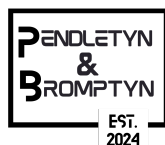


Eleven Years Sample

A Gothic Sci-Fi Novel

Erzsebet Carmean



Pendletyn & Bromptyn

Contents

Chapter	1
1. June 2036	2
2. Mid-August 2036	23
3. Late August 2036	42
Copyrights	87

In 2037, the American government deployed VX nerve agent in the atmosphere over Fort Chamberlin, Virginia, to stop the spread of a classified contagion. Thirty-two scientists died within minutes of deployment. The bodies of the dead remain where they fell.

June 2036

Chapter 1

The interview team stares at Doctor Anne Huntington, waiting for her answer. A toilet flushes somewhere down the hall, followed by a cacophony of bangs and whistles from the plumbing. In the subsequent deafening quiet, one of the interviewers clicks her pen. Another clears his throat. The third, a dumpy woman in a shirt two-sizes too tight, simply looks at Anne.

"I'm sorry, but can you repeat the question?" Anne asks.

"Why did you leave your postdoctoral position? SUNY is a tough place to get into, even for someone who holds a doctorate from..."

The youngest interviewer, the girl with the pen, completes the man's question. "University of Chicago."

"I decided academia wasn't a good fit for me," Anne replies.

"In what way?" the man asks.

"It was too... Well, the pay isn't equivalent to what I can earn in the private sector. I want to buy a house." Anne hopes the interviewers believe that, yes, a mortgage she doesn't want explains everything.

"Did you get along with your colleagues?"

“Yes,” Anne replies.

“Tell us about a time when you were in a situation where you had to discuss something difficult with a coworker. Something contentious. How did you handle it?”

In her mind, Anne sees Doctor Iris Cloutier’s book-infested office. Cloutier was furious. Arri Lindt was there, too, looking like he wanted to cry.

“There was a question of faked data,” Anne says.

The two women on the interview panel exchange glances.

“Not mine,” Anne lies. “A junior researcher found it expedient to change results to force the experiment to fit theory. I confronted her in private, over coffee. When she refused to admit the changes to Dr. Cloutier, our lead researcher, I took it to Cloutier myself.”

“And what happened to the researcher?”

“What could happen?” Anne shrugged. “She left the field.”

The girl with the pen writes something. Then she looks at Anne. “Did you have proof the changes were beyond the usual removal of outliers?”

“I did,” Anne says. Arri did, she thinks. He pled with me, not over coffee, but in bed.

“Well, I think that’s about all we have.” This is said by man who could not remember “University of Chicago.”

The other interviewers nod in agreement.

“Thank you for your time,” Anne says, standing. A hell of acid burns in her gut. She wipes her hands on her skirt, a gray affair bought just for interviews, an innocuous color picked for the fact that it is, in fact, unremarkable.

“I’ll walk you out,” the dumpy woman says.

The girl clicks her pen as she and the man exchange a glance. Anne wants to slap the pen out of the little twat's hand. Instead, she nods and leaves the room.



In the office parking lot, she rests her head on the steering wheel. Overheated by the summer sun and closed windows, the dense air is difficult to breathe. How long does it take to die of heat exhaustion, she wonders? Concluding that death will probably take longer than getting drunk, she starts the car, cranks the air-conditioning and pulls out of the lot. The traffic is as heavy as it ever gets; the town is not quaintly “sleepy,” but it may as well be compared to Chicago. Compared to New York, rush hour here is a visit to a ghost town. A motorcyclist cuts her off, and she slams on her brakes with a curse. When Anne arrives at the grocery store, she turns into a parking space, only to find that another driver is doing a pull-through. Instead of backing out, Anne inches farther into the spot. The frazzled woman in the other car mouths something that is certainly not hello and then backs up.

The store is a barrage of noise overhung with the smell of fried chicken. Anne puts cans of refried beans, tortillas, salsa, and shredded cheese in her cart. She tosses in a head of lettuce. It rolls against the canned goods with a thud not unlike the sound of Boleyn's head falling into a basket. The last thing she picks up before checking out is a cheap box of rosé. As always, the self-checkout is out of order; equally aggravating is that of the ten available lanes, only two are open. In the time it takes Anne to choose be-

tween the lane with an overwrought child throwing a tantrum and the one with a doddering woman likely to write a check, three other customers have cut in front of her. She chooses the lane with the granny.

"My, it is hot out, isn't it?" the old woman asks Anne.

"It's summer," Anne replies.

"Still, much hotter than it should be."

"Exactly how hot *should* it be?"

"No need to be rude, young lady."

"Oh, stuff it."

The cashier catches Anne's eye before deliberately turning off the light for her lane. "I'm closing for my break now."

"Are you fucking kidding me?"

"Language!" the old woman says.

"Fuck off. Both of you," Anne replies.

She maneuvers her cart to the back of the other line. Cheap tabloids with the headlines AMAZING WEIGHT LOSS TIPS! and ALIEN BABY BORN IN SYDNEY SUBURB! proliferate amongst candy bars and gum. Anne is unloading her purchases onto the conveyor belt when the other cashier turns her light back on.

"Bitch," Anne whispers.

"What?" asks the skinny boy running the register. His nametag says Milo, Two Years of Legendary Service.

"Nothing."

Milo points at the wine. "ID."

She fights with her wallet to dislodge her driver's license. Milo barely glances at it before scanning the groceries. The total is more than is in her bank account.

"Milo, which would you pick: food or alcohol?"

"What?"

"Never mind," Anne says. "I'll use my credit card."

In the parking lot, she passes the man with the squalling toddler. He is helping the old woman put her groceries into the car. They are oblivious to Anne's glare.

"¿Señorita?"

Anne is startled to find a little girl standing next to her. A beautiful child, really, with huge dark eyes and an abundance of raven hair.

"Where is your mother?" Anne asks. "You shouldn't be in a parking lot alone."

"She is over there," the girl points at a beat-up minivan. "Do you know a woman of flowers? She is looking for you."

"What?"

"She and a man with stars."

"I don't understand," Anne says, relieved to see the girl's mother approaching.

"They want you... behind the water? Extraño." The girl plays with the ends of her hair, which makes her look even younger.

"Sure; go back to your mom."

"Esso es, um, es *trap*," the girl says.

Anne tenses. "What do you mean? That woman isn't your mom?"

"She is."

"Then what are you talking about?"

The woman, an older version of the pretty girl, takes her daughter's hand. "I'm so sorry she disturbed you. It happens when she has premonitions."

The old woman backs her car out of the handicapped space. It makes a wheezing noise, and all three of them look at the laboring vehicle. It is the girl who speaks next.

"Mama, don't be mad at me."

"I'm not." The woman sighs. "I'm sorry Pilar bothered you, miss."

"A lady of flowers and a man with stars, that's a premonition?" Anne asks, annoyed with herself for being curious while sweat is staining her only good blouse.

"It is very bad," Pilar says. "If you go past the water, you will never come out."

"Do you know what she means?" Anne asks the mother.

"No."

"And she does this often?"

"Yes. It is a gift, but she has not learned that not everyone appreciates her... predictions."

Pilar touches Anne's hand, delicate as a butterfly brushing her with powdery wings. "I like your necklace."

Anne frowns. "I'm not wearing a necklace."

"Pilar Mariana! Leave the lady alone." She scoops up Pilar, balancing the child on one hip while awkwardly swinging an oversized purse farther up on her shoulder. Anne watches the pair go into the store. Pilar waves at her, a small, sad motion. Then she turns and kisses her mom on the cheek, giggling.



At home, Anne slings herself onto the natty old couch bought for five bucks from a thrift store. Her glass of wine is within reach on the scratched coffee table. The swiveling fan is ineffectual against the stifling heat, serving mainly to blow a whiff of mildew her way as a reminder that the landlord still has not fixed the leaky ceiling. The old Victorian building she lives

in is a warren of makeshift apartments, and the ceiling over Anne's living room bay window is the floor of the upstairs neighbors' outdoor balcony. If they kept their balcony mopped clean of water, it would help. As it is, they let it pool up, and now it's gone on so long, soggy chunks of ancient plaster drop into Anne's living room.

She turns on the television, not so much to watch it as to hear something other than her own thoughts. The Congressional Hearing on the F.I.G. project is finally over, and General Wittenberg is on the steps of an impressive building. His medals shine in the sunlight.

"The Falstaff Innovative Genetics project, or FIG, is a tree that bore poison fruit. Specialized 'experts' abused the trust the American people put in them. Instead of being forthcoming with their results, which I remind you, were results implicating the *possibility* of cellular weapons of mass destruction—instead of being forthcoming, the scientists obscured their findings from the governmental oversight board. This was not insubordination; it was insurrection and treason."

A mob of reporters ask questions at once; Wittenberg points at one, saying, "You, sir. Adams?"

"Yes, thank you, General. Does it inform your judgement in any way that the findings turned out to be scientifically infeasible? That there was no chance of doing what initial experiments indicated?"

"No. The chain of command was not apprised as to the nature of the initial findings. If further experiments had supported the first positive results, there is no certainty the guilty scientists would have come forward."

Another reporter, remarkably nimble in getting her words out before the rest of the horde asks, "Will

the experiments be made public now that the Falstaff Congressional Report is complete?"

"They will not."

"Why not?"

"The work is classified."

"Despite the failure?"

"No, miss. Because of the failure. There may yet be a way to get it to work."

Anne changes the channel. On this one, Senator Teryan is being interviewed in his office. "The FIG project came to a poor end," he says, "but this does not mean the research into genomics has ended. The Committee on Science, Space and Technology has earmarked an additional slice of the budget to fund new avenues of research."

"Are there any ongoing projects building on FIG research?" the reporter asks.

"Yes."

"Can you expand upon the nature of those experiments?"

"National security impels me not to do so."

"Citizens want to know the details, sir."

"To those citizens, I admonish them to be patient. Trust your elected officials to keep your interests at heart and to do what is best for the safety of our nation and the well-being of the world."

"That is a bit much for people to accept, Senator. The congressional hearing is proof that the government did not know what was going on with FIG. Why should anyone trust that the same misdirection is not occurring on these other, undisclosed projects?"

"Additional safeguards have been instituted—"

"And these safeguards are?"

"The top priority of those running the program."

The reporter leans forward, saying, “Who *is* running the program?”

“Again, and as you well know, that is protected information. We cannot put their lives, nor the lives of the scientists working honestly and diligently for the well-being of America, at risk of abduction, terrorism, or even murder. It is unanimous among the Committee that we maintain their anonymity and security while they perform difficult and highly specialized work.”

Senator Teryan leans back in his chair. His expression, his folded hands dark against the white papers on his desk, his smile: all of these indicate confident superiority. The reporter is undaunted, and probably unaware that the camera operator has expanded the view to show the lowness of the reporter’s chair compared to the senator’s seat. The optics make it clear who viewers should believe has the moral superiority.

“Thank you for your time, Senator.”

“I’m always happy to speak to a member of the Press. Transparency is vital to an active and successful democracy.”

Anne swirls the ice cubes in her increasingly watered-down wine. A McDonald’s commercial comes on, advising her to avoid a grumpy morning by getting an egg sandwich and a cup of hot coffee. Best of all, she can get a free side of hash browns if she downloads the app, although the offer is valid only once a day for the next month.



Days later, the remaining tortilla is stale and moldy. A follow-up call to the company where she interviewed tells her they are still evaluating candidates. It has been raining non-stop, and the pots under the leaky ceiling need to be emptied often.

Anne goes outside to smoke. Shal lingers in his usual spot under the awning, his possessions in a shopping cart next to him. "Hi," Anne says.

"Anne! Lovely soul and friend of the friendless! Spare a smoke?"

"Sure," she replies, handing him a cigarette.

They sit beneath the awning, listening to the rain patter. The bleak afternoon has fooled the street-lights, which are on in a futile attempt to replace the sun. Shal stinks, but Anne realizes she probably does, too. A quick sniff at her pit confirms that, and she wonders when she last showered. Two days, three?

"They say dogs are a man's best friend, but I disagree," Shal says. "Cigarettes are. You can always count on a cigarette."

"They'll kill us."

"Better that than the rays," Shal replies, pointing at the lowering sky.

"Okay," Anne says.

"Believe me, *they* are sending signals."

"Who?"

"*Them!*"

"Alright, say they are. What are these rays? Why send them to a couple of smokers minding our own miserable business?"

Shal takes a deep drag on his cigarette. It has burned down to the filter, but he continues to puff as if there's something left. "You ever hear of the Moscow Signal?"

"Can't say I have."

"In the, oh, 1950s, the Russians started beaming a pulsed microwave signal at the American and English embassies in Moscow. The microwaves were focused on the East side of the building, on the floors where the highest-ranking people conducted high-ranking business.

"The signal was found during a routine radiation sweep. In 1953! Our government declined to tell anyone in the Embassy until the '70s. Why? Because *they* wanted to know what ray would *do* to those poor suckers." Shal leans closer to Anne; she can see the nicotine-stained plaque on his teeth. "An ambassador started bleeding from the eyes, then died of *leukemia*."

"Was he the only one who got sick?" Anne asks. Her cigarette is done now, too, and she tosses the butt into a puddle where it hisses to death. "If he's the only one, it's unlikely that the microwaves did it."

"Kissinger said it was the Moscow Signal, no doubt. Direct quote, he said, 'we're trying to keep this thing quiet.' If they'd hide that from the sycophants at the embassy, what do you think they're hiding from us?"

"Probably a lot," Anne says, thinking how Senator Teryan's teeth are dazzling white and brightened by expensive treatments, whereas Shal's are rotting out of his head.

"A whole *damn* lot."

"What did the Russians think the signal would do? I mean, why go to the trouble of giving one ambassador bloody eyes?"

“The cover our government sold us was that the rays were to spy. I know better. They wanted to see how long it takes to make a man go mad using those frequencies.”

“Did the Russians figure it out?” Anne asks.

“Maybe, maybe not.”

Shal scratches his ass, leaning a bit on Anne to get a good angle. It’s the first time in months anyone has touched her and, despite the smell and the undiluted crazy Shal exudes, it makes her want to cry.

“What’s wrong?” he asks.

“Everything.”

“True,” Shal agrees.

The man who lives across the hall from Anne comes up the steps. He wrinkles his nose at them. “It’s illegal to smoke this close to an entrance.”

“Too bad it’s not illegal to be a sanctimonious prick,” Anne retorts.

“Screw you,” the man says, slamming the door.

“He’s a clever one,” Shal says.

Anne laughs.

“Back to the rays, though. The government did lots of experiments on rats and dogs—horrible things! And that’s what they *admit* to doing.”

“What anyone admits to doing is more about the pressure applied than about what was done,” Anne says.

“Witch hunts?” Shal asks.

“Among other things.”

A car passes by them. They watch it stop at the intersection.

“Have you ever heard about the Russian Woodpecker?”

“I don’t think so,” Anne replies.

“Our government says it was used for over-the-horizon ballistics detection. The Russians didn’t want to be taken by surprise by our missiles.”

“Nasty surprise,” Anne nods.

“Yes.”

“What do the Russians say they were using it for?”

“They never said. The array was irradiated when Chernobyl went up. That was no coincidence. No way.”

“Well, what do you think it was used for?”

“Mind control? Weather control?”

“Do you ever believe anyone?”

“Just you,” Shal says.

“I don’t recommend that, my friend. I’m a card-carrying liar.”

“Not about anything important, I bet.”

“Not at first.” Anne sighs. “I’m going to get evicted.”

“I know that feeling,” Shal says. He stands up and stretches. His jeans are stained and too big for his waist.

“Just out of curiosity, how did anyone find out about this Woodpecker?”

“Some ham radio operators heard the tapping. All over the world, pretty much all at once. The governments didn’t expect that, no, they didn’t.”

“Are you going to be okay out here in this weather? It’s supposed to get worse overnight.”

“The rain is my friend,” Shal smiles. “Stops the rays.”

He pushes his cart along the wet sidewalk. Anne watches until Shal is out of sight, then goes inside, where the bank of mailboxes glower at her in the dim light. She opens hers with dread. As expected, there are a couple of bills she has no money to pay and junk mail offering her discounts on gutter guards for

gutters she does not have, and hearing aids she does not need. Back inside her apartment, Anne tosses the mail onto her kitchen table. A piece falls on the floor and, of course, slides under the fridge. Anne kneels to fish it out and notices something sparkling amongst the tumbleweeds of dust and dead roaches. She grasps the sparkle and pulls it out to see what it is.

Goosebumps rise on her arms.

She is holding a necklace that has been missing for months. A sudden crack of thunder is followed by a power outage. In the murky silence devoid of electronic noise, Anne thinks about death beyond the water and a nebulous woman of flowers who may, or may not, appear as suddenly as the necklace.



A week passes; another. In that fortnight, her internet provider cut her service because of overdue payments. Her creditors harangued her about student loan debt. Plus, Anne's landlord delivered a sternly worded nastygram stating that she is a missed payment away from eviction. Worst of all, the latest issue of the *Research in Bioethics* journal was delivered. Anne treats the publication like a bomb with a faulty countdown timer. She spends long periods of time sitting on the couch, staring at the threat lodged on her coffee table and straining to hear the imperceptible ticking of a mechanism counting down to detonation. A sickening revulsion at the thought of touching it prevents Anne from throwing it in the garbage. She fears that even were she to do so, it would reappear like a demon-infested Ouija board. The journal grows

to enormous proportions in her mind. Twice she has awakened from fitful sleep, screaming and flailing her arms: reason dictates the journal cannot be levitating over her, but at 3 A.M., reason is less substantial than fear.

Time is a myth, evident only in the rising level of murky water filling the pots beneath the leaky ceiling. Random lapses of consciousness overtake Anne during the day. It is from one of these fugue states, which are more akin to nonexistence than a nap, that she awakens to find Arri Lindt sitting in a chair, flipping through the pages of **Research in Bioethics**.

"Arri?" she asks.

"Hello," he replies.

"How did you get in here?" Anne is sitting up and trying to smooth the rat's nest of her tangled hair. Her face is creased where it was smooshed onto a cushion.

"Your neighbors are moving."

"They are?" Anne asks.

"You must be tired to sleep through the racket."

As if on cue, there is some bumping and a hissed curse from the hallway.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," she snaps.

"Please don't; I'm not here to fight."

"Why exactly are you here, *Doctor* Lint?"

Arri sets the journal on his lap. Anne expects it to do something—explode? Burst into flames? It does neither.

"I'm engaged."

Anne blinks in surprise. "Do I know her?"

"Her name is Caliope. She's a neonatal nurse."

"Caliope? Cal-EYE-OH-PEA? You've got to be kidding."

"I call her Callie."

"And you used to call me Annie, for whatever the shit that was worth."

"Stop it," Arri says.

"Fine. How did you two meet?"

"We had a mix up with shopping carts at the grocery store. I had walked off with hers. I realized my mistake when I saw a box of tampons where I was sure I'd put a box of lightbulbs."

"That would have been a painful mistake for her," Anne says.

"Yes," Arri laughs. "In any case, we hit it off. She's sweet."

"I'm happy for you."

"Are you?"

"Don't worry; I'm not going to crash your wedding or key her car."

There is a long pause. Then Arri taps the journal, saying, "Did you see the paper?"

"Don't be an ass," Anne snaps.

"Jesus. It's never..."

"Never what?"

"Not everything's about you."

"I presume my name has been omitted from the list of authors?"

"Your earlier research is cited," Arri replies. "The paper you did with Rappaport and Falkenrath. That was solid work."

"Solid is a nice euphemism." When he flushes, Anne feels a curdled sense of victory. "I believe what you *mean* to say is that I didn't fake the data."

"Yes."

"Oh, fuck you."

"And I never understood why, Annie." Arri catches his gaffe, flushing. "I mean Anne."

"You know the pressure we were under, with the grant coming up for renewal—"

"Do you even hear yourself?" Arri demands. "Do you know I was praying, *fucking praying* that the numbers were blatant plagiarism of someone else's unsound data? Anything, *anything* other than you fabricating results."

"I never meant for it to get that far."

"That's no excuse."

"I never said it was. It's a rush, a little high to realize that the smartest people you know are oblivious to lies right in front of them. That you've fooled them—"

"Finally, the truth!" Arri tosses the journal onto the coffee table. It lands with a flump.

"Yes, the truth is I started with just an itchy-bitsy change for one result set to help us prove our thesis, which you knincorrect;rrect, we just needed more time to *prove* it! But once I'd made that change, and it was so easy, and everyone was oblivious, willfully oblivious."

"We were 'oblivious' because you are a very, very good liar."

"Everyone loved the results." Anne shakes a cigarette loose from the pack on the table. "Want one?"

"I quit."

"Of course you did." Anne takes a deep inhale, blows it in Arri's direction. "You were always the Golden One."

"I have something else to tell you. God knows why I'm bothering."

"More than getting married? Which, might I point out, your timeline is a bit tight. By my calculations, you were either with Caliope when we were still together, or you've had a whirlwind courtship."

"I never cheated on you."

"Is this a baby-makes-three situation?"

"No, she's not pregnant."

"Then why?"

"I trust her."

Arri's words poison the air with invisible regret and dispirited anger. A piece of plaster falls from the ceiling, splashing into one of the dented pots. Water sloshes over the side.

"Are you going to empty that?" Arri asks.

"Later," Anne replies. "You said there was something else?"

"I've been accepted into the European Consortium of Advanced Biophysics and Biocomputing. I leave for Marseille next week." When Anne remains mute, Arri adds, "I thought, well, I thought you should hear it from me first."

"Marseille was *my* dream."

"Maybe you should have thought of that before you defiled the scientific method." Arri stands up with a sigh. "I brought you some groceries and poured out the sour milk. I didn't know where your recycling bin is, so I left the carton on the counter."

"I didn't ask you to do that."

"I guess this is goodbye," he says.

"Fine," Anne replies.

The front door to the building slams closed behind Arri. Anne flicks the rest of her cigarette into one of the pots of water; when she moves, her sweaty thighs unstick from one another with an unpleasant, dirty sensation. She wanders into her bedroom, where it is marginally cooler and where the odor of mildew is weaker. She throws herself onto the unmade bed. The necklace she found under the fridge is on her nightstand. The amber pendant containing a prehistoric beetle was a gift from Arri; when he gave it to

her, she had not started down the path that led her here, to this gritty bed in a rundown apartment.

It is dark when she awakens. She grabs a bagel Arri left for her before slumping on her couch and turning on the television. The 10 o'clock news is on; before she can change the channel to something more innocuous, an image catches her eye. It is a photograph of a little girl.

"A search is underway for a missing six-year-old girl. Pilar Mariana Cortez, of New Mexico, went missing from the family home between two A.M. and six A.M. last Tuesday. Her mother, Esmeralda Cortez, was the last person to see her prior to the disappearance."

The newscast shifts to show a clip of an interview with Esmeralda and her husband. Both look haggard. They lean against one another, as if neither can stand alone with the weight of their loss.

"When was the last time you saw your daughter?" a reporter asks.

"She had a nightmare at 1:30. She fell back asleep around two." Esmeralda wipes tears from her face.

"And when did you discover her missing?" another reporter asks.

"I woke at six to go to work. Pilar was not..." Esmeralda steadies herself as her husband hands her a Kleenex. "She was not in her room."

"And did you immediately call the police?"

"No," Esmeralda says. "She sometimes goes into the desert to meditate."

"Are you saying that you let your six-year-old daughter wander into the desert alone?" someone demands. Before the parents can respond, another volley of questions erupts.

"What do you mean by 'meditate?'"

“Did you know there are three sex offenders registered in your neighborhood?”

“Are you being charged with neglect?”

“How do you respond to allegations that, as the stepfather, you know more than you are saying? That you may be responsible for Pilar’s disappearance?”

“I adopted Pilar when she was not even a year old. I love her and protect her—”

“Then how did she go missing from your home? If you were ‘protecting’ her?”

“¡Alto! Te lo ruego, no más preguntas,” Esmeralda begs. “No more questions. Just, please, please—we are good parents! We just want our baby to come home.”

The program returns to the studio. The newscaster says, “If you have any information about Pilar Cortez, you can call the Las Cruces police or the FBI tip line. Those numbers are...”

Anne carries her laptop to the chipped, two-person table in her kitchen to piggyback on a neighbor’s wi-fi. She searches for the girl’s name, scrolling through photos. Most of these are the same as shown in the news, and it does not take much effort to find a Facebook page dedicated to the search for Pilar, full of pictures and videos. Anne touches the amber pendant on the necklace as she scrolls through the videos of Pilar opening Christmas presents, riding on a merry-go-round, and playing in the snow. It is mundane and sad. Anne is about to leave the page when she sees the title of the next video: “Pilar Reveals Tampering with Inducible Pluripotent Stem Cells (iP-SCs).” The video quality is grainy and appears to have been recorded with a phone in portrait mode. Pilar is seated on a chair, her legs swinging because she is too small for her feet to reach the ground. Several

adults sit cross-legged on the floor in front of her, their backs to the camera.

“Little brains,” Pilar says. “The scientists grow little brains from stems? There is something strange about them.”

A woman off-camera asks, “What is strange?”

“The cells,” Pilar replies.

“Do you know how they are strange?”

“Ummm...”

Someone coughs.

“They are strange because the dee nay is edited.”

“Maybe you mean DNA?”

“Yes, dee nay. Little spirals, like this.” Pilar puts her hands in front of her, index fingers pointed upwards to trace an approximation of a double-helix in the air.

The video ends abruptly. Anne replays it twice and is surprised to find herself creeped out enough to turn on the overhead light. She searches the internet for “Pilar DNA iPSCs.” A flood of results returns, primarily linking to the type of sites known for anonymous discussion of conspiracy theories. Most of the threads are full of pseudoscientific drivel. Anne is about to close the laptop to take a shower when she sees a thread containing valid genetic tectonic theory. The author details a loss of function being programmed into a specific chromosome, including calculations and the results of a gene sequencing analysis. If this is legit, someone is manufacturing and selling tampered pluripotent cells.

Mid-August 2036

Chapter 2

Anne fumbles with her cellphone, nearly dropping it in her haste to answer. The caller is from the company where she interviewed over a month ago. “This is Doctor Anne Huntington.”

“Yes, hello. I’m Kaitlyn Landsdown. We met in your interview.”

“How have you been?” Anne asks. Her tone is bright with forced sunniness. “Keeping cool in this weather?”

“I’m fine, thank you.” There is a long pause. “I’m calling to inform you we have decided to pursue alternative candidates.”

Anne sinks onto her couch. “I can explain. The data—”

“Sorry to interrupt, Doctor, but although your indiscretion in research alarmed us, that is not the final reason for our decision.”

“What?”

“You were flagged in a background check.”

“I never gave you permission to run a background check,” Anne says.

“You did; it was in the fine print of the application on our website.”

“Oh.”

"Best of luck with your endeavors," Kaitlyn says.

"Wait! What was flagged in the background check? There must be some mistake."

"I'm afraid I do not have that detail."

"It seems a rather pertinent *effing* detail, Kaitlyn."

"You can request a copy of your report from the FBI."

"Why can't I have the one you ran?"

"It is privileged information."

"Are you kidding me?"

"Take it up with the FBI. And again, good luck."

Anne throws her phone across the room. "God damn it!" she yells. She needs a drink, but has no alcohol. In fact, she has little of anything: a couple of mealy apples, some cans of cheap tuna that smell like cat food, and a half-packet of crackers gone soggy with humidity. Panic assails her, as sneaky and slow as a bruise on pale skin. If panic is a bruise, her despair is a compound fracture. As shabby as this living room is, her next stop is homelessness. A fierce possessiveness rises in her for the dirty little hovel. Anne gets out her broom and mop in an amorphous desire to stake her claim to the space by purging the mess. She goes no farther than propping the broom and mop against the wall in the living room; no amount of scrubbing will expunge the inviolable fact that she is hopelessly fucked. She flops onto her sofa.

A chapbook of poems written by her sister is discarded on the floor. It was a birthday gift, sweetly inscribed with happy wishes from her baby sister. Inscription aside, Anne has not bothered to read it; poetry goes against her innate rationality, but at this point, nothing in her situation bespeaks reason. She opens to a poem named "Reading Tragedy."

Summer prose crated in hope?
Champagne-aired sinner.

Seething, forced poems?
Factory-stacked dreams.

Death coming from good health?
Puritan luxuries, like meals.

A wave of hilarity hits Anne. Impecuniousness, she realizes, is not the only thing a poet and a disgraced scientist have in common. They also share a willingness to force reality to fit what seems true and right, at least for the space of a page or a graph of data. She closes the chapbook and sets it on the coffee table. She is about to light a cigarette when the intercom buzzes.

“Hello,” a tinny voice says. “Is this Anne Huntington’s dwelling?”

Anne stumbles getting up, tripping on an empty beer can on her way to answer the door. She pushes the button to respond. “Who’s asking?”

“John Baloyne. Anne attended one of my seminars in undergrad, *Psychology and Neurology in the Age of Organoids*.”

“Professor Baloyne?”

“Yes.”

Anne presses the button to unlock the main entrance, saying, “Come on up.”

It’s been years since she’s seen Baloyne, but he looks the same. Based on his reaction, Anne gathers she is not what he remembers. An awkward moment

passes with Anne holding her partially opened apartment door between them.

"May I come in?" Baloyne asks.

Anne steps aside. When she turns around, she sees the apartment as Baloyne does and blushes. "I was just in the middle of cleaning."

"My apologies for disrupting your day. I won't be here long." They shake hands with stiff formality.

"Would you like something to drink?"

"What do you have?"

"Water and... ummm, water."

"I'll have a water."

Anne goes to the kitchen where she searches in dismay for a clean glass. Eventually she finds a mug that looks sanitary and fills it from the tap. Baloyne is sitting on her couch when she returns, flipping through the chapbook.

"I admire Josephine St. Vincent's work. I had no idea she is your sister."

"I had no idea anyone read poetry."

"Ah," Baloyne grins. "You are as blunt as I recall."

She sits at the far end of the couch from Baloyne. "What brings you to Virginia?"

"A job," he replies.

"Where at? The little liberal arts college here in town? It will be a letdown compared to where you've been."

"No, no. Not a job for me. One for you."

Anne blinks but stays silent, watching Baloyne produce a small device from a leather messenger bag. "Is that an EM jammer?"

Baloyne presses a button on the device. A light flashes on it. "Would you like to hear about the job?"

"You may as well not bother. A routine background check flagged me for something. There's no way I'd

get a security clearance for whatever kind of job requires worrying about my apartment being bugged." As if on cue, a roach scrabbles across the wall.

Baloyne clears his throat. "You were about to clean."

They both look at the mop and broom.

"Sure," Anne replies.

"Do you know what in your background check was problematic?"

"The interviewer wouldn't tell me."

"You were flagged for anti-nationalist leanings."

The swivel fan clatters. Anne hits the thing with a stern thump. "What are you talking about? I'm as anti-nationalist as, I don't know...the NFL and mom's apple pie?"

"Your undergraduate thesis is referenced in the Wittenberg Congressional Report." Baloyne digs a paper out of his messenger bag. He passes it to her.

It is a page from the report's bibliography with Anne's name highlighted. She reads the title of her paper, looks up in confusion.

"Do you remember your thesis?"

"Of course." Anne looks down at the page. "I argued there is a danger of scientific progress leading to a disaster via inattention, specifically that the sheer amount of knowledge siloed in different scientific disciplines is not, and possibly cannot, be synthesized to understand the risks of producing technologies that may interact or conflict in a manner harmful to society. My thought experiment specified fictional findings of the Alaska HAARP and the Dugway HiRes facilities, whereby the separation of concerns between the scientific teams, coupled with governmental secrecy..." Anne pauses. "Well, fuck."

"Indeed."

“It was a *thought* experiment! Flagging me as anti-nationalist for it is as absurd as arresting Schrödinger on animal abuse charges for his ‘cat in the box!’ Or taking away Einstein’s driving license for going over the limit when he *imagined* traveling on a beam of light!”

“General Wittenberg has no use for dead scientists,” Baloyne says. “He and Senator Teryan *do* have a use for you. Your psychological profile indicated you would not agree without significant, well, incentive.”

“Like not being able to get a job,” Anne says, fiddling with her pack of cigarettes. “Do you mind?”

“It’s your home.” Baloyne waits until Anne has a few deep drags of smoke. “I am here on behalf of the Committee on Science, Space and Technology, which is chaired by Teryan and upon which General Wittenberg serves as the military advisor. They are offering you a way back into the intellectual community.”

“Ha!” Anne looks around for an ashtray. None is available, and Baloyne hasn’t touched his water. Anne taps ash into it. “Sorry, prof, but the *government* wasted your time. I don’t want anything to do with hypocritical academics and their incestuous community.”

Baloyne raises his arms and leans back, his head propped against his interlocked fingers. It is the relaxed posture of a man used to being the smartest person in the room. “How are your student loan payments going?”

“None of your damn business.”

Baloyne laughs. It is a loud, jolly sound at odds with Anne’s expectations. “You still have battery acid for blood and radon in your lungs.”

"Well, hurry up and say what you've got to say. I've got things to do."

"You are aware of the FIG project?"

"I'd be shocked to meet someone who isn't," Anne replies.

"What the general populace is not aware of is that while FIG ended with ignominy, it showed promise. The synthesis of varied information is that promise. Your thesis was one of very few papers written by Americans to touch on this subject."

Anne shrugs.

"Your perspicacity makes you an ideal asset."

"I think you meant to say, 'ideal scapegoat.'"

"You should take this job, Anne."

"It's a position on FIG 2.0?"

"Until you accept, I cannot give you details."

"Does anyone fall for that?" Anne asks, dropping her cigarette butt into the mug. "I mean, really? No moderately intelligent person dives headfirst into a pool without knowing the depth."

"No moderately intelligent person turns down \$100K a year, not when the only job requirement is to spend time *thinking*. More valuable than money, to even a middling scholar, is the promise of an intellectual challenge. You possess more than moderate intelligence and produce better than middling scholarship, despite your... *peccadillo*."

"And this is on the level?" Anne asks.

"As much as any hidden government activity in a democracy can ever be on the level," Baloyne replies. He takes his feet off the coffee table and leans towards Anne. "Take the dive; the water is fathoms deep."

Water, Anne thinks, remembering Pilar.

"The government will pay off your student loans. American taxpayers will cover the rent on your apartment for the duration of the project. All you must do is accept cost-free room and board in a historic location on the beautiful, if temperamental, Hampton Roads waterway."

Baloyne is watching her, and she realizes he never had any doubt she would accept the offer. "Get the slumlord to fix that leak, and I'll take the job," she says.

"Excellent." Baloyne turns off his scrambler.

His goofy smile supports Anne's theory that happiness ill-fits intelligent men. "When do I start?"

"Someone will be in touch."

"Don't forget the ceiling."

Baloyne mock salutes. When he leaves, she leans against the door, shocked by her change in fortunes. Shal breaks her short-lived reverie by shouting her name.

In her rush to get to the window, she slips on slimy water and cracks her shin on something. She pokes her head outside. "Why are you screaming?"

"He's with *them*!" Shal points at Baloyne. "See the license plate?"

Unperturbed, Baloyne gets into an idling black sedan with diplomatic plates. As the car merges into the light traffic, Shal attacks the intercom button for her apartment. The buzzing is followed by a furious attack on the building's main door; it sounds like Shal is throwing his entire body against it. In a sudden silence, more alarming than the shouts, Anne hears her own panicked breathing. She tries to unlock her phone to call 911, but her trembling hands fumble at the buttons to wake the device. The phone slips and falls into a mop bucket of stagnant water.

Then the woman who lives on the ground floor screams.

Anne peeks out of her window. Shal is standing on the downstairs neighbor's patio chair, trying to climb to the second story. His tennis shoes thump and squeak on a glass sliding door, and his dirty fingers clutch Anne's window ledge. She pours a pot of water in Shal's face. It startles him into losing his grip. She dumps the contents of the mop bucket on him, including her cellphone, which rebounds from his skull to shatter on the pavement.

A police car screeches to a halt in front of the apartment building. Shal bolts, but not before upturning his grocery cart behind him. It makes no difference; in a matter of moments, the officers have Shal on his knees and in plastic zip-tie cuffs.



Shal does not return the next day. His bedraggled possessions remain where he dumped them, soiled clothing and cans of Spam littering the cracked sidewalk. Anne puts them back into his cart. It has a wonky wheel, and fights her as she shoves it behind an overgrown hedge. This is where Shal stashes his stuff while he's panhandling; it must also be where he sleeps, given the thick layer of newspaper and two folded blankets. Next to these, there is a cairn of rocks with a bit of black garbage bag sticking out from under it. She tugs at the bag, knocking over the pile of stones. Something rectangular is inside. The little liar in her mind whispers to take it with her for safekeeping.

Anne returns to her apartment with the bag. In the gray twilight of her bedroom, she empties it, finding a bundle of manila folders closed by a snarl of overstretched rubber bands and a pink ribbon tied in a bow; when these are removed, the folders look naked and vulnerable. One by one, Anne takes out newspaper clippings, random sheets of green graph paper, pages ripped from magazines, an envelope, and a brochure for Fort Chamberlain. After sorting the papers into piles of like material, she begins going through the newspaper clippings. Her body tingles with an echo of the thrill she got fabricating data.

Shal's newspaper articles focus on three topics: organoid research; high-energy cosmic rays; and Pilar Cortez. The papers related to organoid research include a sheaf of redacted documents, a highlighted section of the bill that funded FIG, and an assortment of journal articles. Many of the pages are littered with what appear to be cross-reference IDs penciled in the margins. A cursory look at the cosmic ray news clippings confirms that they, too, have IDs in the margins. Anne picks one ID and begins matching it with other papers marked with the same ID. The trail bounces between astrophysics papers, tabloid articles, newspaper clippings, sometimes even hand-drawn diagrams of what appear to be neurons. Most pages are annotated with multiple cross-references, making it impossible to gather the pages into one pile per ID.

She scans the pages about Pilar. They are a mix of tabloid clippings and printouts from online forums. According to Shal's research, Pilar began making her eerie prognostications two years ago. Lurid headlines shout, among other things, "Four-year-old Predicted the Recent Mass Shooting at a Scientific Conven-

tion,” “Little Girl Warned Airline that Flight Out of LAX Would Crash A Week Before the Tragedy,” “Tiny Prophetess Foretold the Outbreak of Swine Flu in Arkansas,” “Does Pilar Mariana Cortez Have a Direct Line to the Future?”

A printout from a forum catches Anne’s attention. The discussion is about Pilar’s prediction that a high-energy cosmic particle will emanate from the Boötes Void in 2037. The rudimentary astronomy most adults possess wouldn’t include knowledge of voids, let alone the *names* of the voids.

A bang in the courtyard behind the apartment building tightens a corset of anxiety around her lungs; she reminds herself Shal is incarcerated. Tossing the forum printout on the ground, she returns to considering Pilar’s prediction. The Boötes Void is the most perfect vacuum in space. Spanning nearly 250,000 light-years, the void is sparsely populated with galaxies. The eons of space between those galaxies are nearly devoid of cosmic dust. A particle’s trek through the void would be lonesome, as unlikely to encounter another particle as it is to encounter a living human in the depths of the Mariana Trench. A cosmological event of that magnitude and rarity Pilar predicts is impossible to know in advance; there are only three recorded instances of a high-energy particle coming from the Local Void, and those detections occurred over the span of forty years. Anne is aware of no similar particles detected from other voids, much less Boötes. An accurate forecast of a particle from Boötes is *literally* astronomically improbable.

Anne turns her attention to the stack of graph paper. At the top of each page, someone has written “MYR HYPOTHESIS (Shal’s copy).” Dense, neatly written equations follow the heading. The math is

elegant and appears to derive a function predicting the wavelengths necessary to induce some sort of modulated change in behavior, affect, or both. Anne sees no obvious flaws at the level of neurons, but the extrapolation from neurons to a human brain is tenuous.

“Who *are* you, MYR?” Anne asks aloud.

She stands up. Her foot is asleep and sends little shocks up her leg as she walks to her kitchen to steal her neighbor’s Wi-Fi. While she waits for her ancient computer to connect to the internet, she shuffles around the tiny room, waking her foot up and rereading the first pages of the MYR HYPOTHESIS. Nettles of envy sting her pride: the initial derivations are obvious, almost comical in simplicity, yet they had never occurred to her. Worse, Anne knows the thought would *never* have occurred to her. Such elegant insight is rarer than high-energy particles emerging from cosmic voids.

Anne sits at the table, shoving aside dirty dishes to make space for Shal’s papers. Her first search bookings at the local jail. She finds Shalmaneser Antony Mordino’s mug shots. Arrest and court records in the county reveal arrests for vagrancy, solicitation, trespassing, and minor burglary. His earliest offense was seven years prior. Either Shal had been a stable member of society until then, or he was committing crimes elsewhere. Anne bets on the latter but does not attempt to confirm her hunch. Instead, she uses an image search on the mug shots, discovering that after leaving graduate school with his PhD in astrophysics incomplete, Shal worked as a software engineer at a handful of failed startups in San Francisco, Austin, and Waltham. Anne can find no other information on Shal: no living relatives, no social

media accounts, and no obvious collaboration with mathematicians or scientists. At a dead end with Shal, she scours the internet for posts including the novel mathematics attributed to MYR. Nothing is returned by the searches, even when she uses LaTeX notation.

Anne turns her attention to the grimy envelope. Dumping it onto the table reveals the contents to be scraps of paper, predominantly gum wrappers, that fall with papery whispers. Many have Library of Congress Classification or Dewey Decimal identifiers written on them; a few have what might be surnames; some might be co-ordinates or dates and times. A slightly bigger scrap of paper is inscribed with excitable block letters: "LAURIE ZOLL!" A search for this name returns a paucity of results. It takes nearly an hour to discover Laurie is the sole surviving granddaughter of a Margorie Zoll. A little more digging reveals nothing more about "zoll laurie," "l.zoll," "lori zoll," and a dozen other combinations.

The last item in her stolen cache is a brochure for Fort Chamberlin. It is worn and cross-hatched with wrinkles where it has been folded. It opens to a map of the fortress and thumbnail pictures of sites to visit. The most interesting feature, though, is an emphatic radioactive symbol drawn in thick, black Sharpie over the center of the map. Googling "fort chamberlin" produces a slew of results, a relief after the elusiveness of MYR and Zoll. Anne's first stop is a map, and she considers throwing her computer out the window when she realizes the area is blurred out in satellite images and rendered a featureless green blob on the street map. Despite the secrecy, older aerial images exist, revealing a misshapen, hexagonal star of seven bastions encircled by a tidal moat.

An article on VirginiaIsForHistorians.org informs Anne that the existing fortress, which is built of stone and brick, supplanted several iterations of less-durable construction. The earlier forts, under various names, were destroyed by war or hurricane. Westernized history of what is now Fort Chamberlin began in 1607, when English captains Christopher Newport and John Smith noted the auspicious defensive position at the confluence of the Chesapeake Bay, the York River, and the James River. Construction of the first English fortification on the narrow peninsula began in 1609, ousting the Kecoughtan people. Not quite two centuries later, the British established batteries on the peninsula as they made their way to their defeat at Yorktown. British plunder of coastal Virginia waterways during the War of 1812 underscored the need for stronger fortification to prevent ships from traveling inland on the York and James Rivers; the re-architected fortress was completed in 1834. Given the vulnerability of Washington D.C. to attack by Confederates via the same waters the British terrorized, Union command was swift to secure Fort Chamberlin early in the American Civil War. The fortress remained the sole Union stronghold in the Confederate state of Virginia. In what may have been a taunt, the Confederate President Jefferson Davis was imprisoned in the tiny fort at the conclusion of the war. Fort Chamberlin continued as an active military base, serving as a training ground for both World Wars. The fort was decommissioned in the mid-2000s, became a museum on the National Historic Registry, and looked set to be a perennial must-see for tourists visiting the American Historic Triangle of Jamestown, Yorktown, and Williamsburg.

Except that never happened. In 2031, the museum was shuttered without any explanation; a year later, the entire fortress was closed to public access. The closure fell out of the headlines, only to be reignited with the evacuation of Phoebus, the town nearest the fort. Located on the “mainland” side of the narrow Mill River strait, the bridges connecting Phoebus to Fort Chamberlin were two of the three land routes onto the peninsula. The third road onto the fortress was destroyed by the Army Corps of Engineers in early 2032 when they blasted a canal across the isthmus to the north of Phoebus. The peninsula became an artificial island, and Phoebus a closed city within an exclusionary zone.

Phoebus residents were offered payment for their property and the full cost of relocation to another subdivision in the same school district. Challenges to the eviction made their way to the Supreme Court of Virginia. The justices ruled the eminent domain laws applicable, despite lacking any clear definition of public benefit to be gained by governmental seizure of the land.

Following the white rabbit of Phoebus, Anne scrolls through anti-government forums where conspiracy theories about the use of the fort proliferate. The screen name “lorikat” contributes at least one comment to every “chamberlin phoebus closing eviction” thread. In one post, lorikat linked a map of boats registered to marina slips on the fort, but it is not the marina that captures Anne’s attention: it is the name of the waterway: Hampton Roads.

“Oh, fuck,” Anne whispers. “Baloyne, what the hell have you gotten me into?”

The thought of calling Baloyne and demanding an explanation is superseded by a craving to organize

Shal's notes as if they were her own. She slides the graph papers into protective plastic sleeves; tapes the gum wrappers onto peach-colored construction paper; and sorts the newspaper clippings and print-outs into a blue canvas accordion folder with tabs to indicate which topic is contained in each slot. The items in the plastic sleeves and gum wrapper pages go in a battered three-ring binder emblazoned with the name of her undergraduate college. Her sense of ownership is complete when she puts it all in a backpack that she shoves under her bed. The only evidence openly accusing her of theft is the detritus of Shal's previous storage system. She stuffs dry-rotting rubber bands, worn folders, and the grimy envelope into her garbage can, tucking it under smelly Thai leftovers. As she gets ready for bed, Anne discovers she forgot to throw away the pink ribbon that tied Shal's papers together. She keeps it, fully aware this action bears more than a passing resemblance to a serial killer's memento.



The next day, a city employee removes the rest of Shal's belongings. Except for the toppled cairn, there is no evidence Shal ever existed. The downstairs neighbor catches Anne coming out from behind the shrub that used to be his home.

"Did you hear?" the woman asks.

"Hear what?" Anne replies, irritated that the woman caught her at the scene of the crime.

"He's been remanded to the state mental hospital."

"Oh."

“He really scared me the other night.” When Anne doesn’t respond, the woman continues. “He seemed *very* focused on you.”

“I noticed,” Anne says.

“Do you know why?”

Anne walks past her neighbor’s, refusing to make eye contact. It is obvious the woman wants to continue talking, but Anne wants to forget Shalmaneser Antony Mordino. No Shal, no crime.

“It’s just so strange, right?” the woman insists. “Shal never scared me before. I wonder what set him off?”

“No idea,” Anne lies, hurrying to unlock the front door to the building.

“Weren’t you *terrified*?” the woman asks.

Anne pretends not to hear her, taking the stairs two at a time to avoid being cornered in the lobby. Her satisfaction at her evasion dissipates when she remembers that her rent is overdue, again. She knows that a letter informing her will be in her mailbox, along with a strident threat of a fifty-dollar penalty for every day she is late. Anne applies online for yet another credit card—the fifth? Sixth? As she waits for the approval process to complete, Anne checks her bank account. What she sees makes her double-check that she hasn’t somehow logged into someone else’s account.

One-hundred thousand dollars.

One-hundred *thousand* dollars!

The credit card application comes back as a rejection. She giggles: one-hundred thousand dollars! Anne considers paying her rent. Instead, she decides the landlord can wait for her black-op benefactor to pony up the cash while she browses her favorite clothing site. Mentally, she revises the last line of her sister’s poem: puritan luxuries, like meals – or new

clothes. She is torn between the teal skirt and the one with a lemon print when her cellphone rings. The spot where the caller's number should show is cracked and unreadable from being dropped two stories. The screen is held together by clear packing tape. Anne gently picks it up; if she drops it again, it will become unusable.

"Hello?" she says.

"Is this Anne Huntington?" a man asks.

"Yes."

"This is a courtesy call to inform you that your student loans are paid in full."

Out of habit and forgetting that the screen is jacked up, Anne moves the phone away from her ear to look at the caller's number.

"Ma'am? Are you still there?"

"Yeah, yes. Are you sure? Can we verify the account number?"

"Certainly. One moment."

The man at the loan office reads out a string of numbers. It is a match. Anne has no need to verify by looking it up; years of restructuring payments had the effect of making it unforgettable.

"You're sure I owe nothing?" she asks.

"Yes. Congratulations!"

"Who paid it?"

"You didn't?" the man replies. It is the first time he sounds like a human rather than an automaton playing at being human. "You must have a guardian angel."

"Can you see who?"

"I'm looking now. Hold just one second, please." The hold music blares at an abusive volume. Anne moves the phone away from her ear, waiting until the

torture of saxophones is replaced by the tinny sound of the loan officer's voice. "Miss. Huntington?"

"Yes?"

"I've never seen this before."

"It's not paid?"

"No, the loan is settled. I didn't mean to alarm you."

"Then what?" Anne asks.

"The payment was made anonymously, somehow. The system reports RESTRICTED ACCESS in the field that should show the paying entity. You have a good friend by that name?" he laughs.

"Baloyne," she whispers.

"Sorry, I couldn't hear you."

"It's okay."

"Shocked?"

"Straight-up electrocuted."

Another youthful chuckle is cut short, as if a manager has given him a stern look. His next question is an aggressive resumption of the emotionless-cog persona. "Is there anything else I can help you with today, Miss Huntington?"

"No, thank you."

"Have a nice day."

"You, too," she says, ending the call.

The sudden absence of debt is dizzying. Anne crumples to the floor. I am a champagne-aired sinner, she thinks, drunk on relief.

Late August 2036

Chapter 3

Two young men dressed in Army fatigues arrive at exactly 8 A.M. to transport Anne to Fort Chamberlin. Neither wears insignia denoting rank and, where their nametags should be, there is a blank rectangle of Velcro. Skin color aside, they are similar in the eerie way of all soldiers: tall, muscular, clean-cut, and brutally serious. Anne slings the backpack containing Shal's research over her shoulder and is about to pick up her suitcase when the Black soldier says, "Please sit on the sofa, ma'am." He plucks the backpack from her. She takes a seat, feeling naked in her new teal skirt because she is the only person not dressed for war.

"Ma'am, do you have firearms or weapons of any sort in your luggage? Anything sharp that could hurt me when I search?"

"No," Anne says.

"Any flammable liquids?"

Anne shakes her head.

The white soldier wipes the suitcase handle with a cloth to detect gunshot residue. As he works, his partner empties Anne's backpack. He sets the binder and accordion folder on the coffee table, followed by

random pens, hair clips and a fistful of highlighters. When he gets to her graphing calculator, he frowns.

"No devices are permitted, Doctor Huntington."

"It's just a calculator," Anne says.

"You can't take it with you. This laptop is prohibited, too."

"What's your name?" Anne asks.

"You can call me Smith."

"Is that your real name?"

"It is as far as you are concerned, ma'am."

"And you?" she asks, looking at the guy pawing his way through her clothing. "What's your name?"

"Wesson."

Anne laughs. The stern expressions of the young men silence her. "Well, Smith and Wesson, the laptop is a POS, but I need the calculator to do my job."

"No devices," Smith repeats.

"None," Wesson agrees.

Smith looks at his partner, asking, "GSR?"

"Negative, sir," Wesson replies.

"Okay, is this some sort of prank?" Anne asks.

"National security is not a prank, Doctor Huntington," Smith admonishes.

"Wait! You're taking my Boox? An e-reader can hardly be considered a threat to the country."

"Not so, ma'am." Wesson is holding a handful of Anne's underwear. "Ideas are the most dangerous weapon."

"How philosophical," Anne says. "And is it necessary for you to go through my panties?"

The nonverbal answer is that yes, it is necessary. Furthermore, Wesson silently conveys that bras with underwires are forbidden. When her best bra is set on the coffee table next to the calculator, Anne says, "Oh, come on!"

She picks up her cellphone, searching her contacts for Baloyne's number.

"I'm sorry for the inconvenience, but no calls." Smith extends his hand, saying, "Pass me your cellphone, ma'am. Please."

"What if I refuse?" The soldiers stare at her until she sets her phone on the table.

The next indignity is the removal of her high-heels, sequined club dress, and her interview suit. Defiant, Anne shoves all of it back into her suitcase. "Those are not devices."

"They are unnecessary for the mission," Wesson says, passing the offending items to Smith. Now that he is done inspecting her clothing, Wesson turns his attention to the books tucked in a side pocket of the suitcase. "**Dahlgren**," he remarks. "This is a good book."

"Delany fan?" Anne asks.

"Yes, ma'am. I love the **Neverÿon** series."

"Wait, I can't keep the book?"

Wesson looks truly apologetic. "Outside literature is prohibited."

"Where are you taking me, a 1950s Russian gulag?"

"No, you're stationed within the continental United States," Smith says. "Besides, the Navy is unwilling to loan the Army its time machine."

"Good one," Anne says. "Very funny."

"Last step is to wand you for weapons," Smith says.

"I'm in a tee shirt, skirt and sandals. Where do you think I'm stashing a weapon?" A moment passes, and she says, "Never mind; I don't want your answer."

Smith unclips a metal detector wand from his belt. "Stand with your arms above your head and your feet shoulder-width apart, Doctor." Anne does as she is told. Up close, she smells his sandalwood aftershave

and a whiff of coffee breath. When no gun is detected, he steps away from her.

"Is this a handmade chapbook?" Wesson asks. He is holding **This Frabjous Day**, the book by her sister. "Do you read poetry much?"

"Yes, it is handmade and no, I'm not a fan of poetry," Anne replies. "Still, I want to bring it with me. I also need the research you took out of my backpack."

"I'll call and see if we can get clearance for the math," Smith says.

"And the poetry, sir?" Wesson prompts.

Smith is already dialing his phone and does not answer. "General Wittenberg, sir. This is Smith, calling from the Huntington residence." There is a pause during which Anne can hear the distant rumble of a man's voice. "Yes, sir. She is prepared to leave. I have a couple of questions about remitting prohibition of some contraband items she says are necessary for her work." Another pause, and then Smith says, "Yes, sir." He passes the phone to Anne. "General Wittenberg would like to speak with you."

She takes the cell phone. "This is Doctor Anne Huntington."

"Hello," General Wittenberg replies. "Let's keep this short, Huntington. What are the items and why do you need them?"

"A binder of derivations, and an accordion folder of relevant news clippings and research. I'd also like my graphing calculator. And a book of poetry my sister gave me."

"You will be provided a calculator on site," the general says.

"Fine."

"And you can have the binder and folder."

"Thank you. What about the poetry?"

"We can get a copy sent to you."

"No, it must be this one. My sister died. She inscribed it for me."

"You are aware I know you are lying?" the general asks.

"I am now," Anne replies.

"If you were a soldier, I would reprimand you. As it is, the most I can do is strongly caution you to keep in mind that you are a subordinate and I expect prompt, concise, and truthful answers to any questions I or others in the administration may ask. Is that clear, *Doctor* Huntington?"

"Nice meeting you, *General* Wittenberg."

She passes the phone back to Smith. While he is busy tucking it into his pocket, she gets Wesson's attention by gesturing at the gaping hole in her ceiling. "Can you believe that I've waited a year, and that it's still not fixed?" In the moment both men are distracted, Anne shoves the chapbook into the back of her skirt, pulling her blouse over it. An impish thrill at her own brazen and unnecessary fraudulence brings a flush to her cheeks.

"That looks like some sort of building code violation," Wesson says. "It must be terrible when it rains."

"Oh, yes. Awful."

Smith zips up Anne's suitcase while Wesson tucks the ill-gotten research into the backpack; it is clear they intend her to carry the items, and she does. The trio goes into the hallway. The men stand guard as Anne locks her door. On the way downstairs, Smith walks behind her. Anne feels the chapbook slipping. When they get to the front door without the poetry falling out of her skirt, she feels triumphant.

The nosy downstairs neighbor is on her patio. "Is everything okay, Anne?"

“Everything’s fine.”

“Will you be gone long?” the woman asks.

Anne puts her suitcase in the trunk, ignoring the woman.

“I’m asking because if you are gone, someone needs to make sure your apartment won’t leak onto my patio.”

Wesson opens the back door of the sedan and ushers Anne inside. As the car pulls away, Anne flips off her neighbor. “That woman annoys the shit out of me.”

“She has a point about the leak,” Wesson says.

“Oh, my God! Can everyone just let it go?” Anne, noticing Smith watching her in the rearview mirror, exaggerates her pout.

“Doctor Huntington,” Smith says, “she couldn’t see you flip her the bird; the tint is very dark.”

“Will you go back and let me roll down the window to make my point clear?”

Wesson lets loose a goofy, braying peal of laughter. “You must make a lot of friends.”

“That is a vile accusation,” Anne jests.

A smile cracks Smith’s stern expression. It almost feels like they’re three friends on a road trip. It reminds her of the drive from Chicago to Raleigh for a conference. She, Ehlani Rappaport and Timo Falkenrath presented the paper Arri called “solid work.” The mirage of a road trip dissipates like a heat shimmer approached at twenty over the speed limit.



After two hours of monotonous interstate travel punctuated by a traffic jam near Richmond, they

reach the closed town of Phoebus. No sign welcomes them. Instead, a tall chain-link fence topped by razor wire indicates that visitors should fuck right off. Ominous metal signs on the fence alternate between blaring NO TRESSPASSING GOVERNMENT PROPERTY and warning that the area beyond the fence is PATROLLED WITH LIVE FIRE. A guard station punctuates the wall of threats. A set of gates, intricate as the inner workings of an antique clock, bars the road beyond the building.

"This looks like a prison," Anne comments.

"It's not," Smith says. "The fence is to keep people out."

"If you say so," Anne replies. She leans forward to see out of the windshield. An eighteen-wheeler idles in front of them. "What is A-A-F-E-S?" she asks, curious as to the letters on the back of the truck.

"A-fees," Smith says.

Wesson shifts in his seat to look at Anne. "It means Army and Air Force Exchange Service. Soldiers live and die by acronyms."

"Academics live and die by frivolous papers published in obscure journals. At least the military has the decency to *mean* something." Anne points at the AAFES truck, asking, "What's the hold up?"

"They are checking for explosives or stowaways," Smith answers.

"And proper identification," Wesson adds.

"Is it common for people to drop by with bombs?" Anne half-heartedly jokes.

"The lunatic fringe is alive and well, ma'am," Wesson replies. "Civilians are convinced Fort Chamberlin is some sort of modern-day Tuskegee—or worse, if that's possible. I've seen social media posts ranting about eugenics."

“What *is* being done here?” Anne asks.

“Whatever it is, it’s beyond our security clearance level,” Smith says.

The pneumatic brakes on the eighteen-wheeler release with a groan; this is followed by the rhythmic mechanical growl of the engine engaging. As the sedan pulls into the space the AFEES truck vacated, Anne tries to open her door. It is locked, and there is no mechanism to unlock it. She has never been in a police cruiser, but clearly the military took some inspiration: locks, razor-wire, guards.

“It’s too late for me to decide not to go, isn’t it?” Anne asks.

“Doctor Huntington, it was too late when we arrived at your apartment,” Smith says.

“You would have carried me screaming and fighting to the car?”

“No. We would incapacitate you first.”

Frowning, Wesson says, “What Smith means is that we’re glad you came willingly.”

Anne shrugs.

A woman in camouflage comes to the driver’s side of the car and salutes Smith. He rolls down the window for her to scan his military ID.

“Morning, Specialist Noe.”

“Sir, good morning. Do you have transport papers for the passenger?”

Smith passes his iPhone to the guard, who scans a QR code. Handing the phone back into the car, she says, “Papers are in order. Please roll down the windows and let me verify the vehicle occupants.”

A humid fug steamrolls through Anne’s window. Specialist Noe comes to her side of the car. “Good morning, Doctor Huntington. Please look directly at me. I’m going to run facial recognition.”

Anne looks at the tablet that the woman is holding.

"Thank you, Doctor."

"All good?" Wesson asks.

"Yes, sir."

Anne takes a grateful breath of ice-cold air when Smith rolls up her window. Specialist Noe scans Wesson's ID. Another guard, this one male, steps out of the little brick enclosure. He uses a metal rod with a mirror on one end to examine the undercarriage of the sedan, while Noe investigates the trunk and the engine compartment.

"You can pull forward onto the scanner, sir," Specialist Noe says.

Smith drives the car onto a steel plate that makes a slight ringing noise. The male guard returns to the brick shack to scrutinize a monitor displaying an acid-washed, hyper-vivid scan of the car. The profusion of color is as mystifying to Anne as a fetal ultrasound. Whatever the colors mean, they satisfy the guard. The first security bar beyond the checkpoint jerks a few times before clattering into a perpendicular position.

"Good to go, sirs."

"Stay cool, soldier."

"I'll try, sir," Specialist Noe replies.

Now that the AC has replaced the muggy air let in through the windows, Anne realizes she has been smelling the vacation scent of salt water. Both sides of the road are lined with waist-high concrete barriers, beyond which Anne sees the foundations of demolished houses. Here, the military doubles-down on the threatening signs. The NO TRESSPASSING signs are joined by a set of giant red billboards proclaiming DANGER ENTERING LIVE MINE AREA. The sedan hits a bump in the road and Anne jumps.

“Jesus,” she says.

“The signs are a precaution, ma’am,” Smith says.

“So, there aren’t really any mines?” Anne asks.

“There are,” Smith replies.

Wesson, always helpful, looks at Anne in the rearview mirror. “This is the only road into Fort Chamberlin, and it is guarded by snipers. Anyone who approaches through the deadzone on foot will regret it.”

As if conjured by Wesson’s comments, Anne notices the manned towers. Sharpshooters aim at the car, swiveling so that there is not an instant where Anne feels safe from the anonymous people who could decide to blow out her brains. They reach a second guard station; this one is just to validate the IDs and transport manifest. When that is done, a metal door slides along a track, revealing a quaint Main Street lined with ancient homes and little shops. There are no people on the sidewalks and no cars in the parking spots. Fading and tattered Halloween decorations festoon porches of uninhabited homes. Despite being abandoned, not a single window is broken. All doors, on both houses and shops, have signage admonishing that TRESPASSING IS A COURT-MARTIAL OFFENSE. Smith slows the car to let a pair of squirrels zigzag across the street. Anne watches them race up a tree, passing a bedraggled witch effigy dangling from a lower limb.

“We’re almost there now, Doctor Huntington,” Wesson says.

“Is it always this empty?” Anne asks.

“It wouldn’t be much of an exclusion zone if it wasn’t,” Smith replies.

“True,” Anne agrees.

They are passing an abandoned coffee shop. Next to the entry are gorgeous wrought-iron planters where flowers used to grow. Naked mannequins pose in the window of a boutique clothing store like women in an Amsterdam red-light district. A flyer for an author signing event hangs in the window of a bookstore; Anne cannot make out the author's name, but the book cover indicates it is a horror novel. Through a grimy window of a seafood restaurant, she sees tables covered in white cloth with little crystal vases patiently awaiting diners that will never come. Nothing moves inside any of the buildings. The sedan passes through an intersection, ignoring the stop sign. There are posts where street names should be, but the signs are missing. Perhaps because of the book cover, Anne suddenly recalls reading **The Stand**, by Stephen King aloud to her sister when they were in high school. Phoebus is as empty as King's fictional towns in the aftermath of Captain Trips.

"Did you know any of the people who used to live here?" she asks.

"I didn't," Wesson says. "I was in boot camp in Georgia when Phoebus was evacuated."

"My home state is Mississippi. Until I was stationed at Chamberlin, I had never been in Virginia. Everything was locked down when I got here," Smith says.

"Where in Mississippi?" Anne asks, not caring about the answer but wanting to hear something other than the hum of cicadas and the quirky noises of the sedan.

"Hattiesburg, Doctor Huntington. My family has been there since the 1800s. Not by choice, originally, but it's home now."

"Slaves?" Wesson asks.

"Yes," Smith replies.

“Then you know the history of Chamberlin?”

Smith nods.

The men fall silent, and Anne fumbles for a question. She settles on asking Wesson, “What history? I don’t know anything about this area.”

“I love reading American history. When I got my orders to come here, a stone’s throw from the heart of The Historic Triangle, I read everything I could find.” Wesson turns in his seat to smile at Anne.

“The first Africans on this continent arrived here in 1619. It was named Old Pointe Comfort then. The ship was christened *White Lion*.”

“That’s a cringe-inducing name.”

“Which one?” Wesson asks.

“Now that you mention it, both,” Anne says, looking at her own pale legs reflected in the car window.

“The place redeems itself a bit in the Civil War.”

“That seems unlikely,” Anne says.

“In 1861, escaped slaves who made it to Union territory were classified as contraband, a term repurposed from the original meaning of goods captured from the opposing forces. As contraband, slaves were not returned to the Confederacy. One of the first Contraband Camps was right here in Phoebus.”

“Harriet Tubman was a nurse at the Contraband Hospital at Fort Monroe,” Smith adds.

“Where?” Anne asks.

“Sorry. That’s one of the other names this place has had.”

Smith parks the car perpendicular to a narrow bridge. Anne hears her door unlock. She wonders if this is a test and sits still, waiting.

“You walk from here, ma’am,” Smith says. “I’ll pop the trunk for you.”

"Now you'll thank us for stopping you from over packing," Wesson says, a teasing tone in his voice.

"Sure." Anne pauses with the door partway open, one leg in the car, the other on the roadway. "Where do I go?"

"Cross the moat and go through the tunnel. Someone should meet you at the Main Gate."

Wesson looks at Anne over his shoulder and says, "The Main Gate was built in 1820."

"Good to know," Anne says. "Thanks for the tour."

"It was nice making your acquaintance, Doctor," Smith says.

"Will I see you guys again?"

"I'd like that," Wesson says. When Smith clears his throat, Wesson hurries to add, "Doctor Huntington, ma'am."

"Look me up, I guess," Anne says, wondering where in the hell she's going to be if he ever comes looking.

She steps out of the car into the overheated, swamp-like air. The sun is merciless. Seagulls cuss each other out as they fly over the narrow tunnel leading into the fortress. There is a green swath of grass and a twisted live oak visible at the other end of the tunnel. She stops gawking long enough to get her suitcase and backpack before closing the trunk; Wesson waves at her, and she nods. Once the sedan is out of sight, she takes the chapbook from her waistband. It represents a tiny triumph over her strange, albeit consenting, captivity. She smiles and shoves it into the front pocket of her suitcase. Slinging the bag of stolen research onto her shoulders, Anne resumes looking at the Main Gate. There is something aggressive about the square mouth of the tunnel; perhaps it is the twin pilasters looming on either side of the door like faceless sphinxes, or maybe it

is the trapezoidal voussoir stones arranged like huge teeth above the lintel. Not quite resigned to venturing between the judgmental sphinxes or passing beneath the predator-like stones, Anne looks over the side of the bridge. Minute ripples disturb the surface of greenish water. The pond scum smell she expected is absent, and after a moment, recalls reading this is not a stagnant moat, but tidal and refreshed by salt water. From her vantage on the sallyport, she can see two sides of the fortress, arranged like an upside-down 'L.' The limestone walls of the longer side of the 'L' are interspersed at equal intervals by narrow casements, whereas the short side of the 'L' is windowless. The most unsettling facet of the view is the anti-aircraft guns emplaced on the ramparts, pointing their long, metal turrets across the moat. Black-eyed Susan and purple coneflowers enliven the grassy thickets between emplacements. The juxtaposition of weapons and flowers is both dreamlike and unsettling. A mallard drifts out of the shadow cast by the bridge, his plumage shimmering emerald; he is followed by a drab brown goose lazily paddling behind him.

The heat goads Anne into the tunnel, where her steps echo off the walls and rebound from the low brick ceiling. She reemerges into the sweltering sunlight at the crossroads of Ruckland and Bernard, with Ruckland being the name of the road through the tunnel. Across Bernard to the right stands a fellowship of tulip maples, Virginian junipers, and live oak trees. To the left are pair of narrow apartment buildings with long walkways along the front of each of the three stories. The façade and the pillars supporting the walkways are brick, the entire edifice saved from utter asperity by arched windows. Other than a gray and white cat immoderately cleaning herself on the

sidewalk nearby, there is no sign of life. Anne chooses to follow Ruckland. Her luggage wheels make an absurdly loud noise as she drags it across Bernard. She glances back at the cat, but it is gone.

Anne walks past a large home: whitewashed brick, copper roof, a covered front porch complete with a rocking chair. A second, nearly identical home is next door. Behind them is the parade ground, a rectangular stretch of grass ornamented with an ancient cannon. The unmistakable architecture of a church occupies a slight bend in the road. Sunlight plays with the stained glass in the tall, narrow windows. Anne shields her eyes and looks at the roof. Rather than a towering steeple, a simple cross is erected above the door. It is charming in its simplicity, even to Anne, who claims no religion. Not far beyond the church, she reaches the end of Ruckland to find herself at another intersection with Bernard Road, which runs along the fort's perimeter. Just beyond the intersection, there is a grassy hill taller than any of the buildings. A staircase rises to the summit at a steep angle, and Anne realizes she's looking at a rampart. As far as she can recall from Shal's pamphlet, the brick "wall" supporting the rampart is a casemate, or a long narrow building with the earthen rampart for a roof. Any two intersecting ramparts meet at a pentagonal bastion. This results in a structure that, in an aerial view, is shaped like a lopsided star with pentagons at each point. The "legs" of the star are the ramparts, and the "points" are the bastions. Within the star is an entire community of scientists, a fact Anne is beginning to doubt as there is still no one in sight.

A cicada chants in a harsh voice. The solitary rasp is amplified as hundreds of cicadas join the first. At

the next house, Anne cups a hand over her eyes to search for any sign of habitation. No lights shine in the windows of the main floor, nor are there any lit in the half-windows beneath the raised porch. She continues dragging her suitcase along the deserted road until she reaches a narrow drive barred by a NO ENTRY sign. It wends up the earthen embankment to a tower-like building that, unlike all other structures, is in what Anne guesses to be mid-century modern architecture. The building is three stories tall; despite this, it looks squat and indicative of low ceilings. A spiral staircase, whimsical in the military environment, connects the lower two floors. The second floor has a narrow widow's walk with a metal ladder rising to the flat roof, which is surmounted by railings and bristling with meteorological equipment. The overall impression is of a lighthouse without a beacon.

A door to the widow's walk opens. Anne tightens her grip on the handle of her suitcase in irrational readiness to swing it at an attacker. A man comes out onto the walkway.

"Professor Baloyne?" Anne yells.

"You're here," Baloyne shouts. "I'll come down."

Anne watches her undergraduate professor clatter down the spiral staircase; she wants to giggle, both from relief at no longer being alone and because it is surreal to see Baloyne descending the bizarre structure. When he reaches the road, she notices the sweat rings under his pits. She doesn't need to look at her own shirt to know that she is in the same situation.

"Welcome to Fort Chamberlin, Anne!" Baloyne extends his hand to shake and, changing his mind, balls

it into a fist instead. "I'm grimy from messing with equipment topside."

"Is that a weather station?" Anne asks, fist-bumping him. "Looks like a lot of instruments *topside*."

"This is Tempest Tower, which was a weather station in a previous life. Now, though, it is a cosmological research station. By day, heliophysicists map radio bursts emanating just above sunspots. Then the astrophysicists come in at night and investigate radio signals from an exoplanet in Tau-Boötes." Baloyne takes the handle of Anne's suitcase.

"Exoplanet, not the void?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Just curious." Anne touches the amber pendant on her necklace. "Is it always so quiet here?"

He laughs. "Oh, no. We get the reverberations and bangs from some of the experiments. You'll hear tonight."

"They run tests at night?"

"Experiments run twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week." Baloyne nods toward a stately white house a little farther along and on the opposite side of Bernard Road. "That's Quarters Number One. Admin offices on the bottom two floors, my residence on the third floor."

"Is there air conditioning?" Anne asks.

"A window unit," Baloyne says.

Quarters Number One is a three-story building flanked on either side by two-story wings. The attitude is one of stern symmetry, broken only by the imposing central staircase leading to the main entrance. Across the street from the house is another tunnel but unlike the Ruckland tunnel, this one is blocked with concrete barriers and a chain-link fence.

“That’s the East Gate.” Baloyne collapses the telescoping handle back into Anne’s suitcase before starting up the stairs. “Quarters One predates the fortress. It was built in 1819 with Federal-style architecture on the outside, Southern Gothic on the inside.”

When they reach the porch, a soldier seated on a rocking chair snuffs out his cigarette. “Professor,” he says. “Ma’am.”

“Hot enough for you?” Baloyne asks.

“No, sir. It’s cold compared to Afghanistan.”

“We still have men in the Middle East?” Anne asks. “I thought we withdrew a decade ago, after the Mind Your Own Hemisphere Treaty.”

“You do know that’s not the official name,” Baloyne says.

The soldier unlocks the door and holds it open for them. The entrance hall is easily the length of her entire apartment. An area rug accenting a gleaming wood floor is complemented by a sage wall tapestry with burnt orange accents. On the left side of the entry hall, a staircase sweeps upwards, drawing the eye to the graceful curve of the ceiling on the right side of the room. A grandfather clock ticks away moments, the sound seeming to arise not just from the clock, but from the entire room. A chair and a credenza table loaded with vases of fresh peonies and roses complete the furnishings. The room smells like the memory of a garden.

Anne walks to the middle of the foyer. The room to her left is breathtaking. Sumptuous rugs, heavy brass lamps, and fine-grain leather armchairs emphasize a broad fireplace, its mantle decorated with an antique oil lamp and a crystal vase of white flowers.

“Look up,” Baloyne says, pointing at the ceiling over the staircase.

She steps past him and gasps. An oval painted the color of a bright, cold winter morning and inset with a multitude of gold stars decorates the ceiling. “It’s beautiful.”

“Agreed.” Baloyne gestures to the room on the right. “Shall we?”

The layout is identical to the room on the left, but that is the only similarity. Instead of parlor seating, there are two desks, neither of which is in keeping with the grandeur of the other room. The threadbare carpet is coffee-stained. Where the other room reposed in luxury, this room is utilitarian. A printer sits on a waist-high set of dented gray filing cabinets, and the mantle has a wi-fi repeater instead of an oil lamp. Baloyne takes a seat behind the desk farthest from the window. The surface is cluttered with red folders marked TOP SECRET.

Anne drops her backpack to the ground, then sits on a metal rolling chair upholstered in dull-mustard and olive-green fabric that has seen better days. “Well, I’m here. Now what?”

“We wait.”

Anne is about to ask what they are waiting for when a woman enters the room. She is likely in her sixties, with legs thin as a plover’s and an equally bird-like face. She is holding a silver tray with a matching coffee pot, sugar jar, and milk jug. Two delicate coffee cups on gilt-edged saucers complete the ensemble. She sets the tray on one side of Baloyne’s desk, then inspects Anne.

“Welcome to Fort Chamberlin, Miss...?”

“Doctor Anne Huntington,” Anne corrects. She shakes the woman’s hand and is surprised by the grip strength of her twig-like fingers. “Nice to meet you.”

Baloyne clatters with the tray, pouring a stream of coffee into one of the delicate cups. “Anne, meet my right-hand woman, Bettina Morris. She’s formidable.”

“Nice to meet you,” Anne repeats, uncertain what else to say.

“Is there anything I can get you before I leave, Professor?” Bettina asks.

“No, no. Excellent coffee, as always.”

Bettina nods, looking like a quail pecking at seed. Anne fails to suppress a smirk. When she hears the front door to the building open, she laughs. “Is she a bird on the matrilineal side of the family? Or was it her father that was feathered?”

“Don’t let her frail appearance fool you,” Baloyne admonishes. “Coffee?”

Anne nods.

He pours coffee into the second cup, completing the pour with a flourish. Not a drop stains the saucer.

“Cream or sugar?” he asks.

“No, thanks.”

Baloyne passes the saucer and mug to Anne, then sits back in his chair. It squeaks a bit. “I’m glad you decided to join the team.”

“You didn’t leave me much choice.”

“True.”

The coffee is rich and just hot enough to be satisfying, but not hot enough to burn. She savors it for a moment, then sets down the cup. “Why am I here?”

“Iris will explain.”

“Iris *Cloutier*?”

“The very,” Baloyne replies.

“I don’t understand.”

"Iris requested you."

"You're kidding, right? Doctor Cloutier wouldn't spare a teaspoon of water if I were on fire. The entire neuroethics community knows as much."

The front door opens, and someone approaches the desk. Anne swallows hard before looking up at Doctor Cloutier. She is as imposing as Anne remembers, standing nearly six feet tall, with piercing green eyes and the misfortune of a pug nose rivaling that of Socrates. Her hair is waist-length, a dense thicket of ginger frizz going white.

"Nothing here is a joke," Cloutier says.

"Hello," Anne replies. She isn't sure if she should stand or attempt to shake hands. Cloutier decides for Anne by settling her long frame in the other ugly chair opposite Baloyne's desk.

"Where are you with the orientation speech, John?" Cloutier asks.

"We've just come inside," Baloyne replies.

Cloutier turns to Anne. "Welcome to the Fiction Innovation for Advanced Scientific Concepts project, Doctor Huntington."

"FIASCO for short," Baloyne explains. "The 'c' and 'o' are from the Concepts; otherwise, it would be fee-ass-see, which doesn't have quite the same ring to it."

"Is the project expected to result in an unmitigated disaster or a medieval wine bottle?" Anne asks.

"Neither, although that is a fine reference to the original meaning of the word." Baloyne picks up his coffee, takes a sip, then adds more cream. "Iris, would you like any? I can get another mug."

"Thank you, but no."

For a few moments, the only sounds are the ticking grandfather clock and the clink of Baloyne stirring

his coffee. Anne tugs at the hem of her skirt for no reason other than for something to do in the awkward silence. She feels the others staring at her and, taking a deep breath, faces Cloutier.

"Why am I here?" Anne asks.

"The research..." Baloyne starts.

Anne cuts him off, "Yes, I know about that. I mean, why am I here, Iris? Have you forgotten your very public, very harsh disavowal of me?"

"Of course not," Cloutier replies.

"I ask again, *why* am I here? I'm not a writer, so the 'fiction' part of FIASCO doesn't apply. And I'm no longer a scientist, which rules out any involvement in the 'scientific advancement.'"

"My recommendation to bring you on was not without reservation," Cloutier says. "If I had any other option, you would not be here."

"What about Arri? He was your chosen one."

"Doctor Lindt is where he needs to be. He is brilliant, precise, and dedicated to a purity of methodology. Those excellent qualities are exactly what disqualify him from FIASCO."

"Wow," Anne says. "Just wow."

"It's the truth," Cloutier replies.

"What I believe Iris means," Baloyne interjects, "is that we need your *willingness* to step into gray areas."

"In addition, your history provides plausible deniability for the government," Cloutier continues. "If you go public with anything related to FIASCO, the campaign to discredit you will be swift. If you do not go public, yet there is a leak that reflects the project in a negative light, the campaign to discredit you will be equally damning."

"I'm a scapegoat."

"Yes," Cloutier replies.

"You're more than that." Baloyne fiddles with his spoon. "FIASCO may provide redemption. An expression of contrition, perhaps."

"Redemption won't get me back into the field; publication will."

"Not everything is about you," Cloutier says.

"Perhaps not from your perspective."

Baloyne drops his spoon with a clatter. "The point is, Anne, you are not necessary. Doctor Cloutier and I agree you are valuable, but if you choose to be a problem, I can arrange a ride back to your apartment."

"And the paid-off student loans?" Anne asks.

"Become unpaid," Baloyne replies.

Anne takes a deliberate sip of coffee, willing herself to relax. "I won't be a problem. Just tell me what to work on."

"That's better," Baloyne says. He leans back in his chair, lacing his hands behind his head. "General Wittenberg unearthed a paper you wrote freshman year of undergrad."

"Even I don't have copies of my undergrad work; how does a general?"

"You've been on a scholastic watchlist since middle school," Cloutier says.

Anne looks at Baloyne. "Is she joking?"

"No."

"The particular paper the General admired was for a history class," Cloutier continues. She pauses as the grandfather clock down the hall pronounces the top of the hour in deep, reverberating tones. "Your paper outlines a framework for understanding scientific failures in terms of military strategy in the Korean War."

Anne surprises herself by laughing. "Really? I wrote that on a twenty-dollar dare."

“Did you win?” Baloyne asks.

“I got the money and an A. The department chair invited me to change majors to history.” Anne looks at Cloutier. “I suppose you wish I’d done that.”

“No. That paper is one of the reasons I wanted you as a postdoc.”

“Not my empirical quantification of consciousness?”

“That, too.” Cloutier smiles, and for a moment, it is as if the bad data never happened. “A colleague of a colleague sent me the paper, and when I found out it was a joke and, furthermore, well-thought and well-argued, I wanted you on my research team.”

“I never knew that.”

“Professor Kirkus was not happy to cede you to me. I used budgetary constraints as pressure. The Dean backed me because I had money, whereas Kirkus was quote-unquote ‘overdrawn.’”

The room thrums with a deep bass vibration, followed by a bang. When neither Cloutier nor Baloyne looks surprised, Anne frowns. “What was that?”

“One of the experiments,” Baloyne replies. “It’s too soon to go into details. Most of the odd noises, smells or sights are expected.”

“How will I know the difference between an emergency and by-products of routine experiments?”

“You won’t,” Cloutier says.

“We follow the latest safety protocols in our labs,” Baloyne adds.

“So did Fukushima,” Anne says.

Iris shakes her head, taps one sandal-clad foot. “You are not naïve enough to think there would be no risks. Even if you were, driving through the exclusionary zone would have disabused you of that misconception.”

"True," Anne concedes. "Is there anyone else I know here? Besides you two?"

"Doctors Rappaport and Falkenrath are in residence," Baloyne says.

"*Ehlani Rappaport*? She despises military-funded science! How did you convince her?"

"With great difficulty," Baloyne says, grinning.

Doctor Cloutier stands up

"Is that it?" Anne asks.

"For now," Cloutier says. "John, you're in this next meeting."

"Am I?"

"Yes."

Baloyne sighs. "The administrivia is never-ending. I'll be there in a few minutes."

Anne waits until she hears the front door close before saying, "I didn't appreciate being sideswiped like that."

"My job is to get the best people here. If I omit a detail or two, it is out of a sincere belief that FIASCO outweighs any inconvenience it causes you or anyone else." Baloyne rummages through files on his desk.

"Ah, here it is." He picks up one of the TOP SECRET folders. "Sorry for leaving abruptly. Someone will be by to show you to your quarters."

"And I just wait?"

"Yes." When Anne doesn't move, Baloyne clears his throat. "You'll need to wait outside."

Anne follows Baloyne out, dumping her backpack and suitcase on the porch. Baloyne folds himself into the small space of a waiting golf cart. The soldier driving the cart says something she cannot hear; when Baloyne nods, the cart whirs away, a tiny electric motor noise drowned out by the seagulls shrieking overhead.



Anne sits in one of the rocking chairs on the porch, waiting for whoever it is that she awaits. The floorboards creak as she rocks. It is annoying, and she moves to sit on the top stair instead. A stiff breeze coming in off the water pushes her hair into her eyes and mouth. With a mental curse, she sifts through a detritus of pens, Kleenex, and loose change in the front pocket of her backpack, looking for a hair tie.

“Anne! Is that really you?”

Anne feels what she’s looking for yanks a hair thing out of the pocket. As she sweeps her hair into a ponytail, she looks at Doctor Ehlani Rappaport. Ehlani wears bright red shorts and a linen top; her hair, always a mess of curls, is held back by a hairband that is not equal to the wind’s force.

“Do you have another of those?” Ehlani asks.

“Sorry. I was lucky to find this one.” When she stands up, Ehlani hugs her. “You know I hate that.”

“I know.” Ehlani releases Anne. “I am just so happy to see you! I heard rumors you were coming, but...”

“The Grand Dame Cloutier requested my presence.”

“No!”

“Yes,” Anne replies.

Ehlani loops her arm through Anne’s. “What did you think of our little minefield?”

“A bit last-century Cold War for my tastes.”

“The elegance of the moat compensates, no?” Ehlani asks, feigning seriousness.

“But of course! I would be remiss not to mention the landscaping. Whoever *is* your gardener? I must

have his name. His artistry in arranging a battery of anti-aircraft guns is enviable.”

“This varietal has taken first place at the annual Blooms and Booms exhibition three years running.”

“You don’t say!” Anne places a hand over her heart. “Magnificent!”

Two armed soldiers dressed in fatigues are walking on the other side of the street. Ehlani’s smile dissipates. “It’s not really funny, is it?”

“No, not really.”

They walk in silence. Three Canadian geese haul their ponderous bodies across the road. Their loud honking is an aggressive sound, interrupted by the banging noise of the experiment Anne heard while she was in Quarters One.

“What is that?” she asks.

“The nuclear physics team is up to something underground.”

“The FIG project,” Anne says. “Wasn’t there something about cold fusion? Rumors about a ‘divine wind’ of a neutrino field enabling a release of atomic energy at a distance?”

Ehlani nods.

“Are we getting irradiated?”

Ehlani pulls a small device from the pocket of her shorts. It is a miniature Geiger counter. The radiation level is within the range expected for normal residual background radiation. “Not at the moment,” she says, tucking the instrument back into her pocket.

“I need one of those,” Anne says.

“No problem. Just put it on your requisition list.” Seeing Anne’s confusion, Ehlani clarifies. “There is a clipboard hanging on the door to your room with blank req. sheets; you put the supplies, books, even snacks you want on it. Someone comes by and takes

it, returning with what you asked for—if it is not prohibited.”

“Speaking of my room, do you know where it is?” Anne asks.

“Right here,” Ehlani says.

Anne considers the long brick wall of the casemate. White doors surmounted by half-moon windows are spaced with military precision along it. Equally precise are the identical, narrow-paned windows flanking the doors. Broad arches sweep like monochrome rainbows over each trio of door and windows. Constructed of four rows of narrow bricks, the ends of the rainbow terminate in blocks of limestone demarcating the boundary of each cell in the casemate.

“Anchorites would be at home here,” Anne remarks.

“Nuns in isolation have nothing on Poe’s black cat,” Ehlani says.

“There’s no cat in ‘The Cask of Amontillado.’”

Ehlani makes a small noise that is somewhere between an exhale and a chuckle. “The Black Cat’ is the story I’m thinking of. The narrator walls his cat in with the corpse of his wife.”

“That’s pleasant,” Anne replies.

“Poe lived here for a little while when he was in the Army.”

“No shit?”

“Yah,” Ehlani replies. “It seems that being walled in here inspired him.”

Anne wipes sweat from her forehead, sweeping it into the damp mass of her hair. “Which one of these is where I’ll be immured?”

“The second one from the end, on the left.”

Anne follows Ehlani to the door, dragging her suitcase behind her. The grass lining the narrow walk-

ways is dry and brown. The cicada song reaches a whirring crescendo as Ehlani passes a key to Anne.

“Welcome to 134 Bernard Road, Apartment G,” Ehlani says

The interior is cool. The vaulted ceiling follows the line of the arch over the front door, and beneath the apex on the far side of the room, there is a single four-paned window facing the moat. Except for the front and the back of the cell, the whitewashed brick walls are curved.

“See how it looks like we’re standing on the diameter of a circle?” Ehlani asks.

Anne nods.

“That’s because the architecture *is* a circle, with the bottom half buried in the ground. The reciprocating arches make the casemates incredibly structurally sound. They really built things to last.”

Anne continues to look around her room. The wooden planks of the floor are scarred and scuffed with age, and the furniture sparse. To her left there is a narrow bedstead covered with a bright patchwork quilt and sits on a faded area rug. A nightstand with a lamp completes the extent of furniture on that side of the cell. A desk and wooden chair are pushed against the far wall under a four-paned window; Anne sets her backpack in the chair and looks outside. The room abuts the moat, the water rising to just below the windowsill. It is disconcerting. A table with another wooden chair is on the right side of the room. Two place settings, a microwave, an electric teakettle, cardboard salt and pepper shakers, and a tin of instant coffee are on the table. To the right of the table, a fridge hums, and just beyond that is a free-standing sink, surmounted by a round mirror

freckled with brown spots. A washcloth and a hand towel dangle from a utilitarian rack.

“Um, where is the bathroom?” Anne asks.

“There’s a latrine with showers in the parking lot at the end of your casemate.”

“A *latrine*?”

“It’s not as bad as it sounds. Individual stalls, hot water. Air conditioning. And actual heaters that you’ll be grateful for in the winter.” Ehlani points at the radiator Anne hadn’t noticed mounted near the bed. “It’ll get chilly in here.”

“Were you on the fort last winter?”

“Yes.”

“This whole time? Did you get to go home for Christmas?”

“Yes, the whole time, and no, we can’t leave for holidays. Or anything, for that matter.”

“How do you stand it?”

“By keeping busy. It doesn’t hurt that we’re doing interesting research. I have days where I feel like a captive, true, but there are other days when I feel like a kid in a candy shop: any equipment I need for my experiments, no scrabbling or infighting for budget.”

“Do you live in this casemate?”

“No,” Ehlani says. She blushes slightly. “I live in one of the officer’s quarters.”

“Do you have a bathroom?”

“It’s down the hall from my room...”

“Why am I out here, then? Did Cloutier choose my accommodations? It would be just petty enough for her.”

“She’s not petty,” Ehlani says.

“I know,” Anne sighs. “It doesn’t mean I have to like her or that she isn’t responsible for my cell.”

“All the synthesists live in casemate apartments.”

"Synthesist?" Anne asks. She turns the knob on her sink. It belches a rust-colored stream, followed by clear, blissfully cool water she splashes on her face.

"They didn't tell you you're a synthesist?"

"The word was mentioned, but I didn't know it was a classification."

"Synthesists are the ones with the juice; they come up with the wildest things they can, and the scientists see if they can make those things reality."

"Are you a synthesist?"

"No, I'm classed as a scientist."

"And I'm not."

"It's not a slight," Ehlani says.

"Sure." Anne turns off the water. "Professor Baloyne told me that Timo is here."

"He is! I know he's looking forward to seeing you."

"Does this ever stop feeling odd?" Anne asks, gesturing at the room.

"I'll let you know," Ehlani replies.

A knock on the door startles them. When Anne shows no sign of doing so herself, Ehlani answers it. Anne exhales when the visitor is neither Shal nor Cloutier.

"Perfect timing!" Ehlani steps back into the room, letting Timo pass by her. "Look who joined the party!"

"Doctor Timo Falkenrath," Anne says, smiling.

"It's been a long time," Timo says. "I meant to call you. After the... well, you know."

Anne crosses her arms under her breasts, appraising him. Timo's mother is Persian, and his father is German; their genes combined to create a luxuriant creature of contrast, with blue eyes and olive skin.

"I'd forgotten how pretty you are," she teases.

"I forgot how tiny you are," he says, wrapping her in a hug.

Her head reaches just to his collarbone, and she tilts her head back to look up at him. The weight of the amber pendant on her bare neck feels like guilt. She steps out of Timo's embrace.

"How the hell did they get you here?" he asks.

"Money. I give them my soul; they pay off my student loans."

"Are you sure you still had a soul to sell?" Timo jokes.

"No, but don't tell Baloyne that."

"Hey, where's your bathroom?"

"That's a sore topic," Ehlani replies.

"I have a latrine down the street, apparently."

Timo looks from one woman to the other, trying to determine if they are joking; after a moment, he bursts out laughing.

"Haha," Anne says, rolling her eyes.

"I come bearing gifts," Timo says. He steps aside, revealing a large cardboard box at the threshold. Behind that is an antique rocking horse, its colorful paint chipping and faded.

"A horse?" Ehlani asks.

"He was lonely in the attic," Timo replies. He pushes the box into Anne's room, then picks up the horse and carries it inside. When he sets it down, the trio watches it sway on its rockers.

"It's kind of creepy," Ehlani says.

"No," Timo protests. "He's cute. Right, Anne?"

"I have no idea what to say."

"Thank you?" Timo suggests.

"I don't know about this," Ehlani says. "Objects can have entities attached to them. Maybe this should go back in the attic?"

Anne taps the narrow wooden muzzle of the rocking horse. "It is wood and lead paint, Ehlani. No entities."

"I'm not kidding," Ehlani says.

"Then you're really not going to like this," Timo replies, opening the cardboard box. He takes out a battered Ouija board.

Ehlani crosses herself.

"Wait, are you religious now?" Anne asks.

"I converted to Catholicism."

"You have a doctorate in physics and a second one in biology!" Anne's voice is louder than necessary and curdled with incredulity. "And you're... *superstitious*?"

"I have faith," Ehlani replies.

"Don't look at me," Timo says to Anne, raising his hands in surrender. "I come from a family of lapsed Muslims."

"A Catholic, an atheist, and a lapsed Muslim walk onto a military complex..." Anne starts.

"What could possibly go wrong?" Timo completes.

"This is really thoughtful of you. Weird. But thoughtful." Her gratitude is awkward, and she brushes it off as if it were a spider. "I need a shower."

"You aren't kidding about needing a shower," Timo teases. "Seriously, though, want to meet back here in an hour? Is that long enough?"

"No, let's meet at the cannonballs," Ehlani suggests, still looking at the Ouija board.

"Where?" Anne asks.

"There is a pyramidal stack of cannonballs in front of the casemate back near Quarters One," Timo clarifies.

"Okay. See you there."

When Ehlani and Timo are gone, Anne gets out a change of clothes. A thorough search of her luggage reveals that Smith and Wesson must have deemed her toiletries nonessential. Not only that, but she has no full-sized towel. She pushes the rocking horse, setting it swaying. “Air dry it is,” she says to no one in particular.



Anne arrives at the meeting point before her friends. She sits on a bench, running her hands through her wet hair. The only sound is the wind trembling the leaves of a tulip maple. Shifting patterns of shattered light and shadow dance on the brick walkway; a robin lands on the ground nearby, hops twice, then takes off with a flurry of wings. A viscous wave of exhaustion crashes against Anne’s consciousness, and she wonders if the bed in her cell is as uncomfortable as it looks.

“Fancy seeing you here.” Timo sits on the bench next to Anne, his knees wide apart and a goofy smile on his face. “How was the latrine?”

“Surprisingly nice,” Anne replies.

“Really?”

“Yah. It’s air-conditioned.”

They sit for a moment, the changeable shadows making masks of their faces. Timo stretches his arm along the back of the bench; he is not close enough to touch Anne, and she considers discreetly scooting to her left to change that. Instead, she says, “How long have you been here?”

“Just over a year. Ehlani and I arrived within a week of one another.”

“Did I miss much?” Anne asks.

“Not even slightly. We spent most of the time retrofitting the officer’s quarters and barracks into labs, requisitioning instruments, and cultivating iP-SCs and trying to extend time before cell death in 3D organoids.”

“Did you have any luck?”

“Some, yes. Ehlani has another idea that we’re trying now.”

“Where is she, anyways?” Anne asks.

“Praying?” Timo suggests.

Anne laughs. “I hope God doesn’t keep her long. I’m hungry.”

“Me, too.”

A disheveled, gaunt woman clothed in a long white dress passes them. She goes to one of the case-mate doors, then leans against it, sobbing. Anne looks at Timo, but he is tying a shoelace and does not catch her glance; when Anne turns back around, the woman is gone.

“Do you know her?” Anne asks.

“Who?” Timo replies, straightening up.

“The woman who just walked by.”

“I didn’t see anyone.”

“She was thin, seemed upset.”

Timo shrugs. “I was surprised they brought you on as an NF.”

“What?”

“NF. A generalist-slash-synthesis. The rest of the NFs they’ve cycled through here were psychics, writers, and a few anthropologists.” Seeing Anne’s confusion, Timo elaborates. “The groups here are structured by the Berens Four Temperaments. NFs are thought catalysts. SJs are stabilizers: Baloyne, Cloutier, Wittenberg and Teryan—”

“Management?”

“Yes. Then there are the NTs, theoretical scientists. Yours truly is classed as an SP, an experimental scientist.”

“Ehlani is an SP, too?” Anne asks.

“Yes.”

“You said you were surprised I wasn’t brought on as a scientist; that’s not true, is it?”

Timo clears his throat and looks away from Anne.

“You probably agree with the decision.”

“Yes, but that’s not to say I don’t understand why you did what you did...”

“Everyone *understands*. It’s just easier to punish me than change the system that makes it necessary to cut corners.”

“I don’t want to argue,” Timo says, raising his hands in surrender.

“Fine.” Anne kicks a small pebble on the ground near her foot.

“It’s not that I don’t think you could, or even should, be a scientist. But we have scientists in droves. A murder of experimentalists and a parliament of theorists. What we don’t have enough of are ideas people.”

“Hey, Doctors!” Ehlani says. She is flushed, perspiration giving her face the kind of attractive glow that only a beautiful woman can have when sweating. “Sorry I’m late. I got caught up with some anomalous results from my recent test run. Are you hungry?”

“Yes,” Timo says, standing up and stretching his long arms overhead.

“This way,” Ehlani says, motioning to Anne. The trio begins walking; their slender and elongated shadows gliding away before them with each step.

“Anyway,” Timo says. “We had fiction writers, but their creativity was reductive and unsurprising. With

your technical background, I know you'll come up with something amazing."

"And when their ideas are rejected, they go home?" Anne asks.

Timo rubs the stubble on his chin. "At the very least, they are no longer stationed on the fort. Whether they go home or not...?"

"Of course they went home," Ehlani says. "You sound like a conspiracy nut."

The trio walks in silence for a little while. Anne is the first to speak. "I bet the payday for those writers was better than the advance on a novel."

"Probably," Ehlani agrees.

"My sister is a poet. She makes less than minimum wage as an adjunct at a community college. Her Patreon brings in some money, for handcrafted chapbooks, but it seems like a waste of time to me."

"I always wished I could be a poet." Ehlani's gaze follows a butterfly drunkenly buffeted by a breeze. "I'm sure the SJs know about your sister; creativity skips generations in families, but clearly it didn't skip your generation, which makes you a promising idea generator."

They turn the corner onto Ruckland. They cross the road to reach a two-story house with a sign proclaiming this as The Chamberlin Canteen. When Timo opens the door, the smell of hamburgers and fries makes Anne's stomach rumble.

The interior maintains the building's origin as a house, with a hallway leading from the front door, a staircase to the left, and a room that would have been a large parlor on the right. The only evidence this is not a home, aside from the multitude of small tables in the erstwhile parlor, is the enlisted man standing behind a rickety-looking lectern in the entryway.

“Three?” he asks.

“Yes,” Ehlani says. “Thank you.”

“Of course, Doctor Rappaport.”

Instead of ushering them into the room on the right, the man leads them to the second door in the hall; the room is smaller than the parlor, and the seating consists of a few booths. The paper menus on the table have today’s date printed on them. They are speckled with flecks of dried ketchup and brown rings left by coffee cups. Anne pulls one of the pages in front of her. There are two entrees listed for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. It is dinnertime, and the choices are hamburger or black bean burger. The dinner sides are salad, fries, baked beans, and corn on the cob.

“Can we get drinks here?” Anne asks the soldier.

“Yes,” he replies. He takes a handheld point of sale device out from the pocket of his server’s apron.

“What do you want?”

“Gin and tonic,” Anne says.

“Water for me,” Ehlani says.

“I’ll have a beer,” Timo says. “What do you have on tap today?”

As the soldier rattles off the list of beers, Anne looks at the framed pictures decorating the wall next to their booth. They are of Fort Chamberlin. Based on the style of dress, it appears these are from the early 1900s. In one photo, a chubby toddler perches on the antique cannon at the edge of the parade ground, grinning at the photographer.

“Are you ready to order, or do you need more time?” the soldier asks.

“I’m starving,” Timo says.

“Me, too,” Anne replies. “I never had lunch.”

Ehlani smiles at the soldier. "Yes, we're ready. May I have a black bean burger, salad, and corn on the cob, please?"

She sets her menu to the side. Her hands are slim and elegant, her light pink nail polish unmarred by chips. Anne folds her unmanicured hands in lap and tells the waiter she will have a real burger, with fries.

"Salad?" the soldier-waiter asks.

"No," Anne says.

"I'll have what she's having," Timo says.

"I guess you're still a vegetarian?" Anne asks Ehlani.

"Fifteen years and going strong."

"I don't know how you do it," Timo says.

"I don't know *why* you do it," Anne says.

Another soldier comes out of an adjoining room, carrying a tray with their drinks. Clearly accustomed to serving, she brought extra waters for Timo and Anne. Anne removes the stirrer from her cup and takes a swig of the G&T. It's surprisingly strong, and she intends to keep them flowing. Ehlani thanks the woman with a sweet smile.

"I forgot what a good girl you are," Anne teases.

"There's nothing wrong with being polite." Ehlani takes a prim sip of her water. "Did Timo tell you about the ghosts?"

"Ghosts?" Anne repeats.

"You know I don't buy into any of that malarkey, Ehlani," Timo says. When Anne and Ehlani laugh, he gives them a puzzled look. "Well, I don't."

"Malarkey!" Ehlani giggles. "No one under the age of eighty says 'malarkey!'"

The alcohol is smoothing the jagged edges of Anne's awareness, and she takes another gulp of her G&T. "Tell me about the ghosts."

"There's the lady in white," Ehlani says. "The story is that she was an officer's wife. She was murdered."

"Did the husband do it?" Anne asks.

"It's always the husband," Ehlani replies

"Misandrists!" Timo exclaims.

"Nope, just statistics."

Timo raises his hands in surrender. "I'm outnumbered. *Was* it the husband?"

"It was. Apparently, he was quite a bit older than his wife, and while he was deployed, she found a less-stodgy uniform to keep her company."

The waitress returns with their orders, deftly balancing all three plates. The trio takes a few seconds to ensure Ehlani has the bean burger. After passing the ketchup bottle around the table, they resume the conversation.

"How did he do it?" Anne asks.

"He shot the couple in bed."

"That's hell on the sheets," Timo says.

"You're awful! In any case, the lady in white is said to be crying and searching for her boyfriend, who seems to have fled beyond the veil."

"He..." Timo tries to keep a straight face and fails.

"He *ghosted* her?"

Ehlani rolls her eyes.

"Come on, that was funny," Timo prods. "Right, Anne?"

Anne shrugs, then says, "I think I saw her."

"You did?" Ehlani asks, leaning towards Anne.

"Where? When?"

"Just before we came here. T and I were sitting on a bench waiting for you. She was crying."

"You've been here all of, what, four hours and you already have your first sighting!"

"I didn't see anyone, and I was there the whole time," Timo insists.

"Not everyone is sensitive," Ehlani replies.

"Me, sensitive? Take that back!" Anne says, mock-insulted. "That's slander!"

"Given that she didn't laugh at my joke, I agree 'sensitive' is *not* the first word that comes to mind when I think of Doctor Huntington."

"You really need to get the Ouija board out of your room," Ehlani says. "If you are attuned to the other side..."

"Okay."

"I'm serious."

Someone turns on a fan, and a breeze tickles the back of Anne's neck. It is a creeping sensation not unlike the feeling of being watched by someone unseen. "Are there other ghosts I should know about?"

"President Lincoln is sometimes seen in Quarters One. He stands by the fireplace in the room he stayed in for about a week in 1862," Timo says.

"The duplex next door to this restaurant is known for poltergeist activity," Ehlani says. "Furniture rearranged overnight, loud banging noises with no apparent source, and a proclivity to always turn any knickknacks to face the windows, instead of the room. There are also reports of heavy footsteps and something changing the time on mechanical clocks."

"Why are you looking at each other like that?" Anne asks.

"There are rumors that the quote-unquote poltergeist is a red herring," Timo says.

Ehlani nods. "That goes with the rumors that the Experimental Psychiatry lab in there developed iP-SCs primed for schizophrenia and bipolar disorder."

“You’re saying the scientists are spreading a rumor about ghosts to keep people out of their lab?” Anne takes a sip of her G&T. “Why?”

“We’ll never know for sure,” Timo replies.

“The scientists assigned to the team were dismissed.” Ehlani picks up a fry, sets it down. “They are the only SPs that have ever left Fort Chamberlin.”

“Maybe their experiment failed?”

“Maybe,” Timo says.

After a moment of uneasiness, Anne changes the topic, telling them Arri’s news. The rest of their meal they spent catching up on gossip and relationship drama. Ehlani is the last to finish eating, and the only to leave anything on her plate.

“Want to walk off some of this food?” Ehlani asks.

Timo stands and stretches. “Pet cemetery?”

Anne turns to Ehlani for clarification. “I’m sorry, but—what? Did he say pet *cemetery*?”

“It was tradition to bury Army service dogs along the ramparts.”

“Oh,” Anne says. When she gets up from her chair, she wobbles, using the back to steady herself. “The alcohol went straight to my head.”

“I’ll bet,” Ehlani says. “You hadn’t eaten.”

When Timo and Ehlani head to the door, Anne says, “Hey! Are you sticking me with the bill on my first night?”

“Yep,” Timo says, winking at Ehlani.

Anne follows them to the lobby. The soldier at the hostess station is playing a game of solitaire. “Can I get the check, please?”

“There is no charge, ma’am.”

“None?”

“All food is free.”

“Drinks, too?”

"Yes." The soldier pauses then questions, "Doctor?"

"Huntington."

"Welcome to dining on Uncle Sam's tab, Doctor Huntington."

"Nice."

"Yes, ma'am. Have a good evening."

Anne goes outside. "You asshole!"

"Guilty as charged," Timo grins.

"There's no such thing as a free lunch."

"Ehlani! Are you going to steal all of my joy?"

"Ignore him," Anne says, looping her arm through Ehlani's. "He's just jealous we look so damn good."

The trio climbs the steep hill of the Eastern rampart, Ehlani steadying a tipsy and clumsy Anne. The view from the summit is panoramic. Behind them, the sunset is a smear of orange clouds. A gigantic anti-aircraft gun looms ahead of them, a dark shape against the twilight sky. Across the moat is a narrow strip of land with a lighthouse sweeping soft beams across an endless expanse of open water.

"That's the Chesapeake Bay," Timo says.

"It's beautiful," Anne says.

Ehlani nudges Anne. "Let me show you some of the gravestones before it gets too dark."

As far as Anne can see around her, there is nothing rising from the ground except the monstrous artillery. "Are they far?"

"No, silly. They're right here."

The women walk a few steps. Then Ehlani kneels to wipe grass cuttings and stray sand from a plaque set into the ground. "This one is loose."

Anne crouches next to her and reads the inscription aloud. "Milly Milkweed. Too smart to be a dog, too good to be a human. 1908–1920. This one says,

'I'll see you soon, Kitty Kitty Sky Toad.' That's quite a name."

Timo reads another marker. "Nema Jewel. Daddy's Little Princess."

"That one makes me want to cry," Ehlani says.

"Nothing is sadder than the death of a pet," Timo agrees. "And I'm saying this as someone who lost both parents and a sibling in a house fire."

Ehlani and Anne exchange startled looks. The silence is broken by an owl hooting. They both speak at the same time.

"I never knew—" Ehlani says.

"—shitty luck," Anne says.

"It was a long time ago," Timo replies.

Ehlani reaches out to take his hand. "I'm so sorry. I can't imagine..."

"It's okay," Timo says. "Let's go. These mosquitoes are the size of jets."

Anne follows them, carefully avoiding the general vicinity of the grave markers; night has fallen, and even the lighthouse rays cannot illuminate the ground closest to the rampart walls. Moving alleviates the immediate assault by the bugs; absent their whining buzz, Anne hears the ripples of the moat against the fortress walls. The salt smell of the ocean and the baked earth scent of the ground is obliterated by the piney-skunk scent of marijuana. Anne turns to look behind her, surprised to see Ehlani with a blunt.

"You want a drag?" she asks.

"No. I get paranoid when I smoke."

"Paranoia is constant here," Timo says. He takes Ehlani up on her offer. "They say snipers in the bastions aren't watching us."

Anne cannot see Timo's face clearly in the gloaming. He is a silhouette holding a brightening red em-

ber that may as well be a target guaranteeing a headshot. Anne rolls her eyes as she says, "We aren't prisoners."

"Oh, Anne. We are. Of *course* we are."

Discomfited by Ehlani's tone, she follows the granite rampart wall back to the steep concrete staircase that leads to the interior of the fortress. A phalanx of bats swoops overhead, their shrill echolocation as unwelcome as spiderwebs on bare skin. It is enough to make the scientists rush down the narrow stairs.

"If you can't leave, where do you get the pot?" Anne asks.

"They'll get you anything you ask for."

"Except freedom," Timo corrects.

"Yes, except that," Ehlani replies.

Copyright © 2026 by Erzsebet Carmean
Previously published as Lorikat © 2025 by Erzsebet Carmean

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except as permitted by U.S. copyright law. For permission requests, contact the publisher.

The story, all names, characters, and incidents portrayed in this novel are fictitious. No identification with actual persons (living or deceased) should be inferred. Recognizable places, buildings, and products are used fictitiously.

Interior Formatting: E. Carmean using Atticus

Cover Design: E. Carmean

Cover Images: Woman looking up by muratdeniz. Getty Images Signature (License via Canva Pro); Cat Reading Math Formulas, 3Lloi Koteika. Pixabay (free stock image)

Gothic Sci-Fi Books | gothicscifibooks.shop
Pendletyn & Bromptyn Press

E-Book ISBN 979-8-9978159-1-2