

Chapter 1

“Isn’t it a pain in the ass when people you murder come back?”
Derek asked the lady who answered the door.

Confusion on her face gave way to mind-shattering terror.

“*I cremated you!*” she wailed, fleeing into the house as
Derek ambled after her.

The place intrigued him.

Its exterior was nondescript weathered gray stone, its architectural style like that of an old church. One half-expected to see gargoyles squatting on downspouts.

Here, of course, the gargoyles lived *inside*, a middle-aged couple that had murdered dozens of street-people, students, their own son, and an unfortunate other version of Derek — all in their efforts to create a master-race.

They had succeeded.

Indeed, they had done so in ways they could never have imagined, ways that defied logic and the laws of physics.

Today, he would deliver a morsel of retribution.

Derek strolled down the long hallway past oil paintings of landscapes on the walls and entrances to the living room and

dining room, the parquet floor creaking under his feet — until he reached the study’s massive oak door.

He kicked it open.

Books in darkly stained walnut bookcases lined the room, and a walnut desk stood in front of the French doors that opened out to the garden.

Mrs. Pembroke cowered beneath it, sobbing.

He was *almost* tempted to give her an explanation of what was happening.

She didn’t deserve one.

“Where are the red pills? The ones you created from my brain.”

She howled.

Derek scanned her mind and learned the pills were stored in liquid nitrogen in the basement laboratory.

He teleported to the lab and spotted a cryogenic Dewar flask wrapped in mist on the workbench. He put on insulated gloves, grabbed it, and teleported home.



Derek Evans was a husky, pale, six-foot four twenty-five-year old with brown hair and brown contact lenses.

He teleported to a restroom on the second floor of the University of Chicago’s Oriental Institute and then joined Alessandra and Professor Andromeda Cole in her cluttered office.

Piles of papers and old books covered most of the floor-space. Massive wooden shelves behind the desk held stone tablets with Egyptian hieroglyphics, a human skull covered with arcane symbols, and decaying scrolls.

Derek’s wife, Alessandra — Allie — was a petite brunette with an olive complexion and a beautiful face marred by a scar on her right jaw-line — and brown contacts.

Get the pills? Allie wordlessly beamed to him as he sat in the other guest chair.

Yes.

“Where is this site?” Professor Cole said. She was a middle aged woman with a rugged face in jeans and a blue denim blouse. Her gray hair was gathered in a ponytail.

One could easily picture her living out of a tent in the Middle East with a coiled whip hanging from her belt.

“It’s in Southern Africa, sort of,” Derek said.

“Sort of? What does that mean?”

“To explain that, I have to flip a coin,” Allie said, throwing a quarter in the air.

She caught it and slapped it on the desk.

“What’s the outcome?” she asked.

“It came up heads, of course,” Professor Cole replied. “Why are we flipping coins? I thought you were going to explain. . .”

“Wrong,” Allie said. “It came up heads *and* tails and, to a slight extent, landed on its edge.”

“All in different universes,” Derek continued. “When an event has multiple outcomes, all possibilities occur in multiple copies of the universe. You split into several Andromeda Coles, each one seeing a different outcome.”

“If you’ll excuse me,” Professor Cole muttered. “I have an urgent meeting on uh . . . Planet Earth.”

Archaeologists are catnip for crackpots, she thought.

Allie and Derek laughed.

“Huh?”

“It’s just that we have a cat named Norton,” Derek said. “And we should plant catnip in . . . at home.”

“We’re crackpots with money,” Allie chuckled, fanning out a sheaf of hundred-dollar bills. “Just humor us a few more minutes.”

Professor Cole stared at the money.

“Please join us in this corner of the room,” Derek said, standing. “We want to demonstrate something.”

Professor Cole eventually joined them, thinking, *The sooner they leave the better.*

A flash of . . . discontinuity and . . . ecstasy followed.

“What was that?” Professor Cole gasped. “It’s like something I experienced . . . long ago.”

“The spirit world,” Allie said. “We tunneled through it.”

They stood in a corner of Professor Cole’s office — and other versions of Derek and Allie sat in her guest chairs, while another Professor Cole sat at the desk.

The two Professor Coles stared at each other in shock.

“Tails,” the seated Allie said, pointing to the coin on the desk.

“We have to return you to your original timeline,” Derek said. “There are two of you here and *none* of you there.”

There was another flicker and the office now held three people, huddled in the corner.

“Who . . . *what the hell* are you two?” she muttered, shaking.

“You thought you need a drink,” Allie said. “So let’s get one, and we’ll answer your questions.”

Are they reading my mind? Professor Cole thought.

“Yes, we are telepaths,” Derek said.

They walked to the Wabash Pub on the corner of Woodlawn and East 59th street — bordering the Midway Plaisance Park, its trees blazing gold and yellow on this crisp fall day.

The place was almost empty.

It was a dark wood-paneled bar with tables opposite the bar and pool tables in the back. On one wall, a large poster

announced a Halloween party and dance at the University of Chicago student union.

A jukebox blared *American Pie*.

Looking at the poster, Derek felt a twinge of nostalgia.

Longing for the days when we were young and foolish and full of hope? Allie beamed at him.

“Aren’t we full of hope now, *me amuri*?” he said, his eyes tearing up.

“Oh *maniac*, I love it when you talk Sicilian to me,” Allie sighed, tapping Derek on the shoulder. “You’re right of course. Our time has come.”

Get a room, guys! Professor Cole thought.

“We don’t need a room,” Allie whispered. “We have the Sea of Desire in the land of Oz.”

“Believe it or not, that’s a place,” Derek said.

When their eyes had adjusted to the dim lighting, they took a table.

“God, I *hate* these things,” Allie muttered, removing her brown contact lenses. “I can’t imagine how people wear them all the time.”

Professor Cole gasped when she saw Allie’s Indigo eyes, with irises sparkling like diamonds.

Derek removed his contacts too.

“That’s one of the most visible outward signs of Indigos like us,” Derek said. “Besides having no fingernails or toenails.”

“Indigos?”

“That’s what we call our species,” Allie said. “*Homo Sapiens Indicus*.”

“Your *species*?”

“We are the result of genetic experiments,” Derek said.

“In another timeline we call Origin,” Allie said.

“Hi doc,” the bartender said, waiting on them. “Balvenie neat?”

“You know me too well, Nick.”

Derek and Allie ordered coffee, and Nick left.

“Three keys to happiness,” Andy said. “True love, a good career, and a well-trained bartender.”

“I can’t wait to be able to drink again,” Allie said, pointing to her pregnant belly.

“When are you due?”

“No idea,” Allie said. “I don’t know what our gestation period is. The funny part is I can see her being born.”

Andromeda smiled.

“In most futures, she’s born in the daytime and some, at night. Different times, different places.”

“In *most futures*?” Andy said. “You literally *see* this?”

“All I know is it’ll be *amazing* . . . and *soon*. Somewhere between a day and a month from now. Most important, she’ll be *healthy*.”

“Our precognition doesn’t sync with calendars or clocks,” Derek said.

“Vittoria will be our first natural-born,” Allie said. “Ever.”

“You two weren’t natural-born?”

“Doctor Pembroke gave me a DNA-altering virus,” Derek said. “Part of a bogus drug-study.”

“Pembroke?” Professor Cole said. “The name sounds familiar.”

“In our timeline, he was nominated for a Nobel prize in biology,” Derek said.

“I remember! My ex was a biologist and she was always going on about what a genius Pembroke was.”

“He was a *monster*,” Allie muttered.

“He knew physics? I mean physics must be involved with going into timelines.”

“No,” Derek said. “All he knew for sure was that we’d be telepaths. His lab animals became agitated whenever he *thought* of torturing them, and calmed down when he changed his mind.”

“That’s horrible!”

Nick served their drinks.

“He got what he deserved in the end,” Allie muttered. “In our world, he got it *after* infecting Derek. In yours, he got it before.”

“How *do* you travel to different timelines?” Professor Cole said. “I mean, if Pembroke didn’t know physics.”

“We go to a place we call the spirit-world,” Derek said. “The crossroads of existence. Every corner of every timeline is accessible from there.”

“It’s a place where thoughts are sounds,” Allie said. “That’s the basis of telepathy and ... everything else. Pembroke screwed with the human brain and got a *lot* more than he bargained for.”

Professor Cole sipped her drink.

“What is your timeline like? What did you call it? Origin?”

“It looks a lot like yours,” Derek said. “Except it’s five years out of sync.”

“And President Eakins is trying to turn America into a police state,” Allie said.

“That lunatic is *president*?” she said. “*That’s not possible!*”

“His two opponents despised each other,” Derek said. “Each had supporters who hated the other. They stayed home on election day.”

“A woman told me she couldn’t vote for either of them in good conscience,” Allie said. “She asked me whom she should

write in: Mahatma Gandhi or Martin Luther King. That was Eakins's opposition."

"Jesus!" Professor Cole muttered, gulping her drink.

She ordered another.

"What do you call *this* timeline?" Professor Cole said, rapping on the table.

"The *Culinary* timeline," Derek said. "For personal reasons."

"So why did you guys pick me? You're not the typical loonies who want me to investigate ancient astronauts."

"It's your book *The Future of the Past*," Allie said. "At the top of page 203, you said 'given advances in space travel, especially Eldon Trask's manned Mars missions, archaeologists must prepare to study alien cultures and artifacts.' As far as we know, you're the only archaeologist to say anything like that."

"I became a laughingstock. I've always been interested in the idea of first contact. My parents were astronomers."

"Hence your name Andromeda?" Allie chuckled.

"Call me Andy," she laughed. "Everyone does. I have a brother named Sirius and a sister named Ceres. And I don't believe for a minute that you know the exact page number in my book."

"We have good memories," Derek said.

"We'll see," Andromeda said. "What is it you want me to do?"

"Investigate ancient astronauts," Allie laughed.

"We don't know that they're astronauts," Derek said. "They are ancient — and not human. In a timeline we call Oz."

"How ancient?"

"A hundred thousand years," Allie said. "Maybe more."

"Most artifacts on the surface will be severely degraded,"

Andromeda said. “Even the Egyptian pyramids would be unrecognizable in that length of time.”

“The surface has been scoured,” Derek said. “Southern Africa in Oz has huge plains of fused black glass and a melted mountain. We think someone detonated a large number of atomic weapons.”

“Is it radioactive?”

“Not at all,” Derek said. “That’s why we think it happened at least a hundred thousand years ago.”

“Whatever happened there killed off these aliens *and* early humans,” Allie said. “So the human race never evolved on Oz.”

They sat in silence for a few minutes.

“I can’t believe it,” Andy Cole said. “I split into *two people?*”

“More than two,” Derek muttered, beaming *Should we burden her with the truth?*

No, Allie beamed.

Professor Cole sighed and looked around.

“This has been fascinating,” she finally said, standing. “But I’ve got . . . papers to grade.”

She left.

“Back to square one,” Derek muttered.

“Maybe not.”



Back at her office, Professor Cole pulled out a copy of her book, *The Future of the Past*, and turned to page 203. Sure enough, Allie had quoted it verbatim.

She left the institute and strolled to the elegant Gothic cathedral-style building containing the Mathematics Department. Her partner, Llewellyn Masters, had her office on the second floor.

She chuckled at the poster hanging over the open door: “Infinity bottles of beer on the wall, infinity bottles of beer. If one of the bottles should happen to fall, infinity bottles of beer on the wall. . .”

“My goodness, Andy!” Professor Masters said. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

Llewellyn Masters was a petite brunette in her mid thirties wearing a white blouse, black skirt featuring a picture of R2D2, a colorful beaded necklace, and thick glasses on a red silk eyeglass-necklace.

Her office was a stark contrast to Professor Cole’s: spotless with everything in its perfect place. Pens and pencils lined up on her shiny desk — parallel and equally-spaced.

A framed photo of her and Andromeda standing in front of Egypt’s Great Pyramid hung on the wall.

“I just spent the most bizarre half-hour of my long . . . absurd life. On this ordinary fall day, an ordinary-looking couple came to my office and *showed* me . . . portals to alternate worlds.”

She related her encounter with Derek and Allie.

“Did you actually see *another version* of you?”

“Yes!”

“The Many-Worlds form of quantum mechanics postulates the existence of other timelines.”

“You’ve mentioned it once or twice. . .”

“As far as I know, you can’t visit them,” Llewellyn said.

“Well, we did. Even the . . . trip to this other . . . timeline was strange. It was like that hermit’s cave in Ethiopia.”

“When you were looking for the Ark of the Covenant?”

“Yes, that uncanny feeling . . . of . . . of ecstasy or infinity. They said it was the *spirit world*. I’ve seen weird in my day, but aliens who can alter space and time is a whole different flavor of weird.”

“*Aliens?* What did they want from you?”

She explained.

“*Your absurd life?*” Llewellyn smiled, hugging her. “You’re my fearless Lara Croft.”

“I’m not a cartoon character, honey. And I’m not feeling very fearless today.”

“You’ve traveled the Middle East, Africa, Tibet,” Llewellyn murmured. “Lived among Tuareg tribesmen in Mali and monks in the Himalayas. This could be the greatest adventure of your life. Of *our* lives.”

“*Our* lives? Your idea of roughing it is slow room-service.”

“Our sabbaticals are beginning soon. I want to go along and . . . and see what you do, be *part* of it. If it means living in a tent and sleeping on the ground, so be it. I’ll be your assistant. And I could work on *p*-adic Hilbert schemes without distractions.”

“I’ll never see those two . . . people again,” Andromeda sighed. “If I do, I’ll say yes to them. We sure as *hell* could use the ten million dollars.”

“They gave you ten thousand dollars just to *listen* to their pitch?” Llewellyn said.

“Yes. I say we go to the most obscenely expensive restaurant in town. A place with heel-clicking, French-speaking waiters in monkey suits.”

“I have nothing to wear.”

“We’ll go as we are. Our money’s as good as anyone’s.”

Chapter 2

In their spirit-bodies, Derek and Allie hovered near the Oval Office's ceiling.

They were in the Origin Timeline — the one where they had been born.

“Bastard!” President Pete Eakins muttered, slamming the phone down. “Daniel Ford!”

“Isn't he one of your biggest supporters, Mr. President?” Renard Moreau said. He was the former director of the CIA's Clandestine Service, and now President Eakins' right-hand man.

“He reminded me of a promise I made.”

“You're not in a giving vein?” Mr. Moreau smiled.

“What the hell does that mean?”

“Never mind.”

“Are you familiar with Hitler's Night of the Long Knives?”

“In one night, his people murdered all his political opponents,” Mr. Moreau said. “Some eighty-five people.”

“The real number was in the hundreds. The absolute fucking *genius* of that operation wasn't that he eliminated his enemies. Any idiot knows to do that. He also murdered his *friends*. Peo-

ple who put him where he was and felt it made them his equal. People who felt he *owed* them. A true leader has no equals . . . and owes *nothing to anyone.*”

“You want to get rid of Mr. Ford?”

“*All* my early supporters,” President Eakins nodded. “Treason against the human race — conspiring with Derek and Alessandra. I want *signed confessions*. Their property will form a nice revenue stream. Hmm. . .”

“What?”

“Accuse people of crimes and let them sign their estates over to us. In exchange, they get a subsistence pension. If they refuse, they go to prison. Incidentally — how’s the search going?”

“Search?”

“*The goddamn search!* What, am I speaking a foreign language?”

“We’ve gone worldwide and found nothing. I still say. . .”

“Derek and Allie are *not* in another timeline!” President Eakins shouted. “Your own chief scientist says they don’t exist. You were drugged and brainwashed.”

Renard felt an aching nostalgia for the time he was Derek’s prisoner on Maui in the Oz timeline. It had been more like a long-needed vacation than imprisonment — and he hadn’t had to listen to lectures on Hitler’s brilliance.

If that was drugs, where do I get more? Mr. Moreau thought.

“He’s not the final authority,” he said.

“That fucking Nobel prize winner. What’s his name?”

“Korman, Mr. President.”

“He said only atomic particles travel between timelines. Cancel that prick’s research grants. He dissed me.”

Mr. Moreau said nothing.

“Call it off,” Eakins finally continued. “I know how to flush them out.”

“OK.”

“We execute everyone in Derek’s hometown, one by one. All three thousand.”

“Pardon me, Mr. President,” Mr. Moreau said. “How far will Derek go to defend them? Your supporters there burned down his parents’ house and blew up Chloe Teague’s church. Derek’s own Aunt Abigail is one of your more . . . enthusiastic followers.”

“Chloe Teague? Who the hell is she?”

“The Episcopal minister who performed Derek and Allie’s wedding. A close friend of theirs.”

“Right. Well, that’s why we have to kill the children too. Those two are insanely sentimental when it come to children.”

“They’ll do anything to stop it, Mr. President.”

How right you are, Derek said.

“They’ll be sucking my dick.”

We’ve got to stop him, Allie said.

He’ll be alone soon, Derek said.

“The military won’t do it,” Mr. Moreau said. “Even my people won’t believe American children are terrorists.”

“One of these days,” President Eakins sighed. “I’ll have a military that *works*. Replace enough four-star generals with hungry second lieutenants. OK, do what you did with my secret service contingent.”

“Prisoners?”

“People on death row or lifers. Assemble a force of ten thousand and give them state-of-the-art weapons and training. The President’s Own.”

“It’ll be messy. Boothbay Harbor is rural and everyone has guns.”

“I know,” President Eakins said. “Begin by disbanding all local police. Your people can do that at least. Quarantine the area so people can’t leave.”

Accompanied by a security detail in two cars, President Eakins’s limo exited the White House complex onto Constitution Avenue NW and took I66 to Northern Virginia.

After twenty minutes, the motorcade entered the town of Hadleyville and pulled up to a small suburban ranch style home. The security detail fanned out and surrounded the property. When they had declared it all clear, President Eakins exited the limo.

His Secretary of the Interior, Mallory Keithley greeted him at the door with a smile. She was a middle-aged woman in a gray pants suit.

“I have a treat for you tonight,” she said. “Six and seven and *stunning*. Brother and sister.”

“Sedate them better than the last two,” he said. “I don’t want another wrestling match.”

“As you wish, Mr. President.”

They entered the living room where two blond, blue-eyed children sat on the sofa, yawning and barely able to keep their eyes open.

President Eakins looked them over.

“They are positively angelic!” he said, flushing and roughly stroking the boy’s hair. “You have an artist’s eye, Mallory. I’ll wait in the bedroom.”

Unbuttoning his shirt, President Eakins strolled down a long hallway to the master bedroom.

He shut the door and unfastened his belt.

Alessandra popped into existence beside him and zapped

him in the neck with a stun-gun, as Derek appeared and caught him slumping to the floor.

They vanished.



They appeared on a grimy city street in early afternoon. It looked a bit like New York except for the hundred-foot high posters of a smiling middle-aged man that covered every building.

The stench of rotting meat and shit hung in the air.

Building-mounted loudspeakers blared military music as a female announcer said, “Yet again has Sacred Leader led The Land of Peace to *glorious victory*. The invaders were *utterly* destroyed. It is the duty of every citizen to hate Sacred Leader’s enemies.”

On cue, three people down the street chanted, “Hate! Hate! Hate!” in unison, pumping their right fists into the air.

Derek and Allie deposited President Eakins on a garbage can as he came to.

“What third-world toilet is this?” he growled. “My people *will* find me, and everyone you know or love will die slowly and in the *utmost agony*.”

“Geographically, we’re in North America,” Derek said.

“This is what a real police state looks like, Eakins,” Allie said. “If you want to survive, keep your head down and your mouth shut.”

They vanished.

Pete Eakins fastened his belt, buttoned his shirt, and staggered down the street to a man carrying a wicked-looking automatic weapon. The man wore a black helmet whose visor covered his face and heavy black body-armor emblazoned with the words *Safety Service*.

“Officer!” Eakins said. “I want to report a kidnapping.”

“What is your citizens’ welfare number?”

“I’m the fucking president of the United States! Don’t you recognize me?”

“You have uttered a proscribed phrase! Show me your papers! Where’s your barcode?”

“How dare you use that tone with me!”

The Safety Service officer punched Eakins in the gut, doubling him over.

As Eakins vomited, the officer cuffed his hands behind his back and threw him into a black windowless van that pulled up.

In the Oval Office, Renard Moreau answered the phone.

“President Eakins disappeared,” Mrs. Kiethly sobbed. “Without a trace. We tore the house apart.”

“Take the children home,” Renard said.

“I can’t. The security people ran off with the limo and the other two cars.”

“That’s what Eakins gets for using murderers as bodyguards,” he muttered. “They clearly kidnapped him. I’ll send a car for you.”

He hung up, called the Secret Service, and gave them the house’s address.

Afterward, Renard paced the Oval Office.

“OK you two,” he said to the empty room. “Where did you stash him? Oz?”

“We wouldn’t pollute Oz with scum like him,” Derek said, materializing and making Renard jump. “All you need to know is he isn’t coming back.”

“We put him in a timeline we call Pembroke,” Allie said, popping into view. “A police state.”

“Pembroke? As in the Harry Pembroke who experimented on you two before he got murdered?”

Derek nodded.

“We wanted to ask his spirit how we would change over time,” Allie said. “Since he’d created the virus that . . . created us.”

“We were afraid he was in hell, though,” Derek said. “We didn’t even want to *visit* there.”

“I don’t think Pembroke really knew what his virus could do,” Allie said. “Besides telepathy.”

“We finally got up the nerve to visit him,” Derek said. “And found he’d already reincarnated.”

“He’s a she, now,” Allie said. “Two months old . . . with a barcode tattooed on her neck.”

“Some government official’s clone,” Derek said. “To be used for spare parts.”

“This is all very interesting,” Renard Moreau said. “*Bizarre* but interesting. The big question: where’s the nuclear football?”

This was the steel attaché case containing launch codes for the country’s nuclear arsenal.

“Eakins was about to rape two small children,” Allie said. “He barely had clothes on.”

“He had the football with him when he left the White House,” Renard said. “He dismissed the marine who usually carries it.”

“Doesn’t it have a GPS tracker?” Derek said. “It would make sense for something that important. . .”

“Eakins disabled it whenever he went to Hadleyville,” Renard said. “Did he make any stops on the way?”

“I don’t know,” Allie said. “We didn’t follow him. We knew how to find him.”

“Right now, the US is unable to retaliate if attacked with nu-

clear weapons,” Renard said. “This may or may not be serious. It all depends on where the football wound up.”

“The *US*?” Derek snarled. “You mean the country that put out a kill-order against us and our friends? That elected a president who’d murder three thousand innocent civilians to get at us? *That US*?”

“I know we’ve treated you horribly,” Renard groaned, rubbing his face. “And I’m responsible for a lot of it. You don’t owe us a damn thing. Whether you help us or not, I’ll try to make it possible for you to return. This country shot itself in the foot a hundred times when we drove you and your friends into exile.”

“Yes,” Allie said.

“I acted out of fear,” Renard said. “With your abilities, you two could’ve committed devastating acts of terrorism. You’ve been useful enemies for Eakins. Anything that goes wrong gets blamed on you two.”

“Like what?” Derek said.

“Last week they blamed you for an earthquake in California. They even made a geologist go on TV and say so.”

“How’d they do that?” Allie snorted.

“The guy wanted to stay out of prison. Anyway, we provoked you, but you just stayed away.”

“We have a home in Oz,” Derek said.

“It’s a wilderness,” Renard said. “You don’t strike me as people who’d be content watching grass grow. You could reopen your art gallery, Allie.”

“Is that a *joke*?” Allie growled.

“What do you mean?”

“Your people *raided* my gallery,” Allie sobbed, tears running down her face. “I see Jim Moretti’s *Gotham Redux* hanging on the wall over there, so you must’ve liked *some* of the art. You

never paid him a *dime* for it. You threatened him with *prison or death!*”

Renard sighed deeply.

“And that steel sculpture, *Land of Fire*. You ripped it to pieces and sold it for scrap. If you didn’t like the art, you should’ve given it back to the artists!”

“We searched for embedded microchips,” Renard muttered. “We couldn’t believe it was just pieces of metal welded together.”

“It was Lena Fairchild’s *heart and soul*,” Allie said. “Six months of her life! I’ve heard people call art crap and ask why anyone would pay *anything* for it. We *need* it, though; it’s our *soul*. It’s what makes us *human*.”

Curious, Renard thought. *From one who is definitely not human.*

“I’ll have my assistant look into it,” he muttered. “We’ll compensate all your artists.”

“I gave those *poor bastards* my *word* as a *businesswoman* and critic,” Allie shouted. “I said I’d display their work and try to sell it. I failed them — completely! I’ll *never* be able to show my face in the art world here. *Ever!*”

Allie broke down and cried.

“Let’s go, honey,” Derek said, hugging her.

They vanished.

“I heard shouting,” an aid named Henry Martins said, running into the room. “What was that?”

“Oh, I just pissed off the last people . . . in the entire universe . . . any sane person would want to piss off.”

“Huh?”

“Luckily they’re not vindictive.”

“President Eakins?”

“I said they’re *not* vindictive.”

Derek and Allie arrived in a secluded grove of palm trees in Oz.

“I’m sorry,” Allie said. “Moreau touched a raw nerve.”

“We already paid our artists with gold bars,” Derek said.

“Not easy to convert into cash,” Allie said. “Especially when they can’t say where the gold came from! Lena Fairchild wouldn’t take any. Besides, Moreau *owes* them and should pay too! He and Eakins destroyed so many lives. Paying our artists is the *least* he can do.”

Two days later, Derek and Allie hovered in their spirit bodies near the ceiling of Andromeda’s office.

“I feel like we’re being watched,” Llewellyn said, shivering in the guest chair and rubbing her hands together.

“Ah, Breasted’s ghost!” Andy laughed. “There’s a legend he hangs around here and haunts lazy grad students. Maybe he doesn’t like mathematicians either.”

“Was he the inspiration for Indiana Jones?”

“He founded this place,” Andromeda nodded. “Probably the greatest Egyptologist of all time.”

Derek and Allie materialized in nearby restrooms, went to the office, and knocked on the door.

“That was us in our spirit-bodies,” Derek said. “Some people sense our presence.”

“Your eyes!” Llewellyn said.

“I just can’t stand these accursed contacts,” Allie muttered.

“Have you considered our proposal?” Derek said.

“If you’re telepathic, you already know the answer to that,” Andy said.

“I was being polite and pretending not to.”

“Our answer is yes,” Andy said. “I’m just concerned. . .”

“It might be dangerous for Llewellyn?” Allie said.

“I *can* handle it,” Llewellyn said. “I *want* to.”

“We don’t want this to be dangerous for either of you,” Derek said. “At the first sign of danger, we’ll call it off and give you all the money we promised.”

“I’ll have to acquire expedition gear,” Andy said. “Tents, ropes. . . What do you think we’ll need?”

“Just bring yourselves,” Derek said. “We’ll provide living quarters on site and everything else you need. We can always go shopping.”

“There’s shopping there?” Llewellyn said.

“There’s shopping *here*,” Derek said. “Travel is . . . easy for us. It takes minutes.”

“I normally have a bunch of graduate students assist me,” Andy said.

“That will be a problem,” Derek said. “But we have plenty of refugees in Oz who are bored out of their minds and eager to participate.”

“Refugees?” Andy said.

“President Eakins and the government drove us and our friends out of the Origin timeline,” Derek said. “They put out a kill-order against us.

“*President Eakins?*” Llewellyn said. “That has such a bizarre ring. If *he* could become president, I guess anything is possible.”

“With our powers,” Allie said. “We could steal a nuclear weapon and set it off in a big city. *Theoretically*. There’s no defense against us. There’s no prison that can hold us, either.”

“We never lifted a finger to carry out this insane idea,” Derek said. “We never even hinted that we were thinking of it. We even agreed to work with the CIA.”

“Here’s the speech Eakins gave on TV,” Allie said, playing a video on her cell phone.

They watched intently.

“Space aliens from another galaxy?” Llewellyn said. “That’s ridiculous. Even if you *were* extraterrestrials, it would be from another planet or a nearby star.”

“Yeah,” Derek said. “Eakins felt his followers were too dumb to understand *Earth*-aliens not from Mexico.”

“Dumb?” Andy said. “That’s for sure. I can’t believe he told gun owners to kill anyone *suspected* of helping you guys.”

“Yeah,” Derek said. “People are getting shot in broad daylight. The death-toll’s in the thousands. . . .”

“And includes all of Eakins’s political opponents,” Allie added.

“If there’s no defense against you,” Andy said. “They felt they *had* to kill you.”

“We’re almost invulnerable,” Derek said.

“Oh,” Andy said. “So they had to threaten people close to you. Non Indigo people, I mean.”

“They tried,” Derek said.

“I hate to ask this,” Andy said. “If you’re refugees, how will you get ten million dollars to pay us? I mean, we’ll probably do it for a lot less. Hell, if it’s half as interesting as you say, we’ll do it for free.”

“We picked winning numbers in the MaxiMillion lottery,” Allie said.

“Indigos are good at . . . acquiring money,” Derek said. “We also have access to gold.”

They agreed to meet in two days.

Derek and Allie teleported into a gray concrete ten-by-ten cell with a metal chair bolted to the floor and a sink and bucket.

Wearing a gray jumpsuit, a barefoot Pete Eakins sat in the chair sobbing.

Ancient and fresh bloodstains decorated the walls.

Bruises closed Eakins's right eye and blood ran from his nose and mouth. A wall-mounted camera recorded everything.

Before guards could intervene, the Indigos teleported him to Volcano Island in Oz — its counterpart to the big island of Hawaii.

The sun blinded them, and the humid gale carried the scent of wild orchids and sulfur.

Miles away, a thundering lava fountain spewed liquid fire hundreds of feet into the clear blue sky, radiating heat that warmed their faces.

The ground shuddered.

Tiny plants bravely tried to poke through the black lava moonscape.

Eakins looked around and burst into tears.

"Please don't take me back there," he sobbed. "I'll do anything."

"Where's the nuclear football?" Derek said.

"Ah!" he smiled. "Take me back to the White House . . . and I'll tell you."

"OK," Allie said. "I see what happened to it."

They returned him to a rural area of the Pembroke timeline. A sea of golden wheat swayed in the wind, and stacked sheaves stood every fifty feet.

"Maybe you'll be able to stay out of trouble now," Derek said.

They left.

Across the road, three men with pitchforks bundled hay into horse-drawn wagons. One pulled a tarp over his his wagon, tied it down, climbed aboard, and started to clop away.

“*My God!*” another whispered, pointing to Eakins. “You’re wearing *starvation* garb!”

“Please don’t turn me in,” Eakins moaned.

“Quick! Jump in the back of my wagon!”

Eakins complied, the man covered him with a tarp, and the wagon lurched into motion.

“I recognize you from TV,” the driver said through the tarp. “When they put you in the chamber.”

Eakins cowered.

“He left it in the presidential limo,” Derek said.

“Thank you,” Renard said.

“We rescued him from a Starvation Chamber,” Allie said.

“A *what?*”

“Yeah,” Allie mumbled. “They film prisoners starving to death and televise a speeded-up version with the statement ‘Thus do Sacred Leader’s enemies perish.’”

“He committed three crimes that carry death penalties,” Derek said.

“Crimes?” Renard said.

“Uttering the phrase ‘United States’, lacking papers or a neck-barcode, and failing to drop to his knees when confronted by safety service officers,” Derek said. “Oddly enough, people there have no idea what ‘United States’ means. They just know it’s illegal to say.”

“Bizarre!” Renard said.

“Hell, *they* don’t even know,” Allie said. “They have an agency that rewrites history. They don’t even know what year it is. They restart their calendar with each new Sacred Leader.”

“How strange!” Renard murmured. “A brain-damaged nation.”

“What about the vice president?” Derek said. “*Here*, I mean.”

“Leave Knox to me,” Renard said. “He’s a buffoon and total nonentity. We’re close to finding the limo. The bodyguards will die in a shootout.”

Derek and Allie registered shock.

“What? They’re all *murderers!* On death row before Eakins recruited them.”