

The Next Big Idea

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Gum poppers. People high on whatever. There is no actual hope for humanity.

His turn came. He stood before the source of his thoughts.

“Account number,” asked the source.

“I am new.”

“Fill this out. Both sides, all pages. Pop. Remember to sign and initial where indicated.”

“Thanks.”

“Turn around.”

He did.

“See the tables. Go there to work on the forms. Okay? Pop-pop.”

“I see. Thanks.”

He went.

He entered a bubble of his own. His focus on the white pages in front of him was complete.

First question: Name. Last. First. Middle Initial.

“Hi.” Later he would realize that he had been played from the beginning, but this was the beginning and he thought it was his lucky day, which it was.

“I am sorry. Apparently I disturbed your thinking. Oh yeah, that first question can be a doozy.” She chuckled under her breath as she stood next to him.

She looks familiar.

“You don’t talk much do you? I know you from school. Fremont High class of ’08. Remember me?”

“No.”

“I remember you. I was hanging with a football player. Nice guy but not my kind. You never noticed me? I noticed you.”

He looked up at her. She looked familiar, but maybe not. He wanted to be a writer. Who knew what she wanted.

“I can see you thinking. That’s why I like you. When I saw you here I thought, ‘There he is. It’s like magic.’ Want me to prove it? Here goes: Your name is Bradley, Omar L. The L stands for Laurence, which is why everyone called you Larry. It’s a good name, full of historical context and all. What did you study in college?”

“Economics and witchcraft. You?”

“Ha! I studied business and lightheartedness. I got a degree.”

He knew he was losing. His walls were crumbling under her relentless attack.

“Okay, Okay. I changed my name from Larry to Oh Ell. It was not a stroke of genius. I admit that. Not noticing you when you were hanging with the tight end

was probably the result of a supply and demand problem. You were not available and I didn't want a girl friend." He secretly wished he'd stayed home. But he'd really wanted to get out, not just from his family home, but from the whole thing. He wasn't thinking about suicide, yet, but he was thinking that the whole thing had gone wrong somehow and he did not know how to fix it.

"Look, ah, what is your name?"

"Meredith Johns."

"Okay, Meredith, I want to be a novelist but I'm going in the wrong direction. This place will not help me become one. A novelist does not apply to a temp agency for work as a novelist. At this moment in my life I could do anything. You are..."

"The same as you except I want to be the President and there is no line for that here either. I know I come off as silly, but I'm not. I saw you come in here, and on inspiration, I saw you as you wanted to be, as I want you to be. Look, this may be weird but I want to be with you, that is what I felt when I saw you."

"Wow. This never happens does it."

"Don't know. Don't care. Is it happening now?"

"Madame President. Nice to meet you. Get a copy of the forms, fill them out, take the test. It will tell you what you are suited for. There are a few steps from here to president. What is yours? Law? Find out."

"And you? Do the same. Maybe you will become a famous economist slash writer."

"Write about money? I always thought of myself as split between the two."

"Okay genius. What's in this for me?"

“Think big.”

“I am only twenty-two and I want to be president. Not big enough?”

“I learned some things in college that are moving me to write. These are not trivial topics but central to the problem of our time. What I want to write about is beyond the safety zone for most publishers. So, if I want to be a writer on my terms I will have to change the publishing business, which is why I studied economics: a means to an end.”

“Ah, ‘think big.’ Gotcha. So why will anyone vote for me?”

“That is a step. But the real question is, in fifteen years, when you age qualify for the first time, will anyone be voting at all?”

“So if I want to be elected president I will have to work to ensure voting still can happen...fairly...honestly...and not just be a gamed corrupt system of bribery and thuggery. Do I have that right?”

“Not so judgmental. More compassion, more empathy. The role of money in politics has privatized the Constitution. It is being amended in board rooms. It is not the only body of laws that is being treated this way. Everyone’s democratic institutions have devolved. It is a big game. There are a few hands full of really big players that pick world leaders. Rarely are they chosen by voting citizens. Money is the new form of citizenship. Without money your vote is meaningless except, perhaps, in a deluded sort of way.”

“I was right about you.”

“Is that good or bad?”

“Shall we find out? I have a small apartment two blocks from here. I was on my way home when I saw you. I am free of attachments. You?”

“Free and living with the parents. Trying to make something work to get out. It’s claustrophobic, if you know what I mean.”

“I can solve your problem, for a month or two.”

“What’s in it for you?”

“You.”

He said, “Go get a set of forms and let’s do the work. I need to touch ground for a bit. Dinner together next. These forms are going to take all day.”

“Dinner it is. I have everything we need at my place. Bradley... Omar... L. ...”

“Oh Ell, Larry, Omar El, Bradley, Brad...I like Brad. I could live with a Brad.”

“I have a basic choice. Should I be ashamed of my name? I became Larry when Omar became a ‘foreign’ name. My father – what can I say? – he knew why he chose Omar Bradley. He wanted to let his old commander’s name honor his son. I became Larry at age ten. He was so destroyed. Then he lost everything he had saved, put in pensions, the whole thing went down in ’08 and my mother with them. I learned to stick up for myself. My name is Omar. My nickname is Oh Ell until another one comes along.”

“Meredith and Omar. Omar and Meredith. Omar Bradley, famous general’s name sake, famous author and economic critic in his own right, husband of President Meredith Bradley who rose up through the ranks of business to become the CEO of Something Big and Important, Inc. before her election in a landslide as the 47th President of the United Snakes. Hmm ...”

“Snakes?”

“Just seeing if you were with me or not.”

“The wine is working. I have been sitting across from you for three hours. The dinner was wonderful. Do you do this every night?”

“I like cooking. I just don’t want to have the time to do it, if you know what I mean.”

“I am thin because I hate food. I am great at ordering out. Once I get a job I will prove that.”

“One of us needs a job to pay the rent. Today was interesting. Tomorrow a job.”

“Meredith.”

“Yes, Oh Ell.”

“Life is choices. Are we picking one another as life mates, saying no to other choices? How is that done? My parents are both elderly. I am the last of their children. They were kind to me but now they are a huge burden. They are on Medicare. They are both dying. I have to help them.”

“Same here. Mine are failing fast and almost penniless. If we wait for them to pass our opportunity may pass. Not much of a choice.”

“If we both have jobs we have more choices.”

“What do we do now? Right now?”

“I should go home.”

“This is your home.” Meredith reached towards him. He looked at her hand, then her eyes. Her eyes smiled. He reached out towards hers.

“Neither of us has used the word ‘love.’” He said.

“This is not about love, it is about a conspiracy of sorts.”

“Conspiracy?”

“A conspiracy to find happiness with one another.”

“In this world?”

“Is there another?”

“I hope so because if we do not find a different world to live in besides the one we just described then we are lost.”

“So we are conspiring to change the world to our own liking. Is that it?”

“How do we start?” His hand met hers in a handshake.

“Do you find sex disgusting?”

“No. I just don’t want to write about sex. I want to write novels not porn.”

“Porn? I see. Porn is disgusting sex. Other people’s sex can be disgusting.”

“MP? I want my characters to speak without biases. Objectivity avoids passion. Ideas cannot be seduced.”

“Ooh. ‘Seduced.’”

“Is there something you are working this conversation towards?”

“Am I so obvious?”

“Maybe it’s your hands and the way you are dressed, or not. I wake early to write before we both go to work.”

“You’re annoyed?”

“This is day three of our conspiracy for happiness concocted over a bottle of wine, great food and an all-night conversation. Success or failure depends on us each doing our part.”

“That’s it! I want you to do your part to make me happy.”

“Okay, but tomorrow. Today I write.”

“You’ll have to get up earlier to leave time for the obvious.”

“The obvious is that we will have sex one day. But I can only imagine procreation if we are stable as a family and a community.”

“I have heard that it’s fun.”

“Some people do it for fun and find hard truths follow.”

“Romance is lost on you?...Me, too. But can we be different? Can we live without sex together, with one or both of us having sex outside our home?”

“I write about people making choices to please themselves rather than another person, or a company or a deity,” he said.

“Life is Art?”

“Yup. I am surprised at my adamancy. I think you are attractive if not outright gorgeous. You are Art. Yet at twenty-two and a virgin I want the thing I’ve waited for, and it doesn’t begin with sex, though it is included in the ultimate fantasy.”

“So, momentum carries us as we seek affection for one another. Wake me in time for work.”

“No prob.”

“Oh Ell. Its almost 2 PM. Aren’t Saturday’s wonderful?”

“Meridith, everyday is wonderful if you spend it buried in your hair between dreams and despairs.”

“You sound so glum.”

“I have reasons and so do you. We are ignoring them. Our parents. Sorry, not used to being happy.”

“I suspect there is more to this. The parents are beyond our help. I mean by the time we could really help them, given realities, they will be gone. This is one of the features of our lives: we must pick between the parent’s momentary entertainment and a chance at a future for ourselves.”

“Life is not fair and neither are the economic ground rules. Our parents miss us.”

“No. That is not how I see it. They do not want us to be failures and hang with them. They want to be lonely watching our successes. It is religion to them.”

“We serve them best by serving ourselves?”

“And their posterity.”

“Us and children? Did we decide about children?”

“No. We have a very sketchy plan so far. It is only Week One, but the plan languishes for a place in our priorities.”

Meredith squeezed Omar's head between her hands, kissed his forehead, rose from their bed and skipped across the room to the bathroom. Omar, despite any doubts, was home.

Omar and Meredith were both still virgins. It did not matter much to either of them. They had been desperate and now they had each other for companionship and partnership in the Happiness Project as Meredith called their meager plan.

"It's transactional psychology. There are three components: You, Me and Our Relationship. We exist to serve Our Relationship. Our Relationship exists to serve us both in a balanced life together."

"You learned that in a business course?"

"Negotiations and conflict resolution. People are not represented in Economics. They are counted in classes but not considered as people. In business, it is people that count."

"Sales."

"Product design."

"Image."

"Exactly."

"Therefore media and advertising."

"Surveys and taste tests."

"Plus the after sale effects?"

"Lawyers and winnable cases."

“And friendly forums, courts and squishy laws that can be made pro-business?”

“There is an edge.”

“Used to be an edge, when there used to be prosecutions for fraud.”

“Bad for business,” she said as she closed the bathroom door.

Writers can sleep until dark. Omar rolled over and drifted back into his dreams about being a writer.

MP as he called her, showered, dressed and determined not to waste what remained of sunlight. “I am going for a walk dreamer boy. You gotta keep up or catch up. Which is it?”

“So what are you saying?”

“We have to step this up.” She said. “The plan is demanding more than we have put out. No shame. We were ahead of schedule for two years; now, we are behind.”

“Clerking for a federal judge was not in the plan. It was an add-on to shorten the next steps. That’s about to kick in and we will be ahead again.”

“If ahead of schedule is good then far ahead of schedule is better.”

“We could hire help if we started fundraising. We need an office to run for.”

“I am twenty-eight. Ready for Congress. Not the Senate.”

“This is a choice point. Do we go for office or do we go for business cred first?”

“State offices are up and I qualify for them.”

“You cannot raise a ‘war chest’ running for dog catcher.” Omar stood and began pacing.

“Obvious, but how does Economics guide us in this choice?”

“Economics has little to say about the role of politics in the economy. There is an assumption that politics will bend to meet the economic needs. But politics is a

business now at every level and in every niche.” He stopped walking. “Which means politics has ceased to exist. There is only money.”

“The Tea Party proved that. Some of those people raised millions to support their lifestyles... even if they lost.”

“They will never be presidential material.”

Silence. The dinner table was the center of their lives together. Meredith called it Our Relationship, since most of their days were spent sitting at it. The table itself had been moved several times: from the little apartment, to the law school apartment, to the clerk’s house, to the firm lawyer’s city loft where it is now bathed in moonlight. They kept the lights off when the sun set. The moon rose full and, now two hours later, they stared across Our Relationship into each other’s eyes and thought thoughts of power and a process to redistribute it from those who ran the world to those who had a different idea about the point of it all in the first place.

“Not qualified does not mean unelectable if electable means chosen by the PTB.”

“The plan is to make the most out of current realities. What is the opportunity we have that your current position affords us?” He sat back into his dining room chair again.

“I am a lawyer at a prestigious city firm yet I have very little actual position there. Five more years to make partner. Until then I can pick one pro bono case a year. I spend my free time for no pay to attempt to bring justice to those who do not qualify for the auto-justice of the rich.”

“I have an idea, MP. Pick your next pro bono carefully.”

“They come from a list.”

“Can you add to the list?”

“Yes, Oh Ell. But it takes approval. What’s the strategy?”

“Supreme Court on Issues of Importance to a budding Presidential Candidate.”

“That sounded like a number of Capitalized Words.”

“Six.”

“You should have studied lightheartedness, like me.”

“We’d do nothing but giggle.”

“That would be bad?”

“Very bad!”

“Well, Oh Ell, what does your position bring us for options?”

“My contribution is vague. We both have jobs. You make enough for both of us. I am still trying to recreate the publishing world. I blog therefore I am. I am a writer since I write all day. My blogs carry ads, and though it is the Evil Google that pays me, I can say what I will. Does it pay us much? Does that matter?”

“Too defensive, try ‘my readership in the US is half FBI, half CIA half NSA.’”

“Three halves is more readership than anyone else.”

“Yah! All spying on enemies. All spying on you. You must be seeking fame?”

“I hope not.”

“Fortune?”

“Not interested.”

“Why not? What are we doing then?”

“Staying united by ignoring the things that divide us.”

“Are you talking about us or US.”

“Us.”

“Oh. Shall I be sad?”

Silence is comforting. The words flow too fast. Ideas and realizations get lost in the hurry to find the end of discomfort.

Without torture and mercenaries much of the resource exploitation sector of the global economy would collapse. The rich would easily be the most affected of any as measured by loss of net worth. Billions of others would be affected, as well measured by such things as hunger, thirst, homelessness, disease, early death and catastrophic environmental events.

Years before climate disasters reeked such havoc, Blanche Givens saw this condition as too catastrophic a possibility to ignore. The year Barack Obama was first sworn in as President, Givens had gone to Washington to lend her hand to controlling climate change. She campaigned tirelessly to limit the damage. Eight years later she wanted to run for the Governor of Illinois, her home state.

As wise as she seemed to be, there was a river-wide streak of naiveté down which her optimism flowed. She had done well in business and lost nothing by being in government. This was her first run for public office. She had no idea what was in store for her.

Governor Hugh MacLean never met Blanche Givens though they were nearly equals in Chicago's political culture's view. MacLean wanted to die in office. That is what he would do if he could push down Given's challenge for power. He had sensed her interest early, but his opposition research gave him little to campaign with. Over a few whiskeys at the Chicago Downtown Men's Club, he and several legislators conspired to pass a 'midnight law' that would give his attorney general the power to arrest and imprison Givens for the period of the campaign.

The Family in Politics Act they called it. It was never clear that the legislature ever voted on it. MacLean signed what looked like a piece of legislation. His AG took it and ran. Within two hours of signing, at 4:30 in the morning, a black-clad SWAT Team broke down her door and took the defiant Givens into ‘custody.’

Her campaign never began. Her close associates and personal secretary, worried about her disappearance, contacted law enforcement after six hours. A fruitless search led them to look for help. Omar had been searching, too. He was looking for the case of cases that would catapult his lovely, smart and ambitious lawyer wife into the spotlight on an international level.

“Givens Missing Says Her Secretary” “Business woman disappears, gone for three days, staff suspicious of foul play” read the Chicago headlines. Omar felt a twinge of something – “intuition,” he would call it.

“Hello.”

“Miriam Mikala? Omar Bradley of Bradley and Associates. Do you have a minute?”

“Is this about Mrs Givens?”

“Yes, I think we can help. Can we meet and talk? I am in town for the next few hours and ...”

“Mr Bradley, we have tried every way we know to find her. What could anyone else do?”

“Ms. Mikala, my business is applying logic to difficult problems. Mrs. Givens was taken from her home in the middle of the night by persons unknown. They did not take her to a hospital or a city jail. She is being hidden. There will be no ransom

note. There is a chance she is dead, but I would say ‘not’ or we would have her body by now.”

“No note, no body, no trace means she is being held prisoner, but the authorities deny holding her.”

“Something else is at work. I have a few guesses. Can we talk face to face so I can eliminate the unlikely?”

“Where?”

“The building you are in has a coffee shop on the ground floor. I am there, sitting at the counter, right next to the register. Come now.”

Omar texted Meredith. “Hon, I got a case for you. It is in Illinois but it’s Federal. It hasn’t been filed yet but it is a habeas corpus problem. Someone kidnapped for political purposes. I haven’t gotten the real ‘why’ yet but will. Reply asap.” That was his third message without a reply but it would come.

“Mr. Bradley, Ms. Mikala.” She stood next to him. He waved his hand as an invitation to sit. It took him a few seconds to realize that there was no seat near him. “Oops, let’s take a walk outside. A bus bench will do.”

The day was extremely calm for Chicago. The sun not too hot. The humidity was just humidity as opposed to stiflingly uncomfortable and windy ear-splitting chaos that had been the weather for recent months. A bench was empty. They sat on it.

“Call me Miriam.”

“Omar.”

“Are you Muslim?”

“Cultural confusion, so no. You?”

“Yes.” Miriam said, then, “No, I am not, but my family was. Another story.”

“What made Givens special?”

“She wanted to be Governor.”

“Ah, I thought it might be anti-environmentalists from her days in the government, but this is more immediate.”

“She hadn’t announced, but she had spoken with some of her business contacts,” Miriam said. “We did polling. She led by five against the incumbent governor.”

“Who knew? Who did the polling?”

“A democrat firm, SF Logic.”

“Not. SF stands for Strategic Force. Rightwing mercenaries.”

“They lied to us?”

“No, they told others, namely your opponents. Imagine someone thought Givens was worth kidnapping to keep control of the state?”

“Anti-woman’s movement?”

“Maybe. What do you know?” Omar asked.

“A measure to amend the Illinois State constitution making women’s vote invalid and barring women running for office. Six other states as well. Governor MacLean leading the charge. ‘America was built by men of character and ruined by women of low repute’ is his line.”

“Nice one, Miriam. Question remains, where is she? MacLean is PP Systems.
Answer to the question: in a PP Systems’ prison.”

“Okay. How do we find her and get her out.”

“I have an idea.”

Just then his phone buzzed an incoming text reply.

“Give me a few minutes.” Omar rose and walked up and down the street talking all the time into his phone. “Meredith call it Givens v State of Illinois et al. I emailed the facts and a theory. I love you. This is it.”

When Omar sat down again, he looked pleased.

“Mr Bradley, did you call the cavalry?”

“First send a negotiator, then send the cavalry. The negotiator is coming.”

“The cavalry?”

“We have work to do.”

Our Relationship sat by itself in the middle of the room. Sunlight streamed through the windows and skylights, leaving the reclining chair nearest the south wall in the shadows. Omar sat, laptop open, hands poised. He stared off into space, regarding the unknown before him and the words running across his mind, free of any restraint that would send his fingers into action. His fingers were still.

It's all talk. Nothing more. Fingers lay quietly. There is a contradiction that must be solved. On one hand, prolonged action is infiltrated and punished. We claimed action organizes and as we organized, we found violence in spite of our pledges to remain non-violent. Nothing. Nothing new. On the other hand, we need to organize free of the participation of the agencies supporting the status quo. How do we both do and not do? How are we to act if action organizes our foes? Can we organize ourselves and not our foes?

Meredith sat at Our Relationship. He had missed her entrance.

“Oh Ell. I love you.”

Some ordinary sayings are surprising when said.

“Ten years... six months...No... make that five months twenty-nine days.”

“I know. That took a long time.”

“Now what?”

“Let’s go for it. I am, as of today, a partner at the firm. My law career is in high gear but bland except for *Blanche Givens v Illinois*, which has wended its way to the 7th Circuit Appeals.”

“Only a step away from the top.”

“A big step. Your idea about a pro bono case was good. My profile is higher than any of my partner’s.”

“Thirty-two. Four to go. Quit the firm. Take Givens with you. Start a small boutique firm based on the case. Spin off a corporation dealing in the case’s paraphernalia. It’s an instant hit start-up.”

“How does that help?”

“The business of elections is electing businessmen to office. Er...women, too, though it is hard to find examples there. *Blanche Givens* would have been an example if she had been allowed to run and was elected.”

“But since that is the issue in *Givens v Illinois* ... if the court can be persuaded ...”

“Stall the case’s resolution, if you can, until after the next presidential election. It will get more attention if it is undecided.”

“Four years. *Blanche* will be in her 70’s.”

“Wait.” Omar’s fingers began to move. Meredith smiled and left for work. He noticed but yielded to momentum. As she was pulling the door closed, he said, “I love you, too.”

“I heard that. I beat you by six minutes. See you later.”

Historically, if any movement rises above the level plain of the subjugated masses, if any change is in the offing from any movement, the powers perceive it like a nail on their deck and hammer it flat. It is an automatic response requiring nothing to be decided. It is SOP.

If a business rises above the plain, it is seen as competition, not a foreign object to be removed but an income stream to be absorbed when advantageous.

She put the laptop down after reading what he had written.

“Darling, it always sounds the same. The problem. The solution? Nothing follows.”

“Change can only be allowed to happen within constraints. Outside of the constraints change is perceived as a threat.”

“Is there no solution within Economics? Wouldn't the desire for change be a commodity: a product with its own market?”

“That is what Blanche, Inc, is all about. Can power be bought in the marketplace like one buys shoes? If it can, then it has already happened, is happening.”

“So we compete in a game without any experience or advantages in the classic sense. The question remains: how is this game to be won?”

“New rules. Rule One: Never tell anyone what Rule One is.”

“Doesn't sound helpful.”

“If you have heard about a movement, it has already failed and is now a federal agency sting operation.”

“Exactly.”

“Everyone knows this. It has been the case for at least two generations.”

“So why try?”

“Exactly.”

“But you will anyway, right?”

“And expect the opposite to occur.”

“Huh?”

“MP, the actual rules of the game are never stated completely or honestly. No one knows all the rules, but to win play like you made all the rules.”

“Rule Two: Make the rules or play like you do.”

“Good. Your idea for Blanche, Inc. is key to what I am saying. To successfully compete for power, Blanche, Inc. will compete in an open market. It will make up its own rules and tell no one what they are.” He stopped talking. His fingers danced.

Blanche, Inc. will take on the entire woman’s products industry. Blanche will challenge the system by redefining capitalism to include the Next Big Idea.

“MP. The way to win in this competition is to take the Next Big Idea and create the Next Big Thing: a new democracy that replaces the authoritarian plutocracy.”

“Listen to you. Voting is still happening and only three years to go.”

“Blanche will have an advantage in the marketplace. Its catalog speaks to woman’s power, the products support a woman’s power. Blanche’s messaging will never speak about this. Instead, it will treat it as if it were an unintended consequence of the business.”

“That’s Rule One.”

“Blanche will be a different sort of corporation with no publicly traded shares. Blanche will call its customers ‘corporate citizens’ and they will determine the board members. The board will be pledged to organize its citizens to advocate for women’s issues. The employees will use cooperationist ideas to run the production.”

“Rule One. Business won’t like the idea, so don’t tell anyone.”

“The name Blanche has caché. Blanche is a business woman above all other things. She is tough. She does not sit idle while there is a world to compete in. She is a baby boomer grown to maturity. She is the essence of the American Dream. She is everywoman.”

“She is a crusader for Constitutional rights. Her suit against the State of Illinois, for barring her from running for governor, has set authoritarianism on its heels. If the Supremes see it her way she has a \$500 million payday.”

“Forget that. Act like you make the rules. Be who you want to become. Prepare for power. Blanche, the business woman, will lead the way.”

“Wow.”

“There are a few details to work out. Timing is important.”

“And place. How about Chicago? We could emphasize a tough image of a woman who can do everything a man can do and have children.”

“Help is needed there.”

“Not much.”

“We have the Chicago ground-breaking this weekend. Can you be there?”

“Duty calls. My employer is asking for electoral recommendations for the mid-term elections. He wants them state by state. I haven’t begun yet. It will take my team seventy-two straight hours of work to put it together.”

“One less man at the opening will not be noticed. Just teasing.”

“I believe you. This is my last election as a consultant for anyone besides you, MP.”

“Oh Ell, we have come a long way and here we are still sitting around the same table in a condo overlooking Chicago. It might be time to upgrade so we can do more entertaining.”

“We could buy a couch.”

“How about we redesign this place using Blanche? Interiors by Blanche? We could expand our services and do entire makeovers. Why stop at the coat, hat and shoes?”

“No one says full steam ahead like Blanche.”

“How about we get married?”

“Is it in the plan?”

“It better be because we are months away from the birth of our first child.”

“How many months?”

“Ten. Maybe eleven.”

The first Blanche was not a warehouse the size of a football field with a showroom the size of gas station. Blanche was virtual. It was an instant hit. Blanche Givens had followers from Canada to Argentina from Russia to South Africa. Everywhere where there were women there would be a Blanche. All anyone needed was their computer. No one used any words other than those spoken in retail conversations. No alphabet agency sought them.

“Oh Ell. I am nearing age-qualified but I am not President yet. Am I too impatient?”

“Well, MP, impatience, in comparison, is a virtue. Wasn’t this covered in your classes on lightheartedness?”

“Good memory! Thirteen years brings a lot of forgetfulness. However, in light of this being my birthday I thought I should bring this up. What is our strategy?”

“We have eighteen months. There is a schedule of speeches being organized by your personal staff. We have candidate committees forming in all fifty-one states. GeoPac, BlanchePac and several others are raising serious money. But none of that is strategy.”

“I like all of that. We can put a serious dent in the GOP. I will talk them sick.”

“Winning is complicated but in a basic sort of way. Marketing change as a product was easier than we thought. We built the biggest global network in the shortest elapsed time. Geo and Blanche are very powerful in their reach. At the time I

wasn't as impressed by Geo as you were. It almost doubled our numbers." Omar squirmed in his chair with a pulse of excitement and pride.

"Blanche Givens is no fool. She saw this coming and drew us in. By the way, 7th Appeals is going to weigh in tomorrow. Timing is good."

"Not my favorite but it will provide content. The speeches must have content. Blanche and Geo have built a widespread audience for content and the capacity to transmit the message."

"Remember Sara Palin, Oh Ell? Didn't she have a child on a plane during a campaign?"

"Ummm."

"Is she still around?"

"You are teasing?"

"No."

"Are you suggesting that maternity on the campaign trail is a benefit?"

"Sticks with the Blanche theme. Getting pregnant is a project in itself. I've penciled in some dates if you want to be included?"

"You're funny."

"So are you."

The meeting of the directors of Blanche, Inc, was a two-day affair. An auditorium was rented in order to accommodate the crowds. Nothing like it had ever happened before. The people who found their way to the meeting came by word of mouth and little more.

“Staff in the stores and on the phones, they are the ones who make the meetings great. Every sale creates an opportunity to invite participation.” Omar Bradley stood at a podium, his image and voice projected to the meeting’s attendees as well as live-streamed on the Blanche and Geo websites around the world. “Online attendance yesterday made the Blanche directors meeting the largest gathering of humanity ever. There were more viewers in the US than during sports championship games which have held the record for decades. We will eclipse that US record again today. Globally, the only comparison is the anti-war demonstrations against the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the acceptance of the Arctic as a new State in the Union.”

The largest screens in front of the Chicago audience showed the interior of the auditorium where the board was officially convened. Other screens showed the interiors of other auditoriums. The scenes rotated so that in the first hour over one hundred sites were visible.

The board sat in one hundred-twenty plush chairs arranged in bleacher fashion in a semicircle, with the podium at the center. Omar moved from the podium to sit in a smaller seating area behind the podium and facing the directors. It was Blanche

Givens' day to bask in the glory of dreams come true as Meredith rose to introduce Blanche to the citizens of Blanche World.

“My name is Meredith Bradley, CEO of Blanche and CEO of GEO. I want to thank the staff of Blanche and GEO for the multitude of organizing efforts that we see on the screens around us.” She was visibly excited. “Gorgeous,” Oh Ell had said as left her the center stage. Her thoughts drifted to the daughter she was incubating, who would change her life, of this she was certain.

“I want to talk about the ground rules, and then the hope upon which Blanche and GEO were formed. We are different. We wanted to be different. As time passes we will all become more powerful as investors in our own lives. The rules of our meeting are thus: Dream large. Mother, not smother. Peace is a gift we give one another. Share.”

Her words were running in a crawl across the screen with an inset showing Sign. They were also transcribed on the blogs that Bradley and Associates had launched over the years for this purpose and translated into all the languages spoken in the world.

“Dreams come true. Mothers nurture humanity. Peace is the goal of every dream. That is what our hopes are. In the corporate setting we often lose sight of these aims. To revitalize ourselves we have the opportunity to hear from millions and millions, even billions of our customers. The candidates presented today will become directors of the customer, staff and investor citizens of our little world, Blanche World, elect them.

“In the next few hours, we will hear from the fifty-six people running for the forty board positions. Our websites have hosted their biographies. I have spent the last week watching the candidates and I can say that any one of them would be a

benefit to our project. All you have to do is to vote for those you can support, those who speak for you, anyone you think would protect your investment or anyone you would like to work for. Vote often. Do not wait for perfection. We are different. We do not reason the same. If we act as nurturers; if you act as a nurturer, then Blanche will be yours.”

“My job tonight is to introduce the founder of Blanche, Inc., Blanche Givens, whose bravery overcame one of the darkest moments of modern history. There have been many wars and plagues over the last century and then, in a category of its own, there was the disenfranchisement of women in twenty-two states. That ended when the Supreme Court ruled 9-0 in favor of Blanche Givens vs. Illinois, awarding her the 500 million dollars that started us rolling. The 7-2 conservative Supreme Court ruled that women are equal to any other citizen, and Blanche Givens is here to drive the point home.

“When I first met Blanche Givens, I was an ambitious young attorney and she was just realizing the power to do harm that resided in a national dialogue that excluded women. State after state had passed voting laws in defiance of the 19th Amendment. Thousands were arrested in demonstrations responding to this crisis. The power of the Security State defeated attempts to overturn the laws. There were martyrs like Judy Carrington, shot down outside the Illinois State legislature by a House representative claiming she had threatened him with a pamphlet. He said he saw a gun, and drew his from a concealed holster, shooting her five times before he was subdued. He was acquitted under a Stand Your Ground law. As you know, those laws have since been repealed, but only after Rachel Wood, Ingrid Jorgenson, Nugyen Kai, and many others died as a result of Men Only laws.

“When Blanche first declared herself a candidate for Governor ten years ago today, she was arrested in the middle of the night. Taken from her home and imprisoned in a secret, corporately owned prison, she languished beyond the help of her friends and family. Her crime was simple. A woman could not participate in political activity, including voting, speaking, writing, walking while singing and a host of other so-called violations of the so-called ‘natural’ order.

“Blanche Givens is now free. She is back in business. She is the Chairwoman of GEO and Blanche, her namesake. This is her 70th year of life. She is an icon for women everywhere. She is here. May I introduce Blanche Givens.”

There was a roar. The audience leapt to its feet in a collective greeting that spread across the continents into auditoriums and homes. Blanche walked slowly to the podium, surrounded by directors who greeted her with loving expressions of triumph. The commotion lasted for fifteen minutes.

“Hello,” she said, and the audience yelled “Hello” back to her.

“Thank you for your kindness and affection. Believe me, I feel the same about you, and no matter how large the audience is today, I consider you all my family.”

Omar sat in a room out of view of the audience. He was reviewing his checklist and updating Meredith’s speaking schedule: as soon as Blanche says the words.

Blanche stood rod-straight at the podium, regal, unpretentious, basking in the realization that she had overcome a personal crisis that was her gender’s crisis.

“There is an honor that I have been given to bestow on a person whose dedication to her fellow humans I hold in the highest regard. She introduced me to you, so you know her well except for the one new fact I want to inform you of right now. But first, a little story about her and her wonderful husband. The story is this: He

calls her MP. That is his nickname for her and I recently figured out what it meant to them. Next year a new President of the United States – the 47th – will be elected. I know who is going to win. So let me introduce her to you again. MP, Madam President, Meredith Johns Bradley.”

There are moments that cannot be described. Omar sat letting the words flow over his mind.

“She will become the youngest president in our country’s history, bringing with her a business career unparalleled only by her experience fighting for the civil rights of women.” As she spoke, Meredith walked slowly up behind Blanche until she stood next to her. The cameras in the audience went crazy, causing both women to search for a dark corner above the crowd to focus on, avoiding the random light pulses.

The two women, one half the age of the other, looked like mother and daughter. In the eyes of some beholders, and in the two women’s hearts, they were sisters. They stood and waved at the crowds, alternately bowing and raising each other’s hands above their heads in a sign of victorious togetherness.

Meredith said nothing, finally retreating back to where she came from as Blanche stood alone at the podium again. Quiet quickly returned. There was business to do.

“Now we will perform an act of democracy. We are the citizens of Blanche World and it is time to pick the people who will help to lead us farther than we have ever gone before, beyond the arbitrary to the uniquely beautiful, simply by caring, listening and deciding. This we will do as our last act of this annual meeting.”

With that, the virtual became real. Blanche Givens’ image faded and the faces of the fifty-six candidates filled the screens. The convention was underway.

In the main hall of the Chicago Downtown Men's Club, chairs had been arranged facing a large screen. Two hundred men sat together, watching the events of the annual meeting not two blocks away. When Blanche announced Meredith's political intentions to Blanche World, the men who had kidnapped and imprisoned the chairwoman were gray-faced. When the cheering began, the volume was mercifully muted so that the impact would be muted as well. Many of the men had consumed alcohol over the course of the evening and were in a state of rage. The sound of the cheering may have provoked one or more to violence. Management of so many privileged men required common sense.

"Gentlemen. Gentlemen. May I please have your attention." The speaker was not unusual considering the setting; gray haired, portly, well dressed, coifed like an emperor. Quiet quickly settled on the room.

"Gentlemen, nothing will come of it. Bradley cannot get on all fifty-one ballots, even if she won the Republican nomination—and certainly never as a Democrat."

"I disagree," someone yelled.

"How so? We control twenty-two states today. When the crunch comes we will control a majority. No woman will ever stand between us and our rightful place in this great country given to us by God to use as we see fit."

"You're too old school," said the same voice.

"Old? Justice is never old. And we will have justice."

“No, old man, the tide has turned, and what we saw is the end for us. Not the beginning of the end, but the end.”

Arguments burst forth as clumps of men waved their arms, gesturing sometimes madly, as their voices rose far past murmur to outright hostility.

The speaker was an ex-Governor of Illinois and his antagonist the current State Attorney General who had lost *Givens v State of Illinois* in the Supreme Court. Each man was now seeking the other. They met in the middle of the room and stood facing each other with unmistakable fury.

“Omar, a client of mine wants to invest in Blanche, Inc. Any hints? The stock is not listed.”

“Gerald, good to hear from you. I haven’t seen you since undergrad. Who are you with? Merrill?”

“Smith, Barney.”

“You are looking for an investment and you call a novelist?”

“You’re not only a novelist. You are an economist and married to the top. That must be an interesting story. Write that one. I’d buy it.”

“Privately-held and self-financed. There is no door in except the ones into the showroom.” Omar wondered if Gerald would get it.

“How about GEO? Same?”

“You’re a genius.”

“Omar, can I ask you a question?”

“You just did ask a question.”

“What’s going on in there? We saw the meeting online. Every dreary minute of it, just like we were shareholders, which we aren’t. I saw the whole thing and I still do not understand what Blanche is.”

“Blanche and GEO use a new style of highly effective and profitable economics.”

“And now your CEO wife is running for President? Do you realize how impossible that journey is? She won’t be on half the ballots.”

“We’ll see about that. Using Givens’ award, Billion dollar award, as a guide, fundraising ought to be worth ten to fifteen billion dollars to Meredith.”

“Oh Ell, are you trying to storm the Bastille?”

“More like tear down the Berlin Wall.”

“You’re not Reagan.”

“It’s not me who is doing the work. I am tagging along for the ride. And you’re right; it is a great story and not yet finished.” Omar knew he could say too much.

“Gerald, if I have a different answer sometime in the future, I will call you.

Goodbye.”

Dorothy was born on Christmas Day in a train in the Dakotas. Omar thought she was born in North Dakota, but her birth was registered in in a small town in South Dakota known for almost nothing except, now, for Dorothy Day Bradley's birth certificate.

She was an immediate sensation, the media darling on the campaign trail, everyone wanted to see her.

But it wasn't until Blanche, Inc. put Dorothy on the home page and the cover of the new catalog did women and children become the main issue in the primaries.

Within days Meredith was the runaway favorite, not only for the nomination but the general election as well. The more the Republicans aimed the machine of shame at her, the more she and her daughter became a symbol of moderation.

Meredith could do no wrong.

"MP, brilliant move. The thugs are stepping in their own stuff now." Omar and Meredith sat at opposite ends of Our Relationship – a new one with seating for twelve. In between was The Campaign, as Meredith referred to the printed material and laptops that were their luggage when on the road.

"DD is a good baby. She likes traveling more than I do. Luck of the draw."

"More like the skills of the mom. What would you like to do this morning while our darling naps?"

"Can we review our downside?"

“Easy. We are not yet on nine ballots. All of these are solid red states. Our campaigns are full-ahead in every one of those states. However, there is violence and death threats. We have changed a few venues to avoid the worst of it. but we are still weeks away from Secret Service protection. I think the FBI is investigating.”

“Sorry to say the FBI does not make me feel comfortable. Violence and threats? Are you keeping things from me?”

“Nope. We stopped using electronic communication except for mass communication. We have shredders and burn buckets everywhere. Did you know that GEO has made a small fortune with their shredders and buckets?” Omar began searching his laptop for statistics to quote.

“I have taken a leave of absence from GEO, but the plan was to convert from data to paper. The needs for privacy from the ever-present snoopers, lurkers and hackers caused the change.”

“Buying the recycling capacity and the paper reproduction was brilliant. We control everything, we depend on no one.”

“How do you explain the violence, Oh Ell?” Meredith had wrapped her arms around her body. She thought about the missing DD, post partum blues she thought.

“The violence is a constant since the annual meeting. Our offices, our staff and our volunteers have all been affected. Most of the attacks are poorly planned. Two days ago, in Louisiana, our last stop, three men were seen breaking windows at a copy shop we were using. They apparently saw stacks of our signs and thought it was a GEO store. They drove by twice, throwing rocks and bricks from the back of a

pickup. We ID'ed them electronically within an hour and had our private security pay them a visit. We took a look around outside their homes, set up surveillance and then tagged them for twenty-four hours. A report is being drafted and we will have it in hand in twenty minutes or so. Reggie tells me it is very interesting. He claims we can trace these guys to a GOP consultant operation. Even better, our guys staged an all-night drinking session for the attackers, and once they were stumbling drunk and passing out, our guys called 911. The attackers are now in a cell on drunk and disorderly charges while the police, unwittingly, await the report that will provide all the evidence that is needed to up the charges to terrorism."

"You were right about the security need we would have. Costly but necessary, you called it."

"Campaigning has become more like gang war than debating. We have won on the issues and now we have to win the war. We will not go down the violence road ourselves, but we can catch whoever does. My guess: it will all lead back to Illinois, an ex-Governor and that AG you beat in Givens."

"There must be others at work as well. Oh Ell, I love you. Thank you for being who you are and for being the father of our child. She will have a good mind. Be careful. Tell me about the threats."

"Ugly."

"More. Who is targeted? Who is looking for the perps?"

"Really ugly."

"Please."

“You are a target. Blanche is a target. The stores. Our offices. Our staff, including me, and worst, DD is the primary of the majority of the threats.”

“Ouch. I guess I knew that instinctively. Any leads?”

“Plenty. We include them in our oppo research because much of this comes from other campaigns and their consultants. We are seeing patterns of donors and consultants who are involved, but it’s shadowy. We are planning some passive interruptions.”

“Remember the idea of setting a trap?”

“We are working on it.”

Ginger walked right through the front door without so much as a tap. What she saw, and her right to describe what she saw outside of a closed court room, was heavily contested.

Her argument was that her memory was her property, and she could do with it as she wished, when she wished. The men argued that what went on in the room was their property. It was their room, and they were not committing crimes. They would have no luck finding a court that would agree with them, but it was all a moot point since she started talking the minute she was removed.

As the security men pushed Ginger into a service elevator, she was yelling her name and describing what she saw in vivid detail. Many people heard her. One, an Argentinean, recalled similar scenes during the so-called Dirty War, when people were pushed into ubiquitous white vans that circulated through the cities. The Argentinean woman saved Ginger's life when she began echoing Ginger's words as the elevator doors shut.

Omar's number also happened to be on her speed dial. "Mr Bradley," she said, "I saw the kidnapping of a woman named Ginger Sheldon or Shelton. Hotel security, or someone pretending to be them, pulled her into a service elevator and they're headed to the roof."

Omar's phone was heavily monitored for these kinds of calls, and within minutes a traffic helicopter was over the roof, interrupting what looked to be an attempt to

throw Ginger onto a six-lane interstate highway twenty-six floors below. The Argentinean, who worked for Omar as a watcher at suspected dirty warrior safe houses, caught up to the kidnapers on the roof and she spirited Ginger away while the men scrambled from the watchful eye of the helicopter's cameras. The scene was being broadcast live on cable TV.

Ginger, now in a car rigged to record and communicate live conversations in- and outside, was shaken by the experience, but within ten minutes blogs and TV stations had her story with documented video of most everything that happened. The driver, a chief of security for GEO, took her to a special location in Chicago, an underground garage, bomb proof and heavily secure, below the largest Blanche, Inc. store.

The opposition claimed, "she was swallowed up," which of course was exactly what had happened to Blanche Givens a decade ago.

"Project much?" was Omar's reply to the media who inquired about Ginger's whereabouts "The average citizen is not kidnapped, taken to a rooftop twenty-six floors above a tollway and nearly pushed off the ledge, only to be saved by a traffic helicopter and a bystander."

"Was she an employee of yours? Did you know her?"

"I only heard of her when I received a call from our employee who happened onto the scene while on other business. You know, we have several thousand direct or indirect employees in the campaign. I still do not know Ginger's last name."

"Shelton."

“Okay. As for what happens next, Ginger sent me a note this morning asking us to set up a presser so that she and her attorney could tell their side of this attempted murder.”

“Why did you get involved?”

“Face it. She has a story to tell that supports our contention that our opposition is involved in these type of events. We have given you a list of similar events and have speculated with the FBI as to who might be behind them. Ginger Shelton’s story supports our thesis that the opposition to the election of Meredith Bradley as the next President of the United States is the perpetrator.”

“What did she see in the room?”

“She wants a presser. Give her one. Hear what she says.”

“Omar?”

“As far as I know the value of her observations to Bradley for President is in the support it gives to the concern, we have that more security is needed to protect candidates.”

“Omar?”

“Julie.”

“How does Dorothy feel about this?”

“Looking for the motherhood angle? Mother and child are doing fine.”

“One more question. What sort of employee was the woman who happened onto the scene? What was her business in the building and how was it that her business was on a floor rented by only one occupant?”

Omar looked at the questioner, looking for credentials. A nicely suited young man behind Omar focused his camera on the questioner's badge and pressed the button 21 times on the basis that 21 was his lucky number.

“That reminds me of a story my father told me. A comedian, a Doctor somebody, would refer to a question he was asked often, Why are we in Viet Nam? That is really two questions. Why? And, are we in Viet Nam? The second question is easy. Yes, is the answer; we are in Viet Nam. The first question is Why? And the answer is I don't know. Thank you.”

As Omar walked off the podium the young man continued to photograph the scene. He took pictures of faces, of hands, of badges. Omar had suggested the project to him. He was building files on everyone who attended these campaign sessions. The objective was to understand who they were and what was behind the questions. Reggie had many projects as Omar's aide. Omar said that what they would confront during the campaign would be complicated by the fact that they could not see where it – whatever it was – was coming from. Detailed photographic records could point the way to it.

Reggie had seen a number of security issues dealt with by the campaign's inner circle and he had an idea about where it was all heading. He began keeping a diary. It was locked in the GEO headquarters' safe which was under the bomb shelter under the biggest Blanche store in the world. Since the computer is not much in the way of securing important information, it had to be kept on paper and far away from computers.

As Reggie left the building, looking for a cab back to his hotel room, he saw a white van turn a corner and head his way. He noticed because it blocked his view of cab traffic. He waited patiently at the curb for the van to pass.

What Reggie hadn't noticed was that he had been followed from the presser by two men. The first man was being followed by the second, unbeknownst to the first.

Reggie was too agitated to stand still and decided to get lunch. He turned and took two steps back toward the hotel. As he did this, the van pulled to the curb and its cargo door opened. The first man took one step forward towards Reggie, only to be stunned by the second man. The second man pulled the first to a bench and sat him down. Once the first was secured, he turned to the van and leapt through the door. Two muted thumps were heard. The second man exited the van and called 911.

Reggie ordered a ham sandwich and a beer.

Omar heard the story before Reggie took a bite.

“Omar, damn it. Who makes the rules around here?”

“Jim, my dear friend of the last three years, I cannot tell you who makes the rules.”

“Omar, friend is the wrong word, do you have another term?”

“Partner in crime?”

“Better. I trust you in that way. So partner, I ask again who makes the rules?”

“I see no rules. I see people who would like to be rulers, who by inference make the rules. I have no ruler.”

“Gotcha! It is you who’s making the rules.” Jim always meant well. Fifteen years older than Omar, he sometimes took on the Big Brother role in an attempt to come to grips with what was happening. “You know why I care? It has nothing to do with you. It has to do with your wife and daughter. If anything happens to you, I am responsible for them. Weirdly, I am your oldest friend, though I have known you only for a very short time, and poorly at that.”

“What grieves you so you would trouble me with your grief?”

“Did you just make that up? I laugh. Listen. You are a nerd in a world of ogres. I grew up in the ogre world and I see you do not belong.”

“I never meant to belong because belonging has no freedom attached.” Omar never wanted to talk like this. It meant he was too tired to deflect the probing friend ... as close as he got to a friend that was not MP.

Jim looked confused and exasperated. He refused to look Omar in the eye. He stood and turned to the door of the suite.

“Don’t leave. I want you to understand. You are right about this, it is about rules and who makes them. I would be mad if I were you.”

“Then tell me something...to soothe me, kind sir.” Jim said.

“Would the moment portend such a thing?”

“Omar, please, cut it. I want to know what is supposed to happen. Help me.”

“Sit, please, and I will implicate you in the plan, as we call it.”

“Will this help me sleep?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Go on.”

“Darling Have I ever called you ‘darling’ before?”

“I have a good memory. No. The campaign trail is laying tracks across your vocabulary.”

“I hate that.”

“The worst thing in the world are terse, confusing, soon to be trite sayings.”

“Like ‘actually?’”

“My teenage favorite.”

“Let’s not list them tonight. I need help with the fear factor. I can feel it running through every word I hear on TV. The internet no, but the rest, yes. I need to know I need not feel it. I need to know my child, our child, will be safe. You know what I mean?”

Omar was usually the one who needed to count to three before talking, to be sure the other was done with their talking. No ducking this question. “It is mine, too.”

He hesitated, not wanting to hear himself speak as he must.

“Truth: I do not know. How do I get through the day? I work hard to stay up and ahead of Them.”

“Them?”

“You know. The one’s that did Blanche Givens.”

“Gotcha.”

“We hear Them talk about events they are planning, and most times we are at the scene before the event. We are working hard to identify Them and to keep up with Them. We are bringing the fight to Them and we can always expect Them to fight back. We knew this when we started. We did not know what They would do, but we knew we would prepare to counter and defend.”

“So far, so good... That works for me. The Team is working,” she said.

“Yes. Very well. You asked about trapping Them and we have. Several times. We are learning who They are, how They work together. They are big...as big as They get.”

“Therefore the capital letters?”

“You got it.”

“Will we end Them or will They end Us?”

“Well put. Let’s find out, shall we?”

The board meeting of GEO was like no other. The agenda was unwritten. There was no virtual attendance. There was no public record. No announcement. No email. No texts. Only one way in. Blanche Givens presided.

“Live and face to face. That’s how I like it. All here,” Blanche said, as was her habit. “Cut to the chase. How do we mobilize our worldwide capital to benefit our citizens.”

Nations had become corrupt. Corporations selling the Prosperity Gospel had put a spell over democracy. There were no more political opportunities remaining. Free speech was money and nothing but money. Blanche was something new. It was a corporation with its own citizens: corporate citizens, doubly empowered as people and corporation with an orderly array of responsibilities and objectives that served the people and the corporation.

“Blanche, Inc. and GEO positioned themselves to compete for all the chips. We are riding a wave that began with my candidacy being barred by the Secretary of State of Illinois. The forces who had amended the state constitution to restrict citizenship to white male property owners are still at large ... and I mean large.”

Blanche Givens knew what had to happen next and she would prepare for the eventualities.

“Timing is the question for today. We are seven months out from election day. We have global corporate assets. We have human assets and time in the form of an

undisclosed number of foot soldiers. Let's put our heads together and break down the plan so we know where we need to put them.”

GEO specialized in difficult projects. One such was to defend Blanche, Inc, from predator incursions, real or virtual. Blanche Givens formed GEO to consult with organized groups of people to defend access to the tools of power. GEO stayed low key. It made no public statements. Did no advertising. GEO stayed away from most Fortune 500 companies, except Blanche, Inc. If GEO revealed its earnings, it too would have made the Fortune's list.

Blanche Givens was a special person. She had seen a dungeon from the inside and studied its walls in near darkness for six months before she was found and freed.

“As we look at each issue, please focus on DD's safety and exposure. Reggie is sitting in with us so he can coordinate the implementation of our recommendations.”

Blanche Givens was old enough to be Meredith's grandmother. She acted the part with passion. Her great grandchild's life was primary. She knew the horror of the powerlessness to prevent suffering and death. DD will be able to protect herself someday, but now it is my job, GEO's job to do so.

The candidate was taking forty-eight hours off for a maternity leave and her husband decided to stay up all night as the period began. It wasn't his fault. Work called. Sometimes "later" is not going to work.

Omar enjoyed the belief that he had not been detected by Them. They knew of him, but in the public way as a spokesperson for the campaign. Part of his ritual was to reassure himself that his belief was still believable.

He was trying to hide a number of things. Keep things in the dark. Rule One.

The majority of what was to be kept hidden was classified in a way that it was in the normal course of any business, like all corporate secrets — formulae, recipes, methods of operation, real financial statements and reports on competitors. That would be the insiders view.

In the financials, things were also hidden. Public disclosure laws did not require that GEO or Blanche's financials be made public. The dark budget was imbedded in the bigger budget. The Bradley campaign statements said Bradley and Associates. It also said GEO. That was all an outsider could see.

As he neared the GEO garage entrance he noticed Jim ahead of him. They drove into the garage together, passed security and parked next to each other near the elevator down to the area they called "Storage." They shook hands briefly, smiled and entered the elevator one at a time without a word. When the doors reopened,

they walked down the hall to the security desk, passed through one at a time and entered the secure area.

“Damn, Mr Bradley, what a load of BS getting in here. That is the best I have seen. Ever been breached?”

“Not to my knowledge. Few know this is here. It’s not in the building permit. No one has tried as far as I can tell,” Omar said. “Nothing outside can find an electronic route to Storage. There are no continuous electronic connections to the outside. Electrical runs on a series of batteries which are always in use or charging. When charging, they are physically connected to the outside. When they are in use, they are physically disconnected from the outside. But we are not in Storage yet. Two more levels.”

“Aarrgh!”

First the strip down. New clothes. Then the scans.

“This better be worth all the hassle,” Jim said, as he sat down in the most comfortable chair he had ever experienced in a room that was fragrant with the smells of home cooking and the sounds of a backwoods evening. “You live here or just imagine living here?”

“We thought this through in many scenarios. That was the end of more than a few.”

“I get the feeling the proverbial is about to hit the euphemism.”

“We are closer than I planned. As GEO’s Chief of Security it is time for you to step up. We built Storage to be the place where all planning occurs. It is, therefore, secret, contained, indestructible.”

“In the three years I have worked for Mrs. Givens she never mentioned this lower level. I thought it all ended two levels up.”

“Secrets must be kept. Can’t keep them if everyone knows. May as well leave the door open. I’m showing this place to you so that you can appreciate the extent we have gone to keep our secrets. My feelings tell me that something outside is opening and we need to close it or we will be shredded.”

“Yikes.”

“Yikes, indeed.”

“Tactic number one is attack first.”

“Let’s begin the end game we talked about last time.”

“Where a small band of Merry Men take on the King in an epic battle for justice?”

“Jimmy boy, that’s the one.”

“Can it wait for tomorrow?”

“Afraid not.”

“What are we after?”

“We need to know if they know who we are. Have they detected us?”

“So what you are looking for may not be there? Or maybe only in data?”

“Not likely. They are there.”

“And they are not entirely stupid. They are learning from us. As they fail to see who we are, they are disappearing themselves. Jim, we could become like our enemies. Guard your soul.”

“Well put. Watch yours too.”

In Blanche Givens' mind there was only one purpose for all of her work and that was to identify, capture and execute those responsible for her kidnapping and torture. But she never said those words even to herself. She just never doubted that that was her aim. Or why play? Play to win or do not play at all. Death was the end, but the question was: Who's first to die; me or them? The lessons one learns depends upon the time one has to plot revenge. Blanche Givens had six months to work it out.

When she emerged from the corporate prison cell she met her lawyer, the one who found and freed her, the one within whom she imagined herself rejuvenated in a younger body: Meredith Johns Bradley, young and ambitious, seeking to turn back the tide of repression. Blanche became Meredith and Meredith became Blanche, Inc. Meredith Bradley also became a candidate for President at age 36.

One of the first things Blanche Givens did, once she was free, was to sell her business interests and find the best security chief she could find. It took two years to find Jim Shelton and his wife Ginger. Two more to train them. Jim and Ginger were never explicitly told what was in store for them.

Givens was on her way for a meeting with Omar and Jim. As she entered Storage, she felt the first odd sensations that brought her to her knees and then the floor. The security cameras captured those moments and the response had her hospital bound with seconds.

“Not your time. We caught you before it went too far. You will make it.”

She woke in bed. Her room well-guarded. Omar was at her side.

“Mr. Bradley.”

“Mrs. Givens.”

“Glad to see you.”

“And I you.”

“What’s the matter, buddy? Campaign getting the best of you? Do you feel an unrelenting beast at your heels, a dog nipping ...”

“What are you selling me? Mattresses or software.”

“Great pun. Can I have that?”

“No. I own every word I ever say.”

“Omar, you can be quite the bullshitter.”

“Takes one, Gerald.”

“Thought I would try back to see if you found a way into Blanche, Inc?”

“Wow. You are a mind reader. Anyone ever tell you that?”

“No, and I am not listening to that crap.”

“I brought your call up to management and they just sent a reply that asks for some proof of identity. They had questions as to amount and terms sought. The usual.”

“I need marketable paper. Anything with a market.”

“How about a special class of stock. Gets you into the meetings.”

“Been there.”

“Best I can do.”

“Back to you asap.”

Omar sat back in his chair and closed his eyes. Weary, he thought. Weary and alone again. The forty-eight hours was half gone. His wife and child in isolation. Blanche down and almost out. The plan looming like a sharpened pendulum over his head. How bad can one more day be?

“Tell me, Omar. If I listen to my doctors, I am to rest, but ...”

“Blanche, you lived through a stroke that mercifully spared you much damage, but you do not need another one so do as you are told.”

“Omar.”

“No matter. If you die, we will miss you and struggle on. Maybe now is the time for retirement. We can call you if we have a question.”

Blanche was quiet. Her eyes closed against the light. Omar imagined she was in discomfort and he rose to shut off the lights.

“Dark is the worst, Oh Ell. A glare I can put up with, thank you. Talk to me.”

“Remember the part of the plan called Full Court Press? And the part we called End Game?”

“Yes, dear, I do?”

“They are both underway. Jim has the End Game and I, the Full Court Press.”

Omar smiled as he looked into Blanche’s eyes. She is still with us. No one will enjoy the next few days as much as she will. “GEO is no more. We never put up a sign so no one will miss it. There are now fifty-one state-wide entities that do everything GEO did in the US. GEO still exists as a multinational, which we may rename if someone sees it. In any case, our foes have missed their chance and we are now in full black mode.”

“Thank you. I was so looking forward to our meeting with Jim. He is marvelous. Have you gotten to know him?”

“Partners in crime.”

“What?”

“That’s how he sees us. It’s his idea of life in a world of ogres.”

“I know what he means. I feel very close to him. Does he worry you?”

“He has a perspective I prefer to avoid. In action he is solid. But something is leaking. Maybe it is me. Things have sped up. Maybe it is the campaign. Maybe I need a day off.”

“Today? Why not?”

“I’d be alone.”

“Meredith?”

“Yes, Reggie. How can I help you?”

“Your interlude is at an end. DD is asleep for the night. Another day safe from the outside world.”

“Tell me the news, please.”

“Blanche will be fine.”

“Givens? What does that mean?”

“I chose not to tell you the bad news. Fortunately there’s been relatively good outcome. Blanche had a stroke. Doctors say it was too small for big damage but she is still in the hospital. “

“Are there concerns about how she had a stroke?”

“Age.”

“Not paranoid enough. I’ll ask Omar. More.”

“GEO is gone. The corporation still exists, but GEO is now fifty-one separate state-defined, GEO juniors. They’re called Strategic Security of Kansas, or wherever, as well as Wherever Committee to Elect Bradley. It took two years to recruit and train the staff of these entities.”

“How is the team?”

“We are all still together. Omar has his concerns, which are vague at this point. The plan is still a secret. We can find our foes on any day and interrupt them nearly every time. GEO’s security guy is fully involved, as are the GEO directors — now GEO International directors, I guess.”

“Reggie, what’s your role in all of this?”

“I have two projects for Omar that take up all the slack from daily chores.”

“Am I a chore of yours?”

“Yesterday Omar dropped from sight and has yet to surface. I greeted you for him like the good aide I am.”

“I see. I appreciate the greeting, though it just put me back to work. I must see Blanche. Can you arrange that for me?”

“Thank you, and absolutely. I’ll send a note to you with news.”

“Jim, isn’t this chair to die for? When we built Storage we imagined coming here at times just to feel safe for a few minutes. I nap here often when I am in the neighborhood. My home is good, but the presence of the potential for intrusion is enough to keep me tense and too aware to really rest.”

“Partner, I found you here, right where the crystal ball said you were. You had your twenty-four off, now as your duty calls. It is time for action.”

“End Game?”

“End Game is upon us like a plague.”

“Let me brush my teeth and I’ll be right back.”

Jim stood his ground and offered Omar his hand for leverage. Omar looked at him as if he did not understand the gesture.

“Omar, it is called giving you a hand up. It is a bro thing to do.”

“Oh yeah. Sorry. I am a little foggy. What time is it?”

“4:30.”

“Morning?”

“Yes. We are getting a jump on the day.”

As Omar went to relieve himself, Jim fetched coffee for the conversation and headed for the board room and its other inhabitants.

As Jim entered the boardroom, the six that comprised the board of directors of GEO International halted their conversations to greet him. Minutes later Omar entered.

The vice-chair called the meeting to order.

“Time for show and tell. Omar? Jim? Who’s first?”

Swallowing a sip of coffee, Omar rose. “Madame chair, if I may. We call this the end game, all lower case, because it is still a work in progress. It is now End Game in caps. It is underway. Our periodic meetings have become more frequent and soon – in less than a month – we will need to have a constant presence here until End Game is complete.”

“Sounds like imprisonment.” Charlene Graves was known for her observations, not so much for cleverness as for truthiness. “Where will we stay?”

“There is a level below this with ten condominiums, some large enough for an entire family. As we planned, your identities have been kept secret. We are monitoring our opposition continuously and feel confident that we will know what they know, when they know. Your security and GEO’s success are equivalent. Someone must dance on their graves.”

Monique Duvalier, the vice chair, was normally a very serious person. A retired general from the French armed services, she was familiar with these types of contingencies. “Omar, can you be certain we are still hidden?”

“Madame chair, I would say we can never be certain. However, we have done our utmost to leave your names off everything. There is only one way to know who you are, and that is to be in this room.”

Jim rose as Omar sat. “Blanche Givens, who recruited every one of us for our role, is the only person outside this room who has an idea, a hazy idea, of why. The End Game is her term for exposing our foes in a way that will ensure the end of their game and not ours.”

As Jim finished his sentence Meredith entered the room. “Sorry I am late. Blanche kept me longer than we thought, but the time was well spent. I think I understand what she is thinking.” She noticed the smiles around the table.

One of the people in the room said, “We were just talking about what she was thinking.”

Meredith looked at Loong Psahib as she spoke and recognized in her what Blanche had said she would notice. The busy CEO and Presidential candidate took the time to look at all six of the board members, at Jim and at her husband.

“No need to reveal in words what we feel, know or see. The time will come for each of us to define ourselves. We are undergoing an amazing period of change in our organizations. GEO International is our new name. Our US counterpart is now fifty-one independent movements. They have inherited what we built. I, too, am wandering off the reservation,” Meredith said, smiling, “and hope that today we can find a new CEO to take my place.

“Jim will remain as Chief of Security within GEO International, and his staff, skills and knowledge will guide the fifty-one. Because I am the candidate, the fifty-one will feel my guidance.

“The bad news is that Blanche Givens, our founder, is in her last days. That is why the End Game has been called into play. She deserves to see the fruit of her labor, and within the next few hours she will.”

“Blanche, Inc. is big and powerful and that is why you call me so often looking for info.”

“Where does its power come from?” Gerald asked. “And what’s GEO about?”

“Gerald, you are a curious guy.”

“Why is your wife CEO of both?”

“GEO was all structure. It served one end: Protect Blanche, Inc. from attack from competitors. But Blanche’s customers are its most powerful factor.”

“The customers?”

“Blanche’s customers, they are the ones who spend their money on essential services and goods. Our customer’s lives have been redefined into a corporate identity, a Blanche identity. Blanche is a global nation. It is democratic. Its income is distributed to expand the power of its members.”

“Is this capitalism?”

“It is Corporatism, plain and simple. We are just better at it than the greed machines designed to concentrate wealth for the sake of the investors and often at the expense of customers and staff.”

“What is the economy of your method?”

“Loyalty.”

“They only buy from you?”

“Yes.”

“Why? Lower prices? Not what I have seen.”

“It is a trust thing. And money has various values. If you have money you can have more civil rights, you can preserve your constitutional rights.”

“I don’t get it.”

Omar had been here before, just not with Gerald who was obviously fishing for information for some mysterious investor. Omar assumed the investor was a foe.

“Ger. The reason you cannot see the value is because you do not understand power the way we do. We like to think we have imagination.”

“I don’t?”

“Let’s see. What is your next move?”

“Mine? Ah mmm. Consult an economist, maybe one of your professors; try to determine if what you said makes sense...something seems missing. Then I will interview your customers and staff, where I can.”

“Gerald, I want to be open and honest with you, yet I am not getting that from you. Doctor Greysen, my thesis mentor, spoke to you last week. I have photos somewhere. And we have transcripts of over one hundred random calls you and your associates already made to customers and staff. I was hoping you would show some imagination but ...”

“You got me.”

“Not quite, but closer than you might think.” Omar liked Gerald because he was easy to figure out. Gerald would follow any path he was instructed to follow and none other. “Do you work for Smith, Barney, as you told me you did?”

“Ah.”

“I take that as a no. How about Stratfor? They were caught snooping on business competitors and public citizens who had a beef with its clients: all very felonious and anti-democratic. I know you were a V.P. with Stratfor at that time, and now your consulting group works 24/7 for them. Assume the worst. I do.”

“Clever. Smith is a client for whom I work.”

“Just like Stratfor?”

“Exactly. It’s only business. I do for those who do for me. What else is there?”

“I think the ‘what’ matters, not only loyalty and quid pro quo. It matters how you do what you do. This is elementary ethics. You know these things.”

“Omar, it sounds like you are still the mama’s boy I knew in school. You never got laid, never partied, probably still haven’t.”

“Okay, Gerald. Devolution is not on my agenda.”

Hugh MacLean, ex-governor of Illinois and shareholder in and a board member of PP Systems, Inc. had sat through many meetings fuming about how gutless his fellow board members were. His grudge began from the days when the prisons were emptied of marijuana convictions. “Damn near pushed us to bankruptcy. We should have beaten them back, but no, they didn’t want the spotlight on the meaning of PP.”

Of course he was right. When the backlash happened, he pushed for new voting rights legislation and succeeded in twenty-two states. Until Givens’ little girl upset the gambit.

While Governor, he was very busy compensating PP Systems for the loss of income from pot legalization. Luckily, the voting rights riots solved that problem. He was criticized in the newspapers for his heavy handedness but it sure was profitable. And fun. That Givens woman was only one of many, some still languishing in the darkness. Ha Ha.

MacLean sat at his table at the Club waiting for the current State Attorney General to join him. They had made up after their public dispute following Blanche, Inc’s board meeting. The AG was a younger man, but short — not tall like MacLean who had used his size to push his way into wealth and influence. And the power of the Governorship.

“Sean O’Connor, Attorney General of the State of Illinois.” The maitre d’ had his little habit. In a gloved hand he carried a gold plate topped by a folded white cloth upon which a business card laid. The Governor looked and nodded.

In a few moments O'Connor was standing by the table. There was a handshake and a nod at MacLean’s invitation to sit.

“General, how is the inquisition going?”

“Governor, the souls of the faithful will join us in heaven.”

“I doubt that, Sean. What have we got on Blanche? What the hell is GEO and why is everyone telling me to watch my ass?”

“Mac ...”

“Don’t call me Mac. Only people who don’t know me call me that behind my back.”

“Sir ...“

“Better.”

“Mac, you can be an ornery shit.”

“Cut it. What are we doing here?”

“I wanted to tell you face-to-face what I have learned from a consultant firm. We may need to beef up our security.”

“Why? Who?”

“The consultant interviewed a principal in Blanche, Inc. and found a brick wall with no door in.”

“He is led to believe we must fear the unknown.”

“Blanche Givens was admitted to a hospital two days ago. The consultant thinks that any plans of revenge she might have contemplated will become a priority.”

“Nah! She is done. We let her succeed in her business.”

“Let? She had a couple hundred million dollars from winning her false imprisonment case. Did I ever say, ‘Thanks to you?’ I meant to. And when you go off in front of two hundred crazy, drunken white men, all of whom love to talk under the influence of good whiskey, you can be sure Givens heard your position.”

“So...if she knows I still hate her. What’s she going to do? Throw a pie in my face?”

“I was thinking of a word that begins with S.”

Jim Shelton was almost asleep when he heard Blanche Givens say, “Now. Make it end now, please.”

“How long do I have?” he asked her.

“If I am to hear the words spoken, it will need to be fairly soon. They say I have two months.”

“Blanche?”

“Yes, Jim.”

“When you told me what you had in mind and offered me a job that included the End Game, I was stunned by the possibility that my nightmare might come to an end as well. You looked for me and found me, and when you did my life became full again.”

“Revenge can have that effect.”

“You mean ‘contemplation of revenge’ can be soothing to the soul? But you also said ‘revenge can be cruel and that is to be avoided.’ Remember?”

“I do not want to render you powerless. I wanted to empower you with the possibility. Is it a mistake to ask you to do what we have spoken about so often?”

“I want to think about it. I have thought about it. In honor of your desire for a positive end for me I will think about it one more time.”

“Good. I hoped you would not act out of loyalty.”

“I will act out of love, for you.”

“Don’t say the rest. It is our secret. Better left unsaid, especially outside Storage.”

Jim pulled his phone out and texted a five-word message. The two of them waited a few seconds until his phone beeped. He looked. “I will be back in two hours.”

Omar was watching the phone traffic in and out of his numbers. One of the necessary changes GEO made was to expand the regional contact numbers to statewide levels. Instead of seven numbers, he now had fifty-three. Reggie had figured out a way for him to see the total traffic and the responses his staff was generating. The same was true for net traffic and tweets. Those individual numbers increased as well and the solution for him as a manager was to become a corporation of his own. Omar, Inc.

He saw the text from Shelton and interrupted the feed. If he hadn't caught it that moment, it would have taken five minutes to rise to his "Red Screen" as Reggie called it. He'd had a few days since its inception and was gaining ease with it. Within a minute Jim's question had been answered. His reply text read, "Men's Club lunch?"

Besides Jim, three other people saw the message. The first one was two hours away and too late to change the outcome. The other two never found out what it meant, but they hurried to the location, expecting to find their prey exiting the Blanche building on his way to the Men's Club two blocks away.

Jim left Blanche's hospital room and descended in the elevator to the ground floor and the front entrance. He was amazed at how the rich died compared to the common man. His thoughts focused on this difference. *It is ugly when the hardened cement is your death bed. I hope mine comes in a real bed with a pillow.*

The cab trip back to Storage was uneventful. He disembarked and walked in the opposite direction he had intended to go for the sake of caution. *Wow! What's this? Two men walking away from me.*

In spy school you learn how to follow and how to run. These were not spies. By the way they turned from his gaze they were clearly amateurs. They knew him by sight. *They run because I may know one of them.*

Jim Shelton was in fine physical condition. His skill levels in the martial arts remained high even into his fiftieth year.

Jim saw Ginger step out of a hotel entrance just as the two fleeing men were passing. She was twenty years his junior but every bit as tough. She carried no weapons that were not bits of jewelry or parts of her shoes or belt. Ginger blocked the men's passage as if by accident, reached into their coats and stole their weapons. They looked at her in shock when she pointed their Magnums at them. Hands in the air they waited, as told, until Jim arrested them in the name of the law and placed the cuffs carefully on their wrists. Ginger's driver cruised to the curb and in a few seconds everyone was comfortably sitting in her black van.

“Where to?” her driver asked.

“Mars.” Ginger’s voice was smooth and direct. She could have been an actress but preferred “real” to make believe. *What is the point in pretending to be an agent? Be an agent.*

Mars was Ginger’s nickname for Storage. The entrance was a football field away.

“Ginger? I think there may be more of our friends around than we think. Let’s head for the River. See if we attract a crowd.”

“River it is.” Ginger liked the River.

The driver headed for the main highway that lead north, out of the city and toward what might be a good place to trap a few more.

“Hello, gentlemen. I see you are overdressed for the weather today. As you know, it is hard to conceal a large weapon on a hot day. Bad choice, dummies. It got my attention.” Ginger talked as calmly as ever, even with a near overdose of adrenaline spreading through her muscles and her mind. “Would you assholes be kind enough to tell me where to find your IDs?”

Jim watched the men’s faces as Ginger offered her estimate of their professional abilities. He knew both of them from Reggie’s photo studies of crowds.

“Bloggers,” he said. “I know them. ‘Armed and Dangerous’ is how they advertise themselves.”

“Well, boys, want to relieve your guilty souls of the truth about what you were doing armed outside a corporately owned building housing innocent working people, looking for all the world as the murderous bastards you are?” Ginger was playing it up. Give them a little crazy and see what happens. “The River is cold

even on this hot day. With the clothes you have on you won't last long. Maybe we can avoid a swim. What do you say?"

The two men had been staring straight forward, unwilling to give Ginger credibility. They were not young men full of energy to resist physically, nor were they so bright and confident that they could talk their way back to safety.

"Shit. I told you no guns, but no, we had to carry," Armed said. Dangerous stared at the floor of the van.

"Gentlemen," Jim said, "no kidding, this is a weird situation. We caught you following me. You ran when I saw you. This nice lady here was lucky enough to invite you for a ride, and now we are having a discussion of where you want to be at the end of this drive. There are any number of choices. Use your imaginations."

Jim smiled as he talked. He checked his watch. "It's still lunch time. I have an idea how about taking a break and have a bite at the Club?"

"Great idea, hon. I am starved. Let's drop in and say hello." Ginger loved to eat men's food. "But first, let's see who is in the Beemer that has followed us through the last two interchanges. Perhaps we could invite them as well."

"Nice. Let's stop for a potty break at the gas station at 115th and Ward Street. Driver?"

"Yes, sir."

The station is one with a car wash drive through. There were cars everywhere, slowly traveling in a horseshoe. The driver kept the car headed into the wash as Ginger and then Jim slipped out the doors. The Beemer people had parked by the entrance, probably thinking they would pick up the black van as it left the carwash.

A knock at their window startled them. When they turned and saw the two Magnum barrels pointed against the glass, they froze.

Ginger looked through the glass from behind the guns and whispered, "Please."

The passenger rolled down his window. Ginger said, "Thanks. Look, I just want to sit in your back seat and watch my car get washed. It's something we can do together."

The two men offered no resistance.

As she entered the back seat, Jim slid in next to her. He removed the two Glock 9mm's the men were carrying. The two men sat quietly, their hands on their heads as if that was the safest place for their hands.

"It's like they dress as twins and carry their twinny weapons. Teams. Teams from different places." Ginger had a way of putting things that made sense to Jim. It was why they were together.

The four of them sat quietly doing what Ginger described, just watching the cars, and hers especially, moving from one point to another until the van was ready to drive away. The two cars returned to the city and the Men's Club.

Before Ginger and Jim left the van and Beemer in the garage, they took Polaroids of the four men. They left them sitting in the van, handcuffed and ready for the driver to take them to a place away from the city for release.

The Men's Club is an exclusive club. The ex-Governor and sitting AG could only be disturbed in one way. The maitre d' would visit their table and present a calling card. The member would assent, or not, and the guest or guests would be seated with them, or not.

The maitre d' was George Harrison, who almost changed his name when, as a teenager, his poetry teacher could not help singing Beatles lyrics to him under his breath. There was something eerie about a teacher humming "Believe Me." But he didn't change his name, and he soon learned that his teacher really did love him. Now they are happy together in public, instead of hiding and closeted.

George knew when he saw Ginger and Jim that they were also a happy couple. Their smiles were genuine and generous. Jim handed George a hundred dollar bill and George was inclined to do as he was asked. Plus, as Jim spoke, George knew that this was going to be interesting.

Normally the members pay for quiet conviviality, and women were forbidden. But Ginger was in drag, dressed in coat and tie, and there was no anti-drag proscription so, what the hell. *I hate those bastards anyway.*

The maitre d' placed the photos on his gold platter and walked them to the Governor's side. He put the tray on the table and waited.

The Governor looked at the four pictures, passed them to the AG. "George, please seat the gentleman who brought these to me."

"There are two, sir."

"Then two. Thank you."

They repeatedly reviewed the photos passing them back and forth, nodding and grimacing as they did so.

Jim and Ginger knew who they were looking for, and now they had an intro. They seated themselves opposite each other, with their prey left and right.

“We are the Shelton brothers, Jim and Gin. We take photographs of passersby. These four gentlemen said they knew you and that you would pay handsomely.”

“Ah, you are merchants selling your wares? I had hoped for something more.”

The ex-Governor overestimated the charm of his banter. Not to mention, Jim and Ginger knew exactly what was going to happen in less than two elapsed minutes from the moment the men handled the photos. The photos had been soaked in a translucent psychedelic, easily absorbed through the skin. Ginger learned about it from the CIA.

“Nothing more,” Jim said as they pair rose and walked from the room. The two members sat silently wondering – just wondering.

“Jimmy dear, why leave them like that? I would feel better seeing lots of blood.”

“Blanche has her way. Their end has begun. It will not be by poison or bullet or by knife or a short fall to the cement. It will be by suicide by their own hand, in their own time.”

“So you figure that this will be life changing for them? What mechanism will cause this?”

“Have you ever taken any of that stuff?”

“Yes. LSD, PCP, MDMA.”

“That it?”

“Did I mention Speed?”

“Did you put all of them in your concoction? Damn. What will happen to them?”

“Self-awareness. I took those once. I know what’s inside me.”

“So they will follow in your footsteps.”

“Meaning?”

“They will come to despise themselves for what they have become. They will each struggle to learn to live with it, to live it down or find some way to balance their exceptionally bad Karma. They will not know themselves again as they were this morning.”

“Something like that. They are done.”

They parted: Ginger to go home and Jim to the hospital to report back.

Meredith sat in her seat at her computer console remembering the first time the idea of finding Omar came to her. She was sitting in a Poli Sci class, just days from graduation. She was done with college in a way only a senior can be. She had lived through it in spite of the poverty. She had resisted pregnancy and an early marriage in the only way she knew would really protect her from it.

Her father had been a joker. There was no time for seriousness with him. When she let down her guard, there he would be with his child-like sense of humor, wondering if she knew how far it was from her ass to her elbow. She remembered the question but not the answer. Anyway, it was a stupid question and she prided herself at not remembering.

None of that had anything to do with Omar. She just missed her father who had spiraled into dementia, leaving her without his funny mind, without his love and caring. Loneliness is made of this and other things—longings she did not have words to describe but which her subconscious would yell at her all day long. In the midst of her loneliness, she saw Omar smiling at her during Spanish class. She found out later he needed glasses to see that distance. She thought he loved her at the time. But, no, he had yet to come to love her. It seemed like whimsy to seek someone's love as if it were fully formed, find nothing, and then stay to create it. She did. He did. They were happy together and neither sought another.

Her console seat was aboard her private plane. Blanche Givens had given the jet to her and the tail had a large photo of Givens' stern smiling face, a trademarked grin

inside a memory of a painful experience. Meredith shared the idea but not the empathy since her life had yet to encounter a hatred as intense as Blanche had suffered under.

“No matter,” she said. After speaking she looked for listeners and realized she was alone again. Time for fun. Who is on board? She beeped her attendant.

“Mr. Bradley is in your suite. He is napping, I believe.”

“Omar? Thank you.” *I will wake him as I did the first time we made love. Wait.* She sent a text. He texted back. She chuckled and headed for the stern and the forgiveness of pleasure shared.

“Mrs. Bradley,” the unwelcome voice belonged to a young female reporter. “Susan Niles with the Guardian.”

“UK or SF?”

“UK.”

“How can I help?” Meredith knew enough from *Givens v Illinois* to be wary of the young and hungry.

“Everyone else went to sleep and I saw you come out.”

“Finders keepers?”

“They were right.”

“Okay.”

“You are witty.”

“Don’t be fooled. I stole that from Omar. What kept you up?”

“A news story out of Chicago. Local news is reporting that an ex-Governor and the current AG got into a fist fight at a men’s club – no porn in the story, so it’s probably a private club – and the Governor was shot twice and may die.”

“What? This is bad news.” *It means that Blanche Givens is dying.* “I am a fan of neither man, but it seems a tragedy. What about O’Connor?”

“Worse. He was packing. He shot several members and was shot himself by an employee, a George Harrison, the maitre d’. The Governor is critical. Both men appeared drunk, and their belligerence increased until they upset the table and began throwing furniture at one another. The rest followed.”

“Thanks for the news. I am headed to bed. Refresh my memory at breakfast, my table.”

“Thanks for the invite. See you for orange juice.”

They parted at Meredith’s cabin door. A tap, a humming version of “Darling” and they were together again.

“Hey! Wondered if you’d find me or when.”

“I came to see if you wanted to play.”

“You mean play ‘Ooh Aah!’?”

“I have a bottle of wine on the way. Your fav, a light Chablis. Will that work?”

“Magic. But first, have you heard about Governor MacLean? And what’s his name the AG?”

“MacLean went to the hospital. AG O’Connor went to jail.”

“Oddly poetic. Same hospital as your friend.”

“Let me check on something. I will be back before you finish the wine.”

After tiptoeing past the sleeping media, she read the Chicago news websites on her console to see how far the story had progressed. There was speculation based on the public arguments the two had at the Men’s Club, more or less common knowledge.

Meredith called the hospital to check on Blanche, then she called Reggie to check on the latest from his sources. Jim and Gin may as well have been invisible. George Harrison was a hero who saved lives. The injured would all make it except for MacLean. He was shot in the head and was on life support until his family could gather. Reggie thought O’Connor would plead guilty to a lesser crime in an attempt to dodge the death penalty, but so far, no charges. *Probably waiting for the other shoe to drop, as it were.*

“Damn. Blanche, hold on baby. Don’t let that bastard win this one.”

“Mrs. Bradley? You are still up.”

“Ms. Niles. Yes, your news was more disturbing than I at first thought, so I was picking through the bones of few stories to understand what happened.”

“Looks simple from my view. Two egos finally get drunk enough to fight to the death. No one will talk about the argument, what it was about. Something to do with Blanche Givens was all I got. Maybe you know why they would argue about that case. Some speculate that Maclean was blaming O’Connor for the loss. The AG was beyond his limit, drew his concealed weapon and emptied the gun into his drinking partner, hitting him twice, along with four other diners. Other than MacLean, none of the wounds is life threatening.”

“Well done. Let’s hope MacLean survives. Off to bed with me. Good night again.”

“See ya.”

Meredith plunged into the darkened passage, ahead of the reporter who pulled the door closed behind her.

Back in the suite, Omar exhibited the effect of his solo abuse of the bottle of wine.

“Saved you some.”

“Oh Ell, is it okay to toast the death of an unrelenting enemy?”

“Not if you want to be elected. Silence is best if one cannot praise the dead.”

“Then a toast to fate and may mine be less ignoble than his.”

“Here, here.”

Drinks quaffed. Glasses back on the table for a refill. Omar smiled into her beautiful eyes, placed his hand on hers as she reached for her glass. “Wait. Blanche is calling for us to return. You cannot, but I will. We are landing in Minneapolis, so I can get a Chicago connection. MP, sorry to leave you alone with the media.”

“She’s going.”

“She is, but not too soon I hope. She is tough enough to hold on, to savor victory.”

“To Blanche. You go girl.” Clink.

The City of Chicago was in mourning. Two of its finest citizens had passed away within days of each other. The funerals created demonstrations of competing interests, although the most massive gatherings honored Blanche Givens' life in a time of crisis. Crowds had gathered near the Blanche, Inc. building, on opposite sides of the Marriott Hotel. The fans of Blanche outnumbered the reactionary political groups who supported anti-women movement. From his position in his office twenty floors above Storage, the only sounds Omar could hear was the of chanting "Dream large. Mother not smother. Peace is a gift we give. Share." Blanche Givens must have been leading the crowds.

Three days ago, he sat at her bedside. "Blanch, he is gone. The other will be charged. You won. Congratulations. We all love you."

Omar sat with her until Blanche herself no longer was in the room. The nurse woke him and told him she was gone. He rose to see her face in death and said, "Good-bye. I miss you."

Shaking his head to free himself of the shadow of memories, Omar looked at the monitor. She was lying in state outside the main gates of Blanche, Inc. Citizens of Blanche World marched single-file past her body to mumble words they had practiced for hours. Reggie had placed a microphone to record those words—Reggie envisioned a book of her life and times.

Mc Lean was gone. One down. Umpty-five thousand to go. Omar sat in his favorite chair out of the reach of most, enjoying his revelry and sorrow. Tomorrow

was a board meeting on the GEO plan, a monthly review that was soon to be daily. The question was, “is today that day?” If the answer was yes, then the board would come to ground in Storage and the End Game would expand. Now is the time. Full court press will be boiling to the surface in a matter of days.

“Where did the term full court press come from?”

“Basketball.”

“No. I meant how did the strategy get its name?”

“Familiar with the game, or no? I guess no.”

Ginger flung her body armor across the room at him.

“Mr. Dickhead ... I mean Mr. Marvelous, I am going to give it to you at the proper speed. Here goes. There is a strategy we call full court press which no doubt reminded the makers of basketball. What I was curious about was why or how the name came to be the name. Do you know?”

“No.” Jim was done talking. Stripped to his underwear he leaned back onto the bed and in seconds was asleep.

“Good night,” she said. “Pleasant dreams.”

Ginger looked around the condo they shared in Storage for the first time. She was surprised when she saw the windows. For the next two hours she explored the world, morning, noon and night. Life underground would be easier to take with a world “outside” that consoled the occupants. The window image generator could create an exterior view from anywhere in the world, and as one walked about the condo the perspective was consistent. After the two hours she realized the obvious,

there are no people in the scenes. *Wow, I am getting lonely looking for someone to watch.*

“Quit grumbling and come to bed. Tomorrow will be intense. Sleep is advised.”

“Jim, I am sad. There will be a world without people. Just robots.”

“Gin, sweetie, maybe a pleasant dream is in order.”

“Maybe I should have taken that concoction instead of giving it to them.”

“What? You are upset. Let me give you a massage. What do you say?”

“Full court press, item one: where and when?” Vice-chair Charlene Graves and the board Executive Committee chair Monique Duvalier were visibly excited. Graves stopped her reading of the agenda and turned to Omar and Jim who stood at the head of the six-person table. “Gentlemen, I assume the responses will be ‘everywhere at once’ and ‘now.’”

Both Omar and Jim nodded. Neither spoke.

“Then we are here to stay, Omar?”

“After the funeral,” Omar said, “we have decided to move in and release our assets for the full court press. We have a sea of details to work out before we can begin to estimate how long we will be here. There is no reason to think any of us is in danger. We are here in Storage in order to assist our teams, especially in the identification of the targets. Getting this right without creating more hardship for you is the bottom line. Jim.”

“Folks. Some of you have been working for this moment for decades. Each of you has built a personal organization using GEO assets and your own connections. We have provided secure communications for you, the condos contain the only terminals. In this room, anything can be said and be absolutely unheard by the outside world. In your condos you are advised to speak in the euphemistic languages you have each developed to communicate privately, even if intercepted.”

“What about the NSA and the programs they are running on us?”

“We have a system of random origination. You send a text. It appears to come from a node that is not associated with any of us. It cannot be traced back to you. The return text is treated similarly, and it is untraceable. The entire exchange will appear to be unassociated with any of us.”

“Thank you,” Vice-chair Graves said. “More questions at this point? Seeing no hands, we are on to item two: End Game.”

Omar said, “End Game is set. Now that it is underway, it will have a life of its own until it is completed. When we have updates you will be buzzed and we can meet to view the results. As this takes shape, full court press will be completely defined, leaving the future of our enterprise in GEO out of the hands of anyone in this room.”

“So, we should adjourn to tend our networks and return when we are buzzed, as Omar called it.” Graves and the rest of the six board members rose nearly simultaneously and headed down to their condos.

Omar and Jim stayed behind. Omar collapsed in his easy chair and Jim in his. In recent weeks they could be found here most days, staring at the ceiling and waiting to be disturbed by Reggie or Ginger.

“How many different countries are we in now?”

“Seventy-nine, counting the US.”

“How many teams?”

“By my count one hundred twenty-one.”

“Eleven squared.”

“Huh?”

“I have always loved numbers. Eleven is very special, and squared it is potent.”

“You believe that?”

“I believe I’ll have a beer in my condo after we end the conversation for the night.”

“You expect no news tonight?”

“People need to settle in and get some sleep. Reggie was asked to hold off on action until 6 AM. What about Gin?”

“We are inactive tonight, waiting for the full court press to kick in. Go for your beer and pleasant dreams.”

Meredith missed Omar on the campaign trail, but now, as the convention was getting into gear, there was little that her staff could not handle without him. The last time she saw Oh Ell was on the plane to the West Coast, the flight he left to return to Blanche's death bed.

Dang, it has been almost two weeks, and since the funeral Omar had gone to ground to work on the full court press. They had agreed to silence rather than chance, mixing her apples with his oranges. She checked her accounts, and the only evidence of Omar was the stuff he called chatter. Chatter was the euphemism for misleading emails and texts that purposely flooded accounts. The real stuff was kicked into the spam folders. At least that is how it worked this week. Omar always thinking, that's Omar.

DD was a true star on the trail. Seven months old and getting her airplane sea legs. She was asleep in Meredith's lap, deeply relaxed and snoring lightly, just like her father. Meredith had become the master of sidewise typing, leaving her lap in the open for DD's convenience. The console and its little room on the plane had space for little more than the two of them, so the knock on the door required her to push as far in as DD would allow to open the door.

"Yes? Oh, Ms. Niles, how are you this evening?"

"Never a dull moment. You look so sweet the two of you. I want to write a story about you that shows how amazing the two of you are."

“I forbid it. We are not special. Mothers and babies have been doing this for ever.”

“I hear you, but it is still special to watch.”

“You’ll lose your objectivity card.”

“It will be momentary. Maybe after this is all over.”

“How can I help you tonight?”

“More news. Exxon’s chairman, Phillip Handy, was found dead in Nairobi. No one knew he was even in Nairobi until his body was identified. He had seven hundred hatpins stuck through his eyes and ears. His brain was scrambled a little at a time.”

“Yikes. Why all the details?”

“Hatpins? Sounds cruel.”

“Twenty years ago, he was accused of ordering the torture of several local citizens who were organizing villages against Exxon’s oil explorations. Pieces of their bodies were mailed to family members.”

“Revenge?”

“Might be. Thought you might be affected somehow.”

“They do not support my campaign, so Mr. Handy’s untimely death cannot hurt us, and I do not see how it helps us. Do you?”

“What if ...”

“I cannot ‘what if’ with you at the moment. Maybe after we land in Chicago we can talk more.”

The reporter left and closed the door. Meredith typed into her phone. “Umpty-five thousand minus two.”

In seconds her returned text said, “Can’t imagine what that means. Oh, Charlene sends her best.”

Life at the Men's Club was back to normal. After the murder, the Club closed "for renovation," and now, with new carpets, paint and furniture, the maître d' sat the first member for lunch.

George Harrison thought there would be a crowd, but the lone lunch patron stayed alone until almost 2 PM, when a guest arrived with a gold embossed card.

"Sir, a Mr. William Bond from Stratfor, if you please."

The card went untouched.

"Thank you, George. Please seat him at the bar and I will join him there."

The member rose, and taking his brief case headed for the restroom. The member was unknown to George, who did not believe calling oneself 'Bob Smith' was truthful. But George was just a door keeper, not caring for more than Smith's possession of a valid membership.

Returning to the lobby, George handed the card back to the guest, and with a "This way, sir," he led Mr. Bond to a seat in the bar. At this hour George doubled as bartender, so he rounded the bar and asked, "What can I get you to drink, sir?"

"A martini, please. No ice, no Vermouth."

"Will Bloom London Dry do, sir?"

"Do you have Monkey 47? I prefer it, thank you."

“Yes, sir.” George hated gin, and increasingly he hated gin drinkers. The word he held in his mind for them was “snotty.” He had been writing to a friend and misspelled snooty and it stuck. Snooty, snotty what’s the difference.

Searching the gin shelves for Monkey 47 he sensed Smith enter the bar. As he bent over to check the lower shelf he heard a grunt and a chair moving aside, as if someone was sitting at the bar. Not finding any Monkey 47, he grabbed another gin bottle to offer.

“Mr Bond. I am sor ...”

He stopped talking when he saw the blood filling the inside tray on the bar.

Smith was nowhere to be seen, but someone had poked a big hole through the back of Bond’s head and he was definitely dead. He smiled as he dialed 911. Two in one month. In five years: none. Now two. Weird.

“Ger, how is it going?”

“Damn, Oh Ell. It took you two weeks to answer my calls. I thought we were tight.”

“Last I looked, I would say not. We could be, except you work for the wrong people doing the wrong things.”

“Am I on your list of bad people?”

“Now, Ger, I returned your call as soon as the convention ended. I was way busy and I now have time for fun. Where should we meet?”

“Men’s Club?”

“You a member?”

“How about a beer on me? Fifteen minutes?”

“Ooh. I am a ways off. How about 5 PM. Happy Hour?”

“You’ve never been to the Club. You’ll love it.”

“5 PM.”

Five came and went but Ger refused to give up his seat and the one he saved. Six came and George sidled up with his gold plate and Oh Ell’s card.

“Please seat him here, George. Thank you.”

Omar ordered a beer. “Cheers” were performed with the clank of a beer mug and a long drink.

“Thirsty, Omar?”

“Once you get to work for fourteen-hour days, week after week, the word thirsty takes on new dimensions. How can I serve you Old Roomy?”

“I was looking through my files and came across an interesting fact. Givens and MacLean were related.”

“Oh, yeah. Cousins?”

“Close. He was on a board of directors for PP Systems. A list of their prisons includes the one where Givens was discovered. MacLean ordered her imprisoned in a secret order that was defended by O’Connor in the courts. He lost the case.”

“I didn’t know about the secret order thing. Are you writing a book or something?”

“I pride myself on not being stupid. There is a connection.”

“They were not friends. They are both gone now. May they rest in peace.”

Gerald Frech was related to some FBI character from a few decades back. Omar thought him a little outside the boundaries of sanity himself, the inheritor of a similar mentality to his great uncle Louis.

“What the hell. Givens never forgave him.”

“You never met her. You wouldn’t know. She never mentioned his name to me as a friend or foe.”

“Hmm. So what are you saying?”

“Bartender?”

“Yes, sir.

“Do you have tin foil back there somewhere?”

“Will aluminum work?”

“Not as good. Thanks anyway.”

“Always a joker. I do agree it is not much to go on, but it bugs me nonetheless.”

Omar sipped his beer. Gerald sipped his beer.

Gerald studied Omar’s reflection in the bar’s back mirror. Omar studied his smart phone as if waiting for Gerald to break the silence.

“Scoping me out there, Ger?”

“Trying to think through what I have seen of late.”

“Stratfor demanding info from you?”

“Maybe. And a few others.”

“You come to me to tell me your business is expanding? Good on you, bro.”

“Something feels wrong about this, and other things too.”

“I ordered some tinfoil for you. I hear it settles one down right away. It will be delivered here.”

“Not funny.”

“Ger, it has been swell, but I must go. I promised DD some pureed prunes for dessert. She cannot be consoled once she sees I have failed her.”

“Sit down. I am not done.”

“Yes you are, old friend.” Omar stood to go but Gerald grabbed a handful of his coat.

“I know about Handly, too.”

“Dude. The foil is on the way. Amazon next-day delivery. You’ll look even smarter with a shiny helmet.”

“Fuck you.”

“Another time.”

George could tell that there was something awry with the gentleman and his guest.

“Sir, may I escort your guest to the door, please.”

“Thank you. I can find my way,” Omar said.

“It is my pleasure, sir.”

They walked side by side to the door. At the door, Omar passed George a hundred dollar bill.

“Thank you. Your timing was excellent.”

“Anytime, sir.”

Omar returned to Storage. The directors had been there for nearly four weeks, during which Meredith was chosen by unanimous voice vote as her party's nominee. The board had met three times a day for business related to the operations underway. End Game was of the most immediate interest. The directors had the role of picking the targets for the security staff to focus on. This had happened years ago, with only one change – an addition – in that time.

Blanche Givens' gift for organizing had created GEO. Each director had her role and her constituency. The target of each director was the top choice of her constituency. Any director's success was shared by all.

Omar never spoke with Blanche about the details of her work before they joined forces. Omar's nerdy facade masked his inner warrior, as MP described his stubborn streak. Blanche had liked his nerd mask. It was something to do with her imprisonment and isolation. Omar could see the scars on her face and hands and the shadows that crossed her face from time to time. She had been in therapy, but never let on to Omar the means by which the scars were made.

Fact is he did not care. The fact was the scars were undeniable. Now that Blanche was gone, it mattered even less to speculate about her private thoughts and memories. For Omar, Blanche was at war from the moment they met until the moment they parted.

Omar did know what GEO was about. He knew the plan. He knew the personnel. He knew the why of it, and this “why” was the reason no one dared to speak out loud. They feared compromising the End Game before it was completed.

The evening meeting began pro forma. Now Chair Graves called for the agenda and Omar offered “updates.”

Mrs. Graves searched for another hand and listened for another voice. She was very sincere, but her manners made her appear lighthearted, even comical. Everyone smiled those special smiles of the revered.

Omar began, “We have completed End Game.”

He had expected a bit of applause or a ‘good job’ but got neither. Shoulders slumped. Eyes were downcast.

“The last target met his fate at mid-day today, in London, where he resided and worked in the British affiliate of the Bank of America. Congratulations Ravi.”

Omar’s small speech was in keeping with the prior six speeches, no more no less. No one wanted more words to be said. They would adjourn in silence and return to their condos until the morning meeting and the What Now? agenda, which no one was prepared for.

As the directors departed, Jim and Ginger entered and sat in the comfy chairs while Omar stood amazed at the end of a plan so many years in the making.

“Hey partner How are you?” Jim said as he offered a hand to Omar.

“At a loss.” He said as he accepted the friendship gesture.

“Us, too. How about a day off?”

“We have until morning meeting, when everyone will be here.”

“Twelve hours is twelve hours. See ya.”

Omar watched them walk away, wondering at how fast they had moved from Heathrow to Storage.

As the stairway door to the condos closed, the door to the outside opened and Reggie and Meredith with DD in arms walked into the board room.

“Is it over?”

“Yes.”

“What’s next?”

“Ah. Hello. I am fine. You?”

“Oh Ell. I love you.”

“Then, the answer to What Now? is to rest until the morning. I have work to do to get ready for the meeting. Are you on stand-down?”

“Yes. I am bushed and need ten hours if I can get them. See you in my dreams.”

With that she followed Jim and Gin and retired.

Reggie looked as tired as anyone could be and still stand. Omar felt no better.

“Question?”

“Where do I bunk? It’s my first time sleeping here.”

“Right. There is a bunk in the console room. You’ll get no sleep tonight.”

Reggie left for the stairs. For a second Omar stood alone. No sleep tonight.

General Monique Duvalier entered from below, saying thank you to Reggie for holding the door.

“Monsieur Bradley, bonjour.”

“Bonjour, Madam General.”

“We are finished with the first step, non?”

“We are.”

“I have a request and a suggestion.”

“I am here to serve.”

“First my request is that we renew our pledges for secrecy. No memoirs. No books of any kind.”

“It is on the agenda, as you wish.”

“My suggestion is that we find some way to expand the program rather than end it. There are still a large number of targets. Blanche wanted her justice, and gave some to us in return, but our constituencies have asked for justice, too, and their targets were not included.”

“I see your point and agree with you. Full court press is underway, and it has a similar aim in the US. GEO International has no additional projects, so it could engage in pursuing its own aims. I am not staff of GEO, but Jim Shelton will be with us in the morning. He seemed open to ideas for the future.”

“Where are you bound for?”

“We have fifty-one state offices and the international organizations, all of which need attention between now and the first of September. We still have nine voting rights states to get on the ballot, plus the culling of our opponents. Rough work.”

“Is that your euphemism? Culling?”

“It is appropriate. My view is familiar to yours. The economic inequalities have created a state of unrest in billions of people. Wealth is so concentrated that following its natural inclination, it will subjugate the billions by extinguishing democracy. Wealth has a way of protecting itself at the expense of all others, as if all of the billions of people, acting freely in the economy, actually represent competition. There is no way out of this situation. People act in small groups and alone. Security is increased. Major military operations follow drones and death squads. People are captured, imprisoned, tortured. No group can rise to win back democracy because they are infiltrated and crushed. The high levels of cronyism and corruption make political solutions nearly impossible. That is where Blanche came into the picture, and then the rest of us.”

“So, Omar, that means that GEO and Blanche, Inc. can change the impossible?”

“No. If there is a solution, it is a return to what worked, when it worked. To do that we have to reinvent not only our politics but our economics. We must make choices to aid people and attempt to all rise together.”

“That is full court press.”

“I guess so.”

“So we know what to do. We all agree on the analysis. We all are free of daemons now.”

“That is an improvement. But to figure out the future we must reassess our present.”

“We have a lot to account for. It seems too large a task.”

“Alone, yes. But we have several thousand assistants waiting for our direction. Shall we sit together and bring some light into the darkness?”

“If it is this or sleep, let it be this. Sleep can wait for death.”

To reach the console room they had to return to the residential area, and there, behind an unmarked door, was the center created to serve one purpose, devising full court press. It was Omar’s brainchild, but Reggie was the architect. The console room was the euphemism — it was far more. War room was more accurate an implication.

“We laid our own cable across Chicago across lake Michigan across the Leelanau Peninsula to a town called Peshabestown. If the world cared about our internet traffic, it would be lead to an open field with a view of Grand Traverse Bay. From there, south, there are several other nodes waiting if needed. And then there is another cable in another direction and a similar small town and open fields.”

“We won’t be heard, and we won’t be stopped?”

“That’s the plan.” They entered the room. Reggie had it lit up with a hundred LEDs.

“Now we send one email and the fun begins. We sit here and watch the one hundred twenty-one websites that comprise the first level of our networks. We will see facts and figures that together will make spread sheets and other analytic tools to determine what our current state may be.”

“Et voila!”

“Vraiment.”

The Chicago Downtown Men's Club was in disarray. Two murders, one arrested member and the maitre d' a witness to both. The committee, as they called themselves, met to discuss whatever moves they would make. Their consultant firm, GF Services, sat in on the meeting.

“Gentlemen, as your chairman I feel it is necessary for us to reassert our faith in the elected officers and our consultants. That is why I called this meeting. Once this is accomplished, in whatever manner it ensues, we will then, I suppose, at the whim of the officers, determine what path we will take—if it is different from our current one.”

Gerald listened to The Windbag as Gerald affectionately called him. For \$500 per hour, let him talk.

For everyone else, Howard Hughes Maitland made sense and they put their heads together and decided to do nothing new for the moment. Status quo won the day.

Too lazy to think. Doomed. Gerald knew what he would do when he was called to address them, but first there was another pressing issue on the agenda: repairing the bar which was left soaking in blood for too long. The wood was stained, or so George Harrison said. The members grumbled that it wasn't a member's blood, just some guest with a strange reputation and a powerful position for a man who came from uncertain parentage. And then there was the mystery of who the member was who invited the guest into the club environment to apparently murder him. Gerald waited.

The murmuring subsided. The chair looked at Gerald. Gerald nodded. The chair pointed his gavel towards Gerald and said, “Now let’s hear from Louis Frech’s son ...ah?”

“Gerald, sir, and thank you for the intro. Great nephew actually. Let me be clear from the start. I sell services that increase the security of the people who built America. I have worked for you for over a decade and during that time absolutely no one has suffered inside the Club until the last month or so wherein the two murders occurred. If that were the end of the story, we could all go home to our beds and have a good night’s sleep. But there is more. Potentially everyone in the room should consider himself as a target of international terrorism.”

The Executive Committee meetings were usually stuffy with cigar smoke. When Gerald stopped to sip water, the cigar smokers puffed up big and several older gentlemen were caused to cough, one so excessively he went for a hit of O2.

“Come on Gerald. We buy it all already, like a major medical policy with a high deductible. We are writing six figure checks every other month. We are scared already. Why this now?”

“Right. I didn’t mean to add to your burden because I was having a bad day. The Club is having a bad century, and I would be happy to furnish the details either all together or at your leisure. I stand by what I said. Incidentally, I give you less than six months, if what I see is real.”

Rich old men are used to giving orders according to the playbook, which has been rewritten but never improved upon from the time of the Roman emperors. When told they need to change their game they grumble. It is what old, privileged men do and then they seek revenge.

“Thank you, Gerald. I sense the consensus is for ‘at your leisure.’ We’ll call you.”

Gerald knew they would fire him. He wanted it. He despised them just as he despised that old fart uncle of his who conned his way to the top of the FBI. What did he say? ‘The value of intelligence,’ or was it secrets. Both work.

And now he had more than a few secrets himself. I wonder where Oh Ell is?

Reggie loved the console room. He bought the chairs himself, made to order for each person who was likely to sit and watch the numbers scroll across the screens, aggregated and operated upon by the algorithms that he designed.

“Reggie what is it that you are calculating?” Monique asked.

“General, we have built a special model that demonstrates, in a variety of ways, whether GEO or Blanche is tracking its expected course. The obvious one is economic. Do we have enough cash? Are our liquid assets growing? How distributed is our income?”

“What other ways?”

“Personnel: do we have the needed people in place? Or Security: is there more to do?”

Omar was watching the interplay between Blanche’s income distribution model and the actual on-the-ground experience. He was also interested in the life satisfaction indicators comparing Blanche World citizens and the rest of the planet. They worked every day to increase the number of Blanche's citizens and thus diminish the population of “the rest of the planet.”

“Omar?”

“Sorry, General.”

“We have been here for two hours. Where are we?”

“More analysis will help, and we look to be an hour or more away from a reliable point. Sleep. I will wake you when we have what we need.”

No one would speak again until final numbers were achieved and comparatives were available.

Omar’s beeper went off. He left for the surface and failed to wake the General.

“I thought that would get your attention, Oh Ell.”

“Ger, I am never too busy for an old friend.”

“No, you want what I have to tell you. If we were friends, we would play golf or squash together.”

“Okay. Got me there. Can I buy you a beer?”

“It is 3:30 in the morning. Bars are closed. A local all night?”

“Doggie Diner? My stomach hurts thinking about it. How about the Marriott Downtown’s lobby cafe. Never too late for coffee.”

“When?”

“I am ten to fifteen out. You?”

“I’ll wait.”

Omar had never turned a consultant for the foes into a friendly. He had been in conversations where he thought that may be the offer only to find the prospect was trying to draw him into a trap. When Meredith began her run, when they first began their fundraising, he was asked to lunch by someone who presented themselves as a disgruntled ex-employee of Stratfor, only to be warned by Blanche Givens herself that it was unlikely the prospect was what he said he was. More likely, he was an operative for the sitting Republican President.

On the other hand, Omar never told the “truth” if he could help it. Whatever Gerald Frech wanted with Omar, it was probably nothing he would ask for.

The Marriott was directly across the street from the Blanche headquarters. Omar was outside looking at the main entrance when he saw Gerald enter the hotel. Omar was on the phone talking to the security detail watching the front entrance of Blanche.

“When did he arrive?”

“Well, sir, he was outside Blanche for fifteen minutes. He looked agitated. He received a call, then turned and walked over towards the Marriott.”

“Did he look like he knew what was in Blanche or was he just walking around.”

“He examined the exterior like he was looking for a door bell.”

“Can you provide a tail for me.”

“CYA, sir?”

“That’s correct. I’ll be in the Marriott lobby for a private talk with the subject.”

Omar always got excited around the potential for danger. *I am an adrenaline junky.*

The walk across Michigan Avenue from Blanche to the Marriott, even at this hour, was enough to get one’s adrenal glands excited. If one follows the lights, it takes ten minutes—if one hits all the lights red— which in Omar’s experience was every time.

As he waited for the first light at the end of the block, he saw an unmarked black van arrive at the hotel’s valet parking slot and drop off a man and a woman

carrying what looked like musical instruments. They walked arm and arm into the lobby.

The Shelton brothers. Omar crossed against the red and took a chance with traffic to arrive in three minutes. The scene inside the hotel was bizarre for the hour.

“International Jazz Convention” the sign said. Who knew? Jim and Gin.

Clearing the knot of saxophones and guitars at the entrance, Omar descended into the coffee lounge where he hoped to find Gerald. In the old days, they say, the men would be seen with port and cigars in this lounge; not a woman in sight if you didn't count the wait staff.

Walking down the stairs, Omar could see over the crowd and into the booths that lined the far wall. There was Gerald. Omar turned to look back and there was Jim. His cover Gin is here, somewhere.

On the floor, he waded into the crowd and headed to the booth. He slid in, not looking up, avoiding eye contact. Omar often felt his own self-judgmental ethics was his worst tell. No eyes no tell was his remedy.

Within seconds a voice loud enough to hear over the crowd entered his mind.

“Your friend had too much to drink? He has a room so we can assist him to it.” So said the security man, who looked a lot like Gin, but then ... Omar looked up and did a doubletake on Gerald, who on a moment's inspection was unconscious.

“Okay. I just arrived and ...”

“I know, sir. My partner behind you will help and we will let you lead the way. Room 1721.”

“Thanks.”

In the elevator silence reined. The room 1721 was a constant on GEO's balance sheet. It was an old-style condo penthouse, used for all the usual things and a few unusual things.

In the main room Gerald was plopped down safely on the couch between two pillows. Omar asked in mime for clues from Jim and Gin.

"We'll give a report to our supervisor on this event. I can text it to you in ten minutes, if you wish."

"That was a good booth you pulled us from."

"It was all warmed up."

"Hot?"

"It probably had its own sound system using WiFi."

"Damn, and we gave that up."

"Stay or go, sir."

"Stay. To see what I can see."

"There is beer in the fridge."

"Bless you."

Beer in hand sitting in a corner slightly out of Gerald's sight, if er were to gain consciousness. Gerald pulled his smart phone open and began to write.

"Few male characters in novels do much in the way of soul searching, most just meet their fate and there lines end. There are books about some who come back from the dead, but for the most part they create havoc not peace. There are very few examples of books where the male changes for the better in time to make the

story dull. Most learn too late. Like murderers, caught and about to die for their crime.

“The novel I want to write is about the few who do change in time to make the story dull.”

Omar put his smart phone down when he saw Gerald stirring. Omar checked his watch. Ten minutes. Right on.

Jim and Gin disappeared with a nod to Omar.

Omar moved to a wooden diner table chair and placed it in what would be Gerald’s line sight when he regained consciousness which he did with a sudden jolt.

“What,” he said.

“Amazing this suite was available. You’re lucky. You were out cold and they let us in here on Sunday night rates. You still don’t look well. Drink? There’s beer, maybe some soda, OJ.”

“Stop it. Oh Ell you have grown mighty ...”

“Leave it there and it’s a compliment.”

“... and scary to me. How did you do this? Are we still in Chicago?”

“That coffee finally kicked in, I’d say.”

“Where’s the head?”

Omar pointed. “Two doors down.”

His cell rang. Reggie.

“Red hot boss.”

“I think water should cool it off.”

“Tried it.”

“Military.”

“Yes.”

“I am out for two more hours. That makes it 6 AM. Tah.”

Gerald returned to his seat, after evicting the pillows.

“My piss was green.”

“Asparagus.”

“What?”

“Makes your urine greenish.”

“Omar, we need to talk. You are right. We are not friends, nor are we likely to be. It is the trust thingee, as you said. That said, we could be on the same side — that is if we saw each other that way.”

“It’s a matter of perception.”

“Right. I help you etc., etc.”

“Let’s not talk about if and maybe. I heard you say you had stories of the MacLean aftermath that led to the guest’s death. I am working on a novel. It is a murder mystery where the prospective murderer changes his mind in time to change the outcome. I was hoping you were going to tell me one of those kind of stories.”

“Potential partners do not use date rape drugs on each other.”

“You’re still a virgin, if that’s what you are worried about.”

“That’s not funny, and you are beginning to make me mad.”

“Deep breath. Breathe in peace, breathe out anger.”

“I get you.” Gerald was never a silly fool in Omar’s estimation.

“Gerald, you have what are known as secrets. One or more of them might be mildly valuable to me, but unless there is one you think would help right now, I would prefer to work in real time. We have been in this building for about forty minutes. Anything you learned, even as you walked in the door, is too old for me to deal with. Secrets do not automatically have values that algorithms can use in calculations. So, except for a tale for a book, or just a fun conversation over lunch, we are done until next I hear from you.”

“Omar, I have secrets about you.”

“Gerald, this is the big game which you can play if you play big. We do not tear each other down—we build each other up. Secrets are things that are almost forgotten. Forgetting them makes the future happen.”

“Memory can be dangerous to one’s health?”

“More like, don’t dive unto the pool unless you can swim.”

“Not good enough for me. I want out of the big game. And, sadly, secrets are all I have to ensure retirement.”

“More like interment.”

“You would kill me?”

“I think Howard Whatshisname, the Chair of the Men’s Club Executive Committee, is more likely to.”

“I see.”

“You told me there is a connection between the two murders and I assumed his name would come up, considering his long history in corporate homicide. But then, he’s a client of yours, or was until just before you called me today.”

Gerald sat stunned.

“Quiet is good at a time like this. You called me with secrets to share and instead I have told you a few. I am not saying you owe me, because that would not be fair. I can be almost be 100% correct in guessing your secrets. I won’t recite them. Like I said, they are boring—hard to use and often deadly. So where is the value? My hero would keep secrets by forgetting them. Like you did in Iraq. Colonel Frech. Your service earned the Distinguished Service Cross for keeping the information you carried a secret long enough to mute its value to Al Qaida. You received a medal of congressional valor for your service under torture while being held a captive by AQ until you were freed in a raid on your secret prison.”

Gerald had never lost his military bearing. Once a Marine. He sat up, surprised to hear his service record incanted by Omar of all people.

“I thought you didn’t care.”

“More than you know. Did you know who those AQ were? A black op crew from NATO. Remember the questions they kept asking about a gold shipment under your command. Something about the terminal point. No?”

“You really are scaring me. No one knows that?”

“I do. And more. I know who ordered the operation and who lead the interrogation State-side. Interested?”

“My God.”

Omar was high on adrenaline and low on alcohol. Sleep deprivation was making him take chances. Enough, Omar, he has the picture.

“Gerald, can I get a limo for you?”

Ginger emerged from the hallway behind Gerald. Jim was behind her, hiding his assault weapon behind her back.

Gerald’s eyes widened.

“Probably my best option.”

Omar nodded to them all and left.

At ten to six Omar exited the elevator into Storage. Madam General and the five other directors were all present in the board room, with Reggie reviewing spread sheets that covered more than a dozen screens.

Omar moved out the stairway door and down to the console room to replay the meeting at 2x speed to catch up on the discussion. Reggie began speaking without an introduction. Robert's Rules gave way to necessity and respect.

Things change, but rarely very fast. After calculating the dozens of comparatives for four years, he and Reggie knew the changes were seldom meaningful. The directors' body language was difficult to read—everyone operating under stress from multiple sources.

Omar checked his red screen for emergencies and saw only that an investigator in the Governor's murder had died in a car accident. The Governor's body had been cremated without a chemical autopsy. The investigator had been doggedly pursuing a theory that alcohol was involved. There was a short interview with the maitre d', who had no memory of the drinking, one way or another. The story went on to say that previous witnesses have largely changed or recanted their testimony. All but one: George Harrison. Drinking aside, he knew what he saw and what he did.

Reggie came in the room and sat while he finished.

“Your turn.”

“Nice job.”

“Thank you. Coming from you, that’s large.”

“Suggestions?”

“Full court press.”

“Thank you.”

When Omar re-entered the board room they laughed at him, saying that they had watched on the security cameras as he pee’d before joining them. There was Gin with a playful sneer directing the security camera displays.

“No fair.”

“Yes fair,” Charlene Graves, the chair, said.

“Please, I have abstained from sleep tonight, as you may have as well. I want first to hear from you. From what you have seen: what’s next?”

There is always a pecking order. Some push their way to the front. Others lurk in the back. Each has their own reasoning for the place they chose to maneuver from.

“Palace politics” was the way Blanche Givens put it.

Everyone in the room that night realized that the greatest value was in silence. No one spoke out. No one gestured.

Everyone studied the faces and hands of the others in room.

There must have been many times like this in the past: This board had never had one but others, probably. Reggie was seeing it for the first time. Wow. What am I watching? The silence is awesome.

The directors had begun to rise from their chairs.

“Reconvene after breakfast, 7:30.” The chair took charge and the scene dissolved, with directors going to their residences or the bathroom or both. Reggie and Gin remained.

“Reggie Bikko.”

“Ginger Shelton. Jim is my husband.”

“Food? Drink?”

“I want to hit the gym. Pump up a little.” With that Ginger left him alone. He sat in one of the reclining comfy chairs and slept until his preset alarm woke him at 7 AM.

Gerald left the hotel at 4 AM, entered the limo and headed towards his home. He had no wife, no children, but he was in some way lucky: he was a youngest son who inherited wealth at an early age. He wanted to be head of the FBI, or any NSA-style organization. He wrote a paper in a PoliSci class espousing the concentrating of power in a few hands, hands that knew what to do and were not confused by ignorance or illegal drugs. He lived almost forty five minutes from his current location. He had time on his hands or.... Maybe, I don't. Oh Ell could be right about the Club members. Maybe I was seen leaving the hotel... but who knows? The Sun will rise before I see my bed again, but a few naps and a lot of coffee with sugar and I'll tough the day out.

The limo phone rang. Gerald didn't hear it because he was asleep, dreaming about being awake and talking on the phone to a beautiful woman.

The driver answered it. It was the driver's phone. Steve, or L'il Stevie as his girl friend called him. She was joking. He answered, hoping it was Ralene who was all he wanted to think about except that he was a trained security agent working this rendition routine. His bosses never told him whatsup but he could see it. He had picked up this dude who was messed up and was to drive him around until his supervisor gave him a destination. The backseats were in an air-tight environment, so almost every one passed out within ten minutes. There were spritz bottles at each seat. As your O2 levels drop, you heat up and a spritz is good—except for the knockout substance therein that the Sheltons' said was their brand.

The phone call was from Ginger, with a new address.

Gerald was very unconscious, and would be continuously even if he urinated or moved his bowels. The substance rendered the subject comatose with no rational control of any organ. Depending on how his day goes, he could waken and not know a thing, or he could smell very badly. Ginger said she picked a place close to their location to save him the stink. Whether they made it to a potty in time or not was a crap shoot. L'il Stevie almost puked, trying to stop laughing at his own joke.

The inboard cameras covered all the action in the limo. The rear and front cameras recorded the traffic. As Gerald fell asleep, the rear camera was tracking a white van moving in and out of traffic and staying close. The front camera showed the head lights of the commute traffic nosing toward the city.

These scenes and the driver's spy cam were being shown on the screens in the board room as Jim explained. "This is the limo's environment fore and aft and front and back inside. We have a helicopter overhead. That is on the screen number five. We have a car following the white van with new tails every other entrance to the highway. We knew they had this limo's inboard phone number: they monitored Mrs Shelton's call to the driver."

Nothing substantial changed for a few minutes and no one spoke. Jim began again.

"The destination was one we set up for this purpose. It is, literally, a trap. We built a small agent 'community' with what we call an 'unsafe house' in its midst. It looks like any four suburban neighborhood blocks, but it is not."

Four new screens came into action.

“These are the destination cameras. Others will come on later as needed. These show the four roadway approaches to the destination. We are still ten minutes out. Anyone we see on these cams is a foe.”

Nothing changed for a few minutes.

“Oops. We have an alert on the overland camera that is watching the four block area for approaches overland, not on the roads. Look at screens ten through thirteen. Four shows the backyards enclosed in our community.”

“There they are!” the General said. She pointed to number eleven where a team of four, dressed for assault, was moving through the lawn furniture and barbecues.

“We will let them enter the building. They are more valuable talking at this point. We will pick up their communications as soon as they make their next contact. Using what we learn from that contact we will search all traffic for the predecessor traffic and put the entire evening’s discussions amongst them together for countermeasures.”

The directors were glued to the scenes.

“The countermeasure we are experimenting with here is called, and please excuse the euphemism, a circle jerk. It will likely be violent, so we ask that you act accordingly. You do not have to watch the outcome live, or at all. It is a world of ogres and nerds. Nerds will win.”

There was a flash on Jim’s laptop. “Here is something interesting. The driver’s girlfriend has just called our agent driver. Here is the audio.”

“Stevie. I am afraid. Someone is in our house.”

“Be cool. You have Rodney.”

“Oh, yes. He’s on rock and roll.”

“If you speak, make your point.”

Omar entered the room and stood quietly, watching and listening like everyone else.

“Folks, this is the scene at Ralene’s house: screens sixteen through nineteen. Two men are maneuvering, attempting to find her apparently. Ralene was placed there to be sought. The trap is about to be sprung. Let’s go dark on those until you want to review the outcome.”

The screens went dark, one after another, until only the limo cams were bright.

“All intruders in both sites are now in custody, captured. The limo has a tail which will, in all likelihood, be told to disengage in a few minutes.”

Silence followed until screen one showed the ever-present white van pull back and make a right turn off the highway, followed a few seconds later by a black van.

“I am finished, Mrs Graves.”

“Thank you, Mr Shelton. Omar, I am disturbed by what we have seen. We have captives?”

“They will be released within a few hours, after a light questioning. We can listen.”

“No, thanks. Not now. Our agenda is still pending and we all need to digest this. We are in recess until 10:30.”

Gerald woke up with a wind blowing in his face. It was fully daylight. He dozed off.

When he woke again he was still sitting in the car, but the limo was stopped and the passenger door stood open. His pants were a little wet and he needed to take a dump. The car was parked next to an elevator in what looked like a parking garage. The driver paced slowly, texting on his smart phone.

“Driver, where are we?”

“Oh, Mr Frech, you are awake. You must have had a long day. You slept for almost six hours.”

“Why am I here and not home?”

“Uninvited guests at your home. Mr. Bradley thought you should be safe, so we have been going here and there, waiting for you to come back from dreamland.”

“Oh Ell was right.”

“Sorry, sir?”

“Is Mr Bradley available?”

As Gerald asked his question, the elevator door opened and Omar stepped through, hand extended to Gerald.

“Gerald. Glad to see you alive,” Omar said. “We had a long night keeping you that way. Stevie, how many people were out to cause Mr Frech harm last night?”

“We nabbed ten altogether. They are still having breakfast with Jim and Gin.”

“There is a oneway window we could use. Want to see your would-be tormentors?”

Gerald answered by shuffling across the seat and grabbing Omar’s extended hand.

“This ought to be interesting,” he said.

The Breakfast Room was on the lower garage level. Omar and Gerald entered through a heavy metal door, twenty feet from the elevator. Green was the color of everything, with different shades on each wall of a long hallway.

“Omar?”

“Here we are. Right in this door. It will be dark. There are three chairs fastened to the floor. The drill is to enter the room and halt until your eyes adjust to the light.”

“Can we talk?”

“Yes.”

They entered. Stood for a minute or two, then sat, first Omar then Gerald.

There was no one to be seen through the darkened glass until Omar touched an LED on a panel in front of him. The glass became one-way translucent. Ten people were seated on a wooden bench with ankle restraints and chest restraints controlling them. A man and a woman sat at a table in front of them. They were eating while the others watched or didn’t. Not everyone was happy.

One of the restrained men was dressed in a white full-body suit. The others were black clad except for their feet. Everyone wore throw away hospital slippers. No one wore a hat. Only the two at the table looked fresh.

“Jim, we are ready.”

“Copy that.”

“Gerald,” Jim said. “Some of these men had ID’s when we caught them. On the console in front of you there is a list with photos of faces and hands for each, starting at the left. Take a look. Tell me what you see?” Omar pointed to a monitor.

“Okay.” Gerald studied the men in shackles and the information displayed on the console. “Are we in a hurry?”

“Nope. Be certain.”

Gerald was certain.

“Omar, do you see number six. He has similar marks on the ears and hand as I do.”

“Noted.”

“Number eight is a Stratfor contractor. Number two is part of the Men’ Club security team.”

“How about the guy in white?”

“Never saw him before.”

“That’s number five. Hang on a sec.” Omar texted. Jim reacted and texted back.

Then again and again. “Got it.”

“Oh Ell. Their clothing is different. There are two groups of four and two singletons; five and six.” As Gerald talked Omar highlighted two groups of four.

“We agree, and those ticks indicate our guess.”

“Those are the ones. Stratfor, Men’s Club and two strays.”

“Clients of yours?”

“Mostly, not the solos as far as I know. A deeper examination may show us who they are. Now what?”

“We’ll send a team with you to your home. Work out what you want from there.”

“Nothing. It’s just stuff. What I need for work I keep with me or in storage facilities that I helped construct.”

“Data? Documents?”

“And curios like weapons used by others who didn’t know I collected.”

“You are fascinated with deaths, or is it assassinations?”

“I would say assassins, and the people who pay their salaries.”

“My opinion of the moment is that regardless of your desires, we find ourselves working together to keep you alive. That makes us allies in your immediate self-interest. My aide Reggie will take over at this point and work with you to get you safely settled. Reggie has a pleasant manner, but he does not trust. He will doubt your statements and press you to agree with what he knows as my opinion. That is why he works for me.”

“I hear you telling me not to mess with him.”

“Good. Corporately, we do not have to protect you. If you become a liability or a threat to our order, then you are living with the wolves and Reggie can make that happen.”

As Omar spoke, he rose from the seat in the observation room and opened the door, exiting as he finished to be replaced by Reggie.

“Come this way, sir. If you will.”

“Reggie, I am your loyal servant.”

“Don’t go too far. I am feeling a veneer of submission covering an anxiety-ridden and therefore dangerous interior. You have been drugged for almost six hours of the last twenty-four. Follow me and I will help you survive. Follow something else and you...you know.”

“Sorry Reggie. I understand. What should I do?”

“Follow and live.”

Milton Jorgensen, born August 12, 1980, 3458 E Hampton Ave Chicago, Illinois.

Robert F Martin, a resident of Alabama, escaped custody April 1, 2020.

Jim, Gin and Omar studied the monitor.

“These two are solos? No. Alone they mean nothing. They are together, it makes more sense.”

“Alone, that means we have four forces to deal with. Two of them are too small to care about.”

“That’s what I mean, Gin. ‘Alone’ means we don’t care about them. Together they must mean something.”

Omar watched the husband and wife discuss a point one thought critical and the other not. “I hate to take sides in your spat but Gin, but what is his point?”

“He wants to make something out of nothing.”

“Omar, nerds walk in where ogres fear to go.”

“Cut the crap, hon, and let’s hear your reasoning.”

“Okay. Neither of these people exist. They are persona. Let’s look at where we found them and in what condition. We captured ten people. Two at Ralene’s. Four overland at the unsafe house. One in the white van. One at Mr Frech’s house and two trying a front door assault into the unsafe house. The Ralene and front door

assault crews were one brand: Stratfor. The overland four was the Men's Club. The stray's were classic CIA. The so-called solos' communication devices were of one type. The other two groups had their tells as well, but we are taking Frech's testimony as to who they were. They could have been from the same source."

"All CIA?"

"Or eight Stratfor and two CIA."

"Is this helping?" Gin asked. "I like two groups and two solos. Jim likes two plus CIA or one plus CIA. Omar what's yours? All CIA?"

"A bigger view is to say they are all one: against us. How we combat them requires us to understand them first. Understanding means we look for distinctions, differences we can exploit."

"Full court press?"

"I want to say that we have become an enemy of all things imperial and whether we want to or not we must consider CIA as the main foe or a subsidiary of it."

"Nope, we are talking international rulers."

"Chosen by whom?"

"You want me to say CIA?"

"Who else?"

"So that is full court press? Blanche, Inc. against the world?"

Omar wanted a nap. "Let's take ten and reconvene. My brain hurts. Objections."

Silence.

“Gentlemen, we have encountered a problem. Putting it mildly, we have been found out,” Howard said. He was standing behind his desk in the board room off his office.

“Call Stratfor,” said another of the Men’s Club directors.

“They called me. This is unusual. I do not recall a similar situation before. We hired Stratfor and its consultants to clean up around the edges, so to speak. They were about their business the day before yesterday when their assets disappeared from the screen, as they put it. They have yet to surface.”

“Sounds like their problem, not ours.”

“I agree it is their problem, but I disagree that we have no concern. Someone interfered with our contractor in a way that shows us the interferers’ power—eight men removed from three operations simultaneously. Not only that, but the otherwise unwitting targets of the operation have also disappeared.”

“I see you are not troubling us with details. Perhaps more information would help us understand.”

“Gerald Frech, a consultant for Stratfor, had lost his way if you know what I mean. He was being terminated. As Stratfor was going about its business, Frech was seen departing the Marriott in a limo. His destination was his home. The driver was intercepted telephonically and told to take him to another location. Stratfor’s crew deployed to the new location and to the driver’s home. Communications were

active until, almost simultaneously, two at the driver's home and six at the purported destination were suddenly lost from sight."

"They walked into a trap. Was that Frech's work?"

"Not likely. But we all agree on the trap aspect, which makes the concern I spoke of real."

"Now what?"

Before the gentlemen could respond to the question, the desk phone rang into Howard's office line.

"Stratfor. Sir," Sang out the intercom.

"I'll take this. It may add to our discussion." Howard loved the excitement. Six men in his office deciding the future of the human race. "Yes."

Howard sat quietly listening to his private phone as it transmitted the voice of the president of Stratfor's board. The men in the room knew something amazing must be in the process of being explained to Howard. No one had seen him listen so well for so long without a rant or hanging up abruptly.

At long last he slowly placed the phone in its cradle. Silent, he waited for some inspiration, perhaps. The men were wondering.

"Howie, damn it. What was that?"

"Settle down. Let me think."

The six began to talk amongst themselves. It was too early for anyone to be in his cups, so fist fights were unlikely. Had George Harrison been in the room he would have increased the volume of the white noise music in an attempt to sooth them

before anger ensued. Howard recognized that he had better begin or he might lose control.

“Gentlemen, it is worse than I said. That was Blaze Stanley, the President of Stratfor’s board. He said they received a video via YouTube. He claimed it showed their eight agents at a beach club called...Longboards, which was clearly visible behind them at the bar. They are working on the exact location, but Hawaii is where the company does business.”

“What does that mean? Howard, these men are fourteen flying hours away from Chicago. They have been missing for thirty-five hours. A video was made of them, partying, and placed on YouTube with link to Stratfor.”

“Good summary. That is what Blaze said, and that was his exact question.”

“Let’s make a list of possibilities.”

“CIA, NSA, MI5, who else?”

“Exxon?”

“Didn’t Stratfor lose a VP in a murder at the Men’s Club? Maybe they are losing their grip on their assets.”

“Carlyle Group?”

The phone rang again. “Sir, it is Stratfor again.”

“Excuse me.”

Howard lifted the receiver. In seconds his cheeks turned red. He began burbling as if his level of anger was so great he could not find words to mask his exasperation. He slammed the receiver into its cradle.

The phone rang again. The man to his left picked up the phone and after ten seconds pressed the speaker-phone option.

“Can you hear me?” said an oddly familiar voice. “This is the President.”

“Mr. President,” said Howard. “To what do we owe the honor? We were ...”

“Howard, I don’t have all day. Your men are in a resort on the west shore of Oahu. I was asked to tell you, so that you would know this is coming from the highest authority. My private line rang two minutes ago with the news from a source I do not recognize. How the call got through, no one knows. Very disturbing.”

“Mr President?”

No reply. The connection had been terminated.

“Howard, who was the other caller?”

“Some asshole telling me the Loser in Chief was about to call.”

“He was right, Howard.”

Meredith and DD were running for President on a 24/7 schedule. Omar was along for the ride, but he generally stuck with a headset and a six screen monitors seemingly “glued” to the front of his head.

It was early morning. The media were still asleep. DD had wakened Meredith, who found Omar in the dark, fully engaged in his electronic nerd world.

DD nursed and Meredith yawned away her sleep. She reached out and stroked Omar’s fuzzy head to get his attention.

“Ah! You two are so beautiful. Thanks for getting me off that conference call. The daily chores. Can I get you anything?”

“OJ and a muffin. Maybe tea. Chai would do.”

“Back in five.”

Omar left the suite for the main deck and the galley. Meredith picked up her smart phone to check the tweets she liked to wake up to.

After a few jumps through cyberspace, she landed on a news site called Inside Washington. “The President’s Phone Hacked” was the headline. “Yesterday, while the President was napping after a hard day of fluffing his pillows, his private line rang out. The call was from a mysterious source, as yet unidentified, but an apparent hacker. Inside sources tell us the President was not pleased. Rumor has it that the shock of such a secure line being hacked bode poorly for the President’s

campaign for re-election. Why? The call reportedly involved the President in a crime: Murder. More when the dust settles.”

Omar came back with the pre-breakfast breakfast. Mother and child had fallen back to sleep. Meredith’s phone still had the news article on screen. He picked it up, read it, then replaced the phone next to her.

“Reggie’s contacts are amazing,” Omar said under his breath.

“I thought that was you.”

“Sorry. Did I wake you?”

“No. These moments are the best. I forget the rest of it and just feel DD and her growing into this world. Is there anything you want to tell me?”

“Full Court Press is now in caps. We are in the game.”

“I wish there was a heaven.”

“What?”

“Blanche would have enjoyed it most. Any more details?”

“Not for DD’s ears...or yours. Not yet. After your November vacation, only six weeks to go.”

“Five weeks and four days until the morning after. Do you have polling I don’t have?”

“The spread is widening. This latest will help your lead grow, I would say.”

A kiss on the head. A pat on the behind. Back to the electronic world. Omar gasped, then laughed out loud. “There are calls for his resignation to give the VP a

chance to beat you. Not a likely outcome. We start new commercials in twenty minutes based on your Blanche, Inc. experience. You and DD will get 75%.”

Meredith was asleep but smiling. DD was asleep and quietly peeing into her diaper. Omar was leaning back in his chair, taking deep breaths with his abdomen, letting his megalomaniacal thoughts flee his head.

“Where would I be without yoga?”

The phone rang into his headset. “Omar,” he said.

The Chicago Tribune, a small online “newspaper,” led with the longest headline in its history:

“Seven business men found in apparent group suicide pact says Chief of Police

– Not since Al Capone has there been such a large number of gangland murders
and all in the Chicago Downtown Men’s Club!

– ‘Murder’ calls the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.”

George Harrison was going down in history. He had just hung up the phone when a CPD Sargent, who was assigned to evidence preservation duty, came to stand nearby. Harrison closed his laptop.

“Sarge, that was a big Hollywood agent who wants to help me write a book about my experiences here. Says it’s worth millions.”

“You don’t know anything. You’re a servant.”

“Bet I have shot more people in this building than you have.”

“Yeah, but only O’Connor.”

“Bless his heart. Remember I shot him.”

“You missed his heart.”

“Didn’t know he had one.”

“Yuk. Yuk.”

The sergeant strolled back down the main corridor to the yellow taped door of the board room.

George followed.

“What happened in there?”

“Didn’t you look? Who found them anyway? Wasn’t it you.”

“No, not me, but I called 911.”

“You have that part down okay.”

“Dial 911. Make a cop come, sweetie.”

“Asshole. Better not let me catch your swishy ass outside.”

“Look who’s talking.”

“Well, Omar, that takes care of the Men’s Club angle. Wasn’t them. Who got them? Was it us?”

“Gin, if it wasn’t you, it wasn’t us. Big surprise. Maybe Blanche is still out there, evening the score.”

“Boss, you are one funny guy. Dear old Blanche never swatted a fly, much less slaughter a wallow of pigs.”

“You, my friend, are a hoot yourself.”

Omar and Gin sat in comfy chairs, taking a break. She was suited up and ready to go, but her targets were recently deceased.

“Tell me the story about the helicopter saving you from being thrown from their roof.”

“No, But you know the recently deceased were the men in the room plus three others.” Gin said.

“Right.”

“The two Koch brothers and a mega-rich dude by the look of him. Some kind of foreign dignitary, if you can call what they were doing dignified.”

Omar laughed. “Men have done what they were doing for millennia. Not me, but there is much in that realm I will never do, much less get caught doing. I have

often wondered what secrets men will kill to keep, and this was obviously one of them.”

“I have been around the block, but not that block. It didn’t look fun. I was not aroused even by the sight of all that wood. Funny sight.” Ginger grinned so hard she had trouble enunciating.

“Guess they do not have to wonder if they will ever live it down.” Omar said

“You make me laugh. But what is your guess? Who did them?”

“And why? Well, maybe CIA, but it looks too sloppy and unbelievable. Could have been Stratfor. What was the cause of death?”

“No one knows, or says they know. The poison has not been identified, but it must have been poison.” Ginger said.

“Crazy. Something new maybe?”

“They were asphyxiated. It is possible they were strangled softly. Their throats expanded shut. After death the throat relaxed. What makes little sense is that they did not struggle or cry out. They just died, all at once. A mystery.”

“Not a shot fired? No collateral damage?” Omar asked.

“Well, there is a chance a small op had large collateral damage. In order to kill one of them, all were killed? That has not been considered. Maybe the room was sealed and the O2 sucked out and replaced with CO2 or CO.

“Gin, funny idea. Where is Gerald?”

“He left the US this morning. before the news broke on the deaths.”

“I hope he enjoys paradise.”

The Republicans were sore losers as usual. There were constant pledges of opposition and cries for revolution rang out in the media. Suits were filed. It would be a noisy circus, but in two days the tents would fold and all the crying would go behind closed doors as resistance and vengeance were plotted.

The main room at the Men's Club was less than full. Besides the eight missing leaders, the usual habitués were absent as well. There was a general fear of the place after so many deaths: it just wasn't what it once was. George Harrison had left for the West Coast and no replacement had been made, since it was the Executive Committee of the Directors upon whom the task would fall and they were not having meetings anymore. Being dead prevented that.

No one knew how to replace the directors since the board was self-named and no actual process for replacing them all at once existed. No one had ever contemplated such an ending to its membership. No one, legally, could claim ownership of the building. It went in testate, as it were, and closed when no one could pay the bills – or would pay the bills.

None of this meant that the attempts at sabotaging President-elect Bradley's term in office were not powerful. Omar could feel the hairs on the back of his neck almost all day as he sat through transition meetings and tours of DC offices and the Whitehouse. It may be the seat of power, but the power did not belong to Meredith or anyone he knew. That much was clear, immediately.

Within months of the victory Blanche, Inc. doubled in size. Its income became enormous. GEO reformed itself after the campaign, reuniting the US version and merging most of its many subsidiaries. Omar became its CEO. Jim and he continued their successful relationship.

By the first of the year, Omar, feeling he had learned what he could about Meredith's challenge's in the near term, left DC for Chicago and GEO.

Meredith was unwilling to destroy her corporate successes to make her presidency meaningful since the White House had essentially become a relic of a now distant and misunderstood past.

"Omar. Maybe I should resign and let my very female and very competent VP run this charade. Then I would use the time to explain what Blanche, Inc. is about to do. I want to be President of Blanche, Inc. and see the next part through."

"Yes, dear."

"There is no discussion?"

"I support it wholeheartedly. You did what you came to do, as only you could do it. Is there anything else?"

"DD needs a little sister. Are you up for it?"

"I accept your appointment as husband to your growing horde of ladies. Shall I come to DC?"

"I am coming home for a few days. I have a speech to write."

The annual meeting of GEO was held as usual on January 21st, the day after Inauguration Day when there was one. Omar flew into Chicago and entered Storage at 4:30 AM to find the room buzzing with the board members plus Jim and Gin. Reggie was in the console room below.

“Omar,” the Chair, always gracious, greeted him, which was followed with hellos from everyone. “Are you ready?”

“Yes, Madam Chair, I am ready, once Reggie joins us. Give us five minutes, please.”

Mrs. Graves turned to her board mates, “Convene in five minutes, please.”

What followed was an unconscious sequence of comings and goings, of greetings and apologies that bind members together for their yearly duty to their corporate selves.

“Order, please.”

The silence that followed, the silence Reggie described as “worship,” held the room. Omar counted the seconds—it never lasted more than a minute. After thirty seconds a throat was cleared, the first hints of impatience won out against whatever prayers anyone was reciting.

“The agenda is in your packet. The first order of business is to confirm our membership and offer support to our staff.”

The process was now tried and true. Assents and support statements were made and the item concluded with relief and smiles.

“The next item is a report from our CEO Omar Bradley.” As he stood, the Chair rose as well.

“Omar. We have a surprise for you. We all want to give you hugs. We have come so far and accomplished so much. Words do not express our individual gratitude.”

One by one they walked up to him. After three hugs and well wishes he was tearing up, by the end he could not speak. He sat and as he did Jim. Gin and Reggie came up behind him and put their hands on him. A deep breath and exhalation was ordered by the Chair. The universal compliance led to laughter and another round of hugs. GEO meetings were like no others.

Omar had missed the trust and generosity and said so. “DC can never be home, not as much as Storage has become home. We have been here over three months now and it shows. When we built the rooftop gymnasium, under the glass dome, with the garden and arboretum, we thought it would be a great compliment to our self-imposed isolation. I can see everyone is using it.”

“How come we didn’t include a bar with a pool table and a poker parlor?” More laughter.

“I miss golfing. How come we don’t have a course?” Even more laughter.

“Folks, all of that exists. We are arranging access. We own the building the Men’s Club occupied. It has all that, with a miniature golf course in the basement. If I am not mistaken a tunnel is under construction which is due to be completed...ah, Jim?”

“On your birthday, partner. February twentieth.”

“We’ll have a party then. Omar, would you lead us back to the agenda please?”

“Yes, Madam Chair. The annual report is included in your packet. There is not much that is worth mentioning, given how hands-on you have been this last quarter. I would like to draw your attention to the purchase of PP Systems from bankruptcy. Page thirty-six and following.”

The pause, while various hands sought the page, lasted for a few seconds. When the sounds of paper shuffling ceased, Omar continued.

“PP Systems was not the kind of purchase we would normally engage in as it has little relationship with our other goals except to provide cell space for anyone we might detain. When we discussed this at the board meeting, when we agreed to buy out this company, it was also agreed that we would dismantle the facilities and plant forests or wildlife sanctuaries in their place. We have sought demolition bids on all but the southern Illinois facility that imprisoned Blanche Givens. At the meeting, I mentioned there was some reticence to remove that from memory. Making a shrine was mentioned, or a museum on the subjects of prison and torture.”

Omar stopped. No one spoke. Jim raised his hand. Omar nodded.

“Security does not depend on incarceration. It depends on loyalty to one another and it depends on honesty and transparency. Blanche Givens needs a memorial, but Blanche, Inc. is that for me. That building should be removed from our memory. Every time I see it I get mad.”

“Directors, do I hear a motion?”

“Yes, Madam Chair, I move that a request for bids be issued for the demolition of the aforementioned southern Illinois facility.”

“Let the record show: All hands are raised as seconds. The motion passes unanimously. I would like to hear a motion to change the name of the corporation to Blanche World. We have joked about it so long I think it exists, and the prison conversions would signify the meaning Blanche gave to our world.”

“So moved.”

“Second.”

“Objections? None. Passes.” Madame Chair took a short note, “Omar?”

“Reggie has that second motion. I will ensure the first is done asap. I share Jim’s view. We will be happier when that part of history is gone.”

“The last item on the CEO’s agenda is Full Court Press. Where are we with this, Omar?”

“This may shock you, but Meredith has a draft plan—all talk, no paper. It is based on figures we generated for December sales, but it is borne out in early January sales as well. Our citizens are growing faster than projected.”

“Gerald, how is paradise treating you?”

“Oh Ell, nice surprise. I thought you had forgotten me. You know, out of sight...”

“We thought about bringing you into the White House, but you require too much security.”

“My enemies are your enemies.”

“Still true, though I prefer foe to enemy. Someone said, ‘Love your enemies.’”

“That would be Jesus.”

“You get my drift.”

“Omar, I am surprised again. You were such a peacenik.”

“Is that still a word? Look, you are alive because we are developing a new way to conduct business. Our opposition prefers to compete through intrigue and violence. That is not our choice.”

“You don’t fight?”

“We have been in a fight all our lives, but the scars are all old now. Nothing new in ten years, yet we have won every battle.”

“No one was wounded saving me?”

“No blood. There might have been, but our teams are disciplined and dedicated to our method.”

“I do not believe you, Oh Ell. In recent months we have seen dozens of assassinations or weird deaths of corporate leaders. I like to think you did that—or I am forced to believe something bigger than you exists and I am still not safe. Which is it?”

“If we were the most powerful, you still would not be safe. Besides, Ger, you have the wrong idea about how we operate. Someday the story can be told, but not now. There is more to do.”

“What about those deaths?”

“Difficult to answer the question.”

“Who is bigger than you?”

“Do not forget the early decades of this century. We did not exist and fortunes were exploding with tens of trillions of dollars manufactured out of thin air and recorded as assets guaranteed by governments. Taxation became a means of transferring wealth from the lower income groups to the upper incomes. The people who benefited had worked hard for decades to enslave governments to wealth. We are still there.”

“Meredith is President. Won’t she change it?”

“Ah, Gerald, you of all people. Rich by inheritance. Allowed into the room to serve the winners. Do you still not know who they are?”

“Oh Ell? You sound so anarchistic. You have made a fortune, too. Not big enough for you? Is that greed I hear?”

“Ger, the world has changed and people are changing with it. Greed is not an issue. We call it hoarding. We refer to the status quo as enslavement. Scarcity is caused by hoarding. Militaries and private armies exist to protect the hoarders from the poor.”

“And your security forces? Are they not the same?”

“I called you with an invitation. You have been out of the loop for about six months, so what you know is probably worthless considering the pace of change. We are trying to figure out how to put you back into the wild.”

“Like a dolphin trained to balance balls?” Gerald said.

“Like a shark cured in captivity of a deadly virus that would have destroyed the fisheries and is now safe to roam the seas, or at least safe enough not to do more than a natural amount of harm.”

“I prefer dolphin.”

“Meaning you never did harm? Well, if true, then this won’t be hard at all.”

“Omar, I like this paradise of yours. I live here almost alone. No one has come close to kidnapping or murdering me since you saved me from whatever it was you saved me from.”

“Your ex-employers, who silence the ones they are finished with and were within minutes of finishing you.”

“Then I should stay as I am.”

“That is a luxury neither you nor I have. Time to pack. You will be back in it as soon as we can arrange a drop, probably tonight. Tomorrow we will talk in my

Chicago office. You'll be back in the penthouse for a few days, and then on the street."

"How will I survive? You scare me."

"Did you remember Ginger?"

Omar thought of Them as nameless and faceless. Jim said he was denying what had to be accepted to take the next steps. “They think of themselves as chosen to succeed. Omar, you know that. There is no rational way to deal with Them, as you put it.”

“Partner, I admire your ability to use force and to withhold force. I know what must happen next, and I know, as you do, that it has already started. My reluctance is that I have never seen death up close. I can’t recall ever seeing anyone in pain. My parents included.”

“That is why Blanche found and trained me.” Jim said. “Someone has to stand and protect. She had her reasons for hiring me that went beyond ‘protect.’ It was her End Game, and that part is over.”

“Jim, I think the board of GEO has other ideas.”

“If they do decide to listen to their constituencies, then they will have to figure out how to complete the act, because I am not beholden to the board.”

“Now I see. I must be tired. We do not disagree about our participation. But that does not mean it will not happen.”

“Okay. You sound tired. Omar, we have seen a very large game through to the end. The planning was great and we lost no one. There were no loose ends.”

“Gerald.”

“Oh, yeah. Good old Gerald. That will be fixed in the next few days?”

“That is the plan. We’re bringing him in tonight.” Omar twisted in the comfy chair to see the monitor and the time. In three hours plus he’ll be in the penthouse. We’ll have twenty-four hours to download everything he knows.”

“How do we accomplish that?”

“My view of him is as an onion. Get a nick in a layer then peel it away.”

“Sounds impossible, since he looks like a blockhead to me.”

“What can you get out of a blockhead?”

“Sawdust.”

“Jim, you are a funny guy. So it will be up to him to tell us what he thinks will be enough to help us help him. What’s his status?”

“He has been missing from Chicago for six months. His accounts remain open. None of them has seen any activity during that time. Gerald is wealthy enough, but he cannot touch any of it or even return home without sending a signal loud and clear: I’m back. Come and get me.”

“If we could give him a new identity and raid his accounts by hack. He could go to a paradise of his choice.”

“Might work. Might still be found out if they are serious about him. His trail is cold, but any activity might expand their vigilance.”

“Well, then, we have the option of just showing him the door and wishing him well.”

“What about Stratfor? They were the contractors on his near-death experience. Who hired them? Does he know?”

“Or does Reggie know? I’ll get him.” Omar leapt from his chair, opened the door and was back with Reggie before the door could close.

“He was in the hall. Reggie, we are all about Gerald. He is headed our way, due in three hours.”

“The flight plan would get him to the penthouse by limo under the wing of the esteemed Ginger Shelton. She brought some music with her that she called sing-along music.” Reggie enjoyed his little joke by himself. “You know, canary music.” Still no takers.

“Reggie, are you telling Omar and I that Gin had ideas about helping Gerald to open up to her?”

“I will make a bet on it.”

“I won’t take the other side of that bet. Not me. If Gin says it will happen, take it from me, her husband, it will happen.”

“What do I call you?”

“Mr. Frech, my name is Mrs. Shelton.”

“What do your friends call you?”

“What friends?”

“Everybody has friends.”

“You don’t.”

“Okay. Well, people call me Ger or Gerald. How about you?”

“Mrs. Shelton. There is almost never a problem being polite.”

“I think I have seen you before.”

“The morning lineup after your rescue. I was eating breakfast with my husband. You were still a little groggy after your ordeal.”

“Oh, that’s right. You cut your hair differently.”

“You could use a bit of hair care yourself. No barbers in Tortuga.”

“What?”

“Frech, you have no idea where you have been and now you do not know where you are going. Does that make you nervous? There were ten men in that room watching me eat. Do you have any idea what became of them?”

“They disappeared?”

“They did. So did you. They are staying gone. You are about to exit Pleasantville for the painful experience of Chicago.”

“Why? I don’t get it. Omar is picking on me.”

“Wrong, rich guy. I, Mrs Shelton, am picking on you. Omar said I was, to quote, drop him into Chicago, unquote. He always lets me use my imagination. I figure I can hit City Hall with your sorry ass.”

“Mrs. Shelton, I am amazed. In our call, Mr. Bradley assured me you would be responsible for my safety. Perhaps you could ask for clarification.”

Ginger smiled, patted him on the knee and flipped open her phone. A minute passed before the call went through. Ginger ignored him while she waited for a secure line.

“Yes, sir.

“We were talking about dropping him on City Hall.

“Okay.

“He was not into it.

“Is that all you need, Mr. Bradley?

“I’ll call you either way.

“Good night, sir. Thank you.”

Gerald stared at her. She sat silently.

“What did he say?”

“He said, ‘Fair Grounds would be better.’ He was worried about the homeless who sleep around the City Hall grounds.”

“What?”

“He did make an offer.”

“Anything.”

“He doubted you would do it, so I am to call when you are on your way down.”

“That’s crazy. What does he want?”

“He says you have two hours to tell your tale. Names, numbers, the whole nine yards, no BS.”

“He scares me. You are beyond scary.”

“And beyond control. I can show you how to pull a specific organ out of your gut. I practiced.”

Gerald had no idea how he became so weak in a situation he would normally control. She is beyond my control.

“How do we do this?”

“We have two hours until we are over the Fairgrounds. We will produce a document. The document will be factual. It will be sent to our fact checker. He will assess the truthiness of your assertions. It’s pass/fail. Pass is alliterative with Penthouse. Fail with Fall.”

“Clear. What does he want?”

“Here is a notebook with the questions. Work assiduously.”

“Huh?”

“Get your ass in gear. You have one hour, fifty-five minutes.”

“Well, Reggie, what did she send us?”

“Cool stuff. There’s the internal Stratfor structure—ownership, clients—though some of this is old. There are dates with simultaneous events corresponding to those dates that seem to implicate several, more than several, in felonious activity. There is mention of torture, more than a few times, some with names of the victims. More stuff that will take time to understand, maybe subjects for future talks.”

“Aren’t you going to say I told you so?” Jim would have bet Gin would get it all.

“You guys are amazing to me. I don’t feel I can count coup on you. Ginger is most amazing and predictably so. Good night. I need dreaming to balance life.” Reggie headed for his flop in the console room.

Omar studied the information Gin had passed on. Jim sat back in the comfy chair and closed his eyes.

“Omar, are we talking to Gerald tonight?”

“He needs a friend, some place to catch his balance, but he also is required to get to the heart of it fast. Something is bothering me about him. Could he be a set-up, some kind of virus that is inserted into us? Catch my drift?”

“The original line is ‘Do you get my meaning, do you catch my drift.’ The same old, same old. Just like love. Go slowly. Always be packed.”

“Jim, you are cynical. Never having had a broken heart, or even a breakup, I have nothing to go on that wasn’t in a movie.”

“Gerald has a special something. I saw the scars and heard the story. It would be good if we could understand his commitment to whatever. Does he know who hurt him?”

“I told him it wasn’t us, just before we sprang the trap.”

Reggie had been explaining to the board the likely forces that would be set loose when the Full Court Press was set loose. The timing was important, he had argued. Blanche, Inc.'s board elections were two weeks away, preparations were in the late stages.

“Our analysis is clear. The new board members will be the investors and odds are they will be the actors to signal the Full Court Press. The President has an array of options to draw attention to the Full Court Press. Many of those options are exciting to consider, and I hoped we could begin that conversation today when she is here. She may have other agenda items.”

Mrs. Graves was visibly impressed with Reggie. “Thank you, Mr Bikko.”

The door from above opened and DD and her mother and father stepped from the elevator. Graves attempted order and gave up, joining the reunion.

DD and her small entourage disappeared into the stairs leading to the residences. Meredith promised to come back within minutes, during which time the board recomposed itself and returned to the agenda.

Chair Charlene Graves stood at the head of the table. The six-person board had never been expanded to replace its founder, Blanche Givens. The empty chair was intended for the board's newest member.

“We have reached the item New Board Member – Selection. This is a bit tricky, as we have noted in our prior meetings. It is obvious that bringing a new person

through security to stay with us here will be difficult. We have adapted to life underground. The staff keeps us happy, but we have spent as long down here as Blanche spent in her dungeon. The plan that keeps us here is coming to an end, yet adding a new mind to ours means, perhaps, years of catching up. There are few people who can fit right in, and we know them all. They are here today.”

Silence followed Mrs. Graves speech.

Vice-chair Madame General Monique Duvalier rose as Mrs. Graves sat. “My friends, I rise to confirm the analysis of our chair. The list we have offered ourselves is short. If we stay with only women on the board, then the list has only two names. If we pick a man or a woman then our list is expanded by three to a total of five. Ginger, Jim, Reggie and Omar all have distinct and necessary roles. Meredith is President of the United States which doesn’t leave her much time to be here.”

As Monique spoke, Meredith re-entered the room and stood by the door.

Ravi rose as Monique sat. “Meredith has come to the meeting. Madam President may I summarize our situation for you?”

“Please.” The ritual of greeting an arriving director in the midst of a meeting was older than GEO. Meredith, the Ex-CEO, was greeted in this way as a matter of respect for the person, rather than respect for the role she played. “I extend my apologies for being tardy.”

“Madame Chair,” Ravi began, “We have an empty chair at our table and we are considering who to invite to sit with us and in what capacity. A sitting President of the United States has not been known to sit on any boards of any kind. In spite of

that, it appears this body would extend an invitation to Meredith to take the empty chair if it pleases her.”

“Thank you, Madame Secretary. Your summary is appreciated. Any suggested amendments. Is there a motion?”

With this Meredith became the President of GEO.

In the middle of Saturday afternoon, Jim and Omar sat in the only bar they had secure access to, and that was the old Men's Club bar. The TV's were on. The Lions were defeating the Bears in a rerun of last season's highlight game: Twelve touchdowns, nine field goals and a safety settled in the last second of the first overtime when a team fumble led to a ninety-nine-yard return and a tackle on the first yard line. A face mask penalty lead to an 'extra point' field goal and a Lion win.

"As many times as I've tried to see what the ref said he saw, I don't see it. When that YouTube vid showed the ref was in on a fix, then I see what the ref saw." Jim had said this once before, but Omar had not been there. "Too many dollars changed hands to change the outcome. He was innocent because to say otherwise is to do the impossible and make the money right. That is a short version of the ethics we are dealing with."

"Same with the so-called crash of 2008. Biggest theft in history and no one went to jail. My favorite line wasn't 'too big to fail' but that the theft was 'too big to unwind.'" Omar laughed.

"Free Market Capitalism at work. Fraud wins." Jim said.

"No one big was injured. Anyone who would have fought the theft was made a beneficiary of it. People kept thinking billions when the theft was over \$100 trillion, split in less than two hundred ways, except for the last few hundred billion which was the cost of doing business," Omar said. "Ironic. Theft is business."

“There were a few deaths that looked like assassinations. As far as we know no one was tortured.”

“Strange positive statement. They stole trillions but no one was tortured. The outcome was millions more into poverty and prisons filled with low level criminals. Thousands met an early death, hundreds of thousands led a life of crime to die in prison and a younger generation imbued with hopelessness.”

“These are Them. Right.”

“That’s my view.” Omar finished his beer and quietly set the glass onto the bar. “Gotta go. Gerald has been stewing all night. Today is his singing debut. Ginger softened him up on his flight in with her charm and now it is my turn to play audience to my old friend. Wish me luck.”

Jim raised his glass. “Luck.”

“Look, I am working on a thesis I call ‘The Economics of Corruption in Politics.’ There are names we know, like ex-Congressmen Eric Cantor and Paul Ryan; corporate lobbyist and Americans for Tax Reform head Grover Norquist; ex-Chase CEO Jamie Dimon; Wells Fargo CEO John Stumpf; David and Charles Koch; Walmart CEO Mike Duke’; Senators Mitch McConnell and Newt Gingrich; Wall Street titan and Fix-the-Debt funder Pete Peterson; one-time Senator Rand Paul; sleazy corporate front man Rick Berman; the deceased Fox News president Roger Ailes; and his also deceased boss, media mogul Rupert Murdoch; the late Radio reactionary Rush Limbaugh; casino billionaire benefactor Sheldon Adelson; Senator Ted Cruz; Chamber of Commerce CEO Tom Donohue; NRA hit-man Wayne LaPierre. Research is amazing. These are names and faces that go with the concept. What am I missing?”

“Omar, you sound like research. These are people from ten, twenty years ago. Facts are different. Those names and faces are functionary, not directional, as in gives the nod that sets something in motion. Those people, the directional, are all dead. The current crowd follows the book that got them where they are. Same shit, different day. Whoever terminated those...what...fourteen men at the Men’s Club—one from every continent...did a good deed in my book.”

“Fill me in. Who were the victims?”

“With one exception, they had given the order to torture. The exception had risen to a place from which the order to torture was a constant, unspoken thing. If I were

to guess who did this, I would say a small cabal of torture victims who set their sights high and hit some bulls' eyes."

"Interesting. You are saying the dead were not the top of the food chain?"

"That is what you are after, Omar? Who has the trillions? Who has the most to lose if there is democracy and peace? If there was justice for torture victims?"

"For instance?"

"Blanche and GEO are working that side of the street."

"Is that a question?"

"No. I might be wrong, but I don't guess so. Knowing you and seeing you go. I guess it is you."

Omar had been sitting on the penthouse's living room couch. When Gerald stopped talking, Omar rose to walk to the windows overlooking the crystal clear view of the bay that their height and the weather made possible.

"Oh Ell, listen. You said something that meant something to me six months ago. I had six months to think about it, sitting in seclusion."

"Oh, my god." Just like Blanche, only different.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"No, something. Tell me later. Let me continue. You said you wanted to write a novel, no matter how boring, about a man that stopped before he killed, and you hoped the story was one I would tell you."

“Yes.”

“I cannot stop myself from ever having killed. But I can put that in the past and not kill again, before I might have.”

“Ger, now you are scaring me.”

“I should. I was sent to kill you.”

Ginger is a foot shorter than Gerald Frech. He was trained by the military. She was trained by her parents, both trained assassins, very successful and both free and alive. Ginger had imagined that Gerald would make his move without talking about it, so she was ready for any motion of his body. He talked about his intention without moving a muscle. Ginger remained perfectly still not five feet behind him.

Gerald had been skin searched, scanned and patted three times to get from paradise to penthouse. A person with Gerald’s history can never be said to be without weapons.

“Thank you, Mrs. Shelton, for not laying a finger on me.” Gerald said.

“Gerald, as an old roomie I must say that I have never found you as interesting as you are now. You were sent to kill me and decided not to, sensing a trained assassin in your blind spot. Maybe I never figured out who you were.”

“Same for me.”

“Ginger, please join us. Gerald is within range for trust.”

Ginger walked into Gerald’s view. A look passed between them, a professional kind of look. It didn’t say truce, it just acknowledged the presence of another similar being in the room.

“Gerald, tell us why we are here.”

“This may take some time to tell in detail, but the short form is that you have been allowed to grow, and now it is time for you to go. Just business, as they say.”

“You are the messenger.” Omar asked.

“Yes, I was supposed to speak the way you did to the torturers, by terminating you.”

“I see. Murder is freedom of speech?”

“If you say so.”

“Okay Gerald. Games are being played. I am playing one and you are playing one. I suppose I would like to know if we are in the same ballpark so to speak?”

“I have some information that will help you and help me. I can only bargain for it with you. What is it worth to you? There are other questions, but it ends with Will you kill me, because I did not kill you?”

“Gerald, I do not like your questions.”

“Omar, there is no threat in me. Talk to me. Tell me something that will make this work for both of us.”

“You are no longer who you once were.”

“Blanche, Inc.’s annual meeting is called to order. Welcome to Blanche World. As your current chairperson, I welcome the millions who are attending in this conference center in Chicago, Illinois, or in the two hundred fifty—plus conference centers around the world. I also welcome our virtual attendees, which will number in the hundreds of millions world-wide. Last year we became the third largest country by virtue of citizenship. When we have finished our meeting this weekend, we may be the largest country on the earth.”

The auditorium had the big screen above the elevated stage. The directors sat in the same style of bleacher seating as always, with each of the one hundred twenty directors sitting in their own comfortable seat with a monitor on a small desk. All the directors were in attendance in Chicago.

“Our rules of operation have been amended because of the passing of our founder Blanche Givens. Until her passing, she had been the only chairperson Blanche, Inc, had known. I was elevated to chair by necessity, but only temporarily—until a new annual meeting, this annual meeting, would bring us together to vote for a new chairperson to replace Mrs. Givens.”

The screen showed videos and stills of Blanche Givens’ life, with the animated scenes of her arrest and videos of her first day of freedom with the now President of the United States leading her through a door in the Southern Illinois Facility of PP Systems. Blanche waved at the crowd that had gathered to help Meredith

Bradley welcome her back to freedom. The last scene showed her cutting the ribbon for the flagship store in Chicago.

“Forty director seats are up for election. This year the investors’ seats are decided. Last year was the election of the staff representatives and next year it will be the clients who will provide the candidates. This year the investors selected the candidates. We will all listen to the forty-seven candidates and vote aye or nay following each presentation. As always, every candidate qualifies and would make an excellent director. As Blanche Givens was fond of saying, vote often but only once for each director that speaks for you. The forty top vote-getters will sit in the seats behind this podium for the next six meetings.”

The screen broke into twenty-five smaller screens, each showing a different conference center. Every minute or so the small screens switched to a different center until all of the three hundred scenes had been shown and then they began again.

“Before we elect new directors, we have a first for Blanche. The President of the United States is here and she has a message for us. If it pleases the directors, I will bring to the podium the one-time CEO of Blanche, Inc., Meredith Bradley. Madame President ...”

The stage was designed to provide safety to the President. She climbed up out of a staircase that was directly behind the podium. A bulletproof shield rose in front of the podium. She walked the two steps to the podium, waving at the cheering audience and hugging Sanjay Gupta, the temporary Chair.

When the cheering diminished, she began to talk and within seconds she was the only source of sound.

“Thank you for your generous welcome. We do not have much time so I will get directly to the point. There are a few less than three hundred countries on earth with independent governments. Of those governments, some seventy-nine are known to practice torture and illegal detentions. Two-thirds of those countries joined the United States during the early part of this century in the practice of rendition and torture. The first initiative on the agenda today directs Blanche, Inc., with the aid of its sister corporation GEO, to undertake a new program to influence each of those countries to renounce detentions and torture, and to denounce those who order crimes against humanity. These orders come from dictators, members of the military, political circles and from at least one hundred thirty-seven international corporations.

“Behind me, on the screen, you see the exact wording of the initiative. The details of our campaign are necessarily vague and unspecific. We expect these governments to resist, but as we will see, the citizens of Blanche World supporting this initiative are majorities in all seventy-nine countries. Your vote today will be considered the result of democracy in action, and I, as President of the United States, will order the assets of our nation to enforce, if necessary, the results of the voting on this initiative.”

The screen showed scenes from the conference centers in the seventy-nine countries. Three crawls listed the countries and tabulated the votes. There was an urgency in those crawls as the voting proceeded.

“We have been voting electronically for ten minutes now and no new votes have been registered for the last two minutes. I call the voting on initiative number one to be concluded. Let’s examine the result. The initiative passed in every country in

the world. In the seventy-nine countries, including the United States, three to one majorities prevailed.

“Now to the second initiative. Many of my predecessors in the White House used the power of the US military to enforce policies that were harmful to many if not all of the seventy-nine countries that used torture and illegal detention. The citizens of Blanche World include majorities in all of those countries. All of them yearn for economic democracy.”

Omar watched from Storage. In three months, Meredith had grown into the Presidency, and now she was going to spin reality for everyone to see. Gerald had made a big difference in how GEO organized itself. He had taught them how They organized Themselves.

The General sat with him in the comfy chairs in the console room.

“That was history being made, Omar. We are lucky to be able to see this.” Monique said.

Omar nodded slowly. “We are lucky. Full Court Press here we come.”

Meredith was describing the way many nations were dying and only the militaries remained, but as corporate private armies. The citizens of these nations had no means to act to benefit themselves, and that was why Blanche, Inc. was formed, to recreate citizenship.

“Today, as President of the United States, I have issued Executive Order number 14,376, entitled ‘Termination of relations with torturing nations.’ It is what it sounds like. The second initiative for Blanche World responds to this order and in essence says, ‘We are Blanche World, a democratically governed international corporation comprised of seventy-five percent majorities in the seventy-nine

torturing nations' populations. We have trained staff, native to each of the nation-states involved, ready to organize new local governments based upon our experience in each of these countries. Together we can bring peace to the tortured part of the world.'

“The initiative is to peacefully eliminate all seventy-nine governments, including the United States government, to the extent necessary to remove the structure supporting torture. This will be a partnership of a group of nations and a modern democratically run corporation whose investors, staff and customers are the citizens and whose market role is peaceful.”

The President turned to look at the screens behind her, they were switching quickly from one meeting to another.

“It is time to vote.”

Meredith shrank away from the podium. Her role as presenter and President would give way to others to tally the vote. She descended the stairs into the secure world of Special Service controlled territory and then into GEO's hyperspace as the tunnels were called.

As she walked along the corridors back to Storage, DD was handed to her for nursing. These were the moments she cherished. There was silence, and for fifteen minutes they were together again. .

“Mrs President.” Reggie stood at the door. “The Directors have a question.”

“Ten minutes, Reggie.”

“Aah?”

“Five minutes.”

Reggie waited at the door.

“MP, just bring her along.”

“You’ve never been a mother.”

“Or a woman, or President.”

“What do they want?”

“They want to make you Chairman of the Board.”

“Tell them yes, but give me ten minutes.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“So wait. Wait. You are telling me that the President of the United States is now the Chairman of the Board of a corporation which is backed by the US military to take over the governments of dozens of countries? What countries?”

“You are correct. The list is on your screen. Tab fourteen. Every one of these is in our yard.”

“What is the point? We will resist this theft of our rights.”

“With what? These countries, their armed forces, are under new commands. Some are resisting. We have already recommended patience be practiced. The resistance will be short lived. How is this possibly successful?”

“The US is no longer supporting us. We must do for ourselves and that is not what we are used to doing.”

“Why?”

“Torture. The new president does not want torture to be used, and is amending the US behavior and attempting to rectify the harm done.”

“How?”

“Blanche, Inc.”

“The virtual mall? What are they going to do? Provide face tissue?”

“There is quite a file on Blanche. Bradley was its CEO and, breaking with tradition, is now Chair. Then, there is GEO and rumors from consultant firms about what it is, which no one really knows. Plus, a cleanup was ordered for the POTUS’ husband, but it has encountered extraordinary difficulties.”

“What?”

“We are having trouble finding Mr. Bradley. We sent the cleaner in with a great cover and the cleaner disappeared. We sought to eliminate the cleaner and lost eight people. You know what happened in Chicago?”

“It sounds like we are being out flanked. Someone has more game on than we have. Chicago? I don’t want to hear about more of the same.”

“Laurence, if I may, this is new. What we are seeing. They anticipate our advances and beat us at our game.”

“Crush them.”

“Leadership is needed.”

“Negotiate and then crush them.”

“I think we need a new playbook.”

“Nonsense. Go with what got you here.”

“Listen to the President this morning?”

“What did I miss?”

“She mentioned you by name and described you as one of the thirty-five trillionaires. She went on a bit about how you managed to amass such a fortune in one lifetime.”

“Am I getting a medal for success?”

“Sounded more like she measured you for a gallows.”

“Get Bryce Melton, Stratfor. Let’s have a sit-down with what’s his name, somebody Prince with his mercenary company Xe or whatever he calls it now.”

“Melton. Prince is very dead, but his assets are part of our security force. We have 35,000 men under arms with all the hardware of a modern military.”

“Okay. Melton in a conference call.”

“Okay.”

The console room seated seven people comfortably. Today there were ten. The board members sat with Reggie at his monitor. Omar stood behind the board members. Meredith and Jim stood next to Omar.

“Guy’s name is Lary Fishburn. His firm is Global Controls. No one outside this room had seen that name until Meredith mentioned it in her address this morning. Reggie caught it on a corporate ownership site while looking for a poster boy for our campaigns. We had an insider describe the trillionaires for us, and we have found most of them. ‘The Plutocrats’ is our new descriptive term.” Omar said.

Omar and Meredith were holding hands. Jim looked uncomfortable, being taller than anyone in the room.

“Fishburn is the big guy in the Plutocrat Club.” Jim said. “His company dominates most of the seventy-nine countries and has for some time. We have documented direct orders to torture that emanated from his office—from his phone and email. Reggie what are we going to see and hear?”

“Fishburn and an executive from Stratfor named Melton, plus Fishburn’s minor partner, a German named Hans Schulte, are conferencing on what they expect to be a secure line. I could reassure them that it is secure: no one but us was listening.” A low chuckle came from a director. “We recorded their conversation, but in the interest of time we’ll summarize. They are now about twenty-five minutes in. Monitor one has a synopsis of their conversation thus far.”

Monitor one held a list by time interval, followed by a one or two sentence summary.

As people read to catch the drift of the meeting, occasional gasps rose from them.

Reggie began again. “As you can see, the meeting begins with Schlute and Melton discussing the President’s speech and what the implications of ‘arrest,’ ‘confiscate’ and ‘justice’ meant in context. Melton is an attorney as well as a mercenary.

Schlute knows where Fishburn and Global draw the line. Melton thought he made the rules. Their posturing was uncomfortable and the conversation had become impassioned and combative. Then Fishburn joined and interrupted the heated exchanges.”

“Shut the fuck up. No one cares what anybody thinks about this. All I want is an end to this BS and I feel you two have got nothing for me.”

Melton was interrupted by Schlute. Melton raised his voice and Schlute yielded. “Get real. On our side we have each other. We have private armies and consultants. We used to have seventy-nine countries and seventy-nine armies, one of them the biggest in the world. Not anymore. Bradley has frozen us out. She has threatened to arrest us or you at least.”

“What the hell you going to do for us, Bryce?”

“Negotiate your surrender.”

“You are fired.” The phone call from Scotland was terminated.

“Schlute, you still there?”

“Bryce, I think you angered him.”

“He came that way.”

“What do we do?”

“Do what Bradley and the rest must be doing: Hide. Wait. Figure out what our foes are planning and counterattack.”

“Fishburn and I are on the Interpol Red List.”

“Fishburn is beyond arrest, in his castle in Scotland.”

“I’ll stay here in New York in the corporate condominium. Maybe I can still leave the country—but all of the places I felt safe yesterday may not be safe today.”

“We have agents everywhere, but if our assets are confiscated or merged into Blanche, Inc., then we have to learn a new way to dominate.

Remember, we have three dozen of these guys like Fishburn with their families in similar circumstances. All of them have their hide-holes with provisions for a major attack. But even if we add everyone’s security forces together, we can only protect, not attack.”

“Remember Saddam Hussein trapped in a basement, pulled out crying and thrown into a prison cell to be hung in public? I have no plan to hide and wait. Hang on a sec.” Schlute turned his attention from his monitor and Melton’s image to a landline phone at the corner of his desk.

“Yes... Who?...I am not here.” In a panic, Schulte turned back to his monitor. “Bryce, they are on their way up the elevator.”

“Who?”

“Treasury agents, according to the management.”

“Well, Hans, I guess I’ll see you on TV.” As Melton finished his sentence Schlute watched as chaos broke out in the background of Melton’s office. Melton was arrested at the same moment that the condominium door yielded to the Treasury agents battering ram.

Reggie lowered the volume on the two scenes and let the others in the console room understand that this was being repeated in cities across the globe. Other monitors began showing hand-held cam shots of a number of arrests.

“Will we get Fishburn?” Asked Monique.

From the back of the room Omar said, “He has something we want. We are waiting for him to make a move toward its location. We have completely interrupted his security force’s ability to relocate, so they cannot, at least, reinforce. He will know this within the next hour and then, we hope, he will attempt to move himself towards the cache of data and documents he has collected. Jim, who is leading the Scotland team?”

“Ginger is within sight of Fishburn’s residence, where his last transmissions locate him.” Jim said. “Monitor twelve shows the infrared of his castle and we have a plus sign over a heat source we believe is his.”

“Jim, have there been deaths or injuries?” Ravi asked.

“There have been some gun battles in various places, which we can turn our attention to if you wish. Mercenaries usually surrender when surrounded and before being attacked. Loyalty can be bought, but not the passion of a warrior. Our plan uses overwhelming numbers and police tactics, including negotiations, before any actual force is used if ever.”

Omar turned to Meredith, “Give us your view MP.”

“Our military did as they were ordered to do. The extraction of our torture-related units vastly improved the responsiveness of the generals. Jim’s suggestions about who to approach helped get that going.”

“Madame President, I was passing on the insider’s advice. I am not surprised, but I am pleased the info was good.” Jim said.

“As the chair of Blanche, Inc. I can say that our customer constituencies in the seventy-nine countries are and will be essential. I suggest that we take this time to monitor the countries in our individual constituencies. As President of GEO I hope we can have updates from Reggie and others as needed, and let’s continue with the agenda for an after meal call to order for the GEO board.”

With that the room began to empty into the hall. Reggie stayed behind as Omar had asked him to do. “Reggie, show me what you hid from us.”

“Nothing really. We could look at some of the less successful country scenes. We have new governments in fifty, no, fifty-one of the countries. No one fired a shot. In the remaining twenty-eight countries there are problems, and on a scale of one to ten Saudi Arabia is the worst. It’s the ‘woman’ problem that Blanche and Meredith have trouble overcoming. The Saudi family is one or more of the Plutocrats, and they are going to be difficult to bring to justice publicly. China should have been a problem, but they have grown warm to Blanche, Inc. They might have sensed our intentions. India is its own problem and will be difficult culturally until they understand that this is not a new colonial era or an empire. Climate is likely to have the final say in India.”

“The stock markets seem to be pointing out the worst corporate citizens with huge drops in Fortune 500 companies.” Omar didn’t really care about what the markets

would do, except for the phenomena of identifying the dirty ones. “I look forward to reviewing today’s sell-off. Can you get me the buy side of these contracts?”

Reggie tapped his keyboard, “Your lips to god’s ear.”

“Thanks.”

Fishburn was not answering his phone. One of his dark consultants told him he was hackable, therefore had been hacked. That pissed him off almost enough not to speak or to write at all. Schlute was gone from his apartment. No one knew anything.

“Damn. No one left to talk to,” he said to nobody.

“Ahem.”

Fishburn spun about to see a small, thirty-ish woman dressed in black leather holding a pair of cuffs and an anal vibrator.

“You look familiar,” he said.

“You are looking at my breasts.”

“No. I know you.”

“We had fun before. This will help you take a load off.”

“Who sent you?”

“I have a note from Hans to confine you and see to your known need for submission.”

“I don’t have time.”

“That’s not what he said.”

“Ah, let me go to the bath for a moment and maybe I will feel better.”

“I have substances you enjoy.”

“One minute. This is better than anything I was going to do today.”

Ginger laid out her camera equipment where he would not see it. She unlocked her cuffs and attached them to an exercise unit Fishburn liked to look at to increase confidence in his future. She was ready when he emerged.

“Well, my dear, what do you have in mind for me?” he asked.

“I do not want this to be recorded. The sadness of it is overwhelming.” Omar stopped the streaming of the scene from Ginger’s cameras.

“Omar, they do what they do because they feel what they feel. This is not cruel to Fishburn, it is pleasure.” Meredith grasped his hand. They had awakened by design to see what Jim said would be “very interesting.”

“She might kill him.”

Meredith sat and stared at her husband for a few seconds. “He has already had three climaxes.”

“He won’t take a normal shit for the rest of his life.”

“He was born for this moment.”

“MP you have changed.”

“Oh Ell. Life is trite, ah, short.”

“Or something.”

“Don’t hate me, do you, almost father of two.”

“You’re pregnant?”

“Check your schedule. Tonight is the night.”

“How many times can I climax?”

“I am the President of the United States, two large corporations and control seventy-eight other countries. You will do as I say, for as long as I say to do it. Clear?”

“Yes, master.”

“Good boy. Let’s get to work.”

Reggie sensed something tickling him. A small LED went on, followed by a buzz that lasted four seconds—enough to wake the dead.

“Yikes. We have been breached.” He pressed the keys and the alarms rang at every station in the world. Called the General Alarm it triggered full alerts on all activities of GEO and Blanche.

The drill was simple: Sow confusion. Draw the foe away and identify them. Counterintelligence and countermeasures. All standard playbook except for the available countermeasures.

Security was a branch of GEO that specialized in rewriting the playbook. Jim and Gin worked at trickery. “Control the space you are in,” Jim said. “People are trying to get to us. Create places they cannot go and they will attempt to get there.”

“How about this, Jim? We are communicating as if we are from the rural Midwest, from sites without people. We have watched several helicopters survey our primary remote site. We imagined they will try digital invasion having found nothing to kill. We have planned for this eventuality by creating a digital portal for invaders that will lead them to yet another remote site and in the process an alternate virtual space that we control. The plan is set. The software loaded. We are hearing them knocking...shall we let them in?”

“Omar, Meredith? Charlene?”

“Yes.”

“Yes.”

“Yes.”

“Done.”

Reggie opened the gates and a schematic on monitor six, showing the infrastructure of the computers’ networks, programs and memory storage folders began to change color as the invasion got underway. Initially, there were significant patches of red that faded as blue patches grew elsewhere.

“What we are seeing is the invader being led to the place we prepared. The invader will in turn be invaded and returned to sender.”

“Do we know who sent the invader?”

“Them,” Jim said. “AKA Stratfor and the Plutocrats.”

“Can you tell what they are after?”

“The invaders are miners sent to dig around. Considering the context of Full Court Press, we are exposed, therefore high on the radar and fair game. Thus, our plan to trap and infect the invaders.”

The schematic was all blue again. A trail had been formed—the first part created by the invader as it sought to understand its “surroundings.” The invader was now happily capturing the “data” while it became entrapped by the destination at the end of its trail.

“Is the invader being led by a conscious being?”

“It is. It has started search programs and altered the terms in a non-computer way. They are searching for addresses of key personnel. They are not after money. They

are after corporate documents. They are looking for the directors' identities and locations. Looks like they are way behind and trying to catch up. They might not have been paying attention. Now we have them."

"What weapons do they control? Drones?"

"Drones. That is why we are in Storage. We are tracing their networks now, looking for the destination of the data they are eating. We assume that targeting programs will launch, and once one is targeting, we will take control of whatever part of their weapon systems they show us. We are seeing that kind of activity now. They are launching on our primary remote site. The codes they are using we provided. We have assisted them by altering the targeting to match the launch site. A dangerous boomerang on its way home. Boom. We have all their drones now. We have sent a five-minute warning."

"Reggie, what is our goal here?"

"Reduction of threat. We all want to go home."

"The warning is of deadly force?"

"All of the drones' computer-controlled payloads will detonate in four-plus minutes. These payloads have a limited effect and will destroy the drone and its launch station."

"Why don't they just launch them?"

"They can't. We control the launch codes and have reset the passwords."

As the four minutes passed a monitor began reporting the sites under control. Hundreds of identifying marks began to show up in the US, and then other

continents, until thousands of sites were identified. As the countdown was completed a new identifier appeared.

“Those are the successes. We expect to get them all. They were not well guarded. We have some ground truthing going on. Helicopters and our own drones are flying to give visuals. Looks good.”

“Reggie, I worry about deaths.”

“Five minutes is enough to leave the scene, but not enough to counter control their assets. More time reduces our success. Were there deaths? We’ll know as we gather ground info.”

“We have to stop killing.”

“We have to protect.”

There simply are no ways to exit a situation without adequate transportation: the Moon, for instance.

Two environmental pods were established on the Moon by private ventures during the early 2020s. Fully manned, there would have been several hundred miners working in the stark landscape. The inability of the private sector to supply these bases reduced the moon staff to a half dozen: three men and three women, no more than prisoners of the corporations that brought them there with promises of wealth.

Everyone on the Moon was named Smith for simplicity. Everyone's first name was a number and a letter—F or M for female or male. The six residents renamed themselves. There was little else to do. When they realized the mining corporations might not retrieve them, they made a pact to recreate themselves and to find a way off, no matter what it took.

Rob, Scott and Jack wedded Heather, Holly and Kelsey. They had thought about monogamy, but decided they were ill suited to it and would be better off acknowledging their dependence on each other.

Rob, Scott and Jack built rockets in one of the pods called the Boys' Club.

Heather, Holly and Kelsey worked the earth's social networks on Earth from the Lady's Club.

The Clubs were miles apart, beyond walking distance. They had no ground transportation. The planned roads connecting the pods never were built. They had a plan for that, if they could get ground transportation.

By then, Omar was a friend of the Smiths.

The Lady's Club found Blanche, Inc. Using every penny they could find, they sought 1000 shares: the minimum to qualify for the investor directors' election. Shares were scarce and it took months to reach their goal. On the last day to qualify, a block of 500 shares came to them and they qualified for the election.

In the March 2029, Heather Smith became the first director from the Moon. On the Fourth of July, they declared themselves a new nation: The Smiths.

They also began broadcasting directly to Earth. The early messages were sent through Twitter feeds. They described a civil war for control of a ballistic missile.

That same day, a small consulting group based in Singapore discovered that the Moon bases were hotbeds of anarchy. For two months the ransom notes from space clogged the corporate media as nations prepared "to launch a series of satellites and space expeditions to recapture the Moon for civilization."

No corporation or group of corporations or group of nations challenged the US and Blanche, Inc. for military might. President Meredith Bradley asked her Congress to disband major portions of the US military. There would be repercussions some said. The Seventy-nine Nations disbanded their militaries. Arms were gathered and destroyed.

“Madam President, how can we trust our security to non-violence?” Susan Niles of the Guardian asked during a news conference at the White House.

“Ms. Niles, thank you for asking. The future is insecure, but the cause of the insecurity cannot be bombed or tortured into surrender. To secure our future requires us to produce peace instead of conflict. Unlike past periods of history, ideology and violence will not help us.”

“Are you saying nature is the culprit?”

“Nature is a process humanity has disturbed, it has changed in a way that threatens our survival as a species. There are two things we can do. The first is to unwind the relationships that support CO2 production. The second is to establish a new set of relationships. The Seventy-nine Nations will assist humanity during the next stage of its history.”

“As President of the United States, what are you going to do?”

“Between now and Thanksgiving, I will travel to the seventy-eight other capital cities of the nations the US considered our closest allies—the nations that tortured.

On Thanksgiving I will deliver a final speech at a Joint Session of Congress. I have chosen to speak many times because the aspirations we share are community values, and there are many communities with their own aspirations.”

There were seventy-nine different speeches, each one a portrait of communities designed by the citizens of Blanche World. At the end of her seventy-ninth speech, given from the Congress in Joint Session, Meredith Bradley resigned her office.

As she stood at the podium, acknowledging the audiences appreciation, Omar and Jim watched their beloved companion while sitting in the comfy chairs. DD took an afternoon nap on her daddy’s chest.

“Jim, it is not over. We have a few more steps. Where are we in your view?”

“Rest and we die. Our foe is at our heels or soon will be. The last to quit are the strongest and will win.”

“Too melodramatic for me. I like to think that the untried is the true way,” Omar said.

“Saturday morning kids’ stories.”

“What?”

“Look. You want to win. To win you must play. Am I missing something?”

“It is about rules. Rules determine a game. To win a game one must play by the rules. Bollocks” Omar stirred the air with his right hand as if the thought smelled.

“Bollocks? What the hell does that mean?”

“Jim, you are kidding?”

“Sounds like BS for the faint hearted.”

DD stirred and Omar rose to take her to the residence for a clean diaper and a new outfit. “Mommy will be here in two hours. You have to smell nice for her. A bath?”

Jim watched the two of them, she crying, he cooing. He had seen it before.

He turned his attention to the monitors. There was a screen for each continent with a list of members. With a few keystrokes Jim could see the details. The plan for the Seventy-nine Nations had been easy to describe until the details began to emerge. No force was to be used. No confrontation was to be sought. The monitors revealed that perfection was difficult to achieve.

Four months had passed from the launch of the US effort to end torture. Blanche, Inc., with its constituency-customers, facilitated the election of a virtual government for each country without a functioning democracy. The Blanche World initiative was to remove the torturers from power. GEO had carefully studied corruption and torture and found a link, with social strife connecting the two.

“Reggie,” Jim said, as Reggie entered through the residence staircase.

“Jim. Current data. I’ll update the screens in three, two, one second. Done.”

The screens changed, with more color added to identify difficult spots where struggles were underway.

“How we doing?” Jim asked.

“Not bad for never having done this before. The data shows the power in violence diminishes when large majorities are organized against it,” Reggie said.

“What are we facing?”

“Jim, you are the experienced one around here. To me, it looks like the nature of humanity is revealing itself. Violence is easy to find. There was a GEO board

realization that change will cost less than the status quo. They knew there would be human costs, but even with that they ordered the Full Court Press action.”

“Meaning? They are responsible for all the pain? I know you are right about the directors considering the costs, but wrong about their responsibility for them.”

Omar came back into the room with no DD. “Monique,” he said, to answer the unasked question. “What is happening? Monique says that something big is underway in India.”

Reggie and Jim lept from the comfy chairs and the raced to the console room to see what was happening. Charlene and Ravi were already in the room.

“Revenge killing? That is part of their religious culture. Always too strict.”

Charlene had lived in India and felt for the women who had to accommodate male domination. “There is so much anger. Farmers committing suicide. Lives being taken for imaginary insults. Their arable land losses in the last decade have been vast and hunger is driving many of them. Blanche has more stores in India than any other country.”

Ravi sat eyes glued to the monitors. Her hometown Rasayani near Mumbai would avoid violence by sharing with anyone who needed human necessities. the inundation by rising sea levels that had plagued the low-lying areas had not affected her home, at least physically. The migration of millions of Indians to find food, water and new lives had affected the entire nation and beyond.

“Luck is a gift. The Indian dilemma is visible. With luck we will survive in some way,” Ravi said. “What are we doing about the violence?”

“The strategy is to let the havoc play itself out until nightfall. Disarming the military was only the first step. The citizens have to disarm, too. If history proves

to repeat itself, once citizens fire off a few rounds for no gain they will bury their guns for a future uprising.”

“Mob rule subsides when the whiskey is gone.”

“Something like that.”

“Reggie, what are you seeing?” Jim asked.

“I want to cry for everyone who is suffering through this violent spasm. I want to cry most because the mass migration global climate change is causing cannot be made to come out okay. It won’t. We knew that. Beyond revenge, we wanted to balance out karma with a service to humanity involving as many nations as we could. No one is escaping increasing violence, but it is not increasing as it might have had Blanche not organized the world to provide for itself to the greatest extent recorded.”

“Taking the weapons away from nation states prevented border wars against migration,” Jim said. “Civilians are not as easily controlled. We planned to provide social structure—and we did, but not homogeneously, not everywhere. Rural, less networked areas escaped our work. It was a choice. Where there were farmer cooperatives and rural manufacturing, we had commercial connections, but not enough to matter.”

“Jim, we did the best we could,” Ravi said. “I’ll stick with that. The board took a risk when we began Full Court Press, but the risk was not that we would act too soon. The risk was always that we wait too long to do what we could. We started when we could and we withheld nothing.”

“Ravi,” Reggie said. “As the youngest people in Storage, our view is different from our elders. The elders are spending their lives to save ours. We are spending our lives with the hope of seeing a better future for ourselves.”

“I would accept any future over the one we are slipping into.”

Rob, Scott and Jack, the Boy's Club, were rocket scientists. They anticipated the need to repel an attack and capture transportation. They imagined a rocket catcher.

The Lady's Club had brought the Moon's few occupants into the forefront of human consciousness. "Lost on the Moon" was the name of the season's hottest movie. Unfortunately, it was not a romantic comedy but a horror film about aliens invading the human mind. It did not matter. Rockets were coming and they only needed one to get home.

Omar communicated often with the Boy's Club.

They had a plan.

On a night during a peak period of solar activity, a small rocket was launched from the Siberian-Chinese border. The Koreans thought it was aimed at them and fired twenty-two rockets to bring it down. In all the excitement, no one could say what happened. Six days later, the Lady's and Boys' Club would receive a gift.

Omar, through GEO, had gained control of a private rocket company when the Moon bases were abandoned. That was two years ago. The rocket company was also the communication center for the bases. Omar sat in the company's Houston building, enjoying the sight of his first launch orbiting above the Boys' and Lady's Clubs on the Moon's surface.

"Omar, here." Time delay.

"Heather, here." Time delay.

“Stuff is flying by as we speak.” Time delay.

“Nice. We tracked it coming in.”

“You have the keys to drive the bus. Good luck with landing.”

“Omar, the bill of lading shows a shipment from Blanche, Inc. Does this mean we are going to be resupplied from below?”

“As a Blanche director you will be supported in whatever strategy you pick. Right now, you are boss. Whatever the Seventy-nine Nations put together to send your way will be benign.”

Omar was thirty-seven years old. When he and Meredith first began their relationship, they had next to nothing except college degrees and big ideas. Sixteen years had made a difference.

“Omar?” Time delay.

“Sorry my thoughts wandered.” Time delay.

“Send us more people...and the supplies that are needed for six months.”

“How many? How much?”

“Well. Let’s think? Two vehicles. Return trip fuel. Crews and replacements. Plus ground transport or some way to go back and forth between Lady’s and Boys.”

“I get it. You have been there too long. I hadn’t realized you were so far apart. You want to get off there, don’t you? Our plan is your plan to get off. Heather, I am with you. The six of you would be perfect for ...let’s talk in person. I’ll be there in eight days. I’ll bring the ground transport.”

Fishburn knew everyone else was stupid. He was so drugged on so many substances he couldn't swear anything he felt or thought he remembered actually happened. His bedroom quarters stunk to high heaven and were extremely trashed.

As his memory returned, he remembered how multi-talented she was. She was fun, and when she went away, he missed her.

"Nice party," he said to no one.

No one answered.

"Damn."

She hadn't been very clear about what "substances" he'd tried. He had his guesses. He checked the time but realized he didn't know how many days had passed.

"I owe Hans one. Where is Hans?"

He walked out of his bedroom suite into the hall and turned to the wing with offices, including his. He remembered how meticulously neat everything was kept. The thought leapt into his mind because the scene was unusual. As he passed offices, he saw that all electronic equipment had been taken. A rough search of documents was obviously done. The hallway showed signs of that search.

"Fuck you!" he yelled to nobody.

what was there. He knew his persistent emotional swings and heavy attitude was his normal, but any sense of danger was nonexistent. Much as he hated to admit it, he needed people to neaten up after him. Right now, he appeared to be alone.

“It’s 7:23 AM. In thirty-seven minutes, staff will arrive. I need a drink.” He headed for his suite again, stopping in the cooler for a beer.

“Beck’s. Best beer ever made.”

The full-length mirrors in his suites exaggerated the mess. The floor was completely littered with bottles, discarded clothing, towels and shredded sheets. Fishburn had nothing moveable in his rooms that had not been moved. He stood there completely nude, his corpulence multiplied by the arrangement of the mirrors. At his age, nudity should be a crime, he thought.

“Lousy bastards looked everywhere. For what?” Fishburn sat at the foot of his bed, sipped his beer, scratched his beard. He belched then hiccuped.

“What was her name? This is not good.” He rose and headed for the bathroom, barely getting his face over the sink before he barfed.

He staggered back into his rooms and realized he hadn’t heard any of his personal staff nor anyone buzzing in through the gates.

“Crap.”

Pulling on clothes from the floor, he began searching the four floors of his mansion and adjoining office building.

“Empty. No one is here.” Fishburn stopped to splash water on his face.

Fishburn was not a religious person. He was rich. Not rich, as in he could take a vacation. But rich, as in he could never take a vacation. His income was so huge he

spent nearly four hours a day spending money on anything that moved his addled impulses. Most days, the mad rush to rid himself of it all made him laugh with the foolishness of his endeavor.

“I own damn near everything on the planet. Wait!” Suddenly motivated again, Fishburn grabbed a travel case. In it he found clean clothes and his toothbrush. He headed for the garages.

“Where is everyone? No driver? No servants. What the ...” The garages were neatly organized. The keys were easy to find. He struggled to find the ignition on the silver '85 Mercedes. After a few tries with the key he froze with frustration, his hands were shaking so violently he couldn't complete the act. With both hands he managed to get the key in and the engine warming up.

He had not driven on these roads in months, and now, in the morning commute, he was increasingly beleaguered with the decisions he was forced to make.

“It's a damn good thing I am not armed. These a-holes are pissing me off.” He pulled to the curb. “Deep breaths.”

“Gin, honey. You’re massage service scared the locals. We gave up recording it.”

“I got it, don’t worry.”

“Fishburn has spent the day coming to grips with his new status. He drove himself into Edinburgh and is parked on a main road.”

“We put devices in all his cars. We are tracking him too.”

“Hot puppies. Look sweetness and light, this guy is deranged, as I am sure you know, but my point is, do not spook him. He is running and easily confused.”

“He is not armed, and he has no allies trailing him. We are ten minutes away from him, but as we get in the city area we’ll need face time,” Ginger said. “I’ve got a complete team working this, and we have audio-visual on him.”

“What’s he doing parked there?”

“Might be his destination.”

“It’s a park.”

“Copy that. I am pulling across the park from him. He is leaving his car and headed for a neighborhood. Do you have a bio for him? Did he grow up around here?”

“Yup. Address is near you, a house on Marchfield Grove.”

“He’s heading through backyards.”

“Headed home.”

“Trying to stay close.”

“What?”

“Where did he go?”

“I’ve got both of you. Somehow you passed him. What did you miss?”

“A hole in the ground? He walked right through your position. He must be under you. Maybe a tunnel. We’ll find the entrance for you.”

George Harrison's first movie was a piece of work. It had been a rush job by Hollywood standards: less than a year from event to historical fictional docudrama.

The cast was so-so. The editing made the film. An Oscar would be won.

The content was imaginary. George had painted the picture of the internal life of the Chicago Downtown Men's Club. The writers had gone for the end zone with a fact-starved explosive exposé aimed at indicting "mysterious people" whose dark forms could be seen milling around outside the Club. Four people, all men in the opinion of the narrator, worked feverishly at a task that was difficult to understand.

The cinematographers did a fabulous job of trying to identify the figures the security cameras had captured in the twenty-four hours before the meeting. Jim thought Ginger's face was the one that came out best, but he knew she wasn't there. She said so. Ginger thought one of the other shadowy figures had a butt like Jim's.

They watched the entire film, joking their way through it until the end when names were named and the men who died were accused of torture or abetting torture.

"That was a bit out of the blue, don't you think?" Jim hated surprise endings.

"They'd been building up to it. The histories of these guys were damning. They didn't name the perps. Surprised they did not try."

"All the time spent on the faces. It was like they are trying to solve a crime—and then this." Jim said.

“The dead were not victims. The mysterious people were unknown heroes.”

“Did I miss what killed them? They didn’t even guess, did they?”

“Nope. They had bodies. They had the shadowy figures video. Weird.”

Meredith gave speeches. She spoke once or more a day in a formal setting for several months after she resigned as POTUS. “Power is in a message, and there must be messengers. The leader of any nation’s citizens in a democratic society limits her comments. The message Blanche World sends to its citizens is much larger than the message a President of the United States can bring to US citizens.”

As she grew more obviously pregnant, her speeches turned to analogies of maternity. Her idea of birthing a new democracy ran counter to the hysterical PR messages of tyrants predicting end times and ignoring Climate Change—a real end times.

“We must have a vibrant active democracy fueled by relevant facts and thoughtful, inclusive opinion. Sexism, like racism and nationalism, does not constitute either a fact or an inclusive opinion. The changes we seek as citizens of Blanche World are specific: We...I need a world for my girls to grow in that is physically and spiritually nurturing. That’s why I am here.”

The child inside her was a thing of hope. “We are not allowed to predict the end of humanity, in spite of what we see happening around us. DD and the unborn Hillary, and by extension every child or unborn child, needs a world friendly to them so that they can grow fearless and unashamed.”

She and DD sometimes took the stage together. At a year old, DD had begun to talk and walk. Mother and daughter dressed alike. When they appeared together

photographers vied for the ideal shot: the Madonna and Child. By the time they stopped for Hillary's birth, there were dozens of snaps. They were for each other, a duad plus. The rest of the scene, including audience and cameras, disappeared as they were enveloped in their archetypical mother + child = nurture pose.

Had she used environmental analogies, she would have spoken about the nearness of the end of "life as we know it." It was too late for democracy to alter what would be the heat blast that began that summer, and the coming months would make cities unlivable, starting near the equator and headed to the poles.

Omar was admired by The Smiths. He arrived in a private rocket and brought ground transports that allowed the six newlyweds their first night together after being married for almost two years. That wasn't why he was admired, though.

“Omar, I am happy that you came to visit us. You and Blanche, Inc. brought us into humanity. When you gave us five hundred shares of Blanche so that we qualified for the board election as investors, you transformed us from servants to owners,” Heather said.

Omar had never met any of the cloned humans before he sat across a table from Heather in the Lady's Club on his first day on The Smiths.

“Heather, I am honored to meet you. My family sends its regards, as does the entire board of directors of Blanche, Inc.”

Omar opened his briefcase, space version, and took from it a sheaf of papers. “We are beyond digital. This is an invitation given to every board member so that they can attend the next board meeting. I came to visit you so we could plan for this next event in our common life.”

“Omar, we are not a ‘we’ but six ‘I’s, even though we are clones of the same two humans. We will not procreate with each other, but we can with others who are not so brotherly-sisterly, DNA-wise. We are obvious products of someone's forethought. We are smart. We are strong. We are cooperative.”

“The old-style corporatist dream of the ideal worker.” Omar said. She nodded.

“Yes, but we owe you for the context within which we can contemplate our true situation.”

“Collectivists?”

“No, too much political baggage. We were not scarred by human delusional fears. We have our own scars by virtue of our loneliness. We have been up here in low gravity for years, so it will take work to return to Earth. We do have a desire to be there. Contrarily, we love the Moon. Some of us want to stay if we can.”

“You asked for more people. We know people who need a place of safety that does not exist on earth. We could send them.”

“Yes, we had a plan to fool you into sending people, i.e. a large enough vehicle for us to return to Earth in. Then our thinking changed. One of us and Blanche may be enough. I go to Earth to ready for the next board meeting. You send whoever you want and we will adopt them into The Smiths.”

Omar sat quietly thinking about this new twist in the plot of his novel, the one he was always working on, but never actually had written a word of.

Omar had spoken to Heather every day since he discovered the existence of the Smiths and how to communicate with them. He traveled to the Moon that took him out of sight for two weeks. The journey was rough. It was very physical, not defeating as much as hardening. It was rough emotionally, too.

When they were at last face to face Heather wanted to tell him tales of her youth, growing up on the Earth-side version of the Moon-base. She knew it must have been Earth-side because she remembered the gravity difference. She read about the exploration of the Moon and found that she had participated in it. She and the other Smiths were literally made for the Moon.

“Mr. Bradley, I have never seen the Earth. I have never smelled fresh air. I have never swum in a river. I want to do these things and a few more. We have been here for almost five years, after being raised in a similar place on Earth, I believe. It was a pod like this one where we were trained,” Heather said.

“Ms. Smith, I assure you that you are free to go to Earth. We can leave together. But I have a long story to tell you, which I hope will shape your future. We have time to talk. We have time to plan. However, we do not have time to waste.”

“How do we begin?” She said.

“My story will make more sense if I know who I am telling it to. Let’s all four of us meet together so all can hear and share.” Omar was still a little uneasy about food. There was a strange aroma in the Lady’s Club. As Omar clicked through the possible causes, he realized it was the absence of aroma he sensed. Heather was right, focusing on what she had never experienced. Life on the Moon is measurable by the myriad of missing pieces only found on Earth.

One minute after Omar spoke about a meeting, all three of the Lady’s Club members sat before him. “That was fast.”

“Waste no time. We are ready,” Holly said.

Kelsey pushed herself to the front of her chair, looked directly into Omar’s eyes and introduced herself. “I am Kelsey Smith, born twenty-seven years ago as 62F Smith. I was raised in a unit much like this one until I reached twenty-three years. I was educated in communication and metallurgy. I am a miner. We ladies have been together, segregated by gender all of our lives. The Boys’ Club is accessible only by communications through the Comsat—the stationary satellite directly above us.

I have never seen the Boy's Club. Now we can travel back and forth thanks to your cargo." Kelsey fell silent.

"My story is no different but you know I am not like the other two who are not like each other. I am Holly Smith. I was created by cloners from the same mother, a woman judged to be strong, smart and cooperative. I am all of that and more, of course. We have thought our origins through, and we cannot determine much about who or why except that we are miners brought here by a private company without benefit of an opportunity to decline. Slave is a word that resonates in this context." Holly fell silent.

Omar studied them while no one spoke. He looked at their faces and hands for the scars he knew to look for, but the scars of torture were the signs of torment. Omar was taken by the calmness of the three women.

"May I speak?" He asked. The three nodded approval together.

"You are American citizens, conceived in the State of Georgia and transported in vitro to a facility in Northern Michigan where you were raised in a virtual prison, operated by a company that operated many prisons. A mining company had designs on the Moon. They hired a company I now control, SpaceX, to build a facility – actually the two base facilities yours and the boys club– for mining operations. You were transported here five years ago. First, the mining company, then SpaceX went bankrupt. You were for all intents and purposes, left here to die. When I took control of SpaceX, someone told me where to look. I found expenditures and budgets for the flights that would have brought hundreds more like you here for mining operations. Then I realized someone must be here already. Then I found the file with your identities and contact protocol. I called you. Now I am here."

They sat together, the four of them knee to knee, their legs in a four pointed star. They were silent until Omar spoke again.

“Okay. That is the past. On Earth, things have changed rapidly during the years you were here. We have the time to prepare. My company is preparing to bring a contingent of people to live with you, including, perhaps, myself, but we have to satisfy your needs first. So, we are going to go to Earth first.” He had expected a sound of joy or a hand clap or some sign of gladness.

“Are you referring to climate change and a die-off?” Heather asked. “We have seen reports of inundations of agricultural lands and temperature rises making cities in the equatorial region unlivable.”

“Yes. The projections leave us about two decades to prepare for the worst.”

“Jim, things are getting complicated. Let’s put our heads together.”

“Things are way simpler for me, Omar. Today was a no-threat day. Meredith and her girls are safely tucked away. The GEO board is home, in their own homes. Everyone safe and accounted for. What grieves you so, you would trouble me with your grief?”

“I said that first.”

“I remember. It was the day you showed me the plan.”

“We became partners in crime.”

“Sounds right. Omar, I am tired. I need to move on. The plan is over.”

“There is a new one.”

“Will it help me sleep at night?”

“Yes, most definitely.”

“Let’s hear it.”

“It starts at the Moon. Are you ready for the Moon?”

“Space travel has never interested me. I like standing on the ground. Are you talking about The Smiths?”

“I like them. I visited a month ago, before Hillary was born.”

“Your rocket company? I thought that would come along eventually. What do you have in mind?”

“Our guests in paradise need a new home and maybe a *raison d’être*. Especially Fishburn, who has grown ornery in his mid-years. Gerald is still afraid of reprisals and could benefit from the added distance between him and Them.”

“Ah, Them. I laugh.” Jim demonstrated his laugh. “They are still active, but at a lower level since Fishburn unraveled the knot for us.”

“That is a whole other story. I am at least three books behind and his story is one of them. Maybe next year.”

“You said there was a plan?”

“Yes, but before we can talk about it, we need the shelter of Storage. We need Reggie’s help to understand it. He and the Lady’s Club came up with it.”

“Lady’s Club?”

“Storage.”

“Storage.”

They rose from their seats at the Men's Club bar, took an elevator to the tunnel, made the two block walk underground into the level two garage in the Blanche building.

He didn't mean to harm anyone. Ever. But that is not the way things turned out.

Gerald was raised in an upper middleclass home. When he left to attend college, his father began to develop a new hotel chain that launched him into the realm of millionaires.

After college, Gerald became a marine like his father had been. That was where he learned to kill. It was ten years later he resigned as a colonel to become a V.P. in Stratfor.

His father died a few months after he decommissioned. He inherited the hotels, which he sold and began his career as a consultant.

Now he had run the gambit. He had learned to kill for money.

"Look, Gerald," Fishburn said. "I find your 'conscience' to be unnecessary. It is a means to one's own destruction. If I shame you, then you will be owned. If you want to be free, free yourself of those self-destructive tendencies, those little angels on your shoulder telling you not to do what you want to do."

If Fishburn had a sense of embarrassment it did not show. Nothing he was accused of caused him to regret a single act of his life.

"Let me tell you a story, Fishburn. One day, after working for Stratfor in its euphemism for a death squad, I found the work less than thrilling. I left. No angel on my shoulder. I started my own shop and continued as I had, except that I saw opportunities to diversify my work."

“And now. Now without shedding a tear, you walked away?”

“There is more. I met guys like you. Big guys with power who wanted stuff done. Most of it was about theft and/or murder. It was break and take. Then I was hired to get into Blanche and, once in, to kill Omar Bradley.”

“Your old friend? I get it. You lost your edge and quit.”

“Nope. Listen to me. Your idea about living without regard for others got you nearly killed in that explosion the Shelton brothers set up for you.”

“Who cares? Death is inevitable, so what use is a conscience if it only limits what you can do while alive? I just don’t get it.”

“Fishburn, patience is not your strong suit nor is empathy. You must have skipped pre-school where we are taught to wait and to help.”

“What difference does the past make?” Fishburn asked. “We were in the same situation despite our differences. I took the same offer that you took. If we had stayed where we were, we were going to just be dead meat. Now we are just meat.”

“Where we are going, the challenges might give you a different attitude.” Gerald said.

“You, too.”

“Yeah, maybe so. These people who are taking us in—hiding us, really—they are different.”

“No way, Gerald. There are only humans out for their own gain. These people are our wardens. We are prisoners. ‘Sent away,’ as they used to say.”

“Fishburn, you are a problem. I understand Omar’s move in picking you up and trying to help you rather than just destroy your body once and for all. Conscience or not, I would not have saved you from the Sheltons.”

“Ah, the Sheltons. Very dangerous characters those two. Not unlike you. Killers. She is without conscience, as well. What guides her, do you think?” Fishburn asked, and as he did he rose from his seat and floated weightlessly up and behind the so-called front seats of the robotic capsule that would eventually deliver them to the surface of the The Smiths.

Gerald let time pass. Then when he was ready, he said, “My guess is revenge. I learned from Reggie—you know Reggie. He is Omar’s assistant, been with him for twelve years or more. Quite a character. He took me from a near death experience to paradise and the scene of my transformation. Anyway, he knows them well. The mystery of the Sheltons is their motive. He was tortured like me. She is dedicated to him, so maybe that is it. If you want to contemplate a mystery of motive, it’s the Bradleys. Have a guess there?”

Fishburn floated back into his seat. “This long journey together is unusual for more than the obvious. My view point is shifting. I would say power is the Bradley’s motive. A source of an injury for which they might seek revenge is unknown but may exist. My view is changing because I am beginning to see something amazing that can be created in these circumstances.”

“Are you evil, Fishburn?”

“Just creative.”

“Without a conscience.”

“Back to that? Okay. Simple statement: if there is no god there is no conscience. Agree? Disagree?” Fishburn said.

“Just because there is an impulse we call conscience does not mean there is a god.” Omar said. “The impulse exists—at least at times, in some of us. If god led to conscience, then you would have one.”

“Nicely done.”

“There is one more thing to add, Fishburn. You argue that conscience is a weakness, counter evolutionary even. Further, you argue that it is useless. Yet you also argue for a guide to explain our actions. Motives or conscience—I suspect you have one after all.”

In the course of the three-day journey to The Smiths, time hung heavily on the travelers. Conversations were intermittent. Long periods of silence were broken by a sentence, every now and then. The topic was usually the transition they were engaged in. That changed as the Moon grew in size to dominate the view. Then the topic was the future. Most often used words were “I,” “wonder,” and “if.”

“I wonder if there is ice cream?” Gerald said.

“If there is none, we will have a two-week fast until the next ship comes in.”

“Booze?”

“Same.” Fishburn answered with the sound of patience in his voice.

“Who is here?”

“Six originals. A few new people sent by Omar. People like us, Gerald.”

“Women?”

“The people Omar sent might be. The originals are all brother/sister clones.”

“What are we supposed to do here? Plot our escape?” Gerald knew he had been handcuffed for months with the chains of unlimited Mai Tais in a paradise he could never geo locate. When he was moved to the rocket launch site he had been abundantly pleased by the drugs he was fed to calm him for the difficulties that he was unaware were in his near future.

“We came here freely, and we will leave when we can. This doesn’t look like home, but nothing does these days. I have no ideas other than to see what is going on and work out my little problems.” Fishburn had closed his eyes as he spoke. The sounds of near silent breathing of sleep was all the sound there was for several hours.

Meredith, DD and Hill, with Omar in the background, traveled throughout the Seventy-nine Nations. Blanche and GEO did no harm. Global climate change was becoming a critical factor. Food, water, shelter and healthcare became the most sought after commodities. All were easily hoarded to create scarcity bubbles that could be used to control populations and extract tribute in the form of high prices. That was the old way of corporate exploitation fueled by violence and corruption. GEO reduced the violence and confronted the hoarders. Blanche produced democracies and leveled the distribution problems for hoard-worthy items. Democracies reduced corruption.

“Omar, whose idea was it to convert the militaries into humanitarian organizations?” Meredith was writing her memoirs as they traveled by solartrain from India to Moscow. “Is this a Plowshares idea?”

“The Joint Chiefs made that recommendation to you as Full Court Press was in full swing. Oddly, it was a General Bradley, Benjamin Bradley who was able to see the future for an organized and mobile cadre to assist in redistribution. Essentially, Blanche, Inc. hired the militaries of most nations to become what we see now. It was a great idea in many respects. They had fuel, transport and trained operators with well organized crews all over the world.”

“General Benjamin Bradley?”

“Yup.”

“Omar, do you remember when we first met after college?”

“At the Worldwide Temp Agency. About 10:30 in the morning, September 1, 2012.”

“I told you I wanted to be President and you told me to think big.”

“Guess you took that to heart.”

“Yeah, I did, but what was your ‘think big?’ What did you get out of this?”

“I shot the Moon and won.”

“The Moon. I thought you might have other ideas.”

Omar sat quietly, contemplating first his wife, then each of his children, then the landscape that was passing his window as the train climbed up a mountain and through forests so remote they had never been logged. These were now more sacred than any motive to log for the consumption of this resource.

“I wanted to write novels that I knew would not be published in the world we lived in. I wanted to change whatever it was that barred some thoughts from publication.”

“But, you haven’t written a book yet?”

“MP, you are so kind to me. I wrote a lot in the first years, but our business took time away from writing. I should start again.”

“What would you write about?”

“Gerald and Fishburn went to The Smiths.”

“That should be interesting in itself. But why them?”

“We are a story about what happens when two nerds get along. They are both ogres, or maybe ex-ogres. Can they get along? Can they change and never kill again? We’ll see.”

“Why did you save Fishburn from Jim and Gin?”

“To save Jim and Gin from their duty to protect Blanche and from delivering revenge.”

“Sounds like a long story.”

“It’s not over.”

General Monique Duvalier sat in her favorite spot near a port window with a view of Orion.

“I like it when we go dark.”

“You prefer stars? Sun is a star.”

“Too close to be considered beautiful, more like overwhelming.”

Heather and Holly liked to sit with the General, especially when she became talkative instead of taciturn. Sometimes, like today, she would tell a story. There was one in particular they wished she would tell.

“I wasn’t always a general. Actually, I was never a general in the French armed forces. I was a colonel when I was discharged. The new rank was ceremonial.”

“They wanted to reward you for service?” Heather asked.

“I had been held captive for almost ten years. I was an officer in the Seurette on assignment in Syria. When I was released, I was given the colonel rank, and six months later I was discharged.”

“I notice you have scars on your hands and face,” Holly said. “I pry, my bad.”

“It is alright to ask. I do not want to have secrets from my neighbors. The story is ordinary for those times. A rebel force kidnapped me from the embassy parking lot as I was headed into work one morning. I was on special assignment, involved in the movement of gold bullion through Syria from Iraq.”

Heather and Holly waited a few seconds for the General to continue, then both started talking at once. The General chuckled.

“My dears, there are so many cute traits you have, almost like twins. And so polite. How will you decide who talks next?”

“We have individual wills, but we have been together so long we begin to think the same things at the same time. Not unusual. We also have not spoken to others, such as yourself, with more than one of us in the room at a time.” Heather turned to look at Holly.

“Remember when Omar first got us all together? We couldn’t stop from all talking at once. Omar gave us a Ram’s Horn—it was really a coffee cup. Whoever had it could talk. That worked.” Holly turned to the General. “You were tortured to give up the gold?”

“Yes, I was. Had I known then what I know now, I would have given it up immediately. But that is not what we are taught to do. We are taught to protect the status quo—to not think about a different set of circumstances.”

They both started talking. Stopped. The General said, “Whose gold was I protecting?”

They both nodded.

“You’ll be surprised when you find out. I have a question for Holly. You are excited to talk to me. More than Heather, who is excited too, but you have something you want to know. What is it?”

Holly thought for a while. Her face moved as if she were following a path to find its end. “Why did our makers think we would make good slaves?”

“I heard they searched for the nicest man and nicest woman they could find. They would be bright and strong, athletic even. And they were cooperative, not competitive or aggressive. Those are all admirable traits. More people should be like you.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“It’s all I know, believe me.”

Heather and Holly sat facing the General as she spoke. A sense of shock overcame them. They both began to talk again and stopped.

The General said, “How about alphabetically? Or how about a Ram’s Horn. I’ve finished my coffee. Here.”

They both reached for the cup, then Holly stopped. Heather held it in her hand for a few seconds, then handed it to Holly.

“Thank you, Heather. General Duvalier, I know nothing of your apparent suffering. I have sympathy for your position. I am grateful for your role in GEO, which I assume will bring your tormentors to justice. But it seems to me that the ones who benefited are the ones who must be confronted. To do that, you must know who it was. That means formal charges and a trial of peers. Nothing like that has happened, so your answer is acceptable for truth but not for revelation. Do you have any names?”

“You are persistent. I do have names. I can answer that question. Sorry about trying to avoid your first question. But your second is beyond me, and I would say I fear what I do not know. At this moment, in this place, I am afraid of your persistence.”

“We remind you of your torturers?”

“Yes, I guess that’s it. A question is the first step. It cannot go unanswered. The pain that follows tells you so. That was a difficult lesson that I tried not to learn but did. There is a reason why I am here. The capsule orbiting above has the reason in it. There will be a drama here in the next few days.”

Heather reached for the cup. “You do know if our makers considered us to be slaves, owned by a corporation?”

“Yes. They did think of you that way. There are papers on Earth that say that.”

“I am angry,” Heather said.

“No one blames you.”

Holly reached out. Heather handed her the cup. “They were smart enough to clone us, but they did not understand what it was they made of us. We know. Omar knows. One day you may know. The others who are coming better get it quick for their own sake. You, we can put up with. We are victims of the same torturer.”

“We’ve been here for twenty-two orbits. Almost two days.”

“They are trying to make us glad to see them.”

“Fishburn, it cannot all be about you. They have made no radio contact. They are making us suffer,” Gerald said with a taste of bile as his fear rose.

“Don’t go all weak and cry. Think about Saddam on the gallows. He spit at people and screamed at them even as he was seconds from death. That was the day the West lost the Middle East.”

“I plead for quiet,” Gerald said.

“Granted.”

The last three days had been difficult for them. They could not kill, therefore they had to cooperate—even if they did not like each other. And they did not like each other.

Neither of them were rocket scientists, so they knew they were dependent on others for their life. After days of sizing each other up, it was plain that swearing off murder was more a problem than a solution.

“The Smiths to capsule Zulu.”

The ex-Marine came to life. “Copy.”

“Prepare to descend under our order.”

“We are all clear.” Gerald couldn’t help but flash a smile at Fishburn. “Larry we are going home.”

“Fuck you, killer boy.”

“Death sounds more fun than looking at you for another day.”

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Scott and Holly had a life separate from the others. And because their eyes were so full of each other’s, they did not see that they were not alone. As Omar sent new people to be citizens of The Smiths, each new face looked for something or someone they could be with. Apart from Fishburn and Gerald, most people welcomed a companion.

So far there were twenty-three people, which included the six originals. No one had yet been born there, and it was known that such an event would not occur within the next nine months, if at all.

Everyone was gathered at what had been the Lady’s Club for morning circle and a special broadcast from Omar and Blanche about the coming Annual Meeting and the elections.

“I am feeling like Lord of the Flies, if you know what I mean.”

“It’s going to get more so. I am afraid.”

Omar’s face and voice interrupted Scott and Holly’s conversation.

“Hello neighbors. Bad news from below. Brace yourselves.” Behind Omar’s face were several screens depicting events in various places. These were scenes of discord, of argument, of pain and death. The perpetrators were long gone but the tide they created was crashing on the inhabitants of the moment. “This year’s Annual Meeting will be more virtual than in past years. The scenes behind me are grim. The agenda for the meeting is being revised. It will not be postponed, but there is a general call for directors to adopt self-protective measures. GEO is in full alert. In the coming week, adjustments will be made, but we will meet as the largest democratic organization in history. The grim scenes are sad to see, especially when we know we worked so hard to avoid them. But physics and chemistry prove more powerful than organization and cooperation in some cases...No, in most cases. What we need is a day without mass calamity. But that is not what climate disturbance holds for us.”

The audience in the Lady’s Club watched as the source of their life blood was dissolving into chaos.

Omar’s image remained on the screen. but no new audio or video was forthcoming. Ten minutes passed, then twenty. No one moved.

Rob stood up with the Ram’s Horn in his hand.

“I yield to whoever wishes to speak.” No hands were raised, no voices were heard.

“Then I stand here to lead us in crying if need be.” Still no hands, no sounds.

“I share the need for thought but I feel the need to insert another view into our morning. Let me begin by telling you the conclusions of our own annual report,

delivered twenty-one days ago. I paraphrase: The Smiths are now able to live free of Earth's governments' influences. Omar and Blanche have created a sustainable agricultural and environmental colony on The Smiths. We have room for more adults, and more are on the way, with a new development at the Boy's Club. The prospective new residents will arrive in ten days. There are twenty modules with people and supplies. Omar is aboard, which means this may be our last."

Someone in the room inserted, "How about a remake of Lost on the Moon?" Everyone turned to scowl at Fishburn, who smiled back.

Scott held the cup. "I will yield to Fishburn."

"I accept. Nothing new. Earth is worse than the Moon now. Here, nothing but the Sun and an occasional meteor disturbs us. Human error, yes. Human vileness, no. We win. We live. I yield back to Scott."

As meetings go, a cooperationist meeting was essentially consensual. There was no authority or body of rules to appeal to for dispute resolution. Nothing mattered as much as getting along.

"I yield to the next speaker," Scott said, extending his hand with the cup. Hands were raised. The cup was passed. The discussion turned to work to prepare for the new arrivals that could not be delayed.

Reggie Bikko had been right about the end of the reign of the Trillionaires, and how that would effect those who had so little. “Up for grabs,” he said. “That will be the new ownership rule—Finders Keepers, whatever you want to call it. There is only one way out and that is to share. We need to plan for chaos or chaos will overcome us.”

Reggie never saw the Moon coming.

It was a month before the Blanche Annual Meeting when things began to look like chaos was winning. He and Omar were sitting in the console room reviewing the world scenes. Violence was increasing. Catastrophic events were making efforts to find feed and shelter for the roving mobs near impossible.

“Time will settle this. We can identify the bad actors and reduce their influence. Or we can just keep working the edges, hoping to settle people down as their anger subsides and their hunger grows.” Omar had no rule about how to do this.

“We can expect these events to recur or increase as calamities create more homeless. The number of refugees is growing. The latest is in the hundreds of millions, maybe a tenth of humanity. The Blanche directors have been helpful in their communities, but where there is no director and few members, our reach is shortened. The sad thing is that we are undergoing a die-off and all that entails. Production of essential goods is falling. The Seventy-Nine Nations are, on average, better than the others, due to Blanche’s influence.”

“The Smiths.”

“What?”

“Pack your bags. We leave in five days.”

“Omar, me to the Moon? Nah, there is no room for me and my gear.”

“Reggie you don’t strike me as foolish. Maybe a bit demented from isolation in Storage, but who of us isn’t?”

“I can’t leave the console room.”

Omar had gone too far in Jim's opinion. "He broke a rule I wish he hadn't. I told him not to get greased and leave his wife and children to me to feed and clothe. He went to the f'ing Moon and left them here."

"Jimbo you have a weird sense of reality. Who gives a rat's ass about him or his family. I don't want much to care about. Live on the edge..." Ginger laughed, wildly into his face.

"Or just edgy." Ginger said. "Look, I am jealous of your devotion. I like it when it's me you come home to. I want you to be devoted to me."

"Thanks, sweetie. I am glad you are here when I come home. When I know you are not here, I don't bother."

"Aw, you said I am your home."

"I did? I did. You are the special thing in life," Jim said as he remembered their wedding. They had jumped out of a Cessna flying at 10,000 feet with a crazy Ukrainian preacher who spoke no English. For all they knew, he was praying for the death of both of them. As they free-fell towards Earth, the preacher mumbling the words that made them legally married, Jim and Gin smiled at each other. The three of them held hands until the preacher panicked and hit his cord, which immediately swept him away. Alone, the two newlyweds slipped through the air talking dirty to one another.

"Hey, where did that Ukrainian preacher come from?"

“Father Radish? That guy? I found him in a Comedy Channel resource directory. I liked the word Ukrainian. Feels funny to say. He promised not to even think in English.”

“Remember his hair? A big, poofy afro, dyed white. The dude wore a red tuxedo and jump boots.”

“What brings that up? Omar heading to the Moon?”

“Heights scare me. Our wedding was the closest I have been to the Moon. Am I afraid of losing you?”

“Nah. You’re sentimental. You don’t love, you just cannot do without,” Ginger said.

Jim sat on their couch, his legs stretched out in front of him. “Slouching,” Omar once said, “is the way we see ourselves relaxed. It’s a guy thing. We were trained by years of TV sports watching. The popcorn bowl and a beer can be easily balanced if you are slouching.”

Ginger paced the floor, back and forth, between the bedroom door and the glass wall that framed the South Loop view from their Astoria Tower condo. Ginger would always be grateful to Blanche Givens for giving them her home in her will. “You guarded me and made this home to me. It is now your home. I hope you find as much peace here as I did.”

The night slipped away in remembrances. In the early hours of the morning, Jim said, “Won’t be much to do when Omar’s gone.”

“Honey, we could go too. He has a space for us on the last ship to leave town.”

“Gin, in spite of everything, In spite of the reign of terror we waged for a decade or two together, I have no enemies. Maybe I’m over. Maybe I need a new life. But I thought it would be here in Blanche’s apartment, with you.”

“Honey boy, I’ll stay with you or go with you. The Ukrainian clown married us for real. No joke and that cannot be undone except by death in the other’s arms.”

“Do I go to the moon to save you?”

“You already saved me, dreamboat.” Ginger stopped in front of Jim. “The three choices we face are about where and how and with whom we finish our lives. Moon, SpaceX’s experimental environment, or here.”

“Or Omar or Meredith plus kids or just us.”

“Jimbo, we still have time to pack. Omar said they will be gone in seventy-two hours. We need to travel to Houston for the flight. By car, that’s a twenty-hour trip. If we stay on Earth and want to go to the SpaceX site in Michigan, it’s a four-hour drive from Chicago. They say they will seal the environment as soon as the climate warrants—which is difficult to judge. We should be there in relatively the same time-frame no matter which of those options we chose.”

“Thanks for the rundown. We have two days for the moon, three days for SpaceX and all the time there is if we stay here. If we don’t leave in three days, we will be here in the end, when the end comes.”

“That’s about it. Hungry?”

“No.”

“Sad?”

“Yeah.”

Reggie hated no one. No one who knew him hated him either.

“Reg, I am going to hit on you because you are so cute. Will you mind?”

“Do you mean will I obey you?”

“No, will you hate me?”

“Ravi, you and I are the only two without a mate. You want to mate me?”

“You are funny. I really know little about where you came from, how you arrived here in Storage, but I see you as married to this equipment.”

“Nerds follow nerds. Nerds came here and I followed.” Reggie and Ravi stood together, looking at the console room from the doorway.

“Are we done here?” Ravi asked. She liked standing near Reggie. When she met him the first time during a GEO meeting, something special bonded them.

Reggie did not answer. She took it as sentimentality. “We had some very interesting times in this room.”

“Ravi, I don’t want to go and leave this behind. You are right, I married this stuff. I think it’s part of me.”

“That’s why I asked permission to invite you into bed, to seduce you away from here with the scent of pheromones. It has been known to work.”

“Thank you, Ravi, for explaining your motive, but ...”

“Reggie, how long has it been since you have felt someone’s skin? I hunger for it. May I touch you?”

“But,” he said.

She interrupted him by turning off the main power switch to the console room, bringing darkness to the hundreds of LEDs that Reggie worshipped.

Reggie physically resisted. His body clenched and his intake hissed. “No,” was all he said.

Ravi stood, arms crossed, looking past him. “Yes. Omar told me to fire you gently and bring you along to a new amazing journey. He said, ‘Bring your book and finish it on the Moon.’ He said he had no faith in pheromones.”

“But...you amaze me Ravi. I feel something for you. I do.”

“Let’s go have a glass of wine and let our imaginations lead the way from there.”

Gerald had never been in love. There was no doubt in his mind. People brought and took. People smashed and grabbed. He had a few intense weeks with a number of people. Women who brought and took. He fought and worked for people who smashed and grabbed.

“Fishburn, after all this time, after all the hours of discussion, of haggling, of...words fail me...can I say painful dialogue?...Was it painful for you? Maybe not ...”

“I’d call that hyperbole, which means taking the long way round, if you ask me.” Fishburn was glad he was on the Moon. He was less burdened. He felt stronger, younger.

“Okay. Okay. What do you say, ‘fish or cut bait?’ Okay. What the hell difference is there in the way you think about what happened?”

“I like questions and yours is a good one. I cannot possibly answer you truthfully. I can make stuff up to please you, but that would be disrespectful.”

“So, if you lied to me, you either didn’t know or you did know and did it anyway?”

“You are trying to make the point that I have not changed during the hours of discourse I think you call the BS sessions. That it?”

As always, there was no need to hurry a reply. As usual, Fishburn had gone for the central point, so Gerald had to consider what had been said and its consequences.

After only a few seconds, Fishburn went on. “Too many words in a row for you? Listen, I am not different—my circumstances now are different. Therefore, I will not act the same as in previous sets of circumstances.”

“What about principles and morality?”

“What about practicalities and survival? Gerald, show me how principles and morality hurt us. If you have not considered this, you cannot say your position is thoughtful.”

“And the same for you?”

“Gerald, we live on the Moon, where practicalities and survival are all that matter.”

“We need principles and morality to get along.”

“Hmmm. The people who demand we follow principles and morality are the people responsible for all the calamities of our times.”

“Fishburn, you are unprincipled and immoral.”

“Gerald, you are impractical and suicidal.”

The first hours on the Moon for the new settlers were a flurry. But, after the initial organization, life became maintenance—except for the meetings.

The environmental pods were built on opposite ridgetops of crater Tsiolkovsky. The Smiths, as they now collectively referred to themselves, clones or not, built a track between the pods so that travel would not be challenging.

The Boys' and Lady's Clubs were within sight of each other across the crater. They were placed high so that sunlight would be available for maximum solar production. All very practical and designed to heighten survival rates and life spans.

Once this was completed, there was little to do but monitor and maintain.

Scott sat at the console Reggie had built in the Boys' Club. On his left leg, the firstborn Moon Smith sucked on her fist: Eve Smith, the child of Reggie and Ravi, who would eventually be the mother of Scott's grandchild.

Scott handed Eve to Holly and picked up a small red rubber ball. "Watch this," he said. "Fishburn taught me this yesterday." He balanced the ball on the edge of his fist a few inches beyond Eve's grasp. He waved his other hand. The ball disappeared. Eve was presented with the two clinched fists.

"Which hand?"

Eve pointed as if she understood.

“Darn, she is right.”

“Is that all Fishburn teaches?” Holly said.

“He told me things he made me promise to keep secret until the General’s gone.”

“No. Not good. She is sick.”

“He promised she would die first of the two of them.”

“Why?”

“He thinks the best vengeance is to outlive Them. He is Them to her.”

“But why does he offer this to the General?”

“He ordered her torture. It is a long story involving Gerald, too.”

“Saddam’s gold. I heard Gerald’s story.”

“Omar talked about the story, too. Something about the gold being stolen by the Men’s Club while Fishburn owned it. They tortured Gerald looking for it. Then, found it, stole it for a few days, then lost it to Fishburn. In between, Fishburn had the General kidnapped and tortured because he thought it was she who took it.

“Omar says Fishburn sold it to start the cloning program that created us.”

Gerald sat at the communications console in the Lady's Club. Omar sat next to him, watching a dark board, as it was called—dark because no signal had been received for the last ninety-six hours. They had sat there for two days hoping that the equipment aboard the Comsat would come back to life and reconnect them to the Earth base.

“You know, Oh Ell, as much of a jerk as Fishburn was, we won't see his like again. I miss him.”

“Years together will do that to you. I miss the General. She was the best friend I ever had. I don't expect another like that will happen again, either.” Omar was aging into retirement, having trained others to do his job. He now had nothing he had to do. “As I say that, I guess I should say ‘after Meredith,’ though we haven't touched each other for almost forty years. And then there is you. I definitely have known you the longest of anyone still alive anywhere.”

Gerald grinned his grin. “We have loose ends. Looking back, you'd think we could have taken time to rid ourselves of them.”

“I never stole a girlfriend or hired anyone to kill you,” Omar said.

“Like I told you, we have issues. I can say the same for me, except for the fact I accepted a job to kill you.”

“Blood under the bridge, Roomie.”

“No blood.”

“A mere detail, Ger.”

“Next time we have whiskey, let’s drink to peace.”

“No one in their right mind would pass that by.”

“It is 2060. We graduated from college forty-eight years ago. Weather was getting weird then. If we had stayed, we would have gone the way of Jim and Ginger.”

“I have thought a lot about it. We blame people who did nothing, yet it would not have mattered much if they had tried. When we noticed, it was too late to alter the outcome.”

“How many years until things settle down?”

“Who can say?” Omar knew the answer and Gerald’s silence said he knew Omar knew. It was like asking when the rain would stop.

Omar wanted the answer to be “in my lifetime,” but he knew that was not going to be true.

“I don’t know, Omar. Fishburn’s story may not be the best example. He was a very mixed character.” Gerald had been Fishburn’s friend for decades. “You know we talked philosophy and politics damn near every day since you put us in capsule Zulu.”

“So, you are saying he wasn’t a killer and a torturer?” Omar sat with his laptop at the ready, waiting for the muse.

Gerald sat close to him, wishing he could talk to Omar about the blood under their bridge. “Fishburn financed the movement of a shipment of gold. Sound familiar?”

“Weren’t you ...”

“Yup. My torment was his gold.”

“When did you find out?”

“In transit to The Smiths.”

“So?”

“So what?”

“Let’s see. You were held captive and tortured by an American-led NATO black op. You want to see that whoever did that to you is treated in a similar manner, don’t you?”

“I can’t say that at one time I wouldn’t have been happy to switch places with whoever it was. Now? No. But, Omar, what about you? What are you after in this?”

“Good question. I guess I am looking for a story of revenge undelivered.”

“Remember I asked you if you ...”

“Gerald, please tell me who Fishburn was? Whose gold was it anyway?”

“He told me the story many times, each time in a different way. Fishburn bought Saddam’s gold while it was in transit from Iraq through Syria. This happened about the time MacLean imprisoned Blanche Givens. The unit I commanded loaded it onto trucks on a US military base. I rode along to the Syrian border.”

“So Fishburn didn’t buy it until after it left your possession?”

“Right. I could never have known he owned it. I assumed it was just another CIA or State Department operation. So, he isn’t the ‘whoever’ who tortured me.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. What became of the gold?”

“Fishburn bought it outside of Damascus, where the Syrian military guaranteed its safe transport to Turkey where Fishburn’s corporation was to take custody.”

“Who did he buy it from?”

“He says he bought it from the Iraqis in 2013. Could have been any one of a number of figures. What happened that caused me pain was that someone else had their eyes on it. \$50 million, Fishburn said he paid. Whoever wanted it worked with Nato, as you said. I never looked for my torturers, so I don’t know who it was.”

“The main point being that Fishburn wasn’t one of them?”

“Like you said, ‘Maybe.’ Maybe you should talk to the General. She has a story too. About gold and all.”

The plan, lower case since it was just the plan not The Plan, had been devised in the early days to control procreation. Reggie and Scott had charted three hundred years or ten generations of breeding patterns so that the plan would have a chance to succeed.

The notion that people would watch out for the integrity of the gene pool without guidance was not tested. Everybody was given a name, a number and a letter. Each new generation would replace a prior generation. Omar III would replace Omar I. Omar V would replace Omar III.

The hope was that disease would not decimate them. Nor would they breed in negative traits and physical weaknesses, but ensure that the strongest, smartest, most cooperative individuals resulted from their breeding.

The Moon pods and the Earth pod communicated easily through the existing system. Communication satellites orbiting Earth and the Moon would function for many generations. The plan was to continue the conversation and share experiences to support one another and to keep a common language.

The plan included a question: When the Comsat system fails, will they try to do anything about it? Omar and Meredith could not talk to each other if Comsat didn't relay their communication back and forth.

Communication halted unexpectedly in the first generation.

“Look, Omar,” Reggie argued, “We live in hope or die in despair. If we go up to fix the Comsat, we increase the probability of success of the plan by less than one percent., even if we fix it to last another fifty years. However, that is based on a one-way trip for the repairman.”

“One way? Stop and fix if it’s the fault of the Moon orbiter and go on to the Earth maybe?”

“Burn up in the atmosphere or orbit for a few weeks with a similar result.” Reggie watched as thoughts passed behind Omar’s eyes. “Before anyone commits, we might as well be certain the problem is the satellite.”

“How?”

“Ping it,” Reggie said.

“Haven’t we done that?”

“Yes. Just now.”

“The result? Let me guess to save you the roundabout. Comsat works fine. It must be the Earth base.”

“Yes, and a little more. There was a message we missed three days ago. It was transmitted on a little-used emergency line that we had stopped monitoring thirty years ago. It said ‘Goodluck.’ One word.”

“Reggie?”

“Look, Omar. We knew we had a low chance of success, but we had no choice but to try. We thought the Earth base was the safest. It didn’t prove to be true. I have been looking for clues and found a cache of documents sent over the last weeks into the Comsat servers’ memories. I sent them to your account. They tell a story of

a breakdown in the base social structure that was causing violence and rebellion among the inhabitants. It doesn't say the people are all dead, but it does say that they were not as lucky as we have been.”

“Reggie, what happened?”

“Hard to say. Some rebellion against the plan is what I see from scanning the file names. All we know is that communications have been interrupted by the Earth base. The last message is disturbing, but hopeful in a way.” Reggie clicked through the files that had been uploaded to the Lady's Club servers. “Here is one from Meredith with your name on it.”

“Earmark it for me. Reggie, let's bring in the Ladies. They may have an idea.”

Reggie's fingers danced. His body swayed as if he heard music in his fingers.

“They are on their way. Five minutes max. What can they do?” Reggie asked. “Do they have secrets from us?”

“I have secrets from them.” Omar sat at the console with Reggie. “They stick together like siblings, and now there are twenty-six Originals—six here and twenty there. I have to remember that they are all a family. Maybe they have another communications system.”

The minutes passed rapidly. Omar read Meredith's last message, twice, then paged through several other documents from the Earth base.

The Ladies were quiet as they came into the console room. Kelsey, Heather and Holly found seats and tethered themselves to the console chairs.

Kelsey liked to talk and started. “Gentlemen, you called us? We guessed it was a Comsat question.”

“It is bigger now,” Omar said. “We have worked on the problem to the point that we identified the Earth base as the offline item. We came to an end. Something happened and now there are no signs of life on our established communications channels.”

“Omar and I called you because we are unable to do more than guess at how to proceed. We hoped you, any of you, have another route into the Earth base.”

No one spoke.

“My children are in Earth base,” Omar said.

No one spoke.

“I am grateful to you for your help in supporting our life here on The Smiths,” Heather said. “I am also hopeful the Sistine Project works and we ...”

“We are hopeful, too,” Holly said. “We are part of the breeding plan. Our children will inhabit the Earth if we succeed. If we do not, then we are here until our systems fail.”

“We have shared with you as you shared with us. We hold nothing back. Food, water, comfort, companionship, friendship, art, music, passion we share with you,” Heather said. “You were hoping there was more?”

“Yes, but ...” Omar stopped recalling his lifelong tendency to talk when he should be quiet. “I ask because I will be alone here with you for the rest of my life. I fear I will grieve the loss of my wife and children, not knowing how they ended.”

“They still live,” Kelsey said.

No one spoke.

“That is all we feel comfortable saying.” Heather stood and left the room, the others close behind. They left with respect, they would say to him one day. What Omar wanted they could not give, but they could give him something.

As Kelsey left the room the General entered.

“The General tells her story.” That was how the video was introduced. “General Monique Duvalier tells the tale of her time on Earth when the Trillionaires ruled.”

Omar chuckled when he saw the promo—the trailer was provocative.

“Torture plagued humanity. The Trillionaires protected their unconscionable wealth with crimes against humanity, including mass murder and a torture for profit program that eventually led to their undoing. Too many years passed under the yoke of emotional slavery.”

The General was sitting at a port window with a view of Sunrise Rock. The Rock was in the predawn darkness that kept its presence a secret. It was the first place in the view from the pods that sparkled in the rising sun thus its name.

“My unit was called Saddam Watch. He was dead, of course, but his gold was traveling across Syria. The French government sought to capture it and our task was to find it. That was what we were told, anyway, going in under dark cover.”

Her voice continued on from moment to moment, event to event.

“One evening, as I was returning to our compound, my car was blocked by several black Humvees. I was alone in a Mercedes AMG5. I was trained to surrender under such circumstances and did. Mine would have been a useless death, so I avoided it.

“Syria was coming apart. Rebel forces were numerous. It could have been one of them—their equipment was typical. I was held for ten years. I was moved often at first, then no one seemed to care, so I was left in a small village near the Turkish-Kurdish border.”

The General had been through a few things. Her face clearly showed the signs of torture. The scars of hot brands and scissors that clipped her ears bit by bit, day by day until they were gone. Despite her toughness, tears flowed along her cheeks ridges.

“The question was ‘Where is the gold?’ At first, I answered truthfully. I did not know. Then, as that answer did not satisfy the torturers, I offered ideas based upon guesses I made in the middle of the night. The first time I did this, they were excited that I had broken, and they left me alone for two days. Then they started again, but harsher since they determined I had lied to them. After six months they left me alone all together, but they would not release me.

“I was crushed. My mind, burdened with pain and loneliness, found a fantasy to dwell in. I mumbled, continuously. I would like to say it was a ploy, because it would have been an effective one, but no—I was crushed.”

She then went on to talk about her recovery, which began after the eighth year of captivity. One of the village children befriended her, taught her Kurdish and eventually helped her make her way into Turkey and escape.

“Blanche Givens found me. She had been looking for me, but I was hard to find. Within two days after I walked out of captivity, she was standing in front of me, holding my hands which were as scarred as hers. Words did not pass between us for several weeks. I was silent, having problems with my languages. My child-like Kurdish was no help. Good food and medical care brought me through.”

Sunrise Rock lit up.

“I joined GEO as a community leader two years later. Blanche had convinced me to seek revenge by building a bigger, kinder capitalism. We built Blanche. We helped many people find the best end possible. I was in Storage and made it to The Smiths.”

She stopped to look outside, to acknowledge the Sun’s presence.

“I often wanted revenge. Blanche wanted me to seek it. I grew strong thinking about finding who ordered this done to me, but I was not a victim. GEO would succeed. We would fight and defeat those who fought us.

“Did I get my revenge? One day I watched my now good friend Fishburn run to ground. He was captured by Ginger Shelton. He was a Trillionaire. It was his gold. At the time, if I had known it was his, I would have said so through the car window and avoided the whole damn thing. I didn’t know until Omar told me. Today, I would die to keep his name secret. He did not torture me. It was the men who ran the Chicago Downtown Men’s Club.

“Did I get my revenge? Jim and Ginger let me lead the incursion into the Club that killed them all at once. Do I feel better? The best revenge is to outlive your enemy. They are gone. I am here. They are not part of the gene pool. I am.”

“Do you feel love for another being?” Heather spoke into a silence that she and Scott had dwelled in for some time.

A new silence began and ended.

“I love spinach—everything about it, including the soil it grows in. I love its feel and smell—raw or cooked, any style.”

Time passed.

“Are you always hungry?”

“We don’t talk about hungers, especially sex, very much,” Scott said.

“Maybe we should. It would definitely fill some time.”

“So would performing sex fill some time.”

“Are we heading someplace with our conversation?” Heather asked.

“No, unless one step leading to another gets us someplace. Let’s see: love, hunger, sex talk, sex, do. There is a trajectory.”

“Not mine. Scott, my time is coming to an end. After all the searching and researching, I want to settle down. When I was born, I had nurses who cooed. Then, nannies who scurried. Then, guardians who trained. No one taught me love.”

“I see. You are after a taste of something you have heard about all your life. You remind me of Fishburn’s poem. The part where he is weeping for his lost love.”

“Yes, but he knew what he had lost. I do not know what I have never seen or felt. That is why love and hunger interest me. Sex I have had. Hunger ...”

“We hunger for all the things we have not seen, for all the pleasures we have not tasted. I, too, have wondered about love. I mentioned Fishburn because of the role he played to destroy his greatest pleasures...until there were none left. The story I heard is that Omar brought Gerald and Fishburn for us to study.”

“I wondered. So Fishburn and Gerald are the ones to teach us love?”

“Every Blanche World citizen here except Fishburn and Omar were tortured. Love may be beyond them. Omar cared, but love seems a stretch.”

“What about Omar’s relationship with the General? There was love there.”

“I saw caring, which was beautiful to watch.”

“Read *Jerry and Peter*. That is a love story. Omar thought Fishburn and Gerald loved each other.”

“He knew them both well enough. Not me. They talked about things from an Earth perspective—the vocabulary was unknown to me. Listening to them recount their past pleasures made me realize how many hungers I have, and now that my body tells me ‘no,’ I want to resolve the yearnings so I can pass. I want to be content with the life I am finishing and not wish I had another fate.”

“Heather, we were born on the same day, in the same place, from the same parent’s DNA. We were raised the same, fed the same, taught the same things. I feel you when you walk into the room, my skin begins to buzz.”

Silence again.

“Are you saying we love one another because we are conscious of one another?”

“Without fear... We know each other and have secrets we hold together. I am confused that you want to go, and I want to stay. You are still youthful.”

“You are still beautiful. I am tired of days on end. The sameness. I know this way too well and there is no other.”

“Boredom?”

“Ennui.”

Silence.

“What Omar brought to teach us about love, taught us about cruelty.”

“Scott, it would be cruel of me to not say, ‘I love you’ at least once. Of everything I know, including spinach, I must love you the most.”

The quiet that followed had a quality of enjoyment for Scott. His dying friend, sister, lover was still here. He did not miss her yet, but he knew one day without her would be too many for him.

She saw his plight as tears welled in his eyes. Her hand found his and they dwelled together in a world of their dreams.

89 X

Three hundred years is a long time.

On the first of August, 2329, a small transport left The Smiths, heading around the Corner, as the horizon of the Moon was called, past the Comsat, into orbit with a transport, then off to planet Earth. It was the first such rocket sent on this journey since The Smiths was founded.

There had been 401 living in the two bases, there were 399 left. The passengers were named Omar X and Meredith X. Both were sixteen. They would be the first to reconnect with the Children of Meredith who were waiting for the Children of Omar to return to Earth. At least that was what Omar and Meredith were taught. They had no reason to doubt, so they didn't.

An even smaller rocket had been sent two months prior, to probe the Earth's atmosphere for information about the conditions on the surface. The result had encouraged The Smiths to send the pair to the home planet.

Their journey to Earth had been part of The Plan for as long as they knew. Every day of their lives they worked to bring The Plan to fruition. Omar X worked in the Boys' Club rocket plant. Meredith X worked in communications at the Lady's Club.

They had been raised apart, as was the custom of the Originals. From fourteen on they lived together with the others their age. They knew they might be sent home together. They knew they would live and die on Earth if humans could survive or die together before they reached the Earth. It all depended on the equipment, and if they could land, and where they landed, and the presence of food and water at a temperature suitable for human life.

Sex was a highly controlled human endeavor. Omar and Meredith were taught the biological realities. They felt the human desire, but The Plan called for restraining human desire. Reproduction and the results were determined by The Plan. The Originals and the Blanches bred with a purpose. The purpose was to send new settlers back to the overheated planet when the trend reached a survivable world. The new Earthlings would be as special as the Originals. The Originals brought their cooperative nature, the Blanches a strong desire for justice and survival. That was what The Plan implied.

“The story says that Omar and Scott figured out a breeding pattern during the first years on The Smiths. Heather, Holly and Kelsey—the Original women—put the early version into action, and within a few years a new generation was built that combined the traits of both. The third generation blended second generation Blanche with the second generation mixture, and onward and onward until the tenth generation, when Omar X and Meredith X were chosen to return home.”

That was the way Gerald X told it.

The Plan spoke about the history of the Originals and the Blanches. The Earth had changed. The human population went underground in a place called Michigan, or had travelled to the Farside of the Moon to a crater named for the human who foresaw the human tragedy 150 years ahead of the creation of the moon bases that

harbored the Originals until the Blanches rose ‘into the Heavens’ to join the Originals and prepare for their return to Earth.

No one alive on The Smiths had seen the Earth. Centuries ago, two men, members of Blanche, Inc., travelled to the Corner to see it. They took pictures. Only one returned, Gerald I. The other, Fishburn I, did not return. He laid on the surface, watching the Earth rotate above him. Gerald I left him to his chosen fate.

“He once owned damn near all of it. From where we sat, it looked like a beautiful jewel. Fishburn I saw what he saw. I saw a dead lover’s body. Her corpse arrayed before me. Such sadness. Fishburn I could not take his eyes from her. I could no longer look.”

Gerald I talked about the beauty of the planet Earth, or so the history said, but Fishburn I wrote a poem, a love poem to the Earth. Every new Smith committed the poem to memory. People said Gerald I and Fishburn I were in love with each other.

Gerald I wrote a novel about two men who he called Jerry and Peter. It was the first book written at The Smiths. Jerry and Peter were trapped in Hell together for all time. Their lives were either spent in boredom or in discussion. They disagreed about everything.

Ravi I and Reggie I wrote a book too, a history of the end of Earth’s human dominance. It became the text to improve decision-making.

Omar I wrote his autobiography.

Fishburn ’s poem and Gerald I’s novel became the inspiration for other writers. Novels were written about Meredith Bradley and Blanche Givens. In the first generation, when the Originals and Blanches were still alive and the

communication with the Earth base still functioned, the writers among The Smiths learned from Meredith I directly. When the communications failed, there was the cache of documents Meredith I had secretly sent up to the Moon in the last days communications worked.

“Who are we and what will we become?” wrote Meredith I. “Our children know better than I...or they will. Blanche Givens had a simple dream: She would work to slow global warming and to feed, clothe and house the displaced. The number of people she envisioned assisting rose in her lifetime from hundreds of thousands to hundreds of millions—and after her death to billions.”

Blanche, Inc. was the means by which the lifespans of millions were lengthened. But as Meredith I put it, “When Givens was imprisoned to halt her campaign against Global Warming, the die was cast. The end was as certain as certain can be. In the years we have spent in the pod, our sensors, which look for animal movement across approximately 10,000 acres of one-time forest, have seen less and less movement. Around 2040 the last movement was detected. The temperatures are between 120 and 140 degrees. Nothing freezes. No water exists on the surface of the land. The forests are gone. There is no shade. Nothing we recognize lives.”

The third and fourth generations knew fewer and fewer people who knew Meredith I. The seventh and eighth knew no one who knew someone who knew Meredith I. The ninth generation sent the tenth generation to find the Children of Meredith.

There were a billion or more people still living when the outer door of the pod complex was closed and barred against invasion. Everyone who knew the location, of or even the existence of the pod, was inside or on the Moon. If someone had come to the door and asked for admittance, no one was prepared with a response. No one had ever come knocking before.

The sensation of sealing oneself in a “time capsule” where one would surely die, of raising children who also would die in the pod – ten generations or more of children – was difficult to describe.

Meredith I and her daughters sat together at a port window watching the rain fall as the door was closed and locked; sealed against invaders. They could not hear it, but they imagined the sound of the rain.

“Mommy, I want to go outside.”

“So do I, sweetie,” Meredith I said as she squeezed DD’s hand. The three-year-old DD in turn squeezed her little sister Hill’s hand, passing along the maternal love.

“We will have fun inside. Today we begin a new life.”

Meredith I and her daughters were among the hundreds who had been gathered in the pod and its subterranean levels designed to house many times more. Their number was expected to grow as humanity inside expanded through procreation.

“Omar, dear, how did you find the people you brought here?” Meredith I said to her monitor with its image of her husband, whose aging showed in the deep worry lines crossing his brow.

“We haven’t spoken about this. As a matter of fact, I have not spoken to anyone about who was invited to ‘the gene pools.’ That’s what we are now: gene pools. One of The Smiths helped to devise a breeding pattern. The objective is a new human that is more cooperative than the versions who could not end the global warming threat.”

“I am shocked, but not surprised. The idea hurts my head—but what doesn’t in these days of nothing old, everything new. I think we could have changed fast enough had it not been for ...”

“My dear wife, it does not matter what has brought us here as much as what we do now. You were possibly the most important human in history. Yet, there will be no one to remember you if we do not respond to our challenge.”

“So who are we? What do you call us?”

“The Children of Meredith.”

“And you are the Children of Omar?”

“Yes. There are two sorts of people living in the pods. The Originals and the Blanches. If you follow the Breeding Plan, then we will be compatible when we meet again.”

“The Plan is to breed the best humans we can while waiting for you to rejoin us? That sounds romantic. Who are the Originals?” Meredith I asked.

“They are a special sort of being. They were once numbered and unnamed. There were six left on the Moon, others were imprisoned where you now call home. They were the results of a breeding plan created by a corporation who wanted to produce miners for their Moon bases.”

“They are clones?”

“Not strictly. They are IVF products, therefore each is different, but all siblings.”

“So, there must be something special about them.”

“They are smart, strong and cooperative. They were raised in isolation. They were segregated by sexual orientation. They have few social skills and a little of that tortured energy that we came to know so well at GEO.”

“How did you find them?”

“Fishburn. He told me where to look ‘for something way interesting.’ I bought SpaceX and there they were, so to speak. The Originals told me about those on Earth. By the time I found them, only twenty-one still lived. Their value is enormous. We would not survive here without them. They make the station work. We have water, food, oxygen at the right temperature, and they have ideas about fuel for returning. They also know how to live in these things, so they don’t get tweeky and stupid.”

“I worry about ‘tweeky’ myself. So your idea is that we breed with them to introduce their qualities into us as a whole...as a gene pool?”

“It’s the only idea that will work, given our desire to control our birthing for number and genetic drift.”

“Otherwise, we could meet again, but be different enough to not be able to interbreed.”

“Yes. It may happen anyway, but we should try. We want to come home someday, and if we bring something magical and interesting back, it has to be in the form of our genes.”

“What do you call this plan?”

“The Sistine Project.”

“The creation of Adam? Okay. The Sistine Project it is.”

Fishburn's poem was read aloud twice a day.

Gerald missed his friend. Twice a day he remembered his feelings as he turned back to the pod leaving his friend there in the Earth's glow to die.

He realized that Fishburn was not going to get off the ground and return to the pod only when Fishburn pulled his communications cord from his suit. Just because he could not be heard or hear anything except his own body's sounds did not stop him from talking. Gerald stood over him and watched as Fishburn spoke his poem into his suit recorder. The alarms on their suits simultaneously began to signal the need to refresh the O2. Gerald could tell Fishburn was not going anywhere.

As he sped across the plain, he pleaded for help from the Lady's Club, but received no answer. Ever the bad boy, Fishburn had seen to it that no one knew they'd gone out for a stroll.

That is when he decided to rescue Fishburn.

When he had Fishburn in sight, he saw that he had removed his helmet. Gerald fell to his knees in that slow Moon gravity way. He didn't say anything out loud. His alarms warned him his O2 had ran out and he switched to the emergency supply and drove back to the pod.

The poem was found on Fishburn's recorder by Holly, who monitored and cataloged all local communications. When she heard it for the first time, she thought he was reciting a childhood memory, too long to be said in one breath.

She sent it to everyone.

Reggie figured out the realtime for sunrise and sunset each day for Edinburgh, Scotland, Fishburn's home. Kelsey recorded herself reading the poem and it was played each day over the intercom at those two times.

Each generation was different. The past became myth. There were the first people: the Originals and the Blanches. Extensive records were created. While the Originals were still alive, people spoke the same language. Generation on generation, the words changed. Much of the conversation was about pod life, about systems that nourished them and the technology that made it possible. Life on Earth, as remembered by the Blanches, had little appeal for the those who were born and would die within the confines of the pods on the farside of the Moon.

The language changed to practical routines and entertainments called the Harmonies. Their gatherings were to entertain. The Harmonies became the centers for social life and discussion. The Harmonies required humor and imagination: Funny Fantasies they were called. Poetry, plays, novels and stand up, sing-a-longs and soliloquies. Discussions brought out healing energies and realizations, existential and otherwise.

“Nice idea, seems exciting,” Omar III said. “The Corner let’s you have a view, but Fishburn’s poem is all there is of a distant Eden, a land of nakedness and freedom to breed by desire and children made of love as we may have once been.” He was a Third. His name told you that. His age made it obvious, but Omar II still lived and Omar IV was on the way—respect meant having your own name but carrying your genetic memory. The “Omar” told his lineage. Soon someone with that name would return to Earth, his name would be Omar X. “To go to the Corner ‘to see’ what one cannot see. To dream about a place which no longer can be. Drink merriness instead and dream a place for you to sleep in peace for as long as it

takes. Drink merriness and eat from all the trees, but one, that stand in the pods' gardens. Old ideas still live of a death before death, first the soul and then the body, of damnation—lost in depression and weariness. The tree is ego. Eat and the death comes that leaves your body living on without you. Harmonies cannot cure this ailment.”

Omar III had a sad poem that warned of imaginary places in the mind where traps lay that make life unbearable in the pods. Sometimes Omar III talked about the others who had followed Fishburn to “the Corner and Beyond,” as it was called. “Where did they go?” one began. “They went beyond to places only known to them. Their genes are pooled. Their ends were here or there, then or now. Why Beyond? What did they seek? Harmonies of silence and an end to lonely, and to the sadness no singing cures, the sadness of homesick, Earth just there - but in the future, Eden lost for centuries of generations of its people. Did they hope they would awaken from a nightmare of drowning in the Moon's air or did they seek it to become one with the Moon?”

Omar did not need to say what became of Fishburn—a mass of flesh deserted by its soul. Every molecule was recycled into plant food. Every organic molecule of everything in the pods was returned as breath, water or food.

Omar III did not think very far into the future. He would not live long enough to meet Omar X.

Omar X and Meredith X went around the Corner in a capsule SpaceX, sent in the last days of the old Earth. Now, there were twenty-three capsules orbiting The Smiths, ready to make the journey back. Omar X and Meredith X were the first molecules to leave the Moon to return to Earth.

The Smiths had lost communications with the Earth base during the first generation. Omar X and Meredith X were the first to return. The path back was simple, in a complicated way: Moon to orbit, dock with transport, blast to Earth orbit, doc with shuttle, shuttle down.

Omar X had studied probability. He knew what chances they had to live, to see the surface and breathe the air. Meredith X did not care how poor their chances were—since there was a chance, she had to have it.

The equipment was “fool proof.” Omar I had preset all the GPS data so that the landing zones were pre-chosen. The vehicles were automated. The humans were passengers with no actual role, including the use of the communication gear. Omar X was not a pilot anyway, but Meredith X was a communications specialist.

“Meredith X to The Smiths.”

“Gotcha square on. How’s the view?”

“Looks hot from here. I rigged a scanner to pick up data dots, like always. Nice picture. Full suits we will live for an air load. Twenty minutes, if it’s good, no doubt.”

“Look, Eve. Look at Eden. Look at 45th para North, near some lakes. It’s your set down spot. Better there than anywhere, we’re hoping.”

“That’s near Earth base. 110 degree lows. Highs will boil water. It’s all the same. 20 minutes. Know it.” Omar X said.

“You’re going down in five.” She said.

“Nope. Jammed the local computer. I choose now, not him, the old dead one.”

“Damn. What’s new there?” She said.

“A plan would help. Go down and die for nothing is not a plan. I hoped for more. Want to make a difference?”

“Is Reggie X around? Want him. There's a better bet, no doubt.” Meredith X had never raised her voice. “A machine am I. Clear of mind. Do, no doubt, don’t wait to think.”

Omar X had given up his life for the experience of seeing the view he now had.

“I do not want to go down to see you die.”

“Good, I’ll take your air with me,” Meredith X said. She had given up her life on the Moon to make a life on Earth. Omar X had not been part of it. She wanted “nature” and the wildness of spirit Fishburn I’s poem spoke about. “Ten minutes I leave. Get gone or go in ten, okay.”

“Gotcha.” Omar X spun from his seat and went back to the transport. Omar X was a rocket scientist. The view around him was a junkyard of parts and tanks with fuel and oxygen. “MP X, I will miss you. I will live here. I can live here. Goodluck.” Omar squeaked through the hatch as he swung the door shut.

“That’s a Roger over and the rest. See you next stop.”

“Eve, it’s Reggie X. Over.”

“Eight minutes until descent. Need a plan.”

“Find them. Tell them to let you in. Get them back on line. Make history.”

“GPS me on the dime. Need that or no nothing. Over.”

“We’ll drop within a few meters of the hatch. Make a sign to hold up to a port. Get their attention. The hatch will need to be opened from within. You must convince them to open it for you.”

“One word. ‘Help.’” Meredith offered.

“‘Sugar.’”

“That might do it. Try ‘News.’”

“‘Good News.’”

“How about you go to the radio room window and tell them the frequency for reaching us?”

“Is that the best we can get? In two hundred fifty years the equipment will be dead from lack of use. I’m on with ‘sugar.’”

“Goodluck.”

Reggie X knew her life expectancy was low, less than three hours. When her two canisters of air were empty, she would remove her face mask. What happens next was unknown. There were no dots to help him figure further than the loss of air in her suit.

The shuttle landing was bizarre. Meredith X was a passenger. The trajectory intersected several vertical structures that looked like giant mushrooms. The shuttle munched them into slime, then stopped neatly where she wanted to be. With face mask on she broke the air seal and stood up into the atmosphere.

“Hot,” she said. “Get a move.”

Meredith X never heard from Reggie X again, so she couldn't thank him for his excellent navigation that dropped her in the pod's front yard with the hatch clearly visible.

Her sign was three by five. The letters were made with some dark lubricant from the shuttle's inner hatch hinges. She could barely read it herself.

She went to the nearest port. It was nearing sunset. No lights were on. She could hear no sounds. She looked in the window. No one. She went to the hatch. It was not open.

"Thirty-five minutes," she said. "Find air. Find food. Find cooler."

She pulled the hatch open and made her way through the pod's main rooms. No one. Nothing. She reached a remote arm past the greenhouse, which was growing fine untended. The hatch to the arm was closed. She looked through the port and saw another human face looking back at her. She held up her sign. Nothing happened.

"Twenty-two minutes."

The greenhouse offered a view of about a fourth of the pod's structure. There were other greenhouses and remote arms past them, just like the one she stood in.

"Console room." Off she went, tracing her steps back through the pod until she found what she hoped was the console. "Different."

Meredith X was very fond of Reggie X. He was naturally smart about computers and taught her everything he knew. She was smart at social interactions.

"Found." She spun a chair to face a monitor that brightened as she slid down and began to examine the panel of LED lights and button switches.

“Hello,” she said into an obvious sound pickup device in the center of the table in front of the monitor. The sound that broke the silence was the sound of her voice at maximum volume. “Oops.”

“Hello,” she tried again. “Better.”

“Hello. I am Meredith X. I have seventeen minutes to live. Please open a door and let me breathe with you.” Her voice echoed through the pod.

“One more thing.” She spun a dial to reset the frequency. “Done.”

She rose and sped towards the entrance to the greenhouse.

This would be her last effort. Moon muscles, even exercised and developed for Earth gravity were not enough to make running possible. Now she was down to her last bit of strength. She fell part way through the greenhouse and lost consciousness.

XVI

“Reggie X made mention in his log that Meredith X may have found and entered the Earth base pod. She was trying to reset the frequency on the console so we could reestablish contact between us,” Reggie XVI said. “We have seen no sign that anyone has tried, but each day for these many years we seek a reply. Nothing yet.”

“What is that, two hundred years? My maths suck. That’s seventy thousand times,” Omar XVI said. “Wow, dedication.”

“Look for them. Land nearby and seek word of her. I made a booster for the com system on the shuttle. Line of sight and we might hear you on the surface. Meredith X had no hope of talk once she left orbit.”

“I am not going. You are.”

“Omar, my friend, I would be a pancake on the Earth. Flat and motionless. You have worked to do this. It must be you.”

“No. You have imagined this trip and I will stay. I will train you. You have a year or two to get ready.”

Reggie XVI sat with Omar XVI as the nightly Harmonies drew to an end.

“Reggie, how did we get here? I know my gene pool brought me to The Smiths sixteen generations past, when we began. By why must I go?”

“Oh El, you are called, because you were bred to be him—Omar I. You were made to return, as I was made to stay behind and dream of your life on Earth. You and Meredith XVI will find a new home and found a new human population.”

“I worry about this way of life and if it should be led. I hear poems from past Omars and Fishburn. I see the photos from the Corner,” Omar XVI said.

Silence followed, as was the habit of the place. Words are mulled and finely sifted, given time for everything to be said.

“Are you saying you don’t want to return according to The Plan?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“If I am Omar I, there is a reason. If I am Omar XVI Smith, born on The Smiths, there is another reason. You go. You follow The Plan in my place.”

“Ah. Um.” Reggie fidgeted in his seat.

Silence followed. The Harmonies remained. Time passed.

Omar XVI sat quietly at peace, having sipped of merriness. Reggie XVI sat, harmonious yet disturbed by the new thought that was running around at the top of its lungs, screaming unhappiness in search of something better.

Omar XVI sat humming paeans to his ancestors, melodies he'd learned as a child.

Reggie XVI spoke. "I will."

"What? Will what?"

"Your memory is better than that. You joked me. Yes, you did. I bit. Pan fry me."

Omar XVI said, "Pan fry me.' What's that mean?"

Reggie XVI hit the keys. "Old Talk for 'you caught me now, you can eat me.' It's about fish, an earth animal."

Omar XVI sat wondering if he might not have been serious as Reggie XVI might have been serious.

"Good," Omar XVI said.

"Caught you."

"No. I am serious. I love the Moon and want to follow Fishburn and Gerald and die at the Corner. Meredith XVI annoys me, small places make me violent and I think I suffer from agoraphobia. You go. You are better suited."

"But The Plan?"

"Fuck the plan."

"You're serious."

"Reggie XVI, you could be famous."

Silence ended the conversation.

No one in the Earth pod said “The Sistine Project.” No one spoke about The Plan.

The Bradley clan controlled the pod and the forest around it. The generations had passed the bad years inside, watching the desert take the old world, and then the new world blossoming for twenty-two generations. Now, the Bradleys would venture out.

History would talk about a grand adventure, leaving the inside for the outside, the outside that stood before them like a monster, to be fended off and conquered if possible.

Meredith XXII stood at the hatch and ordered it opened. It had never been opened in anyone’s memory. It resisted opening now.

“I have demanded the hatch be breached,” she said. No one moved. “God awaits us. He who made us and made the world around us awaits. Open the damn door. Use force. Make my way open.”

The men and women around her stood still until Omar XXII rose from his chair nearby. Then scurrying began as people moved away. He took up more space than any of the others.

“Now MP, let’s make this a solemn occasion. I know I have waited many days for this decision to be made by all the people who would be affected. I assume there is no one left who still objects. Wise choices or a series of unfortunate accidents, no doubt.”

“Don’t mess with me. There is a mango tree outside, fifty feet from the door. I have read about mangoes. I want one.”

“Patience. We might not be able to eat from these trees. Our biology has changed without input from these species. Be patient. Watch others.”

Meredith XXII spun from Omar XXII’s gaze as the sound of metal yielding to pressure brought her attention to the hatch again, and a smell she had never smelled.

The Children of Omar XXII waited on the edge of the woods. They had been there for six generations. Other Clans of Omar existed elsewhere, but contact was difficult and spotty. The Omars had wondered about the Bradleys, calling them the Children of Meredith. They stood back from them so that the Bradleys had no reason to suspect their presence.

One day that changed. The Bradleys came out in the open.

Most days nothing happened.

Watching was the only thing one did on those long days, browsing the goats through the maple forests. Watching and imagining. Fishburn XXVIII watched the edge of the Moon, waiting to see signs of God. Omar XXVI and Meredith XXVI talked about a place called Corner and the Womb of God, they were out “in the Heavens,” they said.

At the first darkness of the night, a speck of light rose from the edge for twenty-two seconds. Fishburn XXVIII saw it. He had stayed awake until sunrise, following the Moon across the sky.

Every night he watched the night sky for the second sign, the flame that meant God was coming to Earth again. The story was of many such sightings. Flares in the sky burning brightly as they descended, the vehicle of God which brought the angels and an ark—a ship—within which God dwelled.

For six days Fishburn watched for the second sign. On the sixth day the flame appeared directly above him. It fell to Earth in a field a few miles north of the goat pens. He left the goats and hurried towards the spot.

Fishburn XXVIII was an Omar XVI clansman. He spoke a clannish dialect. He had encountered a Child of Meredith a few years ago. They said hello to one another.

“Where are you from?” he asked.

She looked a little afraid, it seemed to him.

“You talk a crock, old man,” she said.

“My name is Fishburn XXVIII. Who are you?”

“A daft and silly one is you to stop a warrior on the path with jumble in your mouth. I spit on you.” She did, then off on foot she went, away from him. He stood and watched her flee, not understanding a word.

That was the only Meredith he’d come across.

When Fishburn XXXVIII cleared the top of the ridge overlooking the field he saw he was not alone. Two angels were leaving the ark, while four humans lay quiet, a dozen yards away. The angels saw the others. The others stood and shook their fists at the angels. In their hands were the weapons the Bradleys carried: a sword, an axe, a knife—all made from parts of the earth pod, beaten into shapes and ground to a sharp edge for cutting or killing.

The angels wore suits that covered their bodies and heads. In a flash they were rocketed fifty feet above the ground, safely away from the now aggressive Bradleys who approached the ark with threatening gestures. Fishburn XXVIII watched The Bradleys, who were yelling the gibberish they talked.

What happened next was as weird as anything he’d ever seen.

While Fishburn XXVIII stood on the ridge and the angels hovered above the four Bradleys, the ark began to glow with a yellow light. A voice broke the silence as the others were frozen in their footsteps.

“We are from The Smiths, returned home after twenty eight generations.”

Of course, no one understood, but the saying was enough to scare the others into running willy nilly through the field and into the brush. Fishburn XXVIII knew

some of the words. “The Smiths” was another name for the Womb of God, where everyone came from. “Twenty eight generations” sounded like his clans naming scheme.

“We were sent by Omar I, the father, to find Meredith I, the mother, to begin a new race of humans.”

Fishburn XXVIII wondered about the meaning, but he knew ‘Omar’ and ‘Meredith’ since his clan’s lore was about the first humans on the Earth and they were called Omar and Meredith.

Strangely brave, Fishburn XXVIII went down the hill to join his distant kin, newly arrived and needing a hand.

The angels came to land near the ark.

Fishburn XXVIII walked confidently forward saying, “Fishburn, Omar XVI clan. You are Omar XXVIII and Meredith XXVIII from the Children of Omar. I watched you leave the Moon six nights ago and saw you land today.”

“Funny lingo, old and new and stuff I do not get. He thinks he knows us? What’s with you?” Omar XXVIII said.

Meredith XXVIII said, “He calls himself Fishburn....”

“Yes! Fishburn. Poem. ‘Steady Earth, home to me,’” Omar XXVIII said.

“He and his people have been here for twelve generations, if we understand him.”

“You get me. Twelve is on the dot. Welcome home,” Fishburn said.

“Fishburn, are there more like you? Who were the ones who ran away?”

“Meredith, I doubt he understands.”

“I get you. I understand. Old words to me. Get me. I saw you. I found you. You are mine.” Fishburn stood before them, easily two feet taller and able in the Earth’s gravity. “Undress. Naked and free of burdens. You are home and I will help you.”

“What is he saying?” said Omar XXVIII. “ I give.”

“‘Naked and free’ is from Fishburn’s poem. This Fishburn is asking us to join him.”

“Meredith XXVIII, I have strong desires for you, naked it might tempt me.”

“Omar XXVIII, you are daft.”

“Yes. Daft and silly.” Fishburn had a plan.

“Gin honey. You know what I mean?”

“I’ll take a walk with you. With or without?”

“What? Armed? Too heavy. Take what you are. Keep an eye.”

Gin and Jim slowly walked the twenty-two flights to the ground. The Sun was filtered by the morning mist, but the temps were plus a hundred. No one moved but them.

“Where’s people?”

“Aren’t any, last I looked.”

“None now,” Gin said, walking faster through the open streets, waiting in doorways to watch. Jim trailed her, looking here and there and backwards, walking backwards, turning to go ahead.

Jim stopped and called her back to him. “It’s here.”

“No one sees?”

“Let’s hope.”

“No prob. There is a sealed wall below. Secure to be sure.”

Jim wrenched a metal circle out of the sidewalk. A tube down.

“Let’s go.”

Once she was through, he replaced the lid as he descended.

The temperature dropped twenty degrees underground. The solitude and closed space calmed them both. The weather was not a friend to them. The Astoria Tower had become hot, now that the electrical generation had been reduced to military only, if that. Nothing had flown across their view for months, and once their food and water fell to critical levels they had to move.

“Gin,” he had said. “Let’s go back into Storage. Food, water, cool forever. Trust me. Omar, Reggie and I set it up big time. It all works auto. Even with the computers off it will not foul up. There is no internet service. So why use a computer?”

“Trust is easy,” she said, “but then what? Have a kid? Wait to die? Not my way. How about finding others and bring them down. We have a lot of room for nurseries.”

“Omar told me where to find the manual. There will be ideas about how to set that up. He called it a breeding plan, so we don’t mess up our gene pool.”

As they moved through the abandoned Blanche, Inc. World Headquarters, the security doors yielded to their passes. They slowly worked their way through the cavernous Storage. Everything they saw helped their confidence. After a meal together, they began to make plans for sorties into the city to find “good blood” to bring back.

Gin’s idea for good blood was qualitatively different from Omar’s. After the first day of “foraging” for potential new friends, they decided that finding humans in Chicago was not dissimilar to deer hunting.

They built a blind. They set their bait. They waited. They watched the humans come to feed. They picked their target according to their beliefs in what would be good. They watched the feeding, then dropped down to follow their prey.

“Two is better than one,” Gin said.

“A mating pair?”

“No children.”

“Mating pair might work, but something Omar said about numbers. He said with fewer numbers to begin, we will need to control random mating to reduce genetic drift and mutations.”

“He suggested twenty people—ten male, ten female. There is a device in the medical center in the Men’s Club that will analyze our DNA and a program on the system that will produce a mating chart.”

“How romantic.”

They passed up the first few humans that were attracted by the bait. Then by following one, they found a young couple clutching hands, holed up in a basement three stories below the Marriott. They sat still and listened to the pair talk about the food they’d found.

“Don’t know where it came from. Just sitting there. No one around. No one I could see,” he said.

“Catch em.”

“Why?”

“Eat em.”

“Nah. Not me.”

“Follow em. Get their food.”

“Something’s funny,” he said. “They left food sitting there.”

“Maybe they are hunting us,” she said.

They talked in circles, trying to find an explanation and devise a plan. Gin and Jim laid quietly, using sign language to query each other about what they were hearing.

“Good blood?”

“Good blood.”

“Talk to them?”

“Lure them.”

When dark fell, the young pair left to set a trap for whoever he'd left the food. But Gin and Jim had already set a ‘Hansel and Gretel trail.’

Chicago had never been windier. The average winter wind speed was in excess of one hundred miles per hour. The litter in the street had long since been blown into Indiana, to be replaced by organic material that soon would be replaced by the dust that surrounded the earth and sea.

Gin XXIX had made the trip from Storage to the Men's Club for a look outside. This day it was raining. She had seen it before. No one remembered the names of the buildings out there. Most were ground down to a stack of rusting sticks. The wind had seen to that. The blowing sand had worn away bricks and mortar and most everything except the granite walls that stood like plinths as memories of the souls buried beneath them in the private tombs the rich had hoped would be enough to save them.

The men who built the Men's Club had been prescient enough to use little glass in its façade. She had never seen the outside of the building but imagined a castle-like structure with slits shielded from wind and sun.

She went to the pool room to find her family. There were still twelve alive, but not one new one for XXX generation. They were alone. From what she had seen, no one would look for them even if others still existed.

As she passed the entrance vestibule, she turned towards the main door for a peek out the peep hole. Sometimes it was her best view. The glass was a lens that enlarged the view while distorting it into concentric circles. She thought of it as a ring of rainbows surrounding her eye. Today there was a movement. Something

gray, with a glass-like shine, moved closer to the door until it blocked the entire scene. Doing what she had never done, she reached for the knob and pulled the door open. A rush of heat and humidity enveloped her.

Meredith XXIX walked through the door unmolested.

“I found you. I am Meredith XXIX from the Moon.”

Gin XXIX backed up to make room for the mumbling human form to enter. She had dreamed about encounters with strangers. This was it.

“Stop. Please, stop.” She raised her hand in an unmistakable gesture. Meredith XXIX halted. Gin XXIX closed the door against the weather.

“I am happy to find you,” Meredith XXIX said.

“What are you? Robot.”

“Robot. You think I am a robot?”

“Not me. You,” she said, pointing. “You are a robot?”

“No.” Meredith XXIX wanted to take off her helmet and suit. She’d had it on for weeks to acclimatize and survive in hostile environments. “Watch.”

Her gloved hands found it difficult to pull the latches on her face plate. Gin XXIX reached up and turned the locks, freeing Meredith XXIX.

“Thanks to you. Free—if the air can be breathed.” Meredith XXIX took a short suck on her air tube, then braved the native air. First several short, tentative efforts, followed by the first breathe on Earth.

“My name is Gin XXIX.”

“Gin?”

“Yes.”

“Is that Ginger of Jim and Ginger. Jim and Ginger”

“Yes. Jim and Ginger.”

Meredith XXIX pulled her intercom from her suit and spoke into it.

“Found them. Air is good. A woman named Gin XXIX. She seems to know Jim and Ginger.”

“Roger that. The Smiths will know by Moonrise. Over,” Omar XXIX said.

Meredith XXIX sat down. Then laid down.

“Sick? Stay. I will be back,” Gin XXIX said as she patted the shoulder of the only stranger she had ever seen.

Meredith XXIX lost consciousness. Even the act of breathing was tiring. When she returned to her body she was surrounded by a tribe like none she ever imagined. There were two dozen longhaired, bearded and heavily tattooed men. The women as naked as the men, their skin unblemished, their hair in long braids.

Meredith XXIX rose to a sitting position. She was made to drink a glass of water or “goodenough” as Gin XXIX kept saying to her while pointing at the liquid. She was then made to stand, then carried between two men and taken down and through a long tunnel to another set of rooms that felt several stories beneath the surface.

“Storage,” Gin XXIX said.

“Storage,” Meredith XXIX repeated. “Console room? Take me. Please.”

“Console room?” Gin XXIX repeated, as she looked for a sign on someone’s face that they knew what she was talking about. “We do not understand.”

Meredith XXIX had a faint memory of a place called ‘Storage’ that was part of the Blanches’ history. She was sent to find Jim and Gin’s kin, or at least for any news of them, but if these people are in here, then Jim and Gin must have led them in twenty-nine generations ago.

The room they were in was large and filled with more than fifty people. On one wall was a bank of monitors, all blank. A keyboard lay before them. Moving slowly, she sat in a very comfortable chair while the others watched her, not interfering, but curious as to what she would do next.

She found the power button but was unable to brighten the monitors. She pointed at the keyboard and then the monitors. “More?”

“More dark mirrors? The homes below have same.” Gin XXIX grabbed Meredith XXIX’s hand and exited down a stairs to the next level. The walked through a door that needed a key to enter. “The past is in here. The dark mirrors.”

“This is it.” Meredith XXIX pressed a power button. No help. She turned slowly, looking at eye-level for a clue.

“There. A switch. Flip it.” Meredith XXIX rose up the stair high enough to flip it and lights appeared on the console. “Thank you, Ravi XXIX. This is the console room. Reggie XXIX and Omar XXIX almost lived in here before they left for The Smiths.”

“The Smiths. You are from The Smiths, from the Heavens?”

“Yes, the Heavens which you have never seen. I want to open up comms to the Comsat. Takes a min. Stand and I will be done in a few.” Her fingers danced across the keys as she adjusted the frequency between the Earth satellite and the Moon satellite, the Lady’s Club and Reggie XXIX.

The others stood about, but one especially interested in Meredith XXIX’s movements and the lights that went on and off as she checked the equipment for usefulness to her purpose. She found a folder with videos, and she punched one up. A woman had a small white instrument in her hands. She was pressing it into and pulling it out of a man’s anus. He was strapped to a tabletop and moaning in pleasure.

Meredith XXIX punched up another one that replaced the first. It was the same woman moving through an area that was green in color.

“Trees,” someone said. The ones who could see became very excited. Meredith XXIX had never seen anything like it.

“Trees. I’ve never seen them through the glass,” Gin XXIX said.

Gin XXIX stood up from crouching near the screen. The others in her family moved back from the console and Meredith XXIX.

“Wassa?” said Gin XXIX, causing a chorus of complaint.

“No more.”

“Jim and Gin warned us.”

“Do not learn the past or we will repeat it.”

Meredith XXIX sat stunned at the cacophony she strained to understand. Gin XXIX took two steps, following the path that Ravi I took a thousand years ago.

Her hand reached for the switch. Meredith XXIX watched, seeing the end of her mission.

101 XXXI

Reggie XXXI and Ravi XXXI left the Womb in their outdoor clothes. Ravi XXXI had meticulously opened every port and hatch except the greenhouses. Reggie XXXI had stopped all power use but for the water pumps the greenhouses needed.

“Silly. They are my friends, these crops.”

“That’s okay. They will be along shortly.”

They walked slowly through every room, looking for something, anything, that would catch their interest.

“Last time. Said ‘Goodbye.’” Reggie XXXI stood with his back to the console room. Ravi XXXI held his hands, slowly pulling him towards her as she backed towards the hatch and the outside world.

He did not say a word to her. She only cooed into her headset. It was only when their ETV was humming across the surface that he spoke.

“I found a story I hadn’t read. Long story in the old talk. It was Reggie I and Ravi I. Reggie XVI translated it into our language. It still sounded odd and difficult to get. I got stuff. Stuff about how we got here and why we came here.”

“Was I right?” she asked.

“Yes. We are done. The Plan is over. We can go.”

“We will be the last of The Smiths.”

“The people on the Earth don’t miss us.”

“Really, we cannot know if they do. Reggie, why did they stop talking to us?”

“Records show we could not understand each other anymore. We were stuck here with everything settled and the same. They are adapting to circumstances that are changing. No matter. Over’s over.”

“Not sad. I want to take a breath.”

“I want to be naked in the sunshine.”

“Swim in a lake.”

“Eat from the forest.”

“Have sex in the sunshine.”

Ravi XXXI stopped the vehicle.

“Let’s hop from here. Like a walk in the park.”

“What does that mean?”

“Old talk for ‘easy as pie.’”

“Pie?”

“A sweet dish that required grains we did not bring.”

“Ah. Pie and ice cream. Heaven on Earth. Old talk is funny. Let’s hop.”

The Corner had become a special place. It was the closest point to the Lady’s Club on the rim of the Moon. It is the closest place a Farsider could go to see the Earth. In the last three generations, many people came here to give themselves to the

Moon. Before, their bodies would have been brought back for burial in the plasma kettle. Recently the feelings had changed and as time passed more and more the bodies laid where they had rested.

Ravi and Reggie could see the suits scattered about before they had gone far enough to see the Earth rise. Many people may never have seen it or much of it.

First there was the glow of Earth atmosphere that held and reflected the light the Sun provided. Then there was the blue and white. Reggie wanted to see how big it was and they kept going until they could see 2/3rds of its diameter.

“Here. Sit here.”

“Words?”

“None.”

“Read Fishburn.”

“It runs through my head all day long, not yours?”

“Silence seems wrong.”

“Silence is our goal.”

Silence lasted a few minutes until the suit alarms toned.

“Oops,” said Reggie as he leaned over to override the alarm on Ravi’s suit. She returned the favor.

“I want to go.”

“Stay a bit more, unless it is sorrow.”

“I am tired.”

“It will be like sleep.”

“Goodluck.”

There is no sound. The end is fast.