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All events and characters in this work are fictional.  
Any resemblance to reality is purely coincidental.

Or not.

## PREFACE:

John Gutman was in his office. The fluorescent lights cast a dim light.

Fluorescent lights use less energy than regular light bulbs, but they consume more when switched on, so they're suitable for uses where the light will be on for a long time, although LED bulbs were all the rage these days. But none of that mattered anymore. Not the unpaid bills, not the creditors demanding payment, not the competitors who had been making his life miserable to grab a bigger slice of the pie. None of that mattered anymore.

He sat in his desk chair, elbows on the table, head in his hands, mentally reviewing the reasons that had led him to this situation. Finally, he took his Desert Eagle .50 pistol from the drawer and pressed it against his temple. He squeezed the trigger. The high-speed bullet pierced his skull, as well as the drywall of the small office, finally embedding itself in a thirty-centimeter-thick concrete wall.

## CHAPTER I

July 3, 1947

Under the scorching Nevada desert sun, a lone lizard crossed one of the two dusty runways at Groom Lake Airfield, a remote Air Force outpost built five years earlier that would later become Area 51. The team consisted of William Gallagher, Oliver Newton, and Billy Schneider. William and Oliver were in charge of classifying and storing all the information, while Billy was a young, recently promoted Air Force officer. He was ambitious and proud of his status; there, he was responsible for leading meetings with extraterrestrial beings when they occurred and ensuring that proper safety measures were in place, since there was classified information predicting that such an event would happen in that area at some point—information supposedly obtained from flying saucers that had crashed without occupants, allegedly intentionally, years earlier across the United States. The day before, the first flying saucer with an occupant inside had crashed nearby, and the occupant had been taken to the Groom Lake facility under the strictest secrecy.

Billy led the meeting:

- Okay, how is the subject?
- He is being held in the cell, it appears he is sleeping.
- Wake him up and take him to the interrogation room.

Two uniformed guards escorted the humanoid out and into another room, which was fitted with a one-way mirror. From the inside, it was perfectly visible from the outside. Behind it stood Bill Hartman, ready to extract as much information as possible from the individual. The guards secured the humanoid's arms to the chair, which had metal wrist restraints, and then locked them, preventing any possibility of movement or standing up.

- Tell us, where does it come from?

"We are evolved descendants of Homo sapiens, we have evolved so much that we can no longer mix with your species," he said, in a tone that hinted at a feeling of anger.

- And how come you speak our language?

The humanoid hesitated for a few moments, after which Bill continued.

- Answer me, or I'll give you a dose of scopolamine... do you understand?
- Okay, so how come you speak our language?
- Learning your languages is essential to be able to study you and understand your species; we know each and every language on your planet.
- So, you know all our languages because you're... very intelligent... right?
- Relatively, yes.
- If you're so intelligent, then explain to us how the universe was created?

You are incapable of understanding or accepting the truths of existence. Something cannot be created from nothing; existence is infinite, without beginning or end. A universe is an infinitesimally small part of existence. There are an infinite number of universes, one contained within another. Each universe has a limited lifespan and can also be intentionally destroyed. As I said, you are incapable of accepting the truths of existence.

- So, does every universe have a creator?
- Each universe is created as a consequence of a series of random events that converge at the same point, creation.

- So, if the universe is the result of random events, can we say that the universe has no meaning, and therefore we also have no reason to be... So... what is the meaning of existence?

- There is meaning. - I

think you're contradicting yourself. -

Meaning is found in the mind. - No, no... You

can't live a meaningful life if that meaning is something imaginary.

- This universe, as well as your life, has a meaning, but you think that this meaning is due to a mystical plan, it is not so.

- So, what is the meaning?

- The meaning is whatever you give it.

- So what meaning should we give it, then?

- Your species will eventually become extinct because you have not been able to accept the true meaning of life.

- Oh yeah? And how exactly is it going to become extinct?

- Due to a series of random catastrophic events.

- Okay... I think we've had enough for this time, we'll continue in the next session.

The creature exhaled and tilted its head slightly, as the two guards entered the room to proceed with its return to the cell.

#### NEW YORK, A FEW DECADES LATER

John Evans looked away from his interlocutor to fill his second glass of whisky "on the rocks".

They were both seated on armchairs upholstered in faux leather, that kind of leather made of plastic but with a texture similar to real leather. Light from LED advertising signs filtered through the large glass window of the lounge.

- So, what do you think of them, you know, the "little gray men," Arthur?

"Well, they seem nice," he replied. "They've

given us all this cutting-edge microchip technology and whatnot, as well as advances in social engineering. It all scares me quite a bit. What if their intentions aren't entirely good, as they've led us to believe?"

- Well, we'd be really annoyed.

John took a sip of his whiskey and placed the glass on the glass table with a thud.

- It's curious, because according to all reports, all the flying saucers that have crashed were empty, yet we have managed to extract a lot of information using reverse engineering as well as extracting the plans that were stored in their onboard computers, except for one in particular, which crashed on July 2nd, 1947 in Roswell, about which there is very little official information.

"I think if they had wanted to harm us, they would have done so already. In any case, we can't compete with them in any way. Their technology and social skills are infinitely superior to anything we can imagine," she declared.

- I think you've also become curious about extraterrestrials.

Don't get me wrong, I have my reservations about this whole thing too. To be honest, it sometimes gives me the creeps.

John took another sip and placed the glass back on the table, this time more gently.

John arrived at his apartment. After being with Andrew, he was hungry and sleepy. The place was a modest apartment, about forty square meters. It had a wall-mounted television, a spacious sofa, and an open-plan kitchen. As soon as he arrived, he ordered a pizza through the online food delivery system.

Just after putting on her loungewear, the pizza appeared through the kitchen conveyor belt exit.

It was an ingenious system designed to eliminate the hassle of preparing food for human consumption. The building featured a fully automated "kitchen room" that heated pre-prepared frozen dishes. The menu offered a wide variety of dishes and desserts, which were heated and placed on a conveyor belt that delivered them to the apartment where they had been ordered.

The policeman ate the last slice of pizza and placed the empty plate back on the conveyor belt to be sent back to the kitchen, where it would be cleaned and prepared for reuse. He turned on the television to watch a Vikings-Panthers game, and later fell asleep on the couch.

Claire and Mike were at the Infinitum nightclub, a trendy venue where people were dancing to techno music. They were sitting on one of the sofas in a more secluded area, away from the dance floor; a gin and tonic for him, and a margarita for her. They were engrossed in their own conversation, completely oblivious to the party, and no one was paying them the slightest attention.

"You know, they say Hitler was an enlightened one," she said.

- I think that's true, because he wasn't even German, he was Austrian. It's curious, because they had the best tanks, the best planes, the best submarines, the best of the best of everything, and yet they still lost the war.

- I certainly believe that.

- It reminds me of the Illuminati thing; people are crazy about it, but I'm worried about where it might lead us.

- Well, we're not supposed to repeat the same mistakes of the past.

- That's what they say.

Everyone else was still caught up in the party, as if possessed by something, something greater than any individual. They formed a kind of uniform mass that moved to the rhythm of the music. The lasers mounted on the ceiling moved from side to side, as did the beams of light emanating from small spotlights. One of them created a cone of light rays that rotated on its own axis while moving randomly in all directions. Claire resumed the conversation.

- Well, you get used to it. You know, my father told me to go see a man next week. His name is James Stuart. He said he's an interesting man, that I should talk to him. I'm actually intrigued.

- I don't know, I don't know him.

Mike picked up his drink and brought it closer to Claire's, who did the same.

- Out of curiosity.

- Out of curiosity.

The crowd remained absorbed by the music, dancing to its rhythm.

Claire had a natural curiosity that led her to want to know about all the matters that were

within their reach, especially metaphysical questions, such as life and death, or what lies beyond.

She simply didn't understand why so many of the things happening around her were considered "taboo." What she was about to do was write a diary. She'd never done it before, but there's a first time for everything, she told herself. She sat down at her desk and picked up a blank sheet of paper. This was a momentous act for her; she wanted to write something that would be useful to future generations. A book is like a small time machine: it allows ideas, concepts, and thoughts to travel to the future and reach people in a time and place very different from the one in which it was originally written. Despite writing a diary, Claire aspired to one day write a great book; one of those books that people buy in physical format just to display on their bookshelves. But for now, she was content with writing a modest diary as a way to improve her fluency and, later on, to write her masterpiece. She took a pen from the pencil holder and timidly began to write the first lines:

Yesterday I was at the Infinitum nightclub, talking to Mike about everything, but it seems he doesn't have the answers I need. I'm going to have to investigate further; I'll talk to Ryan and my dad to see if they can help me with this.

It was a rainy night, although it had stopped raining at that moment. Advertising posters were plastered on building facades everywhere, and light from them filtered through Claire's window.

Ryan Burke worked for the secret service, which gave him access to classified information. He and Claire had been friends since childhood, and they knew each other quite well. That day, he was eating noodles at one of the many Chinese food stalls around the city. In the background, he could hear the hum of electric cars coming and going, occasionally interrupted by the splashing of water as they hit puddles. Suddenly, a woman approached and asked him for a cigarette. He took one of his long cigarettes and offered it to her. The woman took it, looking him straight in the eye, then turned and disappeared into the crowd. Not many people smoked in the Illuminati, so this couldn't have been a coincidence: it was the secret service. Definitely. The way these individuals acted seemed, to say the least, bizarre. Just then, a man took his place and said to him:

You know, there's a debate about which invention is the most important for humanity. Some say it was fire, others the wheel, but for me it's neither. For me, the most important invention in the world is communication: the ability to transfer ideas and concepts to each other. Without it, we wouldn't have achieved anything. The capacity of a group is incomparable to that of an individual.

After which, the man turned around and disappeared into the crowd, just like the woman.

Claire was in the airport terminal, planning to spend some time in Washington, where both her father and her friend Ryan had moved for work. She stood at the counter of a cafeteria, about to choose between a salmon sandwich or a croissant that looked slightly artificial. She chose the croissant. To drink, she ordered a fresh orange juice and sat down at one of the corner tables. From there, she had a complete view of everything happening around her. The sun was setting, and its rays streamed through the terminal's large glass facade, giving an orange hue to the fuselage of the plane in front of her and everything else within it. The men and women on the tarmac, as well as the machines, moved about in a kind of chaotic order. Ideas and thoughts swirled in her head. "Will everything go well? Should I be direct, or beat around the bush a bit before getting down to business? If I'm too direct, he might get upset. What a mess." Suddenly, she noticed a man standing at the register. He turned and glanced at her. He was carrying a tray with a cortado. He sat down a couple of tables away.

Further on, facing her, with his back to the window, she took a sip of juice and broke her croissant in half, watching the man. He seemed engrossed in reading a newspaper, occasionally glancing at her. She felt watched. She had nothing to fear, as she wasn't doing anything wrong, but the situation made her uneasy.

The flight was uneventful; the plane touched down smoothly on the airport runway. Ryan was waiting for her there, having parked his car in the arrivals terminal parking lot. She waved to him when she saw him, and he waved back. He picked up her suitcase, and they both headed to the car.

- Claire, it's so good to see you! What have you been doing all this time?

- Well, I've been gathering information, you know, going back and forth all the time.

- Well, I suppose you have a lot of questions. I don't think you came all this way just for one day to see old Ryan.

- Well... yes... a few.

Don't worry, I'll tell you what I can, and what I can't, you'll have to find out on your own. How about we go for dinner at a Thai restaurant?

- Perfect.

The restaurant was packed; they had to wait about fifteen minutes for a table to become available, but it was worth it. This was one of the best restaurants in the city. Once seated, Ryan resumed the conversation.

- Well, tell me, what brings you here? You've got me intrigued.

- I'm doing a research project on the Illuminati, and I need information.

It was clear that the only way to approach the conversation was directly, as Ryan had given him no other option.

- Well, tell me, go ahead, shoot.

- What are you working on now? For example.

- Well, there are currently a series of operations underway aimed at, let's say, "eliminating" the secret groups that still operate around the world. It's undeniable that any average citizen should be concerned that a shadowy power is deciding their future, and that of their country, without them being able to do anything to stop it.

- But that's a bit contradictory, don't you think? I mean, the Illuminati is riddled with groups that operate in secret.

- Yes, you're right, but we always do it solely and exclusively for the good of the human race.

- It was a predictable response.

- I know, but it's the truth.

- And what can you tell me about the Illuminati?

Well, here, each person is a vital part of a larger machine that benefits all of humanity and is in turn benefited by all of humanity. Each person has the freedom to discover their purpose, to follow their passion, to improve themselves, and to see how their efforts contribute to the lives of eight billion other people, instead of simply serving themselves and their needs. Furthermore, free will is guaranteed; that is, each human being has absolute freedom regarding their actions and can choose the path of good or evil, although that always has consequences, of course.

- Wow! It sounds like you took it from a manual.

- That's what I'm authorized to say.

- And the aliens? Where are they really?

- Well, we assume they're simply observing us from a distance from their planet or their spaceships and constantly debating our situation. Things went wrong with the first visitor from space; we don't really know why, but we couldn't get any truly useful information out of them, which set back our evolution as a species significantly. Now, after several years, we're beginning to identify the

The problem is that we've at least managed to reach a stalemate with them, where, let's say, they're starting to want to help us again, but there's still a long way to go to win their favor.

- Yes... I understand... and how did they manage to get here? I mean, the distances in the universe are enormous; just crossing the Milky Way takes light one hundred thousand years, so that civilization must have started its journey a long time ago, otherwise, how is it possible? "You see, they've shown us that it's possible to stay in contact despite the vast distances of the universe. I can't tell you more; it's classified information."

## CHAPTER II

Claire stood in front of the TWC Telekom building. It was a concrete building, with an appearance solid, without windows. It had large square openings arranged along its entire length, which served as ventilation ducts to circulate the air necessary for cooling the computer server systems inside.

She took out her phone and indicated to her contact, James, that she was already at the door, after which there was a beep and the sliding glass doors opened with a whirl. In front of her there was a spacious hall with three elevators at the far end. On either side were corridors flanked by a series of arches with their respective columns, made of concrete but in such a way that they resembled stone. These arches and columns separated the hall from what appeared to be the main room. The other side of the corridor was a wall. Claire could make out some doors in both walls, whose destinations were unknown. The place had a majestic air.

In the center of the room stood a sculpture of the god Atlas, kneeling with one knee on the ground, carrying a large globe on his shoulders. Certainly, that sculpture hadn't been chosen at random, but she still didn't fully grasp its meaning. She walked to the far end, and as she stood before the central elevator, the doors opened with a soft hum. She stepped inside and turned around, as usual. To the right of the doors was a panel indicating the current floor, as well as a list of all the floors in the building. Floor number thirty-three was automatically selected, and the doors closed in front of her. She wouldn't have known the elevator was starting if not for a sudden surge of gravity pulling her downward. After a few seconds, she reached the indicated floor. The doors opened, and before her lay a large, column-free hall with rows of large, black servers.

Each side of the room extended to the walls on either side, creating a kind of central corridor. Lighting came from fluorescent tubes hanging from the ceiling and running the length of the walkways. At the far end was a table with a computer monitor, keyboard, and mouse, as well as the computer tower. In front of the table was a simple armless desk chair pushed to one side. James sat there, dressed in a long-sleeved shirt and brown chinos.

- Hello Claire, welcome

- Hello

- How's everything going?

- Okay, what is this site?

- This? This is one of the most important places in America. It's a global data collection center. Absolutely every call made passes through these servers and is stored. Each number is associated with a person. If you want to search for something, you just have to identify a person on the computer along with the keywords for what you want to search for, and then the system extracts all the conversations where

Those words appear. Once you've done that, you can listen to the entire conversation. I'm the administrator of the entire system, and therefore I have full access. And besides that, I also work for the government. Well, you might be wondering why we've brought you all the way here.

Claire nodded shyly.

- Well, it turns out there's a group of people we want to get our hands on; they're important people. Important and powerful, very powerful, and some people think they're responsible for most of the bad things that happen in the world. We need them to

Get to know them and gather as much information as you can.

- Okay, if that's what I have to do, I'll do it.

- Very good, perfect.

James gave him a mocking smile.

- Anything else?

- Yes, try not to get too close to anyone, nobody knows what might happen.

- Okay, I'll try not to.

- Well, let's see how far you can go, I wish you luck.

- Thank you

- Okay, so your first contact will be at a party they're throwing. You know, these people throw parties that are more like get-togethers to talk about their stuff. You'll go there and try to get invited to more parties, and that way you can keep gathering information.

- OK.

- Okay, here's the address and time of the party.

John handed her a piece of paper on which he had written the address, as well as the day and time.

- You will go there and if anyone asks you, you will say that you are coming on behalf of your father, Mr. John Sullivan.

- OK

Well, I have nothing more to add. Do you have any questions?

- "Well, no," Claire said, shaking her head.

- Okay, then that's settled. We'll meet again and you can keep me updated on how you're doing.

- Very good

- Oh, and remember: Life is simple and easy for those who want to believe it is.

- Take care, John, we'll see each other soon.

- I hope things go very well for you.

Claire headed back to the central elevator. The doors opened, she stepped inside, and before she could press anything, the ground floor was automatically selected, the doors closed, and it began to descend.

As he stepped out of the elevator, he saw the Atlas statue again. Outside, it was already night. The statue was bathed in a dim light emanating from a row of orange lights lining both sides, where the arches stood. The sight evoked a somewhat eerie feeling, as the statue was shrouded in semi-darkness, giving it an air of

like a ghostly entity.

Claire stepped out of the elevator and stood for a few moments observing that ghostly vision.

After that, he walked towards the door and left the building.

She was feeling a bit hungry. Thinking she might like some Chinese food, she took her iThink out of her pocket and looked for the nearest Chinese restaurant. She was going to buy something for dinner, and a bottle of wine; it was going to be a special night. She had a lot on her mind as she walked along the sidewalk. He began to think about what our destiny was, whether it was to end up controlling each other in order to guarantee our survival as a species.

Claire stood before her bedroom mirror, trying on dresses and wondering how the party would go, who would be there, making guess after guess. She thought it best not to anticipate events and simply go with the flow. This was going to be a special night for her too, as she had never been in a situation like this before. In the end, she decided

He wore a black outfit; it was understated and elegant. After a long time fixing his face and Pelo grabbed her keys, purse, and mobile phone and left the house.

As the taxi approached its destination, a certain tension ran through her body. It was twenty minutes to eleven at night. A light rain was falling from the sky. Through the window, Claire could only see the lights of the other cars, as well as the raindrops sliding down the glass. The taxi stopped.

"We've arrived," the driver told him. "It'll be eighteen twenty."

- Here you go

Claire handed him her card, which the driver then held up to the on-board computer, after which a green "V" appeared on the screen, accompanied by a beep.

- Have

- Thank you, goodbye

Claire got out of the taxi and opened her folding umbrella in one swift motion, even though she was only about ten meters from the entrance. It was covered by a dull red, crescent-shaped awning that extended several meters outwards.

Underneath it was a matching, muted red carpet with a couple of lines

Gold on either side. All of this gave it a very elegant air. The entrance consisted of a translucent glass wall with vertical iron bars in front of it, through which the warm light from inside filtered. Claire approached the two men who were standing there, behind a lectern.

made of wood, both were dressed in suits.

"Good evening, miss. Could you tell me your name?" one of the two men blurted out, flashing a warm smile.

"Claire Sullivan," she replied, trying to force a smile in return.

"Okay, everything's fine, you can come in," he said, extending one arm obliquely and taking a step back.

Upon entering the lobby, he noticed several groups of people scattered around the room. A few more were seated on sofas placed against the walls. It was a fairly large room with a high ceiling from which hung circular crystal chandeliers made up of countless tiny pieces. Both the walls and ceiling were terracotta, with all the edges and borders covered in gold lines. The floor was polished wood. The beauty of the place overwhelmed him; he had never been anywhere like it. There were about twenty people there, arranged in small groups. They were all engrossed in their conversations, and no one seemed to notice his arrival. Pleasant music played softly in the background. He noticed that they were almost all men; there were only about three or four women among the twenty people who must have been there. A waiter strolled among the people carrying a tray laden with champagne glasses.

Suddenly a man approached him. He had a slim build, black hair parted in the side, brown eyes, black pleated trousers, and a striped shirt.

- Claire Sullivan?

- Yes that's how it is

- Let me introduce myself, my name is Michael Williams, but I'm called Mike.

- I have been entrusted with the task of being your host at this party, allow me to introduce you to some of the attendees.

She then approached two people who were there, and spoke to one of them, a heavysset man, who sported a bushy but impeccably groomed white beard.

- I'd like to introduce you to Dr. Norman Stadler, he's the director of the research area at the University of Berkeley.

- Pleased to meet you - Norman said, extending his hand in greeting, to which she did the same and they greeted each other with a handshake.

"And he is," Michael continued, "Oliver Marsh, he is the owner of a major investment fund."

"Delighted," Oliver said, earning him another handshake.

- Well, you'll have time to talk later if you wish, allow me to introduce you to the rest.

As they approached a group of people who were there conversing, Claire managed to overhear part of their conversation.

"Currently, thirty percent of its surface area has already been reduced, and the rate of deforestation is currently about ten thousand square kilometers per year, and it increases every year; we cannot wait longer.

Indeed, Mr. Jayden, the idea you propose is truly innovative and...

- Excuse me a moment, I'd like to introduce Miss Claire Sullivan, she's our newest guest.

The three members of the group proceeded to greet her, shaking her hand with a warm smile. One of them took the initiative.

-grege4

This is Mr. Patrick Bradley, a congressman; this is Bill Travis, a member of the White House Cabinet; and I am David Walker, chairman of the Natural Resources Committee. We were just discussing a very interesting idea: to bombard deforested areas of the Amazon from the air with biodegradable, cone-shaped containers tipped with a ceramic seed. We are considering pressuring the Brazilian government to adopt this solution.

- Wow, very interesting

- Otherwise, in a few decades we're going to run out of rainforest, because the rate of deforestation keeps increasing every year, and we all know that the Amazon is the lungs of the planet.

"Brazil will have to stop smoking," Patrick said.

The three of them burst out laughing in unison.

"Or at least do some sport," David added.

Claire was starting to feel comfortable at the party; they seemed like nice people.

"Would you like me to continue introducing you to the rest of the attendees, or would you like to stay here?" he asked.  
Norman

"I'm fine, but I'd like to continue a little longer," she replied.

- Okay, then let's get to it.

They started walking towards another group of three people, two men and a woman. As soon as these three realized they were coming, they lowered their voices until they were silent.

- How's the party going? Let me introduce you to Mrs. Claire Sullivan. Claire, this is Mrs. Sarah Parker, the Vice President's secretary. This is Dr. Henry.

Brooks is the director of the University of Massachusetts, and this is Aiden Smith, an alumnus.  
After leaving the university, he now dedicates himself to research.

The three proceeded to shake his hand amicably.

"So, are you enjoying the party?" Henry asked him.

- Yes, well, I'm still getting my bearings, but yes, I like it.

"We're sure you'll become a great journalist," Sarah said. Henry and Aiden looked at her seriously; Michael pretended not to hear anything.

This left Claire somewhat bewildered, as she had only mentioned her desire to study journalism to her father and a few friends, and her father wasn't one to go around telling people things; he was rather reserved, and in fact, it wasn't likely that he knew those people, but the point is that they knew.

- Yes, of course... thank you

Sarah looked at her with a confident smile.

- Does it dig?

She hadn't noticed, but the waiter had stopped beside her with the tray in his hand.

Claire picked up one of the glasses and took a sip, while observing her interlocutors.

- Okay... who else can I introduce you to... oh, yes!

- Come here please

He gently placed his hand on her elbow and led her to another group of three men. As they approached, one of them introduced himself directly, likely due to the effects of alcohol.

"Hello, miss," he said, extending his hand.

- My name is Wyatt Donovan, and I am the proud owner and CEO of Robco, it's a pleasure.

Michael then introduced him to the other two.

- He is Ryan Burke, former governor of the state of Nevada, now an advisor at Wyatt's company.

"Well, we don't have much in Nevada," he said with a mocking smile, "it's all desert... but we do have flying saucers!"

- And he is Igor Pavlovsky, he is the delegate of the Russian embassy in Washington.

"Let me tell you, miss," Igor added, with a distinctly Russian accent, "that despite what our respective governments would have us believe, relations between our nations are..."

much better than people think, especially on issues that affect the future of humanity and our planet.

Claire nodded, unable to hide her astonishment at such statements.

- We currently have people working side by side on issues of vital importance to humanity.

"And they also know how to make good investments," Wyatt added. "They recently helped me finance my corporation. We recently received an investment of one and a half billion dollars from the Novostok bank."

"We are happy to help when it's for a good cause," Igor stated.

- The truth is that my company is dedicated to doing research on topics essential to the progress of the human species, despite having such a rough name, from my point of view, and it seems that of other people as well, it is a vital entity so that society can reach its maximum human and social potential.

After this there was a silence in which it seemed that none of them knew what to say.

Wyatt broke his silence.

- Claire, did you know there's a lovely terrace here? Would you like me to show it to you?

- Yes of course

He started walking towards one of the doors there, and Claire followed him.

Upon opening the door, a beautiful square courtyard appeared before her, flanked by bushes, with a fountain stood in the center, and the ground was paved with stone. A few simple wooden chairs were arranged beside the door, under the awning above it. Wyatt took a pack of tobacco from his jacket pocket and removed a cigarette. He placed it between his lips and lit it with a Zippo lighter. He then took it away and exhaled a puff of smoke. He picked up one of the chairs and offered it to her; after thanking him, she sat down. He took another chair and sat down as well.

- Do you like the courtyard? I think it fits with the style of the building; it's nice.

- Yes, it's very beautiful.

It had stopped raining, yet the smell of wet grass still lingered in the air. The dark clouds in the sky had a few clear patches through which the moon could be seen.

-ger

You know, I know your father; I've spoken with him a few times. He's a good man, a good person. You know, some people think it's wrong to participate in the development of an amoral country, lacking real opportunities. However, there are others of us who don't think that way. In that

Suddenly, a young man in his thirties opened the door, which had been left ajar, and burst onto the scene.

- Everything alright, Mr. Wyatt?

"Yes, of course, wonderful. Look, Claire, I'd like you to meet Aiden. He was a star student at the University of Massachusetts, and now he works for me," he said, with a smile on his face.

- Excuse me if I interrupt, it's just that the atmosphere in there was getting a bit overwhelming and I needed some fresh air.

"No!" they both replied at the same time.

"You can stay as long as you like, there's no problem," Wyatt said.

- I suppose she is...

Wyatt raised his index finger, and, looking at him with a slight smile, brought it to his lips, while winking at him.

- Don't worry, you'll have a chance to talk later, but first I want to talk to her about a few things.

- Well, I think I've had enough fresh air, I'm going inside.

- Very good.

Aiden went back into the room, leaving the door closed behind him.

And there they were, the two of them, under the cloudy sky, listening to the constant tapping caused by the fountain that was there.

- You know, Claire, there's something I'd like to tell you.

- Oh, really? Tell me.

- Okay... How can I explain this? We have a lab in a central neighborhood near here. It's a research lab, run by Aiden, the guy you just met. He's a good guy, I'm sure you'll end up liking him. Here's what I'm proposing: that you visit the lab, on the condition that you keep everything you observe and learn there.

In absolute secrecy, you can't tell anyone, not even your father, okay?

Claire looked at him in puzzlement, nodding her head.

- So... is it a deal?

- Yes... of course... I won't tell anyone.

Fantastic! Great, then I'll talk to Aiden, Norman, and Henry and get everything ready for you to come and visit.

"Okay," she said, managing a shy smile.

- Okay, I think they must be missing us inside, shall we go in?

- Yes, okay.

He jumped up, and after placing his chair in line with the others, he took Claire's chair and did the same.

She opened the door, and as she did, the great amount of light inside dazzled her.

Just a moment. He moved forward, and Wyatt closed the door behind him. At that moment, Skeeter Davis's "The End of the World" was playing. That instant sent a shiver down his spine, followed by a feeling of joy that thrilled him for a moment; he had never felt like this before. The excitement of knowing he was going to have the privilege of discovering things that were forbidden to the rest of humanity at that time overwhelmed him, to the point that he had to restrain himself so that others wouldn't notice what he was feeling.

moment.

### CHAPTER III

Claire got out of the taxi and opened her folding umbrella in one swift motion, even though she was only about ten meters from the entrance. It was covered by a dull red, crescent-shaped awning that extended several meters outwards.

Beneath it was a matching, muted red carpet with a couple of gold lines.

each side. All of this gave it a very elegant air. The entrance consisted of a translucent glass wall with vertical iron bars in front of it, through which the warm light of the

Inside. Claire approached the two men who were standing there, behind a wooden lectern; both were dressed in suits.

"Good evening, miss. Could you tell me your name?" one of the two men blurted out, flashing a warm smile.

"Claire Sullivan," she replied, trying to force a smile in return.

"Okay, everything's fine, you can come in," he said, extending one arm obliquely and taking a step back.

Upon entering the lobby, he noticed several groups of people scattered around the room. A few more were seated on sofas placed against the walls. It was a fairly large room with a high ceiling from which hung circular crystal chandeliers made up of countless tiny pieces. Both the walls and ceiling were terracotta-colored, with all the edges and borders covered in gold lines. The floor was polished wood. The beauty of the place overwhelmed him; he had never been anywhere like it. There were about twenty people there, arranged in small groups. They were all engrossed in their conversations, and no one noticed his arrival.

Pleasant music played softly in the background. She noticed that almost everyone there was a man; there were only three or four women out of the twenty people who should have been there. A waiter strolled among the people carrying a tray full of champagne glasses. Suddenly, a man approached him.

He had a slim build, black hair styled in a side part and brown eyes, black pleated trousers and a striped shirt.

- Claire Sullivan?

- Yes that's how it is

- Let me introduce myself, my name is Michael Williams, but I'm called Mike.

- I have been entrusted with the task of being your host at this party, allow me to introduce you to some of the attendees.

She then approached two people who were there, and spoke to one of them, a man.

of heavy build, who sported a bushy but impeccably groomed white beard.

- I'd like to introduce you to Dr. Norman Stadler, he's the director of the research area at the University of Berkeley.

- Pleased to meet you - Norman said, extending his hand in greeting, to which she did the same and they greeted each other with a handshake.

"And he is," Michael continued, "Oliver Marsh, he is the owner of a major investment fund."

"Delighted," Oliver said, earning him another handshake.

- Well, you'll have time to talk later if you wish, allow me to introduce you to the rest.

As they approached a group of people who were there conversing, Claire managed to go part of their conversation.

"Currently, thirty percent of its surface area has already been reduced, and the rate of deforestation is currently about ten thousand square kilometers per year, and it increases every year; we cannot wait any longer.

Indeed, Mr. Jayden, the idea you propose is truly innovative and...

- Excuse me a moment, I'd like to introduce Miss Claire Sullivan, she's our newest guest.

The three members of the group proceeded to greet her by shaking her hand with a warm smile. One of them took the initiative.

-grege4

- This is Mr. Patrick Bradley, he is a congressman, this is Bill Travis, he is a member of the House Cabinet

Blanca, and I'm David Walker, chairman of the natural resources committee. We were just discussing a very interesting idea: to bombard deforested areas of the Amazon from the air with biodegradable, cone-shaped containers with a ceramic tip, each containing a seed. We're considering pressuring the Brazilian government to adopt this solution.

- Wow, very interesting

- Otherwise, in a few decades we're going to be left without rainforest, because the rate of deforestation is unsustainable. growing every year, and we all know that the Amazon is the lungs of the planet.

"Brazil will have to stop smoking," Patrick said.

The three of them burst out laughing in unison.

"Or at least do some sport," David added.

Claire was starting to feel comfortable at the party; they seemed like nice people.

"Would you like me to continue introducing you to the rest of the attendees, or would you like to stay here?" Norman asked.

"I'm fine, but I'd like to continue a little longer," she replied.

- Okay, then let's get to it.

They started walking towards another group of three people, two men and a woman. As soon as these three realized they were coming, they lowered their voices until they were silent.

- How's the party going? Let me introduce you to Mrs. Claire Sullivan. Claire, she is

Mrs. Sarah Parker is the vice president's secretary; he is Dr. Henry Brooks.

director of the University of Massachusetts, and he is Aiden Smith, a former student of the university, now dedicated to research.

The three proceeded to shake his hand amicably.

"So, are you enjoying the party?" Henry asked him.

- Yes, well, I'm still getting my bearings, but yes, I like it.

"We're sure you'll become a great journalist," Sarah said. Henry and Aiden looked at her seriously; Michael pretended not to hear anything.

This left Claire somewhat bewildered, as she had only mentioned her desire to study journalism to her father and a few friends, and her father wasn't one to go around telling everyone things; he was rather reserved, and in fact, it wasn't likely that he knew those people.

But the point is, they knew it.

- Yes, of course... thank you

Sarah looked at her with a confident smile.

- Does it dig?

She hadn't noticed, but the waiter had stopped beside her with the tray in his hand.

Claire picked up one of the glasses and took a sip, while observing her interlocutors.

- Okay... who else can I introduce you to... oh, yes!

- Come here please

He gently placed his hand on her elbow and led her to another group of three men. As they approached, one of them introduced himself directly, probably due to the effects of alcohol.

"Hello, miss," he said, extending his hand.

- My name is Wyatt Donovan, and I am the proud owner and CEO of Robco, it's a pleasure.

Michael then introduced him to the other two.

- He is Ryan Burke, former governor of the state of Nevada, now an advisor at Wyatt's company.

"Well, we don't have much in Nevada," he said with a mocking smile, "it's all desert... but we do have flying saucers!"

- And he is Igor Pavlovsky, he is the delegate of the Russian embassy in Washington.

"Let me tell you, miss," Igor added, with a marked Russian accent, "that despite what our respective governments would have us believe, relations between our nations are much better than people think, especially on issues that affect the future of humanity and our planet."

Claire nodded, unable to hide her astonishment at such statements.

- We currently have people working side by side on issues of vital importance to humanity.

"And they also know how to make good investments," Wyatt added. "They recently helped me finance my corporation. We recently received an investment from the Novostok bank worth..."

of one and a half trillion dollars.

"We are happy to help when it's for a good cause," Igor stated.

The truth is that my company is dedicated to conducting research on topics essential to the progress of the human species, despite having such a crude name, in my opinion.

And it seems that for many people as well, it is a vital entity for society to reach its maximum human and social potential.

After this there was a silence in which it seemed that none of them knew what to say.

Wyatt broke his silence.

- Claire, did you know there's a lovely terrace here? Would you like me to show it to you?

- Yes of course

He started walking towards one of the doors there, and Claire followed him.

Opening the door, she found herself in a beautiful square courtyard, bordered by bushes, with a fountain in the center and a stone floor. A few simple wooden chairs were arranged beside the door, under the awning above it. Wyatt took a pack of tobacco from his jacket pocket and removed a cigarette. He placed it between his lips and lit it with a Zippo lighter. Then he took it away from his mouth and exhaled a puff of smoke.

He took one of the chairs and offered it to her; after thanking him, she sat down. He took another chair and sat down as well.

- Do you like the courtyard? I think it fits with the style of the building; it's nice.

- Yes, it's very beautiful.

It had stopped raining, yet the smell of wet grass still lingered in the air. The dark clouds in the sky had a few clear patches through which the moon could be seen.

-ger

- You know, I know your father, I've dealt with him a few times, he's a good man, a good person.

You know, there are people who consider it wrong to participate in the development of an amoral country, lacking in real opportunities, however, there are others who don't think so. At that moment, a man in his thirties opened the door, which had been left ajar, and burst onto the scene.

- Everything alright, Mr. Wyatt?

"Yes, of course, wonderful. Look, Claire, I'd like you to meet Aiden. He was a star student at the University of Massachusetts, and now he works for me," he said, with a smile on his face.

- Excuse me if I interrupt, it's just that the atmosphere in there was getting a bit overwhelming and I needed some fresh air.

"No!" they both replied at the same time.

"You can stay as long as you like, there's no problem," Wyatt said.

- I suppose she is...

Wyatt raised his index finger, and, looking at him with a slight smile, brought it to his lips, while winking at him.

- Don't worry, you'll have a chance to talk later, but first I want to talk to her about a few things.

- Well, I think I've had enough fresh air, I'm going inside.

- Very good.

Aiden went back into the room, leaving the door closed behind him.

And there they were, the two of them, under the cloudy sky, listening to the constant tapping caused by the that fountain there was.

- You know, Claire, there's something I'd like to tell you.

- Oh, really? Tell me.

- Let's see... How can I explain this? We have a lab in a central neighborhood near here. It's a research lab, run by Aiden, the guy you just met. He's a good guy.

I'm sure you'll end up liking him. Here's what I propose: that you visit the laboratory, on the condition that everything you observe and learn there must be kept absolutely secret. You can't tell anyone, not even your father, okay?

Claire looked at him in puzzlement, nodding her head.

- So... is it a deal?

- Yes... of course... I won't tell anyone.

Fantastic! Great, then I'll talk to Aiden, Norman, and Henry and get everything ready for you to come and visit.

"Okay," she said, managing a shy smile.

- Okay, I think they must be missing us inside, shall we go in?

"Yes, okay." He

jumped up, and after aligning his chair with the others, he took Claire's chair and did the same.

She opened the door, and as she did, the intense light inside dazzled her for a moment. She continued forward, and Wyatt closed the door behind him. Skeeter Davis's "The End of the World" was playing. That moment sent a shiver down her spine, followed by a feeling of joy that moved her for a fleeting moment; she had never felt anything like it. The excitement of knowing she was about to have the privilege of discovering things that were currently forbidden to the rest of humanity overwhelmed her, to the point that she had to restrain herself so that others wouldn't notice what she was feeling.

The alarm clock rang; it was eleven in the morning. Claire felt exhausted after the party. She got up and started making herself a breakfast of oatmeal and milk, mentally reviewing everything that had happened. She thought she'd like to spend a few days at her father's house in the countryside to disconnect from the hustle and bustle of the city and find some peace and quiet to continue with her book. Luckily, she had thought of this before coming to Washington and had brought the old copy of the house key with her. She packed her bags and set off on the journey, which would take her about an hour by car. The drive was uneventful; she found it relaxing to drive along the straight roads listening to rock music from the eighties and nineties. Once she arrived, she parked the car and got out. She took the key ring with the house keys out of her bag and went to go inside. She put the key in the lock and noticed it was a little stiff; it seemed to have rusted slightly. Suddenly, snap! The key broke. Claire stared in shock at the shard of key still clutched in her hand. It took her a moment to process what had happened. How could this be? What were the odds of something like this happening? And to her of all people. And in the village house.

Incredible. He pulled out his phone, intending to call a locksmith, hoping the house would be open, especially since it was Sunday. But when he took out his phone, he saw it was off. To make matters worse, the battery was dead. A feeling of unease washed over him; everything was going wrong. The only solution he could think of was to go to the house next door, hoping the owner would be kind enough to let him call the locksmith from his phone. When he arrived, he gently knocked on the doorknob, which was shaped like a dragon's head, trying to imagine what kind of person might be behind the door, if anyone at all. Suddenly, after the sound of locks clicking, the door opened. A man of medium height, bald and rather thin, appeared. Behind him, he noticed a dreamcatcher hanging from the ceiling.

"Hello," he said, almost in a whisper.

- Hello, good afternoon... look... sorry to bother you, but I have a small problem... My house key has broken and now I can't get in... Also, my phone battery is dead and I can't call a locksmith.

- OK, I understand, and you want to use my phone, right?

Before Claire could answer, the man finished opening the door and invited her in, stepping aside.

- Forward

Claire hesitated for a moment, then proceeded to enter the house. The man closed the door behind her and hurried ahead to show her the way to the living room, which was through a door on the left.

Upon entering, he found a peculiar decor: another dreamcatcher, a salt lamp on a small table, and several wooden Buddhas. There was a large sofa with a low, wide wooden coffee table in front of it, upon which sat a laptop.

- And... what is your name?

- Claire.

- Pleased to meet you, my name is Carl.

After that, he went to a small table on one side of the room and returned with a cordless phone.

Here you go. I hope it's available today, since it's Sunday. I suppose you don't have the number; I'll look it up for you.

He opened the Google search engine on his computer, and after searching, it showed that there was only one locksmith in the entire town. They called, but no one answered the phone; they must not have worked on Sundays.

A feeling of unease returned to Claire; at that moment Carl got up and headed towards the kitchen.

- Don't worry, there's no need to despair. Would you like some tea? We can try calling later.

Claire answered in the affirmative. She really wanted some tea.

Carl placed the full kettle of water on the stove and headed back towards her.

Claire tried hard to bring up a topic of conversation.

- I see you have wooden Buddhas... do you like Buddhism?

- Yes, I am a Buddhist - he replied.

- I find it an interesting religion, but I don't know much about it.

- Well, ask whatever you want.

- Do heaven and hell exist in Buddhism? Or how does it work?

Carl went to the kitchen; steam was pouring out of the kettle. He took it off the heat and patiently filled two cups, then placed a tea bag and a teaspoon in each one.

She picked up both cups and carried them to the dining room to place them on the small table in front of the sofa. Then she made another trip to get the sugar.

- Good question... technically yes, but it's a bit more complicated, let's say, in Christianity, for example.

- When a human being dies, if they have not reached enlightenment, then their soul is subject to samsara, that means that it is subject to the cycle of reincarnation, that is, it returns here again as a human being to continue evolving, until it reaches enlightenment.

- And once it's illuminated, what happens?

- Well, then he is freed from samsara, from the cycle of reincarnation, and then he no longer needs to come back here.

- Aham...

Regarding the physical plane of existence, Buddhism recognizes the six realms of samsara, or realms of existence.

This means that when a soul incarnates, it does so in one of these realms. These realms are: The realm of the Devas, or realm of the gods, is the highest, and is characterized by happiness and pride. Then there is the realm of the Asuras, which is

It is characterized by jealousy and envy. Below this lies the realm of "humans," which is bound to desire, attachment, passion, and doubt. Then there is the animal kingdom, based on stupidity and prejudice. Below this is the realm of the Pretas, the hungry spirits; it is a possessive state of being, dominated by greed. Many wealthy people reside in this realm, living in a sea of thirst, in a constant feast but never able to be satiated. And finally, there is the realm of the Narakas, which is the closest thing to the Christian hell; it is the realm of suffering and anger.

- Wow, that's interesting.

Claire was sipping her cup of tea, which was practically finished.

- Yes, the truth is that for me Buddhism is my life, it is simply a way of being and interpreting life.

- And how do you, let's say, go up the steps?

Well, through the accumulation of good karma and spiritual practice, but above all, through karma itself—depending on whether it's good or bad—you will be reincarnated in one realm or another in your next life. The better your karma, the higher the realm in which you will be incarnated, and vice versa.

It was getting dark outside, so Claire decided to call once more, but the attempt was unsuccessful again.

- Don't worry Claire, if you want you can stay overnight, I have a spare room that I use when a relative comes to visit.

Claire thought that perhaps he was right, because taking the return journey at night did not seem very prudent, and, after all, she didn't quite know why, but that man inspired confidence in her.

- Yes... okay... thank you very much.

- You're welcome, it's a pleasure to help people like you, I like helping good people.

Carl went to the guest room to check that everything was alright.

- Do you like sushi? I make it very well, we can have sushi for dinner if you'd like.

- No... no need to bother Carl, I can have something simpler for dinner, something that's not so much work.

- Don't worry! I was planning to make sushi today anyway.

They had a friendly dinner and continued talking about their lives. Claire confessed that she didn't practice any religion, that she was more of an atheist, but that she found everything he had explained about Buddhism very interesting. After dinner, they said their goodbyes and Claire went to her room.

- Good evening, Carl.

- Good night Claire, sleep well.

## CHAPTER IV

A group of five high-ranking Air Force officers were gathered around the oval table. They were all under the highest level of security available. Their task was to discuss the procedures to follow should they make contact with beings from another planet.

Carter - Good. Do you know why I've called this meeting? - The senior officer said - Because, since the Roswell incident, we haven't had any contact with any other extraterrestrial beings. Since then, there have only been sightings, and we haven't even been able to recover empty craft as we frequently did before that incident. Now it seems they only allow us to observe them from a distance. Which leads us to the conclusion that something must have gone wrong, or been done very wrong, during that encounter.

Dylan - According to reports, all procedures were followed. The individual was placed in an isolated compartment, then taken out and placed in a room equipped with a one-way mirror to gather information. When they went to take him out of his compartment a second time to continue, the individual had died.

Andrew - What is incomprehensible is the fact that they have not contacted us again, nor crashed empty ships, could have any relation to said event, since, according to the reports, the subject was from the beginning to the end, subjected to the strictest isolation, which makes it impossible for him to communicate with anyone.

Dylan - That's what we've assumed so far.

Thomas - What do you mean?

Carter - I mean, given the facts, we suspect he did it somehow, but we don't know how.

Andrew - According to reports, when he was isolated he was not carrying any clothing or objects with him, and the autopsy did not reveal any type of chip or internal object that could be hidden under the skin.

Thomas - Perhaps the others were expecting some kind of response, which didn't happen.

Hudson - We do not have enough evidence to reach a satisfactory conclusion.

Carter - It's clear we're lacking information. But... why? Why have they lost interest in us? That's what's inexplicable.

Hudson - The question is, with the information we have, can we draw any conclusions?

Carter - At the moment it seems not, at least with the information we have.

Landon - According to some reports, after the Cold War there was an attempt to shoot down, without success, several flying saucers that appeared over the skies of the United States and the Soviet Union.

Carter - You said it yourself, without success. In fact, most of the time it was our own planes that ended up crashing.

Andrew - A total failure.

Carter - That's right. In fact, when the Cold War ended, a non-aggressive approach was adopted when such events occurred; that is, not attempting to shoot them down, but it seems that this hasn't been enough. Even so, the number of sightings has increased slightly, especially near nuclear missile sites, but nothing more.

Thomas - It seems they're at least worried that we'll annihilate ourselves with nuclear weapons.

Carter - Either way, we must continue with the official version of denying the facts, as well as classifying all the information obtained at the highest level of secret. You know we have agreements with the other powers regarding this, and that they will behave in the same way.

The next morning, after breakfast, Claire and Carl called the locksmith again, but

They still received no response, so after removing the part of the key that had become stuck in the lock with the help of Carl and some pliers, and after exchanging phone numbers, Claire began the journey back home. There would be no rest now. When she arrived at Casa felt exhausted, as the adventure had taken its toll and she hadn't been able to sleep since. Everything was fine in a bed that wasn't hers. What she wanted most in the world was to have a good time. shower. He took his phone and a small wireless speaker he had and placed them next to the shower. She turned on the tap and undressed, playing chill-out music. When she noticed the water was already running She stepped into the shower, feeling warm. The stream of water hit her head, then gently slid off. over the rest of his body, providing instant relief. He lathered and rinsed himself off as if nothing had happened. habit. After getting out of the shower, she turned on the TV and, on the news channel, started preparing a salad. On the screen appeared the president of Brazil, giving a speech at the embassy of the United Nations: "Modern industrial society is a fanatical religion. We are demolishing, poisoning and destroying all life systems on the planet. We are signing debts that Our children won't be able to pay. We're acting like we're the last generation of... planet. Without a radical change in heart, mind, and vision, the Earth will end up like Venus, charred and dead. Therefore, we will take measures to strictly regulate the deforestation of the Amazon rainforest, as well as to begin its reforestation as soon as possible through the most advanced procedures." That certainly caught his attention, because He immediately connected it to what he had heard at that party. It seemed there was still something left. hope on this planet.

Claire had been tidying the apartment. She was having dinner on the small terrace of her apartment. From there I could see all the other buildings, full of lit windows, like a sea of fireflies spread out before her. To her, that landscape was a clear image of progress. of humanity, of the triumph of order over chaos, of the victory of reason. After it ended She prepared to go to sleep, saying to herself, "Tomorrow is another day," intending to escape. little of all that.

Claire got out of the taxi. It was late afternoon, the sky was overcast, but it wasn't raining. She walked down a couple of alleyways, umbrella in hand, until she reached the address. Before her stood a vintage typewriter repair shop. It didn't look like it would have many customers. As she entered the shop, a bell rang, and a boy who had been writing notes behind a spartan desk, who turned out to be Aiden, stood up and walked over to Claire.

- How are you? Everything alright?

- Yes all ok

- This way, come in

- This is, let's say, our field operations headquarters. Very few people know what we have here. You'll see it, but you can't say anything.

They entered a small office. After Aiden pressed some buttons hidden beneath the desk, the office floor began to descend, revealing the concrete mezzanine below. At the bottom of the elevator, Claire spotted a corridor with a metal door that appeared to be armored, and a card reader beside it.

"Okay, let's go," Aiden blurted out.

Next to the door was a retinal scanner. Aiden approached it and placed his eye in front of the camera on the panel. Instantly, a large green V appeared on the screen directly below. A loud click sounded from the door latch. It had just opened. Aiden pushed it open.

He firmly said, "Let's go," to Claire. As they passed, Claire spotted a room with thick walls of

Exposed concrete and a few brick walls. Fluorescent lights hung from the ceiling, and electrical wires were scattered across the floor. Why was he doing it? Probably because he was searching for answers, and if there were any, they certainly had to be there.

On one side there was a chair similar to a dentist's chair, and a helmet from which a large number of... cables.

"Come in," Aiden snapped.

"What is this place?" he asked.

- It's like, let's say, a communications center.
- OK

- Do you think you can sit in the chair and put on the helmet? It won't do you any harm, I've tried it hundreds of times, the machine's operation is based on a chip that was given to us, and which is inside it.

- Tell me something, Claire, do you believe in God?
- Yes, I do believe so

Are you religious?

- No, but I do believe in a higher power that governs everything.
- Then you're going to be very well received
- By... who?

Aiden hesitated for a moment, as if he didn't want to answer that question.

- You'll see... Are you ready?
- Yes, I suppose so...
- Okay, let's begin.

Claire sat down in the armchair, and Aiden, after checking some things on a laptop that was on a table, proceeded to put the helmet on her.

- Now you need to relax

Claire began to control her breathing, focusing on it and counting the time of her inhalations and exhalations. Suddenly, a voice broke into her head.

- Hello, Claire, can you hear me?

Claire was surprised, as she had never experienced anything like this before.

- Yes, I hear you, who are you?

We're family, we can't tell you anything right now, but we'll talk later, don't worry. Goodbye.

- Okay... goodbye

Aiden, who was in front of a laptop, with his back to Claire, turned around and gently removed her helmet.

- Well, that's it, what did you think?
- Is it done yet?

- The test is done, the test I wanted to perform on you, everything is fine.

- OK

Claire sat up; her body was slightly stiff from being on the stretcher.

- Just one thing before you go, I need you to sign this paper. It's a confidentiality agreement, you know, bureaucracy. Basically, it means you can't tell anyone anything you've seen or heard here.

- OK...

Claire went to the table where he was sitting, and after taking the sheet of paper and reading it carefully, she signed at the bottom. page.

Could you call me a taxi?

- Clear

Aiden accompanied her all the way back and they said goodbye at the door of the venue.

"Well, I hope you have a good night," Aiden blurted out.

"Likewise," she replied.

As she rode back in the taxi, Claire looked out the window and watched the pedestrians and cars going to and fro. Like electrical signals from a gigantic microprocessor, chaotic signals, she thought, yet there was a certain order, difficult to discern, that kept the system running despite all the problems and unexpected events that can arise in a big city.

- We've arrived, it's 22:50

Claire paid the man, got out of the taxi, and headed to her building's entrance.

When she got home she made herself a chicken salad, which she was going to eat after taking a nice bath, and turned on the news:

- "A man who had barricaded himself inside a building was shot dead this afternoon by police. The man was a worker at a microchip plant in Sand Valley, who apparently suffered from mental health issues. The case is under seal."

## CHAPTER V

### 11:36 AM, PACIFIC OCEAN, UNDETERMINED LOCATION

Captain Spencer could barely hear over the roar of the helicopter's engines, a black Black Hawk belonging to the U.S. Navy. The aircraft hovered low over the waves; the sky was overcast, and a light rain was falling, trickling down the windows around it. Five soldiers accompanied him, but none of them, not even the pilots, were aware of the magnitude of the mission they were undertaking.

- There it is

An old aircraft carrier, the USS Orlando, which had disappeared eleven years earlier, loomed on the horizon.

The helicopter continued its journey above the waves; inside, Spencer was getting ready. Mentally, checking his M4 and observing the rest, he just hoped they were prepared for the mission they were about to undertake.

The pilot broke his silence:

- Arrival at destination in three minutes

The captain was born in Wisconsin. After enlisting in the army and spending a few years on missions in Iraq and Afghanistan, he entered the officers' academy, where he spent two years. After graduating, he was deployed again on several missions. At times, he thought his career was over, that he wouldn't be able to advance any further, that his time to retire had arrived. However, he would see his aspirations fulfilled: to retire with full honors. They were after something crucial to the future of humanity. This machine would guarantee the progress and future of the entire human race. That was all he knew, but for him, it was enough. He felt he was reaching the culmination of his career. He didn't know many details of the mission, but he knew enough. He knew it had something to do with intelligence services and that it was a mission of great importance, after which, most likely, there would be some decorations and promotions. He looked with a certain pity at the four poor devils who accompanied him. They knew nothing about the mission; they had simply been ordered to go, period. There would be no medals or promotions for them; it would just be another mission.

Everyone finished checking their equipment, Spencer grabbed a rope coming out of a winch. The aircraft, inserted its carabiner, and slid smoothly down to the deck of the vessel. The other four followed. Once on deck, they notified the helicopter pilot, who, after saying goodbye, took off and began the return journey.

On deck, the five men exchanged a glance. "Well, gentlemen," Spencer said, "we all know this isn't a normal mission. I can't tell you what we're looking for, but I want you to keep your eyes peeled." The captain headed toward the bridge. There was a door with a circular handle, completely rusted, like everything else. It took two men to open it. The captain was tense; all their training and experience hadn't prepared them for something like this. Once through the door, they descended some stairs and combed the deck, room by room.

- Clean

- Clean

- Clean

-Clean

After checking each deck, they went to a room to check everything and get organized.

Spencer placed a map on a table in the center.

- "Okay," he said. "We're on A Deck, and we need to get down to C Deck, where the..."  
The mechanical workshop is, in fact, one of the most spacious compartments on the ship.

- Come on, follow me -

They headed for the stairs and began to descend slowly, illuminating the darkness with the flashlights attached to their submachine guns.

Upon reaching the next floor, the process was repeated; they would scrutinize room by room in search of any threat, and upon finishing, they would return to the starting point.

- Clean

- Clean

- Clean

- Clean

Finally, they came to another closed door, which they opened effortlessly; behind it was that for which they had prepared so much.

They opened the door effortlessly, and then saw a large, dark room with a kind of metal tower about two and a half meters tall in the center. This machine clearly wasn't part of the ship, nor did it appear to be made by humans; it seemed to be...

It was a technology infinitely superior to what we currently possess, and it also radiated a greenish glow, making it seem like something from out of this world.

Captain Spencer remained lost in thought, observing the glow emanating from that metallic cylinder in the darkness. He was worried that he was beginning to suffer hallucinations. He gathered the strength to compose himself and looked at his companions with a rigid gaze, the product of someone who is aware that he has something transcendental in his hands.

- We have it

After that, he pressed the button on his communicator again.

The bird is in the nest, I repeat, the bird is in the nest

Those words echoed in the command room of the destroyer USS Numeral, Vice Admiral Michael Caine had been serving in the navy for twenty years, and he knew that in peacetime, this was an important mission; otherwise, they wouldn't have sent a fleet of one

An aircraft carrier, three destroyers, two frigates, and two submarines. I knew that was going to be the final act. At the height of his career, he was eager to return home with his trophy. Now he just had to send the support team to finish securing the area, and the aircraft carrier would be towed to port. safe with your valuable equipment inside.

Andrew McArthur was an employee of Section 12 of the FSN, the National Security Service. He firmly believed in the State, which he saw as a superior entity that guaranteed peace and prosperity and in which one could always rely. In addition, he was also a staunch defender of social classes, even though maintaining those classes "in their place" often involved...

of harassment, blackmail, or extortion. Their new target was John Gutman, a businessman who owned A ship storage facility, built with the money he had saved working as a ship's captain for years. This man was very capable and talented, too much so in the eyes of the FSN. They had determined that, if things continued this way, in about three years he could rise in social class, and that would be very compromising, as it was something that wasn't allowed; others had already tried it and had faced the clutches of the FSN. This time was going to be no different. He had to destroy John Gutman at all costs. John Evans was a close friend of his, so he wouldn't say anything to him. His attention then turned to his ex-wife, an ambiguous woman who, in her forties, worked as a saleswoman in a clothing store. He had seen her before, at some party at John's house.

So he arranged a date with her.

It was an English-style pub, on a quiet corner on the outskirts of town. It was a cold night, the dark cobblestones of the street covered in puddles. Inside, rows of tables and benches were adorned with lamps featuring green glass shades in the center. At one table, the two sat facing each other, staring intently: Jacqueline, John's ex-wife, and Andrew. The latter took the initiative.

- Well, you know me, I won't beat around the bush, I've called you here to talk about your ex-husband, John Gutman. The truth is, we have a problem with him, because he's become an "undesirable" element of society, a danger. If we don't act, terrible things could happen, and we need to neutralize him. I can't give you any more details, but I guarantee that it won't affect you in the slightest, well, unless you don't cooperate.

- What do you mean?

- Well, he knows very well that if he doesn't cooperate then we won't be able to guarantee his safety, on the other hand, if he cooperates with us, we could reach an agreement to transfer, let's say, about one hundred thousand dollars clean into his account.

The woman's face betrayed a slight look of astonishment, though he detected it immediately; he had learned to discern such gestures with a keen eye throughout his career. He knew he had hit the nail on the head. marrow, that was practically what she earned in a year, the question was, would she be willing to betray the man she had once loved.

Andrew stood up, opened his wallet, and took out a business card, which he dropped on the table.

- If you need anything, call me

Then he turned around, pushed open the door, and disappeared into the darkness. She remained lost in thought, feeling a mixture of fear and euphoria. She waited until he was gone before getting up; then she would go home and think it over in peace.