

Eternity's Shadow

E. Thomas Canton

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The King James Version of the Bible
Book of Ecclesiastes 3:1

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For Roman

Acknowledgments

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Beyond the walls of the Great City, on the Plains of Elsincourt
Two armies will assemble, their blood to rain upon the land
The black sun will die unheralded, but by a few
And the one who was two will perish in fire

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PREFACE

I may already be dead. This is no mere drama to heighten your curiosity. In fact, it's quite possible. I don't know which earth I'll be traveling to next, but we know there'll be danger waiting for us. I say 'us' for a reason. It's the reason that I've had this book published on as many earths as possible. You need to know who saved your life without you ever knowing it. I had been her confederate-in-arms during her adventures in the omniverse, and stand witness to her courage, compassion, and her tenacity, so it falls on me to tell you her story.

I admired Brooke. She lived an extraordinary life. Brilliant beyond reason. Eccentric. Despite tactical setbacks and personal losses, Brooke never once surrendered to the Blackness until it consumed her. History soon forgets those who blow with the prevailing wind, instead it remembers those who stand fast against it. And time honors only the bold and visionary. And so it will be with Brooke.

As the chronicler of our experiences in the multiverse, I must thank Brooke for finding my journal. She filled the gaps in the narrative where I had not been present. We had become separated for several years, so much of what we write here is from Brooke's point-of-view.

My major contribution to this volume came as an editor. The previous edition caused some confusion regarding the subject of

time. To explain, each earth has its own means to mark the passing of moments, and not all measurements represent the same span of time. For clarity, in this edition, whenever we mention time, it will be in relation to our home earth. It's how Brooke and I remain consistent in our workings. Therefore, I eliminated all references to dates and time from this edition of my journal in favor of narrative flow.

In addition, this edition has sections to make clear from whose point-of-view the narrative is being told.

My view of events should be given no more importance than Brooke's. They are both valid. To be honest, I must admit to some amusement by our different takes on our budding friendship.

Maximillion Nilsson
Former Deputy Minister of Science
In exile

PROLOGUE

Our steps grew heavy as we carried Brooke's body along the dirt road. Still ten years from its death, the world had already acquired a ghostly pallor. Unrelenting quiet enshrouded us as if the fog had suffocated every creak and moan on Earth. The dampness penetrated my jacket, chilling my bones as we stepped onto the wood and rusty iron of the decrepit Vatican Street bridge. The old, skeletal railway crossing had long since decayed into disuse and disrepair, and now rotted like its promises of prosperity.

"I know this place," my partner said, as if speaking any louder would stir the dead.

We carried her to the center of the bridge over the river, and heaved her to the top of the black iron fence that ran its length, exhausting our remaining strength. Our eyes gazed off into the silence behind us. The wait wasn't long. His ethereal chanting floated ahead of him through the chill night air. The monk appeared apparition-like out of the mist as he walked along the ragged shoreline. My accomplice turned in my direction. With nothing more than a single look, we pushed Brooke over the edge.

I distracted myself from the sight of her body plummeting into the river below by concentrating on the view of the city. As I looked west along the rail tracks, I saw the lights of downtown shimmering through the mist, giving that nightmare of concrete a beautiful, haunted look.

Did I feel regret?

As I watched the city lights flickering, I strained to remember how many times I wished the city, and the entire world, would burn. I never thought it actually would.

The current took Brooke's body to the nearby shore as I watched.

My friend snapped us out of our unwarranted nostalgia and said, "Come on. We're running out of time."

We fled from the bridge. I turned to see her body tossed ashore like so much flotsam the river discarded. I wouldn't discover until much later that her sad, uncomprehending eyes had awakened. The monk would have discovered her by now, and he would see that she received medical attention.

I wouldn't meet Brooke for another ten years, and then it would only be in the final hours.

THE MINISTER'S STORY

“... but to understand Wilde, or Adims as people knew her then, it becomes necessary to understand her unlikely friendship with Deputy Minister of Science, Maximillion Nilsson of her home earth. That being said, it becomes necessary to understand who he was. All considerations given they should have been enemies...”

Helen Schaeffer
Octavia Wilde: The Definitive Biography Vol.

1¹

I uttered a forbidden curse. No one could hear, but I allowed it to escape only as a murmur. If anyone were listening, they would have only heard the drip, drip, drip from the faucet. My towel couldn't clear the steam from the mirror, so I stared at my half-shaven face as the mist obscured my reflection. The dark circles under my eyes attested to my continued lack of sleep.

Large red digits glowed on the clock face. 3am. I sat alone in a dark hotel room as a flashing neon street sign caused shadows of Venetian blinds to splash across the bed. No moon hung in the starless sky. People lived there, and they spoke English, but beyond that I knew nothing of that new world. Brooke died... again. I lost my journal, but I found this small notebook in the top wooden drawer of the nightstand. By the light of a small lamp, I tried to recount what led me there before I began to forget.

1 All quotes from Schaeffer's *Octavia Wilde: The Definitive Biography Volumes 1 & 2* are used with the permission of the author.

Angels had not heralded the end of my Earth, as the Bible would have you believe. It did not come as God's vengeance upon a sinful humanity as the priests had always insisted it would. Ancient writings had not prophesied it. Chaos, war, fire and brimstone were nowhere to be found in the final hours of planet Earth. The Darkness would come at night, without a sound, and without any pain, and without any suffering. The moon would cease glowing in the night sky, but no one would notice. People went about their usual business during those last hours. They went shopping, drove to work, visited loved ones, and carried on unaware that the end of the world had come.

The morning of the end saw me three floors below street level. Wrapped up in my insignificant problems, I never thought that something unknown waited for us in the darkness of the coming night. Something evil that would extinguish the light of over seven billion people. Instead, the doors opened, and I stepped into the gold and mirror-plated elevator. The button for the fifth floor above ground lit up as I pushed it. The gold elevator doors and the marble floors were all a show put on for the public. Vanity gone mad. Some reformers, mostly country priests from poorer areas, had suggested using the money to help the homeless. Word came down the Church had no concern for worldly problems. Priests would be better off preparing the souls of their parishioners for their place in Heaven.

Once you stepped away from the public areas, the decay became obvious. My floor of the Ministry, for example, was a cold, gray mausoleum. The only light shone through the windows along the three sides of the floor. Most of the fluorescent lights had burnt out and had needed new ballasts for several months. As

was customary, repairs of this nature waited until winter when the artificial light became necessary.

I navigated through the musty labyrinth of gray, anonymous cubicles to my office.

DEPUTY MINISTER OF SCIENCE
MAXIMILIAN NILSSON

I always thought my 'office' had once been a janitor's closet. The Minister called me ungrateful, but that doesn't explain the washbasin, and the lack of a window. I sat down behind my desk and checked my inbox. Now empty, it would soon overflow with paperwork. If I didn't lock my door, my inbox would tower over me by the time I came to work in the morning.

I pulled the files from my briefcase, scattering them across my desk before sorting them to find the least laborious one. This brought a curious report from one of my field agents to my attention. It regarded one of the Ministry's grant recipients, a physicist named Halstead. She gave the agent the required progress report into her research on the Higgs Field. As he received the report, the Field Agent noticed a slip of paper in a desk drawer that hadn't been closed all the way, or perhaps, in too much of a hurry. The slip contained several blocks of numbers arranged six digits across and four digits down, with another four blocks below them. That had raised a red flag with the Agent. The Church's Gendarmes had already intercepted similar coded messages. This led to several prominent physicists and astronomers being implicated. In what, we were never told. We never were. All ministries, with special notation to mine, had been told to keep an eye out for anything

resembling that kind of communique. The Field Agent had kept his wits about him, noticing that the slip of paper had a signature on it, 'Johannes'. The name Johannes had also raised a red flag, as in Johannes Kepler. Might Halstead be a member of the Heretic Underground? No, it didn't feel that way. She was likely just another dissident. The Field Agent had no way of knowing if Halstead instigated the message or had received it. The entire situation would require further investigation. I made a note to send it to the Gendarmes and pushed it aside.

I shouted in my mind as I opened the next folder, '*Oh, Come On. Does this guy expect to get funding from the Church for this? He wants to dredge this up again?*' While on a dig in Ethiopia, some university anthropologist had discovered a partial 'pre-human' skeleton, to use his term. He labeled it *Australopithecus afarensis*. Claiming that argon-argon dating had revealed the bones to be around 3.2 million years old, he wanted to open an investigation into the theory of evolution. The Church had already stated many times that humanity could not be any older than six thousand years, emerging formed as we are today. That's what they claimed. The anthropologist would either conform with the promise of funding into a less controversial topic, or he would become the Inquisitors' problem. No third option existed. *Wait a minute, what University is this guy from? West York? This might come in handy at my lunch meeting.* I put the report into my briefcase and leaned back in my chair. *Oh God, I am so sick and tired of all this.*

The clattering bells of the phone bellowed at me until I answered.

"Deputy Minister Nilsson... Alright... tell the Archbishop I'll have somebody bring it to him, right away." *I needed this. Now the*

reports from the Ministry's field agents would have to wait until I got home that night... again. That was the reward you received for the hard work, extra hours, and the ritual sacrifice of a personal life. The Bureaucracy was all, and all was the Bureaucracy. I stepped out of the closet.

"Fitzpatrick." I glanced around. *Where is he?*

"What?" a faceless voice rang out from one cubicle. I wasn't sure which.

"Go down to the Records Department..."

"Don't want to."

"Excuse me?"

"I don't have to."

"Yes, you do."

"Not as long as you work for my father, I don't. You want him to come down and have a word with you?"

No. That's the last thing I need is a fight with my superiors about their lazy, self-entitled brats.

"It's the only reason I took this job, 'cos I don't have to do anything," he said.

"Me too, bro." A second voice from another cubicle. I saw two hands reach above those stupid dividers, and high five each other. I sighed.

"Get Simmons to do it," said Fitzpatrick.

"I'm not doing it," said Simmons. "He may work for your dad, but your dad works for my uncle."

I hated these people.

"Oh, for... Fine. I want that report on that Professor's grant.

You know who I mean. The one who wants to study those fossils he found in Alberta,” I said, making my way through the maze of cubicles.

“I gave it to Saunders to do,” Fitzpatrick said.

“Saunders?”

“Yeah, I gave it to Frobisher.” Frobisher responded almost immediately.

“Don't blame me if it's not done. I gave it to Hudson.”

“No, you didn't.”

“I gave it to you yesterday.”

“Yesterday?” I said. “You should have finished it last week.”

“Yeah, Hudson, get it done.”

“I don't care who does it. I want it in my inbox on my desk by the time I get back,” I said, slamming the door behind me. Dust fell on my head.

So, why didn't I fire those lazy, smart-asses? Why would I do that? The more civil servants working in your Ministry, the bigger your share of the Church's budget. The larger your portion of the budget, the more important it made your Ministry, and the more important it made your Ministry, the more important it made you. And in those days of decay and corruption, getting what you could from the limited finances of the Church became all that mattered.

In the third basement below street level, I searched row after row after row of filthy metal shelving units. Each unit contained scores of boxes. Some were damp with mold, some had holes chewed in them by rodents, and all looked like they had no human contact in decades. The dim light made reading the faded paper labels difficult, and that's if they had labels at all. Most had fallen

off years before onto the filthy cement floor. Over time, they blocked the drain, causing a pond of brown water with the stench of rotten eggs to form.

“You're enjoying this, aren't you?” I asked, looking up.

The Archivist didn't respond. She sat there with her bowl haircut, horn-rimmed glasses, and that withering stare of intense disapproval. I could only assume she wished I would suffer a quick death. The Archivist of the Records Department had been born the daughter of a Cardinal in Rome. He'd married in Moscow long before joining the Clergy, but had a keen mind, a kind soul, and enough money to buy his way into the Church's heart. *What's her name? Natasha? Anastasia? No, not that.* I couldn't remember. At any rate, her father banished her halfway around the world to our sub-basement archives as a punishment. No one knew what she'd done to deserve this. The most popular theories were one, to cover up the crimes of an incestuous father. Two, she had become pregnant out of marriage, and had one of those abortions that didn't exist, and never happened. And three, she was a lesbian. No one knew the real reason, but she had served as the Ivan the Terrible of the Archives for twenty-seven years now.

“Goddamn it!” I swore out loud, knocking over an unoffending file box. That's when I heard the tapping. The distinctive rhythm of four, repeated over and over, again and again, echoed around the cinder block walls. I turned to find What's-Her-Name, the Archivist, drumming her nails into her desk. Her stare burned.

“Alright,” I surrendered. “I'm sorry.”

Her disapproval of me haunted her lifeless eyes.

“Oh, come on.”

The death-look did not subside. Kneeling in the cesspool, I sacrificed my remaining dignity, and pleaded to the bare incandescent light bulb hanging from the ceiling as if God anointed it his personal stand in.

“Lord, I am sorry I spoke your name in vain. Please forgive this sinner for all his trespasses. Amen.” I turned from the holy bulb toward the Archivist to ask her if that humiliation had been enough.

Without a word, the Nameless One returned to her work, leaving me to re-examine the broken box I had knocked to the floor. The pages floated over the dirty cement, and I came to the only reasonable conclusion available to me: *Well, I'm not cleaning this up. If the Archbishop wants this cleaned up, he can bloody well come down here, and do it himself.*

The Archivist picked up the phone almost before it rang. Without saying a word to identify herself, she listened for a heartbeat, then held out the phone. I recognized the voice.

“No, Excellency. I can't find it anywhere. Yes, Excellency. I'll keep looking. Hmm?” I surveyed the disaster that surrounded me. “Yes, yes. I'll clean up the mess.” I couldn't help but wonder why the Archbishop had attached so much importance to having it right then as I hung up.

“You know, this will go faster if you help. You are the Archivist, aren't you supposed to know where everything is?” In response, she drew out a nail file, and filed her nails, all the while not once taking her eyes off me.

I found nothing even after searching aisle after aisle, shelf after shelf, box after box, file after file. Only one reasonable place remained to be searched; the most illogical place it could be, and that's where I found it.

The box, like many others, lay scattered on the floor of an unfinished woman's washroom. I negotiated my way through the construction rubble. The dust billowed as I blew on the lid, opened the box, and rifled through the contents. That was it, but I couldn't figure out why the Archbishop had been so intent on having the files right then. Lifting the summary sheet, I grabbed the box and escaped that subterranean gulag before the Archivist realized I hadn't cleaned up the mess.

Once enclosed in the elevator with no sign of pursuit, my attention shifted to the summary sheet. What I read was incredible, no, impossible. It had to be. *It had to be.*

The elevator doors opened, and I stepped into the Grand Hallway of the one hundredth floor. People derided it because it stood twice as wide as any other corridor in the building. Small trees ran down the center, and a diminutive fountain sat at the far end. The Archbishop's suite occupied one half of the floor, and while that was an archbishop's privilege, a Cardinal would have the entire floor. He might even, depending on his seniority, have two. Two floors were only fair, they said. After all, the Pope had the entire Vatican. I walked to his office, past the fountain.

The heavy oak doors gave way with some difficulty as I entered the Holiest office in the province. His secretary held up her manicured hand to stop me from entering the inner sanctum.

"He's in a meeting. Take a seat while I announce you," she said with all the forced politeness of an OCD sufferer. With a sigh, I sat. Satisfied that her duty now fulfilled, she took up the receiver, and buzzed the Archbishop.

"He's here... yes, Your Excellency," she nodded toward the closed door, and mouthed the words *You can go in now.*

Entering the Archbishop's I couldn't help but see a vast sea of gleaming glass skyscrapers, scores of satellite dishes and digital billboards announcing the latest updates to mobile phones and gaming units. Opposite the window, hung the stoic pillars of the Church. When I had first walked into that office two years ago I recognized the paintings right away. As an educated art lover, I identified them as being by Raphael, *The School of Athens*, and the *Madonna del Prato*. Further along the wall were *Wedding at Cana* by Veronese and *Salome with the Head of Saint John the Baptist* by Luini. Not only did I recognize the paintings, but on my many visits, I had concluded that they were neither copies nor clever forgeries. They were the originals, and worth millions. *Financial crisis? What financial crisis?*

And between Raphael and the skyscrapers, sat the Archbishop behind his desk. He had been appointed directly by the current pope, John XII to replace his predecessor when Pope Benedict IX, John's predecessor, became politically toxic.

"I apologize for the wait," the Archbishop said to his guests. Still ten years from retirement, the Archbishop's mind remained sharper than a razor's edge, and his body more fit than a man half his age.

Sitting on the chairs in front of the Archbishop's desk were two young women. The first, Brooke, had been the subject of the file box I held in my hands. Brooke sensed me staring at the crescent scar on her forehead. She brought her hand up and brushed her hair over the scar while averting her gaze. The Archbishop kept his eye on Brooke at all times, all the while tapping his fingers with a relentless fervor on his desk. I looked at the object of his attention. Brooke sat without uttering a word while

the other girl spoke, but she had still put the Archbishop on edge. *Curious.*

“That's alright, Your Excellency,” the woman I would come to know as Fen said. She verged on being adorable, with short, dark hair, large brown eyes, and a sweet smile. She hung on the Archbishop's every word like a devoted accolade. My mind could not accept that these two young women were the geniuses the summary sheet implied. They looked far too young to do what they'd claimed.

I set the box on the Archbishop's desk.

“That'll be all.” He didn't even bother to look at me. As I dragged myself out the door, I couldn't help but overhear the Archbishop.

“So, I was never sure about him,” he said. “He didn't seem like he'd make a decent husband for her. But things seem to work out, so I guess I was mistaken. She calls him her best friend.”

“A husfriend,” Brooke said.

Husfriend? I cringed as the word assaulted my ear. The Archbishop chuckled to himself as I closed the door behind me.

In the outer office, the secretary said something, but the desk clock shouted at me too loud to hear her words. I would soon be late for an important lunch appointment.

Crusaders stood frozen with their weapons set to strike, or covered in a deep crimson while their victims lay paralyzed in agony for all eternity. His brush strokes caressed the surface, but were not masterly by any means; the colours chosen had combined well, but were still only a journeyman's effort. The scene depicted

the Holy Crusaders massacring the indigenous village that had once occupied the land. It displayed a brutality blunted only by the high arching ceilings and the elegance of the chandeliers.

I sat in the chair with my head tilted back, staring at the ceiling mural until a silver tray floated over me, guided by the assured hand of the waiter. A second server glided toward the table in front of me with effortless grace. He held a tray aloft with a single hand, while clearing more space on their table with the other. The tray swooped down in a clean, swift motion, close to, but not touching the table as the server placed their order in front of them.

Beyond the waiter, he walked in, surveying the dining room as he approached me, and sat down. Dressed in a dark gray three-piece suit with a black necktie. He cut his thinning hair short. It grew gray along the sides and back, while it remained darker on the top.

"Max," he said. "Let me tell you how sorry I am to hear about your mother."

"Thank you for coming, Jack."

Once again, he looked around.

"Only out of respect for your loss. Given that, I don't expect you to waste my time."

"I'll get straight to the point. It's come to my attention that Professor McAllister is resigning. I could fill that position."

"You want to head the history department?"

"If a PhD in medieval history isn't enough, my qualifications also include..."

"You're assuming too much. We're not family anymore. I

have no obligation to you.”

“I told you and the Gendarmes everything I know.”

“Did you know her friend killed herself that same day?”

“I know.” Over three years later, and I still couldn’t tell him the truth.

“What was going on between them?”

His voice became a wisp of smoke dissipating in my ears as, before becoming conscience of it, Mary's grave lay before me. The dry, brown grass snapped like small bones beneath my footsteps. The grave markers had become strangled with weeds and choked with dirt. Few visited here, for the hallowed ground of a churchyard lay across the road. Here, the grave markers were the simplest of stones laid flat on the earth. They recorded only their name and the sin that condemned them on their cracked surfaces. No date of birth, no date of death, only *Mary Nilsson, suicide*.

“Don't know. I'm at work all week, you know that. I only know what she told me.”

“Which was?”

“Not much.” Jack looked as empty as I felt when I discovered her body in our garage, sitting with a peaceful smile in the front seat of our car as if she were asleep.

I had to tell him. I couldn't withhold it longer.

“Mary and Helen were having an affair.”

“What?”

“Three years ago I heard, through my connections at the Ministry, that the Gendarmes were investigating them. I mean, maybe I suspected, but... anyway. I warned her about the investigation. That was the day before she... did what she did.”

Jack leaned back against his chair and exhaled. He looked up at me, opened his mouth as if to speak, stopped himself.

“Growing up, she would say little things. Nothing that meant anything on its own. I wondered about her even then. That's why I was so happy when she married you... I don't... you did the right thing. Better she should go out on her own terms, then get sent to the Inquisitors. We've all known people who'd gotten sent there, never to be seen again. I don't approve of her... life... no self-respecting member of the Church would... and it terrifies me to think of her as damned for all eternity for committing suicide. I'm glad you did what you did, but the University still can't hire you. If anybody found out that you warned them, and I hired you. We're already under serious scrutiny because of the Archaeology Department.”

“I know,” I said. “Your dig in Ethiopia.”

“Wha...? Right. Deputy Minister of Science.”

“The report on what you've found can go away. It could be my last act as Deputy Minister.”

“If the Gendarmes found out, I could get sent to the Inquisitors. I'm sorry, but I can't.”

Jack stood up. “I'm sorry, Max.” He walked out of the restaurant. My mobile rang.

“Deputy Minister Nilsson... Fine. I'm on my way.”

As I walked into his office, I saw that the two women had gone, allowing the Archbishop to become engrossed in the paperwork spread over his desk.

He seemed unaware of my presence. The file box I'd

brought on my last visit sat untouched on his desk. The unreality of what I'd read in the summary sheet had led me to believe that it would be a simple, easy-to-prove fraud.

"Do you think they've done what they claimed, Excellency?" I asked.

The Archbishop looked up, as if for all the world just noticing I existed.

"You read the summary?" he said.

"Earlier, in the elevator, Excellency." I grew a little worried that the Archbishop might decide to claim that I had breached some unwritten protocol.

"No, it's not possible."

"But if they did...?"

Three groups of papers, all budget projections for the next year's moon launch, lay on the Archbishop's desk. One set of projections came from the Ministry of Science, the others came from two independent research firms, and none of them agreed on anything. In less than a year's time, the Ministry of Science would place men on the moon, and with any luck, return them safe and sound. This meant that my minister would need to squeeze the Vatican Bank for the funds they claimed didn't exist. I know what you're thinking; if my civil servants were as incompetent as most, and they were, how could the Minister ever hope to accomplish such a herculean task? Well, the reason the Minister required so much funding had nothing to do with developing new technology. Instead, it had to do with the need to contract everything out. If you want something done well, don't get the government to do it.

The audacity of the endeavor had caused my Ministry to

become the center of the universe. This came as a shock to those die-hard members of the Clergy who still believed the Earth was. It also meant that every other Ministry hoped that, given enough rope, my minister would hang himself. For the time being, at least, he bathed in the glory of his upcoming accomplishment.

"It's not possible," the Archbishop said. "If the Bureaucracy had informed the Church what they were up to, they never would've received funding."

"It was such a small amount of money," I said.

The Archbishop went back to his business, "The money isn't important. In fact, if they had received more money, someone could have caught the mistake earlier. Where did you find their file?"

"The archives, hidden behind several other boxes."

He nodded without taking his attention away from his assessment of the budget discrepancies.

"That's what I thought. They slipped through the system somehow. You've seen how sloppy the Bureaucracy is. You're part of it. Part of the problem."

It's always nice to have one's best efforts appreciated, I thought as the Archbishop prattled on.

"Another misplaced file." He sighed and looked up at me. "I want a background check on Fen Smith."

"Not the other one, Excellency?"

"Unnecessary."

Well, now, that was unusual. Why the one, and not the other?

The Archbishop saw the intrigue etched on my face.

"I'm sure they're only after publicity. Still..." he said. "How long before you can have a field agent check their claim?"

That wasn't something I needed to think about. The Ministry's responsibility lay across the entirety of Northern Americus and had six field agents. They had five hundred people to report to. The Ministry resembled a five-ton elephant supported ten stories in the air by a few scattered toothpicks.

"All my field agents are back logged for almost three years, Excellency," I said, hoping that I would sound overworked and could use funds to hire more field agents. Instead, the Archbishop almost smiled.

"I thought I made that up. Do it yourself."

I must've misheard. He couldn't be telling me to lower myself back down to the level of a mere field agent. I'd worked myself into a coma to get to my current position. Do you realize how few field agents make it to the upper levels of the Ministry? Almost zero.

"I'm not a field agent anymore." I said, showing my contempt for the suggestion.

"You are today."

"Today, Excellency?"

I felt the Archbishop had attached too much importance to what had to be a simple scam for government funding. That being said, I realized I'd been convincing myself it must be a scam, but the money involved was so insignificant that it undermined my conviction. They could've asked for much more than they did because there's nothing more that an incompetent government likes to do during a financial crisis than squander money on useless

garbage. So, why did they ask for such a minuscule amount of money unless they were hoping to go unnoticed? But again, if it proved to be a scam, why would they come to the Ministry and ask for permission to proceed with their experiment? Why didn't they take the money and run? If they were con artists, the con must be more subtle than any of the usual frauds we had uncovered up to then.

“I want a verbal report,” he said. “And give it only to me.”

Were those two women the super geniuses that their project claimed? If they were, this would make next year's moonshot look like a child's game. If I could attach my name to this... I accepted the summary sheet as the Archbishop dismissed me.

On my latest journey down the grand hallway, I checked the address, and discovered what neighborhood I'd be traveling to. *I'll get mugged*. The area became famous for being even worse than the rundown tenement slums on the outskirts of the city.

While taking the elevator into the parking garage, I checked the contact number; a 6-4-7 area code, which meant a mobile phone. It gave me hope I could make contact. My days as a field agent were frustrated by trying to track down people who would give their office numbers, but made a point of never being there. Walking to my car, I made the call. The phone picked up, and I recognized the voice that answered; *Husfriend*. I didn't want to talk with this person. Making it quick, and one-sided, I told her that if she wanted to not wait for three years to see if her experiment worked; I expected her to be in her laboratory in one hour. No later. I hung up without giving her a chance to speak.