!” Larry gave a thumbs up. Donovan started walking along the northern rim eastward with Horace.

Sakata and Fletcher let them have their space then trailed behind. “You are dating Horace’s daughter? That must be interesting.”

“It’s an adventure. I met her at Rosemont High School in Sacramento, California my freshman year. Didn’t think too much about it. We were in a government class and I was taken by her world consciousness. The Oklahoma City disaster happened. I remember she knew crazy things about Waco, Texas. These disasters happened a couple of years apart from each other, pretty much to the day. *Turner Diaries*. She knew about them. The teacher would get mad at her. *Like she knew too much, or something*. John Doe Two from Oklahoma City. That sort of thing. The brother of the governor wrote a book and his killer was Tom McVey, not a far stretch from Tim McVeigh. So we dated and loved to watch Oliver Stone movies together. *Natural Born Killers* was the first one, I’m pretty sure. Her dad knows Stone I’ve been told.” Fletcher looked out into the ocean. “Have you seen the national flag of this place? Looks just like this!” The Kiribati flag featured a white and blue ocean of wavy lines, a red sky, yellow Sun and a yellow bird flying above. “I get to travel because of Vivian. I lucked out. Her dad’s amazing. So long as Vivian is happy, he lets me do whatever I want.” Fletcher stopped, turned around, and pointed back to the barge. “My camera’s back there.” He resumed walking. “I’m a photographer.”

“Art dealer? That’s Horace, right?” Sakata asked. She knew he was in the Central Intelligence Agency from Donovan. She knew he sheltered Vivian and wasn’t sure what was told to Fletcher. She knew his main cover was in art.

“It’s a mystery. I don’t question much. He treated us to a Venezuela vacation a couple of years ago right after we graduated high school. *Strange trip*.” Fletcher walked along with Sakata for a few seconds and wondered what Donovan was talking about with Horace. “We study the weirdest things when we travel. *Lava*. I was in Hawaii. *Kilauea*. Lava’s been seeping out of the Earth since 1983! I go there and all I’m expected to do is take pictures!”

Fifty yards in front of Sakata and Fletcher, Horace and Donovan spoke to each other. “We were in Fiji last night. Me. The kids. Robert Hyde. A few others.” Horace marveled at the coconut trees. “Such a beautiful place! Can’t believe we don’t come here more often!”

“I can feel the tension. Not all the time, but it’s there.” Donovan thought about

his own New Year's Eve celebration. "Sakata asked me about the Scoundrels. *With all this diabolical crap you talk about, why aren't there ninjas scaling the side of our boat right now?* I brush it off. On the plane ride over she wondered why their jet fighters weren't shooting us out of the air. I laugh it off."

"MAD. *Mutually assured destruction.* Did you tell her about that?" Horace shook it off. "It doesn't matter. At least not for too much longer. They're starting to single us out. They're going to make their move. This year? They have the election rigged. It's not just mind control through the media. They have electronic voting machines wired to give the GOP the election. *Sequoia, ES&S, Diebold.* The major three are all on board. Next year, we have it pegged to July fourth or September eleventh. The Twin Towers are coming down. I spoke with Paul Laffoley this past July. He was a friend of Andy Warhol in the seventies and was involved in the construction of New York's World Trade Center under Minoru Yamasaki. They incorporated Saudi Binladin Group as subcontractors. *There are explosives in those buildings that no one knows about.* The Saudi Binladen Group was headed by Mohammed bin Laden. This guy worked on the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. He had more than fifty children and one of them, Osama, was pegged as a mastermind behind terrorists who set off an explosive in the parking lot of the North Tower in 1993. Of course, the whole thing was a sham. Mahmud Adouhalima, Ramzi Yousef, Ahmed Ajaj and the others were patsies. The FBI was running a drill and these guys believed they had powder, not anything that would ignite." Horace walked along and took in a few deep breaths. "The Scoundrels are planning something much bigger. They want to control every part of our lives."

"Sakata dreams about it." Donovan turned back and waved to her. He blew her a kiss after she waved back. "She has insights. She knows what's going on."

"Not too many people have chosen to live on this island," Horace said. "In the summer of 1998, a Berkeley student working on his master's stayed here. Ate turtles, but not the protected ones. Brought his own. He tried to emulate what he thought Fred Noonon and Amelia Earhart were going through. Brought peyote. I know because I supplied it for him. I take my barge far and wide around these Pacific areas. Geology student, by the way, and fascinated by Mu the continent. Wild curly hair. They called them Jewfros in the seventies but I don't think this guy was Jewish. Nappy beard hair. Zeke Fowler's the guy's name. And he studies and he writes his dissertation here. Fringe tectonics is his specialty and he minors in folklore. Smoking the peyote night and day, it shapes up." Horace stopped to face Donovan. "Mermaids. The Element. The whole thing." He didn't stop for too long because he wanted their conversation to remain private. "Two-foot mermaids come up to him on the shore where we're heading. They speak like dolphins but they also have rudimentary capacities for human syntax. He has a camera but realizes they understand something about it. Any ordinary person would call this bullshit but I entertained his explanation. *The vibe.* The mermaids and mermen knew they would be exploited if he started filming." Horace walked for a while without saying anything. "He talked of lobster creatures with the torsos of humans." He walked more. "Edward Cayce. Have you ever heard of him?"

"He was a psychic medium. Mid nineteen thirties. Knew about Mu through his telepathic powers and others before him. FS Oliver made contact in the late nineteenth century. Phylos and Ouowu were powerful spirits they contacted." Donovan walked for a while without saying anything. *I know why Horace goes quiet. This is crazy talk. To anyone outside of Contrarian circles, this is lunacy.* "Richard Shaver wrote some of the

first comics I owned. He wrote about Mu but he called it Lemuria.”

“Cayce helped form what we believe about Mu but regular people don’t accept his methods. James Churchward tried to give the so-called myths scientific credibility. This is where Zeke Fowler comes in. He’s an Iconoclast, by the way, just like Clint Roth. Remember him?”

“Yeah. He picked me up in Yucatán and took me to Eotwawki back in eighty-four. We were supposed to meet up in Bolivia but never did.” More silent steps. “He was afraid of porpoises, I heard.”

“They picked him. Sparrows, they say, are messengers of death. Have you heard of people who are prone to have sparrows knock at their windows? Even if they move? Porpoises are the same but they deliver a message of knowledge. That’s what Clint came to believe. *He knew too much.* That’s what he told me and he got cold feet. He’d be on boats everywhere and porpoises would follow him. Strange stuff.” Horace got back to the subject of Mu. “So this Zeke Fowler guy studied these islands. He studied myth, science, and *fringe science*. The South Pacific Superswell, also called the SPS. The South Pacific Isotopic and Thermal Anomaly, also called SOPITA. It’s a few hundred miles southeast of where we are. You spent last night at Caroline Island? SPS and SOPITA nab the southern end of the Line Islands of Kiribati. Society Islands, the Tuamotu Archipelago, Cook Islands, Marquesas Islands and a few others. Not far below the equator and on the other side of the International Date Line. Stretches to Easter Island, actually.” Horace thought about his own New Year’s Eve celebration. “We were in Fiji last night. My daughter and Fletcher are in love. Every now and then, they mutually separate. They think it’s good to have space every now and then.”

“Does SOPITA have anything to do with the Ring of Fire? All the volcanic activity?” Donovan thought about comics he was developing. “Me and Sakata were discussing Agarthia. What can you tell me about that?”

“A guy named Keith MacKenzie believes a comet or something else wiped out Mu. Maniniki is in the center of the SPS, Ontong-Jave in a ring around it, and Marcus-Wake Seamounts beyond that. Zeke Fowler tells me there’s a hypothetical zone of outward flow and downwelling. A radial pattern above an elongated lower-mantle plume. It’s all Greek to me. Twenty million years ago corresponds to the circle outside of Maniniki, forty million years ago for the next and sixty for the last which, by the way, expands to Australia. And? Mu reached well into North America. Everyone wants to know why there’s the Salt Lake in Utah. Whatever catastrophic event that sunk Mu disconnected it’s land from current-day western United States.” Horace reached into his pocket and pulled out suntan lotion. He offered some to Donovan but he declined. Horace rubbed some on his face. “I’m no scientist but I remembered as much as I could. A lot of technical stuff. Later, down the road, Zeke Fowler wanted me to use my connections so he could teach at Harvard. They wouldn’t have him. First of all, he barely completed his master’s and they really want guys with PhDs teaching their kids. Second? His lines blurred too much. He talked about the SPS and SOPITA, scientific stuff, and then talked about the Cayce readings. He wasn’t able to separate his curriculum.”

“What’s your opinion, Horace?” Donovan didn’t know why they were guarding their conversation any longer and wanted to slow down for Sakata and Fletcher to catch them. “Not being a scientist, what do you make out of all this?”

“You know my stance, Donovan. The United States government lies. They

shield people from real information. Decades after something truly important happens, they release redacted documents through the Freedom of Information Act and a small piece of the puzzle.” A strong gust of wind blew and Horace liked how it felt. “So this Zeke Fowler fellow is telling me about this mesozoic impact-triggered disturbance, as he called it, and starts to talk to me about isochrons. Do you know what they are?” Horace stopped in his tracks again.

Donovan believed that was the cue that they would wait for the others. “Isochrons? Never heard of ‘em.”

“The United States Geological Survey has satellites in the air. *High tech stuff*. They’re able to peer into the ocean floor all around the world. These isochrons are able to tell us how old it is. Our Earth is supposedly four billion years old. How old do you believe the Mid-Atlantic Ridge is?” Horace looked back toward Sakata and Fletcher. They were now in speaking distance.

“Well, water wasn’t here from the very beginning. One billion years old?” Over the years, Donovan had many strange conversations with many people. He recalled a DC comic writer, Neal Adams, talking about something similar to this. Sakata walked up to Donovan and he held her. He told her, “We’re talking about comic book fodder right now. And local fringe science.”

“Fringe science?” Horace asked. He embraced Fletcher when he was close enough. “Viv and Sakata’s friends might meet us here tomorrow. That’s the plan for now but if weather gets nasty, we’re heading back to Fiji.” Horace looked to Donovan and the group kept walking along. “Ten million years! Fringe science? This is the United States government saying the ocean floor in the middle of the Atlantic is ten million years old! There’s a vertical ridge east of Hawaii also ten million years old! The ridge to Hawaii’s west has only been here eighty-five million years and the oldest ocean floor is near the Philippines and it’s a hundred and fifty million years old! Do you know what this means?”

“Everyone has been wrong about our planet?” Donovan thought for a while. “Years ago, Thelma introduced me to a cartoonist, Neal Adams. We were drinking at Preston’s place in the Hollywood Hills. I remember he said the Earth was expanding like a balloon! Amazing frickin’ idea! I thought he was joking. He’s in comics. He said he’s drawn many globes. Mars is half Earth’s diameter. When Earth was that size, it had no ocean. Neal showed us some sketches how all the land masses fit perfectly together.” Donovan grabbed for Sakata’s hand and held it. “Honey? Do you remember me telling you about Neal Adams?”

“You got drunk with him. That’s all I remember.” She smiled.

“Yes,” Horace said. “I’m convinced that our planet is growing. Our telescopes are incredible. We see it happening on Europa, one of Jupiter’s moons. There are long trails that form all across the surface from mineral deposits. They are separated by tectonic spreads. Without these spreads, they perfectly line up.” Horace focused on Fletcher, “I’ve told you these things, right?”

“Yes sir,” Fletcher said. “I don’t retain it all but you said something about LAB. What was that?”

“LAB?” Horace thought. “Yeah, yeah! Acronym for Lithosphere-asthenosphere boundary.” He turned back to Donovan. “The upper-most part of our crust is the lithosphere. Right below is the asthenosphere. The boundary of these regions is thick, about a hundred and thirty-miles around the eastern United States. It gets thinner

as we head west. Seventy-five miles around Texas, Utah and northward. By the time we get to California up through Alaska, it's only thirty miles! Thin! In geological terms at least."

"What does this mean to us today?" Donovan asked. "I appreciate your help and your knowledge, but this is something me and Sakata ponder. We keep stumbling on esoteric information and we don't know what to do with it. Me? I'm doing comics. I told Sakata I might join Caliber or I might branch and start my own thing, Enigma. The Information Superhighway is out there and begging for pioneers to dump data and stories everywhere." Donovan tried to remember any of the conversation with Neal Adams. A lot was going on, subjects went from left to right in a hurry, and alcohol was involved. "If I remember right, there's a dispute between these so-called fringe scientists about what's causing the Earth to become larger. Neal, if I remember right, believes in Einstein's ether. There's a solar wind out there. Newton's laws of physics don't apply in extreme conditions, especially in quantum mechanics. Subatomic particles are shot off in all directions and, in the middle of the Earth, they are melded into hydrogen atoms and larger atomic building blocks. Natural fusion. The Earth grows."

"Something triggered and it didn't start expanding until about a hundred and fifty million years ago. It sat along as a Mars-sized planet for a few billion years. Something happened and mass started accumulating in the middle, like you said, and pushing outward. A smaller Earth explains so many things! The huge dinosaurs! The giant sea creatures! Mosquitoes with wingspans a couple of feet wide! Nephilim! Human giants!" Horace considered the peyote Zeke Fowler brought to Nikumaroro. "We've lost so much of our primal humanity! We don't have all the answers but we sure have a lot of clues. I'm convinced our Earth expanded quickly. I would hesitate to tell my daughter, Vivian, because I tell her too many strange tales. This might be a little too beyond." Horace ruffled Fletcher's hair. "Are you gonna tell her about this, son?"

"No! I don't need her to think I'm crazy." Fletcher Browne laughed.

"The other school of thought," Horace told Donovan, "is that the Earth is expanding but it is hallow inside. *Agartha is the world in the middle*. Neal Adams prefers to call his theory the Growing Earth model because he believes mass is being added. James Maxlow, an Australian engineer, likes Expanding Earth Hypothesis. Why? He believes the Earth's core was solid ice. Something triggered a hundred and fifty million years ago and it melted. *Methane gas formed a bubble in the middle and it kept pushing out like pumping up a basketball or blowing up a balloon*. You have to keep in mind that Maxlow doesn't believe gravity pulls from the center of the Earth. He believes it pulls from the crust on the outside. There's only so many miles of it. Water gushed out of these isochrons and the Earth got bigger and bigger. There is an ocean above and below the Earth's crust. Agartha. It's below us."

"How frickin' neat!" Sakata loved to hear the story. "I want to know if we can get there!"

Horace told her, "Admiral Richard Byrd, less than ten years after Amelia Earhart crash landed on this island, flew an airplane into a hole at the North Pole! Can you believe that? Not fiction, at least the guy is not. Real army pilot with a real story he stood by. And? You no doubt know about the alien base in Antarctica?"

There was a pause. "I know about the tiny humans. Me and Donovan discussed this on the way over here!" Sakata raised Donovan's hand to her lips and kissed it.

"It ties in," Horace said. "All the same region. The hole at the pole, silver discs

near Beardmore Glacier where those miniature human skeletons were found. Then there's the issue of missing scientists on the other side of the Ross Ice Shelf." Horace changed the subject. "I'd like to start a campfire when we reach Ameriki. There's something about this place that fills me with bliss. Have you ever heard that people have beacons? *Spiritual beacons, I'm talking about.* This place calls to me. When I'm away, I think about this island all the time." Another strong gust of wind blew. *It's almost like the island is acknowledging me,* Horace mused.

The group walked along without talking and a half hour later, they reached the atoll's southern tip. Sakata broke the silence, "Do you believe in love at first sight?" She wasn't asking anyone in particular. "Or true love?"

Horace answered. "I love humanity. That's the type of person I am. It might not show to some, but I root for us. *I mean all of us.* It's hard. Very, very difficult. There's a lot of imbeciles in the world. A lot of people want to hurt others for no reason at all. Thick skin. Ignorance. It's hard to keep faith in this world but I try. I really try to stay hopeful." There were dancing coconut trees and a mild breeze. Horace loved the moment he was in. "I'll gather firewood." He walked toward a group of trees.

"I can't stand the way this is beginning," Donovan said to Sakata and Fletcher. "This is the first day of 2000 and it's too good. Bad omen. Almost always when I feel like this, there's nowhere to go but down." He looked upwards and believed the clouds were moving particularly fast. "I'm getting a feeling of vertigo."

"I'll help Horace get wood." Fletcher took off.

"Where do you see this going?" Donovan held Sakata tight. His stomach tingled but he was optimistic. "I have to fight through moments of doubt but I think we're going to be fine."

"I believe you're immune," Sakata said. She was happy. "There's a lot that goes on in America, Europe, Asia and the rest of the world and you have your own thing going on."

"I keep thinking there's something we're missing." Donovan looked across the ocean waters. "Give it a couple of hours and it'll be gone. I'm sure it will." One of his worst feelings was uncertainty. It was fine in some circumstances but not this. He believed something catastrophic was coming and couldn't shake it. "What was that about love at first sight? And true love?" Donovan Cobb gazed across the breaking waves.

"I want to know who Jesus was. That's why we have this special year, right? He was born two thousand years ago. Who was Jesus? What was he to you?" Sakata stroked Donovan's back. She waited.

"We don't talk about religion too much in our circles. I mean, a lot is understood. But if we talk about it too much, it's almost as if we lose ground." He turned to his lover. "Sakata? Jesus was a great man. I'm sure of that. With all the religious elements around him and the great legend he left behind, I'm pretty sure he was a good man." He thought about it for a few seconds. "You know the Scoundrels? The people we butt heads with sometimes? They are oppressors, just like the Romans were. A couple of generations before the birth of Christ, a Greek lady moved to Egypt and ran the country. Daughter of Ptolemy, Cleopatra. She had a son from Julius Cesar and later married Marc Antony and had twins. They were power hungry people back then just like now. She was hunted by Gaius Octavius, great nephew of Julius Cesar, and Rome's Emperor exactly two thousand years ago. They were crucifying people in Judea long, long before Jesus came around. They'd hang 'em up in the trees, feed 'em to the wolves

and torture them any which way. Jesus? He got it bad. Crown of thorns, nailed to a cross, humiliated around friends and Roman soldiers. *King of the Jews*. They wrote it on a plank in three different languages and nailed it above his head. I can see Jesus there right now. In my mind's eye, I see him in agony, blood dripping down his face. One of Roman soldiers—*centurions is what they're known as*—put a sword through his side while he was up there hanging. Pierced his lungs and water came out. Actually, it wasn't water they came to find out. *Pleural effusion is what it's called*. And when he was thirsty, they put a rag of vinegar up to his face."

"If many people were crucified before Jesus, why was he special? Wasn't he just a carpenter? Or was he a fisherman? What was he?" She reached around Donovan's hips and started to rub his buttocks. "It's such a strange religion because I don't understand why God's son would have to die here on Earth." She waited for an answer. "What can you tell me?"

Donovan peeked past Sakata to make sure Horace and Fletcher were still out gathering firewood. "Jesus was a great man, like I said. We're only fish, you understand? We came from the sea and at some point before our existences, we were single celled organisms. Somehow, we managed to manipulate and dominate the land. We extracted copper out of the ground." He put his hand on Sakata's chin and directed her to watch Horace and Fletch gather wood in the distance. "We learned to create and manage fire."

Sakata watched Horace and Fletch gather wood.

Donovan continued, "We fought the woolly mammoth and defended ourselves against saber-toothed tigers. We became the top of the food chain. When there were no more beasts to threaten our species, we fought each other. We built jails with the metals we extracted and forged. We built weapons and we built torture devices." He looked Sakata in the eyes when her gaze returned to him. "We are the scariest animal this planet has ever known. Jesus knew what he was doing. I'm convinced of it. The Romans dominated and they oppressed. Jesus knew that being outspoken could get him killed. He spoke anyway. There were thieves and murderers they made examples of. But? The crime of Jesus was blasphemy. That's what sets him apart from the others that were hung on the cross." Donovan could see Horace and Fletcher approaching through his peripheral vision. He looked over and saw both were carrying large heaps of varied branches. "The Scoundrels would have us killed, Sakata. This is why I relate to Jesus as a man. *Not necessarily as a deity*. I've been around too many pious wankers and scathing hypocrites to adhere to traditional Christianity as it's evolved in modern day America. But I can respect a person standing up for his beliefs even if it gets him killed. Somehow, that's the crux of it."

"I can't wait for the fire!" Sakata kissed Donovan's chin then ran to help Fletcher set up a pit. As the Sun began to set, the campfire began to burn and spread warmth. As the sky got darker, small chit chat ended and Sakata blurted, "Donovan and me were talking about Jesus Christ when you gathered wood."

There was silence.

Horace commented, "We don't talk about it too much, but when we do it's for hours. You really want to open this can of worms?"

She thought about it and became solemn. "*No. Not really.*"

"I was telling her about the woolly mammoth and saber-toothed tigers, too. Can we talk about the chupacabra and huay chivo? I'm sure Fletcher would love to hear these

stories.” Donovan talked for a while about fringe and esoteric teachings and knowledge. He explained how very few species fossilize. “Did you watch *Weird Science* as a kid, Fletcher? You remember when Gary and Wyatt had that raging party when Gary’s parents left town? We used to do a lot of that kind of stuff when I was a teenager. Gary and Wyatt got lucky, though, and were able to clean the house before mom and dad came back home. *Barely, though.* There was no evidence that anyone was there. Let’s suppose, though, that someone took a Polaroid picture of a couple of friends in the kitchen and it turned up a few days later. You like Polaroids, right? Horace tells me you’re into photography and have collected vintage cameras. Anyhow, the Polaroid picture would be like a fossil. It’s some evidence that there were people in the house. But? There was a raging ten-kegger going on! Hundreds of people with their own unique lives. And the bikers and Lisa and the Porsche 928 and whole shebang! They were there but no evidence. We have had fantastic creatures walk this planet and roam in our oceans. We only have a *fraction* of a clue of what was going on.”

“Don’t forget the aliens from outer space!” Fletcher laughed and pointed to the sky. Even though they were on an island near the equator, lights began to flicker. “We’re not supposed to get aurora lights here, are we?”

“In the south it would be aurora australis and in the north it would be aurora borealis.” Horace Streets was mesmerized. “No, Fletch. It would be quite unusual to have flickering lights of that magnitude out here.” He thought about the alien ship from *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* and he thought about the old school arcade game, *Space Invaders*. The lights grew and there was an intensely bright disc coming from the east half the size of the Moon. “Could happen with a radical pole shift.” Two more bright discs zoomed into formation behind the first. Horace looked over at Sakata and Donovan. Don’s jaw was literally dropped. “Maybe solar storm. The Carrington Event of 1859 was a coronal mass ejection which could be seen from Queensland in Australia. *Brighter than the Moon.* Something like that today would fry the circuits of orbiting satellites. Life here on Earth would be changed. Chaos. Death.”

“They’re moving in formation, sir,” Fletcher commented. The discs became larger and slowly scooted north then west then south. They seemed to dance subtly for a few seconds.

Horace continued speaking about aurora lights, almost in denial of what he was seeing. “So in 1859 they saw the aurora borealis in Honolulu.” He was speaking in a trance. “That’s twenty-one degrees north of the equator. And in 1921 in Samoa they were witnessed there. That’s thirteen degrees south. In Singapore in 1909 they were observed. Eight degrees south.”

The flickering lights on the eastern horizon remained. It was the most naturally beautiful thing Donovan could remember seeing. The lights were aqua green and swirled and span upward in thin spokes. Still higher, there was a violet haze which dissipated like the rising smoke of their campfire. “Sir? Those are indeed aurora lights.” Don looked at Horace and saw his face was frozen.

By now, the discs were larger than the Moon and growing. Slithering. A metallic quality.

Horace snapped out of his stupor. He turned his back to the discs and crouched to the sand. “Yes, Donovan. We are at four and a half degrees south of the equator and this would be some incredible feat.” Horace tried to think and make sense of the objects and remained crouched for a few seconds. When he turned toward them again, they were

even larger. Five times the Moon. Six times. Ten times. Fifteen.

Then they zoomed away into the northeast and disappeared.

When they were gone, Horace remained awestruck. After it sunk in, he broke out into boisterous, delirious laughter. He cackled and he snortled and chortled. When it was over, we walked behind Donovan and put his arms around him and held him from behind. "I saw something like this in the sixties. I never thought I'd see it again."

"Aliens?" Fletcher Browne asked. His eyes were still fixed at the point where the discs left.

"In the fifties, the United States Air Force had a kind and receptive attitude toward the public in regards to reporting unidentified flying objects. *Project Sign and Project Grudge of the late forties*. Over time, that changed. They began to ridicule and categorically deny testimony as a matter of standard government policy. *Project Blue Book of 1952 was the start of this*. There were internal rumblings about how to handle this issue. Decades passed. In 1994, the Federal Emergency Management Agency released a booklet to firefighters nationwide about how to deal with radical situations. Chapter thirteen was titled *Enemy Attack and UFO Potential*." Horace released Donovan and turned him around. Sakata backed away and let the two men chat. "Did you know it's illegal to make alien contact?" Horace grinned and fastened a grip on Donovan's shoulders. "*Five thousand dollar fine! Maybe jail!*" He chortled and was near total delirium. "Title fourteen, section twelve hundred and eleven, Code of Federal Regulations passed in 1969! Then on October 5 in 1982, Congress formalized it more by passing a national bill!"

"I don't care what happens from this point forward." Donovan reached out for Horace and held him. He let it last for a few moments then released him. "This is a game changer."

"Donovan?" Sakata called for her lover. *Am I crazy?* she wondered. "I have a feeling our plans are going to change." She studied his face.

Don turned toward her. He took her hand and led her toward the foaming ocean waters. The aurora lights were dimming and almost gone. "We'll be a couple of minutes," he called to Horace and Fletch. "Game changer," he told Sakata. "Game changer," he repeated. "Okay?"

"I understand. I want to meet Vivian, Horace's daughter. Fletcher said good things about her when we walked here." She felt nervous.

"We will camp here tonight. In the morning, we head out and you take off to Fiji with Fletcher. I will give you all the money you need. We have friends there. Zhen Choi is a banker and he operates a couple of casinos. Macau was run by the Portuguese for centuries until last year. Better gambling town than Vegas in my opinion. You will have fun and I'll arrange for your friends to meet you there. *Kapuni, Onishi, Sawa*. Ilha Encantada is one of the better hotels and that's where you'll be."

They embraced. "When can I expect to see you again?"

"*Game changer*," Donovan said.

"Prophecy? Is this some kind of prediction that someone made? You act like this is some type of omen. Can I be wrong? I mean, I'll admit it stretches beyond my idea of what a coincidence is." Sakata thought about her friends. "How do you move on from this?"

"You force your way through. Find meaning later, not now. It'll drive you nuts if you try to make sense of it." Donovan walked with Sakata along the shore. "I'm sick

of it myself. You grow up in America hearing about all these strange things. Bigfoot, aliens, telepathy, secret societies and many mysteries. You find there's a string that ties them together."

"What's the string here?" Sakata asked. "What's the unifying theory on this?"

"A half million years ago, an alien race came to Earth and they shaped what humans would become. We were lowly primates at a point in time and barely becoming upright bipedal dwellers. We lived around the oceans and seas. We cannot exist without water. It is crucial to who we are." Donovan cherished sea mist blown onto his face. "Also, we learned to control fire." He looked over at their campfire in the distance. "Flint and wood." He continued walking with Sakata hand-in-hand and looked into the night sky. "Somewhere out there in the great distance is something called the Oort Cloud. The distance from the Earth to the Sun is an astronomical unit or AU. The Oort Cloud is located forty thousand of these things away. This is where comets form but that's not all. Zecharia Sitchin wrote that entire planets exist out there and some travel like comets in oblong orbits around the Sun. Planet X, also known as Nibiru, is one of them and it's larger than Jupiter. Swings by every twenty-six thousand years. The Anunnaki come from this place. *They raised humans*. The Sumerians lived where Iraq is today. They were given knowledge of time and they were the first to divide it into allocations of six. Twelve months, twenty-four hours, sixty minutes, sixty seconds. Everything divisible by six."

Sakata yanked Donovan's hand and stopped him. "You don't believe this! I can hear it in your voice! It's a legend, but you don't believe this!"

Donovan averted eye contact. The campfire was far away by now and he could only see her faintly from the moonlight. "When I was young, I contemplated these things. I studied. I questioned motives. Why is a person saying or teaching a certain thing? Money from books? Genius? Madness? Bold stupidity? Guessing?" Donovan sat and watched the reflection of the Moon off the Pacific waters. His feet took in small incoming waves. "Let's sit," he told Sakata. When she was seated, he said, "I compared notes and I contemplated scientific theory and I put it next to science fiction. Lionel Fanthorpe, Ray Bradbury, Isaac Asimov, Carl Sagan, Benjamin Crown, Sebastian Watson, Piers Anthony, Mercedes Lackey. I studied fringe science and pseudo science. I have a ten by twenty public storage space in Los Angeles with all my comics, notebooks, photos, charts, maps, school books, newspaper clippings and a crap load of other things. Christmas cards, love letters, souvenirs, artifacts, mementos, posters and so on. I have documents released from the government. I have foreign magazines, ideas I had for inventions and movie scripts, and a few contraptions I made of my own." *Is this the culmination of my life?* Donovan wondered. "I had an idea based off Bode's Law and Star Wars that it wasn't Nibiru that brought the Anunnaki here. It was the planet that existed between the orbits of Mars and Jupiter." Donovan waited. *You're crazy*, he thought. *That's what she's going to say. You're crazy.*

"I could believe it," she said. "I don't know anything about astronomy or science fiction, but I could believe it. What else explains those UFOs we saw?"

"The Earth has incredible explosions," Donovan explained. "In the ancient world, this would only be volcanic blasts. Sumatra, Yellowstone and so on. These things alert the aliens. It's like looking for lost hikers in the forest at night. *Flare guns*. They make it much easier to find people." Donovan took a deep breath. The smell of seaweed was strong and he enjoyed its unique aroma. "When we dropped atomic bombs in New

Mexico and Japan, we didn't need another supervolcano to blow soot into the atmosphere. It worked like a flare gun. *They came*. Just like they did thousands of years ago, they came. Roswell, New Mexico. Other places."

"But they defy physics, don't they? The way they travel?" Sakata dug her fingers into damp mud. She hoped to find sand crabs. She knew they weren't on every beach she went but she hoped they would be in Nikumaroro.

"In the early nineties, me and Preston had pagers. We stopped seeing each other as often because he was raising three daughters but we'd hook up when we were both in LA at the same time. Can you imagine what aborigines think of our technology? I wondered about it often in those days. Magic. They must believe it's magic. But it's not. Science explains how pagers work. And the new Blackberry cell phones." He shifted. "In theory, all the matter in the Universe was created at the time of the Big Bang. But did you know that an equal amount of antimatter was created at the same time? Somehow, though, we can hardly find any of it. Maybe it's hiding? Who knows? Aliens. If they exist anywhere near us, they know how to use it."

"And advanced energy honing? Fusion, perpetual motion and stuff we can't fathom?" Sakata discovered a sand crab and held it up to Donovan. "Would you like a pet?"

Donovan took it and let it squirm around his palm. "My dad called these ghost crabs." He answered Sakata's inquiry about energy, "They definitely have something going on we don't understand. This was the beginning of Nazi power. In 1871, Edward Bulwer-Lytton wrote *The Power of the Coming Race* and this was the start of the Vril Society. Legend has it that aliens landed in Germany sometime in the nineteen thirties and gave Hitler a brief technological edge over the rest of the world. Furthermore, they led the Germans to their base at the South Pole."

"I don't like to think too much about it because these so-called legends are muddled with too much political gunk. You don't think so?" She started to rub mud onto Donovan's legs and thought to ask him if he'd like to be buried in the sand. She refrained.

"Doesn't matter. We all witnessed the same thing earlier. They know our calendars. They know the significance of this day. It is January 1, 2000 and they want to send a message. What are they trying to say? Not sure, but it's best that we prepare for something different. I have to figure out if there's reason for alarm. I'm going to talk to some people and it'll take a couple of weeks. After that? Business as usual." Donovan kissed Sakata's cheek and handed the crab back to her. He suggested, "Maybe tomorrow when we wake up, I'll let you bury me in the sand. Just not too close to the waves."

Sakata laughed and believed she might have a tinge of precognition developing. The next day, she was sent to Fiji with Fletcher Browne. Horace Streets and Donovan Cobb made their way to Auckland, New Zealand where they stayed at a hotel near the recently-built Sky Tower. Like much of the rest of the world, casinos were popping up left and right. SkyCity Hotel had opened in 1996 and was New Zealand's second place open for gamblers. The first was Christchurch Casino which opened in 1994. Horace and Donovan were at SkyCity for the night life, but they were also there on a matter of strange business. The following day was January 3, 2000 and they met with Contrarians north of Auckland in a humble town, Paihia. It was a great resort town for tourists with wonderful beach waters and lovely rolling hills of lush meadows with plenty of sheep feeding on it. They gathered at Kingsgate Hotel and discussed important matters. The

list of Contrarian tycoons included...

Jared "Buster" Arnold - hydraulic fracturing business,

Preston and Hale Bancroft - movie producers,

Thelma Rhett - Donovan's wife and inheritor of the Circus Echelon Toy company,

Darryl Tyler - involved in human trafficking and sex trade,

Zhuan Choi - brother of Zhen Choi, manager of Chinese banks and Macau casinos,

Dennis Heydrich - corrupt evangelical minister, speaker and writer,

Kubu Lacey - pioneer of reality rap music and record label owner,

John Leonard - actor and unofficial head shrink,

Isaac Hook - private equity investor,

Julian Garrett - head of RMI,

Barry Pierce - lumber bigwig,

Luke Hammond - marijuana trade,

Connor Milton - exotic animals dealer,

Eugene Donotus - owner of Jersey and Vegas casinos and investor in SkyCity

Hotel,

Phyllis Horner - clothing designer,

Norman Whittaker - trucking, sea transport and general logistics,

Herman Eichelberger - NSA representative,

Cornelius Stuart - CIA liason,

Spencer Lafayette - vertically challenged entertainer and actor,

Clive Klauber - lawyer hot shot,

Evan Ruxton - pornography,

Travis Perry - real estate,

Dale and Earl Owen - endowment brothers,

Lyle Garman - chemicals, pesticides and agribusiness,

Tanner Doyle - builder of yachts, cruise liners, oil platforms, and island dredging,

Fabian Lynch - big pharma,

Roger Corliss - motivational speaker and author,

Titus Clemons - arms trader and operator of black sites,

and the Hyde, Callypso and Cobb clans.

The Contrarians met every December in various world locales but it wasn't a requirement for everyone to come. They focused more on five-year cycles which were typically around Atherton, Australia. They enjoyed Cairns because of the lovely beach and they liked camping around Wooroonooran National Park. Every now and then, they would hunker up at the Innot Hot Springs. Once in a while, it would be Bedarra Island near the Great Barrier Reef. August was a good time for meeting in Atherton because of the annual Maize Festival. This was a special circumstance, though. An emergency gathering was called and they were in northern New Zealand. Unidentified Flying Objects were spotted by Sakata, Donovan, Horace and Fletcher in Nikumaroro. They weren't alone, though. These objects were spotted by other Contrarians around the world from China to California to South Africa. It was a sign. It wasn't just the Contrarians. It was the Scoundrels as well. It wasn't a normal thing for the two groups to meet anymore. They met in late 1979 after the American embassy in Tehran was stormed and hostages

were held. They met in October of 1987 after the Black Monday stock plunge. They met in May of 1993 after the Waco Siege Debacle. After the multiple UFO sightings on New Year's Day of 2000, they knew it was time to meet again. Bygones were bygones for the time being.

The misnomer about secrets societies was that their plans and their participants were secret. They weren't secret at all. Jonathan Vankin was an author who compiled lists of conspiracies and wrote *The 50 Greatest Conspiracies of All Time* published in 1995. Who would listen to him? John Stormer wrote *None Dare Call It Treason* and published it in 1964. Who listened? No one. Oliver Stone directed JFK which was released in 1991. Yeah, it piqued the interest of conspiracy theorists and opened some minds to the idea of multiple shooters on the grassy knoll but the United States did not release classified information on the assassination. It had a practical zero-sum effect on American society. The secrets of esoteric, stealthy cliques are out there. Who listened? Hardly anyone.

In 1983 Preston Bancroft prepped his best friend, Donovan Cobb, to join the Council of Nine. They discussed the history of the Illuminati and their two main subsequent splinter groups, the Scoundrels and Contrarians which took form after the Federal Reserve was formed in 1913. John Kennedy was killed in an elaborate assassination plot in 1963 in Dallas, Texas. There were no less than eight snipers situated in Dealey Plaza. JFK planned to end the Federal Reserve and the Scoundrels wouldn't have it. Honchos met at Clint Murchison's estate on November 21, 1963, the day before the killing in the guise of a fund raiser. Present there were LBJ, George Herbert Walker Bush, Richard Nixon, John McCloy, Haroldson Hunt, Don McErlane, Clyde Tolson, Adam Boyle, Derrick Sanborn, and J Edgar Hoover. They wanted to kill JFK and their plan involved many, many people including most of the Secret Service and many Dallas police officers. Lee Harvey Oswald, though demented and full of angst, was indeed in the Texas School Book Depository with a shotgun. Officers Roger Craig, Seymour Weitzman and Eugene Boone discovered a German Mauser. Problem? It wasn't a Mauser which killed JFK. It was ultimately an Italian Mannlicher-Carcano.

The CIA got involved with the mafia. It remained this way for decades. The CIA provided money, logistics and vital intel. If something was botched, there was plausible denial. The eight snipers in Dealey Plaza were placed in four two-man teams. Not all police officers were "in on it" and their testimony demonstrated their ignorance of the assassination plot. Twenty-one Dallas cops swore they hear shots from the grassy knoll. Donovan Cobb told his lover, Sakata Tara, there were always connections between strange events and strange people. Oliver Stone, who Don met in Yucatán in January of 1984, went on to direct the movies *JFK* and *Natural Born Killers*. Woody Harrelson starred in *Natural Born Killers*. Who was Woody's father? Charles Harrelson. Who was Charles? One of the eight snipers on the grassy knoll.

Cops took off after the grassy knoll shooters but they lost them in a rail yard. There was a struggle in Parkland hospital where JFK's body was examined between local police and Secret Service agents. A Dallas cop, JD Tippit, was killed on the day of the assassination. His buddies had nicknamed him "Kennedy" because he resembled JFK in physical appearance. The actual head of JFK was blown to shit in different directions by multiple shooters and they needed JD Tippit to cover up the assassination. There was a reconstruction of JFK's skull as it flew from Texas to DC but it did not turn out as well as hoped. James Humes, who performed the initial autopsy, burned his notes. It was a

disaster and the body buried in Arlington National Cemetery was not John Fitzgerald Kennedy's. It's the body of JD Tippit.

In essence, the Scoundrels have always existed. They're the people that would ride along in a winding mountain pass from the passenger's side then reach over and grab the wheel if they see a patch of ice. They will wreck people. They don't trust people. They make rash decisions to the detriment of everyone around them. Build mountain of lie upon other lies then claim it's all the truth. They destroy souls and their skin is too thick to know they ever did it. Blinders. They wear blinders.

Donovan Cobb found himself in New Zealand at a bistro on the beach. There were ten other Contrarians with him and he was drunk from red wine. "When I joined the Nine in 1984, I was high on life!"

A few cheered in unison.

"Preston?" He hugged his best friend and kissed his cheek. "I am nothing without you!"

More cheers and Preston filled Donovan's wine glass.

"I learned about the Stockholm Syndrome from Preston! You know what? We get hijacked! We as people go into a bank and someone decides they're so important that they need our money? Why? They need a yacht! Or a trip to Vegas!" Donovan laughed. "They need your money!"

Donovan stood up and pointed to each individual.

"You know what I witnessed? In my life, I was in South America and I saw the opposite." Donovan smiled. All faces he spoke to were frozen and anticipating his next words. "The Lima Syndrome, motherfuckers!" he yelled. He grabbed the bottle of Mazuran's Vintage and poured wine into all empty glasses. "I was there at the Japanese embassy in 1996! You know Sakata? My lover! A few of you know I am addicted to Asian poontang!"

Laughter. Hearty laughter.

"We're there and I'm staring. Some fucker walking around with a gun like he's gonna kill us!" Donovan licked his lips. "Mother fucker, right? Mother fucker!" He waited. Gathered himself. "And I stared at him!" Don took his pointer and middle fingers to motion at his eyes then to the group. *I'm watching you.* That was the gesture. "I look at this fruitcake who thinks he's gonna intimidate us."

"Donovan?" Preston asked. Tears streamed down Preston's cheeks. "Are you the guy? You never told me!"

"Fuck yeah! I'm the mother fuckin' guy! I heard too much about this! *You're rich, you should be happy!* Fuck you! Ordinary people don't understand! The jack asses who took us hostage turned one-eighty! You don't know who you're fucking with when you take a Contrarian!" Everyone cheered and laughed. *This is the pinnacle of my life, I'm pretty sure,* Donovan thought. "We are meeting with Scoundrels tomorrow." He passed out flyers. "Moturoa Island. Looks innocent, but it's not. We have a type of truce with the Scoundrels. They won't come to Cairns, not most of them. Australia? That's off limits. New Zealand? In emergencies, we co-exist. Neutrality. Every five-to-ten years we get together. Economic crisis. Military operation gone wrong. Riffraff rise up successfully in unison. We get together." Donovan looked around and saw everyone checking out the flyer. "Sometimes it's a phenomenon. Weird shit happens. And we have to sort it out. Waco, for example. What was that?" Donovan felt rage. He felt confusion. He felt intelligent. He felt gratitude. He felt mastery. "We need to touch

base even though they are our rivals! We don't need to destroy each other if there's something pushing us outside of our groups. Take everything with a grain of salt. They can't be trusted but they're looking at us and thinking the same thing. These alien space crafts? Are they from them? A hoax? A scare tactic? Paranoia will ruin us all!"

Horace Streets stood up. "I went through this in the late sixties. Are we experiencing an alien intervention? Probably. In my modest opinion, probably. Why have we not returned to the Moon since the early seventies? The aliens don't want us there. Now? The Scoundrels are off their rockers. Many Contrarians have opted out of this meeting. My wife is one of them. Becky is back at the hotel right now. What will the Scoundrels do? If history serves as an indicator, they will capitalize on this as soon as they feel safe. In the meantime, they trust us. They believe our expertise. They think we have a special relationship with the aliens and their space ships. We can't rely on this. Scoundrels will stab us in the back. It's their nature. It's what they do."

"There is no need for paranoia, guys," Donovan told the group. "But? Keep your defenses up."

The next day they traveled to a nearby New Zealand island, Moturoa. It was scenic and full of a lot of farm land. It was a Scoundrel stronghold. If there was ever a shadow defacto "leader of the world" it was Roy Thurman. Over the centuries, there were prominent families. Medicis, Rockefellers, Sinclairs and so forth. They nearly broke apart in the mid- twentieth century as the world entered the Space Age. The Thurmans were to able re-unify the groups breaking apart. They reminded the wealthy elite of their history and importance. They cracked down on hippies during Vietnam protests and they planted seeds in the national media. The banking conglomerate was the closest thing they ever had to a true conspiracy and the Thurmans made sure that savings and loan companies were bailed out during the Reagan eighties. The media was kind to them. There was no toppling of their structure.

Roy Thurman was in Baja California drinking tequila when he saw the alien space crafts on New Year's. He called his friends and made sure they contacted the Contrarians as well. He planned a meeting on Januray 7, 2000, a Friday. Many, including Donovan Cobb, got there early on a Monday. There was mingling and discussion. Roy Thurman was fifty-four years old and had an eight thousand square foot home, all of it one story. He had two huge barns and plenty of horses. There were sheep dogs which kept herds in line. The first of his barns had actual livestock. The second? It was a front. Instead of cows, horses and hay, there was a solid Italian marble floor. There was a round table in the middle in the spirit of the King Arthur legend. It was thirty feet across and seated thirty-six people around the perimeter. From the top, it looked like a Mercedes logo as there were three entrances equidistant from one another allowing access into the middle with butterscotch paths. There was a soft, black swivel chair in the middle with three night stands to the side of each of the three paths. They had elaborate diagrams and bureaus. The diagrams explained a rudimentary organization of world social structure. There were stained glass windows which further alluded to people's places. This included war scenes, mining of gold and creation of money, and various eccentric maps.

As it stood, the Scoundrels consisted of...

Roy Thurman, Olivia Russell, Maureen Li, Sebastian Reynolds, Lily Rothschild, Luther Xavier, Howard Rockefeller, Justin Cavendish, Ralph Van Duyn, George Astor, Janet Onassis, Logan DuPont, Zooey Morgan, Curtis Randolph, Elton Bundy, Mindy

Collins, Carl Brock and Keith Freeman.

Their parents, grandparents and great-grandparents built America and much of the rest of the world. Some of them traced their ancestry to the Mayflower and others traced their family lines to the first Crusades. They were in charge of billions of lives and they ruled unabashed without any shames. They came from many disciplines including banking, insurance, military, real estate, aerospace and media. They thought of themselves as benevolent but the Contrarians believed they were ruthless and operated with total cunning.

Each of the three sections of arched tables seated twelve people. There was an overflow of guests and they were seated in simple chairs behind the rest along the wall. Gunther Schauer was a Contrarian body guard and was seated behind Donovan. He was quite a sight to see at six foot five, open leather vest, tight mohawk, and red and blue face paint. By the time everyone was seated on the first Friday afternoon of 2000, there were more than fifty participants.

Roy Thurman was seated across from Donovan Cobb and began the discussion by slamming down a gavel. The participants were seated in alternate order. It was Contrarian-Scoundrel-Contrarian-Scoundrel all the way around the table. Contrarians wore plain red baseball caps and Scoundrels wore blue. Roy stood and had no cap on. He announced, "I am commencing the 2000 gathering of the Illuminati. Let's face it. Nobody believes we exist including people in this room. History knows we were founded on May 1, 1776." He grinned then shouted, "*May Day! May Day!*" Roy was dressed formally in a three-piece black and white tuxedo. Most others present were dressed semi-formally in dress pants and knit collared shirts. "History teaches the world that we were disbanded within fifteen years of our inception by Bavarian prince, Charles Theodore. Pope Pius VI sent out an edict prohibiting Catholics to intermingle with us. But here we are! Somehow, here we are!" He was passionate and appreciated hoorays from his Scoundrel compatriots. "We infiltrated the Freemason society! We lived on! We became strong! We dominated the oil industry! We mined gold! We took coal from the Earth! We forged steel! We built rail lines! We created the New York Stock Exchange! We won wars!" His friends applauded loudly. When they quieted he said, "We are bankers." He paused. "We buy politicians! That's right! When I was a thirteen-year-old child, I had an exquisite baseball card collection. Mint condition Honus Wagner. Joe Doyle, Walker Cooper, Al Kaline, not to mention 1955 Roberto Clemente, 1952 Mickey Mantle, 1954 Ted Williams, 1933 Lou Gehrig. Quite a collection and I was proud. When I was twenty-one, I absorbed twenty million dollars in a trust fund and I farted around for a few years trying to figure out who I was. When I reached the magical age of thirty-three in 1978, I knew what my calling was." He licked his lips, took a sip of water, and scanned the room. "I decided to collect *people*! Thirty-three is the age of Jesus Christ when he was crucified and thirty-three is the age of Thomas Jefferson when he penned the Declaration of Independence! Thirty-three is a sacred number to my brethren in the Skull and Bones fraternity I attended at Yale and it has great significance to all Freemasons. From bottom to top, there are thirty-three degrees of membership. So in 1978, I said to myself that I could be trampled under foot like Jesus Christ. He had too many sympathies for the common person. If he were to assert himself as a distinct individual, he could have lived as a family man with Mary of Magdala! We know they had children together! Two sons, Epharaim and Manasseh! And a daughter, Sarah!" Roy poked his fingers together and exuded confidence. "Or? I could be like Thomas

Jefferson and take the bull by the horns! That's what I chose! I lived in Toledo, Ohio and became involved my father's shipping business. Fords, Pontiacs, Chryslers passed through our ports. Iron ore. All kinds of industrial products. In the ninth district where I lived, there were always Democrats elected to the House of Representatives. But? I knew I could put one of our guys in office! Virgil Webster! Personal friend of mine from college. Tom Ashley had been in office since the fifties! I helped Virgil with funds, I coached him in speaking, and I started a smear campaign toward the Teamsters that supported Ashley! It was regular American politics! I learned you could buy politicians and, even though Virgil only lasted one term, I got good at lobbying in Washington, DC! I bought one politician after the other! I bought Republicans because I believe in de-regulation, but I bought Democrats as well! This was to hedge my bets! And I'd allow them to have parameters with certain liberal social issues like homosexual rights, but they knew better not to knock my personal three rails! Don't fuck with the bankers, don't fuck with the military, and whatever you do never, ever, ever take a real jab at the Illuminati!"

There were cheers and even a handful of red hats joined.

Roy wrapped up his opening statement. "I know many of you believe we are not the same unit anymore. I've read some of your letters to one another. You call it the Great Rift. After JP Morgan launched the Federal Reserve in 1913, some of your family members tried to move along on your own. *The Heuristic Order of Lachrymose Contrarians* was launched immediately after. Over the years, it's been Contrarians versus Scoundrels!" Roy Thurman clapped slowly and sarcastically. He was joined by the blue hats. "Very mature! On both our parts! For a while, we played along and requested that you refer to us as the Elect instead of Scoundrels. But? We understand the gig. You're going to smear our names until we give in and bend to your wills!" Roy motioned with his finger around the table and then pretended to take off an imaginary baseball cap. He was the only one not wearing one and all Scoundrels took off their caps. "We are one unit today, at least for the next couple of hours!" He saw some Contrarians place their red caps in front of them. "We are in a crisis mode! Aliens are out there! Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev had a discussion in Moscow before the tearing down of the Berlin Wall. In 1985, they agreed to halt the Cold War in case of an alien invasion! Might've seemed like a joke to many, but we're dealing with those implications at this moment! We must set aside our differences until we figure out why we were visited!"

There were cheers from nearly everyone and most people tossed their caps into the middle of the circle.

"One final note about the Great Rift." Roy Thurman took a seat but kept speaking, "There were too many chiefs and not enough Indians. Too many chefs spoil the broth! Do you understand what leadership is? We'd like everything to be democratic, at least with the folks we respect. Sometimes, you have to take control of the reins. We made decisions. You Contrarians don't like what we decided, but it was the best we could do. We were faced with a situation of losing all of our power and, whether you'd like to admit it or not, it would have effected you as well. We were looking at total economic collapse. We set up the Fed so the *Panic of 1907* would not repeat itself. Chicken shit? I can see where an ordinary person would think so. Illegal from a Constitutional perspective? I've heard legal scholars make the case but they don't understand what legal positivism is! They don't know what the law of the sovereign

means! Never in human history has the true lawmaker been subject to the laws he makes! If a mayor in Bumfuck, Egypt makes a thirty-five-mile-per-hour speeding law through his tiny piece-of-shit town, do you think he has to abide by it? He hires the sheriff! He knows the deputies! Who's going to stop him? He makes the law for fools zooming in and out of his one-horse shit hole! Article One, Section Eight of the Constitution says only Congress has the power to coin and regulate money! Who do fuckers think wrote the damn Constitution? We did! Look around this table! Our guys wrote it!" Roy Thurman slammed his gavel. "I cede the floor to Contrarian head, Donovan Cobb." He acquiesced and twirled his right forefinger in a near-mock ceremonial motion.

"Coattails. Riding coattails." Donovan Cobb stood up and put his red cap back on his head. He was one of the few that didn't toss it into the middle. "Your group is the *epitome* of riding coattails." He paused, looked around the round table, then walked into the middle. "Do our guys do it? Of course. But we don't pretend we should be running the world without merit. One of you guys have a distant ancestor who learned a new way to mint coins and you pretend you still own those same coins. Another one of you guys have a great-great-great-grandfather who learned a better way to produce an automatic rifle and you believe you should be worshipped like a deity. A few at this table accepted bailout money when your savings and loans tanked during the eighties. Do we hear anything about that? No. Not a peep. Blinders. You work with blinders. You have a habit of remembering your best moments over the decades and shining spotlights on them. You look at us and the rest of your rivals and you amplify our faults, mistakes and weaknesses. You lie, exaggerate and misrepresent. You are whores. In a simple word, it's the best I know how to say it." Donovan was near the black swivel chair in the middle but he did not sit. "I have respect for a few of you, actually, but it's not complete. Do I like to drive around in automobiles powered by fossil fuels? Of course I do! Any of us do and you Scoundrels are still the best at finding oil and drilling for it. But? You don't see the future! If you do, you sure don't show it. We have less than one hundred years of petroleum left on this great planet of ours. According to Contrarian scientists, that's actually a conservative estimate. You guys are saying we have more than a thousand years yet every year we are drilling further and further from our coast lines. We are heading further north into Canada's latitudes and won't stop until there is an oil platform right at the North Pole. There was a time during the nineteenth century that anyone could walk along dirt paths in Texas and step into exposed pools of oil like they were puddles of mud after torrential rain." Donovan finally sat in the chair. He leisurely spun himself around in a three-sixty and studied the faces. He stood. "One of the best pieces of advice my dad gave me was to never believe your own propaganda but somehow you've done it. You've painted a false rosy picture for the public and then you started to believe your own bullshit." Donovan reached into his pocket and pulled out a folded piece of paper. "America had two central banks in its early years. The First Bank of the United States which lasted from 1791 until 1811 and the Second Bank of the United States which went from 1816 until 1836." He unfolded the paper then held it up. "This is from Andrew Jackson, the guy on the twenty dollar bill." He started to read.

Gentlemen. I have had men watching you for a long time and I am convinced that you have used the funds of the bank to speculate in the breadstuffs of the country. When you won, you divided the profits amongst you, and when you lost, you charged it to the bank. You tell me that if I take the deposits from the bank and annul its charter, I

shall ruin ten thousand families. That may be true, gentlemen, but that is your sin. Should I let you go on, you will ruin fifty thousand families, and that would be my sin. You are a den of vipers and thieves. I intend to rout you out, and by the eternal God, I will rout you out.

Donovan held the paper up again and looked around. “These bankers were Rothschilds, Astors and Calhouns. They were Scoundrels, by and large, with few of exceptions. So Andrew Jackson allowed the charter of the Second Bank of the United States to expire in 1836. We went through the Civil War without a central bank. We survived decades and there was always the idea to create a Third Bank of the United States. We prepared for this. Something fair. Something sustainable. Sometime with accountability, transparency and devoid of political influences.” Donovan laughed loudly. He walked along the inside rim of the round table. “But that was too much to hope for!” He returned to his seat and stood in front of it. “After the *Panic of 1907*, you fucked the Constitution and created the greatest Ponzi scheme in all of human history!” Donovan giggled in hysterics. “Now? We are all slaves to it! The Federal Reserve operates behind closed doors and without any Congressional oversight!” He composed himself. “*Warning! Do not back up! Severe tire damage!* We’ve seen those signs in various parking lots. We drive over retractable metal spikes and it’s a one-way flow of traffic. We don’t put the car in reverse under any circumstance. You guys created the financial version of this!” Donovan refocused on the paper in his hand. “This is from Thomas Jefferson.” He looked at Roy Thurman whom had referred to Jefferson as the thirty-three-year-old writer of the Declaration of Independence.

No generation has the right to contract debts greater than can be paid off during the course of its own existence.

“Do any of you pay attention to this?” Donovan asked after he read the quote. “Obviously not! It is the Scoundrel way to behave like J Wellington Wimpy from the Popeye cartoons! *I’ll gladly pay you Tuesday for a hamburger today!* My family was represented at the Jekyll Island duck hunt in 1910. We argued for something sane! We could have created an equitable and impartial system. We don’t need to pass debts on to our children and grandchildren! How do you sleep with yourselves? Thick skin! I know it took thick skin to do what you did! The Great Rift, my friends, is a real enough thing. My family, the Cobbs, together with the venerable Hyde and Callypso families created an alternative for anyone who had a shit load of cash but didn’t feel the need to suck the blood of the general public. You, Roy Thurman, say we are all Illuminati. A couple of years ago on July 1, 1997, Hong Kong ceased to be a British colony. I began my stint on the Contrarian Council of Nine in 1984 when the Sino-British Joint Declaration was reached which planned to transfer governing rights to China. There was a long time, though, that citizens of Hong Kong envisioned their own autonomy and freedom. Same with Taiwan. Today, Chen Shui-bian says Taiwan is independent and most the world accepts them as so. But, ask anyone in the Communist Party in China who owns Hong Kong and Taiwan! They are the property of China! Same as Tibet and Macau!” Donovan read another quote from his paper.

There’s a plot in this country to enslave every man, woman and child. Before I leave this high office, I intend to expose this plot.

“My father, Delbert Cobb, was at Columbia University watching JFK speak these words a week before he was assassinated in Dallas.” Donovan waved over to his father sitting along the wall not far from Roy Thurman. “There is more. He planned to

dismantle the Federal Reserve which most of you adore so dearly. Before this, he attacked closed-door meetings and secret societies.” Donovan read.

The very word "secrecy" is repugnant in a free and open society and we are as a people inherently and historically opposed to secret societies, to secret oaths and secret proceedings. We decided long ago that the dangers of excessive and unwarranted concealment of pertinent facts far outweighed the dangers which are cited to justify it. Even today, there is little value in opposing the threat of a closed society by imitating its arbitrary restrictions. Even today, there is little value in insuring the survival of our nation if our traditions do not survive with it. And there is very grave danger that an announced need for increased security will be seized upon by those anxious to expand its meaning to the very limits of official censorship and concealment. That I do not intend to permit to the extent that it is in my control. And no official of my administration, whether his rank is high or low, civilian or military, should interpret my words here tonight as an excuse to censor the news, to stifle dissent, to cover up our mistakes or to withhold from the press and the public the facts they deserve to know.

For we are opposed around the world by a monolithic and ruthless conspiracy that relies on: Covert means for expanding its sphere of influence; on infiltration instead of invasion; on subversion instead of elections; on intimidation instead of free choice; on guerrillas by night instead of armies by day. It is a system which has conscripted vast human and material resources into the building of a tightly knit, highly efficient machine that combines military, diplomatic, intelligence, economic, scientific and political operations. Its preparations are concealed, not published. Its mistakes are buried, not headlined. Its dissenters are silenced, not praised. No expenditure is questioned, no rumor is printed, and no secret is revealed.

Donovan crumpled his paper and tossed it into the middle. “JFK signed Executive Order 11110 on June 4, 1963. This authorized the Department of the Treasury to issue billions of dollars of silver certificates. Interest free. Money printed by the United States government like it used to be. No more future need for the Federal Reserve.” Donovan Cobb crossed through the middle of the floor and stood in front of Scoundrel member, Justin Cavendish. “You, Justin, should know this as good as anyone else. You have a Merovingian background and the Cavendish nobility goes back to the fourteenth century if not more. Your second-cousin, Kathleen Cavendish, was the Marchioness of Hartington. She was born a Kennedy, though, and was close to her brother John Fitzgerald Kennedy until she died in a plane crash in 1948. Her father, Joe Kennedy, was a gangster. He was a Scoundrel and was tight with Chicago mob boss, Sam Giancana. JFK was one of us! A Contrarian! Someone who fought the status quo and fought for justice! He had integrity and it probably got on his father’s nerves that he went after the mafia in New York, and New Orleans and Las Vegas!” Don returned to the swivel chair and sat and span slowly. “Frank Sinatra was a friend of JFK’s but the two stopped speaking.” Donovan looped around a few times quicker and sang, “*Start spreading the news... I’m leaving today... I want to be a part of it... New York, New Yoooooork... These vagabond shoes are longing to straaaaay... Right through the very heart of it... New York, Neeeeeew Yoooooork... I want to wake up in a city that doesn’t sleep... And find I’m king of the hill... Top of the heap...*” He stood and accused, “Scoundrel oil man, Clint Murchison opened his home. On the evening of November 21, 1963 his guests were: Lyndon Baines Johnson; his mistress, Madeleine Brown; his hitman, Malcolm Wallace; his mastermind, Cliff Carter; Senator Ralph Yarborough and

Governor John Connally who both would lose grips of money if JFK ended the Vietnam War; Mayor of Dallas, Earle Cabell, whose CIA brother was fired directly by Kennedy; mobsters Carlos Marcello and Cliff Carter; Averell Harriman, Haroldson Hunt, Richard Nixon and Amon Carter, Cornelius Stuart and Jack Ruby; not to mention John McCloy who actually shared a seating box with Adolf Hitler at the 1936 Olympic games in Berlin. Did I mention J Edgar Hoover was there? He was with his gay lover, Clyde Tolson.”

Donovan Cobb was quite surprised that he got this far along without some disgusted rebuttal.

Donovan continued, “On the morning of November 22, 1963, JFK leaves Love Field with wife, Jackie in a topless Lincoln Continental limo. Secret Service agent, Emory Roberts, tells fellow agent, Henry Rybka, to abandon his post at the rear bumper of the car. They reach the intersection of Houston and Elm on the outskirts of Dealey Plaza and the original *Nightmare on Elm Street* begins. Colonel George Lumpkin is talking on the radio to George Herbert Walker Bush’s buddy, Jack Crichton. They are timing and coordinating different sets of snipers. First, to the motorcade’s right on Houston, is the County Records Building. On the eight-story roof are Eladio del Valle, a disgruntled Cuban Batista supporter, and Dallas deputy sheriff Harry Weatherford, armed with an Italian Mannlicher-Carcano. The next building north is the Dal-Tex Building operated by Haroldson Hunt and coordinated by radio man, Eugene Brading. George Wray Gill represented mobster Carlos Marcello and had a clear view of Elm directly in front of him from the second story. Snipers, Loran Hall and Nestor Izquierdo, are with him. The Texas School Book Depository is next and is on the northwest corner of Houston and Elm. Charles Nicoletti is in there representing his mob boss, Sam Giancana. Malcolm Wallace is in there, too. Corrupt Chicago cop, Richard Cain, is listening and waiting for the signal. This guy had trained soldiers for the Bay of Pigs invasion. Further along is the infamous grassy knoll. Charles Harrelson, Charles Rogers, Bernard Barker and Roscoe White are waiting. Jack Lawrence and Frank Sturgis are aiming from the triple underpass. In a storm drain below the grassy knoll, Johnny Roselli has the closest shot of all. By the way, Eugene Brading from the Dal-Tex Building stayed at the Century Plaza Hotel in Los Angeles right near the Ambassador Hotel in 1968 at the very time Robert Fitzgerald Kennedy was assassinated.”

Roy Thurman appeared intrigued rather than irritated by the speech. He had a habit of twirling his fingers in a ceremonial motion as if to say “get on with your point” and he did so when Donovan looked his way.

“Harry Weatherford’s shot hit JFK five inches below his collar near his spine. He shot with a Mannlicher-Carcano the same as Nestor Izquierdo who pegged John Kennedy in the back of the head. The difference in their rifles is that Nestor’s wasn’t silenced. Jack Lawrence fired from the underpass and put a hole through the limousine window. Roscoe White was so afraid of hitting Jackie Kennedy from the grassy knoll that he missed everything altogether. Mac Wallace’s shot hit Governor John Connally. There was no magic bullet, of course. Frank Sturgis hit JFK in the temple. In all the commotion, JFK was hit in the throat. With all these bullets flying everywhere, some say it was Jackie who had a hidden Derringer hidden in a bouquet of flowers. Some say it was William Greer, the limo driver. Others say it was Governor Connally who fired through his coat pocket. Some think it was Frank Sturgis from the underpass. Who knows? Maybe it was Roselli from the drain.” Donovan cracked his knuckles. “JFK’s body was stolen by the Secret Service from Parkland before a proper autopsy could be

performed. How many people know that Lee Harvey Oswald was an FBI informant? Three weeks before JFK was killed, there was a plot to assassinate Kennedy in Chicago. Guess who tipped off the authorities? Oswald! He made enemies with you Scoundrels when that happened which is why he was framed in Dallas. Ideal patsy. Everyone else walked. John McCloy was at Clint Murchison's the day before the assassination. He was the former president of the World Bank and Chase Manhattan Bank. Chairman on the Council of Foreign Relations, one of the strongest Scoundrel outfits. Trustee in the Rockefeller Foundation. Does he have forensic experience or a police investigative history? Not at all! But somehow he winds up on the Warren Commission to cover it up! That is my whole point here!"

Donovan took a few deep breaths and expected someone from somewhere to cut in but nobody did.

"Decorated general, Smedley Butler, was approached by you Scoundrels in 1933 to overthrow Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the United States government! Have you no shames? A failed coup d'état in America! JFK was assassinated in the physical sense! A young Bill Clinton met John Kennedy during an American Legion Boys Nation event as a sixteen-year-old. And you assassinated him as well! Can't you leave fuckers alone? With Bill, it was years of hounding from 1998 Time Man of the Year co-winner, Ken Starr. Character assassination. When there was a budget standoff and the government shut down, you sent some chubby chick to go suck his cock in the White House!" Donovan laughed. "Sounds like a joke, but each of you Scoundrels remind me of the poor sports I met on elementary school playgrounds. You don't like the way something's going so you take your ball away! No one's gonna play if everyone doesn't treat you as special! And you wonder why I brought up Hong Kong and Taiwan earlier? You think you own everything! Chapter One, Article One, Part Two of the United Nations charter addresses self-determination of peoples. If the people of Hong Kong want to be free, they ought to be free! But you freak shows twist laws to your liking and convenience! The legal system is cafeteria to you! *I'll take some of this but none of that!* We Contrarians got burned by the Federal Reserve system! Only one Contrarian, my grandfather Hatcher, was invited to participate afterward in the creation of the IMF and the World Bank at Bretton Woods, New Hampshire back in the forties. We are not represented and to make matters worse, you kill our friends way too often! You don't like this journalist or that political leader? Gone! Bam! No one knows what hit them! But we're here to talk about the possible alien invasion because of the ships that visited us all! Of all the fringe reasons that people hated JFK ranging from the mafia to the Russians to the Cubans to the Texans to the bankers from the Fed, not many people bring up the fact that he was going to disclose UFO secrets. He was associated with the Majestic Twelve and he was going to disclose a whole lot of information. That's why I came here to New Zealand. Let's get on with this!"

There were claps and cheers for Donovan.

Donovan Cobb sat on the far right end of his semi-arch. The eleven to his left were Maureen Li, Thelma Rhett, Keith Freeman, Lyle Garman, George Astor, Clark Callypso, Sebastian Reynolds, Zhuan Choi, Elton Bundy, Phyllis Horner and Janet Onassis.

The next semi-arch of twelve included Horace Streets, Zooey Morgan, Preston Bancroft, Lily Rothschild, Isaac Hook, Roy Thurman, Robert Hyde, Justin Cavendish, Fabian Lynch, Carl Brock, Connor Milton, and Luther Xavier.

The final and southern-most semi-arch included Kubu Lacey, Ralph Van Duyn, Julian Garrett, Logan DuPont, Roger Corliss, Howard Rockefeller, Eugene Donatus, Mindy Collins, Clive Klauber, Curtis Randolph, Titus Clemons, and Olivia Russell. Sitting behind the round table included Tanner Doyle, Hale Bancroft, John Leonard and some others.

Horace Streets stood and spoke out of turn. "I think Donovan was addressing a trust issue. Why does it matter what we discuss about alien spacecraft if we don't trust one another? Project Blue Book? Does anyone here remember that? I have other personal issues but they can wait for the time being." He sat.

Mindy Collins decided to clear the air. "You Contrarians have vivid imaginations and your sources are accurate. But? You didn't mention the Umbrella Man in Dealey Plaza. Was that on purpose? Was he one of your guys? Roy Hargraves was his name. Oh, Donovan! You didn't expand on our guy, the fake Secret Service agent, Bernard Barker! He blended in so well and you know it! And? Nicoletti was in the Depository, not the Dal-Tex Building! Haroldson Hunt, the building's owner, spilled the beans in quite lucid detail. Oswald was filmed at the Depository's entrance as the motorcade went by! Funny and weird! Wouldn't you say? And the guy in the storm drain was Roscoe White! Not Johnny Roselli!"

Roy Thurman cut in, "Horace? Let's not kid ourselves. We are at war with each other. We have gold. You have gold." He stood. "I love you guys, believe it or not. We have standards, though, and we have plans. One of your guys, Robert Plant, sang a song for Led Zeppelin. *Should I fall out of love, my fire in the light? To chase a feather in the wind?*" He pounded his chest and did not sing. He spoke as if reciting the lyrics from an album sleeve. "*Within the glow that weaves a cloak of delight there moves a thread that has no end.*" He looked around the circle and dared anyone to question his retort. "The song goes on and we ponder. *Yours is the cloth, mine is the hand that sews time.*" He spoke with more reverence than ordinary preachers citing Bible verses in front of packed congregations. "*His is the force that lies within. Ours is the fire, all warmth we can find.*" He paused, still waiting for a peep. If he saw a sneer from any Contrarian, he was sure he would be unable to control himself. He would walk over to anyone with scorn enough to question. He would spit in the person's face.

There was no one to mock.

Roy recited the final line. "*He is a feather in the wind.*"

Across the room, sitting to Donovan's left, Maureen Li started snapping her fingers like hip beatnik. It was genuine appreciation.

"At some point in our human history, a guy sat around a fire eating a piece of bison. He had his knife with him, the same knife that chopped the bison into many pieces. He cooked it for his tribe or had his wife do it, or whatever the fuck they did back then before villages and huts and the whole thing," Roy explained. "Do you see what I'm getting at, Horace? We love you like brothers! We love you like Cain loved Abel and Abel loved Cain! Do you not think they had a few good moments? Don't you think they'd be outside playing catch with a baseball if we could bring them here today? But somehow, God hated Cain. He was a vegetarian. Cain offered fruits and nuts to God, but the prick just wouldn't take it! And Abel is out there chopping up the buffalo and whatnot! God adores him, though, right? God likes to murder and he likes to kill innocent animals! *Sentient beings!* And we notice this! From the beginning of time, there has been an Establishment figure. And? There has been a Contrarian! Do you not

know that we understand this? Way, way, way, way, way before the creation of the Federal Reserve we have been at it. In periods of history, we are together. *We are united!* And then something happens and there's a break! A schism! God couldn't let it be! He needs sacrifices and prefers blood sacrifices all the way to the death of his son, Jesus Christ!"

Horace stood and demanded, "Are you planning to destroy the Twin Towers in New York in order to implement a police state?! I need to know from your mouth! My colleague in the CIA, Malcom Howard, told me he has been tasked with placing explosives in the World Trade Center! Is this your blood sacrifice?"

Roy was stunned by the interruption. He twirled his fingers and allowed Horace to finish his point.

Horace recited lyrics, "*Tears of the feeble, hand of the slaves, skin of the mothers, mouths of the babes... Building the towers belongs to the sky, when the whole thing comes crashing down don't ask me why.*" It was Soundgarden's "Limo Wreck" but Horace didn't stop to cite the source. He went on, "*There are fifty thousand beggars roaming in the streets, they have lost all their possessions, they have nothing to eat. Burning Down the House. Life During Wartime. Down come a bolt of lightning, now and electrical storm, starts a chain reaction, go pull a fire alarm.*" He meshed Talking Heads songs. "*Check out Mister Businessman, he bought some wild wild life! On the way to the stock exchange, he got some wild wild life. I got some groceries, some peanut butter to last a couple of days, but I ain't got no speakers, ain't got no headphones, ain't got no records to play. Burned all my notebooks! What good are notebooks? They won't help me survive! My chest is aching, burns like a furnace, the burning keeps me alive!*" Even though he was skipping around, he thought he made his point. Horace almost expected a mild ovation but there was nothing. He said, "I need to know today right here and now if you're planning to use the Pentagon and the Israeli Mossad to attack New York City! Are you planning to end democracy as Americans have known it!" He studied Roy's face from across the circle. "Trust is the issue and talking about an alien invasion is moot unless we believe we have one another's interests at heart!"

Roy waited long enough to make sure that Horace had nothing else to add. He reached into his coat and pulled an embroidered cloth from his inside pocket. He wiped his forehead. He waited to make sure that no other outbursts would happen. "If you would have allowed me to finish my point, I would have said this. We are all feathers in the wind, Horace. The common person believes that because we are billionaires, we control everything. There are moments when things go horrible awry. You know this. We went through a couple of sets of Asylum Wars. We locked your people up, you locked ours up. Jabbing ice picks through eye holes to scramble frontal lobes pretending it was science. *Zombification.* We electrocuted one another pretending that it would fix our brains. We got revenge on each other. We love each other like brothers. *Cain killed Abel.* They were brothers, but they loved each other. I am convinced that before God started picking favorites, they were a functional family. I like Led Zeppelin music even though they are Contrarian in nature. There are valuable insights. But? We make choices. Kill or be killed? What do we choose? Learn or forget lessons of life? Let's learn! We've studied your written letters to each other. You call yourselves Contrarians! You call our group the Scoundrels! Who remains? In your world, the Normies. *The normal people.* But? We happen to know you interchange Normies with Cretins! When you are frustrated they won't rise against us all, you call them the Cretins!"

“Fair enough,” Horace said and sat. “Are you going to take away their country? The United States of America?”

“There will be a rapture,” Roy explained. “Not a Jesus rapture. There will be a scanning of society to make sure we don’t leave anyone behind. There are worthwhile people in your so-called Cretin group. They will have a legit chance to join our ranks, either as Scoundrel or Contrarian.” Roy laughed then elaborated, “We’ll humor you with your own terminology for now.” He gave further details, “There will be stock crash later this year so pull your holdings from dot-com companies! This is a plan! It is a courteous warning! Eventually, American democracy comes to an end! We own the electronic voting machines that are in Florida, Ohio and other swing states! No paper trail! We hand pick the American president from this point forward! And? In the wildest dreams of the Cretins, voting is still legit! But? We control both parties now! They are both bought by Scoundrels! The best any common person could hope for is the lesser of evils! In 2001, we knock down the Twin Towers! Fourth of July? Maybe. It’s the earliest scenario. Likely, it will coincide with the end of the Jewish calendar for the year six thousand! September eleventh! If we can’t coordinate, it will be Christmas Eve. By this time, they will be ours! Slaves forever and many won’t realize what happened! We’ve drafted a piece of legislation called the Patriot Act which will take away regular freedoms, all the while sounding American. Thugs will rise in ranks and thinkers will be scoffed at... unless they’re working for us! The final insult will have to do with rock ‘n’ roll! It will be dead! Do you think we’ll have a modern version of Creedence Clearwater Revival singing ‘Fortunate Son’ all around the country? No! A modern John Lennon strutting around saying how much we suck? No! We’ve learned! We have a singing competition on Rupert Murdoch’s Fox network that ensures that anyone with any singing talent will look like a corporate tool! Just like Jesus was sarcastically called the King of Jews, these guys will be called American Idols! There will be no cultural revolution because we will control every aspect of the media and banking!”

“You sound like an evil megalomaniac!” Horace was enraged.

“I happen to know about Connor Milton’s zoo for exotic animals in Mexico.” Roy Thurman started to walk around the outer rim of the round table. “I’ll admit that I was hurt when I learned he had a few chupacabras and not one of us so-called Scoundrels was invited to see them.” When Roy Thurman reached Horace Streets he told him, “We have a zoo of our own, you know? We have secret places! Many of them! Diego Garcia is a stellar black site! But that’s the tip of the ice berg. We have a human zoo near the North Korea/ China border. Who do you think has been there? Jimmy Hoffa? Mickey Garrity? Antonio Bardellino? Peng Jiamu? Teddy Wang? John Ruffo? Holden Stetson? Take a guess who has been kept at our zoo, Horace! We have a situation for Scoundrels and our friends so anyone can always remember we’re the most powerful thing out there! Are we feathers in the wind? Yes. But Scoundrels are eagle feathers! You walk through our human zoos and you see people who tried to buck the system! There is an open living room for each one with plexiglass and bars! Visitors walk through and wonder what they did wrong. But? We’re not devoid of total compassion! There are underground quarters they have for sleeping and showering. Of course, we keep these places warm and in the high-nineties so they prefer to come to the surface where exclusive patrons come and stare at them like the freaks they became!”

“Is this a joke?” Horace asked. “A threat? I don’t know what to make of you, Roy!” Horace was tempted to leave the room but instead deferred.

"A joke, Horace? We own MTV now! Kid Rock! Is there a way to explain his success? What about Limp Bizkit?" Roy Thurman gloated. "Carson Daly is one of our tools! Do you think the success of Total Request Live was a coincidence? We tell children what to love! We tell them who to cherish! Nothing but Disney children who rose up to become pop stars! How could they ever cut into our deal? Let alone know that we're the ones calling the shots! If we wanted real democracy, we could facilitate America Online to give the public an elaborate round robin system of selecting our presidents! There are tens of thousands of capable people! They are intelligent, hard-working and love the United States of America! College professors, mayors, journalists, lawyers and artists! There are capable people! We know this! Why do it, Horace? Why do it? Why cede power to these Cretins? They like to be told what to do! When they were small children, their parents picked out their school clothes for them. Somehow, they never lost it. *They want us to dress them!* They don't like to think for themselves! They did it all for the nookie, you know?" Roy Thurman laughed and was at peace. "We will help your group if we are attacked by aliens. I promise you that. How will we do it if we are overwhelmed? I have no idea. Politically, you are lost causes! You want to share power with losers who have no clue about how valuable their lives have become! Don't do it! For all of our sakes, when the big changes happen in the next couple of years, don't be stupid! The old school classic rockers have two choices. They can sell out and join our cheering section or they can take a dive. We ruin their finances and coral them into jails. Rock 'n' roll as a revolutionary mechanism is done! It's not a whole lot different than the rise of Islam. Convert to our way or die! You are the exceptions! We'll go easy on you, but never, ever, ever pretend you're at the helm!"

"Your audacity is amazing!" Horace told Roy. "With that said, I don't doubt that your group has the will and the resources to do these things. We will weather this storm. We will hope this storm never materializes. We know your plans. We have people in the CDC that have told us of your protocols. The anthrax spores. The Ebola. The H1N1 and the SARS. Propaganda. Brute squads. We will weather this. We have no reason to confront you at this time. I understand the Led Zeppelin lyric you cited. We are all feathers in the wind and if I believed you could stop this, I would plead to you. You are just a cog, no different than me. If you step out of line with this treacherous objective, you will wind up in asylum. I know the way it operates. They will mow you down. They will grind you up." Horace's place was at the end of one of the semi-arches and he walked into the middle. "Fellow Contrarians! I beseech you at this moment to allow this perilous scheme! Do not try to change their minds! It is already in motion! Live to fight another day! We are all aware of the time markers! The Summer of Love in 1969! The Orwellian Drama of 1984! The End of the Century Hype of 1999! We must coordinate for the next time marker! The Mayan Prophecies of 2012! We will reconsider our business at that time! Until then, we slink into the Abyss and lay low! The Machine is too strong! We let it be!"

Lily Rothschild stood and clapped loudly. "I appreciate your brashness, Horace!" Other Scoundrels applauded with her. "We don't want a fight! We have made decisions to protect ourselves! We are not bleeding hearts, though. We can't save the world!"

Lily was three seats to Horace's right and he waved over at her in resignation. "The next time marker after the Mayan Prophecies happens with Apophis in 2029. Mark my words that if you harm anyone I care about, karma is a bitch! We will rise! For the

few not in the loop, we have discerned the next time marker after Apophis and we allowed our Contrarian artisans in Dramarama to spread the message.” He recalled a lyric from “What Are We Gonna Do?” and recited it, *“2041, the world is gonna end! I got the message from a tiny little man who only said that he’d been sent.”*

Lily Rothschild snickered and said, “Thanks for the heads up on that, Horace.” The talk continued. Lily informed the Contrarians that her family directly descended from Nimrod of the Bible. She said they were interrelated with the Bauer family and they still had the strongest hold on the banks anywhere around the world. They created the world’s first central bank in Amsterdam in 1609 through the Orange Order Brotherhood. The Rothschilds financed eleven thousand British troops to travel to Canada in 1863 in the middle of the American Civil War. At the same time, they propped up Maximillian in Mexico and were poised to attack Texas with French troops from the south. Czar Alexander II saved America’s independence by sending Russians to fight. Lily Rothschild explained that it had always been on the books to take the thirteen colonies back. They intermarried with Warburgs, Cohens and Schiffs ensuring that their wealth and power was kept within the family. They controlled Barclays, Lloyds of London and Royal Dutch Shell just to name a few. She corrected Donovan’s assertion that the Merovingian lineage merely went back to the fourteenth century and told a story about King Clovis I who ruled from 481 to 511. She talked about King Arthur as if he were a real person. She talked about the sixth century: Chlodomer, King of Orleans from 511 to 524; Theodoric I, King of Metz from 511 to 534; Childerbert, King of Paris from 511 to 558; and Lothair, King of Soissons in 511 and eventual King of Franks until 561. It wasn’t much different than Alexander the Great after his death three centuries before the birth of Jesus as the Greek Empire was split between Ptolemy in Egypt, Seleucus in Persia, Cassander in Macedonia and Lysimachus in Thrace. “More recently,” Lily Rothschild ploughed on, “my grandfather, James Rothschild, was a top rocket scientist in 1952 when the Majestic Twelve was formed. He was one of president Truman’s most reliable aids. He screened Detlev Bronk, Lloyd Berkener, Gordon Gray, Donald Menzel, James Forrestal and the rest. Everyone knows about the Roswell flying saucer incident in July of 1947. Few people know that a month earlier, there were flying saucers spotted at Maury Island in Washington State. My grandfather was on the scene there and has been able to separate real UFO encounters from frauds.” She cleared her throat and changed the subject. She drank ice water then kept on, “I’m here talking about my grandfather and UFOs. The public likes to snoop around and they like to try to find out the truth about aliens and bankers. Just a couple of topics they’re drawn to. With my family, you get both. My great-great-grandfather, Leopold de Rothschild, was a brilliant London banker. He bred champion horses, too! Does anyone know this? One of his three sons, Evelyn de Rothschild, was my great-grandfather. The history books and mainstream television scoff at UFOs today. Also, there are no public records that great-grandpa Evelyn had any children. He graduated from Trinity College in Cambridge. He drifted around and tried to find purpose in life. In 1910, he met Jacob Hyde’s younger sister, Myrtle. They had a fling and the next year, grandpa James Rothschild was born. Myrtle took off to Austria with him then World War I broke out. Great-grandpa Evelyn joined the service. He was killed in action at the Battle of Mughar Ridge, Palestine. Myrtle Hyde bounced around with her son, my grandfather, James Rothschild. They went from Austria to Serbia to Montenegro. But? She never married Evelyn. The traditional Rothschild clan did not even know about James until much later. But he

achieved success on his own and was part of Harry Truman's team to study extraterrestrial phenomena. At long last, grandpa James approached Victor Rothschild with the news of his existence and his son, Thomas. At first, they didn't take to him and many of the regular family members doubted the authenticity of the story. It wasn't until a few years ago through DNA testing that they've accepted me, my father, and my grandfather. It is awkward, though. We hear about urban myths where families keep exiled members tucked away in hidden basements? That's how I felt for many years."

Robert Hyde was three seats to Lily's left. He bent around so he could see her clearly. "So my great-aunt, Myrtle Hyde, is your great-grandmother? Damn! Can't say I knew that!" There was laughter around the room. Robert got up, walked over to Lily, and stood behind her. "I wish my ten-year-old daughter, Ginger, was here to see this! It feels like progress! I wish my wife, Daphne, would have accepted the invitation to come but she gets nervous in these large groups." Robert looked across the room. His eighty-one-year-old dad was snoring in the corner. *Must have really needed his nap earlier*, Robert thought. *Poor guy*. "I appreciate your candor, Lily. We need to learn about each other in order to trust one another." He started walking around the rim to where his dad, John Hyde, was snoozing. "Lily Rothschild mentioned her family's history with Merovingian kings beginning with Clovis I in 481. I know this lineage well. From Clovis I, there was Lothair then Chilperic I then Lothair II then Dagobert I then Clovis II and so on. And that's just one of the lines. The Hydies were farm workers in the sixteen hundreds until Anne Hyde became Duchess of York in 1637. We never felt we were lofty people, we worked hard, and we tried to earn our place in life." He reached his father and gently shook him. John Hyde was startled awake. "Lily talked about the Majestic Twelve program and Roy said he was miffed that he wasn't invited to Connor's exotic zoo in Mexico." Robert Hyde walked until he was behind Donovan Cobb. "I got thinking and I started putting the pieces together. There are about twenty chupacabras that Connor has in cages out there. *Quite savage beasts, they are*. I've had the privilege of going there often. It's not a lot different than San Diego's set up. There is a zoo with many caged beasts but there is a wildlife park where some roam here and there. I apologize to Connor if I'm disclosing too much but it seems appropriate right now. I have seen an anaconda longer than a hundred feet. I have seen bunyips, ozark howlers and waheelas." *This feels too surreal*, he thought. *I wish someone would shut me up because what I'm about to say is outrageous*. No one interrupted. "Aliens are out there buzzing our skies. Is that right? I'm one of the few people that did not witness them on New Year's evening. Sleeping. Just like my dad was." People laughed. "But I understand that's why we're here. Unless it's a pretense, of course. Maybe it was an excuse to get us together?"

"It was real!" Horace yelled from across the circle. "Ask Donovan!"

"Okay!" Robert kept walking along until he was in front of his empty seat. "If it was real and there are aliens buzzing our skies... Well? Doesn't it make sense that they might have pets? Chupacabras? Bunyips? Orang pendeks? Ozark howlers? Nabibians? These fuckin' creatures are not ordinary! They do not feel like they came from planet Earth! I saw a chupacabra devour three goats in ten minutes! What the fuck, man?" Robert sat down.

Roy Thurman was seated to Robert Hyde's right. He patted him on the shoulder and muttered, "That took courage, chum." He gave him a thumbs up.

"Yes. The aliens are out there," Donovan said. "And? If they keep pets, we

need to make sure we don't wind up on their list!" He started thinking about comics he was developing. *Maybe we wind up in a zoo on another planet! All of us here! They take us away and we're some kind of featured attraction.*

There was tension in the highly decorated New Zealand barn. The lone black man sitting on the right end of the southern semi-arch stood up. He was wearing baggy jeans, probably five sizes too large. He wore a thick black and white plaid flannel. His face was fat and his head was completely shaved. "My name is Kubu Lacey." He was skittish but determined. "Not only am I the only black person in this room, I am probably the youngest." He looked around and saw fear in people's eyes. *They think I have a glock and I'm gonna mow 'em down.* "Morris Taft is a black Contrarian and he couldn't make the trip." He sensed some ease. "My father, Herbert Lacey, attended Hollywood High School with your favorite person, mister Donovan Cobb." Finally, there was some laughter but it wasn't strong and it wasn't uniform. "Some people say he was an Uncle Tom but I wouldn't know. You see? He was one of the United States marines who got killed in the barracks in Beirut, Lebanon during the 1983 suicide attack. I was five years old. My mom, Shekita, moved with her family to Inglewood not far from the Fabulous Forum. I started rapping and acting like a ghetto thug. I was scared a lot back then. My dad died and there were pressures from all directions. I loved life, eventually, but I learned there's no winning. Even here as I stand before you, I know there is no winning. My dad was an Uncle Tom, they said. My mother said he spoke like Alfonso Ribeiro from the Fresh Prince but Donovan Cobb would never slur him with such a derogatory term. They were friends. And I grew up without etiquette. My mom let the streets mold me. *I'm finna go to the baffroom.* You know? That kind of thing. *I'm fixing to mess you up! You ain't nothin' to me! Ebonics! Get it?* Then she moved me back to Hollywood right before high school and demanded that I apply myself to learn proper English. That was tough on my psyche but I know she had her reasons. All of a sudden, I wanted to be more like Russell Simmons and less like Dr Dre. I became afraid of urban blacks the same way I know some of you are afraid of me. There's something about the ghetto that tears us apart. You can fight the Man and fight authority and fight the police all you want. You can die at a young age and be proud that you never gave in. Or? You can go to church and you can ignore the drugs and violence. You can get out of the ghetto if you're lucky. You can snitch out your neighbors and believe you're doing good deeds. They're smuggling dope and running prostitution rings, right? What's the best you can hope for? A place like this. You exit one hell hole and arrive at a place that doesn't really love you or appreciate you. Fish out of water. Photo op and token minority." He looked at the Asian lady sitting to Donovan's left. "I see you have one of your own. Nothing but white people in this room except for a couple of exceptions." Kubu Lacey sensed grumblings. "I am not here to complain. I want to repeat that. Donovan Cobb genuinely cared for my father and offered me a chance in life. He financed my record label in the summer of 1996 not long before Tupac Shakur was gunned down in Vegas." A tear dribbled down Kubu's left cheek and he hoped people didn't notice. He was afraid to wipe it out of fear that it would draw attention there. "I noticed something early in life. It's no rose garden. You can hope for the best but you better be prepared for tough times. I was one-year-old when the Sugarhill Gang was singing *Rapper's Delight* on the radio. My mother said it always made me smile and dance around. But you know what? I learned from her years later that it wasn't a song. It was a commercial! *So you bust out the door while it's still closed still sick from the*

food you ate,” he rapped, “And then you run to the store for quick relief from a bottle of Kaopectate!” He felt warm in his flannel and wanted to take it off but stuck it through. “And it doesn’t stop there. As a teenager, my mom would point out other songs. In *Funky Cold Medina* by Tone Lōc, he’s singing about Spuds McKenzie, Alex from Strohs and Oscar Meyer wieners. Not only do you have local radio stations pushing ads when songs aren’t played, the pop music is designed to be commercial as well. *Non-stop commercials, basically.* And after I listen to Snoop Dogg’s *Gin and Juice*, all of a sudden I have an urge to buy Seagram’s gin and Tanqueray! Why is that?” Kubu Lacey had operated with Preston Bancroft on Los Angeles movie stages. During the filming of *Bedazzled*, Kubu was allowed on stage and was given sneak peeks at the script. The movie was to be released in late 2000 but he already had some of the lines committed to memory. He told the group, “It’s a common misapprehension that the word ‘gin’ comes from the city, Geneva. Actually, the word ‘geneva’, small G, is a corruption of genievre, which of course is French for ‘juniper’, the wonderful berry that flavors this miraculous livation.” It was a line from Brendan Fraser as Elliot Richards, a fantastic author at this point. Kubu chuckled quietly to himself then he referred to George Orwell. “Isn’t Victory Gin what Winston Smith and the others celebrated with in 1984? I think you guys run mind-control programs and I want to be assured that you won’t pick on me and my friends when I am away from this place.”

“Funny!” Roy Thurman stood up and clapped slowly. He wasn’t sure if people took it as sarcasm. “Very funny!” he said. His cohorts started to clap with him and it became faster and stronger. “*Shush!*” Roy finally yelled at the group. “I have one final thing.” He thought about *Rapper’s Delight* in his head but didn’t address the concern of commercialism within hip hop music. “There are seven central banks currently not controlled by a Rothschild. *Seven.* Iraq, North Korea, Cuba, Sudan, Afghanistan, Libya and Iran. Mark my words. Things will change in the next few years! When the walls come tumbling down next year in New York, they will know who is in charge! It is not ‘we the people’ and it is not you so-called Contrarians! It is us, the Elect! *For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west, the masses will know our judgment!* Seven countries will topple and their banking systems will be integrated with ours! But there are other thorns in our side! Syria, Somalia and Lebanon! Their defiance is grotesque! I beseech you! Stay on your path and don’t interfere with ours! We are all Illuminati! Some of you believe there has been an irreconcilable schism! You call yourself Contrarians and I think it’s very cute! I don’t care what you call yourselves on your own time! You know about the Agenda! The Agenda is very clear! We allow rumblings but we don’t tolerate true opposition! The penalty is torture, banishment and sometimes death! The wheels are in motion and critical events have been meticulously planned. It is not up for negotiation! We operate black sites in Pakistan, Poland, Jordan, Turkey and Azerbaijan! Have you heard of the *Djinni of Djibouti*? You don’t want to meet him! He is a torture artist and will pull your fingernails out! The USS Bataan, USS Peleliu and the USS Ashland are set up for extreme enhanced interrogations! Do you understand what this means? In regular talk, it means you will be tortured until you regret fucking with our plans! And then you will be tortured a little more!”

Preston Bancroft stood in anger and pride. “Believe it or not, I’m walking on air!” He laughed and walked three chairs to his left where Roy had been talking. He hugged Roy tightly then let go. “Mister Hinkley was a remedial teacher. *He taught retards!* Hah! Didn’t think I’d say it! Those goofy bastards! But who’s gonna tell

another person who they can and can't work with?" Preston looked around and could tell most people were dumbfounded. *They didn't follow his logic, including his pal, Donovan Cobb.* "John was a dead FBI agent, but he got taken by aliens and they gave away the suit!"

"John? Dead FBI agent? Mister Hinkley? Spill the beans!" Roy was not upset. He was flustered. He knew it was a riddle. Roy's face was mildly pock-marked and it became flush with redness. He was embarrassed. "A parable? Spill the beans, Preston, or I'm willing to toss you out of this joint!" There was tense silence. "Get on with it!"

"The *Greatest American Hero* debuted on March 18, 1981! When was Reagan inaugurated? Two months earlier! Who was the *Greatest American Hero*, though? Ralph Hinkley! We are programmers, you stupid ass!" Preston pointed his finger into Roy's three-piece suit a few times. "Don't threaten me, Al!" It was a line from *Weird Science*. "You're out of shape!" He could see fear in Roy's eyes. "I'll kick your ass!" It was a line from Kelly LeBrock and he even tried a British accent. He addressed the circle, "Less than two weeks after Ralph Hinkley was introduced to a world audience as the *Greatest American Hero*, John Hinckley tried to kill Ronald Reagan!" Once again, he had the belief that most people there were bewildered. "He was a sleeper agent!" The pilot episode featured a fictional vice president of the United States propped up by murky government agents. They planned to kill the president when he landed in Los Angeles via helicopter. In a plot twist of irony or inversion, Ralph Hinkley saved the president by making sure his flight avoided a booby trap. Adam Taft, the VP, would've taken over as the nation's leader but in reality would've been no more than a puppet figure for the dark forces behind the scenes.

"Holy fuck, asshole!" Roy said to Preston. He was shocked, took his seat, and downed ice water. "I never noticed that!"

"Don't threaten us with your *Djinni from Djibouti*! We have moves of our own! I would rather have my nails taken with pliers than to die in true insanity! Do you forget who we are? Yes, you got to Rosemary Kennedy and lobotomized her ass! You win sometimes! Your Yale pal, Walter Freeman, went around the country in a van scrambling brains with ice picks! You fuckers called this psychiatry! Sticking ice picks through people's eyeballs and stabbing them in the frontal lobe! Stirring it like it was oatmeal! But we trapped a few of your loved ones in Willowbrook! That's all it takes, right? Just a few!" There was rage in Preston's belly and he was afraid it could escalate into physical confrontation. "You don't threaten us, motherfucker! We have your number!"

Roy Thurman took to his feet again. He inhaled, exhaled, then inhaled. *Deeply.* He held up his hand so no one would begin talking. He tried to catch his breath. "We are not aiming to hurt you," he finally said. "We do not want a war. There is an opportunity for absolute power and we are taking it. Fraidy cats will not stop us! My father spoke wisdom to me when I was a child. We have clashes in life. All of us do. We like to make threats. It keeps our adversaries at bay. We can't use them all the time. *Crying wolf.* It's like crying wolf. Sooner or later, no one believes your words. So? I decided to never threaten anyone if I could help it. I do well, actually. In my father's words of wisdom, he said to distinguish threats from warnings, though, as threats are often just full of hot air. *Dogs barking but not ready to bite.* Warnings? There's an eventuality there. Okay? An asteroid might strike our planet. Apophis, 2029. Not the best news to hear, but unavoidable." Roy put his hand on Preston's shoulder. "This attack on New York

next year is a warning, Preston. Not a threat. It's in motion. I can't stop it."

In the summer of 2001, Donovan Cobb found himself living in Shokan on the Ashokan Reservoir not far from Woodstock in New York. He was a mess and disoriented. Sakata stayed with him often but the stress of the world got him. He grew a long and nappy beard. His pals called him Hillbilly Jim. They joked. His mind was burnt out and he had regular premonitions of the Earth being destroyed in a nuclear war. The Fourth of July approached and he knew it was one of the major markers. The Scoundrels would strike. If it was early, it would happen on Independence Day. If it was late, it would happen in December. Their plan was September, though. Donovan suffered from intense anxiety and developed an asymmetrical messiah complex. His grief came and went in phases. He fluctuated between believing he could save the world and then believing he had no control whatsoever of any simple thing. Sakata stayed with him when he needed her and she took off to Manhattan when he needed space.

On the corner of Highway 28 and Reservoir Road, there was a quaint antique two-story burgundy business dwelling where he liked to walk. It was called Winchell's Corner and featured a furniture store with decorative pieces and rare collectables. This is where he bought chairs, lamps and other knick knacks. There was also a restaurant which sold great pasta and homemade soup. The stromboli was particularly pleasing. Donovan couldn't figure out why Subway didn't have a version of it nationwide. Across the parking lot from the restaurant, there was a small music store where he bought a lute and fiddle.

The trees were lush and the people were friendly. The rentals in the area were reasonable. For less than forty dollars per night, a well-kept one-room sleeping shed could be had. Three miles from Woodstock, a three-bedroom brick home could be rented for seventy-five dollars per night. Donovan's family owned a two-bedroom stone cottage at the end of a cul-de-sac south of Van Steenberg Lane and west of Reservoir Road which was walking distance from the north end of the bridge. It had been in the family since the twenties and there was an unofficial homemade sign which dubbed the road as Cobb Trail. Legend had it that there was a haunted railroad station which had been closed down before the Cobbs moved in and it was swallowed up by the reservoir. David Bowie used to live nearby and country folk singer Zach Hester retired in the area. There was an uninhabited island swimming distance on the north bank. The last time Donovan had been in the area, he was thirteen and visiting an aunt for the summer. The island was one of his favorite places. His aunt had a couple of Honda ATCs and she would use them to tug paddleboats to the shore. They would leg it across to the island.

Donovan Cobb spent Fourth of July alone. He watched fireworks from his cottage. When they stopped sometime after midnight, he took a three-mile walk over Reservoir Road bridge. On the way, he marveled at a couple of white brick government buildings which flanked the bridge on opposite ends. He always wondered what they were for. There had been a new Moon a couple of days earlier so it was quite dark. His aunt had showed him how to make homemade tie-dye shirts by twisting and crumpling fabrics then binding them with strings. There were a few of the shirts in the house so Donovan wore one. *Probably my uncle's*, he figured. He wore flip flops and corduroy shorts. He remembered wearing bell-bottoms as a kid. He remembered wearing cords, too, and liking the sound they made as the legs rubbed against each other. He had plaid pants when he was younger. Donovan thought about his early days as a truck approached from the south end. He was blinded by the lights and he waved in courtesy. *Bet they*

think I'm a homeless vagrant breaking into empty summer homes, Donovan thought. He kept walking and ran his fingers through his beard. He scratched. A rash was forming underneath.

Donovan remembered Bermuda shorts he had and Hawaiian shirts. He wore *Lightning Bolt* and *OP* shirts back when they were fashionable. They had gone out of business, he was pretty sure. He wondered what happened to them. Donovan looked across the Ashokan Reservoir waters and felt the urge to swim. He kept walking after he reached the bridge's end and he followed the street along the right to Monument Road. *These are the world famous Catskills*, he mused. The street was cut off to cars by thick concrete vertical cylinders. It became perfect for pedestrians and cyclists. *I wonder what Sakata's doing*, he pondered. He saw her face in his head. If there were more light, he could see baby islands a hundred yards away. He strained his eyes and tried too see them. He saw only shadows. *Is that them?* He walked along.

The next afternoon, Sakata Tara showed up to Donovan Cobb's cottage in a rented van. "I have something for you." His place was a mess. There were stacked boxes throughout the living room, it smelled musty, and the carpet was caked with dirt. Sakata led Don by his hand to the bedroom. She took off her pants and he did the same. They had sex for five minutes without any foreplay, talking or kissing. When it was over, Sakata told him, "I'm taking a quick shower to feel clean. After that, you get your surprise."

"What?" Donovan asked, still sitting on the bed. He put his pants on. "That wasn't it?"

"No! This one is big! It's good!" She blew him a kiss then took off to the restroom. A few minutes later, she returned. "Let's go outside." She led him by the hand outdoors to the rented van. "I noticed your microwave is in the living room on the bookshelf! What's that about?"

"The Element, Sakata! It followed me here! And it talks to me night and day! It's the easiest way to function." When Donovan reached the van, he could see movement inside.

"Is that why your recliner is in the kitchen? That's weird, even for you, honey!" She hugged Donovan tightly. "Don't be angry with me! With all this crap that's been going on, I did something radical." She let him go and played with his beard. She almost expected birds to fly out of it. "I've been talking to the group in New York City. They don't blame you for your actions. Everyone's going through a degree of persecution from the Scoundrels. *Except Cornelius Stuart, that is*. I think he might flip on us! I never trusted him! Anyhow, I was talking to Connor and Julian. A few others. They think you're breaking down but they have a plan."

"A plan? I believe it's fate. We talked about this last year in New Zealand! I told you how they are! It's fate! There's something in motion and we're all powerless to stop it. It's like a herd stampeding off a cliff!" The van's windows were tinted. Donovan got closer and he was sure he saw midgets. He thought about Spencer. "Who's in there?"

"Okay! Fate!" Sakata shook her head. "Fine! You control nothing!" She had rented a Dodge Caravan and slid the side door open.

"What the fuck is this, Sakata?" Donovan asked in genuine shock. He had watched enough of the *Simpsons* to be familiar with most of the characters. He was reminded of the mole guy, but there were two of them.

They had traveled from the city underneath a rough-textured potato-cloth blanket. “They’re chimeras, Don. I got them from Connor.”

Donovan stepped back. The two chimeras walked out of the van. They wobbled and struggled to stay upright. Their eyes were large black beads. They were hairless and pink, much like a pig. Their ears were small and pointed. They had snouts but they weren’t well-defined. Sakata dressed them in tropical clothing and one of them wore a beige fisherman’s hat. Donovan was speechless for a few moments then finally mustered, “I don’t know what I’m looking at.”

The two chimeras strutted around the lawn and began to talk to each other in baby’s gibberish. “They’re genetically engineered, Donovan. They have labs all around the country. Human organs. Pigs have the closest matches. *Scientists created these.* They never figured they’d be cute. They didn’t know what to expect. Half human, half pig. That’s what you’re looking at.” She rubbed Donovan’s back. “Do you want to keep them? I figured it’d be perfect for you. Great company.”

A few seconds passed.

“My life is crazy, crazy, crazy!” Donovan thought for a while and tried to put his life into perspective. “The Twin Towers are going down and I thought maybe, just maybe it would be yesterday.” He thought more. “Horace Streets has a cousin in Arizona. William Cooper is his name. Runs an obscure radio show but he’s blowing the lid off the Scoundrels. Of course, he calls them the Illuminati. Osama bin Laden will be framed.” Donovan walked to the two chimeras. He bent down and watched them chat in a mysterious language. They seemed like happy creatures. He stepped back toward Sakata. “Horace has given me many, many details about how it’s going down. His cousin, Cooper, has released documents to the public. *Protocols of the Elders of Zion!* He’s nuts!” The two chimeras started playing with each other. One wrestled the other to the ground. “A nuclear physicist says there are nukes hidden fifty meters under the buildings. The columns are rigged with nano-thermite. Cuts through steel like butter. Air Force has planes that fly in tandem. Four jets will supposedly be hijacked. They’re running drills in mid-September. The four planes will be swapped over airports, one of them in Cleveland. Can’t remember the others. Lots of details in the operation. A Mossad contact told him to buy pagers with the Odigo alert system.” The chimeras got up from rolling on the lawn and started heading to the cottage. “I keep wondering if I’m living inside a dream.”

“Our lives are strange,” Sakata said. “You’ll get past this and be a stronger person for it.” She held his hand. “I want to stay with you. For a few days.” She waited for an answer. “I’ll take care of them. We can name them.”

Doubt crept in Donovan’s mind but he accepted it. “I’m working on comics night and day. I know it looks like I’m a pack rat. *The Element does this to me!* Spirits all over this place! But? Kiribati is a chain of planets! It’s in the Ziggy star system. Thirty-three planets and one by one, they’re wiped out. Sinister overlords! Natural disasters! That kind of thing.” Donovan watched the chimeras struggle to figure out the door. He walked over and let them inside. Sakata followed. “I’ll show you everything I have! I’m trying to warn the public about what’s going to happen! If I can’t save New York, maybe I can keep a police state from taking hold!”

“I want to be in New Jersey when the whole thing goes down. I want to see it with my own eyes. Julian Garret is working on amazing artificial intelligence. He says he got it from reverse-engineering alien technology. He has robots that are looking very

human.” Sakata took a whiff of the living room. “I can help you clean this place if you’d like.”

“Not just yet, Sakata. I have obsessive compulsive disorder, I know.” He laughed. “I’m kidding but I’m sure any outsider would believe so.” He looked around. There were sticky notes everywhere. “This is the way it has to be.” There was a map of New York state on a wall with colored thumb tacks and pinned yarn connecting them to one another. “Horace told me about *Operation Swarming Gawk*. It’s a Scoundrel program. They’re trying to get us to stop talking to each other. Divide and conquer. Break down communication lines. I leave this place and I’m followed. Getting used to it, but it’s irritating. They follow me to the cafe around the corner and they start talking deliberately loud. They want me to overhear their conversations. It’s unusual.”

“We’ll fight through this, Donovan. We’ll get on our feet and we’ll be better off for it.” She reached the chimera with the hat, took it off, and rubbed its bald scalp. “What doesn’t kill us will make us stronger!”

A month later, Sakata and Donovan moved to the Jersey Shore. From 77 Hudson in Jersey City, they had an immaculate view of the Twin Towers and the New York skyline. The chimeras were sent back to Connor Milton’s hidden exotic zoo in Mexico. He assured them they would be treated very much like regular people with full roaming privileges. At the end of August, Donovan launched his comic book company, *Enigma*. Sakata and Donovan took walks together to Morris Canal Park. It was a small strip of lawn along the water. He shaved his head and cut down his beard. All that was left on his face was a thick mustache and fat sideburns. He reminded Sakata of a young James Hatfield. He traded in his tie-dye shirts for Harley Davidson ones. He wore greasy cut up Levi jeans instead of Bermuda shorts. It was a transformation. Sakata typically wore jeans, shiny black shoes, and plain white t-shirts. She wore lavender ribbons in her hair and she reminded Donovan of Betty Boop though he couldn’t put a finger on exactly why. *Maybe it’s her eyes*, he wondered. When the couple was at the end of the Morris Canal walkway, Donovan said, “They’re coming after us. For sure. They got Aaliyah last night. The pop singer.”

“*Are You That Somebody?*” Sakata asked. “That girl?” She shook her head in disbelief. “Those fuckers never stop, huh?” There was a huge metallic hexagon skeletal monstrosity partially blocking the view of the Manhattan. “What is that freakin’ thing?”

“Pretty sure it’s a clock. Not even sure if it works,” Donovan said. He got back on point. “Operation Swarming Gawk is in full stride. The Scoundrels have manipulated most law enforcement agencies. Just like the JFK assassination, not everyone is in on it. *Most are, though*. Fuckers are attacking liberals, Democrats, Clinton supporters, third-party guys, and most people who are outside of the proverbial box. They don’t want to leave a paper trail, keep in mind. They want to fuck with people but they don’t want to cause widespread fear. It’s not really something you can take out a hand camera and catch them in the act. You feel it in your gut but you’re powerless to explain it because they’re attacking periphery.”

Sakata and Donovan headed back. At the entrance of the park, there was a Korean War memorial plaque. The lawn wasn’t well kept and the trees seemed to be dying. Sakata commented, “I don’t feel as comfortable here on the East Coast. I like California better.” They walked along Dudley Street toward the Manhattan Yacht Club. “Why does the *Project for the New American Century* have to define America as it relates to war? Remember that satellite that went missing in 1999? The Mars Climate

Orbiter? Jimmy Buffet made a song about it and it was funny! But why couldn't it be that? They could have sent astronauts to the Red Planet and had them scheduled to return on January 1, 2000! That could have easily been the true *Project for the New American Century*! We could have been united by a peaceful vision of the future! Who put these jack asses in charge of anyone? Can't anyone learn from the past? Are they not afraid of the lessons of the French Revolution?"

"Someone told me once that if your only tool is a hammer, all your problems start to look like nails! War is all these guys know! Division is the only way they think! Propaganda comes as naturally to them as breathing air." A few minutes later, they were sitting side-by-side on a bench in Liberty State Park facing the Statue of Liberty. "I have this wonderful vision for Los Angeles. Somewhere in Santa Monica not far from the ferris wheel on the pier, there ought to be a giant statue of Marilyn Monroe. Something like this." He laughed. "Horace said my chopper will be ready by next week. It's a V-Rod, first year of production. You go into these biker bars and they're full of tough people. A guy wants to let you know just how mean he is. He doesn't *tell* you, though. No! He walks up to you while you're holding a pool cue and he socks you in the gut! Actions speak louder than words."

"What's so funny?" Sakata asked. "Why is it funny that a guy gets socked in the gut?"

"It's going on right here in front of us! These guys have much more expensive and sophisticated toys, though. Mike Tyson once said that everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth. Do you understand what I'm saying? It's the same guy in the biker bar as in the Pentagon. They are putting the rest of the explosive charges in that building sometime next week. Horace sent me a brief case with more details than I'll ever want to know about. Someone in DC wants to show us how tough he is! Horace collected more warning signs from pop culture. More than Supertramp and Fight Club. He sent me stuff from cartoons like the Simpsons, Johnny Bravo, and Beavis and Butthead. There are things in Marvel Comics, FEMA pamphlets and rap music CD covers. There's a Jackie Chan movie called Nosebleed. You know what's in the script? *It represents capitalism.*" Donovan pointed toward the World Trade Center in the distance. "*It represents freedom. It represents everything America is about. And to bring those two buildings down would bring America to its knees!* That's what's in the script."

"I'm starting to feel helpless," Sakata said. "Isn't there anyone you can go to? The Russians? The Chinese?"

"No! Then we look paranoid and they simply push back the doom date to Christmas. Besides? Russia has a history suppressing its people such as the *Great Terror* under Stalin. The Chinese incident of Tiananmen was only twelve years ago. The brass in these countries *want* the Scoundrels to cripple America. Remember I told you they would rig the 2000 election? The Russians and Chinese want the United States to be totalitarian. Do you think they like democracy here? Or freedom?"

"No. Not really." Sakata got up from the bench and sat on the lawn in front of Donovan, her back to New York. "I don't want to think too much about it."

"Do you know what put options are? In the stock market, it's sort of a hedge. It's like an insurance policy. It's one of the irregularities going on. Word on the street—we're *talking Wall Street*—there's a buzz about put options for United Airlines and

American Airlines. Horace knows a bookoo accountant from the Pentagon. Bryan Jack is the guy. *Two and a half trillion dollars are missing from their books!* You know what else? George Herbert Walker Bush and his military buddies financed two hundred and forty billion dollars worth of ten-year securities back in 1991. Project Hammer of all things! They're due to expire on September twelfth. These guys invested in Russian oil after the Cold War ended, wrecked their new economy, and they don't want to pay out." Donovan joined Sakata on the ground. "These records are kept in the Office of Naval Intelligence at the Pentagon! Besides the Twin Towers, this place is targeted for a hit. They want to clear their names from all the shady business they've been part of."

"How can they get away with this? Isn't it crazy?" She tried to back out of the conversation. "We passed Simple Sams Eatery on the way over. Feel like a bite? Or Amelia's Bistro? Not bad stuff!" She looked at Donovan's face. His sideburns made him look somewhat like a Civil War soldier. His chin was shaved, though. "Are you feeling good in your new incarnation?" She wanted to ask for her own motorcycle but thought it was a bag of worms.

"The Pentagon and Hollywood have an unholy alliance going on. Right around the time of *Saving Private Ryan*, I noticed this on my own. Most news anchors are really failed actors. Did you know this? Got it from a Don Henley song but I observed it over the years and it's true enough. They'll report anything. Washington has Hollywood in its back pocket." *Pretty sure we've discussed this a few times*, Donovan thought. *I'm mesmerized at what's going on.*

"Let's go, Donovan." She got up. "Let's walk. I'll listen, but I don't want to stare at that city over there." They left Liberty Park.

"The entire populous will be trained. There will be zero dissent. The Tavistock institute was formed with the thinking of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung. Somehow, they got into rock 'n' roll. They launched it, defined it, and instituted the Aquarian hippie ideal. Drugs, promiscuity and vulnerability. In some ways, my initiation into the Council of Nine was influenced by this mentality. But you have to pull yourself out and see the big picture. You have to tighten the belt buckle when the going gets tough. The populous isn't primed for this. They will be devoured. It's like the ocean when a tiny fish gets eaten by a larger one who gets eaten by an even larger one and so on. Small banks are falling like flies and so are media companies. The only survivors have thick skins and cold agendas. They are Scoundrel controlled. Clearchannel will tell people what to think. This is the way." They walked north along Jersey Avenue. "Around the corner, there's a place called Zeppelin Hall. Heard it has a big selection of microbrews. You want to try?"

"Yeah. We can do that." She was happy for the moment yet fearful of what was to come. There was too much doubt in her mind to keep her from feeling miserable. "Before we go home, we stop at Cocoa Bakery!"

"I went ahead and produced my own Superman comic book. I want you give it to your friends but don't tell them it's serious. There are detailed plans about how everything's going down. The government drills and the political players involved. Rule of thumb is that the strongest survive. Used to be many car companies but Edsel, Kaiser, Studebaker and AMC are all gone. Comics aren't much different. You have Marvel and DC. Not much else. Zap Comix and Jive Comics give artistic freedom but they will never be household names. I don't expect Enigma Comics to be any different. I can tell stories about how life really works. I can warn people about the Towers. I can sleep at

night knowing I'm doing my best." *What if it doesn't happen?* Donovan pondered. *My brain will break. I think so little of these guys on the other side. They are stupid and detestable.* Donovan considered the circumstance. *Of course they're going to do it,* he concluded. *It's their nature.* "I'm going to pretend like I'm preparing my homemade Superman comic for submission to DC Comics, okay? Lex Luthor is plotting to vaporize New York, alright?"

"I wish we could tell people directly but that would be playing into their hands, would it not? They would whisk us off to a detention camp? Horace said the Metropolitan Correctional Center in Manhattan has a secret wing for CIA torture and interrogation? I would *not* want to end up there! Live to fight another day, right?" She giggled. "Donovan? The world we talk about is crazier than the dramatic world on television. Something tells me it's not supposed to be this way."

"You're right, doll!" He squeezed her hand romantically and kissed her cheek. "You're right!" When they returned to their sixth-floor condo facing New York later that evening, they were a bit tipsy from the beer they drank. "I love you darling," Donovan told Sakata. He twirled her a couple of times then held her close. They slow danced without music for a few seconds then Donovan switched on their stereo. He played "In The City" by the Jam.

*In the city there's a thousand things I want to say to you
But whenever I approach you, you make me look a fool
I wanna say, I wanna tell you, about the young ideas
But you turn them into fears
In the city there's a thousand faces all shining bright
And those golden faces are under twenty-five
They wanna say, they gonna tell you, about the young idea
You better listen now, you've said your bit
Donovan and Sakata made out on their couch without taking any clothes off.
And I know what you're thinking
You still think I am crap
But you better listen, man, because the kids know where it's at
In the city there a thousand men in uniforms
And I've heard they now have the right to kill a man
We wanna say, we gonna tell you, about the young idea
And if it don't work, at least we still tried
In the city, in the city, in the city*

In the city there's a thousand things I want to say to you

When the song ended, they stopped making out. Sakata sat upright. She was concerned. "In the city there are a thousand men in uniforms and I've heard they now have the right to kill a man?" She shook her head. She rubbed Donovan's thigh so he wouldn't be offended. "Why do you listen to this?"

"It's coming. That's all. It was here before, but now it's back." Pink Floyd's "Great Gig In The Sky" had started to play. Their stereo held fifty compact discs and it was on random play. Donovan got up and looked for a song. "This is Crosby, Stills and Nash."

*Tin soldiers and Nixon's coming
We're finally on our own
This summer I hear the drumming*

*Four dead in Ohio
Gotta get down to it
Soldiers are gunning us down
Should have been done long ago
What if you knew her
And found her dead on the ground?
How can you run when you know?*

The song played on. *Na, na, na.* “This was recorded right after the national guard shot four kids dead at Kent State in 1970. Allison Krause, William Schroeder, Jeff Miller, and Sandra Lee Scheuer. Two were nineteen and two were twenty. Kids protesting the war in Vietnam with other students. Shot dead, cold blood.” Donovan rubbed the back of Sakata’s head then brought her forehead to touch his forehead. “There’s no time to put our heads in the sand like ostriches. We gotta fight the power the best we know how.”

Sakata kissed Don’s lips then stood with her back to him. “I have this idea. Call it crazy. But I have to say it.” She walked to their large window facing the Twin Towers. It was dark but the New York City lights provided a marvelous view nonetheless. “You were telling me that they’re going to steal precious metals at the World Trade Center before they demolish it. Building Four has a vault two stories underground with silver, gold and platinum bars. Quarter billion dollars worth. The Scoundrels plan to heist it, of course.” She walked back to Donovan and held his head from behind over the couch. “Why do we have to sit back while they execute all their programs? Why can’t we do our own thing?”

“You have any ideas?” Donovan asked. “I’d like to hear them if you do.”

“Horace Streets has connections many places. FBI, NSA, CDC, NASA, ATF and so on.” She kissed Donovan’s ear then whispered. “What about the patent office? We can hack their computers and we can have insiders swipe some files. General Motors bought people out. They have patents. Cars that got two hundred miles per gallon! Tom Ogle! Remember Horace telling us about him? In 1970, he developed a special carburetor that gave his 427 V-8 Ford Galaxy more than a hundred miles per gallon. Tweaks here and there would give today’s cars nine hundred miles per gallon but GM just doesn’t want it! And the oil companies!”

“Tom was shot in the street after he received media attention! He died in El Paso!” Donovan turned around and scanned the New York cityscape. “Just a couple of years ago, Stanley Meyer was killed. Almost the same story! He invented a car that ran on water! They poisoned him!”

“We need to survive this, Donovan. I’m not a sinister person, but I won’t let them tread on us!” She became anxious and paced. “In 1916, Nikola Tesla filed patent US1329559 for valvular conduit! No moving parts, simply an ingenious design. A one-way tube meant for liquid without any valve flap whatsoever. He has more than three hundred worldwide filed patents! Why is this information not available for us?”

“Tomorrow, we can visit the Wardencllyffe Tower!” He got up and tried to sooth her. “Tesla was going to provide wireless free energy for everyone. But? JP Morgan had been financing the project and when he learned it couldn’t be metered, he abandoned the project. The tower is in Shoreham, Long Island. A bit more than an hour drive from here. Many people say this is when the Great Rift between Contrarians and Scoundrels truly began. Everyone points to the creation of the Federal Reserve, but a

new banking system was inevitable. Even I'll admit that. This, though? It defined what their group was about and what our group was about. Monetary greed versus utopian ideals. They could've advanced society but they couldn't figure a way to make a buck from it!"

"You're in the idealist camp! Too many times, you are." Sakata felt better. "The original compound was a couple of hundred of acres. I heard they dismantled the original Wardencllyffe Tower and sold its contents for scrap metal. The compound is a fraction of the size it used to be. There's a museum there and an awful symbolic replica of what Tesla originally built. I don't want to go."

The evening of September 10, 2001 arrived. It was humid and warm until a brief thunderstorm put a half inch of rain onto the streets. Donovan and Sakata traveled through Holland Tunnel to Manhattan. By the time they reached the South Tower in the World Trade Center a bit past seven, clouds started to disperse and the Moon became visible. It was in its last quarter and the left half of it was shining. A man met Don and Sakata in the lobby. "*Come*," the guy said. "There's a lot to tell you." He took them to his office on the ninety-seventh floor. "I have talked to journalist friends of mine. *Irregularities*. Lots of strange stuff going on."

Sakata, having grown up for much of her youth in Japan, wasn't always sure where people came from when they spoke in different English accents. "Are you Australian?" she asked.

"British. But I have media contacts from Australia and the Netherlands." There were thin slit windows and they provided a great view of New York. The guy walked over to one and stared out. "They say you can see the curvature of the Earth from up here."

"I'm sorry," Sakata said. "I don't think I caught your name."

"Honey," Donovan apologized. "We should have had formal introductions downstairs. This is Scott Forbes and he's been in contact with Horace over the past couple of months."

"Glad to meet you!" Sakata bowed slightly toward Scott.

"Likewise!" Scott smiled. There were gray office partitions and he walked behind one. He brought back a couple of boxes. "Documents. Hard drives. Files, diagrams. Important stuff." He set them in front of Donovan. "Horace said it was imperative I give them to you so I wanted to do that first."

"You were working these past couple of days? Saturday and Sunday?" Donovan began to flip through the files given to him.

"Yes. The Port Authority said there would be a power down. That has never happened since I started working here in 1998. There are mysterious men running wire everywhere supposedly upgrading the computer systems." He reached for a folder. "These are photos."

Donovan looked them over. "Horace talked to a guy, Ben Fountain. Reports are there's been a lot of fire drills lately. More than usual. What can you tell me about this?"

"Not a lot. I'm taking work off tomorrow, though. I would have to be here at seven in the morning." Scott was anxious. "I understand we're neighbors. You have a condo at 77 Hudson and have a good view of this place."

"Yes." Donovan walked to the window. "The Statue of Liberty. Pretty good view from this place during daytime, right?"

“Wonderful!” Scott Forbes was not certain what he was in the middle of. “The Marriott Hotel. Downstairs where we met. I’d recommend it. If you are going to be back here bright and early, it could save you time and rest due to morning traffic. You can go over the files.”

“Yes. I’ll think about it.” Donovan walked over to Sakata. She was sitting on an office chair and her head was down on her forearms. “Honey? Are you ready?”

She was groggy. “Are we going to take a ferry tomorrow? I was looking forward to that.”

“I want to stay here at the hotel outside the lobby. Is that okay with you?”

Sakata smiled but she was unhappy. She wanted to go home and rest in her bed on the Jersey Shore. “When you were in Shokan, I stayed down the street at the Olcott Condos on seventy-second. You want to pass by? Next door to the Dakota Apartments and Central Park. Patsy’s Pizzeria around the corner. Are you hungry?” She mustered the energy to be in a positive mood.

“I could use a coffee break. I want to go through these files so we can’t be out for too long.” Donovan shook Scott’s hand. “Thank you for your time and your information.” He took a final look outside the window. *That’s where I live. Across the water on the Jersey side.*

“Final note,” Scott said. “The vans have been coming in like Horace said they would.”

“There’s a lot of gold in those buildings below,” Donovan noted. “We were told trillions are missing from the Pentagon budget and, just like clockwork, Rumsfeld announced it on television earlier.”

“Red flags everywhere,” Scott Forbes said. “It’s been nice doing business. Take care of yourselves!” He led them out.

Donovan took Sakata and they checked into the hotel downstairs and left the files there. They took a Yellow Cab to the Dakota Apartments and walked through Central Park.

“John Lennon spotted UFOs over his building. Did you know that?” Sakata was tired but feeling better. She gazed the sky.

“I think I might’ve heard that before. No one takes this stuff too seriously.” They walked to Patsy’s and ordered slices of pepperoni to go then headed a few blocks west to Riverside Park where they sat and snuggled along the east side of the Hudson. “Word is noon. They’re going to hit at noon.” Donovan rubbed his temples. “It gives me a headache.”

“I wouldn’t trust every word you hear. There will be tricks up their sleeves. You can bet on it!” The river looked serene. “This is the calm in the eye of the storm.”

“At the crack of dawn, we have a meeting with Horace and other Contrarians in the North Tower. Last minute diplomacy. Lily Rothschild will be there. Maureen Li and a few other representatives from the Scoundrel group. We can pull off an eleventh-hour deal.”

“I don’t like the feeling of any of this, Donovan. You know that!” Sakata thought about their room in the Marriott Hotel. She took one peek inside the boxes of files they were given. “Adolf Hitler was a Rothschild. Did you know that?” She looked at Donovan and he simply shook his head. The whole thing was wearing on him. “He was the son of Alois Hitler who was born Alois Schicklgruber. His father’s name was left blank on his birth certificate and the priest inscribed him as illegitimate. But? Alois

Hitler was actually the son of Lionel Rothschild.”

“Yeah,” Donovan said. “Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah,” he said. “It’s all so much.”

They spent fifteen more minutes in the park then caught a cab back to their hotel where they stayed on the twenty-first floor. There was a gym directly above them where stationary bikes faced the river. “Maybe you should go up and work off any pent up energy,” Sakata suggested.

“I’m fine,” Donovan assured her. They slept well together and met Horace Streets in the North Tower lobby at a bit past eight thirty. He was with Julian Garret.

“All bets are off,” Horace told Donovan. “It’s not happening at noon. *The Event is happening soon.*” He handed Donovan his Motorola pager.

“The Event? What’s going on?” Donovan read the text. *The Event 9am. Get out.* “What? We have a meeting up there! A couple of Scoundrels! This thing might not happen!”

“Did you get the boxes? It’s important! The boxes from Scott?” Horace felt tension.

“Yeah, yeah!” Donovan tried to calm down. “If time is an issue, here’s my room key, twenty-one eleven.” He reached into his pants. This morning, he dressed like a tourist and wore an “I Love New York” t-shirt. He handed the key to Horace who passed it along to Julian. “The receptionist is a gorgeous Asian lady, an aspiring actress named Amy Ting. Very helpful if you have any questions.”

“I’m on my way!” Julian ran into the Marriott.

“Let’s go! We don’t have a lot of time!” Horace turned toward the North Tower elevators. Sakata and Donovan followed. “It’s a set up,” he told them. “Roy Thurman. He baited us here and made people believe it was going down at noon when the buildings are at full capacity.”

“What about Lily? Maureen? Luther? Justin? Curtis? They are Scoundrels and meeting with us!” The elevator door opened. They stepped inside. Sakata watched Horace hit the seventy-three button then butterflies tickled her tummy as they zoomed upward.

“This is how the Scoundrels operate, dear.” Horace was full of frustration. “Sacrifices. They’ve done them for a long, long time.” He thought about Roy Thurman’s relation with Maureen Li. “They were lovers. He’s jaded.”

“Who? Who were lovers?” Donovan demanded.

“Roy Thurman and Maureen Li. We’ve got to save them!” When the elevator stopped, Horace looked at his silver Söhne wrist watch. “Eight forty-three,” he announced. “We have time.” He rushed along and punched a computer code in front of an Adelphia Communications door.

There were six Contrarians and five Scoundrels sitting around a board room table. “It’s about time!” Lily screamed at Horace. “What happened to eight thirty sharp?”

“Shut up! Shut up!” Horace yelled back at her. “All of us have to get the fuck out of here!”

“Shut up? In all the years I’ve known you guys, you’re not one to be rude!” Lily got up and pulled a folder out of an oversized black leather hand bag. “I have proposals for you!”

Horace turned to Donovan. “Assure our guys that I mean now!”

The six Contrarians were Isaac Hook, Barry Pierce, Clive Klauber, Eugene

Donotus and Phyllis Horner. Donovan blurted to them, “*Chateau Des Amerois! Mother of Darkness! Marc Dutroux! Sacrifices!*”

The five Scoundrels were Luther Xavier, Lily Rothschild, Maureen Li, Justin Cavendish and Curtis Randolph. Luther stood and said, “You have my attention, sir!”

Donovan blurted more, “Abraham Lincoln! John Fitzgerald Kennedy! Curt Cobain! Aaliyah Haughton! RFK! JFK Junior! Doctor Martin Luther King! John Lennon!”

Isaac Hook made his wealth in private equity and venture capitalism. “What is this?” He felt dumb. “With all due respect, what is this?”

“Sacrifices of the Illuminati,” Curtis Randolph told Isaac Hook. “I suppose time is of the essence?”

“Yes! Get out!” There was a modern art clock on the wall. It was a quarter until nine. “I beseech you, this is not a test! Warriors, come out and play!”

“What’s that mean?” Isaac asked. Then. He saw it. Frozen in terror. He struggled to point at the window to Donovan’s back. He struggled to speak but was paralyzed.

Donovan saw the fear on his face and turned around.

A jet plane was headed their way.

“Fuck this shit!” Curtis Randolph ran out of the room.

Seconds later, the plane walloped the floors just above them.

“I know it’s a trap now!” Lily Rothschild began to weep. “My friends are above us in the Nikko Securities office! I have to tell them it’s real! Roy Thurman let us believe we could negotiate.”

Donovan grabbed her. “No hard feelings but you’ve been sold out! And a few of us, too!” He turned around. Sakata was at the window looking up. “Get away from there!”

“Smoke, Donovan. Black smoke. It really happened.” She walked to him in a zombie-like trance.

Lily Rothschild told her group, “I’m going upstairs to save our guys! Who’s coming?”

The group scattered out of the room. A few went with Lily but most followed Donovan and Horace. “The elevators are shut off!” Horace slammed his palm on the wall. “We have to hoof it down the emergency staircase!”

Donovan shouted, “The local elevators! Are they down?” They were around the corner. Panic started to ensue. He tried them with no luck. The group jetted down flights of stairs. Of the Scoundrels, only Curtis Randolph ran down. He was a few flights below the rest of the group. Of the Contrarians, only Isaac Hook took off with Lily to warn the others. Every ten floors, Donovan would stop with Sakata for a breath. “My father told me something as a teenager. Courage does not mean living without fear. Quite the opposite. Courage means *having* fear but overcoming it! We are faced with danger, we overcome our fears, we fight on!” He took deep breaths. The group slowed down with him. “Cowardice is the opposite of courage! It’s when you have nothing to fear at all but you buckle! You run!”

Barry Pierce was a Contrarian who made his wealth in the lumber industry and was heaving beside Donovan. “Like we’re doing now? Is this a guilt trip?”

“No! We live to fight another day! We are not cowards! This is only the beginning of the fight! This is just a pep talk!” Donovan ran his fingers through his

beard. He was drenched in sweat. “We distinguish between cowardice and stupidity! Our friends will need us in the days to come!”

“Right, my lover! Let’s run!” Sakata suggested. “Let’s leave!” The group stammered down the stairs and they were joined by others from different floors. Explosions staggered the group every now and then. “Those fuckin’ blasts are below us, Donovan!”

“Yes, honey! I’ll explain later!” When they reached the fortieth floor, Donovan stopped them. He took deep breaths. “The Lehman Brothers are here! If one of you wants to be an irrational hero, you can do so! Save them! Check on them! Otherwise, we breathe a little and move on!” They continued along and then reached the thirteenth floor. “Bank of America, here! Anyone want to save the day? Check on them? Do so! If you please! Otherwise, save your skin!”

Horace Streets was winded. “Let’s blow this taco stand!”

Donovan laughed uncontrollably. “Fuckin’ Horace! I never knew you as a comedian and it’s probably the lack of oxygen to my brain, but that was funny!” Donovan studied the faces around him and made sure they were ready to run. “Let’s go!” He was sure everyone would be safe. When they reached the lobby, Donovan saw a fire chief giving his crew directions. “Why are the windows blown out?” Donovan knew the plane couldn’t have rocked the building that bad. They were all in shock. He couldn’t think straight.

“Get your people out of here!” the chief commanded. “Evacuate now!”

“Donovan? What’s going on?” Sakata pleaded. Some of the pieces started coming to her.

“The documents we got last night. This place is lined with mini-nukes and explosives! That’s why we felt explosions from below! But we have to find Julian Garret! He’s in the Marriott!” Donovan surveyed the floor. “Contrarians! Battery Park! It’s your best bet! We meet up later! Take a ferry! Or the Holland Tunnel! Cars will be lined up, but get out of here! We meet up later!”

It was a bit past nine in the morning. Sakata looked up. She socked Donovan in the gut. “Another one!” She pointed up.

“Holy fuckin’ shit!” Donovan’s jaw dropped. By this time, they were joined by groups of strangers who had also escaped.

A second jumbo jet slammed into the South Tower.

A stranger shouted, “That was not American Airlines!” It was a blonde middle-aged lady wearing large sunglasses. She repeated, “That was not American Airlines!”

Sakata was infuriated. “Bitch!” she yelled. “What the fuck do you know about this?” It was way too specific. She tried to collect her thoughts. *She’s right. It didn’t look like a commercial airplane.*

“There were no windows on the side! It was a military craft with a large payload underneath!” the lady yelled to Sakata. She stared up at the billowing smoke. She ran away.

“Forget her!” Donovan assured Sakata. “Find Julian Garret! We still have time!” Fifteen minutes later, they were in their hotel room from the night before. Julian was studying documents they had left in the room. “Get out, asshole! Get out!” Donovan yelled. “It’s going down!”

Julian Garret was in awe. He held some of the documents up to Donovan. “This is the mother lode of all information!” He was in hysterics. “Benjamin Franklin’s

original design of bifocals! Tesla's thoughts on perpetual motion! Secret patents from IBM, GM and 3M! Fuckin' incredible stuff!"

"It does us no good if we're dead! Come out now!" Donovan grabbed the box in front of Julian. "Please tell me you've already taken the other box down!"

"Yes! Yes!" Julian Garret composed himself and followed Donovan out of the hotel room. "Quantum physics, quantum computers, and nano-technology! Home run! Home fuckin' run!"

Sakata was winded and needed breaks more often. When they were halfway down on the eleventh floor, she sat down against the stairwell wall. She inhaled many times. "You abandoned me last year, Donovan!"

"So! We had a crisis! After Nikumaroro, I needed space and I needed to plan for this thing!" Donovan kneeled down. "Why now, Sakata? Is this about Thelma? My heart is with you!"

"I didn't joke when I said our first son would be named Niku! Remember?" She took breaths, wiped her forehead of sweat, and wasn't sure she would be living in the next five minutes. "Your love child is born! You should have visited me! You stupid fuckin' asshole!"

"What? Really?" Donovan couldn't figure it out.

"Don't you remember my best friend, Onishi? Her new child, Sam?" Sakata grabbed Donovan by his collar. "You fuckin' moron! That's my child, Nikumaroro! If we don't live, take him! He's your son!"

"What?" Donovan was truly startled. "We rest then we get you out!"

Moments later, they were running down stairs again. "This building looks like a midget compared to the Twin Towers," Sakata noted. A group of people were storming down behind them led by a New York City firefighter. They reached the second floor.

It felt like a freight train was traveling at them from above. They couldn't see a thing but the world was shaking.

"Jesus Christ!" Sakata yelled. Her shirt was wet from falling tears. The trembling lasted for ten seconds. "They're letting off the nukes!" she yelled to Donovan when it was over.

"There are no nukes!" the firefighter said to her. "My name is Jeff Johnson! I'm with the city fire department! There was an errant flight which hit one of the Towers! We'll get you out alive!"

"My name is Frank Razzano," a man said to Sakata. "I'm an attorney. Don't panic. We'll make it out."

Someone in the group interjected, "We're in a good place. In 1993, the World Trade Center was bombed. The south side of this building has been reinforced! Nowhere stronger on planet Earth!"

"Let's get out!" Donovan demanded. "Let's go!"

There was no way. There was shattered building debris in all directions. The firefighter yelled. "Get a rope or something we can climb down! We have to go out through the window!"

When they got out, smoke was everywhere and visibility was impossible. "Did a nuke hit us?" Julian Garret asked. He was still carrying a box from Donovan's hotel room. "It looks like a scene from a bad sci-fi movie!"

There were sirens sounding everywhere. Dust was all over the place and it was hard to breath. Donovan and Sakata made it out hand-in-hand. White dust was all over

the street. Black smoke smoldered in the remaining North Tower. "It's oxygen-starved, honey! It still has a chance! It's not a hot fire! Office furniture! The North Tower can be salvaged!" There were others screaming in horror as they ran past Donovan and Sakata. As the couple made their way south on West Street, they turned around. "No! Jesus Christ, no!" Donovan yelled.

The North Tower began to collapse into its own footprint.

"Nukes, darling," Sakata said. She was no longer scared and stopped crying. "That, and thermite." Her mind became clear at that moment.

"Controlled demolition if I've ever seen one!" Donovan said. "*RUN!!!*"

There was a plume of white smoke heading their way. Donovan took Sakata by the hand. They ran past Cedar Street, past Albany Street and didn't slow down until they reached Carlisle Street.

Battery Park was only a couple of blocks away. When they got there, Sakata blocked out the crazed residents of New York City. A few people stampeded past them dressed in business attire but they were literally white as ghosts. They had been caked in dust from the pulverized concrete which came from the gigantic plume. "I am living inside a memory."

"What?" Donovan asked.

"This is not real! Is it wrong to rationalize it that way?" She reached around Donovan and grabbed his butt from behind. "A memory, Donovan! Okay? We are living inside of one! When 2003 rolls around, or 2004? This is a memory! Okay?"

"Coping mechanism? Sakata? Is that how you're dealing with this?" He kissed her forehead.

"We sure-as-shit lost friends in that building! We don't need to mourn! The sooner we move on, the sooner we can win in our own lives!" The couple sat side-by-side on a park bench and watched frantic survivors trying to board ferries and other boats. Sakata sat calmly and asked Donovan, "You know I'm not much into football, but what do you think of Curt Warner? I mean, he came out of nowhere and led the St Louis Rams to a Super Bowl victory! I heard he was bagging groceries before he made it to the NFL!"

"Yeah!" Donovan rubbed Sakata's head and kissed her on the lips. "And those Ravens last year! Didn't they come out of nowhere? Goes to show that defense still wins championships!"

Sakata smiled. "I was bagging on those ugly orange ferries a few days ago. I take it all back! I want to be on one of those things!"

"When the crowd lightens up, we'll do it!" Donovan was okay with life. "If not, we get marsh mellows and cook 'em right here." He wanted to remain light but couldn't. "They call that 'culling', Sakata. The thing they did earlier? It's why we're a humanity. We culled the herds. We chopped off the weak and let the strong survive."

"They didn't like Lily, did they?" Sakata asked. "They thought she was illegitimate? And Maureen? Roy Thurman felt spited or he hated her for being Asian. I don't know, but I understand."

"We'll survive, Sakata. You say we're living in a memory of something we'll remember later on. I think it's a nightmare. For a few years, we'll try to stabilize ourselves but we'll be unable to. *The force out there is too strong.* But we hold on! It might be worth it!" Donovan cried about once per month. He was happy when he did. He didn't want to believe he was a cyborg or anything near it. When he cried, it wasn't a

sign of weakness. *It was a sign of humanity.* Tears streamed down his face and he didn't stop them. He didn't wipe.

"I want revenge," Sakata told Donovan. "More than that, I want to sit back. I want to see what we're in the middle of. I want it to be clear."

"Retards!" Donovan said. "Some people will call the Scoundrels evil for what's happened, but I know it's beyond that. *Retarded.* It'll bite them in the ass! If they were merely evil, they could get away with it! Their tactics, though! Not so bright!" The last of Donovan's tears made its way down his cheeks. "This will come back to haunt them!"

Sakata and Donovan took off to the quaint cottage in Shokan. "It stinks in here!" Sakata shrieked. "Beer? Piss? I don't know, but we have to clean this place!" There was rat shit all over the carpet and many of the boxes were eaten through. "I'll start, Donovan! If I'm going to stay here with you, I have to have tidiness! Can you sort through your stuff? I'd like to throw some of it out!"

Vertigo. Donovan felt strong vertigo. "The legend of Big Foot is strong in this area, you know? If you find large poop, it wasn't me!" Donovan laughed. "I'll clean up, but don't throw anything away until I give the okay. I have sensitive stuff."

"Pack rat!" Sakata called him. She sneaked up to him and reached around to grabbed his butt from both ends. "I can live with you!" She smiled and sucked on his Adam's apple. The living room wasn't easy to get through because of all the stacked boxes but Sakata managed to get to the kitchen. "Do you remember what happened the month before we took off to Caroline Island in Kiribati? November of 1999?" The kitchen was equally a mess. Donovan's recliner was in the middle of the room to make way for other stuff elsewhere. "Think hard, Donovan, because it applies to us here and now!"

"Yes, honey! The family of Doctor Martin Luther King Junior forgave James Earl Ray! They believed he had nothing significant to do with the assassination. After many years, it was uncovered that the FBI had a vendetta against King. Also, the CIA and the Army's special forces." Donovan pulled a box off the top of a column stacked five high. There were comic drawings of his and he sorted through them. "There was a restaurant owner across from the Lorraine Motel. Dating a black gal and claimed to have shot Doctor King many years later. Like Lee Harvey Oswald, it looked more and more that James Earl Ray was a patsy and murky Scoundrel agents really did the job." Donovan Cobb flipped through some of his old notebooks. "I have some good stuff in here I'd like to share with you!"

"We talked about William Peppers and how he painted the picture of a psychotic government at work! They hated Doctor King! They bugged him! They intimidated him! They wrote letters to him calling him a fraud and telling him to kill himself! They sent tapes of him having sex with mistresses! They bugged him and did that!" Sakata was at work looking into cabinets and pulling out Pine-Sol. She was determined to clean as much as she could. "Just like the JFK thing, the fuckers got away with it! This thing that just happened in New York is no different! They're going to get away with it and we're going to be on the run! Unless they like us, we're going to be here, Canada, or somewhere far out of their way."

Donovan started two piles of sketchbooks. One had work that he felt inspired by and he wanted to follow up on. The other had stuff that was mysterious, incomplete, and Donovan couldn't remember his train of thought. "We have our defenses, Sakata," Donovan yelled to the kitchen. "They won't come after us right away. We have ways to

sting them.” Donovan went through his better books and a light bulb came on inside his head. *I’ve got to get these to Preston*, he thought. *This has to be a movie. It gives us an excuse to get together, too.* “Sakata?”

“Yes, doll?” She was preparing the Pine-Sol together with warm water in a bucket and dipping a mop in. “What is it?”

“Hollywood! Next week, we got to Hollywood!” He thought about moves in chess. The Contrarians and Scoundrels were at odds with each other. He was thinking two and three moves ahead. “Or? Australia, but first Hollywood! Okay?”

“Whatever you want!” Sakata was happy and started moving some of the clutter to the outside patio. She was already forgetting about the psychotic events in Manhattan.

A week later, Donovan and Sakata were in Preston’s home off Mullholand in the hills of Hollywood. “This is where Preston told me I was nominated for the Council of Nine,” Donovan told Sakata as they reached the front door. Donovan knocked. “It’s really a great place if we weren’t going through crazy shit.”

“I love Hollywood,” Sakata said and slapped Donovan’s ass.

Preston opened the door. “Great to have you here, buddy!” Preston grabbed Donovan in a bear hug.

Donovan looked across the living room and straight through the clean glass sliding doors and into the Los Angeles valley. “Do you know that’s bad luck in Buddhism?” Donovan pointed across and ignored Preston’s father on the couch. “You’re not supposed to be able to see through a house.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard, but...” Preston thought of something clever to say. “Martinis! Martinis fix everything!” He pulled Donovan inside.

Preston’s father, Hale Bancroft, was already sipping on a martini with a green olive stabbed with a red plastic mini-sword. He raised his glass without standing up. “You are a pleasure to see!” He was buzzed and his words slurred.

Sakata stood and looked outside across the valley. “Does anyone know we’re at war? I mean with each other? So much seems too normal out there!”

Preston scooted to his kitchen and blended drinks. “We reviewed many, many video tapes. My father and I thought to put out a public service announcement but it’s no good. They’re winning!” Preston threw in ice cubes and set the blender to high speed. When it was done grinding margarita mix with ice, he explained. “We’re all on board, unofficially at least. All the supposed liberal bigwigs. Paul McCartney, Mariah Carrey and so on! They’ll kill us, otherwise!” He poured drinks into cocktail glasses and took them to Donovan and Sakata. “I was joking about the martinis. You’ll like this better.” Lime margaritas with salt dashed around the rim.

Donovan took his and drank to the point of brain freeze. “We have no chance here? Not on a movie set? I brought a cartoon storyboard of a movie I think we could feed on!”

“No dice! They’re making lists. They’re *killing* people. Anyone who knows what really happened? They’re on a list!” Preston walked to his rear sliding door and pushed it open. There was a brand new propane barbeque grill sizzling Cornish chickens. “Inversion!” All of a sudden, Preston wasn’t so uppity. Donovan followed him outside and Preston repeated himself, “Inversion! For at least a half year! Say the opposite of what you really feel because they have the upper hand. They’re going to mow us down if we’re stupid!” He poked and prodded the chickens then flipped them.

“It’s all bullshit!” Donovan said to his best friend. “I was hoping we could

fight right now! We could put these guys behind bars!”

Preston spoke to Sakata. “I have bell peppers on the kitchen counter. Would you mind slicing those up and maybe a few onions?”

“My pleasure!” Sakata bowed to Preston then took off.

“Live to fight another day, my friend!” Preston had a silver spatula in his hand and gestured to the valley. “My wife, Tabitha, is down there! My three daughters! Your wife, Thelma, is down there with Tabby in the Roosevelt Hotel! She’s helping to keep things together! The CIA worked with the mafia to execute John F Kennedy and they’re using mafia tactics again right now! The central government in the Pentagon is not coming after you or me! They are coming after my daughters, Donovan! The CIA is behaving like mafia chickenshits! They would come after Sakata if you think you’re going to fight them!”

Donovan sipped from his margarita. “How sure are you that the Scoundrels pulled it off? I mean, I know we had the intelligence in advance, but is there a remote possibility that the mass media is correct?”

Preston was startled. “We all knew and if you slip into denial, you’re no good! You might get killed!” He relaxed and prepped more chickens for the grill. “I suppose you haven’t watched a whole lot of TV? You were quite reclusive for a while.”

“Television?” Donovan drank more margarita and spilled some down his shirt. “Fuck television, right? You told me not to rely on television! You said it’s a supplement and not a substitute for life!”

“Good, Donovan! You got it!” Preston turned his back to Donovan and looked across the valley. There was a thin layer of smog. “Howard Hughes was a brilliant man and he built the largest flying aircraft ever, the Spruce Goose. But? He was terrified of microbes and wore white gloves wherever he went.” Preston reflected on visiting the Spruce Goose as a kid in the Long Beach harbor. It was there with the Queen Mary, an iconic ship. “I can be a doctor at Cedars-Sinai and tell you as my patient to stay away from sick people.” He turned to his friend at the grill. “But the next day, I’ll go see all kinds of sick people because it’s my job, Donovan! Understand? Me and my dad know how to not get pulled into media hype and propaganda! The events of September eleventh were equivalent to *Wag the Dog*! Remember the movie! Total bullshit is coming out now!”

Donovan walked closer to his friend and studied his eyes. “I can handle the truth!” He figured they were now talking in movie metaphors and referred to *A Few Good Men*. “Hit me with your best shot!” He even threw in a line from eighties rocker, Pat Benetar.

“Flight Ninety-three landed in Cleveland. It was reported on the news on the day of nine eleven. There were no debris—*nothing significant at least*—that landed in Shanksville, Pennsylvania. No landing gear, no fuselage, and no engine turbines. Same for the Pentagon! Jamie McIntyre from CNN straight reported it and the mass media won’t show what he reported again.” Tears poured from Preston’s eyes. He never cried in front of Donovan before. “It’s clear as daylight. It was scripted, at least to two thirds of the reporters in the field. A lady in Britain? Working for the BBC? She jumped the gun! Her script was to report that Building Seven, the Solomon Building was down! But?”

“But what, Preston?” Donovan confiscated the tongs and spatula from him after dowing his drink. “I’ll take care of the chicken!”

“The bitch said the building went down!” Preston laughed sardonically. There was a classic chef’s cap on a lawn chair. He put it on Donovan. “After she said it went down, there was one of those graphic inserts behind her and then it actually went down! Demolition style!”

“Fucking funny!” Donovan busted up in hysterics. He didn’t feel good, though. “And I’m sure you and your dad watched all the video of these separate irregularities?”

“Enough that I know in my bones that the Scoundrels did it! Seven of the supposed hijackers have already turned up in foreign countries, Donovan!” Preston laughed, but it was boisterous. “I’m happy, but I fear for my loved ones because they’re not done!”

There was a micro-second of rage in Donovan’s tummy. *This is cowardice!* he reasoned to himself. He knew the larger picture, though. “So we kiss their asses? Preston? I need to know! I am an alpha male in most situations except when I’m with you! If you’re telling me we run with our tails between our legs, we do it!”

“Fuck you, Donovan!” There was no bitterness or anger. In Preston’s split second of reactivation, after having downed five martinis before Donovan arrived, he knew better. *Ignorance eats too many people*, Preston thought. “We win!” Preston kissed his buddy on the cheek like an Italian don in a mafia movie. “We outsmart them! There are too many holes in the damn, you see? We beat them, Donovan! We are in the perfect position to do it!”

Donovan felt happiness inside. He grinned. He realized the genius of the attitude. “Yes! My friend! We kick their asses... our way!” He smiled. Just then, Sakata arrived with chopped peppers, onions, and mushrooms. “And we get laid by pretty ladies for the rest of our lives!” He laughed heartily.

Sakata set her chopped veggies on a table near the grill. “Did I come in during the punch line of a bad joke?” she asked. She kissed her lover on the stubble of his chin. It was one of her favorite things in life.

Hale Bancroft joined the group on the patio from his couch inside. “They seized all the video tapes, Donovan.” He raised his martini glass and his eyes started to look red. “Eighty-five or ninety of them around the Pentagon! The FBI took them! Horace was able to check out a lot of the footage!” He drank and wobbled. “A missile! Horace saw the missile with his own eyes! It wasn’t a plane!”

“Yeah!” Donovan scattered bell peppers on a skillet and ate a few slices. “We’re up against a monster. I have no problem with running and hiding, maybe playing a little theatre. All the world’s a stage, right? They’re determined to smash all the masses. They already ruined our democracy last year. Now? They’re ruining our freedom and they want to ruin our minds. But if we live through it, we just might be stronger people.”

“You guys are silly, silly folks!” Sakata giggled. “Can we catch a movie later at Grauman’s Chinese Theatre? I’d love to go there with you! Maybe *the Count of Monte Cristo*?”

“Suuuuuure!” Donovan responded. He drew Sakata close to his face and lip locked her. They tongued each other in the longest French kiss Donovan had since being in high school. When it was over, he sarcastically added, “That’s what I really want! I want to watch a movie about a guy who was unjustly thrown in jail for many years! And was consumed in revenge fantasies all the while!” A strong gust blew sweat beads from his face. The coolness was a simple pleasure but it was enough to make him grin. He

pecked Sakata on the lips and stared across the Los Angeles valley.

"Don't Say a Word!" Preston felt an emotional warmth inside. He wedged himself between Donovan and Sakata and, for a few seconds, they were three conjoined peas in a pod. He backed off, "Brittany Murphy was really good in it, I hear!"

"Don't say a word! Yeah! In more ways than one!" Donovan said and laughed. His lover, his best friend, and his best friend's dad laughed with him. Donovan remembered an old saying, *Laugh and the world laughs with you. Cry and you cry alone.* They ate juicy Cornish chickens without using forks or knives. They drank dry martinis and lime margaritas well into the deep night. They skipped the movies and wound up chitchatting into the wee hours. When the time was ripe, Donovan played Patti Austin's and James Ingram's "Baby, Come to Me" on repeat play. It was the calm before the storm. It was the culmination of many years of friendship, sacrifice and trust. The world had gone batshit nuts. It would consume them in the coming months then put them on the run. Before dark clouds arrived, they laughed together, and then they laughed some more.

