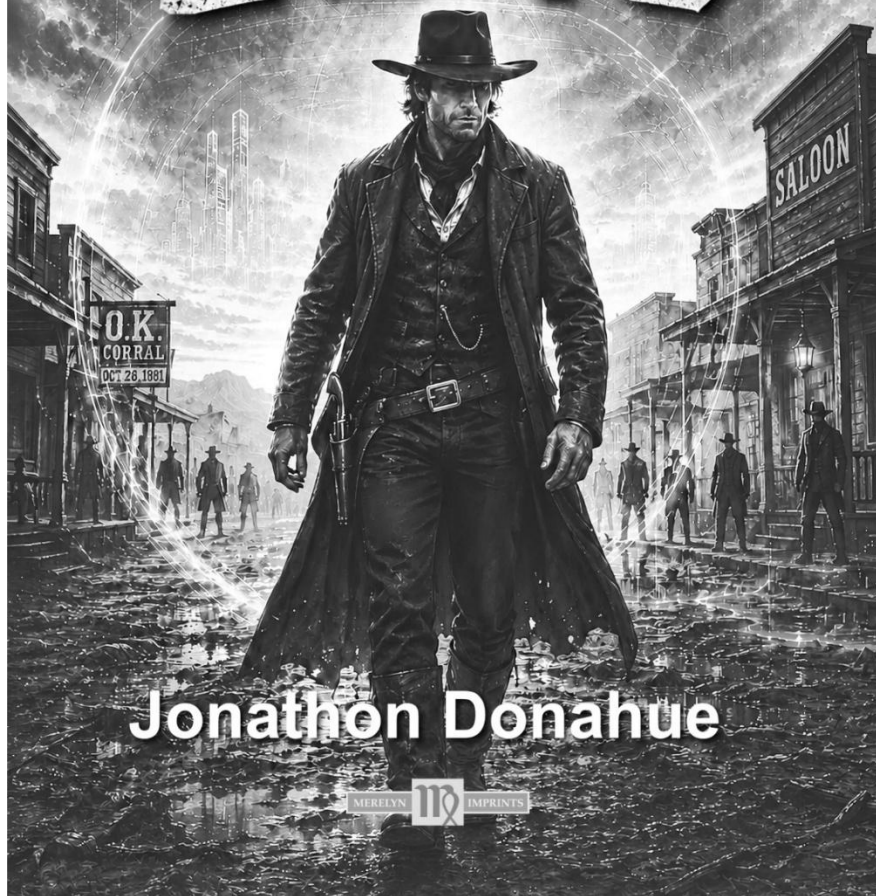


TOMBSTONE 2040



Jonathon Donahue

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“The past does not disappear. It waits.”

In memory of my Mother, Anne Glenna Hill, whose love of books, authors, publishing, and reading inspires and guides my life to this very day. And just for her, this book’s chapter headings use the Folio font, her favorite, and the name of her little bookstore in San Francisco.

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Introduction

Tombstone, Arizona Territory, 1881. A brief 30-second gunfight outside the O.K Corral on Fremont Street. Then 150 years of Hollywood movies, about that gunfight. Which, back in the day, was only a passing irritation to the 6,000 investors, businessmen, gamblers, and working girls in town at that time.

Because Tombstone was a mining camp. A real boom town, for about six years. Richest place between St. Louis and San Francisco. All the money in the world, for a short while. Because of silver, so much silver, right on the south side of town where the land falls off into Tombstone Gulch. And every day, back then, folks talked about how many ounces of silver were coming out of Goodenough, the Toughnut, the Lucky Cuss, the Contention and the Grand Central. These were the high points, like the AI stocks in our stock market today. And there were more than 500 lesser mines in the same nearby hills.

Help me with this. Close your eyes and imagine that you are there, like Major Ashford in this story. In a visceral sharp-cut world. Texture. Smells. City had to hire a whole crew just to sweep up the horse droppings on a few streets downtown. No cars, no electricity. No paper money. No tourists, although there was one, an H.F. Sills, who plays a big part in the drama that follows.

Mining. Six thousand people, all in Tombstone for that lucky strike, that main chance. Young miners making deals with claim owners, to dig a 10' test shaft and if they hit silver paydirt – follow that vein! In the new mining camp, fortunes were made overnight for the first miners and investors. Like prospector Ed Schieffelin, who made the first huge silver discoveries. And his friend Richard Gird, a businessman who brought in the heavy machinery to mine that silver.

Boom town, from 1878 to 1886, and then a later smaller boom in the early 1900s. A mining camp, and I hope my story reflects that world, where men worked 10 hours for three dollars, sledge hammers and drill bits, in near-total darkness.

I live in Tombstone. Older people now, and tourists from all over the world, here to see the true west, the Town Too Tough To Die. But at end of day, with the sun setting on our Allen Street boardwalks, the air can shimmer and suddenly you are back in 1881.

Just like that.

Just like Major Mike Ashford, in the pages ahead.

Red Tide

October 19, 2040. This story starts on a dark night off the southern California coast at Del Mar. 490 miles away from Tombstone, Arizona. 40-year-old Major Mike Ashford, leashed to his Morey Xtreme boogie board, paddles out through the surf. He is 6' tall, about 190 lbs, strong muscular build. Short dark hair, with steel-blue eyes that were calm and dangerous at the same time. Out over the breaking waves with slow strokes, his injured right arm still in a sling. One last surf before an adventure he doesn't see coming. That will take him far, far away, both in space and time.

But then, trouble. Guy next to him in the lineup, yelling "Get out of here, blow-in. You ain't from here. Our break! Get the hell out!"

Ashford just stared. Then he turned and caught the next wave, carving right down on it, now part of it in a way he could never be when standing up on a surfboard. The other guy followed him in, screaming with rage. They both stood next to each other, up their knees in the water.

"Shut up," Ashford said. And then moved closer and hit the guy in the nose with a left cross. Blood in the water. A flood of tears. Hurts a lot when you get punched in the nose. "Get lost, buddy."

Far out to the west, bright Venus rose from the sea. Strands of kelp gently bumped against his legs. Easy to ignore in daylight, but at night most surfers fear sharks. Except this night. A Red Tide, millions of bioluminescent particles glowing a vivid phosphorescent green. Like catching liquid light. Out past the warm October wave line, he laughed with joy, splashing the surging sea. Lying prone right on the crest, as he caught another sparkling green breaker ripping in toward the beach. A perfect wave, on a perfect night. And then another, and another. Bright electric green waves, Ashford slicing right down on a big one, into its shimmering tube for a few precious moments.

Finally, he came ashore in one last vivid green burst of frothy bioluminescent surf. The beefy loudmouth was long gone. Found his towel, shook the water off in a shower of bright small sparkles. Strange, he thought. Most of the time, the ocean is -- well, the ocean. But then we get a Red Tide. Maybe the quantum guys are right... past, present, and future are all somehow coexisting, but now and then a future event pops up, like this Red Tide. Beyond him, anyway.

He was on dry land off the beach by midnight, with a sliver of a new moon now over the little town. A short walk back to the timeshare he was renting near the Seagrove city park. One last look over the bluffs at the brilliant Red Tide sea, and then to bed.

Except his phone rang at 4:00 AM that morning.

"Major Ashford? Sergeant Ramos here, Army DACM. We'll need you to be at Miramar by 6:00 AM, sir. Plane to catch, urgent."

"What's this about, Sergeant?"

"Don't know, sir. They just told me to get you there."

Up. Coffee. Dressed. Out the door, still sleepy. His Chinese electric rent-a-car fully charged, and then off through the quiet streets. Del Mar and the other coastal towns were still intact up to the tops of the first hills in from the sea. Beyond that, crippling poverty and devastation caused by the Great Interrupt. Only a few months ago, in February. High altitude EMP pulse, shorting out electronics across the nation. Aircraft, cars, water, power. Communications.

Fried chips. 'Like the remains of the Red Tide on the beach in daylight,' he thought, the sand all a crusty reddish-brown. So many people out of work, no money for rent, living in their vehicles. Over the top of the hill, he drove silently past the tents, dead cars, and broken RVs to the crumbling 805 freeway, and then got off at Miramar Road and turned into the Marine airbase.

"Major Ashford?" asked a young Lieutenant. "Plane's over here. We're off to Tucson," It was an old F-35D two-seat trainer. 'At least all our military equipment had shielded electronics,' Ash thought. 'Surge suppressors, Faraday shields, and redundant systems. And all the

solar arrays at our Western bases, so we never lost power.' He strapped in, being careful not to touch the primary ejection lever between his legs at the front of the seat. Engine on, canopy down, green light from the control tower, and they rocketed on afterburner down the runway, past the Bell V-180 Valor vertical-lift aircraft squadron. Wheels up over the freeways, then up higher over Torrey Pines State Park, turning over the sea to come back inland on an easterly course.

"Arizona," thought Ashford. "Wonder what that's about..." and he fell asleep to the roar of the jet engine and the hiss of the cabin pressurization system.

Fort Huachuca

A brief stop at what was left of old Davis-Montham AFB in Tucson. Pressed back against the rear ejection seat, Ashford hung on again as the pilot kept the F-35D trainer on full afterburner. Still fast, rocketing down the few minutes flight from Tucson to Fort Huachuca, 100 miles southeast in Cochise County. Oxygen hissing in the worn facemask, which smelled slightly of fear and sweat from many others over the years.

Touchdown. At least the tires didn't blow, Ashford thought. There still were some left in unlooted spares lockers across the country. Touchdown, plane now turning slowly off the long 12,000' runway, an emergency landing strip for the huge Space Shuttles 50 years before. On the ground, following the blinking blue lights onto an apron in front of the main drone hanger. Built for Reapers, Predators, and Gray Eagles, back when. Mostly empty now, save for the few small Terminators that were left after the war with Iran. Ashford unplugged. Pulled off the mask, handed his helmet to an airman. Then down a rusty ladder to the chipped and cracked hangar floor. Up above in the rafters, a flurry of bats exploded out into the clear morning sky.

"Major Ashford." The welcoming committee. No one he knew, but then, he'd never been to Arizona before. Fort Huachuca in Sierra Vista, home of the long-gone 9th and 10th Cavalry, the black Buffalo Soldiers who fought the Apaches for 25 years in the nearby Dragoons and Chiracahuas, 14 Medals of Honor, ghosts of the past.

Army. Two men and a woman. A Major, a CSM Command Sergeant Major, and, to Ashford's surprise, a Brigadier General. Who was looking him over dubiously. Ashford was 40, 6' tall, in-shape slender, short brown hair starting to turn silver. Didn't think he looked too bad, but there it was.

"Mercer." the General said. "Debra Mercer, one star. This is Major Valle, and Command Sergeant Major Hancock. So you're the best they've got," she said in a flat voice. "I don't know if this is going to work."

"I clean up pretty good, ma'am," Ashford replied. Give me a few seconds to get my arm out of this sling, and I'll salute you too." He smiled. Wouldn't help to get off on the wrong foot here.

"Iran, this summer?" She asked. "The clusterfuck?"

"It was that," he sighed. "Almost made it. But then we hit Isfahan. Fought into downtown, into the Grand Bazaar. Chased the mullahs into the Great Mosque. The Masjid-e Jameh. Beautiful building, beautiful blue tile, a thousand years old. Open central courtyard, then hundreds of brick

pillars holding up that vaulted domed ceiling. Anyway, it didn't end well. Revolutionary Guard fought to the end, popping out from behind those pillars. And then they blew up the dome."

"Well, you got back. And now we've got this to deal with..."

"They didn't brief me," Ashford said. "They were in a big hurry."

"Later for that," she said impatiently. "Right now, we've got to get you up Star Hill."

Star Hill

In the stained back seat of an old electric Gladiator XMT New Jeep, Ashford held on as they slowly climbed the steep dirt road up Star Hill. High desert, he thought. Mesquite trees, tall dry grass. The four axle-mounted motors whined as the grade steepened. The New Jeep bounced from side to side, as the CSM struggled to keep it out of deep ruts. The General sat in the front passenger seat. Behind her, Ashford watched as the warm wind blew her blonde hair out from under her starched Battle Dress Uniform cap. A pretty lady, Ashford thought. She looked a little like his late wife, a nurse, one of the Interrupt casualties in February. That pain had mostly faded over the last year. But still, no lasting new relationship. Maybe the General -- but no, she could never go out with a lowly Major. Even after the Interrupt, the Army was still the Army.

But maybe she could read his mind. "This is going to be informal," she said. "From here on out, I'm Debra. Not Deborah or Debbie. Debra."

"Sure, Gener — sorry, Debra." He paused. "Call me Ash," he said. My friends call me Ash."

"We're going in now, Ash," she replied. "Hang on tight." They swerved around a large boulder, then bounced across an old streambed, then down a faint dirt track into a tight box canyon. Ashford watched as the rocky canyon walls narrowed in the morning sun. But then a camouflaged door opened and they came to a stop in what looked like an extremely expensive rich person's garage. Only the Ferrari Elettrica Monzas were missing, Ashford thought.

"Tip of the spear," said the General. "After it hit the fan, we moved the whole Netcom quantum computer array up the hill here, from down in the Fort. Safe up here, no refugees, no goddamn Chinese, no Russians. Have our own power supply, brought in several small gas-cooled nuclear reactors. We run what's left of the Army right here from Star Hill. And another very special project, too. Which is why you're here."

They passed through blast-proof double doors leading out of the garage into a long hallway descending into the hill at a slight angle. Rooms on either side, rack after rack of computer servers with winking, glowing indicator lights. Lots of data streaming through here, Ashford thought. Massively redundant arrays, Internet 5.0 super high-speed transistent-optic data trunks. All the latest stuff, looked like.

Past the computer rooms, two Army sentries outside another door. Sentries with new M8 HyperFire .12-cal sidearms, stepping aside as the General and her party

entered a large and well-equipped conference room. Tasteful cream-colored walls, a gleaming polished dark walnut long table, soft black leather tall-backed seats on both sides, and a standard silver government AI-VFX projector at the far end. Strong hot coffee and fresh glazed donuts. Like old times, Ashford thought, remembering. He sat back and sipped his coffee as the presentation began.

Ruthenium

“Okay, Major Valle,” said the General. “Bring him up to speed.” The Major, a short dark-haired man with a large briefcase, pulled out a silver hand-held controller and pressed a red button. At the end of the table, the AI-VFX projector threw a large virtual screen into midair. Like a three-dimensional PowerPoint, Ashford thought.

“Project Tombstone,” the title read in large block letters. “Ruthenium Acquisition.” Beneath a gold and black Army logo, at least half a dozen top security notifications. TS/SCI Top Secret, Ultra, DCIA, SecArm, SecDef, Potus.

Project Tombstone. The projector whirled and the presentation began.

He was watching a VFX chemistry show. AI video. Moving molecular chains, co-valent bonds forming, separating.

“What we have here,” said Major Valle, “Is a representation of Ruthenium – a transition metal of the platinum group. Ru. Atomic number 44. Karl Ernst Claus, a Russian scientist of Baltic-German ancestry, discovered the element in 1844 at Kazan State University and named it in honor of Russia, using the Latin name Ruthenia. One

of the rarest elements in the Earth's crust, only 130 pounds produced worldwide last year. Used to be 35 tons a year, but we used it all up by 2030, making chips. Gold's worth \$7,800 an ounce, right? Well, an ounce of ruthenium is 100 times that. Rare, and incredibly valuable!"

"Only a month ago," he continued, "We found a small ruthenium rock sample in an old exhibit case, deep in the basement of what's left of the Old Courthouse in Tombstone, a few miles east of here."

The AI-VFX projection shimmered in mid-air, changing to an image of a very small silvery-gray metallic-looking rock. Twisted shape, sharp edges.

"But here's the deal. For years, most ruthenium produced was used in wear-resistant electrical contacts and thick-film resistors. But then, around 2030, we had a new use for ruthenium. As the capping layer for extreme ultraviolet photomasks in semiconductor lithography. You can't make the new sub-10-nanometer AI chips without it. And we have to be able to make those chips. To stay up with the Chinese over in Shenzhen."

Ashford was struggling not to fall asleep. "What's this got to do with me?" he asked. "I don't know a damn thing about geology or computer chips."

Major Valle ignored him and continued. "But now, we've discovered something much, much more important."

"Incredibly important," said the General. "Get this, Ashford. Two months ago, one of our AI netbots doing a routine sweep of old patents came up was something – interesting. A 1937 patent by a fellow named Thomas H. Donahue, up north in Morenci, Arizona. US patent 2,096,846, a process for treating molybdenum concentrates. Look at this."

The AI-VFX projector chirped and an old patent diagram appeared in midair. A typical process chart, where something that occurs in one box leads to something else occurring in another, with branches here and there indicating alternative outcomes.

"Look at the third big box down," said Major Valle. "It's called Purify, with the process reaction formula underneath that title. Toward the end of the formula, if you change +3 Na to +3 Ru, now you are adding ruthenium instead of sodium. And what happens? You initiate a spontaneous reaction that produces three times the amount of energy as nuclear, without any radioactivity."

That woke Ashford up. "Really?" he exclaimed. "That's a big deal. Huge! Who figured that out?"

"The bot," said the General, turning to look at him. "The bot. Deep Blue 7. Sweeping through all those old patents, then using AI to swap elements in and out of those old formulas. To see what happens. We're desperate, Ash! You know the score. Out of oil. Coal and natural gas

infrastructure shut down since the Interrupt. But now we found this. Straightforward oldstyle molybdenum processing with a new ruthenium substitution."

"Unlimited energy. That's the Holy Grail, Debra," said Ashford. "But..."

"But we don't have any ruthenium," she replied. "Nowhere near what's needed to make the new chips. And nowhere near enough to generate the energy to get our downed AI data centers back online."

"Ruthenium! Instant power to restart our electrical grid." She went on. "But the Canadian mine at Sudbury tapped out, just like the Bushveld in South Africa, and our Stillwater mine in Montana. Which leaves Norilsk in Siberia, and the Russians are hardly in sharing mode these days. And thank God they haven't discovered this molybdenum swapout. It's the only national secret we have left that's worth a damn."

Ashford stared at the shimmering virtual screen. Sounded simple, but there had to be a catch somewhere. "So you want me to go find it," he said. "But you've obviously tried already. Tombstone's only 25 miles from here."

"I like Tombstone," he continued. "Went there a few times, before the Interrupt. Something about the place—the history, the land, the perfect weather. Thought about retiring there someday."

Major Valle sipped a glass of water. He pushed a button on the controller and the virtual screen displayed a vivid image, a huge gash in the earth, less than a mile southeast of Tombstone.

"Ash, it's in bad shape these days. Gangs. Crime. Anyway, this was their last mining effort," he said defeatedly. "Started in the last century, back to 1799. With the Escapule family, in these parts since the 1860's. Miners, and, later on, cattle ranchers. After the silver boom hit, prospector Ed Schieffelin gave what became the State of Maine mine to the Escapules, who had brought in the timber for the Scheffelin and Gird mines. They took \$3 million in silver and gold out of that one mine alone, by 1900. Later on, Dustin Escapule, call him Dusty, started up the Tombstone Exploration Company in 1799. He had 265 employees, took out \$64 million in silver and gold. Invented a new way to process old tailings, too. Closed it down in 1987, and he went on to serve 10 terms as Mayor."

Sipping a glass of water, Valle continued. "So we sent in a team, worked those old tailings over and over, and found absolutely nothing. Nothing! We know that the ruthenium's there, because we think a miner named Parsons found it back in 1881. And we have the sample that he left in the Old Courthouse. But we don't know where it is. And we have to find it — fast."

True that, Ashford thought. Energy grid on its last legs, factory production at a standstill, barely enough gasoline

and diesel fuel left to get in one last harvest this fall. But how could they — how could he — and the General broke in as if she were reading his thoughts.

“Ash, we don’t know where Parsons found it,” she said. “But we know when. His diary. Saturday, October 22nd, 1881. Noting a small strange silver rock that glowed in the dark. The miners only had candles back then, no electricity, no carbide lamps. Had to be ruthenium, our geologists agree. But he didn’t say where he found it.”

“So we’re sending you over to Tombstone to have a talk with him,” she laughed. “Piece of cake, Ash. Not Iran, this one’s easy.”

“But you can’t,” he said, confused. “That’s impossible.”

“Quantum physics,” she said. “Trust me.”

Quantum Sphere

"Major Ashford. Ash," said the General, "This all started back in 2025. A local named Bob Ramirez worked on the Fort for 30 years. Army, then as a military contractor. After he retired, he took up archaeological prospecting. And he discovered a dormant microscopic wormhole under Star Hill."

"What's a wormhole?" asked Ash.

"It's a tunnel through spacetime that can connect two different times — allowing near-instant travel between them. It was created naturally during the Big Bang. In 2039, a year ago, our physicists enlarged it just enough to send one person through. A younger guy, Lieutenant Alexander Kitchin. Alex."

"What happened?"

"He got through just fine." She hesitated. "But he didn't come back. Decided to stay there, I guess. Can't blame him, the way things are now."

"Was he looking for the ruthenium?" asked Ashford.

"Yes. But he didn't know about the little ruthenium rock in the Old Courthouse. He went back before our team found it. And back before we stumbled onto Parson's journal, which actually wasn't published until much later. Anyway, he's dropped out."

"So now it's my turn," Ashford said. "Do you want me to find Lt. Kitchin?"

"Sure, if you can. Anyway, we will land you in the center of the city parking lot next to the old Visitor Center building. Used to be the Dexter Corral, back in the day."

"Why there?"

"We don't know. Maybe an anomaly -- something that happened there in the past."

"Debra," said Ash, "Hold on a minute. Aren't you are sending me back right on top of the O.K. Corral gunfight?"

"Only three days before," replied the General. "And we are bringing you back on the same day as the shootout, that night. No choice, it's the way the tech works. That's your quantum window. Enough talk. Time to show you the Black Sphere. Actually, we call it the Transmitter. Even has its own Army part number."

The quantum time machine sat three stories underground beneath the Arizona high desert, inside a circular

chamber lined with superconducting rings the size of railroad tunnels. Army engineers called it a Kerr Bridge, because its design was based on a possibility hidden inside Einstein's equations: rotating masses might twist spacetime itself. Not metaphorically. Literally.

"But will it twist me, too?" asked Ashford.

"Shut up and pay attention, Ash."

At the center of the chamber floated a black sphere two meters across, perfectly matte, colder than interstellar space. It was not a true black hole, but it behaved like a tiny imitation. Inside the sphere, ultra-dense degenerate matter spun at nearly the speed of light, held together by magnetic confinement fields powerful enough to erase a pacemaker from fifty miles away.

"Degenerate matter!" laughed Ashford. "Seriously, Debra?"

"Shhhh."

The spinning mass created something physicists called frame dragging. Normally, Earth drags spacetime around itself by an immeasurably tiny amount. The Kerr Bridge amplified the effect billions of times. The result was a localized distortion in causality. Not a glowing portal. No swirling blue vortex. The air around the sphere shimmered like heat above asphalt. Laser beams passing near it bent slightly out of alignment. Atomic clocks on

opposite sides of the room drifted apart by microseconds... then milliseconds... then entire seconds. Minutes. Hours. Days.

Transmitter! The quantum time machine consumed absurd amounts of power. Three dedicated General Atomics nuclear 44 MW gas-cooled Fast Modular Reactors fed the super-conducting field coils. During activation, the facility drew more electricity than a medium-sized city.

"We shorted out nearby Sierra Vista for 10 hours," laughed the General. "And Ash, we only have enough power to keep you there three days. In Monday night, back Wednesday night. All we can do right now." It was cold in the room. Liquid helium rivers circulated through pipes thick as sewer mains to keep the magnets near absolute zero.

And even then, the quantum window was tiny. The machine could not send armies into the past. It could barely send two human adults enclosed inside a carefully engineered "chronometric shell." The traveler rode in a capsule suspended within concentric rings of exotic metamaterials designed to shield the body from tidal stresses and lethal radiation. Without the shell, a person's nervous system would decohere.

"Decohere," said Ash, struggling to keep up with the tech talk. "Decohere?"

"Just listen up, Ash."

Decoherence was the terrifying part. The equations suggested that time was not a river but a landscape. Human brains evolved to move forward through it at one second per second. The Kerr Bridge forced the brain onto a different path through spacetime geometry.

During early animal experiments, rats returned alive but neurologically scrambled, as if memories had been partially rewritten.

"But it's much better now," said Debra. "Stable. Lots of upgrades. Safe."

"Why me, Debra?" queried Ashford.

"DACM ran the profiles," she replied. "You were the best fit. Physically, mentally, emotionally. Adventurous. With the 'luck' intangible. You navigated the Interrupt as well as anyone. Survived the war in Iran. Still on active duty, good record. Should have been a Colonel by now, but only small-group management experience."

"That's me," he smiled. "Always wanted to be in the action itself, not commanding it."

"Then come on," she said. "Back to school for you. Lots to learn about that 1881 world. And never enough time to get you ready!"

Past Camp

At the bottom of Star Hill near the old parade ground, a cluster of new buildings. The Army's Temporal Field Adaptation Center. "We call it the Past Camp," the General said. "It's a combined military academy, anthropology department, survival school, and psychological conditioning center. Major Valle will run your training. He's my staff S-3, for operations and training. Teach you how to survive in 1881 – and how to disappear into it so completely that nobody knows you are from the future. But before you start, I need you to listen to CSM Hancock for a few minutes."

"Call me Charles," said the CSM. "This is unofficial. We still have those anti-DEI folks running what's left of our government. I'm Black, so I can really speak to this. Racism. Got any opinions about that, Major?"

"Ash. Call me Ash. Racism is stupid. Waste of our time, while the Chinese are buying out our country."

"Ditto that. But very soon, Ash, you are going to be dropped into a highly racist world. Where almost all Whites believe they are genetically superior to anyone else. Appointed by God to bring the savages to Christianity. Back then, most Blacks believed that yes, they are inferior. But maybe someday they'll be sort of equal. Your 1881 Tombstone is less than 20 years from the

Civil War. Half the men there fought in it. And Arizona Territory has more Southerners than Northerners, folks that just came straight west from the slave states. Now, we're making you a Canadian to help with this. But please, just for these few days, be a racist!"

"You serious, Charles?" laughed Ashford. "Christ, you're a CSM! General's aide, top enlisted man in the Army. Hell, I don't even know where to start with that racist crap."

"Just do it," said Hancock. "I don't like this anymore than you do. But we have to get that ruthenium. So you have to fit in, be accepted, to have any chance at all. OK with that?"

"It's also an order," said the General. "Major Ashford, that's the mission. For three days, back there until the night of the gunfight, you're a total bigot. Enough said."

The Past Camp facility contained an entire reconstructed 1881 frontier town built at full scale. Built from past plans of old Tombstone. Dirt streets. Outhouses. Kerosene lamps. Real horses. No electricity. The idea was total immersion. The hardest part was to act normal.

A modern person would stand out instantly in 1881. Attitudes and beliefs. Posture. Eye contact. Vocabulary. Hygiene habits. Even walking style would seem strange. People from the 21st century unconsciously expect electric lighting, instant information, and personal space.

So Ashford had to memorize strict conversational limits. No modern scientific concepts. No future political knowledge.

"Major," asked the Major, "Remember that in their world, President Garfield had died in September, just a month before you'll arrive. He had lingered since July, when he was shot. For months, his condition was the most important daily news. So you'll probably still see lots of black bunting on the buildings. "And," he went on, "No mentioning world wars. No advanced engineering ideas. And no suspicious predictions. Because a single careless sentence might alter history. Most of all, we fear future contamination. Where even a small thing might change the future. Where you couldn't return. Or find that this world... now... might be very different when you do return."

So much to learn, and Ashford only had a few days. Hell, he thought, at least I can ride. But I have to learn how to saddle and care for horses. How to handwrite with dip ink pens. How to play period gambling games, like Faro. How to talk, using 1880s profanity and slang. And most of all, he realized, how to how to avoid attracting attention.

Easiest was firearms training. He practiced with an old 1873 Colt Single Action .45 long revolver. Found that repeatedly hitting a man-size target at only 50 feet was difficult. The powerful gun had a real kick, that took its

barrel off the target after each shot. And you had to recock the hammer between shots.

He learned to dress in 1881 clothing. Wool, cotton, no polyester. Practiced his 'legend', his background cover story, which would excuse his accent and lack of familiarity with western customs.

"Your name is Henry Sills. Hank. You'll be a railroad surveyor, scouting new routes. The real Sills said he was an engineer, but we don't have time to teach you how to drive a steam train, and someone who does might question you. At the trial, you'll be back on script, repeating the testimony we know that you - or the real Sills - gave that day. You're from Calinlie, small town next to Ottawa," Major Valle continued. "Capital of Canada. Your people are part French, part English. When younger, you totally missed the US Civil War, no dog in that fight. Now let's box for a few minutes."

"Was Sills a real person?"

"Yes. And no. He shows up in our record of the Earp murder trial. But the last message we got back from Lt. Kitchin... he said that Sills didn't exist. Spacetime anomaly."

"So part of my job..."

"Is to make sure Sills was there. So that our history of that time stays the same. Which means that our 2040 time stays the same."

They squared off on a grassy lawn. "You have to stand still," Valle said. "No dancing around. Very little footwork. Just stand there, and punch. Same jabs, crosses, and overhands. You take your best shot, then the other guy. No hitting below the waist. No kicking. No wrestling. Very different from our cage fights. Watch a few videos of Bob Fitzsimmons around 1890, you'll get the idea."

They took a break after three rounds, faces bruised from the punches that got through the poor defenses of that 1880s world. "You want to make friends in Tombstone," said Major Valle, "Just show up at Third and Allen on any Saturday morning. Outside the San Francisco Hotel. Men go there to box each other. Mostly for fun, but also seriously in grudge fights. No time limits, no gloves, no headgear. You? Just for fun. Lose a few, and you'll be one of the guys."

"Pain!" laughed Ashford. He was curious. "Where are you from, Major?"

"Call me Dan. Born in Bisbee, down the road from Tombstone. Grew up in Douglas, by *la linea*... the border with México. Went in the Army at 18, basic enlisted grunt. Started with armor, but the tanks went away fast after the drones came in. So I went to drone school here at the Fort.

Started with the old FPV First Person View devices, and then trained with the AI Autonomous models that we still use."

"Were you overseas?"

"Yes. Europe, an observer during the Ukraine truce. And then the Middle East."

"Iran? Earlier this year?"

"Yes. Missed the earlier one, back in '33." replied the Major, looking far away out over the San Pedro River valley, remembering a very different place and time. "Yes," he said slowly. "Back in May. When we invaded them after the Interrupt. Where we tried to take the road in from Iraq to Kermanshah, up highway AH2 to Hamadan and then to Tehran. Same as the British did in 1941, when they threw out Reza Shah."

"Easy for them, then," said Ashford.

"But not for us. Didn't work out. All those drones. FPV and AI. Every single local shooting at us from every hillside. The old IRGC vets, training the kids how to shoot those new AK-97s. Short-range missiles fired at us from every cave in that rugged terrain. They finally stopped us past Hamadan, at Saveh. You know the story, you were there, right?"

"Yes," said Ashford. "In July. In the part of our attack that peeled off from you guys and went east to Isfahan."

"That didn't work out either."

"Nope."

"But we had to go after them."

"No question, after they did Denver," Ashford replied. "But..."

"But we can't win a land war anymore," said Major Valle. "All those drones. All those cheap autonomous-AI handheld missiles." He paused. "Glad we pulled out, saved what was left of our combat teams. Hurt your arm there?"

"Yeah," Ashford laughed. "Bailing out of a New Bradley. An Enteqam-12 drone popped up out of nowhere. But the arm's back to good. Doctors said I can ditch the sling tomorrow. How about you? No damage?"

"I was lucky," said Valle. "Somehow."

"And you're a Major now?" asked Ashford.

"Battlefield promotion. Sergeant to Lieutenant, in the fight outside Kermanshah. After the war, the Army kept me. Up now to Major, don't know why."

"It's your training skills, Dan. We lost what, 18,000 guys over there... and now you have so many new kids to get up to speed."

"Plus you!" joked Major Valle. "Let's call it a day, and tomorrow we'll finish the cultural stuff and show you how to use the Transmitter."

"And I leave tomorrow night?"

"Yep. Scared?"

"God, yes," Ashford laughed. "But hey, *que sera, sera*."

Later, back at Star Hill, he ran into the General in the ready room.

"Ready for tomorrow?" she smiled.

"We lead the way!" Ashford replied.

"Haven't heard that in a while. Ranger?"

"For two years, a long time ago."

"In Iran?" she asked.

"No, just Cuba. That went well. People were truly desperate, glad to see us drop in. Had the hospital ships, had hundreds of landing craft full of food coming ashore at Veradero beach in Matanzas. Little bit of combat, but not much. One short firefight in the sugar cane fields

outside Cienfuegos. Ate a lot of smoke when the Fidelistas set them on fire. But no big deal. And the old cars, still on the road! I found a perfect 1953 Chevrolet 210 coupe, shipped it to the priest in today's Tombstone, Father Stein. Go figure, it's his dream car, or was his grandfather's."

She looked away. "So. Tonight's your last night here. Want to go out to dinner? At the old Texas Road House?"

"We could do that," Ashford replied. "Meet you here in an hour, and we'll go in that New Jeep."

Dinner

General Debra Mercer kept her back straight even in civilian clothes.

Ashford noticed that immediately.

Most people relaxed in restaurants. They leaned into booths, loosened shoulders, softened around the eyes. Debra never entirely did. Even now, seated across from him in the dim light of the hotel dining room, she carried herself like someone who expected artillery reports between courses.

Outside the tall windows, a rare rain slid down the glass in silver streaks. Sierra Vista traffic glowed red and white beyond the storm.

Neither of them had touched the wine. Ashford suspected they both wanted clear heads around each other.

"You're staring again," Debra said quietly.

"I'm studying."

"That sounds more dangerous."

"It probably is."

The corner of her mouth moved slightly — almost a smile. For a moment she looked younger than the photographs shown on news broadcasts and military briefings. Younger than the woman who had commanded evacuation corridors in two wars and buried too many soldiers afterward.

Then the expression vanished.

The waiter arrived with dinner, grateful for the interruption neither of them requested. Steak for Ash. Salmon for Debra. The silverware clicked softly as plates were set down.

When the waiter left, silence settled over the table again. Not awkward silence. Careful silence. Ashford understood battlefields better than this.

Finally Debra took a sip of water and asked, “How bad was it?”

He looked up slowly. “Iran?”

“No.” Her eyes stayed on him. “The thing you never talk about.”

Rain whispered against the windows. Ashford could still see Yelena’s face sometimes when he woke at night. He could still hear the sound of her helicopter spinning, breaking apart over black water only a few months ago. People thought grief faded. What actually happened was

worse: it hardened into architecture inside you. Rooms you carried forever.

"She died because I wasn't here," he said. "The Interrupt. Army had me on TDY, over in Germany, training folks on the Iron Hounds, the new autonomous AI vehicles. So I wasn't here."

Debra said nothing.

"That's the official version in my head, anyway."

"And the real version?"

Ashford gave a faint humorless smile. "I'm still negotiating with it."

She studied him for several seconds. Military intelligence eyes, she thought. The kind trained to detect weakness, lies, intent. But tonight there was something gentler underneath them. Recognition, perhaps.

"Mike," she said softly, using his first name for the first time that evening, "everyone who survives long enough builds a cemetery inside themselves."

The words landed harder than he expected. Because she meant them.

"Call me Ash," he said. "Everybody does."

Ashford looked at her hands resting near the candlelight. Steady hands. Strong hands. But he noticed the faint white scar near her wrist and the exhaustion hidden beneath the discipline.

"What about you?" he asked.

Debra looked down at the untouched wineglass.

"My husband was Air Force," she said after a long pause. "Test pilot, on the F-53s."

Ashford waited.

"He died in Nevada during the Interrupt systems failure." Her voice remained calm, almost clinically calm. "The aircraft hit the ground at Mach two point three."

Rain rolled heavily across the windows now.

"I'm sorry."

"So was I." She gave a small shrug. "But I'm getting by. We weren't all that close."

For the first time all evening the tension shifted slightly. Not gone. But changed. Like ice beginning to crack on a dark river.

Debra finally picked up the wineglass but only turned it slowly by the stem.

"You know the problem with people like us?" she asked.

"We think there's a 'people like us.'"

Another almost-smile.

"No," she said. "The problem is that after enough loss, affection starts feeling irresponsible."

Ashford looked at her for a long moment.

That was it exactly. Not fear of rejection. Fear of survival. Because once you knew what it cost to lose someone, every new attachment came with an invisible casualty report already attached.

"And then there's Tombstone," she said slowly. Sadly. "I grew up there. Went to Tombstone High, graduated in 2018. Great JROTC program, went from there to ROTC at ASU, then Army. No West Point, but being a Mustang never hurt."

"Do you miss it?" Ash asked.

"What, Tombstone? Yes. I'd like to live there again someday. It's my city, my real home. But it's gone to hell. Gangs running the place now. No more tourists. Broke, busted."

Outside, thunder rolled across the small city..

Inside the restaurant, candlelight flickered softly between them.

Neither reached across the table. Neither looked away.

Transmitter

Monday, October 24th. A relaxed day. Ashford slept in. Had a long lunch with Major Valle. Memorizing last tips on surviving in the distant past. Still tired from the day before, he took a short nap, then watched AI videos of the old West. Close enough, he thought.

Evening. He dressed in the carefully-made 1880s clothing that the Army provided. Made sure there was nothing, absolutely nothing, in his pockets or shoulder bag that could give him away. Then the car came and drove him to the Transmitter.

General Mercer was there.

"Ready?" she asked. Then frowned.

"What is it, Debra?"

"Oh, I don't know. Well, yes I do." She looked directly at him. Clear blue eyes, as vivid as Bisbee turquoise. "You stay safe," she said softly. "I want another dinner date."

And then it was time.

Major Valle opened the Transmitter canopy.

"Just get in here, Ash. Put on that racing car seat belt, over both shoulders. Latch in the center. Just slap it if you have to get out fast. Nothing else to do. No controls."

Ashford got in. The black padded seat was actually comfortable, and he stretched out as Valle closed the shatterproof lexan canopy.

The quantum machine weighed eighty tons. Ashford was surrounded by tanks of artificial neutrino fluid rich in oxygen nanobubbles. Their Kerr Field effect suppressed the formation of new short-term memories during transit because researchers feared paradoxical feedback loops between memory and causality. The capsule's onboard AI constantly compared the traveler's quantum state against an entangled reference archive stored outside the field. Even then, nobody knew if the person who emerged was truly the same individual.

9 PM. "Send him!" ordered the General.

"Done," replied Major Valle, as he closed the Transmitter actuator switch.

The actual jump lasted less than two minutes. The machine did not move.

No roar of engines. No flash of blue light like in the movies. Just the low electrical hum of superconductors

and the metallic taste of ozone in the back of his throat. Ashford's hands clenched the padded arms of the chair as the countdown reached zero.

Then the world outside the quartz observation bubble... bent.

Not visually at first. Physically. Like reality itself had become soft wax.

Observers outside saw the chamber darken as photons bent inward. Frost spread across the floor from cryogenic overflow. The rotating sphere vanished into optical invisibility, not because it disappeared, but because light itself could no longer escape along normal paths.

Inside the capsule, Ashford experienced something impossible.

The stars outside the viewing ports accelerated.

The moon flickered through phases in seconds. Sunrises stacked atop one another like strobe flashes. Then the acceleration reversed. History itself seemed to inhale backward. Clouds flowed in reverse spirals. Satellite constellations unbuilt themselves.

Not because the universe was rewinding, but because the capsule had exited normal chronological alignment. The machine did not "move through time" the way movies imagined. Instead, it created a temporary tunnel between

two regions of spacetime already connected at the quantum level — a macroscopic exploitation of entanglement and gravitational curvature. The farther back the jump, the more unstable the tunnel became.

The fluorescent lights in the lab stretched into pale white ribbons. Sound elongated into a deep animal groan. Ashford's stomach lurched sideways as gravity forgot which direction mattered. He tried to breathe and realized that he couldn't tell if a second or an hour had passed. As the neutron flux ran way past its normal limits, he blacked out, a voyager lost in space and time.

Arrival

The Transmitter arrived without spectacle.

No thunderbolt split the Arizona sky. No swirling tunnel opened across the desert. One instant the ground behind Tombstone was empty beneath the night stars of October 1881 — the next, a black metallic shape crouched on the dirt like some impossible iron insect.

For several seconds nothing moved. Then the canopy slowly opened.

Major Ashford climbed out carefully, easing his heavy carpet bag to the ground. He wore dusty leather boots, period-correct wool and cotton clothing, and an expression somewhere between awe and terror. Cold desert wind struck his face as he stepped onto the earth of Arizona Territory. October 24th, 1881.

He was alone in the dirt center of the Dexter Corral. Horses and mules stirred restlessly in the stalls along the corral walls. Outside, Allen Street glowed under warm lantern light, alive with Monday night noise. Piano music drifted faintly through the darkness. Laughter burst from saloons. A few wagons rolled along the street.

Somewhere a woman shouted angrily while drunken men roared with amusement.

Ashford simply stood there, unable to breathe for a moment.

He had spent hours studying photographs of the town. Read court records. Newspaper archives. Maps. Every surviving detail about October 1881. Yet none of it prepared him for the reality of seeing it alive.

No automobiles. No electric lights. No telephone poles. Only lanterns flickering against wooden storefronts beneath the enormous starry desert sky.

The smell reached him next — wood smoke, horses, whiskey, dust, and sewage baking beneath the lingering warmth of the day. It was harsh and filthy and overwhelmingly real.

He looked back once at the machine. Its dark hull reflected moonlight faintly, utterly alien against the frontier landscape. Tiny cooling vents clicked softly as internal systems ran quantum analysis checks. In another century it would represent technology beyond imagination. Here in 1881, it looked like something fallen from another planet. Which, in a sense, it had.

The next time Ashford looked back, it was gone. Monday night, and only two days until Wednesday and his scheduled return. Ash instinctively reached for his Apple

communicator, but it course it wasn't there. Temporal transit would have destroyed it, exactly as the theorists predicted. Time itself was hostile to delicate electronics.

Tombstone. And in just a few days on Wednesday, history would explode into violence near the O.K. Corral. Inside the town tonight were men whose names would survive for centuries: Wyatt Earp sitting somewhere beneath lantern light with cold watchful eyes; Doc Holliday coughing smoke into whiskey glasses; Marshal Virgil Earp trying to keep order in a town already sliding toward bloodshed. And somewhere in the darkness, the Cowboys were drinking too. And out there tonight, George Parsons, whom he would find tomorrow. Ruthenium.

Ashford suddenly felt very small. History books made the past feel finished and inevitable. But standing here, it felt fragile. Uncertain. Dangerous. Every voice drifting through the night belonged to a living person unaware they were trapped inside legend.

A rider appeared along Allen Street carrying a dim lantern.

Ashford instantly ducked behind a stabled buggy, heart pounding. The rider approached at an easy pace, hooves muffled by the dirt street. The rider wore a broad black hat and a revolver low on his hip. He passed by the Dexter Corral without a second glance.

Ashford watched him ride east toward the busy saloons between 4th and 6th. A real person, not an AI construct. For a long moment he remained motionless beneath the stars, truly realizing that he was... there.

No aircraft crossed the heavens. No satellite blinked overhead. The sky looked vast enough to swallow human civilization whole.

And then from somewhere down the street, came the faint sound of gunfire followed by laughter. In just a few days, newspapers would make legends out of these men. Tonight, they were only tired, armed human beings walking dusty streets beneath lantern light, unaware that the future itself had come to watch them. To secretly take something from them, in order to assure that same future against destruction.

As Major Valle had promised, the two-story Arlington Hotel was right next to the Dexter Corral, on Allen at the corner of 3rd Street. "Where the weary traveler finds rest beneath the desert stars," read their ad in the Tombstone Epitaph. Inside, a warm lobby, an inviting bar, and a friendly proprietor.

"I'm Jay Martin. Where you from, stranger?"

"Hank Sills," Ashford replied. "Railroad surveyor. Down from Canada."

"What brings you here, Mr. Sills?"

"Pleasure trip. Always wanted to see the west. But business too. My A.T.&S.F line... Santa Fe... has a New México & Arizona Railroad subsidiary. They are building south from Fairbanks, down the river from you. Besides Nogales, they might want to also bring a line up here. We'll see. My job is to scout ahead, look at the land."

"Sure could use a train," said the proprietor.

"Yep," Ash replied. "You know, there are 14 lines running out of Benson right now, and they have that new roundhouse. Tombstone's booming. Would be a lot easier to bring in the new mining equipment by rail, wouldn't it? Anyway, how about a regular room, with a hot bath."

"That'll cost three bucks. Room 7, up the stairs. Bar's open til 11, and we have breakfast in the morning after 6."

Ashford handed over three near-new Morgan silver dollars, doing the math in his head. Back then times 40. \$120 for a nice room in the heart of a boom town? Lot cheaper than his 2040, by far.

"Need a hand with that bag, Mr. Sills?"

"No, I'm good. See you tomorrow, Jay."

Upstairs, as advertised, a large clean room. Pale yellow wallpaper with a delicate green Paisley pattern. Chest of drawers and a marble washbasin. And, yes! A small bathroom with a tub, and a British Crapper & Co. toilet

with its big wood reservoir up high above his head. They finally had town water, he remembered. Until recently, men from Boston at the Sycamore Spring Water Company brought it in from 10 miles out on wagons, and it was expensive. So the city gave a license to the new Tombstone Water, Mill and Lumber Company, and they put in pipes from a 110,000 gallon reservoir on Comstock Hill. The future? Directors at the Huachuca Water Company had ordered 25 miles of 7" diameter nickel-steel pipe from England, best in the world. They would bring unlimited water from Carr Canyon high in the Huachuca Mountains behind the Fort, but that wouldn't happen for two more years. And until then, Tombstone was a tinderbox.

The bed was soft and luxurious. After his bath, he drifted off to a fast and dreamless sleep.

First Morning

Major Ashford woke before dawn to the unfamiliar silence of 1881.

No highway hum. No distant jets over Arizona skies. Only the faint sounds of Tombstone waking up on a cold morning.

For several seconds he forgot where he was. Then the smell hit him. Coal smoke, and the tempting odor of frying bacon drifting upstairs from the Arlington Hotel kitchen.

Tuesday, October 25, 1881. He sat upright in bed, pulse hammering. He was actually here. The quiet room was small but respectable. His dark traveling coat hung from a chair where he had placed it carefully the night before. He washed up from the pitcher of water on the stand by the bed, and then walked over to the window. Morning light spilled across Tombstone. Allen Street already moved with life. Freight wagons rolled through the dust. Cowboys drifted along the sidewalks with the loose-hipped swagger of men who carried guns every day. A pair of Méxican laborers unloaded lumber from a wagon while a Chinese cook swept the front of a nearby restaurant.

And somewhere in this town, twenty-four hours before the most famous gunfight in Western history, men were already moving toward death. Ashford felt his stomach tightening. He had studied Tombstone for years. Every map. Every diary. Every surviving photograph. But seeing it alive felt impossible. Like walking into a dream built from history books.

Downstairs, the Arlington Hotel dining room buzzed with breakfast conversation. Miners in worn boots crowded long white linen-draped tables beside gamblers, cattlemen, and traveling salesmen. The air smelled of coffee strong enough to remove paint.

A cute young waitress in a pastel-blue dress approached, looking him over.

"Mornin', sir. Special today, ham and eggs?"

"Yes. And coffee."

"You got it. New in town? Where you from?"

"Canada."

"Not much snow here," she laughed. "But it's sure gittin' cold today. Might get some flurries tomorrow."

Ashford sat near the window where he could watch Allen Street as he ate. He forced himself to stay calm. Observe. Blend in. The waitress returned with eggs, fried potatoes,

thick-cut ham, and a chipped mug filled nearly full with strong black coffee.

The food was better than he expected. Fresh, tasty. Different from the synth protein in his 2040. A pair of miners nearby argued about silver prices while another man loudly claimed that Wyatt Earp would soon clean up the town for good. That caught Ashford's attention.

"You know the Earps?" he asked casually.

"Know of 'em. Everybody does."

"Trouble coming?"

"In Tombstone?" The man grinned through tobacco-stained teeth. "Trouble's breakfast around here."

Laughter erupted around the table. Ashford smiled faintly but said little after that. The less he talked, the safer he'd be. After breakfast he stepped back onto Allen Street and immediately felt at home in his borrowed period clothes. But it was... different. The people here moved with an alertness modern Americans had lost long ago. Alert and cautious. Everyone watching everyone else. Outside, a drunk stumbled from a saloon doorway, while a Wells, Fargo shotgun messenger crossed the street carrying a lockbox beside two armed guards.

Ashford went out and walked up Allen, headed toward the Tombstone Bank on the corner at 4th Street. It was a

new building, built since the June fire that burned down half the town. The bank felt surprisingly solid and professional. Brass rails gleamed in morning light. Behind barred teller windows, clerks worked stacks of currency and silver coins.

A heavysset banker looked up as Ashford approached.

"Mornin', stranger." he smiled. "I'm Milton Joyce. Milt. Own this place, and I'd like to be yer banker."

"Henry Sills," Ash replied. "I'll be here for a few days, and need some spendin' money."

He handed over his small stack of seven double eagle \$20 gold coins. "I'd like these exchanged for silver dollars."

The banker examined one closely, biting it lightly before nodding.

"Where you from, Mr. Sills?"

"Canada. Place called Ottawa."

"That explains it. Cause you sound a little different than the folks around here." The banker chuckled and disappeared briefly before returning with a cloth sack that landed on the counter with a heavy metallic clatter.

140 Morgan silver dollars. Real. Should easily last him through Wednesday. Ashford looked at one carefully. The coin felt cool and astonishingly heavy in his palm.

Liberty's profile gleamed in mint condition, untouched by the century and a half that awaited it. For one dangerous moment, the historian inside him nearly overwhelmed the soldier. He was holding a future museum piece while standing in its present.

"These are from New Orleans?" he asked, noting the little letter O on the back, beneath the large eagle.

"Yeah," replied Joyce. "New ones coming from that mint. Train goes there now from Benson. We send it out as 200-pound silver ingots, and it comes back as these coins in canvas bags. Lots of stagecoach holdups this year! And when they rob the stage, we have no cash money for a day or two. Want a glass of whiskey in a saloon? Have to hand over a .45 Long round, and say 'Give me a shot'. Anyway, you need anything else?" the banker asked.

Ashford slipped the coin into his pocket. "Don't you also own the Oriental Saloon?" he replied.

"Surely do. Great place, good food. And safer now since I gave Earp a faro table in the back. When he's there, no dustups."

"Maybe you can help," said Ash. "I'm looking for a man named George Parsons."

That produced an immediate response.

"Parsons? The mining agent? Mr. Sills, he's a good friend and a brave man. Helped me get out of the Oriental during the Great Fire. He's educated, 'n I've heard he writes a diary."

"I believe so."

"He's around town most days." The banker replied. "He's got a place next to the assay office on Fremont, in the Gird Block. Or try the show at Schieffelin Hall later tonight. He attends damn near everything."

Ashford thanked him and stepped back outside.

The town had grown louder now. Miners starting the long walk south, out to their claims in the hills. Storekeepers opening their doors. Well-dressed investors from back east walking to meetings. Gamblers, mostly young men who couldn't get a mining job in the hills. As the sun came up higher in the east, hundreds, then thousands of people on busy Allen Street.

Somewhere nearby, piano music drifted from an open saloon despite the early hour. Hammers rang from construction sites. Ashford paused beneath a sidewalk awning. So many horses! Riders clattering along in the dirt. No paved streets, though they did have concrete sidewalks. And no hitching rails for those riders, Ash remembered, since the streets were so crowded. Had to stable your horse in a corral. Dozens of large wagons up from Benson, filled with supplies. And the the noon six-

horse stagecoach, arriving after its long 12-hour drive from Tucson.

Somewhere out there walked George Parsons. Plus Wyatt Earp, Ash thought. And Doc Holliday, Tom and Frank McLaury, Ike and Billy Clanton. All alive, breathing, and completely unaware of what tomorrow would bring.

He adjusted the weight of the silver dollars in his pocket and headed up 4th Street to Fremont, deeper into Tombstone in search of George Parsons — the man whose journals might hold the key to everything.

Parsons

The Gird Block stood solid and respectable along Fremont, its long wood façade allowing entry to the assay office, the Epitaph newspaper, the small town courtroom, and several small firms. Fremont Street was the busy and respectable business center of the town, quite different from rowdy Allen Street with its 30 saloons and hotels only a block away. Across the street, masons mortared red bricks into place, building out the new City Hall.

Ash reminded himself. He was no longer Major Ashford. Again today, he was Hank Sills, A.T.&S.F. railroad surveyor.

H. F. Sills. A name pulled carefully from fragmented records of a man who had once briefly passed through Arizona Territory and disappeared into history without leaving a trace. Safe enough to borrow. Safe enough, the project scientists had insisted. Ashford still disliked it. A false name made every sentence feel unstable.

Inside, the Gird Block building hummed with business activity. Clerks carried ledgers from office to office while mine owners argued over assay reports and silver

percentages. Tobacco smoke hung beneath the ceiling in a blue haze.

A clerk glanced up from a tall writing desk.

"Can I help you?"

"I'm looking for George Parsons, the mining agent."

The clerk pointed toward the hallway. "Last office on the left. If he ain't wandered off chasing investors."

Ashford nodded and walked deeper inside.

He found Parsons seated behind a crowded desk stacked with newspapers, geological sketches, and correspondence tied up with string. The man looked up immediately, sharp-eyed and observant.

"Yes?"

"Hank Sills," Ashford said, extending his hand. "At the bank, Mr Joyce said you know this district better than most, Mr. Parsons."

"George. You were told correctly, sir. Milt's a good man. That fire back in June, I pulled him and Clapp out the front door of the Oriental as the place went up in a wall of flame. Then we ran over to try and save the Abbott House. Fire was making a fearful headway, terrible thick black smoke. Went up on the balcony, but it collapsed and I fell to the street. Landed on my face."

"How did the fire start?"

"Accident, on Allen at the Arcade Saloon near 5th. Mr. Alexander, the owner, was checking the level in an Old Overholt whiskey barrel. He bent over, smoking a cigar. The escaping liquor fumes ignited in a tremendous explosion! Levelled the Arcade. Blew Alexander and Hazelton the bartender out the back door. It was a windy day. The fire took off and burned down four city blocks. We stopped it the other side of Fremont, kept the Gird Block safe somehow."

"Milt said you were very brave that day."

"No more than anyone else," Parsons replied. "We were desperate. And I was lucky. All I got was a smashed face." He gently touched a white cloth bandage that covered most of his nose. "Dr. Goodfellow set me straight. Fixed me up."

His eyes moved over Ashford carefully. Not suspicious, but evaluating. "Sit down, Mr. Sills. What brings you to Tombstone?"

"I'm a railroad surveyor," Ash replied. "Scouting a possible route for an A.T.&S.F subsidiary. But I'm personally interesting in mining."

"Around here, that usually means speculation."

"In my case, curiosity."

"That's healthier." Parsons leaned back slightly. "Though not much safer in this town."

Ashford studied the man carefully.

George Parsons possessed the alert intelligence of someone who listened more than he spoke. Exactly the sort of observer whose journals would someday become historical treasures.

"I'm particularly interested in minerals," Ashford said evenly.

"Yes." A brief silence. Parsons' expression shifted almost imperceptibly. Finally he rose and walked to the office window overlooking Fremont Street.

"You know," he said quietly, "Most investors ask about silver percentages first."

"I'm not most investors."

"No," Parsons murmured. "You aren't." He turned back slowly. "What exactly are you looking for, Mr. Sills?"

Ashford chose his words carefully. "Unusual mineral deposits," he replied. "Not gold or silver. But rare, unique."

Parsons studied him for several long seconds. Then, unexpectedly, he nodded once.

"I saw something strange recently," he said slowly.

Ashford felt a pulse of adrenaline but kept his face calm.
"When?"

"Just a few days ago. Saturday. Not too far underground." Parsons lowered his voice instinctively. "At the Goodenough Mine, one of Ed Schieffelin's lucky strikes. A crew broke through into a narrow chamber, a little drift off the main stope."

"What did they find?"

"A very small metallic seam unlike any ore I've ever seen." Parsons sat again slowly. "Dark gray stone. Extremely dense. He paused. "And glowing. So Robert – Robert Davenport, the mine superintendent -- called me over. Worthless for ore, not silver or gold. But I'd never seen anything like it."

The room seemed suddenly quieter.

"What kind of glow?"

"Bluish-white. Not reflection. That damned rock produced its own light."

Parsons folded his hands.

"What happened next?"

"Nothing much. Took a small chunk of it over to the new Courthouse, gave it to Curtis Leslie - he's running the construction there. It will be a beautiful building, so much new brick! Anyway, it's just a curiosity. Leslie will store it away somewhere."

Ashford kept his breathing steady.

Parsons continued watching him another moment. "Tell you what," he said. "I can show you that Goodenough drift tomorrow afternoon."

Ashford leaned forward. "You'd do that?"

"Curiosity," Parsons said, "is the only truly contagious disease in Tombstone." He opened a drawer and removed a mine survey map. "It's here," he pointed. "That drift is here. Shift change after three o'clock gives us the best opportunity."

Ashford studied the marked location carefully. The source point. The place where the future believed time itself had first been fractured.

"We leave from here?" Ashford asked.

"Yes, let's. Right here, at 3:30 tomorrow afternoon." Couldn't be better, thought Ash. The brief gunfight at 3:00, then off to the mine.

"This is awfully good of you, Mr. Parsons," he smiled.
"Greatly appreciated."

"No trouble at all. And when we're done chasing that strange rock, I'm going to show you some real opportunities. Several paydirt claims that are up for outright sale, and others where you come in as a partner. Tombstone's wide open for investors, and you don't need much money to get in on the action."

"Better than faro?" laughed Ashford.

"Hell yes!" said Parsons. "See you tomorrow."

Search for Sills

Tuesday October 25th, 11 AM. Ashford stepped out under the chilly gray sky. Walked down to 4th and Allen, letting the city wash over him.

Tombstone in October 1881 was not the sleepy tourist town of his time. It was alive—restless, noisy, overflowing with money, ambition, and danger.

The street stretched before him like a river of humanity. Hundreds of people crowded the thoroughfare. Prospectors fresh from the mines brushed shoulders with gamblers in tailored suits. Cowboy troublemakers rode slowly through the traffic, their hats pulled low against the cold wind. Well-dressed women in colorful dresses made their way along the concrete sidewalks, careful to avoid the churned mud left by wagon wheels and horses. They were successful ‘soiled doves’, Ashford remembered. With finer expensive clothes than the less well-dressed ‘good’ ladies. Who lived on the north side of Fremont Street, and could only cross over to Allen if they had a male escort.

Where to start? First stop was his bank.

"Sills? H.F. Sills? No, never heard of him," said Milt Joyce. "Where's he from?"

"I don't know," replied Ashford. "How about a younger man, named Kitchin?"

"Haven't heard of him either. Try the other bank, and the telegraph office in the Grand Hotel," said Joyce. Ashford thanked him and walked out, then went halfway up Allen between 4th and 5th, to the Cochise County Bank. Same result, nope, never heard of the men.

Next door, he found the telegraph office in the newly opened Grand Hotel. Ash was impressed. It was a large, wide two-story building, with plans to add a third floor sometime in the next year. A lovely lobby opening into a spacious dining room. Investors and businessmen at their lunchtime dinner, and then others clustered around the faro tables just a short distance away.

An angry shout. "I saw that," yelled one of the players sitting at the front of the table. "Stacking the deck with that tricky shuffle! Gimme my money back!"

"Sorry, pal." replied the dealer angrily. "This game's legit."

"Oh yeah?" The player stood and reached for a pistol in his well-tooled gunbelt. The dealer made a grab for his own revolver. As shots rang out, Ashford hit the floor,

crawling under a table. Found himself face-to-face with a very well-dressed lady.

"Fancy meeting you here," he said with a laugh.

"Do I know you, sir?" she asked haughtily.

"No Ma'am. You don't." Ashford apologized. "I was just joking, given this strange situation. By the way, do you know a man named Sills?"

But she did not, and as the string band resumed playing 'Fur Elise', Beethoven's Bagatelle in A Minor, Ashford shook the dust off his coat and went into the Telegraph Office.

"No, no messages in or out for a Sills or a Kitchin," the clerk said. "Surprising. You said Sills was a railway man, and when one o' them comes to town, we get lots of business. Lemme think," he paused. "Try the saloons. And, up at 6th Street, talk to the folks at the Bird Cage Theater. Opened this summer, and it's already the most popular place in town."

Outside, a freight wagon groaned past, piled high with supplies from Benson. Four mules strained against their harnesses while the driver cursed loudly at a buggy that had cut across his path. Somewhere behind him came the sharp crack of a teamster's whip.

Every building seemed to compete for attention. Large painted signs hung from wooden storefronts advertising banks, jewelers, restaurants, saloons, and stores. The smell of cigar smoke drifted from open doorways, mixing with the odors of human sweat and fresh lumber, whiskey, frying beef, and so many, many horse droppings. The mayor had a crew out on Allen Street, cleaning up the greenish horse crap and the cesspools. Seven men, run by a young fellow named Caden. Who had never seen H.F. Sills either.

Dust. Dust everywhere, blowing in with every breeze and wind from the piles of tailings from the 3000-plus claims out in the nearby hills. "The camp is one of the dirtiest places in the world," wrote Clara Brown in a letter to the San Diego newspaper. "The soil is loose upon the surface, and is whirled into the air everyday by a wind which almost amounts to a gale. It makes eyes smart like cinders from an engine. It penetrates into the houses, and covers everything with dust. One is never sure of having a clean face, despite repeated ablutions."

Voices came from every direction.

Miners argued about whether the Grand Central would yield more ore than the Contention. A newspaper boy shouted headlines from the latest edition of the *Tombstone Epitaph*.

Laughter erupted from a saloon. A piano hammered out a tune, as Ashford went in through the swinging doors. Same result.

"Sills? Kitchin? Nope, nobody by those names comes in here."

Next door, Kelly's Wine House. The latest vintages from California and New York State. And from France, bottles of Bordeaux, Chardonnay, and the new Brut Champagne that was all the hit back East. Next to it, Steve Murray's new Tombstone Whiskey Distillery, still fitting out with stills coming in from Tennessee. But again, no Sills.

The wealth of the silver boom was visible everywhere. Men carried money belts heavy with silver dollars. The noon J.D. Kinnear Concord-style stagecoach came in from Benson, with a Wells, Fargo armed guard. Might be worth a try, thought Ashford.

"Hello," he called out to the driver, high up in the box. "Lookin' for a man called Sills, H.F. Sills. Ever run into him?"

"Cain't say as I have," replied Preacher Tom, quieting down his six tired horses. Reins all in his left hand, controlling the pair of closest wheelers, then the middle swing team, and finally the front pair leaders. 'Takes years of skill and training,' Ashford thought. 'Much harder than driving an 18-wheel big rig diesel.'

"What about you, Hugo?" asked Preacher Tom. "Maybe he's one of you Germans?"

"No," said the Wells, Fargo guard slowly, in fractured English. "When I'm in town, I stay over at the Turn-Verein Club on 4th Street. Sleep, eat, exercise in the gym with the other guys. But Sills? Nein. Is he German?"

"Probably not," said Ashford. "But thanks anyway."

Expensively dressed investors from San Francisco and the East Coast walked the same sidewalks as rough miners who had spent the early morning hundreds of feet underground.

Ashford walked east along Allen Street, absorbing every detail.

Later that afternoon, the 4-horse C. Walker stage from Tucson rattled into town with the U.S mail. Through a cloud of dust, passengers peered outside as if they had arrived in the center of the world after their long 12-hour bone-shaking journey. The Tucson stage was a canvas-covered Celerity wagon, aka Mudwagon, used for long overnight runs on the roadless Western deserts. Much lighter than the luxurious Concord stages, it was rough, basic, but practical. The male passengers slept on the ground at night, while the ladies could fold down the seats to make a more comfortable bed. But still, no word of Sills.

News traveled fast in Tombstone, and already curious onlookers were gathering to see who had stepped down from the coach. The energy was contagious. This was a city convinced that its future had no limits. New buildings rose almost weekly. Fortunes were made overnight and lost just as quickly. Every stranger might be a millionaire, a gunfighter, a gambler, a politician, or a wanted man.

He tried three more saloons, no joy. 'I don't think that anyone here knows H.F. Sills,' he thought as he walked in the gusty chill air. 'Or Lt. Kitchin. But Kitchin doesn't matter right now. Sills sure does.'

The businesses on Allen Street came to an end at 6th. 'Well, not all,' he laughed to himself. Because across the street, along 6th halfway to 7th, was the red-light zone. Hundred of tents, line shacks, and even a few two-story dwellings. All to house the 300-plus prostitutes who came to cash in from the silver boom.

He went into the Bird Cage Theater on the corner of 6th. New since June, it was already the most popular variety venue in town. Singers, dancers, magicians, comedians. All the acts that regular people loved, entertainment you could never find at the more upscale Schieffelin Hall. In 1881, variety theaters were opening all over the West, and the Bird Cage was one of the best.

At the bar in the front packed with thirsty men. Ashford bought a shot of Old Overholt, and pushed his way

through the lobby into the theater itself. A large room, hundreds of chairs, and boxes up above looking down on the stage.

"We could go up there, Mister," said a pretty girl next to him. "I'll show you a real good time."

"Wish I could," said Ashford, letting her down gently. "But I'm trying to find an old friend, name of Sills."

"I never..." she began.

"That's OK," said Ash. "Nobody else here ever heard of him either. Here, take this." He handed her a silver dollar. "For you, not your boss. Who is he, anyway?"

"It's a she. Paula Jean, right over there."

Who was in the middle of negotiating with a contractor for a new 14-hole outhouse to go out back. Ashford hoped that since she knew every man in town with her place open 24 hours a day, she might be a lead to Sills. But no. Again, he struck out. Gave up, watched the funny comedy act on the stage for a few minutes, and then went outside. Amid the clatter of wagons and the roar of a booming frontier city, he felt as though he had stepped into the beating heart of the American West. For a moment he simply stood there, watching the crowds surge along Allen Street, and understood why people from across the world had come to Tombstone.

In 1881, this was where the action was.

By evening, he was tired out and frustrated. So he went by the Occidental for a hot chicken sandwich and a glass of Golden Eagle draft beer. And then back to his room at the Arlington, off to sleep early, ready as he could be for his final day in town.

Spangenberg

Wednesday morning, October 26th. Another excellent breakfast downstairs. Same dark-haired waitress. Who came over and sat with him as he ate.

"I'm Rosa," she said. "Are you staying here long, Mister?"

"Nope," said Ashford. "I'll be out of here tonight."

"I wish you could take me with you," she said softly. "Nothin' here for me anymore."

"What happened?" he asked.

"My man, Carlos," she replied. "Two months ago, he got killed in a cave-in up over at the Lucky Cuss. An' now I'm runnin' out of money. Haven't enough to take the stage to Tucson, where I have family."

"There's a lady," Ash said slowly, remembering his training. "Nellie Cashman, runs a boarding house over at 5th and Toughnut. I've heard she helps women in a tough spot. It's hard here. You go broke, only job's to be a working girl. An' unless you're in it for the money, that's a terrible life."

"Nellie Cashman. Yes, I spoke with her. But she doesn't like Méxicans. Like we don't exist for her. So I don't know what I'm gonna do." She started to cry.

"Well, I guess you are going to Tucson," Ashford said. Dug in his pocket. "Here, you take this," counting out 50 silver dollars.

"You cain't do that," she said, shocked.

"Sure can," he laughed. "Rosa, where I'll be tomorrow, they won't take this money."

"What? Where could that be, where they won't take silver?"

"Can't tell you, darlin'. Big secret. Now you better get back to work, afore Mr. Martin comes back."

He went out again, up to the Gird Block. Asked the clerk in the recorder's office about Sills. In the same building, asked a deputy in the county Sheriff's office about Sills. No, and no. He gave up and went back down to Allen Street, overcoat wrapped tight against the cold and freezing sleet. Ended up in the well-stocked library at the Occidental Hotel. They had the latest 2nd volume of Johanna Spyri's 'Heidi', and 'The Portrait of a Lady' by Henry James. He settled in to a very comfortable velvet armchair, enjoying Mark Twain's 'Innocents Abroad'. Had a glass of Claret with a Havana cigar, distracted for a few minutes from his Sills search. 'As nice as any place

in San Francisco,' he thought, watching Mary Buchanan, the Occidental's elegant library attendant, dust the many bookshelves that rose up to the ceiling.

Lunchtime. Another roast beef sandwich, again reminding him how much better real food tasted in the past. Then, outside again. Walked up to 5th. Two men burst out of the side door of the Oriental, 25 feet apart. A young Cowboy cursing an older fellow. Suddenly, the Cowboy went for his gun, fired once, and missed. And almost at the same instant, was shot dead, since 'Buckskin' Frank Leslie didn't miss.

Ashford, across the street by the Double Eagle Brewery, was close enough to get a whiff of the acrid gunsmoke. 'Damn', he said to himself. 'I'd better get myself a gun. This place is worse than East L.A.'

2:00 PM on his last day. The bell above the door jingled softly as Ashford stepped into Spangenberg's Gun Store, halfway up 4th between Allen and Fremont.

The smell hit him immediately. Gun oil. Black powder. Oiled walnut wood. Rifles lined the walls behind glass cases while revolvers rested on green felt beneath the counter. Boxes of cartridges sat stacked beside tins of percussion caps and cleaning rods. Behind the counter, a heavysset man with steel spectacles glanced up.

"Afternoon," he smiled. "Still cold out?"

"Surely is," Ashford replied.

"What can I get for you?" Spangenberg asked. "Just got in some new 10" barrel Colt revolvers. Same as Wyatt Earp carries."

"Sounds good," said Ash. "Heard he has seven handguns. But I'm looking for something small."

The shop owner nodded once. "Pocket pistol?"

"Exactly."

The man reached beneath the counter and produced a tiny nickel-plated derringer. "Remington double-barrel. Most popular hideout gun in the territory."

Ash picked it up carefully. Smaller than he expected. Heavy for its size.

".41 rimfire," Spangenberg said. "Two shots. Up close, it'll change a man's opinion."

"Accurate?"

The owner snorted. "At ten feet? Sure. Beyond that you'd better throw it."

"You carry one yourself?"

"No." The man tapped the Colt on his hip. "But gamblers, saloon girls, Faro dealers, politicians, and nervous travelers buy these constantly."

Ash opened the action, examining the twin barrels.

"What's the best feature?"

The shopowner grinned. "Fits where nobody expects it."

From outside came the distant clatter of wagons along Allen and Fremont streets. Ash closed the pistol slowly. "I'll take it, with four rounds."

"That enough? Can get pretty hot around here, if ya know what I mean. And don't let the Law catch you with it. New Ordinance 9, if ya don't have a carry permit, ya gotta check it at yer hotel or at a corral."

"No, that's all I need. And thanks for the tip."

He paid and stood aside as Ike Clanton came in, still hungover drunk, blood seeping from a head bandage. "Sell me a gun, raught now," he yelled. "Any old thang."

"Can't do that, Ike," Spangenberg replied. "Cain't sell a gun to a man as angry as you. You'd best go home and sleep it off."

Ashford remembered Ike Clanton from his training. After his father was shot dead by Mexican troops stopping Cowboy cattle rustlers, his son Ike became the

spokesperson for the gang in Tombstone. And Ash remembered that Clanton had a really bad 24 hours before that moment in Spangenberg's. Late on the night before, he made threats against the Earps at several saloons. And then, drunk at midnight, he went to the 24-hour lunchbox at the Alhambra. All was well at first, but then Doc Holliday came in and a screaming match erupted between the two sworn enemies. Morgan Earp stepped in and pulled Doc away from Ike. Others helped to break up the fight, but the damage was done. Clanton ran outside. Just a few minutes later, he came across Wyatt Earp outside the Oriental, cursing and threatening that the Earps would get theirs the next day, when the Cowboys and the McLaurys, who fenced the stolen Cowboy beef, were coming into town. Wyatt quieted Ike down, and he stumbled off to the Occidental Saloon, where he was part of an all-night poker game with both Earps and Cowboys. As dawn broke the game broke up, and Ike followed Virgil Earp out into the street, still cursing, yelling, and threatening to get even for his humiliation at the lunchbox the night before. The Marshal ignored him, and both dead-tired men went off to get some sleep.

Then came today, Wednesday morning. About 10 AM, still drunk, angry, and hungover, Clanton went back up Allen Street, yelling more curses, threats, and imprecations. Started at the telegraph office in the Grand Hotel, then weaved his way to Kelly's Wine House. More drinks. Then down to Hafford's Saloon, complaining

bitterly how Doc Holliday and the Earps had treated him at the Alhambra the night before.

The word went out that Ike was armed, angry, drunk and dangerous. By noon, Virgil Earp and his brothers spotted Clanton at the corner of 4th and Fremont.

"Take him," ordered the Marshal. "He's too dangereous to be left walking around." Ike was wildly waving a Winchester rifle, with a revolver stuck in the waist of his pants. Virgil grabbed the rifle. As Ike went for his pistol, the Marshal slammed him across the head with his own Colt. Ike went down like a shot, knocked flat, blood streaming from his forehead. Quickly, the Earps dragged him in front of a judge in the recorder's court, across the street in the Gird Block. Fined \$25 and chastened, Ike quieted down after the judge took his weapons.

'Guess you could say the O.K Corral gunfight started right then,' Ashford thought. 'Bad blood.'

But the peace didn't last.

And now, just two hours later, Ike was at Spangenberg's, trying to buy another gun. And as he stumbled out the door, Ash knew Clanton was headed for trouble, coming his way fast as a speeding bullet.

Gunfight

3:00 PM. Ashford tucked the derringer in the inside pocket of his heavy overcoat. Walked out of the gun shop, following Ike Clanton down the south side of Fremont Street. Very conscious now that he had better be back on script. Because at the inquest after the O.K. Corral shootout, H.F. Sills testified how the fight had come about. About how he was over at 3rd and Fremont, and heard five angry men talking near the entrance to the corral.

Following Clanton, Ash walked over, and there they were. Looking for trouble. Threatening to kill the Earps. "Got my Smith and Wesson," one muttered. "Stand that damn Marshal up real straight."

"That's it, Tom," said another. "He's pushed us too far. Him and his brothers, and that damn dentist. We'll see what they are made of today."

That must be Tom McLaury, thought Ashford. With his brother Frank. They came into town to fence rustled beef for the Cowboys. Like Bill Claiborne, and Billy Clanton, here now, stabling their horses after coming in from

Charleston for the showdown. And Ike Clanton, still hung over after his very bad morning.

Ash looked around. Was another H.F. Sills on the scene? Did a real-life Sills actually exist? Apparently not. Searched the whole town, hadn't been able to find him. Not a trace. Here at the O.K. Corral on Fremont, he was alone with just the Cowboys, the McLaurys, and Ike Clanton for company. Nobody else in sight, there or across Fremont Street at the Gird Block. No H.F. Sills.

So it was just him. And he had to follow the script. And then get the General to send him back again. Because in 2040, they had the court record... that Sills had testified at the murder inquest. They had his exact words, from the original transcript of the Earps' murder inquest. And because if H.F. Sills didn't exist and never showed up as a witness, what changes would history have made back in 2040?

He'd heard enough. Stay on script! He turned around and rapidly walked back down to 4th and Allen. To Hafford's Saloon on the corner, Brown's Hotel upstairs. Warm inside. Four men at the bar. Had to be them, he thought. He walked over.

"Excuse me," he said softly. "One of you Virgil Earp?"

"That's me, stranger. What can I help you with?"

"I just came from the O.K. Corral. Five men. Talkin' how they are out to kill you all today."

"Cowboys?" asked the Marshal. "Gunbelts? They carryin'?"

"Four of 'em are," Ashford replied. "The Cowboys and McLaurys. Puttin' shells in their belts. The other guy, Ike Clanton? No. no gun."

"Damn." The Marshal looked at his companions. "No choice now," he said. "No permits, they are breaking the law. You all up for a showdown, Wyatt? Morgan? And you, Doc?"

"Ah'm ready, Virg," coughed a slender man wearing a full duster overcoat. Pulling out a shotgun. "Ah'm ready."

"Then let's go. They'll be over at the O.K. Corral, with that no-count bloat Ike Clanton."

Ashford followed the Earps and Doc Holliday as they walked back up 4th Street to the corner of Fremont, where the new Post Office lay kitty-corner from the Gird Block. The men crossed 4th, walking past the masons building the new Courthouse. Past the Papago general store. And then there they were, only a few feet away from the Cowboys, just inside the O.K. Corral entrance.

"Throw down your weapons," yelled Marshal Virgil Earp.

"And you can go straight to Hell," was the shouted reply.

The shooting started. Ashford couldn't see clearly who drew first, or who shot first. And he didn't care, since later at the inquest H.F. Sills would say the Cowboys started it. The gun battle lasted only thirty seconds, and three men were dead. Tom and Frank McLaury, and their friend, 19-year-old Cowboy Billy Clanton.

'I'm jaded,' Ashford said to himself. 'After Iran, this is no big deal. Not even a decent firefight. No AKs, no RPGs. No waves of hopped-up jihadis coming right at you, looking to be martyrs.' He checked his railway watch. 3:25 PM. Just in time to meet up with Parsons across the street. He walked across Fremont quickly, dodging the gathering crowd outside the O.K. Corral. 'This is a big deal for them,' he thought. 'Have to remember that. 'Can't laugh it off as nothing much. We sure aren't in 2040.'

"What happened?" Parsons asked excitedly. "Were you over there? What did you see?"

"I was there," Ashford replied sadly. "It was terrible, George. Three men dead, others injured."

"Not Virgil or Wyatt, certainly!" Parsons exclaimed. "I heard that the Cowboys were making terrible threats last night."

"Yes, them and Ike Clanton."

"Ike was there?"

"He was. Unarmed. Yelled 'I don't have a gun, don't shoot!' and then ran off out the other end of the corral, on to Allen Street."

"So who..."

"The two McLaury brothers. Tom shot in the chest with a shotgun blast from Doc Holliday. He won't last an hour. Frank in the head and the chest, died right away. And Billy Clanton, Ike's little brother. Shot about 30 times, he won't make it."

"And the Earps?" asked Parsons. "Are they all right?"

"Pretty much. Virgil was shot through the shoulders and calf of one leg. Morgan was shot through the leg. Doc Holliday was grazed on a hip."

"And Wyatt?"

"Damn lucky, George. Hell, they were firing at each other from just 15' away." Ash paused, thinking how in his 2040 absolutely nobody would have survived a close-range

shootout like this one. "Wyatt?" he continued. "He's fine. Not a scratch. Only man in the fight who wasn't hit."

Outside, the loud screech of a mine's steam hoist whistle. "That'll be the Toughnut," Parsons said. "Emergency signal. Word's out! That will bring in men from all over. Our Vigilance Committee, to arrest any outlaws causing trouble."

"No need. This one's over. But it will be the talk of the town for some time." He looked at his watch. "George, it's coming up on 3:30. What do you say, shall we head over to the Goodenough?"

"You bet," replied Parsons. "We'll go up Fremont to 5th, if we can get through that crowd out there." He retrieved his bowler hat, put on his jacket, and the two men went out to the street. On the other side, an angry crowd. Hundreds of men yelling at each other, cursing.

"Cowboys have a lot of support here," said Parsons. "Mostly stupid people, low-lives who hate the law and order that Mayor Clum and the Earps are enforcing. Too stupid to realize that this mining camp can't grow unless it is safe for investors." They walked past the new Schieffelin Hall, largest adobe building in Arizona Territory, with its stores and large theater auditorium inside.

"You running into problems from the violence, George?" asked Ashford.

“Sure am. Puttin’ a deal together right now with two New Yorkers, Heyne and Wendt. They are lookin’ at getting into the White West, Senator, and Gates mines. Took them around yesterday, and am greatly afraid what they will do tomorrow. They might go to Deadwod instead, now that it’s settled down there.”

Goodenough

At 5th, they turned right and walked south past Allen to Toughnut and the Goodenough Mine entrance. Robert Davenport was waiting. A tall, well-built man with a pleasant countenance. Strong, but friendly. 'He would make a fine Western movie actor,' Ashford thought. 'Still about 30 years too early here, but in 2040? Sure. No Hollywood studios left, but he'd go right into those new Chinese multivision streamers.'

"Back in May last year," Robert said, "Ed Schieffelin found a rich deposit of silver ore. Called it the Goodenough. And we opened her up right away. Richest vein of silver ore in the Tombstone Mining District. Most all near the surface. We are down to 300' now and getting less ounces of silver per ton the deeper we go. Don't think we will go down much further. It's different here than up the hill, at the Contention and the Grand Central. They are going deep. Hit water at 500', and they are bringing in the best mine pumps from England. Schieffelin thought he had a deal up there, but his partners, Williams and Oliver, are welshing on it. Probably will be a lawsuit. Lots of silver. And same as here, there's some gold, too... but only enough to cover the cost of extracting it."

He paused and looked west down the street, over to the crews working on the Courthouse. "I've got 310 feet of stope under Toughnut Street," he said. "And then the Combinaton Vein crosses over into the Vizina Mine, for another 200 feet. Our big stope yields pure silver chloride ore, from right near the surface to 150 feet down. And no water to pump. Doubt we will ever get down to even 400 feet."

"Is the Goodenough still producing?" Ash asked.

"Sure is," Davenport replied. "Took \$143,308 out in September."

Ashford calculated quickly. In his 2040 dollars, that would be 1881 times 40, or \$5,732,320. Profitable indeed. Big money in them thar hills!

"But today we are putting a huge effort into the Toughnut Mine, another parallel silver vein right next to the Goodenough, a little to the south. And further on, going up the hill toward the Contention, there's the Sulphuret. Damn, we have enough silver here to last another hundred years!"

Ashford didn't reply, since he knew that the Tombstone boom would only last another five. In 1886, a large fire knocked out the water pumps at the Grand Central. Next, the government lowered the price of silver. The miners went on strike for \$4 a day instead of \$3. All the easy-to-

mine ore near the surface was gone by then, too. Boom to bust.

Parsons smiled. "Have to get you talking to my investors, Robert. Hundred-year payoffs! Anyway, we are here today to see that strange glowing rock. Lead the way."

They walked south down the slope from the mine office at Toughnut and 5th. Down Into the dark Goodenough Mine entrance cut into the side of the hill. Many of the miners had dropped their hand drills and sledgehammers, rushing into town when the emergency whistle went off. It was quiet now during the shift change. The next crew would set off Nobel-licensed dynamite from the Giant Powder company in San Francisco, and then use a whim, a horse-drawn winch, to raise the chunks of silver ore to the surface.

"It's only about 50 feet down," Davenport said. "And less than 100' on the horizontal, going west toward 4th Street." They walked on in the total darkness, with only their small hand candles for light. The Goodenough mine shaft was pleasantly warm.

The stope stretched ahead like a crack inside the earth, low, flat, and wide. At points, Ashford had to hunch forward to keep his shoulders from scraping the jagged rock above him. The ceiling hung so close in places he could have touched it with his forehead.

Their candles threw only a weak yellow circle into the blackness. Beyond that, the mine simply vanished. The darkness did not fade gradually — it swallowed everything whole. Timber posts appeared suddenly out of the gloom like crooked gallows, then slipped behind him again. The air smelled of damp stone, blasting powder, old sweat, and mineral water. Somewhere far deeper in the Goodenough, a single drop of water struck rock with a hollow tick ... tick ... tick that echoed unnaturally through the tunnels. Every sound traveled strangely underground. His boots crunching on loose ore seemed too loud, while his own breathing came back at him from unseen passages.

The candle flame bent and trembled. Shadows jerked wildly across the walls, creating twisting pale streaks that looked almost alive. Once, their flames guttered low for a terrifying second, and the entire mine seemed ready to collapse into absolute blindness. The floor was uneven and slick with muddy patches left by seep water. Here and there abandoned tools lay half buried in tailings — a rusting shovel, splintered ore buckets, drill steels leaning against the wall where some miner had left them and never returned.

The worst part was the weight overhead. Solid rock. Ashford could feel it in the silence between sounds. Timber supports creaked softly now and then like an old ship at sea. Every groan of settling rock made him stop walking and listen.

Ahead, George Parsons' candle was only a distant floating star in the dark.

"Keep close," Davenport called quietly. "You don't want to lose the light down here."

Ash believed him. For the men who worked in that flat black stope of the Goodenough Mine, a single candle was the difference between being a man ... and becoming another lost thing swallowed forever by Tombstone's silver earth.

"There," exclaimed the mine superintendent. "Same place, George?"

"That's it," replied Parsons. "Only 50 feet down, just about under the end of 4th Street, south side of the stope. That's it, all right. Glad you guys didn't fill in that little drift."

"Why bother?" Davenport said. "It's a vein of something all right, but zero dollar value. And we are too busy right now getting our last silver ore from over near the Vizina. And then I'll shift most of my guys to help with the Toughnut."

They looked down the narrow dark drift, a small natural tunnel running off the stope. About 12 feet in, it tightened and closed up, with a strange glow at the rocky end.

"I'll get a sample," said Ashford. "And take it to a geologist I know back east." He walked to the end of the drift, and

chipped off a hand-sized glowing chunk of ruthenium with his pocket knife. "If it's worth anything, I'll get the news back to you on the telegraph."

"Nah, ain't worth shit," said Davenport. "It's Leaverite."

"Leaverite?" asked Ashford.

Parsons was laughing. "Yes, Leaverite," he replied. "What we call worthless ore. As in 'Leave 'er right there,' for ore that isn't worth mining."

"What are you boys doin' fer supper?" Davenport inquired.

"I'm buying," said Ash. "Heard you have a place here called Maison Dorée?"

Parsons smiled. "This railroad surveyor's made out of money," he laughed. "It's \$5 each."

"My treat," replied Ashford. "You've both satisfied my curiosity today. Come on, let's go have supper."

Maison Dorée

Wednesday, late afternoon. They walked back up 5th to Allen Street through the loud, quarrelsome crowds. A tense time, with Earp and Cowboy supporters on the verge of fighting each other. The Maison Dorée restaurant was inside the Cosmopolitan Hotel, next to Hafford's Saloon over near 4th. It was the town's finest hotel, rising above Allen Street with an air of confidence rare in the Arizona Territory, as though somebody had lifted a fashionable Eastern hotel and dropped it into the middle of Tombstone's dust and gun smoke.

Ashford pushed through the heavy brass front door into another world. The noise of Allen Street dulled immediately behind him. Inside, the lobby smelled of cigar smoke, lamp oil, polished wood, perfume, and expensive whiskey. Thick carpets muffled footsteps. Kerosene chandeliers cast warm yellow light across varnished walnut furniture, rich rosewood paneling, and gold-framed mirrors imported from the East.

Men in tailored frock coats sat in deep chairs reading newspapers from San Francisco and St. Louis. News only days old, thanks to the railroad now at Benson. Unlike the rough boarding houses elsewhere in Tombstone, the Cosmopolitan tried hard to project civilization. Bellboys

carried trunks upstairs to the new second floor. Waiters from the Maison Dorée moved through swinging doors carrying silver trays loaded with steaks, oysters, and wine.

"Quite the place," said Ashford.

"Wait til you see the restaurant," laughed Parsons.

The Maison Dorée, frontier French for Golden House, deliberately borrowed the flavor of expensive Paris restaurants. The dining room glowed with soft lamplight reflected in tall mirrors and polished glass. White linen cloths covered the tables. Heavy silverware and real china replaced the tin plates common in rougher eating houses. Waiters in dark vests moved carefully between tables carrying steaks, oysters, wine, and thick coffee. The large high-ceilinged room smelled of cigar smoke, roast beef, French sauces, coffee, perfume, and kerosene lamps. Large ceiling fans turned lazily overhead.

"Table for three, Messieurs?"

"Oui, ça ira très bien." said Ashford. "Je suis Canadien," he said to his friends. "Couldn't resist." He liked the French touch. On the frontier, many upscale restaurants offered 'French style' dishes whether or not the cook had ever seen France. In boomtown Tombstone, simply putting a French name on the menu greatly raised the price.

Nearby, a gambler with a diamond stickpin quietly ate an expensive supper after a long day at the faro tables. A traveling actress from San Francisco laughed too loudly at something whispered by a prospector already half drunk on imported champagne.

Two well-dressed men sat at the next table. Swarthy and unshaven Rick Miles, who owned the Contentment Mine, up the hill next to the high-yielding Contention. He was irritated. "They aced me out of that big strike," he said angrily. "Schieffelin, Williams, and that Oliver fellow. Hung me out to dry. Only took out 3,200 tons of ore last month, at about 45 ounces per ton in silver."

"Still, not so bad," the other man said.

"They cheated me," Miles snarled. "That damn Tombstone Mill and Mining Company. With their Goodenough, Toughnut, Contention, Grand Central, Head Center, Ingersoll, Vizina and Sunset mines. They pulled in \$6,488,361 last year, and declared dividends of \$2,895,000. Hell, the Contention and Grand Central alone pulled out 12,279 tons of high-grade ore." His face set in a scowl. "But I'll show them. We'll take over this camp, and get a judge to set these claims straight."

"You sure know your numbers," Parsons said. "We live by 'em," Miles replied. "Published every day in the Nugget."

"You can get past Mayor Clum and the Earps?" asked Davenport.

"With the help of our Cowboy friends, sure can." Miles scowled. "Weren't any outside witnesses to the gunfight, I hear. So the Earps will be arrested tomorrow for murder. We will have an inquest, and they will be found guilty after Ike Clanton testifies. Robert, they shot his little brother dead."

Ashford listened carefully. That would probably happen, he thought. The Earps and Doc Holliday would be sent to the baking-hot territorial prison in Yuma. And his world in 2040 would be irrevocably changed, in ways he could never imagine. Brigadier-General Debra had better send me back to testify! Because there surely wasn't any other H.F. Sills in Tombstone these days.

Noticing the heavy black velvet drapery, he changed the subject, rising to his feet.

"Gentlemen," he asked, "Please join me in a toast, to the memory of our late President Garfield. And," he continued, "To health and success for Chester Arthur. He's a good man in a tough job." They all drank except for Miles, who looked down, muttering something about useless Yankee politicians.

The waiter came by to take their order, with the Maison's friendly owner, a tall, energetic man from Brooklyn named Steve Goldstein. He loved base-ball, and regaled

them with stories about the Tombstone nine. "Youse guys, just wait til next year! We'll show dem stumblebums from Bisbee!"

"Where's your beautiful wife, Steve?" asked Parsons.

"Gloria's at home, the popular restaurant owner replied. "You tink I'd let her anywhere near youse guys?" he laughed. "Nah, she's at home. Runs the Dorée's business side, she's so good with numbers."

They ordered. Ashford chose the \$6 dinner special, beef tenderloin with French sauce, potatoes, fresh vegetables, all the trimmings. Prices, for that time when a man only made \$3 a day, were high. Not so much the coffee or tea for 10¢, but the imported claret wine at 50¢ a glass, whiskey at 30¢, or fresh oysters from San Francisco at \$1.00. A venison steak was 75¢, same as quail on toast, also same as trout. Old standbys were less, like fried ham and eggs at 35¢, and roast chicken for only 60¢.

There was champagne for wealthy mine owners. Imported cigars from Spanish Cuba. And Eastern butter and cheeses when rail transport cooperated.

There were extras. Bread and butter for 10¢, apple pie for 15¢, plum pudding at 20¢, and ice cream only 25¢. From his training, Ashford remembered that rich 1881 Tombstone had its own ice house down on Toughnut, and made their own vanilla ice cream that Wyatt Earp greatly enjoyed with a sarsaparilla soda.

Ash enjoyed his dinner and their table talk about mining. The latest news, with Parsons recounting who was investing where. After dinner, he puffed on a cigar, totally content. Then he said his good-byes and went back out into the night to keep looking for H.F. Sills.

Oriental

Wednesday evening, 6 PM. Outside the Cosmopolitan Hotel, it was bitter cold. Ashford walked up Allen to 5th. Went in the newly-rebuilt Oriental Salon for a drink. Didn't see Milt Joyce, so he sat down at a small table next to a boisterous group of men. Miners and Cowboys. Drunk and upset.

"What we gonna do for beef now?" one yelled. "The McLaurys are dead."

"Ike Clanton got away," another replied. "We will be allright."

A third man broke in. "The hell you say," he exclaimed angrily. "Costs are going up, and those rich mineowners ain't going to raise us from \$3 a day to \$4."

Another miner laughed. "You want more? Go down to a stamp in Millville, you can spread mercury for \$7 a day." Ash remembered that mercury spread on large tin sheets would separate the silver from the ore crushed by the pounding stamp engine. But mercury was dangerous, and the word was that it made you crazy as a Mad Hatter, with it used in that industry also.

"Yeah, we'll never see \$4," continued the third man. "And I heard yesterday they was gonna bring in niggers who will work for peanuts."

"Nigras? Not many o' them around. Just those soldiers over to the Fort."

"No, not them. But hundreds more, bringin' them in from Alabama and Mississippi."

"They come here, we'll string 'em up," said a Cowboy. "This here's white man's country. You let any of 'em in, you'll never see the end of it. They'se all criminals. Thieves. And you'd better lock up your daughters." The other men roared in agreement. "Hang 'em high!"

Ash looked over across the table. Couldn't help himself. "So they are better workers than you?" he asked with a smile. "Guess you're gonna be out of luck."

"What did you say, stranger?" yelled the Cowboy. "You one o' them Yankee nigger-lovers? Where you from, anyway?"

"Canada." replied Ash calmly. "Ottawa. And I don't have a dog in this fight. Black man can work hard same as me, and it's a free country now."

The Cowboy slid back his chair, rising to his feet. "I'll show you how a dog bites, boyo," he sputtered. "An' put a notch for another Yankee on this here Colt."

Ashford moved before anybody in the Oriental realized the shouting had turned serious.

The Cowboy had one hand dropping toward his holster, mouth already twisting into a grin like he thought he had time. But he didn't.

Ash crossed the fifteen feet between them like a striking jaguar. Not running wildly. Driving forward low and hard, boots hammering the new floorboards. Chairs exploded backward as men scrambled out of the way. Somebody yelled.

The Cowboy got leather halfway clear. Ashford hit him first. His shoulder slammed into the man's chest with enough force to lift him off balance. The revolver fired once into the ceiling in a blast of sparks and falling plaster. Then both men crashed into a faro table, cards and silver dollars flying through the lamplight.

Before the Cowboy could recover, Ashford smashed a fist into his jaw. Not theatrical. Short. Brutal. The kind of punch thrown by a man used to winning fights fast.

The man sprawled backward onto the sawdust-strewn floor, his Colt skidding away beneath a chair. Ash kicked the gun into the darkness under the bar without even looking at it.

The whole saloon froze. Faro dealers stopped with cards in midair. A piano note hung unfinished. Cigarette smoke

drifted slowly through the air, while nobody moved. He stood over the fallen Cowboy breathing hard but steady, eyes flat and dangerous.

"You reach slow," Ash said quietly, "for a dead man." Nobody laughed. Across the room, three Cowboys stared at him but made no move toward their own guns. They had just watched a man cover fifteen feet faster than thought possible, and end the fight before it properly began. In Tombstone, men respected speed almost as much as gunfire.

"We got trouble here?" came a deep voice from behind him. Ash looked around. A tall man, dark hair, with piercing blue eyes and a handlebar mustache. It was Wyatt Earp, coming over from his faro table to quiet things down. Colt stuck in his belt, nothing fancy.

"No sir," said Ash. "I was just leaving." He picked up his glass, drained it in one gulp, and walked over to the door.

"No harm done," said Earp. "No reason to call my brother Virgil, the Marshal. That other guy will be allright by morning. See ya, stranger."

It was a cold, cold evening. Still light out, but clouds massing in the sky, threatening freezing rain the next day. Ashford pulled his overcoat closer. Hadn't even thought to draw his derringer, thenk God. Mentally kicking himself, he walked back down Allen Street to 3rd and the Arlington. 'Would have been so easy to shoot that cracker

dead,' he thought. 'But then, what would happen in the future? The ripples across time? End to that man's story, end to any descendents he might have, and an end to their stories and their lives in his own time.' He walked faster in the chill air, went into the hotel and up to his room. Threw his hat on a chair, glanced at his pocket watch. 8:30 PM. Time to go, he was cutting it close. Packed his carpet bag and went downstairs.

"Leaving us?" asked the desk clerk.

"Yep," said Ashford. "I'll be staying with a friend tonight, over by the hospital. But let me settle up with you. That's a really nice room." He plunked three Morgan dollars on the counter, and went out the front door into the now-dark night.

9 PM. The Dexter Corral was still and quiet, as he expected. No late arrivals, nobody around. Suddenly there was a strange hissing sound, and the air shimmered. He watched in amazement as the jet-black Transmitter quantum vehicle suddenly appeared. Its Lexan hatch popped open. Ashford threw his bag inside, climbed in, sat down and buckled up. The canopy closed.

He flipped the glowing green Transmit switch to Send.

And then he was back.

Interrupt

Back. Half-stunned by the Transmitter return vortex, Ashford made no move to climb out of the seat. He was lost, remembering another time only a few months ago. February 10. When a low-yield nuclear bomb exploded high over Denver, creating a massive EMP electromagnetic pulse that shorted out US power grid interconnections across the country. Suddenly, no electricity. Aircraft falling out of the sky, like his wife's helicopter. Cars and trucks stopped running, their computer chips fried by a powerful invisible energy wave that turned wires inside into antennas. Which induced massive sudden power surges that overloaded microchips and permanently damaged sensitive internal circuits through rapid local heating.

'Why?' he thought. 'Why had the Iranians done that?' He could not see across space and time, but the endless quantum qubits kept the past nearby.

September 2039. A government bunker, safe beneath the large Imam Khomeini Mosque, near Abbas Abad in Tehran. Iran's cabinet in emergency session. The room smelled of stale coffee and exhaustion.

"We begin," said Supreme Leader Ayatollah Rahimi, who had succeeded Mojtaba Khomeini during the fighting in 2033. He lowered his head. "Allahumma ihdina." May God guide us.

"For three days, Tehran has been without reliable water." he said.

IRGC Major General Amir Rostami replied. "They are terrorists. For thirty years they threatened us. Then sneak attacks, bombing our cities even during negotiations. Since 2026, they have sanctioned our infrastructure repairs. In their bombing attack last week, they took water from twenty million people. Knocked out the pumps at the Jalaliyeh Water Treatment plant. It is gone."

Screens on the wall showed endless lines of civilians carrying plastic containers. Hospitals were rationing water. Firefighters had stopped washing equipment. Neighborhood reservoirs were nearly empty.

The Minister of Health, Dr. Reza Vaziri, looked twenty years older than he had a week earlier.

"We estimate sixty thousand hospital patients are now at risk," he sighed. "Dialysis units are shutting down. Emergency surgeries are being postponed."

The room was silent. Nobody spoke.

The President, Farzad Nouri, stared at an image of a little girl filling a bottle from a muddy drainage canal. "What are the Americans saying?" he asked.

The Foreign Minister answered. "They deny responsibility."

A bitter laugh rolled around the room. Rostani leaned forward. "They struck the pumping stations. They struck the control systems. Whether they admit it or not is irrelevant. Hell, we shot down three of their aircraft."

Outside the palace windows, sirens echoed across the city.

"The reservoirs?" asked President Nouri.

"Three days, perhaps four." replied Vazri.

"And after that?"

The Health Minister hesitated. "After that, people will drink whatever they can find."

Silence. The President looked around the table. "Millions of civilians," he said softly.

"Yes."

"Children."

"Yes."

The commander spoke again. "They have decided that Tehran can die slowly."

The President turned toward the map of the United States. For a long moment he said nothing. Finally:

"They have attacked our people's ability to live."

The Commander Rostami nodded. "And now?"

The President's voice was almost a whisper.

"Now they will learn what dependence feels like. General Hamid, what can we do?"

"Insh'Allah". God willing," replied General Hamid Farhadi, Chief of the Armed Forces. We can... we are sure we can... destroy all their electronics in a single instant."

"EMP," said Rostami. "Pulse! But how?"

"We have the small 10-kiloton A-bomb," replied Farhadi. "The one we got from Pakistan after the USA bombed us in 2033. Small, very light. And we have the Saladin 8 missile. Simple launch, no target, just straight up 100 kilometers!"

"So..."

"So we put the bomb and the missile in an old shipping container. Wrap the bomb with lead to avoid detection. Put the container on a rusty nondescript frieghter, flagged

in some no-name place like Gambia or Cameroon, unload it in the Port of Los Angeles. Which gets 50,000 containers a day. Nobody will notice. Then truck it from LA to Denver. Fire it straight up, and it's lights out America."

"Why Denver?" asked the President. "And when?"

"WERC and ERCOT," said Commander Farhadi. "They have two large power grids in the US. And the Western Interconnection grid and the Eastern Interconnection grid join up right near Denver." he paused. "And when? Well, this is September. We can do it at the start of February next year, 2040."

President Nouri frowned. "You are asking us to cross a line from which there is no return."

Rostami looked around the table. He was a hardliner. "That line was crossed when children in Tehran began standing in line for drinking water."

The Supreme Leader said nothing. Which frightened everyone more than if he had spoken.

"Enteqam az setamkaram," he said slowly. "We are commanded by God to take revenge against evil doers, against injustice. As the Holy Qur'an says, "Whoever defends himself after having been wronged, for such people there is no blame."

President Nouri called for a vote. It was unanimous. And then a closing prayer.

“Insh’Allah. God willing, the operation will succeed, we will have water again soon, and peace will return.”

The room was quiet. Only the faint sounds of Friday prayers from the upstairs mosque worshippers disturbed the silence.

Fort Huachuca, the Transmitter room. Ashford blinked and came fully conscious. Yes, he remembered the Interrupt. Wham. No phones, with the old land-lines long gone. Gas stations couldn’t pump fuel, even for the ancient non-electronic vehicles. Water and sewage systems began to fail. Frozen food melted in stores, restaurants, and homes. Hospitals ran on generators and rationed scarce supplies. And then the American response, sending in the Army in May. Only six short months ago, but it hadn’t worked out.

‘And here I am after we pulled out,’ he thought. ‘With this Tombstone project. And a beautiful lady bending over me.’

“Ash? Ash?” General Debra Wood said. “Wake up.”

“I am, darlin’,” he laughed. “And here, I got somethin’ for you,” handing her the fist-sized chunk of glowing ruthenium rock.

"OMG!" she exclaimed. "You found it. Where?"

"Later," replied Ashford. "After I get some sleep. But it's lookin' pretty good for us right now."

So Not There

Next day, they left the Fort early in a small convoy, two New Jeeps and a Chevy E-Lifter light electric truck. Carrying their supplies. Their weapons. Dressed in informal camouflage-pattern BDUs. It was cold and clear. Along Fry Blvd, past all the boarded-up stores, past all the smashed windows. Then out of Sierra Vista on old Charleston Road to Tombstone, only 20 miles away.

"Watch out for those potholes," warned the General. "Have to keep these vehicles running as long as we can. May not be any more."

"Yes Ma'am," Ashford replied. They crossed the San Pedro River. The bridge was still intact. Start of winter now, with the tall cottonwoods all turned white.

"The river," said Major Valle from the back seat. "Esteban de Dorantes, back in 1539."

"Who was he?"

"A black guy," replied Valle. "A slave. Had a rich owner in México City, who put him in charge of eight soldiers and sent them north to find the Seven Cities of Cibola. To find gold."

"But he was a slave? Put in charge?"

"Sure. Different back then, before capitalism. Where could a slave run away to? No jobs. Same as in old Roman times. Slaves were trusted to run rich folks' affairs. And Esteban was a Moor from Morocco who had been taken to Florida. He escaped and set out to go West to Spanish México with three other men. On foot. He made it, after being enslaved again by Plains Indians for a year. Quite a story."

"So what happened here?" Debra asked.

"General, they came up this river in 1539. About a year before the first Anglos showed up back east, Plymouth Rock, all that. Anyway, they went downriver... the San Pedro flows from south to north... until they came to a bigger river, the Gila. And that's where Esteban sent back a message, 'I have found it'. Then he was killed by the Zuni Indians. But the message got back to México, and in 1540, the very next year, Coronado de Vasquez came up this San Pedro with 1,300 men and the first horses in what we call North America."

"Did he find the gold?" Ashford queried. "I've heard the Spanish were crazy mad for gold and silver."

"They were. And those riches from the New World, once over to Europe, set off the big change from feudalism to capitalism. So much money coming in, so fast! But here,

no. Coronado never found the gold. No Seven Cities, either. Went back to México empty-handed."

"It's Debra, Dan," she said. She looked out the window. "Those people, do we have a situation here?"

There were hundreds of run-down cars and RVs in the parking lots on the other side of the slow-moving stream. Groups of feral-looking young men stood by the road, silently assessing their chances.

"Nope, they won't try anything," said Ash. "Take on the Army? Soldiers? They wouldn't dare. So far." He wasn't concerned. They had their new M8 .12 cal Hyperfires behind the back seat, and the General carried an old Beretta 92 pistol that her Dad used when she was young. 'At least all the people living in those cars have UBI', he thought. \$1,500 a month. Wouldn't get you far, with small apartments now over \$4,000. But Walmart was still in business, took the new EFV food vouchers, and still delivered, even to the homeless camps.

The road wound through the hills south of Tombstone. Hills that prospector Ed Schieffelin was certain held silver, back in March 1878, 'I stopped and took a good look,' he wrote later in *Destination Tombstone*. 'Looked at the hills and formations and made up my mind that if this wasn't a mineral country, I had never seen one. And a day or two later I found the Lucky Cuss.'

The little convoy had an easy drive, no other cars, what with gas holding high at \$8 per gallon, and very few electric cars in rural Cochise County. The road dipped down into Tombstone Gulch, where the mine pumps had discharged more than six million gallons of water each day. Water that kept flowing down to the San Pedro River, adding to the water pressure that kept the stamp mills running. But that was then. And then up a short grade, around a tight curve, and into The Town Too Tough To Die.

Which was surprisingly true. Tombstone was broke, half the stores on Allen Street closed. Most of the others were only open on the weekends. No more dirt on the street, no more bright red stagecoaches. Boardwalk in poor repair. But there was still a steady trickle of tourists going through. Because Tombstone was the only old West town that looked pretty much like its boom days in 1881. Small low buildings, adobe and weathered wood. Classic larger buildings still intact, if crumbling. The Bird Cage Theater, Old City Hall, the Old Courthouse State Park. Frozen in time. And the O.K. Corral. Hollywood hadn't made a Tombstone gunfight movie in 45 years, but the re-created old stables still gave tourists a treat.

"My town," said Debra. "Planned to retire here, back before the Interrupt. Something about the place..."

"Something..." Ash replied. "In a strange way, it just feels like home. Like it's a part of me, and I of it."

Into town. Quick breakfast at the Longhorn, scrambled eggs and synth ham. Hot coffee. And then short walk two blocks over to 5th Street, and then a block down to Toughnut. Half the stores they passed were closed, with broken windows and graffiti on the old walls.

"Gangs," Ashford said. "That's a big change here."

"The Interrupt. No more money," said the General. "They hustle the tourists, shake down the few storeowners still open. Us? Army? In uniform? They won't bother us today."

The Goodenough Silver Mine tour was still open, where Joplin, the manager, was waiting with prospector Bob Ramirez. Ash noticed that she carried a sidearm. 'Tourists often pay with cash,' thought Ashford, 'but Joplin wouldn't be a pushover, not with that Glock in her belt.'

"We're ready," she said. "Generator's on, lights are on."

"Brought my new Gold Bug detector," said Ramirez. "Let's see how it does with that rock of yours." He flicked a switch as the General held out the chunk of ruthenium. The detector chirped loudly.

"Strong signal," he said. "Let's go down, won't be any trouble finding more of it."

But there was. Ashford had no problems finding the short drift off the main stope. Good lighting, and a smooth floor

plus plenty of headroom these days for the tourists. The drift was still there, but... different. Only went back about 20 feet, then the walls narrowed and it closed in.

"Somebody mined it, somewhere over the years?" Ashford asked.

"No," replied Ramirez. "This drift has never been mined. Never drilled, never blasted, never disturbed. No silver, so they never bothered."

"But that's impossible -- " Ash began.

"Not here, Major," the General cut in. "We'll talk about it back at the Fort."

End of the day, marked by a brilliant red-orange Arizona sunset. Reluctantly, Ash drove back to Fort Huachuca. For some unknown reason, he didn't want to leave Tombstone. He looked at the General. She returned his steady gaze.

"Don't we have another dinner date coming?" he asked with a smile.

"Oh, yes," she laughed. "Just as soon as I can get out of these BDUs."

Second Dinner

The dinner crowd had mostly dispersed by the time Major Ashford entered the officers' dining facility. The evening meal was simple: baked chicken, rice, green beans, and a square of apple cobbler that looked as though it had come from an old Army cookbook.

General Debra Mercer was already seated near the window, a cup of coffee in front of her.

She looked up and smiled. "You're late, Ash."

Ashford picked up a tray and sat across from her. "Quantum physicists," he said. "Give them five minutes and they'll explain the universe. Give them an hour and they'll still be explaining it. But Dan Valle makes it easy to understand."

She laughed. "Sounds about right."

Outside the windows, the last light of sunset painted the Huachuca Mountains in shades of gold and purple. For a while they talked about ordinary things. The food. The weather. The young soldiers they went with during the day. Neither mentioned the mission timeline waiting for them soon.

The silence between them became comfortable. Ash realized how rare that was. Most conversations in recent years felt rushed, forced, or burdened with expectations. With Debra there was none of that. She simply listened. As the cafeteria emptied, they carried their coffee to a small private meeting room nearby. Outside in the distance, a bugle sounded retreat. The American flag slowly descended against the darkening cold sky.

"Do you ever think about retiring?" Debra asked. "Where you'd like to live?"

Ash smiled. "I could live in Tombstone," he said. "And, think about retiring? Every Monday."

"And?"

"By Tuesday I'm bored."

She nodded knowingly. "I understand." They looked out the window. Below them, the lights of Sierra Vista began to appear one by one. For several minutes neither spoke.

Finally Debra broke the silence. "You know, everyone thinks courage is charging into danger." Ash looked over at her.

"What is it, then?" She considered the question. "Letting someone matter."

The words settled between them. Ash felt their weight. Both of them carried old losses. Both had spent years building walls strong enough to survive them. Yet somehow those walls seemed less important tonight.

Debra slipped her hand into his. The gesture was simple. And surprisingly brave.

The stars were beginning to emerge above the mountains. For a long while they sat together.

Eventually Debra turned toward him.

"You're thinking again."

Ash chuckled. "Occupational hazard."

"About the mission? Going back again?"

"Partly."

"And the other part?"

He looked at her. "The other part is sitting beside me."

Debra smiled. "I was afraid you were going to say something intelligent."

"I'm saving that for tomorrow."

She laughed softly. Ash reached up and gently brushed a strand of hair from her face. For a moment they simply looked at one another.

Neither was young anymore. Neither was interested in games. Life had taught both of them how quickly happiness could disappear.

Debra leaned forward first. Their kiss was gentle and unhurried. Not driven by passion so much as affection. Trust. Understanding. When they finally pulled apart, neither moved very far. Debra rested her forehead lightly against his.

"That was nice," she whispered.

"It was."

A second kiss followed. Then another. Soft. Patient. Neither felt any need to rush.

Tomorrow would still be there. The mission would still be there. Tonight belonged to them. Eventually they rose and walked back toward the officers' quarters. They stopped at Debra's door. She squeezed his hand.

"We should probably be sensible."

"Probably," Ash said softly.

Debra smiled. "Good night, Ash."

"Good night, Debra."

They shared one final kiss. Then she stepped inside. Ash stood beneath the porch light for a moment, watching the

door close. For the first time in a very long while, the future felt like more than duty and sacrifice.

For the first time, it felt like hope.

A Walk In the Park

Breakfast the next day.

"You have any vacation time stored up?" Ashford asked.

"I do, Debra said. Months!"

"Me too. How about a few days off? Right now? Hit the beach in San Diego?"

She thought for a moment. This would kick their relationship to a whole new level. And she was ready for that. "Let's do it," she smiled. "Today's the 28th. As long as we are back by November 8th or 9th. Because we will need a week to train you for what comes next." She paused. Then "Let's go right now. It's only 7:30, we can be there by tonight."

The drive from Fort Huachuca was longer than either of them expected. 10 hours to get to San Diego. Traffic near Tucson had been heavy. Construction outside Yuma had slowed them even further. By the time Major Ashford guided the rental car across the bridge into Coronado, the sun was sinking into the Pacific.

Neither of them had much energy left. But neither wanted the day to end.

Their suite occupied the upper floor of the old Spreckels Mansion, a beautifully restored hotel overlooking Glorietta Bay. A brass-gated private elevator carried them directly to their rooms.

The suite was magnificent. Tall windows framed the evening skyline of San Diego. Soft lights glowed against polished wood floors. Beyond a set of French doors, a rooftop terrace offered a sweeping view of the harbor and the distant ocean. It was much warmer than Sierra Vista, with a hot Santa Ana breeze coming in from the east.

Debra walked slowly to the railing. "Not exactly Army housing."

Ash laughed. "Not even close."

The last colors of sunset lingered over the water. For several minutes they stood together in comfortable silence, watching the lights of the city appear one by one. The exhaustion of the day seemed to melt away. Eventually they returned inside.

A bottle of wine sat unopened on a table.

Neither touched it.

Neither needed it.

The evening itself was intoxicating enough.

Debra kicked off her shoes and curled up beside Ash on a large sofa overlooking the harbor. Conversation drifted easily from one subject to another. Childhood memories. Old assignments. Friends they had lost. Dreams they had never shared with anyone else. Hours passed without either noticing.

At some point Debra rested her head against his shoulder.

Ash slipped an arm around her. The gesture felt natural. As though they had been doing it for years. Outside, the city lights shimmered across the dark water. Inside, the world seemed wonderfully distant.

Debra tilted her head and looked at him. The smile in her eyes told him everything he needed to know. Their kiss was slow and tender. Not rushed. Not driven by urgency. Simply two people who had spent too much of their lives alone.

The years between them seemed to disappear. The burdens of command. The fears about tomorrow. The complex mission waiting in the future.

All of it faded. There was only this moment. Only this room. Only the quiet certainty that they had found something rare.

Much later they stood together at the bedroom window, looking out over the sleeping city.

Debra slipped her hand into his.

"Whatever happens next," she said softly, "I'm glad we had this."

Ash squeezed her hand. Then kissed it. "So am I."

Then they closed the curtains on the city lights and left the future outside for one precious night.

Together. Exactly where they wanted to be.

The next morning, he rented a boogie board, and they hit a few small waves on the beach at the famous Hotel Del Coronado, a short walk away. The Pacific was warm, a sheet of hammered silver with small four-foot rollers marching steadily toward shore, their tops feathering white in the Santa Ana breeze.

"You expect a General Officer to do this?" she laughed.

Ashford grinned. "Rule One. Don't fight the ocean. See a wave coming, turn toward the shore. Paddle like mad. The wave will catch you and carry you in. Try this one."

She skimmed across the face of the wave, white water spraying around her. When Ash reached her, she was standing knee-deep in the water, soaked, and grinning like a teenager. For a moment she looked years younger,

free of responsibility, free of rank, free of the burdens she carried every day. Just a woman laughing in the surf.

Afterwards, they went into the Hotel Del for breakfast, picking their way through the tents and homeless on the lawn near the back doors. The classic hotel dated from 1888, a formal addition to a duck-hunting camp that was across San Diego Bay from the city.

"No plans," Ashford laughed. "They just... built it." He looked around. "Not much else here," he said. "How about we drive over to Balboa Park? It's a beautiful place."

And only a few minutes away, plenty of parking, and not many tourists, with gas at \$12 in the coastal California cities. They walked past the big fountain down the Prado, an avenue with Spanish-style buildings built in 1915 for the Pan-Pacific Exposition.

"Let me show you my favorite painting," he said, guiding her into the small but exquisite Timken Museum. 'Castine Harbor and Town', by American artist Fitz Henry Lane."

"It's very soft, very dreamy," she said. "So peaceful." Outside, they passed up a major exhibit about Aztec human sacrifices at the large San Diego Museum of Art. Don't need that today, they agreed.

They strolled along the broad walkway between the museums. Palm trees swayed overhead. A street

musician played guitar near a fountain. Children chased pigeons across the plaza.

For once, neither of them was talking about the mission. Debra was describing a painting she had seen earlier.

But Ash was only half listening. Something had caught his attention.

Four men.

About thirty yards ahead. They were pretending not to watch him. But they were. Years of military experience had taught him that much.

One was leaning against a wall. Two stood near a vendor cart. The fourth had stopped beside a trash can. Individually, they looked casual. Together, they formed a loose semicircle across the walkway.

Ash felt his pulse quicken. A familiar sensation. The world sharpening around the edges.

Debra noticed immediately.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Four men."

She followed his gaze. "I see them."

"Keep walking."

“Problem?”

“Probably.” Ash exhaled.

The men began moving. Not fast. Confident. The largest stepped directly into Ash’s path.

“Excuse me,” the man said.

His tone suggested the opposite. Ash stopped. Debra halted beside him. The other three continued drifting closer. Closing angles. Closing exits. Ash already knew how it would unfold.

The leader smiled. “Got a minute?”

“No.”

The smile disappeared. The first shove came an instant later. Not hard. More of a test. Just enough to establish dominance.

A mistake.

Ash had spent 15 years around soldiers, street criminals, and hostile insurgents. He recognized trouble before it happened.

The man’s shoulders tightened. His weight shifted forward. His right hand clenched. The punch was coming.

Ashford moved first.

His left hand shot out, seizing the front of the man's shirt. At the same instant, his right fist drove forward. The punch landed squarely in the man's midsection. All the air left him. The man's eyes widened. He folded over instinctively, unable to breathe. Ash released him. He dropped to one knee, gasping.

The second attacker rushed in immediately. Too fast. Too angry. Ash pivoted and delivered a short, compact punch to the side of the man's jaw. Nothing flashy. Just solid mechanics and perfect timing. The man's legs seemed to forget their purpose. He sat down abruptly on the pavement.

The third attacker stopped. Suddenly uncertain.

The fourth wasn't. He charged. Ash stepped inside the attack. A hard shoulder drove into the man's chest. Momentum did the rest.

The attacker staggered backward and collided with his friend. Both lost their balance. Both hit the ground. For a moment nobody moved. The entire fight had taken less than ten seconds. The leader was still on one knee trying to catch his breath. Another was sitting on the pavement looking dazed. The remaining two were scrambling to their feet.

Ash stood calmly between them and Debra. Not breathing hard. Not angry. Simply waiting. The four men looked at one another. Then they made the only intelligent decision they had made all day. They left. Quickly.

Debra watched them disappear into the crowd. Then she looked at Ash.

"How many fights have you been in?"

Ash considered the question. "Too many," he said.

"You hit very hard."

"Only when people insist."

Debra slipped her arm through his.

"Remind me never to shove you."

Together, they continued down the Prado as though nothing unusual had happened. Balboa Park was beautiful, even with more than 5,000 homeless people. But there was plenty of space, and the tent residents themselves kept things in order, as best they could.

They walked over to the famous Zoo, next to the Arboretum. Ash led her down a pathway, and the Bengal tiger was still there, pacing back and forth on its side of a plate glass window. Watching them, as they watched it.

"Break that glass," said Ash, "And we're lunch." He looked around. "You know what? How about we drive up the coast? We have what, seven or eight more days before we have to get back. I know California, and would love to show it to you. The secret places tourists never see."

"But the Interrupt... the riots, the disorder..."

"That was nine months ago," he replied. "February. This is a rich state. I'll bet it's better now. And all that fake news, we'll be the only tourists."

She considered his proposal. But only for a few moments. Then "Yes! I'd love that! All the way to the redwoods?"

"Yes. Just one thing," he cautioned. "Keep your pistol under the front seat, out of sight. Cali's not exactly a 2nd Amendment state."

Reconquista

"Cali?" she asked. "You call California... Cali?"

"Most people do, these days. Half the folks here are Hispanic," he explained. "Including me. A little, anyway."

"Ashford", she laughed. "So... Castiliano."

"On my mother's side. A descendent of a Yankee sailor, Dan Hill, back in 1825. He jumped ship and married Rafaela Luisa Ortega, muy romantico. They had eight children, and my grandmother was from one of those lines. Cali was Mexican back then. Going back that way today."

"You OK with that?" she asked.

"I don't care," he replied. "The kids call it Reconquista. The re-conquest. Cali going back to its past. Truth is, we just don't know. Story is that the Aztecs – the México -- set out from the valley of Los Angeles around the year 1300. Their god Huitzilopochtli told them to go south until they saw an eagle on a cactus, holding a serpent. Which they did, in what we call the Valley of México, and

they built their large city Tenochtitlan there. Today's México City, 25 million people."

"Reconquista, now?"

"Yes, but nobody except some of the left-wing Hispanic kids cares. México is in a much bigger mess than we are. Totally dead broke. Their last president fled to Dubai with half their treasury."

They exchanged their gasoline-engine Chevy for one of the new BYD Seal electric cars. Ashford wasn't particularly excited about going Chinese, but he grudgingly allowed that the car's AI self-driving made for a fast and pleasant trip up to Los Angeles. 700 miles range, and charging stations everywhere.

In the heart of LA, they stopped to see the Watts Towers, 17 interconnected sculptural spires, mosaics, and structures made by Italian immigrant Simon Rodia back around 1950. Folk art, still intact and preserved in 2040. On benches nearby, a local gang, about 20 young black guys sitting around, nothing going on. Ashford walked over.

"Wahchu doin' here, white boy?" asked one of the young men. Teasing, not threatening.

"Army," said Ashford. "Vacation. Here from Arizona. What's going on? No jobs for you guys?"

"Hell no, mister. Not a damn thing. We black."

"That still a problem here? In Arizona, it's the Chinese comin' in."

"Yeah, they here too. And they don't like us any more than you whites do."

Ashford laughed. "Buddy, I've got a deal for you. Sweet! Join my Army! Good food, good quarters, and damn near zero racism."

Another teenager spoke up. "But you guys got shot up over in Iran this summer. Why would we want to go into that meatgrinder?"

"So hedge your bets," Ash said. "Actually, only about one in ten of us is a combat soldier. Don't have a non-combat skill? We will teach you. For free! Army schools. Computers, AI, electronics, mechanics. Everything."

"They won't want us," the young guy responded forlornly. "We poor. We black. Jus' look around, all them busted cars. No money, we sleepin' on the street."

Ashford got very serious. Walked over to the kid, put a hand on his shoulder, looked him right in the eye. "What's your name, son?"

"Tyshon," said the teenager. "They call me Ty."

Ash spoke slowly, in full command presence mode. "Ty, the Army wants you. My name's Major Ashford, and I and the General over there are ordering you and your friends to go to an Army recruiter and sign up." He paused, then said quietly, "Guys, we are desperate. The Interrupt and then the war really threw us for a loop. Your country needs you. No joke."

Tyshon responded. "I wish - I wish I knew about electricity. How it works. How to repair electric motors. Even, how to design them."

"Can do, soldier," Ash exclaimed. "Damn, you join up, we'll have you working on the latest AI vehicles in no time flat. First school, then in the field! Tip of the spear, you'll be the best." He thought for a moment. "Sounds like you might have something we really value. You enjoy working with both your hands and your mind. So tell that recruiter you want to be an EE."

"What's that," asked Tyshon. "EE?"

"Electrical Engineer," replied Ashford. "Four-year college degree, Army pays all your costs. Wish I could sign you up right now. We are so short, so short of EE's to design new Autonomous vehicles. Better than the ones we had in Iran. And new drones, with longer flight times and instinctive target seeking."

"I can't do none o' that," said the yong man. "We poor. Teacher said I was stupid."

"Teacher don' know shit," Ashford replied angrily. "Never worked out here in our world. Probably laid off by now, AI doin' her job." He paused. "Look, Ty. I was like you. Forget color. We were so poor. I had no idea about the world outside my neighborhood. In a street gang, we fought poor kids from the other neighborhoods. Stole stuff, stole cars. But then I turned 18, got drunk one day, and went to join the Army. They took a chance on me. Changed my life. Will change yours, too."

"She a General?" asked another boy. "Stone fox!"

"Sure am," Debra laughed. "And I'm his boss. Tell your girlfriends about the Army. Great place for young women. You all sign up, we'll get you out of this dump so fast your heads will spin!"

They drove off, with the BYD on AutoDrive to get them over to the ocean at Santa Monica. The old pier was gone, destroyed in a winter storm, no money to rebuild it.

"You think we got through to them?" Debra asked dispiritedly. "That hopelessness..."

"Don't know," said Ash. "But those teachers..." he shook his head. "Used to be three million of 'em," he said. "Today, maybe only 400,000. AI went through that profession like a harvester goin' through a corn field."

"I wonder where they all went," said Debra.

"Over there," said Ash. "And there, and there," he said, pointing to the broken-down RVs lining the sides of the highway. "Wasn't just the the teachers. Used to have three million truck drivers, too," he said as an 18-wheel self-driving Freightliner rolled past them in the high-speed lane.

"They all on UBI, also?" asked Debra.

"Yeah. The lucky ones got those refitted shipping containers. The Stacks, five high. Shared kitchens, baths, free government media. Keeps 'em quiet, so they won't slaughter the One Percenters. Hey, here's the Coast Highway."

End of October, dry and warm, no rain, no mudslides blocking the road. He pulled over at Sunset Drive, and switched from AutoDrive to YouDrive. Suddenly, the BYD Seal responded to his every input like a racing car. So fast, pure power, no transmission to slow down acceleration. Luckily, the other cars on Highway 1 up through Malibu kept him from really letting the BYD rip. Stopped for coffee at a decrepit Starbucks at Trancas Canyon Road, enjoying the truly eclectic Hollywood mix of producers, actors, grips, students, and homeless. 'UBI's better in Cali,' Ashford remembered. '\$2,200. Order that latte!'

They drove past Zuma Beach. "Good surf here," noted Ashford. "Heavy, punchy waves, and both left and right breaks. Friendly to outsiders, too."

Then up past Ventura to Santa Barbara. A wealthy town, with electricity restored. Still had overtones of Old California. The Catholic mission, half-crumbled in an 1812 earthquake, was open again for worshippers. They found their place for the night, the classic Biltmore on Butterfly Beach in Montecito. Owned by Shangri-La Hotels out of Shenzhen these days, immaculately maintained.

"\$850 a night?" said Ashford. "we can afford this?"

"Of course. Over there, you got extra combat pay for a few months, didn't you?"

'Never argue with a General,' Ashford thought. They checked in. The room was lovely. The service was excellent. Another romantic night, and then hot chocolate on the terrace in the warm morning sun. Sun coming in low, streaming like fall magic through the everpresent eucalyptus trees, through the spreading palms.

"Isn't that British prince still here?" asked Debra. "With his wife, the actress?"

"He is," said Ash. "Older now. But her series, 'Breakfast with the Windsors', is still a streaming hit."

"Speaking of breakfast, here or at Charlie Chaplin's Hotel on the main street?"

"Here," he replied. "Bad of me, but it's nice to be in a place with no desperate homeless."

Which didn't last. As they drove out of town, they passed thousands of tents along the beach by the sea, and hundreds more at the Moreton Bay Fig Tree park by the old train station. Yes, Santa Barbara was definitely a very rich One Percenter homeplace. But here they had heart, gave great amounts of money to the city and private services, and at least folks were getting by. Somehow.

Up the coast. Passed on the wineries near Solvang, and then cut inland to Lompoc and over a very old rutted road to... Surf.

"You're joking," laughed Debra. "There's nothing here. No houses, nothing."

"Sure there is," Ash said. "What do you see?"

"Well, there's a train stop. Sign, anyway, but no platform. Right on the beach."

"That's it! Surf, California! Train stops here once a day, each way. Surfer heaven. Have your beach fires without cops. Decent waves."

"But Amtrak surely didn't build this stop for a few surfers," she frowned.

"Nope. This is where they dropped off prisoners, guards, and supplies for Lompoc Federal Prison. Plus more supplies for Vandenberg Space Force base, just a few miles further north. Surf! Best place in the world to watch an evening missile launch."

They continued up the coast, passing San Luis Obispo and Cambria to get to Big Sur. The Big South, a wild coast with Highway One hacked into the sheer cliffs above the raging waves. Stayed for a night at the lovely old Ragged Point Inn with its wonderful dinner menu, then up past Gorda-By-The-Sea with its \$15 gas station.

"Only place between here an' Carmel," said the owner. "'Cept, you got one o' them 'lectric cars. Can't sell you any o' my gas."

The town of Big Sur was worn down and shabby. But the restaurant at the Big Sur Lodge hotel was open, for coffee, a snack, and a brief walk through the towering redwood trees. Then they drove north again, past Point Sur where the huge US Navy airship USS Macon had gone down in 1935. Past Carmel and Monterey, then past Santa Cruz. Staying on Highway One, further up the rocky coast to Half Moon Bay.

Ashford stopped to stretch his legs. "I played here once in high school," he said, pointing to the town's little football stadium. "Fog! Gopher holes! We were lucky to get back to San Fran in one piece." he pointed. "And right over there, at Pillar Point Harbor, you can catch a ride out

to the surf break called Mavericks. Winter swells up to 60 feet high. Rip currents, and the great white sharks love the place."

"Did you ever surf here?" asked Debra, with a very worried look on her face.

"No," he said. "Grew up poor, and the water is usually too cold up north here. Not something for city kids. Didn't pick it up 'til I lived near San Diego, much later. But Mavericks? For me? Never. Way scary!"

San Fran

By early afternoon, they came into San Francisco. The freeways were overrun with homeless people sleeping on the roadways, so they took 19th Street up through Golden Gate Park into the Richmond District.

“Got a treat for ya,” Ash smiled. He drove along Geary street over to 34th, and then north to the Palace of the Legion of Honor Museum. In perfect repair, Alma Spreckels’ fortune still paying dividends every year since 1924. “She was Adolph Spreckels’ wife,” said Ash. “The C&H sugar magnate. He built that beautiful place we stayed at in Coronado. It was the first Cali all-concrete large building, because he’d survived the 1906 earthquake here in SF, when all the brick buildings just collapsed.”

They walked briefly through the Museum, stopping for a quick look at the permanent Hokusai exhibition of Utagawa Hiroshige’s 1800-era drawings. Their favorite, which had her blushing, was Hiroshige’s 1814 blockprint called ‘The Dream of the Fisherman’s Wife’, with a lady passionately, deeply embraced in a sexual situation with two octopi.

"Oh!" exclaimed Debra. "Oh, my! Ash, will you do that to me?"

"Might just," he laughed, "You'll taste OK."

Coffee and an ice cream in the museum basement café. Two men talking high-tech nearby. A third man came over. "Can't find anyone to do prompts," he said sadly. "We'll pay 250 to start, but I can't find anyone."

Ash laughed. "You need to talk to Dan," he said. "My friend, Dan Valle. "He can teach your AI how to write its own prompts. Good at matrix math, too..."

"Ash," Debra warned, "you can't..."

"You're right," he said. "Forget it, mister."

"But listen!" the man exclaimed. "Matrix math, we'll go 500K. Per year. To start! What's the problem here?"

"We're Army," said Debra. "Sorry, not for sale."

Outside, they walked past the large bronze Rodin 'The Thinker' statue, one of 27 castings made in 1904. Walked along El Camino Del Mar and the Coastal Trail, suddenly able to see the Golden Gate Bridge in all its glory from the ocean side, afternoon sun enhancing its red rust-prevention paint with a golden glow.

"Surprised the Iranians didn't hit it," said the General.

"Could've," said the Major, both thinking militarily for a moment. "Those two piers, in the water near each shore. I'd blow those. But the Denver attack caused much more damage. Knockout punch."

It only took a short drive to get to the city side of the bridge. They parked at Marina Green, a long grassy park by the Bay. Little tendrils of fog were drifting in from the sea, and then the long string of bright orange foglights lit up on the Bridge, in aid of the evening just a few hours ahead. Nearby, a chattering group of about 20 rich Chinese tourists, near their pricey SAIC Red Flag electric rental SUVs. All dressed in the latest expensive fashions. Top quality leather, and the finest natural silks. Gold chains, bracelets, and earrings. 'Money to burn,' Ashford thought pensively. 'Now that their Zhongguo "Middle Kingdom" is the richest country in the world.'

They sat on a weathered concrete bench, watching the fast sailboats rise up on their hydrofoils, sails taut, racing at 70 mph across the slightly choppy water.

"Too fast for me," Ash said. "Even with the lidar wave-ahead sensors micro-adjusting the foils. Hit a swell, and you'll flip right over."

Suddenly, a sharp sound. Behind them. From their car. A man, tall, heavy, dressed in black. With a black shielded helmet. Black gloves. Black boots. With him, a young woman in a black shirt and black jeans. And a black face mask.

"Neo-Antifa," said Ashford. "Still peddling that old San Fran woke shit. Masks so they won't be identified on the street cams. Oh hell, he's going after our car."

The masked man raised a billy club, getting ready to smash the BYD's windshield.

"Halt!" Ash yelled. "Stop right there!"

"Fuckin' rich tourists!" yelled the man. And he charged right at Ashford, club held high.

'No time,' thought Ashford, pulling out the little .41 derringer he had brought back from Tombstone. 'No time.' Waited two seconds until the man was only 10 feet away, then shot him in the arm. The man dropped the wooden club, screaming in pain. The woman came running over.

"You shot him!" she cried. "With a gun!"

Ashford held the little pistol steady, pointing it right at her.

"Don't push him," said Debra. "Or you're next. Better wrap something around that guy's arm."

The masked woman wasn't listening. "You shot him," she repeated. "You can't have a gun. Not here in Cali. It's against the law! I'm going to call the police!"

"What?" Debra sputtered. "He was trying to brain my guy, and we can't take him down?"

"Not with a gun," the woman wailed. "This is San Fran. No guns! Never!"

The man groaned. A small puddle of bright red blood contrasted vividly with the lush Marina Green grass. 'Just like that old Western movie', Ashford thought. 'Heaven's Gate'. Where the director painted a patch of dry tan prairie grass bright green to enhance the frequently flowing Indian and cowboy blood. Didn't help, movie still lost money.' He looked at the man. Still bleeding.

"Get him to a hospital. Right now!" he cracked out the order. The woman hooked an arm around the man and they staggered off, as she yelled again about calling the cops.

Ash looked at Debra. "I don't believe this place. Sure wasn't like this when I grew up here."

"Major," ordered the General, "Get us out of here. Cameras all over. Witnesses. I'm cancelling our vacation right now. We just can't take a chance..."

"That they'll pull us in for questioning. Might take weeks to get back..." he paused. "Got that, Debra. Time to git."

"It's OK, Ash. After I saw all those redwood trees at Big Sur, I'm a happy camper."

He backed the BYD out onto Marina Blvd, and they drove east across the near-bankrupt city. Dodging tents on six-lane Lombard Street, trash all over, so many broken vehicles on a road to nowhere, oozing radiator fluid, flat tires shredding. All the stores and shops boarded up.

"Hell," said Ashford. "Let's do it." He drove up to the top of Russian Hill, where Lombard St. starts its tight, curvy descent past some very rich homes down to the Italian North Beach neighborhood at the bottom.

Man with a shotgun. "Stop right there," he said. "No tourists. Don't want no homeless here."

"Understood," said Debra. But we're Army. I'm General Mercer, on vacation from Arizona. And this is Major Ashford, my driver."

The man lowered the shotgun and stepped aside. "My pleasure, ma'am," he said. "Were you in Iran?"

"No," she replied, looking over at Ashford. "But he was."

"I was there in '33, said the guard. "Marines. 31st MEU. Went in at Bandar Abbas, held the beach, but we couldn't get in past the hills. All those damn drones. Sure, go on down," he continued. "But don't bother going to Fisherman's Wharf. Not one store open. Alioto's,

Tarantino's, all those fine old restaurants, all gone. People camping everywhere now, even in the old Aquatic Park Museum."

It was true. Fisherman's Wharf was out of business. Just a few t-shirt shops, no tourists. Nearby, where the Powell-Hyde cable cars came down from Nob Hill, the famous Buena Vista Café was quiet and almost empty. Ash remembered how his grandmother had loved the place. A Red Communist in the 1930s, she enjoyed the writers, artists, poets, and radical bohemians that made the little bar so special. But that was then. No more unions now, and no more people like his grandmother to stick up for all the jobless workers.

At the bottom, they drove down Broadway into the old financial district. High-rise office buildings. Homeless living on the lower floors, laundry hanging out the broken windows. And one 50-story old condo, leaning perilously to one side.

"They never got the foundation down to bed rock," explained Ashford. "The Bay used to come in this far. In 1849, hundreds of wood sailing ships were abandoned here. Left to rot, because the crews left to go to the Sierra gold fields. Under the ships, there's just mud down about 100 feet. And then came the earthquake in 1906. The city just shoved all the broken bricks and wood and stones and plaster on top of the rotting hulks. Later on, when all the crap had settled, they paved the whole area over. End of the last century, it became a very expensive financial

district. All that's gone now, with what's left of the Pacific Stock Exchange moved south to Silicon Valley."

"But," said Debra with alarm, "That leaning skyscraper. Ash, don't get too close!"

"It's OK right now," he laughed. "But in the next quake..."

They picked up the on-ramp to the silver Bay Bridge. Two of the three lanes on each side were packed with homeless. Drove past the exit to Treasure Island, where the large Pan American seaplanes had moored before World War Two, before setting off across the Bay on their long trips to Japan. 'Best view of downtown San Francisco, here from TI,' thought Ashford. 'City did well to make it an encampment. Great place for 25,000 out-of-luck people.'

Over the Bay Bridge to Oakland, where they picked up the 880 freeway going south. They weren't stopped by the police.

"Guess she never called the cops." Debra said.

"But we can't take a chance," Ash replied. They drove through San Jose, heart of the high-tech empire that made California the 4th-largest economy in the world. No homeless here. The downtown streets perfectly clean, nobody sleeping in doorways. No abandoned vehicles.

Perfectly-cut green fake grass lining the sidewalks. Outdoor restaurants full of prosperous business people.

“Another world,” said Debra.”

“Sure is. They are so rich here. \$500K salaries, bonuses, \$10 million 4,000 sq ft houses. Buy those new Cadillac Energetics for \$800,000 cash. All the money in the world, right here.”

Further south, a smooth drive past Salinas into farming country. Steinbeck’s East of Eden. The other half of Cali’s economic miracle, after how years ago, they fought off a fruitless Federal government attempt to deport all the illegal farm workers. He put the BYD back into AutoDrive. Its front-facing lidar saw the potholes coming, with the AI car suspension’s predictive algorithms instantly adjusting the shock absorbers and springs in milliseconds.

Several hundred miles of lush fertile fields, with well-paid workers hand-picking the valuable crops and lugging the vegetables to fieldside quick-freeze vehicles. Green gold. He pulled off at a Cracker Barrel restaurant for a recharge. “Still a few of these places left,” he said.

“Love the food, love the gift shop,” laughed Debra, as she bought a small teddy bear for Major Valle. “It talks in Chinese. ‘Nǐ shì wǒ zuì hǎo de péngyǒu! You are my best friend! It’ll drive him nuts.”

Past the central San Joaquin Valley farmland, they made good time, the BYD's AutoDrive clicking off the miles, navigating them out of Los Angeles on Interstate 10 going east. They stopped in Palm Springs for coffee, sitting outside Sherman's Deli, enjoying the light water spray from the awning that kept them cool in the Santa Ana heat.

"I like Palm Springs," Ashford said. "Back before Hollywood cratered, this is where all the stars came. Want to see a secret place?"

They drove down 111 to the 86, then past the Salton Sea, its shore crusty with dried salt. "Colorado River water's cut back again," he said. "Tough place to live. But rent's a lot cheaper than in the cities. Indians here rent out these crappy shacks to poor whites."

Ashford turned inland, heading west into the desert, to Borrego Springs and The Palms at Indian Head resort on Hoberg Road. Built in 1947. "They all came here," he said. "All the stars. Secretly. Because Palm Springs was too public. Out here, they had no restraints, no boundaries. Marilyn Monroe and Bing Crosby swimming nude in the pool? All the time. Quite a place. And still secret."

"I love it," said Debra, taking in the large lobby with its classic 1950s décor. Chrome-trimmed furniture. Low-slung sofas and chairs in turquoise, coral, avocado green, and mustard yellow surrounded glass-topped coffee tables.

"Let's stay here tonight! I think we're clear of the cops," Debra exclaimed. "I love this place!"

Their restored room with its king-size bed was only \$350. It was so relaxing, and so comfortable. As the sun went down behind the mountains to the west, she stripped to her underwear and plunged into the pool. Ash dived in right after her, and they swam back and forth like two dolphins. No, more like two movie stars back in the day in their secret place, hidden under the countless desert stars from the fans and reporters and flashbulb photographers with their ungainly Speed Graphic film cameras.

End of their vacation. Next day, after a sumptuous avacado toast and bacon breakfast, they were on the road again. Back past Ocotillo Wells to 86, and then south to El Centro and east on Interstate 8.

"El Centro. Used to be the heroin capital of America," said Debra. "Great stuff, did you know that Bayer brought it to market in 1898? Better than morphine. Safer! The good old days. But illegal since 1913. Can't get it on the street today, not since the FDA brought out HappyStone. Depresses the central nervous system, just like heroin and fentanyl and the other opiates. You get every bit as high, but it is not physically addictive. New chemistry. It doesn't cross the blood-brain barrier. Psychologically addictive? Sure. But who cares. Nobody's died yet from using it. Better to have the homeless drugged and

peaceful, instead of angry and rioting. For two years now, they've given HappyStone out free to anyone who asks."

Same as before, there was very little traffic on I-8. They drove east past thousands of windmills and solar panels, before crossing back into Arizona at Yuma. Stopped for a coffee at the Space Age Lodge in Gila Bend.

"We should stay here sometime," Debra laughed.

"Rooms aren't much," Ashford replied. "but that alien in the restaurant is really something." She reached over and put a hand in his lap. "I'm your Alien," she whispered. "And we are so good with our hands," she said softly, touching him. "Earthling, what's this? So... hard."

Reluctantly, they got back on the freeway. After joining up with I-10, they stopped for a late lunch at the historic 1931 Arizona Inn on Elm Street in Tucson. Another special place, with its gracious Audubon Bar and Patio. They loved the large old library with probably a thousand rare hardcover books, and the soft sofas and armchairs.

"I could sit here and read all day," she said, carefully opening an old copy of Claire Van Cleve's 'Master Drawings of the Italian Renaissance'. "My God, could they ever draw!"

Ashford held out a hand. "Up," he said. "We'll come back another time. But we should get back before dark."

Which made sense, since Tucson wasn't doing too well. Hundreds of huge old pickup trucks roaring along Speedway and Broadway, clouds of black diesel exhaust settling on the sidewalk tent campers. Small groups of angry young men and women on the street corners, cursing the unfeeling state government that had recently cut back their homeless benefits. The sun was setting in the west as they got back on Interstate 10, leaving the dilapidated city behind as they went east past Houghton Road.

Two hours later, they were back in Sierra Vista. Back to Fort Huachuca. Back to the mission.

And for Ash, back to Tombstone.

Quantum Redux

The next day. November 1st, 2040, Fort Huachuca. A small conference room. Major Valle playing with his teddy bear. Major Ashford and General Mercer studying a big wall calendar.

"We have a problem," said the General anxiously.

"Sure do," said Ashford. "It was there, a whole ruthenium vein, in 1881."

"So nobody took it, nobody mined it, what's going on here? Where did it go? Ash, we have to find those rocks. Have to!"

"There's a possibility," Major Dan Valle said slowly. "Quantum redux. Revisited. That ruthenium might be caught in the same spacetime anomaly as H.F. Sills. Like, he was there, but now he's not. Qubits from hell."

"We've got two weeks," the General said. "and a bit more. You don't want to go back there before you have to, Ash."

"Roger that," Ashford replied. "I want to go on the night of Wednesday the 16th. Your Transmitter seems to like Wednesdays."

"And then?" asked Dan Valle.

"Then we know that on Thursday or Friday they will serve H.F Sills with the inquest demand. That he must testify on Tuesday and Wednesday, November 22nd and 23rd. So I have to be there that Thursday and Friday, to be served."

"Easy enough," said Valle.

"But I have a better idea," said Ashford.

"What?" asked the General anxiously.

"When I go back again on the night of November 16th for the inquest, I can send the ruthenium back here somehow," Ashford said. He paused for a moment. "Shouldn't be difficult. I'll get Davenport to help me mine the vein, then load the ruthenium ore on the Transmitter. Just the pieces of broken rock. If we take it to the stamp mill to crush into powder, might not work. But we know we can send rocks, like this one." He held up the chunk of ruthenium. "It'll hold 500 pounds, right?"

"Yes," said Major Valle. "It will. You could do that." He paused. "Will it work? Look, I'm supposed to be the quantum genius here. Truth be told, I'm not. The matrix

math to shift the qubits is very strange. Very deep, at the edge of our understanding. Because AI itself wrote the algorithms. The quantum core contains billions of entangled qubits performing spacetime calculations impossible with any conventional computer. Ash, we can only take a best guess, and that's about it."

"And we have time to put another Transmit switch on the outside shell," the General said. "So you can send it without being in it. But then, how are you going to get back?"

"Let's see," Ashford calculated. "As H.F. Sills, I have to be in Tombstone on the night of November 16th. A Wednesday evening, about two weeks from now. Because the inquest record says that I'll be called to testify on either Thursday the 17th or Friday the 18th. And then, if there is still no real H.F. Sills, I'll testify at the inquest for two days, on Tuesday the 22nd and Wednesday November 23rd. H.F. Sills vanishes from history after that."

"So when would you ship the ruthenium?" asked Major Valle.

"Should take two days or less to break down that vein," Ashford calculated. "For only 500 pounds of ore. So on Thursday I'll make a deal with Davenport for two days of mining, on Friday and Saturday. And we'll send the rocks back on Sunday evening, Sunday the 20th, at 9 PM. Same spot, from the Dexter Corral. Which would give your

Transmitter three days to recharge, before coming back again on the evening of Wednesday the 23rd to bring me home. Is that enough time for the device to reset?"

"Yes. General, I think this will work," said Valle.

"Just one thing," said Ashford. "I'll send back those rocks. But the act of that may – may change, may alter, life here. Will I come back to a very different America? After the ruthenium restores the power grid, will you folks still be here at Fort Huachuca?"

The General and Major Valle looked at each other. "We should be OK," said Valle. "We can put the rocks on ice until you return. Stored safely. No experiments, no tests. Locked up, even though the energy guys will want them desperately. But they can wait a few days, right? Ash, that's about as good as we can make it. We should be OK."

The next two weeks went by quickly, but with a surprise. The General came by during training.

"Listen up!" she ordered. "Visitors coming. Top brass. We have an hour before they fly in. Dress Blues, gentlemen. See you on the flight line at 11."

Which came as quickly as the supersonic Boeing Spaceliner, a military C-9 transport roaring in from the east for a perfect landing on the Fort's Libby Airfield.

"Glad you patched that runway, Debra?" Ashford joked.

"Sssh. Be good, Major."

Three people deplaned from the C-9. Debra saluted. "Soldiers, this is Juan Ciscomani, our Secretary of Defense. Fiona De Young, our CIA Director. And you already know Joe Ford, Army Chief of Staff."

'Something big going on,' Ashford thought. He straightend up and saluted. They went inside the hanger.

"Can't stay long," Ciscomani said. He was in his late sixties, a hard-working career politician who had somehow survived the MAGA wars over the last two decades. "Half-an-hour. Then we're wheels up for DC, more talks with the Iranians."

"No time for lunch? C'mon, Juan," Debra smiled. "You know we have the best Méxican chow in America."

"I do, General. Hey, I grew up here. Back home today! But let's get to it." He reached into a jacket pocket. Took out a small navy-blue box. "General, you do the honors."

Debra opened the box, carefully removing a small gold medal with its blue-white-red ribbon. "Major Ashford, parade rest," she commanded. And then put the ribbon over his head.

"Silver Star," she said. "For your bravery at Isfahan."

The Chief of Staff spoke next. "And as of today, Major, we are promoting you to full Bird Colonel. Hear the General's been eating into that combat pay. O-6 will be a help," he smiled.

Ashford was stunned. "Not me," he said slowly. "Not me. It was all of us, over there. Not just me."

"No time to argue, Colonel," said Army Chief Ford. "Because we have something very serious to talk to you about today." He turned to the CIA Director. "Fiona, you take it from here. General, can you get us more coffee?"

They settled back in their chairs as the CIA Director took the floor. A tall, elegant woman, hair turning silver, probably from that nonstop DC stress, Ash thought.

"A month ago," she began, "You sent a young Lieutenant back to 1881 Tombstone. Alex Kitchin."

"Yes," said Charles Hancock. "But he never came back. And the Major here—sorry, the Colonel—couldn't find any trace of him, just like H.F Sills."

"Can't worry about Sills today," said De Young. "It's about Kitchin. We found out two days ago that he is a Russian agent."

"Impossible," said Hancock. "He graduated from West Point."

"He did. But he was the grandson in a deep-cover Russian family. Name of Kichin. They changed it a bit for cover. The old KGB sent sleeper agents to live in the US during the Cold War. They fit in, and stayed after 1991, when the Soviet Union melted down. Anyway, Alex is a chip off the old block. We've learned that he is a very active FSB operative, their Federal Security Service, sort of like our FBI and CIA combined."

"The ruthenium."

"Yes. Your 500 pounds of rocks will be valuable beyond belief. Whoever has them will dominate the world."

"But he doesn't know..." Major Valle began.

"About the Goodenough. Where they are. Has no idea. But he knows that there's ruthenium in Tombstone, because we sent him there to find it."

"So I keep looking for him," said Ashford.

"Yes. And be careful," the CIA Director continued. "Once Kitchin hears that you are excavating down in that mine, he'll come running. And he's a trained killer, Colonel."

The meeting broke up. As they walked out on the runway, the Chief of Staff took Ashford's arm.

"Colonel," he said quietly. "A message for you from IRGC Major General Amir Rostami. His true sympathy for the death of your wife. And his appreciation for how you tried to stop his own troops from blowing up the Masjid-e Jameh, the Great Mosque." He paused. "I'll be meeting with him later today, and we will try to free up some money so they can rebuild it."

Ashford looked away, eyes tearing up. "Chief," he said, "If it helps, let him know that I also feel bad about the death of his wife and son in our May air attack. And that I wish... really wish... that we could make a true peace with his country." He paused. "Anyway, that's all above my pay grade, Chief."

They watched in silence as the big Spaceliner roared down the runway in full afterburner. Rocketed up into the cold November sky. And then it was gone.

"Back to work," said Debra. And over the next ten days, they drilled Ashford over and over on 1881 mannerisms and customs.

"What I was afraid of there before," he told them, "Was my cover as a railroad surveyor. You helped with that. But at the inquest, I identify as a railway engineer. An A.T.&S.F train driver. Help!"

"Let's see," said Dan Valle. "Charles, you're the historian..."

"On it," replied Hancock. "Colonel, they had long heavy trains pulled by steam engines back then. Powerful engines, huge boilers. Large cow-catchers that could sweep a buffalo right off the tracks. Most popular were the 2-8-0 Consolidations, with their eight tall driving wheels. In 1880, Baldwin brought out an improved Consolidation model, a 90-tonner, which went on to become the most popular engine in the American west."

"How would I drive it?"

"It was a skilled job. You'd have a Throttle Lever, to control how much steam went into the cylinders. A Johnson Bar, to throw the train into reverse. A Brake Valve. Complicated, since they didn't have air brakes back then. And a Whistle Cord." He paused. "Just knowing about these controls will get you by. And the inquest record has everything else you need... A.T.&S.F executives' names, the routes you drove, all that."

Hancock looked around. It was just the two of them. Nobody else listening. He pulled a small gold coin out of a Dress Blue pocket. "German," he whispered, "1875." Please take it you, and give it to Jim Young."

"Who was he?" Ash asked.

"They called him Nigger Jim," said Hancock. "He was born a slave in 1844 in Nashville, and then came West, and joined the Buffalo Soldiers fighting the Apaches in the Dragoons and Chiracahuas. After the Army, Young

settled in Tombstone in 1880. Lived there for 56 years. He married Méxican Rosa Romero, and worked as a miner up at the Contention, also staking his own claim nearby.

"He was tough. Buckskin Frank Leslie, a local lowlife, tried to jump Young's claim, and Jim backed him off with a shotgun. Later, in town, Leslie came close to shooting Jim in a store, but held off when a witness showed up, claiming he was just cleaning his pistol.

"It's just as well that Leslie backed down," Hancock continued, "because Jim Young was a quite a boxer. In 1883, two years ahead of your 1881, the Police Gazette sponsored a Tombstone match for the Championship of Arizona. And our local champ James Young took on a white man named Neil McLeod. The Welshman easily fended off Young's enthusiastic over-handed slugging during the first round. According to the Gazette, he 'got in two or three good licks that brought cheers from the crowd, but McLeod retaliated with several punches to the body and then a sockdologer in the mouth, which made Jim's teeth fairly rattle.' The Cornish boxer won that day, but Young became famous for putting up a great fight against a professional." he paused.

"Ash, if you run into Jim Young, give him this gold coin. From me from the future. Wish I could have been there to help him box that Brit!"

"I'll do it," Charles," said Ashford, touched by the request. "And I'm sure that old coin won't have any impact on our future."

The days went by all too fast, and then there he was in the Transmitter room again, strapped in, ready to rock 'n roll, as the old expression went. Shaking hands with Dan and Charles, and a last kiss from Debra.

"Send me," he said quietly. And they did. 'Déjà vu all over again," he laughed as the quantum Transmitter began its deep, rising hum. He knew the machine worked. He had stood on Allen Street. He had held silver dollars minted before his grandparents were born. He had smelled wood smoke drifting across Tombstone at the break of dawn.

This time, what he felt was anticipation. The familiar tingling started in his fingertips, then spread through his arms and chest like the prickling sensation of a limb waking from sleep. The laboratory around him blurred. Lights stretched into shimmering threads. His stomach fluttered, not from fear but from the strange awareness that he was about to leave everything modern behind. Again.

For a brief instant, the disorienting sensation that he was falling and standing perfectly still at the same time. Sound vanished. Weight vanished. Even time itself

seemed to loosen its grip. As the transmission field tightened around him, excitement pushed aside the last traces of anxiety. He wasn't entering an unknown century now. He was returning to a place he knew. The pressure increased. His vision narrowed to a tunnel of white light.

One heartbeat. Two. Then came the peculiar sensation he remembered from the first trip—the feeling that the universe had turned him inside out and folded him through a space too small for matter to occupy. A flash. A crackle like distant lightning.

And suddenly he was breathing the cold dry Arizona evening air once more, with dust in the wind and the Arlington Hotel just a few steps away. Night of Wednesday, November 16, 1881. He checked in, got the same room as before, and immediately fell into a deep and dreamless sleep.

Smokey the Miner

Thursday morning. Breakfast at the Arlington, a different waitress this time. Then a short walk, and he was back underground in the Goodenough Mine.

"Good morning, Sills. You're back!" Greeted Robert Davenport. "What can we do for you today?"

"Had to survey a possible railbed outside of Benson," replied Ashford. "Good to be back in town. Now let's talk about that rock. I'd like to pay you to mine it. Might have a use for that mineral, worth a try."

"Well, let's go have a look at your drift." Which was little more than a jagged slot cut into the mountain, with the faintly glowing rock deep at its end.

Ashford calculated. "Robert, I'll need four good men to follow that vein," he said. "To bust up them glowing rocks into ore, chunks less than half-a-foot across. Timing's tight. Have to do the work tomorrow and Saturday. My friends back East think they have a use for it, to line the new Baldwin Consolidated steam locomotive boilers." He paused.

He continued. "I'll need 500 pounds of it by end of day Saturday, then have it dragged in mine carts over to the Dexter Corral by 8 in the evening on Sunday. I'll send it out early Monday by wagon to Benson."

"We can do that," the mine manager replied. "You bet, we'll start tomorrow."

Ashford went back into town, trying again to see if H.F. Sills existed, and now very much on the lookout for the missing Alex Kitchin. He lingered in the hotels and the saloons, but no luck. And by the end of the day, no inquest process servers, either.

That evening, he went with George Parsons to take in a comedy, Horace Lingard's 'Stolen Kisses' with its hilarious Act II about the tutor, on stage at the new Schieffelin Hall. "Glad we saw it tonight!" the mining agent exclaimed. "They won't be back here 'til March next year."

Early Friday morning the next day. Ashford was down in the Goodenough by 8 AM. At the very end of the drift, the small group of miners faced a wall of hard gray quartzite.

In the center of it lay the strange metallic mineral vein. Barely five feet wide and six feet high, it forced most men to stoop as they worked. The air was damp and heavy with the smell of powder smoke, sweat, and freshly broken stone. Water dripped steadily from cracks

overhead, splashing into shallow puddles on the uneven floor.

"This is Smokey," Davenport said. "Smokey the Miner. He's my lead hand, the best man here. Sills, did those court people serve you yet, for the inquest? You were a witness, right?"

"Yes, I was." Ash replied. "No, they didn't serve me yet. I'd better get back up into town, so they can find me." Carrying his candle, he walked back down the stope and up out of the mine.

Below, the work began. Smokey wiped grime from his weathered face and studied the rock. He handled out extra candles to the men, and lit two kerosene lanterns.

"She's hard as the devil's own skull," he muttered. "Let's go, boys."

Two miners stepped forward carrying a hand steel drill.

One pressed the sharpened drill against the rock face.

The other raised an eight-pound sledge.

Clang! The hammer struck.

The steel bit into the hard quartzite rock by a fraction of an inch.

The man holding the drill twisted it slightly.

Clang! Again. Clang! And again.

For hours the rhythm echoed through the drift.

“We’re gittin’ there,” said Smokey, his face red with exertion. “But we won’t need no dynamite. Hell, one blast would shatter that damn vein and bury it beneath tons of broken rock.”

They were reaching it the slow way. Hand drilling. Hammer and steel. Nothing else.

The two-man crews worked the drift face all day. One man with the hammer. Strike. The other man holding the steel drill. Turn. Strike. Turn.

The glowing vein was exposed inch by inch.

By the end of that first day Friday, they found that the vein was thicker than anyone had expected.

On Saturday, the miners came back at dawn, carefully following the vein, drilling around the edges and prying loose chunks without damaging the core.

Every fragment was gathered by hand.

Nothing was wasted. Ore sacks began filling beside the track.

Twenty pounds. Fifty. One hundred. Ruthenium chips piled around their boots. Sweat ran down faces and soaked shirts despite the cool air underground.

As the day wore on, excitement spread through the drift. The vein widened in places to nearly a foot across. Dense masses of ruthenium-bearing ore came free from the surrounding quartzite.

Ashford was back in the mine at 3 PM. By late afternoon, the ore carts were filling up. The tally climbed steadily. Two hundred pounds. Three hundred. Four hundred.

Near sunset, a final section of vein was freed from the face. The miners broke it loose with bars and lowered it carefully into the waiting ore carts.

"That's it," Smokey said. "Two carts, 250 pounds of ore per cart." The total reached nearly five hundred pounds of ruthenium ore in small chunks, easy to handle later. He looked over the stacked sacks and nodded with satisfaction.

Not a single stick of dynamite had been needed. Just steel, muscle, and patience.

"What do you want to do with them?" asked Robert Davenport.

"Leave 'em here for now," replied Ashford. "Safe here. Then like I said, I'll need a crew to bring them up later,

and take them to the Dexter Corral at 8 PM tomorrow, Sunday evening." He looked at his railway watch. "8 PM on the dot. Can you do that?"

"Sure can," said Smokey. "Robert, you want me to run that also?"

"Indeed I do," laughed Davenport. "Ain't anyone else around here I'd trust to get somethin' done exactly on time." he paused. "Sills, lets git up to the office and settle up. You want to pay these guys off right now?"

"Yes, I do," Ashford replied. "You did good. \$5 a day work for you men?"

"That's very generous, mister," one replied. "Sure beats our regular \$3.00."

"Say, did those servers find you?" Davenport asked again.

"They did," Ash replied. "In the lunchbox at the Cosmopolitan. No problem, I just have to be at the Court at 8 AM on Tuesday, an' tell the Judge what I saw." "Do anything last night?" Davenport chuckled. "Over at the Bird Cage, up in them boxes?"

"Nah," Ashford laughed. "Just read a book, had a good night's sleep at the Arlington." Again, he'd struck out Friday. No Sills, no Kitchin. Nothing. By evening, he gave up and went back to the hotel for dinner, a drink, and

sleep. 'But now,' he said to himself, 'now that we're mining the ruthenium, the word will get out and draw Alex Kitchin like a moth to a flame.'

But nothing happened on Sunday. In the morning, he went with Parsons to the Catholic Church at 6th and Safford. Everyone dressed in their finest boiler suits and Sunday dresses. They sat in the back as the priest, Father Emmanuel Schneider, conducted the service. In Latin. Ash loved it.

"Pater noster qui es in caelis, sanctificetur nomen tuum".

He crossed himself as the priest walked by, incense drifting over the congregation from his swinging thurible. Smoke from charcoal and frankincense, the bluish-white clouds symbolizing prayers rising to heaven. Being Episcopalian, Ashford didn't take part in Communio, the Latin ritual where the faithful received the Eucharist at the altar rail.

"I'm sweet on her," Parsons confided, as a pretty blonde lady returned to her pew. "Miss Bessie Brown. Charles Brown's daughter. He owns Brown's Hotel, with Hafford's Saloon downstairs on the corner." He sighed forlornly. "She won't even look at me," he said, "Now that I've smashed my face."

"Sure she will," Ashford replied. "That fire. You're a true hero. Have you called her up..." he coughed to buy time

to get the words right... "Have you called on her? Left your card? Should do that soon, George."

After church, they took Parson's one-horse shay west out of town to the race track. Crowds of men lining the fences, excitedly waving gold coins in the air as the race horses flashed by. Liquor flowing, wild betting.

"\$40 on Earp," a man yelled.

"Got that, raise you 20!" another chimed in. And then a breathtakingly close race between Wyatt Earp's bay and Curly Bill Brosius's stallion. Both at full gallop, their breath steaming in the cold November air. Cowboys versus Earps. Wyatt laughed off his loss, and then drifted off for a sarsaparilla. Quite a guy, Ashford thought, remembering the apocryphal story about how Josephine 'Sadie' Marcus's bloomers were found left in the Goodenough, the only place in town where she and Wyatt could have their secret affair, before the gunfight. Love under the bright moonlight coming down a mine airshaft. Ashford shook his head, remembering how in his 2040 history, Earp had shot Brosius dead at Iron Springs, on his revenge ride in March 1882. Revenge after Morgan Earp was assassinated by a Cowboy at Campbell & Hatch's billiard parlor, after watching that same Stolen Kisses when it came back through town.

Ash studied Brosius, but didn't speak. He knew he was looking at a very dangerous man. A Cowboy leader,

cheerful and charismatic when sober, but reckless and dangerous when drunk.

They had the 4 PM supper at the Occidental Hotel's Chop House, advertised as 'Good living, good cooking, and the nicest and most pleasant place in Tombstone for a quiet meal.' Ash had Poulette Aux d'Hote Champignons, and Parsons went for the Fricandeau of Veal from the Sunday menu.

"Chicken with mushrooms, and a breaded cut of veal, studded with bacon," translated Ashford.

The recently-redecorated dining room was private and intimate, with only two other customers. They were able to talk without being overheard.

"You'll want to keep a sharp eye out," said Parsons worriedly. "Cowboys are vowing revenge if the Earps get off at the inquest. They mean, it too. They can't take this laying down. Town's ready to explode."

"Damn. 'Cause I like it here. Thinkin' about movin' here," Ash said. "Because when I get back, the railway's going to change my job. From surveyor to engineer. Probably have me on the books that way already."

"Not good?" Parsons was curious. "You don't like drivin' those big engines?"

"Not in winter, I don't. Freezin' cold in the cab, two feet of snow on the tracks, and only my Johnson Bar to slow us down on a long winter grade." He paused. "Rather be here, sleepin' in town, surveying for new lines."

"We going to get one?" his friend asked.

"Don't know why not. The land's good, hard stable soil for the tracks, gentle grades. Me, I'd build it tomorrow. But that's all up to my bosses."

After dinner, he had a large piece of coconut pie with hard sauce, and a snifter of the new Honey Bee Premium brandy. Settled back in his chair, with a perfect Cuban Romeo y Julieta cigar. 'If Debra could see me now,' he thought, smiling.

"What?" Parsons asked.

"Jus' thinkin' how nice it is, right here right now." He opened his eyes and looked over at his new friend. "How about you?" he asked. "Any big deals on the fire?"

"A few. Missed a day last week with a raging toothache. Doc Holliday came over and worked on me for an hour. Broke the tooth. Terrible pain. But then he got the rest of it out, after I had three quick shots of whiskey to get drunk fast. And then it got better."

"Good! I hate toothaches," Ashford agreed.

"And Doc Holliday's good," Parsons said. "Coughs a lot right in your face, though."

Ash sat back, remembering his history. Holliday had tuberculosis, which back then was called consumption. A wasting away disease. No cure for it. And that very next year after the gunfight, Dr. Robert Koch, a German microbiologist, discovered the tuberculosis bacterium. Though it took until 1943 for the streptomycin antibiotic to knock TB out.

'That's why the ladies have those big butts,' he thought. 'Style. Those bustles. Thin people here are in poor health. You want to look heavy. Rich, better off. What a change from 2040!'

"One good prospect," Parsons said. "I took Graham and Riotte - two investors - out to look at ten mines. The Mizzen Top, the Anchor, the Prompter. Several others. Riotte landed on the Bassett, but didn't see much in the rest. He is a mining engineer with his own investors for backing, so I think we will work something out."

"And you'll do well?" Ashford was curious.

"Should do. I'll net about 15%."

Ashford looked at his railway pocket watch. "Time flies," he said. "Have to go. Early to sleep tonight."

Outside, they shook hands and went their separate ways. Clear ice-blue sky, but a bitter cold evening. Ashford walked fast, and was back over to the Arlington by 7:30.

And then he was in the Dexter Corral at eight. 8 PM, and he heard a rattling noise coming from the back of the corral.

The mine carts. "We came up through the alley," said miner Smokey Stober. "Figured you might not want anyone to see what you're doing, where you are storing the rocks tonight."

"Got that right," Ashford said. Then he got serious. "Men, here's \$2 more dollars each for your help tonight. Just don't tell anybody about it, OK?" He handed over the Morgan silver dollars, and the miners left.

"Not you, Smokey. I need your help with just one more thing."

"Here to help," Smokey laughed. "Whatever you want."

Ashford put a hand on the lead miner's shoulder. Looked him in the eye, speaking slowly and deliberately.

"Smokey, in about 30 minutes a - a black machine - will appear out of nowhere right there." He pointed to the center of the Corral. "And then you and I are going to load all those rocks into it. Should only take a few minutes. And then the machine is going to - vanish."

"You shittin' me?" said Stober. "Sills, what is this?"

"An experiment," replied Ashford. "You've heard about Thomas Edison, back east? Patented his electricity invention back in '79?"

"Heard o' him, yes," said the miner. "Heard we'll get electric lights here soon, jus' like the cities."

"We will," Ash said. "But tonight, this is his latest invention. It is called the Transmitter. It can go from place to place invisibly, and we hope it can carry cargo. These rocks are a test, and also might be good for Baldwin, who makes the steam engines. Anyway, my A.T.&S.F railway really wants this to work. Santa Fe fast freight!"

"Damn," exclaimed Smokey. "When's it coming?"

They were over by the side of the corral. "Sit down next to me," Ashford ordered. "And no matter how scared you are, don't up and bolt. It'll only take a minute to land."

Looking at his watch, he held up his hand. 9 PM.

"Three. Two One." The dark night air shivered as the Transmitter took shape. 'Like a big black bug from hell,' Ashford thought. But it was here. The lexan canopy popped open.

"Come on, Smokey!" he yelled. "Let's move those rocks. Pass the cloth bags from those carts over to me."

In seconds, they had a rhythm going. Smokey to Ashford, Ashford to the Transmitter. Dumping the ruthenium everywhere he could. The cockpit space rapidly filled up. And then they were done. He slammed the cockpit shield shut and hit the new Transmit switch on the bottom of the machine. A strange hum, louder and louder, and then a blinding flash of light and then it was gone.

Smokey stood looking in shock. "Did I just see that?" he asked. "Sills, it was here, and now it ain't!"

"Yep," Ashford replied casually, as if this were an every day occurrence. "If the experiment works, it's back at Edison's Menlo Park lab in New Jersey by now."

"Well. I'll be damned," Stober said slowly.

"Here's for you," Ash said, slipping a gold Double Eagle coin into the miner's hand. "An' we gotta keep this secret, least until the railroad starts tellin' the world about it."

"Won't tell a soul," Smokey promised. "Hell, they wouldn't believe me anyway."

"No kidding," Ashford laughed. "Look, it's still early. How about the Bird Cage? It's on me."

Kitchin

Monday morning. Colonel Ashford, waking at the Arlington with a huge hangover. Hoping that he hadn't gone off character the night before, matching Smokey drink for drink at the Bird Cage bar. Remembering manager Paula Jean sitting on his lap, kiss after kiss, until she was called away to stop a dispute between two miners.

Breakfast downstairs. More talk with the hotel's owner, Jay Martin.

"Gittin' anywhere with yer surveyin', Mr. Sills?"

"Hank," Ashford replied. "And yes, it is looking good. Had a telegraph from my company, and the A.T.&S.F will start grading the roadbed soon, coming north from Benson. It will go south to Nogales. No Chinese are employed. And I've surveyed the spur between Fairbank and Tombstone. Only ten miles, and it will undoubtedly be completed at an early day." Which wasn't exactly correct, he mused, since that spur wasn't completed until 1903, with the first train coming into town on the same day as the last Modoc stage. Couldn't tell them that, of course.

"What are you going to do now?" asked the proprietor.

"Back to being an engineer. Drivin' a 2-8-0. If I'm lucky, I'll get the run from Los Angeles to El Paso."

His breakfast came. Bacon, biscuits, gravy with bits of sausage. The cook came over. "Good?" she asked with a smile. "I make new biscuits real early, every morning. Only use White Lily flour, fresh as we can get it. And buttermilk, so the biscuits don't get hard. I know you men are particular about your biscuits."

"They are good. Gravy, too."

"We call it 'Sawmill Gravy', with the sausage."

'A different world,' Ashford thought. 'Everything fresh.' Sweet, rich unpasteurized milk. Almost no government regulation. And it worked well enough. People were healthy, even though they had outbreaks of diphtheria, dysentery, and smallpox.

Outside, it was starting to snow. Windy, and extremely cold and disagreeable. And every place he went into, angry men were arguing about the gunfight. Cowboy supporters denouncing the Earps in the strongest language. Fist fights spilling out into the street, with Marshal Virgil and his brothers being very careful not to provoke any more violence.

"Well I'll be!" Ashford exclaimed, passing by a small dry goods store. Because inside, a black guy was trying on a jacket. Ashford pushed open the door and went in.

"Are you Jim Young, the miner?" he asked.

"Yes, I am. Nigger Jim. What can I do for you?"

Young was tall, strong, and had the instinctive alertness of a first-rate prize fighter.

"You could teach me how to box," Ashford laughed. They shook hands, as another man came into the store. 'Buckskin Frank Leslie,' Ashford said to himself. 'My God, this really happened, and I'm in the middle of it.'

Leslie walked over and spat on the floor. "They let darkies in here?" he snarled. Reached down for the Colt in his tooled leather gunbelt. "Guess I'll show you some daylight."

Ashford thought fast, then carefully moved between the two men. Didn't say a word, just lowered his head a little and stared at the Cowboy. Who let it go, cursing as he went back out to the street.

"Dodged that one," Ash said. "Jim, I have something for you. My friend Charles Hancock wants you to have this." He handed over the old German gold coin.

"Who's he?" Young asked.

"A Buffalo Soldier, over at the Fort. 9th Cavalry, like you used to be."

"He a Negro?"

"Yep. First Sergeant, leads them out after the Apaches. Jim, I have to go. Good talkin' with you." Ashford quickly broke off the conversation, knowing that he had not done anything that could upset the temporal script he was bound to follow. 'Just get through today, and say the right words at the inquest tomorrow,' he thought. 'Easy.'

But it wasn't.

He walked up the street toward the Grand Hotel, anticipating one last luxurious lunch. But outside, an angry crowd. About fifty men, all armed, mostly with revolvers stuck in their pants. Cowboys, and their supporters. Yelling at Marshal Virgil and his Deputy Wyatt Earp.

"Break it up, boys," ordered the Marshal.

"Damn you," said a Cowboy. "We'll get you at the inquest tomorrow. Hell no, we'll jus' string you up right now!" He reached for his gun and Wyatt Earp slammed him on the side of the head with his Smith & Wesson. The man went down, as Virgil Earp fired one shot into the air. The Cowboys backed off, sullenly muttering about getting even for their three dead in the O.K. Corral gunfight. And Ashford went into the Grand for lunch. In

past the five classic arches facing the street, into the hotel with its wide handsome staircase, imported carpets, wallpaper, the telegraph office, and a reading room.

The dining room was equipped with three elegant crystal chandeliers, walnut tables draped in white linen, cut glass vases with fresh flowers, china, silver castors, and cutlery. The nearby bar was topped with a single piece of rich walnut lumber. A French plate glass mirror and splendid engravings covered the walls. Guests were served expensive liquor, cigars, and the latest wines from San Francisco. It was quiet. No faro games going yet, but the little string band was there same as his visit before, playing softly in the background.

Ash sat back in his overstuffed chair, sipping a glass of Chablis. He ordered Chicken Sauté à la Marengo, the white meat broiled in oil and braised with garlic, tomatoes, mushrooms, and white wine. 'Napoleon Bonaparte's favorite', he recalled, 'right here in the Arizona high desert.'

After lunch, over a coffee and a cigar, he went over the inquest script he had memorized for his testimony the next day.

"Good afternoon, sir," said a man standing next to his table. "I believe we might know each other."

Ashford looked up. It was young Lieutenant Kitchin, dressed as a miner, rough clothes, nothing fancy.

"How did you..."

"Recognize you? Easy enough," replied Kitchin. "The haircut. Both yours and mine. Buzz cuts, US Army 2040. Nobody else like that here. What's your name? We never met at the Fort."

"Ashford. Call me Ash. And no, they brought me in after you left. So what's going on? You never came back."

"No, I had to stay," said Kitchin. "To keep looking for the ruthenium. And only yesterday, one of the miners told me that you had found it. But he didn't know where."

"I see," said Ash. "Look, Lieutenant..."

"Call me Alex. Actually, Alexei."

"Yes. Before I left to come back, they told me you were an FSB operative. How in hell did that happen? Is it true?"

"It is," Kitchin replied. He looked away. Embarrassed, but not ashamed. "My Dad and Mom were Soviet agents," he went on. "I guess I followed their love of the old country. Love of Russia." He reached in a pocket, pulling out a faded small badge. "This was my Dad's. Soviet KGB, the sword and the shield."

He continued. "They recruited me after I got out of West Point. Went to St. Petersburg on a fake vacation, but really for FSB training."

He looked directly at Ashford. "I have to find the ruthenium," he said. "Russia is on the edge. Going down. Broke. We will break up into all those little Soviet republics again. Game over."

"So you found the ruthenium substitution formula?"

"We did. We have bots also. That algorithm will save my Rossiya. And we will be able to have power again, to lead the world, and to control the United States."

He looked directly at Ashford. "So. Did you find it?"

Ashford thought fast. Then, "Yes I did. Down in the Goodenough."

Kitchin raised a corner of his tablecloth. "I've got a gun," he said. "Remington Rider pocket revolver. Pointed right at you. Get up real slow, no fast moves. Then we'll walk over to the mine, and you'll show me the ruthenium."

They walked the two short blocks to the mine. Three in the afternoon, with all the workers over at the Toughnut, as Davenport had said.

The drift was barely five feet wide, a cramped tunnel hacked through solid rock. The air smelled of damp earth, blasting powder, and ancient stone.

Ashford held the lantern high. The yellow light revealed the rubble from the digging the day before. Then he heard the click. A revolver hammer. He froze.

Behind him, Kitchin's voice echoed through the darkness.

"Step away from the rock." Alexei stood next to him, revolver leveled at Ashford's chest. The gun looked enormous in the narrow tunnel. The lantern cast moving shadows across Kitchin's face. His eyes were hard and angry.

"There's nothing here!" he exclaimed, looking into the drift, at the leftover pieces of broken ore. "It's gone! The ruthenium, where did you hide it? Tell me, or you're a dead man!"

His revolver never wavered. "Back away from the wall."

Ashford took two slow steps backward. His mind was racing. The drift was too narrow. No room to dodge. No cover.

Kitchin moved closer. "Tell me where it is!"

Ashford said nothing.

The Russian's smile vanished. "I won't ask again." The revolver came up another inch. For a fraction of a second He glanced toward the vein. That was enough.

Ashford slammed into Kitchin before the gunman could react. The lantern crashed against the wall. Darkness. Both men hit the ground hard.

The revolver discharged. The blast deafened them. Flame erupted in the blackness. Neither man knew where the bullet had gone. They fought blindly. Ashford grabbed Kitchin's wrist with both hands.

Kitchin snarled and drove a knee into Ashford's ribs. The gun fired again. The muzzle blast lit the drift like lightning. For an instant Ashford saw Kitchin's face twisted with rage. Then darkness returned. They slammed against the wall. Ruthenium rock dust filled the air, still slightly glowing.

Ashford hammered a punch into Kitchin's midriff. Kitchin staggered. But the revolver was still between them. Another struggle. Another flash. Another shot. Then Kitchin punched Ashford in the jaw. 'Should've seen that one coming,' Ash thought, as the mine spun crazily and then he went down, lights out..

Time went by. He came to. Slowly got up, then stood motionless, breathing hard. The only sound was his own heartbeat. He found the fallen lantern. By some miracle the flame still lived. He relit the wick. Light returned to the drift.

Alexei Kitchin was gone. Vanished. Not a trace.

Inquest

Tuesday morning, 9 AM, at the courtroom in the Gird Block. Justice of the Peace Wells Spicer on the bench.

On this 22nd day of November, 1881, on the hearing of the above entitled cause, on the examination of Wyatt Earp and J. H. Holiday; H. F. Sills, a witness of lawful age, being produced and sworn deposes and says as follows:

"I am H. F. Sills, a locomotive engineer for the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railroad. Visiting in Tombstone," said Ashford, staying right on the inquest script that Major Valle had given him at the Fort.

"On October 26, 1881, did you hear any threats?" asked the prosecutor, Lyttleton Price, representing the Territory of Arizona.

"I saw four or five men standing in front of the O.K. Corral, talking of some trouble they had had with Virgil Earp, and they made threats at the time, that on meeting him they would kill him on sight," Ashford answered.

"Someone of the party spoke up at the time and said that they would kill the whole party of the Earps when they

met them. I then walked up the street and made enquiries to know who Virgil Earp and the Earps were. A man on the street pointed out Virgil Earp to me and told me that he was the City Marshal. I went over and called him to one side and told him the threats I had overheard this party make. One of the men had a bandage around his head at the time, and he was pointed out to me as Isaac Clanton. I recognized him as one of the party."

"Did you see the gunfight?"

"A few minutes after I had spoken to the Marshal, I saw a party start down Fourth Street. I followed them down as far as the Post Office. Then I got sight of the party I had heard making those threats. I thought there would be trouble. I saw the Marshal and party go up and speak to the other party."

He continued. "I wasn't close enough to hear their conversation, but saw those men pull out their revolvers immediately. The Marshal had a cane in his right hand at the time. He threw up his hand and spoke. I didn't hear the words, though. By that time, Billy Clanton and Wyatt Earp had fired their guns off and the Marshal changed the cane from one hand to the other and pulled his revolver out. He seemed to be hit at that time and fell down. He got up immediately and went to shooting. The shooting became general at that time."

Cross-examination by the prosecutor followed, trying to shake his testimony about the start of the gunfight.

"I merely told Virgil Earp that it was a party of armed men I met on the street. I didn't know the men at the time. There were four men in the party. I can't say they were all armed because I could not see the arms of all the party. Of two, the pistols were in plain sight. I was within four or five steps of them."

"You say one of them had a bandage around his head. Were there not two of them with bandages around their heads?"

"No sir, not that I saw. I only saw one. I did not notice the color of it. I only saw it hanging down under his hat. I could hardly say as to his complexion because he had his back to me."

"You did not see his face then?"

"No sir, not at that time."

"When did you first see his face?"

"Before the fight, at Spangenberg's Gun Shop."

"Can you positively swear that the man you saw at Spangenberg's was the same man that you saw with the bandage around his head in front of the O.K. Corral?"

"Yes sir, I can. It was Ike Clanton."

"And did he fire first on the Marshal?"

"No, he did not. The others did. Mr. Clanton did not have a gun."

The audience rustled uneasily. Mostly Cowboys in the packed courtroom, there to see the Earps hung out to dry. And here was the only neutral witness to the shooting, a stranger passing through town, not on one side or the other.

"That's all for today," ordered Judge Spicer. "This Court is adjourned until tomorrow morning at 9:00 AM. You can continue Mr. Sills' cross-examination then," he told the prosecutor.

The next day came fast. Wednesday, November 23rd. Still cold, but at least it had stoped snowing.

"We are in session," the Judge ordered. "Mr. Sills, you may take the stand."

"Where are you from?" asked Price. "And why are you here in Tombstone?"

"I'm Canadian," replied Ashford. "Grew up near Ottawa. I've worked on the railroads all my life. I was in Omaha between eight and nine years. I was an apprentice in the machine shop, a locomotive fireman, and then on the road as a locomotive engineer."

"They also had me do some surveying," he continued. "As for Tombstone, I had a brief furlough before driving

the locomotives again. Wanted to see a real boom town, so I came here for a brief visit."

"Did you know any people here before you came?"

"No sir, nobody."

"And you are still in the employ of the A.T.&S.F.?"

"I am still in the employ of that road. I left the line of that road on the nineteenth of last month, for a vacation. Am going back to take up my employment on the tenth of next month."

"And Tombstone?"

"I came here last month. I came on the Wells, Fargo express wagon with the driver and a passenger."

"Have you spoken to anybody about what you saw?"

Ashford answered. "I haven't told anybody direct what I know of this difficulty. The first word I spoke of it to anybody was when I was summoned to this inquest. When I first knew I would be wanted here as a witness sometime last week, about Thursday or Friday. Marshal Earp would have told you that I was a witness."

The prosecutor asked a key question. "Was there any other person there?"

"I did not see any person on the street when the shooting was going on," Ashford replied. "I was standing close behind the Earps and Doc Holliday when it began, and I stepped away when the shooting became general. Crossed the street and went into the Gird Block. Down the hall from this courtroom."

"During the time you were working in the machine shops and running on the A.T.&S.F. roads, had you a nickname?"

"Yes sir, it was Curley."

"On that road, did you ever know A. A. Bean?"

"The name is familiar," Ashford answered. "I think that he was a Division Superintendent under or over Mr. Clark, it was out of my department."

"Did you know General Kimbell, the General Superintendent of the A.T.&S.F. Railroad?"

"I knew of the man, but was not personally acquainted with him."

Judge Spicer took up his gavel. "Enough of this," he spoke to Price, the prosecutor. "You've established Mr. Sills' bonafides. Any other questions about the shooting?"

"No, Judge."

"Does the defense have any questions for Mr. Sills? No? Then you are excused, Mr. Sills. We will take a ten-minute break, and then the prosecution can call its next witness."

Ashford walked out on to Fremont Street. Heard someone calling his name. It was Robert Davenport from the mine.

"There you are, Sills! I was in the room. You sure told them what you saw. Maybe the Earps will get off. Say, want to go to lunch?"

And Ashford did. One last wonderful 1881 meal.

"Sure do," he replied. "And I'd like that place we went to before. The Dorée. Let's go. Is Parsons around?"

"No," said Davenport. "He's out in the hills, showing that Bassett mine again. Had to miss the inquest today."

At the Cosmopolitan Hotel, the restaurant was almost empty. Steve Goldstein's dark-haired daughter Susan came to seat them. Besides helping at the restaurant, she also taught at the Tombstone schoolhouse on 4th Street, a small adobe building. Friendly and popular like her father, she would go far, Ashford thought.

He ordered a venison steak. 'Can't get that in Sierra Vista', he smiled to himself. Finished up with a large slice of peach pie with cream sauce. Then coffee, and one last cigar.

"About your drift," Davenport remarked.

Ashford felt a cold chill. Kitchin. Had to be.

"What?" he asked, as casually as he could.

"Back on Monday, somebody in the office heard a gunshot from down in the Goodenough, near your drift.. Went down, but nobody was there."

Davenport fished in his shirt pocket, handing Ashford a small metal badge. Through dried blood, he could make out the Cyrillic letters for KGB. "They found this on the floor."

"If you don't want it, I'll take it," Ash said. "I know some people who can tell us what it is. That sword behind a shield design is probably from Europe." Or from Russia, of course. Komitet Bezopasnosti Gosudarstvennoy, the Committee for State Security. KGB. Which wouldn't exist for another 73 years, succeeding the NKVD in 1954. Kitchin's father's badge, back during the Cold War.

"Sure, take it," Davenport replied. "No big deal."

"Too much shooting. I know Parsons is worried about losing his investors," Ash replied. "They say that President Arthur is going to send more law enforcement our way. That O.K. Corral gunfight was big news back east. Every newspaper. Sensational. Big money, back

there. And we will never become a State unless their investors believe we have law and order."

"I've got some real news," Davenport sat up. "Remember that Rick Miles guy? When we were here last? Grousing about the claim arguments up at the Contention?"

"Yes, I recall him. Angry fellow."

"Well, Ed Schieffelin settled his claim dispute with Ed Williams and Jack Friday. They got the upper half, the Grand Central, and Schieffelin kept the Contention and the lower half." He laughed. "Which was named after their dispute, anyway. But it is all settled now. They are ordering the newest pumps from England, as they will hit the water table at 500 feet."

"And Miles?"

"Out of luck. Didn't get a dime."

"Is he still in town?"

"Nope. Went back to San Diego. You know, he's actually a very good writer. Them thick books that come with the new machines? How to run them? That's what he does. Why he came here, I don't know."

"Lots of big dreams," Ashford mused.

"Sure are. Did you know that Wyatt Earp's invested in seven mines? Hasn't hit nothin' so far. Maybe he will with

his latest one, the Mountain Maid North Extension. But I just don't think he's lucky."

"Sure he is," exclaimed Ashford. "Didn't get hit in that gunfight! Robert, they were so close to each other."

"An' you saw the Cowboys draw first?"

"Yep, I did. Jus' like what I said at the inquest. But it happened so fast. So fast! And over in 30 seconds."

"Thar's goin' to be trouble, Sills," Davenport said slowly. "A range war, but here in town. Earps holed up in a hotel, almost afraid to go out on the streets. This fight ain't over."

"I'll miss the excitement," Ash said. "Leaving tomorrow, back to drivin' them Consolidateds."

"Sad to see you go, Sills. I'll tell Parsons."

"Yes, tell him I hope to get back here some day and see you boys again. And tell him that I will try to speed up that new spur to Tombstone. No promises, though... I'm not friends with any of the A.T.&S.F top people."

Wednesday evening, November 23rd, 1881.

Ashford was holed up in his hotel, just like Virgil, Wyatt, Morgan Earp and their wives. So close now to his trip back to 2040, wanting to be very, very careful that nothing

delayed his return. Glad that the inquest was over, glad that he had accurately followed the actual inquest script.

Also glad that Alexei Kitchen's disappearance hadn't stirred up any space-time dislocations, as far as he could tell. Went over his room, looking for any trace of H.F. Sills that could survive the cleaning lady.

He went downstairs to the bar, sitting in a corner to avoid being drawn into the heated arguments about the Earps and the Cowboys. Ate a simple meal, basic, nothing like the Maison Dorée. Chicken pot pie with vegetables, and a last shot of Old Overholt rye whiskey.

"You leavin' us again, Mr. Sills?" asked the hotel owner. "I am indeed, Mr. Martin," replied Ashford. "Let me settle up. I'm leaving early tomorrow. Won't be back for awhile, but I will tell everyone I meet about your fine establishment."

He went back up to his room, lit the kerosene lamp, and lay down on the bed, looking over a small book from the reading room, an 1856 edition of 'Confessions of an English Opium Eater', by Thomas de Quincey. Hadn't had much of an impact here, he laughed. Half the folks in town were drinking laudanum, a tincture of opium dissolved in alcohol. Just the thing for pain, coughs, diarrhea, insomnia, and menstrual pains. Buy it from any druggist, no prescription needed. Sold by the ounce. Helped people get past mining accidents and gunshot wounds.

He pulled out his gold Waltham railway watch. Snapped it open with his thumb. White enamel dial with Roman numerals. Best in the business, accurate to within one minute a day.

8:30 PM. One last check, the room and its little bathroom. Then, carrying his period-correct carpet bag, he went downstairs. Out the door, into the dark cold night. A few feet along deserted Allen Street to the Dexter Corral. A horse whinnied, stamping its hooves in the dirt. He crouched near its stall, waiting.

At 8:58 on the Waltham, he heard the familiar rumble as the air shimmered and the black Transmitter took shape. The canopy popped open. Ashford ran over, tossed in his bag, and then turned as he heard a sound in the darkness behind him.

"Figured you'd be here," said Alexei Kitchen "That you'd go back just as soon as that inquest was over." Anxiously, he went on. "Take me with you," he said waving his small pocket revolver. "You have to take me back. I can't stay here. It's just not safe, not for me now, or for our future."

'Couldn't be better,' Ashford thought. 'Take him back, no loose ends left here to alter spacetime.'

"Sure," he said. "But leave the gun on the ground. Too risky. If it goes off, we will never get back." Kitchen complied, reluctantly. Expecting another fight.

"Relax," Ash said. "Yeah, we both have to go back. Like you said, it's too dangerous to stay here. We could screw up the future without even knowing it." He tossed his bag into the cockpit.

"Seat's big enough for us both," he said. "Come on, let's go." They strapped in. The canopy closed with a hiss. He reached over and threw the green Transmit lever.

And then he was home.

Denouement

11 AM the next day. Debriefing in the Fort's conference room. Ashford's eyes still getting used to the bright indoor lighting. He tossed Kitchin's KGB badge on the table, "His father's,"

"So what are we going to do with Kitchin?" he asked.

"For now, we will keep him locked up. He is still a US Army officer. But we don't want to charge him with desertion, or the news about our Transmitter invention will go public," General Mercer replied. "I sent out a priority request to Ciscomani on how to handle this."

"No loose ends," Ash said. "Alexei had no children there or here, no brothers or sisters here, and his parents are deceased. Best I could do."

"Should be OK," she said. "Hancock? Valle? Are we clean here? Safe?" And they were, with no spacetime dislocations relating to Alexei Kitchin.

The debriefing continued. The General's phone beeped.

"Oh, shit," she said. "You won't believe this. SecDef says to let him go. That Kitchin's father is some big Russian oligarch. Connected to President Dmitri Patrushev. His

Dad Nikolai used to run their FSB. Anyway, SecDef says let him go."

"I want to talk with him first," said Ashford.

"Why not?" she replied. "Can't hurt. And Ash, no getting even for him knocking you out."

The meeting continued.

"The inquest went well?" asked Major Dan Valle.

"Perfectly," responded Ashford. "Followed the script. Got in and out this time without any problems, except for Kitchin. And it looks like I got back without causing any changes here."

"So far, so good," said the General. "Nothing yet. We'll keep checking though, as best we can."

"So you found Jim Young?" asked Major Hancock.

"I did. Gave him your 1875 German gold coin," Ash went on, telling them about the encounter in the store with Buckskin Frank Leslie.

"But that's the gold coin I found, over in the Tombstone Hills," said Bob Ramirez. "About a year ago, prospecting with my Gold Bug near the old Herald mine, near the Lucky Cuss. Yes, that was Young's claim. Must've fallen out of his pocket, during all that digging." Ramirez shook his head. "But I gave that coin to Charles here..."

"And I gave it to Ash..."

"And I gave it to Jim."

The General was totally confused. "So it... is it here twice?" she asked.

"Yes... and no," answered Dan Valle, going into professor mode. "Every object exists as a cloud of quantum probabilities," he said. "Normally those probabilities collapse into a single location in space and time. The transmitter doesn't move the coin through space – it shifts its quantum wave function along the time axis."

"So?" said Charles Hancock.

"So, for a fraction of a second, the coin's probability distribution exists in both 2040 and 1881. Only when the quantum bridge closes does reality decide which history to keep."

"And I get to keep you," said the General, throwing her arms around Ashford's neck and pulling him down for a deep kiss.

They all laughed. "What comes next?" Ash asked.

"Lunch, Colonel," smiled the General.

"Lead the way. This mission's over."

But as it turned out, it had only begun.

Alexei Nikolayevich

Colonel Ashford walked into the conference room, greeted Major Valle, and shook hands with young Alexei Kitchin.

“Good to see you again, Alex. Alexei,” he smiled. “I see they got you some new clothes. And they tell me that you are free to go, in aid of continued peaceful relations between our two countries. As of today, you are honorably discharged from the U.S. Army. Who knows what the future will bring, but at our end, we want all of this kept secret, particularly about the Transmitter.”

“Yes, Colonel,” Kitchin replied, taking note of Ashford’s silver eagle rank insignia. “My country also. They want me to keep looking for the ruthenium, here. It was here — we know that — so it may still be here, somewhere in those Tombstone Hills.”

“Good luck with that!” laughed Ashford. “We tried already, Alexei. Went down in the Goodenough in our 2040 time, and found nothing.” He paused, collecting his thoughts.

"Alexei Nikolayevich," he said formally, using Kitchin's patronymic name, "We bear you no ill will. Our countries are competitive, but not enemies. In fact, General Mercer here is reaching out to our government as we speak, to see whether we should work together with you to find more ruthenium."

"I'll have an answer back in 24 hours," said Debra. "Meantime, why don't you stay here at the Fort? Of course, as Ash said, you are free to go. But it's not so good out there right now." She looked around. "Major Valle, can you set Alexei up with quarters, whatever he needs? Isn't every day we get an FSB Senior Lieutenant as our guest. And, everyone... let's go into town tonight for dinner. I'm buying."

After Valle and Kitchin left the room, she turned to Ashford and spoke quietly. "I don't know where this one will go. But President Vance wants to break the old patterns, the old national rivalries, hatreds, and wars... before it's too late. We don't have much time left before society collapses. So I'm getting from SecDef to do everything we can to avoid a Russian problem."

"So we help Kitchin find more ruthenium?"

"Yes. The 500 pounds you brought back will keep us going for two years, after the Ru substitution. All the time we need to recover from the Interrupt."

"And the Iranians?" Ashford asked. "What about them?"

"Way above my pay grade, Colonel," she replied. "But, politics aside, the President is a smart man who knows his history. Might be a chance to make a peace, or at least an agreement to stop fighting."

"Hope so," said Ash. "Glad he was re-elected. So, you want to take Kitchin out for dinner?"

"I do. And let's give him a look at 2040 Sierra Vista. They told me that when he was here before, he stayed at the Fort, never went out much. Time he got a reality check."

5:00 PM. They went out the Buffalo Soldier gate into town. Down Fry Blvd. to Denny's, still there after all the years.

"Nobody told me it was this bad," said Kitchin, as they drove past block after block of homeless living in tents, packing crates, and cardboard boxes. "This is worse than Russia, and we are in bad shape."

"US has three times as many people..." Ashford began.

"And no jobs," Major Hancock continued. "There was a point, the economists think in 2038, when AI got to be better than 90% of all job skills. Better, faster, cheaper. It took awhile, but by 2038, there just wasn't any reason to hire humans anymore. And so..."

"So there they are," said Ash.

"But can't your government do something?"

"Yes," said Dan Valle. "We have UBI – Universal Basic Income. About \$1,500 a month here in Arizona. Plus basic health care, the new food stamps, and a free phone. But a one-bedroom apartment goes for \$3,500 here in Sierra Vista, more in the big cities. A good used car? At least \$15,000."

"But your oligarchs, the ultra-rich who make huge profits from the AI datacenters... can't you tax them to offset the poverty their technology has caused?"

"Nope," said Ashford. "It's our politics. Vance was just re-elected a month ago, promising to do just that. But he is blocked by Congress. Alexei, it takes at least two million to get elected to the House these days. So the large corporations run the show."

"And they don't want to help?"

"They say they do, but it's bullshit. Their CEOs are judged by quarterly stock returns. And since the stock market collapsed in 2037, they are even more frantic to keep their numbers up."

"It's better in Russia!" Kitchin laughed.

"Nah," said Ashford. "Same deal, rich folks running the place without giving back, really low benefits for old people, crappy health care, and a small economy that

doesn't produce much." He paused. "But you have good schools, and lots of raw resources."

"Which you Americans want!" said Kitchin heatedly.

"Come on, Alexei," laughed Ashford. "Look around. You think we would actually go to war – half a world away – to steal Russian oil and minerals? Buy nickel from you, sure, or Urals crude oil. But a takeover? Alexei, we can't even run our own country."

The General's phone buzzed.

"Yes," she said. "Mr. Secretary. Juan." She listened carefully. "I'll tell him right now, we are going out for dinner. So, his Dad got to Patrushev? Uh-huh. Anyway, makes it simple out here. We're on the same bus now."

She looked at Alexei. "Senior Lieutenant, that was our Secretary of Defense. The President orders that we help you look for, find and take 230 kilos of any ruthenium that may still be in the Tombstone Hills. Like Ashford said, we are not out to take your resources. Just the reverse. And we will connect our scientific people with yours to help with the Ru substitution. Say a prayer, Alexei, that we will find more ruthenium fast... so your cities will have heat this winter."

"Thank you," Kitchin said softly.

"No problem, said General Debra. "Now, for the length of this enterprise, you will all report to Colonel Ashford. You too, Kitchin. The mission continues. Your team will go to Tombstone, locate ruthenium, mine it, and ship it by air from our Sierra Vista airfield to Russia. Clear?"

"I'll order up a satellite scan of those hills," said Major Valle. "Space Force's PRISMA-10 LEO. Hyperspectral imaging, detects subtle mineral signatures, one-meter resolution. With AI analysis, millions of comparators, there's a high probability that it might detect a rare ruthenium-bearing vein.."

"Do it," said the General. "How fast?"

"Twelve hours," said Valle. "Data analysis is instant, but they have to reposition the satellite first."

"What about mining equipment?" asked Ashford.

"I'll call Aztec Minerals," said Major Hancock. "Heard they are still doing deep-core test drilling out there, looking for gold and silver. 2,000-foot reverse-circulation drilling near the old Contention Mine. No luck so far."

"Then we can start tomorrow," said the General.

They went into the old Denny's restaurant. Run down these days, but good food and service. Soft lantern lighting. The food came. And halfway through dinner, a

surprise. The electric lights flickered. On and off. Then came back on at full strength.

“The grid’s back!” exclaimed Major Valle.

“And a toast to ruthenium substitution,” laughed the General, raising her glass to a literally brighter tomorrow.

O.K. Corral

The PRISMA-10 scans came in by 11:00 AM the next day.

“Positive,” said Major Valle. “Look at this, an Ru44 strong indication... but it’s right in town. Damn, right under the remains of the old O.K Corral, at 3rd and Allen.”

“The old Lucky Hit Mine,” said Major Hancock. “Ran right under there. Didn’t pan out, same as the other early mines that ran under what became the city streets.”

“How far down?” asked Ashford.

“Probably 40 to 50 feet. Not too deep.”

“So we won’t need that Aztec Minerals drill?”

“Actually, it will be a big help. It’s an RC reverse circulation rig. Drills fast and brings rock chips to the surface using compressed air. After that, they can bring in a diamond core rig. Slower, but it will bring up solid core cylinders from different depths.”

"I like the diamond one," said the General. "What was that old saying?" she laughed. "Diamonds are a girl's best friend?"

"You wish," said Ashford. "Although, maybe that's a hint," he smiled, hugging her. "Anyway, this should be easy enough."

"For the mining, yes," said Dan Valle. "But Tombstone's a mess. You saw it when we went there in October. And since then, the police here -- the Marshals -- have given up downtown to criminals. The Coyote gang. Feeding on a town that no longer has the strength to resist. Problem for us, the Coyotes hang out in what's left of that old corral."

"City didn't call for County or State help?"

"Nope. County's broke. State? Not enough cars to keep up the old Highway Patrol. And our National Guard's still stuck over in the Middle East." Valle paused. "All those people sleeping in the park next to the corral. They have to pay the Coyotes now to stay there."

"Got it," said the General. "Ash, call Aztec, have them meet us at the O.K. Corral at 2:00 PM with their portable RC rig. At our end, saddle up in a light truck with your M8s, extra magazines, shotguns, and flash bangs. Plus M115 close-quarters grenades. Wear civvy clothes this time. Deniability if we have to get into it with the

gangsters. We'll just take it as it comes. And extra rations for the people in the park."

They went out of Sierra Vista along old Charleston Road. 'Most beautiful drive in America,' Ashford thought. First the flat desert, and then the San Pedro River with its tall cottonwoods. Fewer people there today, now that the power was coming back.

"This was where they shot the Thunderbird," said Major Hancock.

"The Thunderbird?" Ash replied.

"Oh yes. In April 1890, the Tombstone Epitaph ran a story, how two cowboys down here by the river were attacked by a fierce flying monster. They shot it down with their saddle rifles. Too big to carry, so they hacked off a wingtip, and brought that back to town."

"So what the Apaches called a Thunderbird might have been a... pterodactyl? A flying dinosaur? Somehow surviving in these hills, in all those old caves and abandoned mineshafts, for all these years?"

"Who knows. There wasn't any followup story though."

Past the river, the rounded Tombstone Hills, and the road curving, gently rising up to 4,500'. Today, a deep azure

blue sky. Chilly, but beautiful, with small puffy white clouds that would grow dramatically later in the day.

They came into town, and stopped for coffee at the rebuilt OK Café, across 3rd Street from the City Park. Then they walked past 3rd street along Allen,, and met up with the Aztec Minerals crew in front of the O.K Corral. Wasn't much left of it, walls crumbling into the dirt.

"The best spot is... right there," the RC drill leader said, pointing to a patch of dirt inside the corral, only a few feet from what was left of the old wall separating the O.K. Corral from the city park next door. "Yes, right there. Only about 20 feet in from Allen Street, too. They used to have a blacksmith shop there, back in the tourist times. This should be easy."

Ashford studied the RC computer display while Major Hancock and Major Valle helped assemble the compact drilling rig. Nearby, Alexei Kitchen watched silently, his pale eyes fixed on a portable scanner on a folding table. The screen glowed with a bright red anomaly nearly 40 feet below ground.

Ruthenium. Exactly where the 2040 satellite scans had predicted.

But before they could fire up the RC drill, trouble.

A loud voice, from inside the corral.

"That's far enough."

Ashford turned.

A large group of armed men emerged from behind parked trucks, trees, and the broken O.K. Corral wall. They wore mismatched tactical gear and carried rifles, shotguns, and pistols. In the fractured America of 2040, Tombstone had become a place where local gangs ruled more effectively than distant governments.

Their leader stepped forward.

"Whatever you're doing, it belongs to us now. Git away from that gear!"

Ashford counted weapons, angles, distances. Too many.

The Coyote gang spread out. Ten of them, Ash counted.

The gang leader raised his rifle. "Walk away."

Nobody moved.

Ashford fired three rounds at the Coyote leader.. The ultra- high velocity .12 caliber bullets exploded out the back of the man's head in a cloud of pink mush and shards of bone.

The gunfight began, with the other gangsters deciding to stand and fight it out.

Hancock dove behind the drilling rig and returned fire instantly. M8, on full auto, his .12 cal rounds snapping out in a kinetic firestorm. His first burst dropped a rifleman who had been advancing along a stone wall.

Valle rolled behind a concrete planter and fired twice. Another attacker spun and collapsed.

The gang scattered for cover.

General Mercer drew her sidearm and moved with the calm precision of a career soldier. One gunman appeared from behind a broken-down pickup truck. Two quick shots sent him dead into the street.

Ashford sprinted toward the Schieffelin statue monument, bullets racing through the air around him. A shotgun-wielding attacker rushed him from the left. Ash slammed his rifle stock into the man's jaw, knocking him sprawling into the dirt. He fired his M8 once. Five down.

The remaining gang members hesitated. They had expected frightened civilians. Instead, they were in a firefight with experienced combat veterans.

Kitchen was crouched near an old horse stall when a round tore through the flesh of his upper arm. He cursed and dropped behind a pile of equipment.

"Chyort voz mee! Damnation! I'm hit!"

"Only a graze?" Ashford shouted.

"Da, tovarisch." The Russian pressed a hand against the wound and nodded grimly. He tossed a flashbang at their attackers with his good arm.

The firefight continued for another thirty seconds.

A fifth gang member attempted to flank Hancock from behind the old blacksmith shop. Hancock spotted him at the last moment and fired his shotgun right at the man's chest.

The attacker collapsed in a bloody heap, screaming in pain. Major Valle ran over and shot him in the head. Six down.

"Army here! My town! Gonna kill you all!" General Mercer yelled. She was furious. "Now git the hell outta my town! Comin' for ya!"

The rest of the gang broke. Within moments the gunfire ceased.

Without leadership and facing disciplined resistance, the surviving Coyotes retreated up Allen Street. Two dragged wounded companions. The others simply ran.

Sudden silence in the park. Dust drifted through the afternoon sunlight, settling on the remains of the old buggies and wagons in the horse stalls.

Ashford slowly stood and scanned the area. No movement.

General Mercer was angry. "Fuck these assholes," she said. "I like this town. My town, right, Ash? Anybody gets in the way, they're dead meat."

"True that, Debra," he replied. "Guess we'll have to share the place. Our new home, with the Army Corps Of Engineers and Alexei's crew coming in to do the Ru44 mining, if it pans out. Home? Why not? Tombstone sure works for me."

They looked at each other, silently in agreement about their future together.

She checked each member of her team.

"Hancock?"

"Good."

"Valle?"

"Good."

"Kitchin?"

The Russian removed his blood-soaked hand from his arm. "Flesh wound. It's nothing. I'll live," he laughed.

"Go back to the Café and clean that up," Ashford ordered.

"And let's get back to work."

"But Ash, the bodies?" said Major Valle.

"Not our problem," Ash said coldly. "Marshals will show up sooner or later. And if they don't, the vultures will eat well tonight."

He looked around. The scanner still glowed. The ruthenium display remained exactly as it had been before the battle.

The Aztec crew started the RC drill. In just a few minutes, it went down 40 feet, spewing dull silver chip fragments instead of the normal brown caliche rock. Chips that glowed in the afternoon light.

"Oh. My. God," whispered the General. "Talk about a Lucky Strike. It's solid ruthenium!"

"And back then, worthless," said Charles Hancock.

"There's enough here..."

"For everybody. For us. For the Russians. For the Iranians. For the Chinese. You know what this means?"

"Peace," said Ashford. "End of the energy wars. No more blood for oil."

They looked up at the deep blue sky. "Tell you what," he said, looking right into her eyes, "That diamond ring? I'll make it with a ruthenium band, instead of gold or silver."

"I can't wait," she said, pulling him down for a deep, deep embrace. "I can't wait."

Epilogue

December 16, 2040. A dining room at the Grand Ducal Palace in old Luxembourg City. Overly-decorated, eighty feet long, ceiling painted in soft ivory and gold. Crystal chandeliers hung overhead, scattering warm light across polished parquet floors. A long dark walnut table ran down the center, set with white linen, silver candelabras, and crystal wine glasses that sparkled beneath the lights. Heavy burgundy drapes over the tall windows softened the room's acoustics, allowing the diplomats to speak in low voices without echoes.

IRGC Major General Amir Rostami spoke first.

"You have called us here to make peace," he said. "But how can we? Too much blood has been shed. And your Bible says that 'the sins of the fathers shall be visited upon the children, for at least three generations'. Isn't that in Genesis?"

"It is," said President Vance. "But a little further along, in the book of Ezekiel, it says that 'the son shall not bear the iniquity of the father.' Look, Major General –"

"You may call me Amir."

"Yes. Amir, In my faith, I am humbled by a passage in the book of Job, where the prophet is rebuked by God. "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Have you ever given orders to the morning, or shown the dawn its place? Do you know the laws of the heavens? Can you set up God's dominion over the earth?"

"Amir," Vance continued, "God is saying to Job that a man can no more comprehend God than a dog can understand what a hand communicator is. Yet still we pretend that God is with us, always on our side, as do those whom we fight."

"It is so," relied the hardline General. "Our Qur'an, the Recitation, teaches that God is unique and incomparable. 'There is nothing whatever like unto Him'. And I, also, am humble before the mysterious and unknowable will of God."

President Vance leaned back in his chair. "And so, we shall we negotiate in an attempt to please our mutual God. And I can start with news, a revelation certainly guided by the hand of God."

He paused, then looked directly at the Iranian negotiating team.

"We have discovered a new source of energy. A new way to process a very rare element called Ruthenium. To modify it so that a very small amount of the mineral can power a whole country for years."

The Iranian Minister of Health spoke up. "Yes, ruthenium. An element, part of the platinum group. But didn't you use it up making chips, years ago?"

"Yes," said Vice President Ilhan Omar. "It is now incredibly rare. But..."

"But we have discovered a new source," said Colonel Ashford, sitting at a corner of the long table. In a little town called Tombstone, near my Army base in Arizona."

"Colonel," said the IRGC General. "I am glad that you are here. An American who knows our history, our culture. But we are so far apart on our negotiations."

President Vance sipped his coffee.

"I have a vision," he said. "I have a dream, like our Martin Luther King had, many years ago. But my vision will be fulfilled today, God willing. Gentlemen, the United States will share our ruthenium with you and all other peaceful nations. No conditions. As of today."

"But that means..." said Iranian President Farzad Nouri. "That means..."

Vance spoke slowly and carefully. "With unlimited energy from the processed ruthenium, it means that my country will no longer need oil. And it means that your

country will no longer need nuclear energy. We will have to find something else to fight about.”

Shocked, the Iranian delegation excused themselves and went to an adjoining room to talk privately. Then they returned.

“No other conditions?” asked General Rostami.

“None,” replied President Vance. “Because my vision includes a true reset between our countries. Before I came here, I ordered an end to all US and UN sanctions on Iran. And a return of all the Iranian funds we kept, going back to 1979. We will also give Iran a ‘most favored nation’ trading status for at least 10 years. And immediate access to ruthenium and help from our scientists so that you can process it also.”

“What about Israel?” asked the Iranian President.

“They will have to pull out of Lebanon, Syria, and Gaza. Pull their settlements out of the West Bank. Basically, a reset to the 1967 boundaries.”

“And if they do not?”

“Then no more American aid, nor weapons. I think they will see the light. And they can use the ruthenium, too.” He continued. “Our first President, George Washington, warned against entangling alliances. Trade with all, but no foreign alliances. Because then our country would be

drawn into an ally's disputes, into their wars that were not ours. Today, Israel is the best example of President Washington's wisdom. You may be their enemy, but why should you be ours?"

"This is overwhelming," said Alireza Araf, the key clerical assistant to Ayatollah Rahimi. 'Probably has the same power as a Catholic Archbishop,' Ashford thought.

"And you are -- you are -- making these changes today?" Araf shook his head. "This is unbelievable. No conditions?"

"None," said President Vance. "The sanctions are ended. Your funds are released. We have no further interest in trying to direct your society away from your belief in an Islamic-guided society. "

He hesitated momentarily, and then reached across the table to hold out his hand to the Iranian President.

"To a fresh start," he said, lifting his water glass in a toast. "To the future."

The End

Author's Notes

What's fun about time travel – is that there are so many plot possibilities. Endless.

What's difficult – is accurately portraying historic 1881 Tombstone. So many books, so much misinformation. Luckily, I've stayed away from the arguments about the O.K. Corral gunfight... who the good guys really were, etc. Am drawing as best I can from the few source documents from that time... George Parsons' 'A Tenderfoot in Tombstone', Clara Brown's 'Tombstone from a Woman's Point Of View', and Ed Schieffelin's 'Destination Tombstone.' Old online copies of the Epitaph and Nugget newspapers also proved valuable.

I've also found books from other authors very helpful. 'Bonanzas to Borrascas', about mining, by Burton Devere, Jr., and 'Too Tough to Die', by Lynn Bailey. 'Black Powder and Hand Steel,' by Otis Young, Jr. Lastly, a series of small books by Lonnie Underhill, about Tombstone restaurants, entertainment, and hotels.

Best, Jon Donahue jon404@outlook.com

