

# THE ENIGMA CUBE

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First Edition

## PROLOGUE

Berlin, Germany, 1941

Otto Richter scribbled equations into a notebook at a furious pace, as if he were possessed by a berserker demon. He was in hot pursuit of a sudden inspiration—that superfluidity could be used to model exotic matter, which in turn could lead to a mathematical bridge between general relativity and quantum mechanics.

A remarkable insight that might have come from the mind of Albert Einstein on his very best day, but beyond astonishing coming as it did from the mind of a wiry sixteen-year-old boy, still awaiting his growth spurt, who couldn't have weighed more than a hundred twenty pounds dripping wet.

Otto urged himself to write even faster, annoyed at having to delay his thoughts in order to record them, but was unable to coax any additional speed from his right hand as it flew over the page.

Three sharp raps on the door dislodged Otto's consciousness from the nearly transcendent plane it had been on, and he returned to the real world with a violent thud. He scowled at the audacity of this abrupt interruption, which had ripped his mind from a Nobel-prize worthy inspiration and had reinserted it into the mundane.

Or perhaps these raps at the door were *not* so mundane.

They had been sharp, decisive—*demanding* even. Not the knocks of a friend or colleague, but the knocks of someone who was impatient and used to being obeyed.

A chill ran up Otto's spine, for no reason he could pinpoint, and he glanced at his parents, who had been reading by the fireplace, to learn if this visit was expected. From the mystified, worried looks on their faces, it was anything but.

Otto pushed his chair back from his desk and rose to answer the door, but his father, Hans, shook his head and strode past him. The elder Richter turned the handle on the door, and it was immediately shoved open from outside, slamming painfully into his body and driving him backward as if he were weightless.

Four men stood before the threshold, three of them with machine guns slung around their necks, and they rushed inside, uninvited, as though they owned the place. As if the *Richter family* were the trespassers. All four wore impossibly crisp uniforms and bright red armbands containing a white circle with a black swastika inside—essentially a wearable Nazi flag.

Otto had studied the swastika symbol in school, and many others, as the Nazi party seemed to be obsessed with symbolism. One of their only obsessions that wasn't deadly—at least, not *directly*. The same couldn't be said of their obsession with power, conquest, and genocide.

In 1923, Hitler and his Nazi Party had attempted to seize Munich and use this city as a base of operations for a coup against Germany's Weimar Republic. The attempt had failed, and Hitler had been wounded in the process. Still, this bold action had brought him to the attention of the German nation and the world, as did his three-week trial.

Hitler was found guilty of treason and sentenced to five years in Landsberg Prison, but he only served nine months. And while he was incarcerated, he came to realize that his newfound celebrity gave him the means to obtain power after all—but this time *legally*. He wasted no time vigorously spreading Nazi propaganda, beginning with the work he had penned in prison, *Mein Kampf*—My Struggle—which included his description of the symbolism of the Nazi flag.

The *hakenkreuz*, or hooked cross, had been a popular symbol throughout history, but Hitler preferred the Sanskrit term, *swastika*, meaning “well-being,” and described this symbol in his book as signifying the “struggle for the victory of Aryan mankind.”

So much for symbolizing *well-being*.

The four intruders to the Richters' loving home exuded nothing but menace and cruelty, sneering at the panicked looks on the faces

of Otto and his parents. His mother attempted to stifle a gasp, but couldn't, and his father looked to be paralyzed, as if he had turned a corner and found himself facing a pack of rabid wolves.

Otto knew that his father would have *preferred* the wolves.

The three men sporting swastika armbands and carrying machine guns could intimidate anyone, but they weren't nearly as troubling as the man who had led them inside. Based on the insignias on his uniform, this man was exceedingly high in rank, a *gruppenfuhrer*, the equivalent of a major general, and he wasn't with the German army. That would have been a blessing.

Instead, the pairs of stylized lightning bolts affixed to his lapels made it clear that he was near the very top of perhaps the cruelest, most ruthless organization mankind had ever known, the *Schutzstaffel*, which literally translated into The Protection Squadron, an absurd misnomer more generally abbreviated simply as the SS.

The SS was the ultimate paramilitary force, responsible for security, surveillance, terror, and ultimately, genocide. A malevolent collection of psychopaths and bullies who would go on to run all of the Reich's concentration and extermination camps, and who were responsible for the detection of actual or potential enemies of the Nazi state.

And the man in front of him wasn't just a member of the psychopathic SS, his rank suggested that he reported to Heinrich Himmler himself, who was rumored to be the personification of pure evil.

Otto suddenly found it hard to breathe. The Richter family had zero Jewish blood, but many years earlier, most of his parents' closest friends at the university, where Hans Richter taught higher mathematics, had been Jewish. Hans had known enough not to protest too loudly when they had been relieved of their positions, along with all other Jewish professors, and had fled into the diaspora.

Hans Richter knew that his Jewish friends had been lucky to get out of Germany, and he only wished that he could follow. But as much as he wanted to, his wife had too many close relatives in Berlin, and she had persuaded him to remain at his post and do what he could to safely and subtly undermine Nazi propaganda, minimal though this effort might be.

Otto wondered if his father's attempts to influence key university personnel had been less subtle than the elder Richter had thought, and had been responsible for this nightmarish visit. But he quickly thought better of it. Even if these activities *had* attracted the notice of the SS, his father would have never attracted the personal attention of a *general*.

The sick feeling in the pit of Otto's stomach intensified as he realized that they must be here for *him*.

All of these thoughts, musings, and analysis flashed across Otto's unparalleled mind in seconds—his speed of thought just as extraordinary as its quality.

"How can I help you, Herr Gruppenfuhrer?" croaked his father. His mouth had become so parched, and his throat so constricted in fear, the words barely made it past his lips.

"My name is Magnus Becker," said the general, "and I'm here to collect your son."

Hans Richter's eyes widened in alarm and he opened his mouth to protest, or demand clarification, but he bit his tongue. They were at this man's mercy, which was sure to be exceedingly limited, so discretion was the better part of valor. "Apologies for my ignorance, General Becker," he began, choosing his words with great care and fighting to keep the outrage from his voice, "but I would be grateful if you could explain."

"I should think the explanation is obvious," said Becker in contempt. "Your son has come to the attention of the esteemed leader of the SS, Heinrich Himmler. I'm told that little Otto was fluent in four languages, speaking them all without accent, by the age of four. That he taught himself calculus by the age of six. That at his current age of sixteen, he has already made several groundbreaking contributions to the field of mathematical physics."

"That is correct, Herr Gruppenfuhrer," said Hans. "But experts in the Nazi Party thought it best for him to continue his studies at home, believing him to be too young for the university environment. In short, General, they believe it best not to dislodge the goose that lays the golden eggs from its nest. Not when it's being so productive."

“I’m afraid that policy has come to an end,” said Becker. “The Reich needs his services.”

“Is there no way for him to render services from our home?” pleaded Hans.

Once again, the general glared at the elder Richter in contempt. “Your son is the perfect example of the superiority of the Aryan race. It’s high time he was properly deployed. Because of your age, and because you are needed to train the next generation of mathematicians, you’ve been given a pass in the current conflict.” His lip curled up into a sneer. “But surely, Herr Richter, you didn’t think your family could shirk all contributions to the war effort indefinitely?”

“That was never our intent, Herr Gruppenfuhrer,” said Hans Richter quickly. “Our loyalty to the Third Reich is absolute,” he added, a lie that Otto knew to be truly extraordinary in its magnitude.

The general scowled. “I’ve heard rumors to the contrary.”

Otto’s father shrank back, but he was too afraid to even reply.

Otto had been sure that Hitler and his band of irrational psychopaths would quickly lose the war, but their very ferocity, their audacity, had the opposite effect, and it now wasn’t hard to imagine Nazi ideology spreading over much of the globe.

Hitler’s domain already included Austria, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, Norway, Yugoslavia, Greece, Belgium, and France, and at times the German army appeared unstoppable. Germany’s *Blitzkrieg*, which translated to *Lightning War*, had proven successful beyond all expectations, as huge concentrations of tanks, planes, and artillery raced ahead at speeds previously unheard of in war. These forces quickly punched holes in enemy defenses, like an irresistible battering ram, allowing tank divisions to penetrate and operate freely behind enemy lines, sowing shock and chaos, while thousands of German bombers kept the slow, entrenched enemy from resupply or redeployment.

Worse, the Nazis turned the blitzkrieg soldiers into an army of supermen, plying them liberally with crystal meth—speed—in pill form, shipping thirty-five million tablets to their three million troops. This drug allowed soldiers to advance for days without sleep, dulled

their sense of empathy, made them feel euphoric and invincible, and turned them into aggressive, reckless killing machines.

And now, apparently, it was Otto's turn to be violated in whatever fashion the Third Reich saw fit, all in furtherance of mindless conquest.

Elsa Richter maintained a strong bearing, but a single tear escaped from her right eye and rolled down her cheek, beyond her control. "How long will you need our son?" she whispered.

"Until we don't!" barked the general. "My patience is growing thin. I want him packed and ready in five minutes."

"Wouldn't he perform better if we went with him?" said his mother, desperately trying to avoid the unavoidable.

The general issued a cruel snort, not even bothering to answer.

"Can you at least tell us where he'll be going?" she asked as several more tears began running down her face.

Becker shook his head in disgust. "Enough!" he barked. "No more questions. I can't tell you where he'll be, or what he'll be doing. Only that he'll be part of a team of scientists, working on an important, top-secret project, and will be treated well. You'll have no further contact with him until he is finished, whenever that might be. He won't be writing any letters, nor will he be receiving any."

"What if I refuse to participate?" asked Otto, blinking back tears of his own.

The general stared at him in disbelief, stunned that the boy had the audacity to speak. "You're obviously not as bright as I've been led to believe," he spat. "I'm going to pretend I didn't hear that. Not only will you participate, you'll excel. If you don't live up to expectations, there will be consequences."

"Even if I try my best," said Otto, "I can't guarantee results. No one can."

An icy smile spread slowly across the general's face. "Let me put it this way," he said. "The project you'll be on will have the full attention of the Fuhrer himself, along with Reichsfuhrer Himmler. If you perform as expected, if you distinguish yourself, great honor will accrue to you and your family, and the rewards will be significant."

"And if I fail?" asked Otto.

Becker's disingenuous smile disappeared, to be replaced by a scowl. "Failure will not be tolerated. Even success will not be good enough, unless we judge you to be giving it your all. In short, we expect you to *dazzle* us. If not, I'll have no other choice but to explore the rumors I spoke of earlier. The ones suggesting your father is committing crimes against the state, however delicate he thinks he's being."

Otto glanced at his father, who shot him a defiant nod, too quickly and subtly for the SS general to see. A sharp nod that spoke volumes. A nod that gave him permission to use far less than his full brilliance on the project. A nod that told him that if the project was designed to help further the Nazis' cause—which it surely must be—his parents would rather die than see him provide any missing pieces of the puzzle.

Otto turned his gaze back to Becker. "In that case, Herr Gruppenfuhrer," the boy whispered, "I'll make sure that you're dazzled."

But as he stared further into the eyes of evil, tears began streaming quietly down his cheeks.

"Stop your blubbering this instant!" demanded the general, spittle flying from his mouth. "You're embarrassing yourself and the Reich," he continued, enraged, "and it's a disgusting display! You're weak, pathetic—*soft!* Our boys are dying on the battlefield, and you're here curled into a fetal position because you won't see your *mommy* for a while. You make me sick!"

The general stared at Otto Richter in utter contempt, and his tone changed from fire to ice. "If your goal is to dazzle," he said slowly, biting off each word as if it were acid, "know that you're off to a very bad start."



# PART 1

**Enigma (noun):** A person or thing that is mysterious, puzzling, or difficult to understand.



# 1

## The outskirts of Spokane, Washington, 2027

Dr. Kelly Connolly stood by the entrance to a small, single-story factory building and watched as a civilian SUV arrived at a guard gate and the driver stopped to show credentials. The fence around the facility was laughably benign, unable to deter even a modestly capable ten-year-old. No rolls of wicked razor wire crowning every inch of its perimeter, and no deadly levels of electricity coursing through its metal veins.

The gatehouse was also the very picture of innocence, as was the attendant. There wasn't a hint of weaponry or military presence, and there were no spikes embedded in the pavement that could be automatically lifted to shred the sturdiest of tires as easily as a pin could pop a child's balloon.

But, like the faux factory itself, built at the edge of a vast woods, the perimeter was a deception, and far more secure than it seemed. In fact, the site was ringed with enough hidden firepower and other deterrents to ward off a small attacking army. Not that any of it would ever need to be used. Military installations raised eyebrows, piqued curiosity, drew attention. Small factories, appearing to be only minimally secure, on the other hand, drew nothing but yawns.

Kelly sighed. "I don't suppose there's any way I can get out of this," she said to the lanky, balding man beside her.

Dr. Harry Salazar looked amused. "Trust me, Kelly," he said, "you'll enjoy this visit more than you think."

"That would almost *have* to be true," she replied wryly.

She and Harry Salazar, vaunted director of Project Uru, had gotten along famously since she had joined his team seven months earlier. Which in this instance was more of a curse than a blessing.

She was a department head, yes, but only one of six. And yet she alone had been assigned the duty to join Salazar as a Walmart greeter, to welcome Major Justin Boyd, a high-ranking black-operations officer, and give him a guided tour.

Kelly knew full well why she was now with her boss playing hostess while the other department heads were allowed to duck this odious duty. The director of Uru liked being around her more than the others. It was as simple as that. Salazar had confided in her that he found her to be the most polished of the departmental heads when it came to both social graces and personality.

She was also female, and while Salazar would never admit it, she suspected he was playing to the major's more primal instincts, hoping that if he were the typical military hard-ass, he would be less so in her presence. Or better yet, find her attractive. And while she didn't cause auto accidents when she strolled along streets full of male drivers, this latter hope wasn't out of the question. Her smooth skin, large emerald eyes, girl-next-door beauty, and athletic body never failed to attract male attention.

"Trust me, Kelly," repeated Salazar, as the corners of his mouth turned up into a knowing smile. "You're going to be pleasantly surprised."

"What don't I know about this?"

"You have very low expectations for this visit. I get that. You haven't dealt with anyone in the military before, have you?"

Kelly shook her head. "This would be the first."

"I figured," said Salazar. "Scientists tend to think that anyone able to rise through the ranks of the military almost has to be a small-minded, war-mongering hard-ass. But some are very good men and women. Intelligent. Compassionate even. Really."

Kelly sighed again. "I know I'm stereotyping," she said. "But while he might not be a bloodthirsty barbarian, there's no way he's a pacifist, either. Which is why you don't see a lot of Amish generals," she added with a grin.

Salazar laughed. "True, but let me tell you more about the major. You've never met his boss, Colonel Tom Osborne, either," he said, referring to the man in charge of all of America's black sites. "But

he's also impressive. Not at all the power-hungry hawk you might imagine."

"You mean other than being responsible for every secret program in America designed to develop the next generation of WMD?"

"Right," said Salazar, in amusement. "Other than that. But let me get to the punchline. This major we'll be meeting—Boyd—is a member of a black ops program right out of the comics. Supersoldiers. Enhanced human fighters, souped-up in any way genetic engineering and technology will allow. Captain America wannabees." He grinned and gestured at Kelly. "Go ahead, say it. I'll wait."

"And that's supposed to make me feel *more* comfortable?" she asked, right on cue.

"In an ironic way, yes. This program is called EHO, for *Enhanced Human Operations*. And the military took a long, sober look at what they were doing. If you're determined to enhance a soldier, you'd better be sure the men and women you recruit to be your Frankensteins, your unstoppable killing machines, all have a heart of gold and the morality of a saint. They figured enhancement would amplify a person's underlying characteristics. Enhance someone with even a hint of villainy at their core, and you get a super villain. Enhance someone with heroism at their core, on the other hand . . ." he added, nodding at Kelly to finish.

"And you get a super-*hero*," she said dutifully. "Really, Harry? You do know this is the real world."

"Lines between what's real and what's science fiction are blurring more every year. But the bottom line is that the military put a lot of thought into their EHO recruiting effort. They began with very good people. For this Boyd to have made the cut, he couldn't have been a typical military grunt. Osborne, himself, is a very good man, and he tells me that Justin Boyd has distinguished himself, even in this rarified group. Apparently, he's exceedingly bright, moral, decisive, and heroic. He's only thirty-two, but already seen as someone with limitless potential."

Kelly was about to ask Salazar a question, but the man in question had made it through the gate, parked his rental SUV, and was rapidly approaching.

Boyd was dressed in casual civilian clothing, and lugging a gray civilian duffel bag, a sizable version that was stuffed to the gills. He was on the handsome side, although physically unimposing, looking to be of average height, weight, and strength. His demeanor was friendly but businesslike, commanding, but not bombastic.

“Welcome to Project Uru, Major,” said Salazar, shaking the man’s hand.

“Director Harry Salazar, I presume?” said Justin Boyd.

“Yes, and this is Dr. Kelly Connolly,” he added as Kelly shook his hand. “But everyone here goes by their first names.”

“Understood,” said Boyd.

“Kelly has been with us now for seven months, and is doing some fine work.”

“Is she your second-in-command?”

“I don’t really have a second-in-command, Major. She’s one of six department heads. But she’s very good at explaining science, so I thought she’d be an asset today.”

“Excellent. I can’t tell you how much I’m looking forward to learning all about your program, Director,” said the major.

Salazar nodded and ushered the small group inside the factory, which was an empty building whose sole purpose was to house and hide a number of small, self-driving shuttle buses and the mouth of a thirty-foot-wide tunnel. The shuttles took scientists to and from Project Uru’s main base of operations, a sophisticated, multistory research facility eight miles inside the dense woods that abutted the factory, and buried half a mile beneath it.

Salazar gestured for their guest to take a seat in one of the shuttles, and he and Kelly Connolly sat across from him. “Feel free to leave your duffel bag here, if you’d like,” the director offered.

“Thanks, but I’ll keep it with me. It contains a lot of specialty items I used to carry with me in various vests and compartments on commando operations. The stuff in here saved my life several times, so I tend to keep it close.”

“Even though you aren’t on a dangerous mission?” said Kelly.

“Old habits die hard,” he replied simply.

Salazar ordered the vehicle's AI to begin the short journey, and the all-electric vehicle immediately complied, soundlessly entering the smooth, concrete tunnel. The small shuttle picked up speed until reaching its plodding cruising rate of twenty miles per hour. The tunnel was well lighted and bore a continuous but mild declination all the way to the Uru facility.

"So how much do you know about Project Uru?" asked the director pleasantly.

The major shot his two hosts a sheepish smile. "Absolutely nothing," he admitted. "All I know is that it's called Uru, and that you've chosen to base it in a part of the country where it rains or drizzles about half the time."

Salazar smiled. "Actually, you're thinking of the western parts of the state—like Seattle. Spokane is considerably drier."

"Then I guess I know even *less* than absolutely nothing."

Kelly laughed. Perhaps her boss was right about this guy. Charming, humble, self-deprecating even.

Or was this just an act? A guy this bright and accomplished, who knew nothing about their program, would at least Google the city he was headed to. Had he purposely made this error to put them at ease with his humility and aw-shucks charm? If so, she wasn't sure if this made her think less of him, or more.

Salazar studied the major carefully. "I'm surprised to hear that you're so uninformed about us," he said. "I've been sending monthly reports to Colonel Osborne since this program began. Is there a reason you chose not to even skim through them?"

"It wasn't my choice, Director . . . *Harry*," said Boyd. "As you know, the colonel is planning to retire, and he wants me to take over. So I've been coming up to speed on all black ops activities under our purview, and made a list of black sites I planned to visit. Colonel Osborne insisted that I save this one for last, and that I go in absolutely cold. Believe me, I wanted to read your reports. But the colonel said they couldn't possibly do your project justice. That I really needed to see this for myself."

"He's not wrong," said Salazar soberly.

“Do you always visit these sites by yourself?” asked Kelly. “And wear civilian clothing? I’d expect the future head of black ops to travel with more of a military entourage.”

“Uniforms and military entourages attract unwanted attention,” replied the major. “But I do pay extra for self-driving rental cars,” he added with a smile. “You know, so I can pretend I have a chauffeur.”

Kelly laughed, finding it difficult not to like this man. “I don’t mean to be too forward,” she said, “but Harry just told me you’re in a top-secret program called EHO. Which would make you the ultimate combat soldier.”

Boyd sighed. “The better the skills and capabilities, the less need to use them, right? I’ve had to at times, but only when the mission was just, and lives were on the line.”

“Still, why would Colonel Osborne want to tap you for an admin position?” pressed Kelly. “Kind of boring, I would think.”

“Not at all. Having the chance to oversee black sites like yours, scientific sites, is anything but boring. The work being done at these sites is mind-blowing, and vitally important. Radar, computers, GPS, and the internet all came out of the military. I’ve had to engage in violence on occasion, but because I’ve witnessed the horrors of it, I plan to support tech programs that can be used to *prevent* violence, rather than creating more of it.”

“I see,” said Kelly, surprised to receive such a well-reasoned and articulate answer. This guy couldn’t possibly be for real, could he? She thought of the old adage, when something seemed too good to be true, it probably *was*.

So was Justin Boyd just a smooth politician, in addition to his other skills? His answer had seemed a bit canned—like a stump speech. On the other hand, why would he need to win them over? The head of black ops wasn’t an elected position, and Boyd was already slated to take the reins, even if it were.

“Getting back to Uru,” said Boyd, “I haven’t read your reports, Harry, but I have heard rumors.” He raised his eyebrows. “There are lots of them. But if I had to guess which one was true—if any—I’d tend to guess it’s the one that involves *extraterrestrials*.”

“Really?” said Harry Salazar. “And why would you guess that?”

“Because there have been so many UFO sightings over the past few decades. And the colonel’s behavior when it comes to your group is very odd. The rumor that rings true to me is that you’re in possession of some kind of . . . alien artifact.”

The hint of a smile came over the director’s face. “Then you’ve chosen the right rumor, Major,” he said. “But while *artifact* is as good a term as any, the truth is it’s much more than a mere artifact. Since you haven’t read my reports, I can give you the key take-home message in two sentences.”

The director of Project Uru leaned closer to his guest. “My group is in possession of a piece of extraterrestrial technology. I believe this technology is *so* advanced, *so* astonishing, that if we could unlock its mysteries, we’d reveal scientific insights that are as far beyond our current capabilities as ours are beyond those of the *Neanderthal*.”

The major’s eyes widened. “Now that’s what I call a take-home message.”

## 2

The shuttle continued moving through the tunnel at a snail's pace, inching its way toward the greatest find in human history.

"Unfortunately," continued Salazar with a frown, "we've made exactly zero progress unlocking its mysteries."

"So you have the ultimate treasure chest," said the future head of black ops, "but can't find a way to open it."

"Not from lack of effort," said Salazar. "And we will find a way. I promise you. But let me start at the beginning. As I said, it isn't really an artifact, not in an archaeological sense. Artifacts are historical remnants of a culture. This appears to be an active, working bit of alien technology they seem to have inadvertently left behind here on Earth."

"And by *they*, you mean . . . ?"

"I have no idea. You have access to more secret information than I do, Major, so maybe you can tell *me*."

"When it comes to possible alien visitors, I don't know much more than the public does. Namely, that there have been a rash of UFO sightings, which have become so persistent and compelling it's impossible not to acknowledge something is going on that we don't understand. And alien visitation is the obvious answer, even for a public with no knowledge of . . . well, of whatever it is that you're hiding here."

Kelly nodded in agreement. Almost every day, military pilots and other trained observers around the world were having close encounters with objects that seemed to defy the laws of physics. As far back as 2018 the US government had finally come clean, admitting it maintained a secret program to research and investigate UFOs, and released several videos of UFO encounters to the public. In addition, the Defense Intelligence Agency had briefed Congress that it

was sponsoring extensive research into warp drives, wormholes, and other means of interstellar travel, to better understand how alien visitors might have gotten to Earth, and the advanced weaponry they might have brought with them.

“So I’m not at all surprised that Earth is being visited,” continued the major. “No one who’s been paying attention would be. I’m just thrilled to learn that the aliens finally left tangible evidence behind.”

“*Finally?*” said Kelly. “I always assumed the UFO Exploration Group had found evidence a long time ago.”

“I’m afraid not,” replied Boyd.

“And they don’t even know that we have, do they?”

Boyd shook his head. “My understanding is that the Secretary of Defense has chosen to keep this project the most closely guarded secret in the entire country.” He gestured to the Uru director. “But please, continue.”

“Thank you,” said Salazar. “The alien object in question was discovered inside a large cabin on private property. The very property we’re now traveling under. We believe that both the cabin and the artifact within had been abandoned for some time. Almost three years ago, two hikers, Bethany Cummings and Terry McNally, got so hopelessly lost in these woods they began to panic. When they came across this cabin, which was padlocked, they used a sturdy tree branch as a lever to break in, hoping for a phone, a fire, or some food.”

“And that’s when they found the object,” said Kelly, relating the obvious punchline.

“It was glowing so brightly,” continued Salazar, “that it was impossible for them to miss. You’ll see it for yourself in just a few minutes. It’s cubic in shape, and only the size of a softball, but it’s truly otherworldly. Eerie, really. It exudes so much pent-up power that it’s totally mind-blowing. Glorious and menacing, both—at the same time.”

Boyd listened in rapt attention.

“The two women did make it back out of the woods, of course,” continued Salazar. “When they did, they contacted NASA to report the object they had stumbled across. NASA checked it out, and it

wasn't long before it became the most classified find in history and put under the auspices of black ops."

"Who owned the cabin?" asked Boyd.

"A dead end, I'm afraid," said Salazar. "There was literally no record that it even existed, and the owner of the land couldn't be found. It was marked as private property, but whoever bought the land concealed the purchase well."

The small shuttle bus slowed to a crawl and stopped inside another large parking area, joining three other shuttles currently available for the return trip.

Harry Salazar and Kelly Connolly ushered the future head of black ops through the main entrance to the Uru research facility in silence. Inside, it was bright and spacious. So much so that if not for a lack of windows, it could easily have been an expensive corporate research facility in a science park on the surface. Over the past ten years, excavation machinery had undergone revolutionary improvements in cost, speed, and efficiency, making elaborate subterranean structures surprisingly achievable.

"Let me take you right to the center of the maze," said Salazar, "to see the beast. A tour of the rest of the facility can wait."

The major nodded. "I couldn't agree more."

"We aren't planning any tests today," added the director, "so we'll be able to see the object up close and personal."

He ushered Boyd and Kelly through a long corridor that led directly to the center of the facility. They passed through a pair of twenty-five-ton blast doors and entered a spacious room that resembled a hockey rink in several ways, although square instead of rectangular, and lacking any ice. The ceiling was fifteen feet high, with the entire space ringed with transparent, floor-to-ceiling windows, like the protective glass that surrounded a rink.

Instead of stands appearing beyond the glass, there were a series of rooms filled with elaborate instrumentation, computers, or serving as viewing galleries, none of which were elevated. The floor and ceiling appeared to be made of the same material as the windows that surrounded them, although not fully transparent.

And at the precise center of the room, resting on the floor, sat the alien object, tiny but mighty, making its presence known by sending out thick beams of brilliant light from every vertex, each beam so blindingly bright it could be easily seen in a well-lighted room.

“How close can we get to it?” asked Major Boyd.

“As close as we want,” replied the director.

They approached the gleaming, pulsating, otherworldly object, which the major could now see was cubic in shape, as he had been told. He crouched down to get a better view.

The object had an outer shell of edges linked together to form an open, cubical cage, about the size of a softball, as Salazar had said, or, more aptly, a large Rubik’s Cube. It didn’t have a color, but it shined with such unearthly brightness it seemed almost to be made of pure light. Within this outer cage was cradled a smaller solid . . . shape, which seemed to change continuously. Now a cube. Now a tetrahedron. Now one of an eclectic array of geometric shapes, some of which resembled 3D snowflakes. Now an impossible shape that was indescribable and unsettling to even observe.

As if this wasn’t trippy enough, the human mind flipped back and forth between seeing the shape inside as being perfectly motionless, or as spinning at incredible speed, like an optical illusion image that could be visualized in two different ways, but not both at once.

The cube pulsated with energy, which the human mind sensed as being immense, limitless, and its rhythmic throbbing made the cube seem alive, as if it had a beating heart.

The major was mesmerized, as was anyone who had ever seen it. It was almost perfectly hypnotic, drawing him in with its unearthly power. Yet, like everyone else, he was unable to study it for more than ten to fifteen seconds without looking away.

He rose and turned toward the director, breaking its spell. “It’s breathtaking,” he said. “And frightening.”

Salazar nodded. “It has to be seen in person to be believed.”

“Speaking of that, how am I able to see it?”

Kelly grinned. “I *know*,” she said enthusiastically. “From a distance, the light is blinding. If you’re close to it and give it a tangential glance, it’s just as bright. But if you look *directly* at it, you can

see it clearly, despite enough illumination beaming out of it to put a lighthouse out of business. That's yet another aspect of it we haven't begun to figure out."

The major bent to study the object for a second time and then stood, less than a minute later. "Absolutely extraordinary," he said simply, as he and his two hosts formed a circle with their backs to the blinding light. "Colonel Osborne definitely saved the best for last. And he was right. Your reports couldn't have possibly done this justice."

"No doubt," agreed Salazar. "And when he said that you have to see this in person, that wasn't just a figure of speech. You actually *have to see this in person*. An attempted photograph or video of the cube captures nothing but light. And even if this object *could* be videoed, no video could possibly get across what it does to the mind, the feeling of immense power it somehow projects."

"We call it the Enigma Cube," said Kelly. "For obvious reasons. And we call this containment chamber we're in the Enigma Room."

"This room is in the precise center of the facility," said Salazar. "The floors, ceiling, and windows surrounding us are all a foot thick, and made of the highest-grade transparent aluminum available."

Boyd nodded, impressed. Transparent aluminum was a revolutionary alloy that had first been created in 2016 by researchers at Oxford, although the concept had been introduced twenty years earlier in a *Star Trek* movie. It was much lighter than glass, and far stronger.

"The facility itself," continued Salazar, "is encased in a massive block of concrete, three feet thick. And this block is topped by over a thousand feet of natural rock, mostly granite."

The major nodded thoughtfully. "That's quite a protective cocoon you've created," he said. "Your Enigma Cube will survive here, even if the world goes nuclear."

Salazar winced. "The survival of the cube isn't really our goal," he said. "Our goal is to ensure that the *world* will survive, even if the *Enigma Cube* goes nuclear."

Boyd swallowed hard. "Any reason to believe it might?"

“Not any overt reason, Major, but you’ve seen it. Any doubt that it could unleash world-destroying amounts of power if we riled it up somehow?”

“None,” admitted Boyd.

“We have reason to believe it can tap into a nearly limitless power source,” continued Salazar. “It’s been blasting out light and performing its mind-bending transformational choreography now for three years. Probably a lot longer than that before we got hold of it. Its intensity hasn’t diminished one iota, and we haven’t exactly been plugging it in or changing any batteries. We’ve done some calculations, and we believe the energy needed to power the rotations of the inner object, as well as its kaleidoscopic shape changes, is massive. Yet the thing’s power seems inexhaustible.”

The director of Project Uru blew out a long breath. “So while we have no reason to believe it’s volatile, we can’t afford to be wrong.”

“And even if the Enigma Cube isn’t meant to be malevolent in any way,” added Kelly Connolly, “we could destroy ourselves out of sheer ignorance. Bring a primitive man into our time, and he might thrive inside one of our homes. Until the day he shoves his finger into an electrical outlet out of curiosity.”

“Good call, then,” said Boyd. “I applaud your caution. But why build it here? Why not inside a mountain? Or a location even more remote than this one?”

“We didn’t have a choice,” said Salazar.

“Why not?”

“The cabin it was found in is a half mile above us,” explained the director. “And I mean *precisely* above us. We bought the land for miles around it, and then bored a two-foot diameter hole inside the cabin going about half a mile down. The cube came along for the ride. And then we built this facility around where the cube ended up.”

The major blinked in confusion. “So you essentially lowered the cube a half mile, without moving it horizontally.”

“Correct,” said the director.

“Why? Were you worried that horizontal movement might somehow trigger it?”

Salazar sighed. “Not at all,” he replied. “We were *unable* to move it horizontally. Along with the Enigma Cube’s other seemingly impossible characteristics, it’s basically an immovable object.”

He paused to let this sink in.

“The cube only weighs about forty thousand pounds,” he continued, and then shook his head with a lopsided smile, realizing just how ridiculous this must sound. “Perhaps the word *only* isn’t the best choice,” he added, “since no material on Earth forged into a cube of this size could possibly weigh this much. And yet, somehow, it resists lateral movement as if it weighs tens of millions of pounds—maybe more. We have no idea how. All we know is that before we lowered the cube and built this facility, we tried everything we could think of to displace it laterally, without success. We even dismantled the cabin, tried to move it with a two-hundred-ton bulldozer the size of a house, and then rebuilt the original structure.”

“So even the gargantuan dozer failed?” said Boyd in disbelief. “Seriously?”

Salazar raised his eyebrows. “Didn’t budge it so much as a nanometer,” he replied somberly.

The major grinned like a giddy schoolboy. “I have to say that I’m really, really beginning to like this thing,” he whispered.

### 3

Commander Shen Ning kicked his legs high as he finished the third mile of his five-mile run, driving up a steep incline to reach the top of the hill that afforded the most panoramic view of Mount Spokane in the entire county.

Not that he would allow himself to enjoy the view. Or the splendor of the Spokane River and Selkirk Mountains. Or any of the vanilla tranquility that the area offered, for that matter.

He wasn't here to sightsee. He was here on an assignment that brought with it more visibility to the rarified upper echelon of China's government and military than any other assignment ever could. Working out of a private, secluded home that he had chosen to be their base in Spokane.

It had all begun less than a year earlier. Chinese physicists had come up with a device they hoped could detect disturbances in the curvature of spacetime throughout the cosmos. While their new sensor failed to detect anything in space, it did detect the faintest of signals coming from Spokane, Washington.

At first the physicists were convinced it was a glitch. But Chinese military intelligence decreed that it was worth investigating further. What were the Americans up to this time?

After some brilliant intelligence work, the Chinese intel community discovered that the Americans had set up a black ops facility outside of Spokane, Washington, manned by scientists studying a mysterious alien object of immense power and even more immense promise. One that had triggered this new sensor, and one that had quickly drawn the personal attention of the president of China himself.

And Shen Ning had been selected to be the key operative on the ground, to provide intel on this all-important discovery. It had been

the greatest day of his life, a demonstration that his distinguished service had attracted even more attention than he had known.

He had met with China's paramount leader, Shi Yu, himself, who had told him that getting solid intelligence on the precise goings-on within the Spokane facility was among the highest priorities of any mission in China's magnificent history. Its importance could not be overstated.

Shen knew exactly why China's leaders were so obsessed with Spokane. They had long made it clear that they intended for China to dominate the globe, if not through military campaigns of global conquest, then through every other means available.

And when it came to exerting power, to achieving the greatest global reach, technology was *everything*. Whoever controlled breakthrough technologies controlled the world. It was as simple as that. And the object at Spokane represented the ultimate concentration of super-advanced technology. If the Americans had a eureka moment, China was determined to be looking over their shoulder when it happened.

The mission was so important that Shen had been authorized to make use of a prototype surveillance device of astonishing complexity. A bug that masqueraded as an *actual* bug. A fly drone constructed to look exactly like a small housefly, which could fly short distances and attach itself to pants and shirts and shoes.

The drone used active camouflage that put a chameleon to shame, and possessed both video and audio capabilities, miraculous in such a tiny package. Most importantly, it made use of breakthrough transmission technology that couldn't be detected by conventional means, so it was immune to security sweeps.

The Achilles' heel of this tiny fake housefly was its thirst for juice. Its many features, and especially its novel transmission method, required significant power, and its power source needed to be minuscule. The current prototypes were powered by light, but this had proven inadequate. If these devices ran out of power and ceased to be mobile, they would inevitably be discovered, and reverse engineered.

So it was lucky that the very location China most wanted to surveil was the one location that was perfectly suited to this novel

technology. The object the Americans were calling the Enigma Cube gave off enough light to keep a fly drone *drowning* in power. So much, in fact, that the drones could be confidently shuttled to darker parts of the facility temporarily, and then shuttled back to the vicinity of the cube for recharging, without fear that the source would ever dry up.

Shen had landed these tiny flies on several scientists on the Spokane team, who had acted as clueless mules, shuttling them inside. So far none had been detected.

With this completed, he had begun the recruitment of an army of in-country mercenaries who, for the right price, wouldn't ask any questions or shirk from any mission, no matter how bloody. A network with offshoots in a variety of geographic locations within the States, so they could become China's own version of colonial minutemen, able to arrive anywhere on the continent in short order.

Shen had seen to it that this network was established, while making sure it couldn't be traced back to China. Since he spoke unaccented English, this hadn't been a problem. And he had completed this assignment in record time, working through an American intermediary to identify and vet the best mercenary networks. An intermediary whom Shen had killed the moment his task was complete, to eliminate all loose ends.

"Commander Shen," said the voice of his colleague, Li Jin, through the tiny comm embedded in his cochlea, "I recommend that you return to home base immediately."

"Report," he barked back, breathing hard as he continued running.

"We have Priority One activity at the target site," she replied. "Harry Salazar and Kelly Connolly are meeting with a Major Justin Boyd and giving him a tour of the facility. The major arrived alone, in civilian clothing."

She paused for effect. "And based on their conversation, Commander, this visitor is slated to become the head of American black ops."

Shen slowed to a stop. Vigorous exercise could wait. Nothing of interest had happened in four months, but they had just hit the

mother lode. Short of learning that the Americans had made progress with the cube, this was as good as it got.

“How long have they been meeting?” he asked.

“Just over nineteen minutes. I can pipe the audio through to you now while you make your way back to base.”

“That’s not necessary. I’ll be back soon, and I want to watch the video and audio together.”

“Understood, Commander.”

“How much longer do you think the meeting will last?”

“I can’t be sure, of course, but I’d estimate at least an hour. They don’t seem to be in a hurry, and have engaged in any number of digressions.”

“Good. I’ll be there in fifteen minutes.”

The commander began running again, now eager to get back to the large private home that served as his base of operations as quickly as possible. He would need to contact Beijing and get satellites assigned to watch this Major Justin Boyd when he left the Spokane facility.

Despite the major’s civilian clothing, Shen Ning had no doubt that the man would head immediately to nearby Fairchild Air Force Base, and from there hop a military jet to his next destination, possibly his home base.

Chinese satellites could track the plane in flight and an AI could guess its likely destination with a high degree of accuracy after viewing its course. Assuming there were mercenaries relatively close to where the jet was expected to land, Shen could have them take over surveillance. Ever so discreetly.

Chinese intelligence could also hack into American traffic cameras, and he would authorize this as well, pulling out all stops to track the major to his lair.

The cube had been a complete bust so far, and Shen Ning was convinced this wouldn’t change.

But that no longer mattered. Because he now had a tiger by the tail—one by the name of Justin Boyd—and he didn’t intend to let it go.

## 4

Justin Boyd stared off into space inside the Enigma Room—or more accurately, stared off at the viewing galleries ringing the room—ignoring the ever-present alien cube pulsing away with pure light and energy behind him, taunting humanity with its secrets.

“The cube is astonishing,” he said finally. “*More* than astonishing. There are no words.”

“We’re lucky it was finally rediscovered,” said Salazar. “Since it’s immovable, someone must have originally found it in the woods and built the cabin around it. One with no windows, so its light wouldn’t attract attention. Whoever built the cabin kept it tightly locked up.”

“Why not just bury it?” asked Boyd.

“That’s not clear,” replied Kelly. “But there was mostly granite under where it was found, so this might have been easier said than done. Besides, if you have a one-of-a-kind painting by Salvador Dali, you don’t bury it, you admire it. And the Enigma Cube makes the most masterful of Dali paintings seem commonplace.”

“No doubt,” said Boyd.

“So now you know why Harry named this group Project Uru.”

“Actually, I’ve never heard the term. I promised Colonel Osborne I wouldn’t look it up. He said it might be a spoiler.”

“Interesting,” said Kelly. “So you must not be much of a Marvel fan.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” replied Boyd. “I’ve probably seen about half the movies. And *all* the Captain America ones, since he was arguably the fictional father of Enhanced Human Operations.”

“I see. Well, it turns out that Uru is the name of a metal. The metal that Thor’s hammer is made from.”

“Of course,” said Boyd, his eyes sparkling in delight. “Because his hammer is also a small, immovable object. One that wields tremendous power.”

“Exactly,” said Kelly. “Immovable—unless you happen to be Thor.”

“In that case, Uru is a great name. But wouldn’t Thor’s hammer have been even better?”

“There comes a time when a name is just too silly,” said Salazar. “And too on the nose.”

“The other important thing you need to know about Uru metal,” said Kelly, “just to further the metaphor, is that it can only be produced by a forge powered by the heart of a dying star. One run by Dwarves.”

“Well, yeah,” said the major with a grin, “everyone knows that Dwarves make the best weapons.”

His smile vanished, and he became serious once again. “But I see why you think this is so interesting,” he added. “Because the only way the cube could weigh even forty thousand pounds is if it contains a sprinkling of neutron star matter, right? Which can only be found at the heart of a dying star.”

Kelly’s eyes narrowed, and she couldn’t help but be impressed. “I thought I was going to have to explain that to you.”

“Like I said, I dabble in science.”

“I guess so,” said Kelly. “What else do you know about neutron stars?”

“The basics,” replied Boyd. “They begin as stars much bigger than Sol. Then they die, and their outer cores explode in a violent supernova. The inner core that’s left behind collapses in on itself under the irresistible pull of gravity.”

“Nicely put,” said Kelly. “For extra credit, the force of gravity is always this strong at the core of a star. So why don’t they *all* collapse?”

“I’d answer,” said the major with a playful glint in his eye, “but I don’t want to ruin my reputation as a badass.”

“If there’s a world where a badass, souped-up killing machine can’t also be a closet science geek,” said Kelly, “I don’t want to live in it.”

Boyd laughed. “Well, when you put it that way . . .” he said by way of surrender. “Okay, Kelly, here goes. Healthy stars are powered by nuclear reactions in their cores. And these produce enough outward pressure to counteract the inward force of gravity. But once the star runs out of hydrogen fuel, it’s basically *screwed*—which I assume is the correct scientific term for it,” he added wryly.

“Exactly right,” said Kelly. “The collapse squeezes a core that was bigger than our sun down to a ball with about a twelve-mile diameter.”

The major arched an eyebrow. “Which is some seriously dense and heavy matter,” he said. “And I believe that if an even bigger star goes through this process, the collapse can’t be stopped, leading to a black hole.”

Salazar shot Kelly a smug, I-told-you-so look, knowing the major was surpassing her wildest expectations, as he had predicted might be the case. But she was too focused on Boyd to catch it.

“Impressive,” she said to the major. “Aren’t you full of surprises.”

“You have no idea,” said Boyd.

Kelly studied him for several long seconds. “Getting back to the cube,” she said finally, “you guessed that it was made with a sprinkling of neutron star matter. Why just a sprinkling?”

“If the entire cube were made of it, the thing would weigh as much as a mountain range.”

“Outstanding, Major,” said Salazar. “Right in every particular. A single teaspoonful of neutron star matter would weigh a billion tons.”

“So how would one go about acquiring this matter?” asked Boyd.

“It’s pretty simple, really,” said Kelly. “Just drive your starship to the nearest neutron star. Send a probe down to the surface, one that can withstand gravity billions of times greater than we have on Earth and temperatures of a million degrees. And one that can somehow scrape a few bits of material from the most tightly compacted matter in the universe. Then you’d just have to retrieve the probe, which is impossible, contain the neutron star matter within a cube, which is impossible, and power the entire thing, which is also impossible.”

She shrugged. “Piece of cake.”

Boyd whistled and turned to Salazar. “So your claim that this tech is as far above our level as we are above the Neanderthals isn’t just hyperbole.”

“If anything,” replied Salazar, “it might be an *understatement*.”

Boyd turned to study the cube one more time and was instantly captivated by its appearance, mesmerized by the pull of its throbbing energy field, which somehow triggered a primal feeling of awe and unease in a human brain.

He turned back to his hosts. “What powers it?” he asked. “Seems to me that it would almost have to be zero-point energy.”

Kelly Connolly shook her head in disbelief. He might be ruining his reputation as a badass at that. “How would you know that?” she asked.

“There’s a zero-point energy research group under our auspices.”

“I see,” said Kelly thoughtfully. “Which means you might know more about zero-point energy than we do.”

“Not a chance,” said Boyd. “I haven’t had time to read more than a one-paragraph summary. I only know it’s supposed to be nearly infinite, and pervade all of space.”

“Is this zero-point energy group making any progress?” asked Salazar.

“Almost none. It’s considered the longest of our long-shot projects. But still well worth the effort and investment. I don’t need to tell you that success would revolutionize civilization, like fire, the wheel, or electricity.”

“Very true,” said Salazar. “Most scientists believe tapping it is impossible.”

“But we don’t,” said Kelly, “because we have the cube, and this is just one of the miracles it packs into a tiny package. It’s a real showoff. We’re like human scientists a thousand years ago stumbling upon a cell phone. They’d be blown away by its stunning array of capabilities, and all of them would seem like magic. The equivalent of a tiny supercomputer for a brain. The ability to use electricity as a power source. The ability to take and play back photos and video. To communicate across great distances. To understand spoken words. To access billions of pages of information. And so on.”

“So for these aliens,” said Salazar, “tapping zero-point energy is likely as mundane as tapping electricity is for us.”

“And is this energy source really limitless?” asked Boyd.

“Pretty much,” replied Kelly. “Quantum-field theory tells us that even in the completely empty vacuum of space there is a seething froth of activity, as virtual particles pop into and out of existence, creating energy. This is called the zero-point field, and its existence has been proven experimentally. And the energy of the void, zero-point energy, exists everywhere. In the coldest reaches of interstellar space and in the empty spaces between atoms of your body. The exact amount of energy available is controversial, but it’s immense by any measure. An early paper published by NASA estimated that there’s enough energy in a cubic centimeter of empty vacuum to boil away all of Earth’s oceans.”

The major paused in thought. “So to recap,” he said, “you believe this cube contains neutron star matter and is powered by zero-point energy.”

“That’s right,” said the Uru director.

“Is there anything else about it that you’ve figured out?”

“Not a thing,” replied Salazar miserably. “But again, that’s not from lack of effort.”

“What have you tried?” asked Boyd.

The Uru director sighed. “It’d be faster to tell you what we *haven’t* tried,” he replied with a frown.

## 5

Harry Salazar turned to the cube and shook his head, as if it were a strong-willed, defiant teenager whom he loved and hated at the same time. As if the maddening, magnificent object was being uncooperative out of simple spite, and nothing more.

“I can give you an executive summary right now,” said the Uru director to his guest. “If you want the nitty-gritty details, they’re all in my reports.”

“Fair enough,” said the major.

“We’ve been focused on determining the cube’s composition,” said Salazar. “Or affecting its behavior or output. Both have proven impossible. Whatever it’s made from, it’s resistant to our efforts to find out.

“We tried to take a small sample of it, both of the outer cage and whatever it is that lies inside. There’s a force field we can’t breach keeping the inside from being examined, and the outer cage—which we can at least touch—is as impenetrable as the cube is immovable. We haven’t been able to scrape off a single atom to study. Our most powerful microscopes have failed to show us anything.”

“More than that,” he continued, “we can’t affect the material in any way. We’ve thrown every kind of radiation known to science at it. Laser beams of incomprehensible ferocity. But no energy can affect it, excite it, or drain it.

“We’ve hit it with acid. Tried diamond drills. Even used a scaled-down particle accelerator to hit it with matter traveling at ludicrous speeds. We applied a magnetic field that would pull a paper clip from your pocket at fifty yards. We acquired a microscopic amount of anti-matter, stored in a magnetic field, and unleashed it, with no effect. We tried dousing it with fire, and heating it to tens of thousands of degrees. We tried extreme levels of electricity. We tried freezing it with

liquid nitrogen.” Salazar shook his head in frustration. “But you can pour liquid nitrogen over the thing all day long without lowering its temperature one iota.”

“Your experiments sound pretty . . . comprehensive,” said Boyd.

“Just the tip of the iceberg, Major,” responded the Uru director. “We’ve tried acetone, vinegar, alcohol, along with an exhaustive list of other organic chemicals, simple and complex alike. And we’ve even tried the ridiculous. Absurd long past the point of embarrassment. Like barbeque sauce. I’m not kidding. Who knows what might be this thing’s kryptonite.”

Boyd nodded slowly, deep in thought. “What about dark energy?” he asked. “Have you ever hit it with that?”

“As far as I know,” said Salazar, “dark energy is impossible to generate. At least for human science. And we don’t have sensitive enough sensors to detect it if we did.”

“We have a black site research group dedicated to its study,” said the major. “They think they’ve made a breakthrough when it comes to generating small amounts of it, at least on theoretical grounds. They’re working on better detection methods, so they can determine if they’ve been successful, or if they’re deluding themselves.”

Kelly frowned. “I hate to say it, but my guess is that they *are* deluding themselves. I’m an expert in this field, and it’s almost a certainty.” She paused. “This is your anti-gravity group, correct? And I assume they believe that dark energy is a form of anti-gravity?”

“Don’t you?” asked the major.

“Not really. The universe is flying outward, and we’ve discovered that this expansion is accelerating. Science can’t account for it. Given the mass of the universe, it should be *decelerating*, or even starting to slowly collapse inward. Some mysterious force has to be responsible, one previously unaccounted for. Since no one has seen it, measured it directly, or has any idea what it is, it’s been dubbed *dark energy*.” She rolled her eyes. “Might as well call it ‘we have no fricking clue.’”

“Yeah,” said Boyd with a grin, “but the term *dark energy* does seem to roll off the tongue slightly better.”

“I’m sure they don’t have what they think they do,” said Kelly emphatically. “My reasoning is too technical to share, but trust me on this.”

Boyd shrugged. “Even if you are right, why not give it a try? What have we got to lose? If you’re throwing *barbecue sauce* on the damn thing, why not this?”

“Because barbecue sauce is at least real,” said Kelly. “This isn’t. Trust me. It’s a giant waste of time and effort. And you can get barbecue sauce at the local store. I assume it would take some doing to take a top-secret prototype device out of their labs and bring it here.”

“This is true. But it’ll give me an excuse to get to know the members of this team a little better. So I’m happy to get the device and bring it here myself.”

“Thank you,” said Harry Salazar. “If you’re willing, we’re eager to give it a shot. It can’t fail any harder than anything else has.”

“Another of our groups is finalizing work on a laser a thousand times more powerful than anything that has come before,” said the major. “In a few months, we should try this too.”

“Fantastic,” said the Uru director. “Thanks. We can use all of the help we can get.”

“Yes, thanks,” echoed Kelly Connolly, but her tone was far less enthusiastic.

Boyd turned to face her. “You know,” he said, “since you are such a dark energy expert, and also a skeptic, I’d like for you to join me when I retrieve the device. I can set up a meeting with scientists there and have them give you a tour. Uru is too secret for *them*, but you have security clearance to spare in the opposite direction. I can introduce you as someone I’m considering as a potential outside consultant.” He shrugged. “Your reasoning is too technical for me, but it won’t be for them. Maybe you can convince them of your views.”

“When would you want to do this?”

“How about next Tuesday. Early in the morning. They’re located at a place called Haycock Township, Pennsylvania, so the flight will be fairly long. But scientific cross-pollination is good for all involved. We can meet with them for three or four hours and then fly the device here.”

“I think that’s a great idea,” said Salazar.

Kelly sighed. “Well, if both of you think it’s a worthwhile trip,” she said, not looking at all happy about it, “then how can I refuse?”