

The year is 2017. At a remote East Africa radio station, an American engineer discovers a radio signal anomaly originating in outer space, which disrupts telecommunications worldwide. NASA launches a team on Easter Sunday, who disable the anomaly, but discover a prophecy of doom.

Asmara's Anomaly

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# **ASMARA'S ANOMALY**

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## CHAPTER ONE

*Friday, 17 March 2017*  
*The National Security Agency, Fort Meade, Maryland*

Deputy Director Thomas Palozzi slumped in his chair, alone in his executive office at DIRNSA, the National Security Agency command center for the largest most sensitive and far-reaching intelligence gathering apparatus on the planet.

At two minutes before midnight Thomas held up a Krispy Kreme with a thin but muscular arm attached to a huge thorax. His strong mandibles, used to consuming twenty-some ounce bloody New York steaks, compressed the doughnut as he digested the classified transmission from a senior auditor at the NSA Menwith-Hill facility in England.

CONFIDENTIAL

RE: "Silver Claw" Destruction of M.COM Turkey Facility

M.COM International Turkey satellite earth Station is latest victim of group claiming to be the "Silver Claw." Entire facility rendered unusable and ceased transmission at 0205Z. Zero casualties reported. Note: repair estimates and photos of damage to follow.

FYI: Attached is Echo satellite intercept of cell phone conversation following Silver Claw attack. Voice on the Turkish cell phone may belong to a westerner. The scrambled Swiss agent's voice could not be identifiable. Westerner's voice prints will be run against all M.COM engineers and contractors worldwide.

“Those son’s-of-bitches destroyed one of my satcom facilities,” Thomas said. Stunned, he grabbed another Krispy Kreme and leaned back in the wide Italian roll around.

Thomas placed a secure voice call to his second in command down the hall, Gil Guerra and said, “Did you hear the news about the vice admiral?”

“That means you’re in charge,” Gil said. “The Chinese went ahead with their threat—they signed the nuclear arms agreement with North Korea.”

“So I heard. Gil I need to know the status of PROJECT ZEUS.”

“As you know, we experienced problems during simulation with the remote control functionality. Our engineers have been working on it.”

“It’s never been activated.”

“Thomas, the vice admiral has been adamant—PROJECT ZEUS is only to be used as a deterrent.”

“Gil, the world is changing fast—the Red Chinese are bent on destroying us even while they colonize the moon and mine its precious metals. Did you see what the Silver Claw did to our M.COM facility in Turkey?”

“What happened, Thomas?”

“Check your e-mail,” he said and paused. “Listen Gil...I need to know that I have your support with PROJECT ZEUS?”

Thomas listened to the silence. “God damned it, Gil.”

“I’ve always supported you in the past, Thomas.”

“I’ll take that as a yes,” he said and hung up.

The fifty-two year-old acting director of the NSA smashed his ball-peen fist on the desk top. Those Red Chinese bastards were behind the Silver Claw and were disrupting U.S. based telecoms while they made an end run for the moon.

Thomas longed for the good old days when he ran interference for his Notre Dame quarterback. He would bowl them over, with only an occasional penalty for holding. He flexed his massive hands and then peered over at his trophy: “Thomas Patrick Palozzi, 1987 All-America.”

He lifted the phone. “Dorothy, during the vice admiral’s illness you’re going to have to route his schedule over to me.”

The Director’s confidential aide grimaced and said, “Thomas, I’m working on it and will brief you first thing tomorrow. The vice admiral’s condition has worsened. They transferred him to an Argentinean hospital.”

“What’s the prognosis?”

“They haven’t isolated the virus yet. It’s clear they don’t want to medevac the vice admiral back here now. The two specialists we had dispatched from Walter Reed Hospital should arrive in Buenos Aires tomorrow morning.”

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“Thanks, and keep me posted, Dorothy,” he said and hung up.

A New Jersey native, Thomas majored in mathematics at Notre Dame and minored in foreign Languages. When a severe back injury ended his chances to play in the NFL he transferred his four-point-0 smarts and ability to read and write in Mandarin and Japanese to the NSA. He began his career as a cryptologist and got his first big break working in the China bureau.

Thomas uncovered the clandestine activities of a group of Chinese scientists working in classified labs at Lawrence Livermore, Los Alamos, and at Oak Ridge. They had been forwarding the collective parts of a top secret NSA eavesdropping project to Beijing that would have damaged U.S. signal intelligence or SIGINT for decades.

Thomas garnered rapid promotions that led to a high-level position—heading up SIGINT in Europe. He held the post for nearly a decade before he returned to headquarters at Fort Meade and bulled his way into the deputy director position this time last year.

He licked his fingers and then held up sagging cheeks with huge hands that had once squeezed the life out of opponents on the gridiron but now he used to dramatize speeches. He sucked in his waist that had increased from a size 42 to a 46 since he had made deputy director.

The beep on the computer screen alerted Thomas to reassemble his six-foot-five-inch, three hundred pound plus bulk in the roll around. He brushed his hair back, moved the mouse over the blinking phone icon and clicked once.

“I’m aware of the situation in Turkey,” he said to J.D. Hemphill, vice president of M.COM International and former executive at the NSA.

“Thomas, what happened to my satellite earth station in Turkey?”

J.D.’s face mirrored the harried bureaucrat’s reaction back in 2005 when Thomas had confronted him with top secret DVD’s that he had left in his hotel room in Guatemala City.

“It’s bad news, J.D.,” he said, knowing a secure voice link scrambled his conversation. “Your M.COM satcom station in Turkey has been terminated.”

The little man’s blood drained face captured the computer screen “I don’t understand, Thomas,” J.D. said. “Our system alarms are all red, as if the site disappeared from earth.”

“It may as well have. Those son’s-of-bitches, the Silver Claw wiped out the station. The dish antenna feed horns and the high-speed data lines were blasted with plastic explosives. They vaporized the radio hardware with high-level radiation pulses emitted through the wave guides that connect the radio equipment to the dish antennas.”

“Thomas, can you confirm that it was the Silver Claw?”

“They left their calling card—a silver claw—on the paws of the unconscious station dog.”

He watched the M.COM vice president’s Adam’s apple bob before J.D. muttered, “How many casualties?”

“None, other than the dog. It was a surgical strike. No one even saw them come or go.”

“That’s impossible.”

“It has all the ear marks of an insider job,” Thomas said. “There might have been an American or westerner involved.”

“Not one of my guys,” J.D. said.

“It’s just a head’s up. There will be a thorough investigation.”

“When can I expect to be back on the air?” J.D. said.

“Estimates are three to four months, fifteen to twenty million bucks. In the meantime you’ll have to offload terrestrial traffic through the nearest station.”

“M.COM Athens. Thomas, the rebuild timeframe can’t be true? I could build a new site in four months.”

“Those are the estimates, J.D.—it will likely take longer and cost more. I’m forwarding satellite photos. You won’t see any damage except for the blackened antenna feed horns.”

“What are we going to do, Thomas? Do you think the Silver Claw may have discovered that we are using M.COM International to rout NSA traffic worldwide?”

Security had been the main concern when Thomas had activated the civilian company M.COM International for SIGINT support. His engineers swore that the database code algorithm could not be broken. But the “human factor” remained an unknown. “Listen, J.D., you keep the M.Com worldwide network stats in the green and leave the rest to me. Meanwhile, it’s business as usual at M.COM’s worldwide networks. We’ll beef up physical security worldwide.”

Thomas hung up, shook his head and said to himself, “I stopped you Red Chinese assholes once and I’ll do it again.” He scribbled more notes on the yellow pad, trying to formulate the right words that he would present this week at the high-level USIB, the United States Intelligence Board. In the absence of the director, he would sit alongside heads of the CIA, the FBI, and various military intelligence bureaus.

“Hell, the Chinese are whispering Nikita Khrushchev’s old line: ‘We will bury you,’ and America can’t hear them.”

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He wrote it down and underlined it.

Thomas rocked back in his chair and deliberated about PROJECT ZEUS for the time it used to take him to “read the defense” on the gridiron.

*Yes.*

## CHAPTER TWO

*Eritrea, East Africa*  
*Two weeks later...*

American Engineer Neil Keller stood below the pulsating red tower light and observed the M.COM Asmara earth station sixty meters below. The floodlights over the operations center delivered a soft white glow to the undersides of the massive dish antennas.

He clutched the anomalous print out in one hand and his father's flask in the other. Funny thing, Will Keller never drank—the flask was meant to convey memories, not spirits.

The anomaly, if it proved not to be a fluke, could be the Ebola virus that crippled East African telecommunications. After seventy-two hours on the job with catnaps here and there, Neil brushed overgrown hair out of his face. He scratched his three day old straw colored beard with the lid of the flask and looked up.

The night sky glittered with stars, eyes that scintillated through a Muslim's black veil. On the horizon, the ochreous moon glared out of crater eyes. Her old craggy face full of scorn cried out, "I warned you not to do it."

Late last year to oblige his wife's dying wish he had introduced a Chinese agent to local Eritrean politicians. After the government had agreed to allow the Chinese to construct an earth station outside Asmara, the Chinese loaded Sara aboard their *Chang'e* space vehicle. Her remains were scattered on the Moon's surface alongside rich entrepreneurs and faded politicians.

A cold, dark stillness pervaded the East African plain despite the moon's attempt to illuminate it. Asmara, the capital city of Eritrea, glowed in the distance across the mile high plateau. Kagnev Station, the onetime USA military base at the edge of town was now home to the Eritrean military. It had been the headquarters of the American military when his father had worked there as a civilian contractor over forty years ago.

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The ornery moon illuminated the flask's etchings when he tilted the silver container:

*"I do not believe we have a more remote station of our  
Armed Forces than Kagnew Station in Asmara, Ethiopia."*

—General William Westmoreland, 1971.

Kagnew Station had fueled Asmara's economy up until the mid-1970's but today its mention only drew smiles from the few faces of the aged Eritrean's who had worked there. Eritrea survived the war that gave them independence from Ethiopia in 1993. Their relationship with Ethiopia had been marred by border wars and constant bickering by the two nations' leaders. A long awaited peace treaty with Ethiopia signed a few years ago led to M.COM establishing an earth station here.

Neil took another swig of bourbon. The Chinese agent, Ray Chan, had been pressuring him to provide classified information about M.COM International's access code algorithm. When he had refused Ray looked up at the moon and said, "Neil, your wife is eternally ensconced on the moon but your position here on earth is subject to change."

"Neil," a voice yelled from below. He looked down at his close friend and fellow M.COM engineer, Johnny Donnelly. "You're not going to believe this shit," Johnny yelled again.

The data on the computer printout had not lied. Johnny, a wiry engineer, who drank for enjoyment, not for need, stood outside the operations center. His body resembled the filament in a long narrow light bulb. Neil squinted and recognized awe and wonder in the youthful engineer's eyes, backlit by the floodlights on the wall.

Johnny's behavior spurred him on. Neil swallowed a breath of cool air and yelled back, "I'll be down in a few minutes."

Minutes later Neil paused at the base of the old tower that his dad had climbed regularly before Neil had come into this world. The pleasant odor of syrupy coffee and pungent incense overcame the evening chill. Outside the front gate, two separate fires lashed out in the night. On the left, the leather-faced guards, with their AK-47's, stared into the fire. The weapons had been added to the radio station's inventory after M.COM Turkey had been destroyed by the terrorist group known as the Silver Claw.

Although their history had been filled with turmoil, Neil saw the Eritreans through his dad's eyes: a gentle, thoughtful people, anyone of which would chase after you with your wallet if you had the misfortune to drop it on the street. Nevertheless, Eritrea remained near the top of the M.COM threat

assessment list since it had been identified by the U.S. government as a country that harbored terrorists, although Neil had seen no evidence of it.

Down at the front gate, on the right, the Coptic priest had camped out there for the past three weeks. The ancient Christian pointed at the moon and the heads of his two followers bobbed up and down at his shoulders. The old priest's near fanatical interest in the moon and the upcoming Easter holiday surpassed an astronomer's discovery of a new galaxy.

Inside the operations center nicknamed "Kagnew Station" after the old U.S. military base outside of town, Johnny's head bobbed between the video screen and the keyboard of the laptop. Neil walked up behind him in the small tech control room and looked out at the rows of radio and switching equipment whose hundreds of lights projected tiny colored formulae on the wide plate glass window in front of them.

"Okay," Johnny said, and looked up from his laptop. His close set eyes begged for attention in a long face that stretched in all directions. "I'm sure your anomaly, this interfering bitch, did not come from around here."

He gave the UNIX expert and ace programmer a half smirk, half frown and drawled, "You've discovered our anomaly's gender?"

"Ships, cars, anomalies—they're all females."

Donnelly, the anomaly is entirely your fault," he said accompanied by a grin.

Johnny shook a shaggy head of rusty colored hair that belonged in a costume rental shop and replied, "Yeah, go ahead and point the finger at me, Keller. Who else are you going to blame? Berhane, the generator technician? Or that mangy mutt, Dog Dog, drawing flies out by the guard shack?"

He let out a nervous cackle and said, "By the way, you owe me two hundred *Nakfa* from the bar bill last night Donnelly."

His cohort grunted.

Johnny's number crunching had confirmed it. The anomaly, a radio signal gone amok, was not terrestrial—it came from outer space. He shook his head and muttered, "We need to find the origin of this mother alien anomaly that threatens our species."

"Yeah, right," Johnny said wearing a huge grin. "I'll start with the planets closest to earth—Mars and Venus."

"I'll take bets that it originates from a satellite," Neil said, and rubbed his hands as if anticipating a steak dinner.

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"You're on, Keller," Johnny said. "I'll double last night's bar bill. The bet is that the anomaly does not originate from earth or her satellites."

"It's easy money for me, Donnelly. I'm placing five test calls across our satellite S-band and when they all drop we'll know she's arrived."

"You said, 'she.'"

"Yes, the anomaly. Who do you think I meant, Sara's ghost?"

"You said it, boss," Johnny said and his eyes flashed an anxious look. "I bet you paid quite a lot to have your wife's ashes strewn on the moon." He ducked behind an overhanging piece of test equipment.

"More than you'll ever know."

Johnny said, "I'm going out for a smoke. Give me a shout if she shows up."

He recalled his dad's story of how he had tracked the Apollo 17 mission here at Tract D in December 1972. "Wait, Johnny," he yelled after him. "Check the storeroom for that old wideband Yagi antenna. I want to connect it to the battery powered portable spectrum analyzer to measure our anomaly."

Johnny whirled around and with eyes lit up like light bulbs said, "You're going to track the anomaly with that archaic Yagi antenna? Where did it come from?"

He smiled. "The answer is yes, and I'll tell you the story behind the antenna sometime."

"Why didn't I think of that?" Johnny said. "We can get a rough idea of the direction of the anomaly's origin."

"Yeah, I thought about using one of our humongous satellite dish antennas to track it but they couldn't react as fast as you."

Johnny's jaw dropped. "Me?"

"You're going to be our tracker tonight."

"Neil, you're a brilliant, if not difficult, taskmaster."

"Flattery will lengthen your stay here. Now go incarcerate your lungs with cigarette smoke and configure the equipment set up before she sneaks up on us."

"I'm on it, boss," Johnny yelled, and the door to the control room creaked before it slammed shut.

## CHAPTER THREE

*M.COM International Headquarters  
Redwood City, California*

At his executive office off of Marine World Parkway, J.D. Hemphill relaxed and composed a top secret NSA document as a Boeing 797 blended wing aircraft swooped over the bay. He stared out through aqua green windows that matched a decor fit for the company logo: a dolphin balancing the earth on its nose. Down the street in the opposite direction, Oracle Corporation worshiped the black and white penguin.

J.D. crunched the NSA traffic numbers in a spreadsheet, taking care to cut and paste the subscriber numbers into the columns labeled MENWITH-HILL, FORT MEADE, and other worldwide node termination points.

The Boeing 797 floated over the Redwood Shores slough and crossed the San Mateo Bridge as J.D. applied a spreadsheet tool to calculate the percentage of NSA busy hour traffic.

The craft touched down at San Francisco International. Beyond, the city's buildings rose above the famous piers that served red Dungeness crab; meaty but not as flavorful as Maryland crab.

J.D. tapped the enter button on the laptop and placed the call.

"Hello, J.D."

"An issue has come up," he confessed to Thomas Palozzi. "I just sent you a classified document through NSA channels."

"Stay on the horn," the big man said. "I'll get back to you."

J.D. leaned back in his chair and listened to the acting director bark at personnel in the background. He used to sit in the back row during meetings, take notes for the "Captain," and smile when Palozzi got wound up. The big man defied roadblocks. Take the Michelin Man, add a tuft of gray streaked black hair on his forehead, set him on fire, put him in motion, and watch him go; but stay the hell out of his way.

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He missed his old office, a small corner at the end of NASA's windowless structure, far down the hall from Palozzi's executive office. J.D. would keep a bowl filled with Halloween candy just so personnel would drop by and say hello and shoot the breeze. Over twenty-five thousand employees came through the lobby doors daily to disappear behind U.S. Marine guarded doors or descend into subterranean levels like dutiful termites searching for wood to gnaw on.

He used to drive in to work on the Baltimore/Washington Parkway, thirty minutes from his loft apartment in Baltimore, the city where he grew up. J.D. left as a nineteen-year-old student headed to Princeton University in New Jersey. After graduating with an engineering degree a defense contractor recruited him for a job in Washington D.C. He spent five unfulfilling years there before he met Thomas Palozzi at a bar in Georgetown one night and got hired on at the agency.

Baltimore, his quirky city, filled with Bohemian bars where he could disappear, had also supported his secret habit through the years.

"What is it, J.D.?"

He watched the big man swallow the remains of a doughnut, a Hostess Twinkie, or a Milky Way. Thomas smacked his lips and said, "I'm listening."

"Thomas, we have a problem," he confessed.

"What the hell is this, J.D.? I just opened your classified document entitled 'Radio Interference' and I'm looking at a bunch of technical data for M.COM Barcelona."

"Hold on Thomas."

His shaky hand searched through the files.

"It's Haile Major, my chief engineer. I think I messed up and e-mailed Haile your classified NSA subscriber data file."

The big man's face flushed. "What do you mean? You think?"

"I'm certain I mixed up the classified document earmarked for you with the Barcelona data."

"My god, J.D., you can't send classified information through regular e-mail. Can Major download or copy the file?"

"No, but he could read it."

"Okay, J.D.," Thomas said and gulped. "I want you to disable M.COM's Outlook e-mail program—call it a system outage—they happen. Erase Mr. Major's e-mail account and start up a new one. We have to assume—"

"He's already read it. The M.COM message system updates me hourly when the engineers read their e-mails. It gives me an indication of who's on the ball. I fired an engineer who didn't answer his e-mails."

“Jesus, J.D.,” Thomas said, “What were you thinking? This could cripple us if it leaks out.”

“I’m sorry, Thomas, I made a mistake.” He nervously sipped on the cup of caffeine free coffee. The combination of too much vodka followed by too much black coffee had forced him to visit the San Mateo Hospital emergency ward the other night. The doctors diagnosed the episode as an irregular heartbeat and recommended he quit drinking and smoking cigars. J.D. had refused to enter the hospital for further tests.

“J.D., that techno-terrorist attack on the M.COM facility in Turkey caught us by surprise. The job was too perfect. My guys are certain the Silver Claw had inside help. Haile Major is high on our suspect list and now we’ve given him the *golden egg*.”

“Impossible, Thomas. My station manager there, Dudley Womack, is true blue. He’s a tough old retired Air Force SOB. Nothing happens without Dudley knowing about it. And forget about Haile. The man is a saint.”

“A Muslim saint or a Christian saint? I am aware of Major’s association with the Eritrea People’s Nakfa Front. The EPNF, with their Marxist roots and leaders educated in Red China, are known supporters of terrorism.”

He let Palozzi’s portrait freeze on the screen and said, “Thomas, there’s another issue.”

“Jesus Christ, J.D.”

“It’s not a critical problem...yet.”

“Well?”

“Haile Major confirmed that M.COM is being interfered with by a non-terrestrial signal. They suspect it originates from, well, from outer space.”

“Don’t humor me with science fiction tales, J.D.”

“Haile Major doesn’t jump to conclusions or delve in fiction. He’s a pure scientist. I’ve asked him to visit M.COM Barcelona first to investigate further. We may have experienced a similar episode at M.COM Naples.”

“That’s good. We should keep Major out of the picture until we figure out what to do. By the way, who knows about the interference?”

“You and I and Haile Major.”

“Keep a lid on it. Instruct Haile Major not to reveal it to anyone. And let me know if he volunteers that he received the e-mail you sent in error.”

“Thomas, should I confront him about it?”

“No, don’t say a thing. Let Mr. Major come forth. When’s he leaving for Europe?”

“Tomorrow evening.”

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"Send me his itinerary soonest. And J.D. if he doesn't approach you about it by close-of-business today let me know. If he does approach you tell him your mistaken e-mail was nothing more than a contingency 'traffic' plan required by the Defense Department. Got it?"

"Sure, Thomas."

"Send me the anomaly files from Europe, too. I'll have my engineers take a look at them."

J.D. clicked on a file. "You should have it."

"Now, J.D., listen to me. We can't afford leaks to the press about NSA's involvement with M.COM. I'm confident of our computer firewalls but, as you have demonstrated, we can't always control the human element. Speaking of that, do you have your engineer Keller under control? He's the nutcase who collaborated with the Red Chinese to have his wife's remains strewn on the moon."

"We have no proof that he collaborated with the Chinese, Thomas. Who listens to an alcoholic? But he mentioned something that surprised me."

"What?"

"Keller said the Chinese were constructing a new satellite earth station over in Asmara, Eritrea."

"And in the Seychelles Islands, northern Iraq, and several other locations worldwide."

"Why the sudden build up?" J.D. said.

"The earth stations will support their efforts to establish a base on the moon. For continuous line-of-site communications to and from the moon they need worldwide relay stations in concert with birds."

"That's what I suspected."

"The Red Chinese have stepped up their schedule. They plan on breaking ground for their moon base late this year, two years ahead of schedule. The earth stations will enable worldwide coverage of the event. The whole world will witness it."

"Live television from the moon," J.D. muttered in disbelief.

"Their moon based LUNA-TV station will broadcast 24/7," Thomas declared, "and the Red Chinese have already signed up Hollywood's sultry redhead, songstress Sonja Harding, and singer Troy Railsback to air a live broadcast from the moon."

"Have they figured out how to provide electricity on the moon on a long term basis?"

"My scientists tell me they're going to convert H<sub>2</sub>O for their energy source. It's the same old Red Chinese strategy—they lie, cheat, and steal from

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us—and then add a few mediocre ideas of their own. They're constructing plants in China to support the H<sub>3</sub>O energy conversion, as we speak."

"What the hell is NASA doing?" J.D. said.

"They pushed back the lunar landing from 2020 to 2021. They're still sending toys to Mars. Did you know that Spiro T. Agnew, our Vice President, in July of 1972 suggested that the U.S. would put a man on Mars by the year 2000?"

J.D. shook his head.

Thomas gave a nervous cackle and said, "Jesus, J.D., a radio signal jamming us from deep space?"

Before Palozzi signed off J.D. recognized a worried look on his mentor's face.

## CHAPTER FOUR

*Tract D, Asmara*

Neil waited on the anomaly and watched the clock on the control room wall even though it ran ten minutes fast. Johnny, sacked out in the control room chair with his feet propped up on the desk, snored at random intervals.

The timer on the six inch spectrum analyzer screen indicated almost three hours since Neil had placed the five test calls. The analyzer displayed a kaleidoscope of signals. His test calls represented by blips danced above the *noise floor* leftover from the creation of the universe.

It lulled him into the past.

Although the new strain of HIV virus had quietly taken many lives in the Bay Area, Neil and Sara hadn't suspected anything late last summer. The doctor had argued at his wife's low risk factor. A needle puncturing the skin was a nurse's occupational hazard and occurred more often than reported at hospitals. Her patient's chart had shown no indication of any killer diseases. Neil agreed with the doctor who dismissed the possibility of Hepatitis B, Hepatitis C, or HIV. Sara, left out of the conversation, smiled. Without asking her opinion Neil nodded his head in agreement with the doctor as if to say, "Leave it to us professionals."

Neil didn't want Sara to go through the ordeal of HIV medication and its side effects (or was it that he just didn't want to be bothered by the whole thing?). They proceeded his way—the engineer's way. The doctor would analyze Sara's blood samples weekly during a three-month period, as a precaution.

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The phone had rung on a quiet night when Neil happened to be in town. He and Sara drank wine and watched the full moon on the roof top of their apartment building in San Mateo, California. Although he wouldn't admit it at the time, he had understood the reason for Sara's fixation with the moon. She could depend on its appearance.

He let the call revert to voice mail while Sara strummed the guitar and sang Hoagy Carmichael's old song, "It's not the pale moon that excites me..." The beautiful Sara, ten years his junior, had a fine voice but he had never encouraged her to sing professionally.

Later, he had checked his messages. The hospital lab technician reported that Sara needed to see her physician Monday morning. The lab tests had turned up an anomaly—an abnormal condition.

Neil paced back and forth in the exam room for twenty minutes, taking in the cold steel medical appliances, the antiseptic smell, and the white sterile walls. When he and Sara heard two quick taps on the door, they retreated to separate corners. The doctor shook their hands and shrugged. He looked at Neil and then at Sara, and said, "I'm sorry to tell you this young lady but the tests show that you have contacted a new strain of the HIV virus through the hypodermic needle."

Sara's hospital staff had been very caring, professional and efficient. She began taking HIV medication that morning. By that evening Neil accepted blame for not demanding that she take the medication to combat HIV right after she had poked herself. Weeks later, her condition deteriorated when the drugs didn't help as advertised and she had become hospitalized. He had gotten drunk and ransacked their San Mateo apartment, blaming humanity for not coming up with a vaccine for the disease after all these years.

Sara's last days were etched in his mind. They had filled her with pain killing drugs. There were no more tests to be done. Her condition had changed from what the nurses called "managed care" into "comfort care" where they placed the emphasis on keeping the patient in a comfortable doped out state until the inevitable. At times during her remaining days Sara would wake up and ask him to play music. He had left a boom box on the night stand next to her bed.

Her request always began with the same old song, *The Nearness of You*.

"It's not the pale moon that excites me  
That thrills and delights me, oh no  
It's just the nearness of you."

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Afterwards she would look at him with a sweet sad smile and say, "Neil, could you have my ashes strewn on the moon?"

The nurses attributed Sara's request to delirium caused by the drugs but Neil knew better. It was the first time she had ever asked anything of him.

Johnny's grin preceded a long yawn. "You see anything, boss?"

"No, go back to sleep."

Sara's death had eaten away at him. He drank constantly and couldn't stay focused on his job at his old company. In an act of desperation he submitted for a credit union loan to cover the down payment for having Sara's ashes strewn on the moon by a Chinese space company. The twenty-five thousand dollar loan fell through when the company terminated him two weeks later for neglecting a project in South America. The real reason for Neil's demise, he knew, stemmed from his drinking and absence from work.

"Your deep thoughts keep waking me up, boss," Johnny said, yawned and sat up in the chair. "What's up?"

He shook his head. "I wonder how Haile's doing."

After a long silence, Johnny said, "Neil, tell me about M.COM's *magnanimous* chief engineer, your buddy, Haile Major. Is he a descendent from Haile Selassie or what?"

"Did you borrow my dictionary again? Yes, Haile is of noble character."

"Go on, boss."

Neil stole a sip of coffee, glad for an opportunity to get his mind off Sara. "To understand Haile Major's nobility you would have to know his father," he began. "In the early 1970's, Carl Major and my dad worked for the U.S. Army Signal Corps here in Asmara."

Neil took another sip. "My dad used to grin whenever someone mentioned Asmara. His mentor Carl Major excelled in satellite communications. The guy had the classic looks of a 1940's black and white melodramatic movie star, too. They both loved Asmara—our quaint Italian town nestled atop the Red Sea."

"Okay, cut to the chase scene," the impatient Johnny said.

Neil gave his second in command a testy look. "Carl Major and my dad rented a place downtown that housed his 1949 Willy's Overland Jeep, my dad's 1936 Fiat Balilla named Sophie, two Ducati motorcycles, and their share of Asmara's beautiful women."

"Is it the same Sophie that's parked in the Nyala Hotel garage?"

"The very same."

“Go on.”

“My dad met Carl’s future wife Ghidey first and introduced her to him at the Nyala Nightclub.”

“The same Nyala nightclub two floors up from where we currently reside? Where I drag my feet across the dance floor?” Johnny leaned back in the roll around and brushed his locks behind his head, his habit when confronted by the ironies of life that Neil often uncovered.

“Yes.”

Johnny said, “Unbelievable.”

“You see...my dad had already fallen for Ghidey.”

Johnny, unprepared for a tragedy grunted, “Oh.” Nevertheless, he sat straight up in his chair, in anticipation.

“Carl Major with jet-black hair, green eyes and squared shoulders attracted women. The three of them were at the start, good friends, and I suspect Ghidey had the wherewithal not to get between Carl and my dad.”

Johnny wriggled in his seat. “What happened?”

“His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie, the Emperor of Ethiopia, intervened.”

Johnny’s eyes grew. “Haile Selassie? Don’t they still worship him in the Caribbean?”

“The Rastafarians worship Haile Selassie as the Messiah and believe that Ethiopia and Eritrea are heaven on earth. My dad wouldn’t have argued the last part.”

He watched momentum rise in Johnny’s eyes and said, “Okay, you wanted to know about that old Yagi antenna sitting on the table, there.”

Johnny sat there, bug-eyed. “What about Haile Selassie?”

“It all ties together.”

“Oh?”

“Carl Major and my dad had full privileges at the U.S. Army Base at Kagnew Station. They had just come from lunch at the NCO club. My dad had acquired a Yagi antenna from STRATCOM, the U.S. Army Strategic Communications unit. They planned to use the antenna to track the Apollo 17 mission to the moon later that year.”

Awe and disbelief competed in Johnny’s face. “You’re talking about the same Yagi antenna that’s sitting outside?”

“Indeed.”

“You got your name from that Apollo mission?”

*ASMARA'S ANOMALY*

“Yes and no. Neil Armstrong was the first man to walk on the moon during the Apollo 11 mission in 1969. During the 1972 Apollo 17 mission, the last man to walk on the moon was Eugene Cernan.”

Johnny grimaced and said, “Eugene Cernan Keller...no, that wouldn't have worked.”

“Carl Major and my dad were walking toward Kagnew Station's main entrance, excited about tracking the Apollo 17 mission. Each of them struggled to let the other get a word in, oblivious to what was happening around them.”

He paused to catch his breath and reached for a nonexistent glass.

Johnny excused him by saying, “Don't stop now.”

“The Kagnew Station dentist office stood on the left. My dad carried the Yagi antenna, parallel to the ground...”

Neil took another sip of coffee.

“Come on,” Johnny pleaded.

“They turned at a tall hedge. I remember my dad joking that he had mentioned to Carl Major that the antenna belonged in a science fiction movie.

They walked straight into His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie and his entourage. The emperor had just left the dental office. My dad said he would never forget the stunned look in the emperor's eyes when he saw the tall American with his ‘ray gun.’”

Johnny let out a hoot.

“Haile Selassie stood about five feet tall. He looked up into my dad's eyes a good foot and a half above, and that along with the painkiller administered by the dentist must have made the earth beneath his feet shaky. His Imperial Majesty, the Lion of Ethiopia, tripped and fell in front of the two of them.”

Johnny eyes grew to the size of golf balls.

“Carl Major dove to the cement sidewalk. His arm cushioned the emperor's head from injury. The imperial guards grabbed the Yagi out of my dad's hands and pinned both of them on the ground. A dozen rifle-mounted bayonets pointed at their heads.

“What'd they do?”

“Carl Major spoke enough Tigrinia, the local dialect, to ward off the guards but the emperor took the matter in his own hands. He got up, dusted himself off and ordered the guards to stand down. Dad said the emperor turned to Carl Major and said in English, ‘Thank you. You are a good soldier.’ The Military Police, the MP's, looked on, amazed.”

Johnny chuckled, “Wow, I can picture those two on the ground with bayonets at their skulls.”

*D.K. MATTHEWS*

“Several military personnel had witnessed the incident and my dad, Carl Major and the antenna were soon released.”

“What a story,” Johnny said, shaking his head.

“That afternoon, the news that Carl Major saved the emperor from injury spread all over Kagnev Station and Asmara. When Ghidey had heard how Carl Majors had saved the life of His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie; well, it blew off my dad’s chances.”

Johnny eyed him sideways. “So, if it were not for that dusty old Yagi antenna and His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie, then Haile Major wouldn’t be around today.”

Neil wiped his sweaty forehead and thought, *If not for that odd looking Yagi antenna, I might not be around today.*

## CHAPTER FIVE

After Johnny snoozed again Neil clicked on the e-mail from his boss J.D. Hemphill, Vice President of M.COM International.

The annual reminder called for all employees to review M.COM's "code of ethics."

"Yeah J.D., read it and take heed," Neil whispered, recalling his job interview late last year.

He had followed the M.COM executive after J.D. had bragged of his five thousand dollar per month apartment in San Mateo. When Hemphill headed to the Mission Street area in San Francisco instead, Neil trailed the Mercedes' C-Class in his rented Ford Escort.

When the vice president pulled into a dumpy hotel on Mission Street clandestine images emerged from Neil's thoughts. Haile Major had mentioned that the little man had come to M.COM from the secretive NSA. He imagined a buxom blond NSA secret agent who would pull up beside J.D. in a red corvette.

Neil's excitement turned into horror after a smoke spewing aged Lincoln Town Car drove up next to the Mercedes. A shady character got out and exchanged a mop-haired little boy toting a McDonald's "Happy Meal" for a wad of J.D.'s money.

He was tempted to reply to Hemphill's "code of ethics" e-mail to all M.COM employees worldwide. On the subject line he would type in: J.D. Hemphill—pedophile.

The e-mail included information for employees that M.COM employed the services of an ombudsman available 24/7 to listen to employee's complaints and personal problems.

Neil had needed more than an ombudsman last year when he lay stretched out on the couch in his San Mateo apartment with a cheap bottle of bourbon

cradled in his arms. Haunted by Sara's last days, he had drained his liquor supply on a three day binge.

When the doorbell rang he remained perfectly still—he owed rent to the landlord. He closed his eyes, hoping the intruder would go away.

“Neil, open the door, it's Haile,” the voice rang out.

He lifted the empty bottle and tossed it behind the sofa where it rattled among the others.

The pounding on the door continued. “I know you're in there, Neil. Come on now, it's Haile.”

It hurt to refuse the voice of his friend and mentor. “Give me a minute, Haile,” he yelled out, and went and washed up and put on an unstained shirt.

The short, thin energetic Haile gave much more than a minute. For hours he helped Neil put his life back in order. Together, they washed dishes and clothes, shampooed the carpet, and trashed all the bottles. Neil showered and dared to look into the bathroom mirror to shave and brush his teeth.

The next day he had regained part of his self-respect. Haile took him out for coffee at Starbucks on Fourth Avenue in downtown San Mateo. Neil sipped on a cappuccino and the M.COM chief engineer said, “We're installing an earth station outside of Asmara, at the old Tract D compound.”

His fond memories of dad's stories of Asmara, then part of Ethiopia forced a smile. Neil gaped at Haile. “I can't believe it. Tract D?”

“Believe it,” Haile said smiled. “Asmara, our dads' old hangout.”

He had so many questions but it all came down to two words: “When? Why?”

Haile raised his hand and Neil settled down. “It completes the M.COM worldwide footprint,” Haile said. “It'll be ready for test and acceptance next month.” The chief engineer gave him a sly look. “Ready in a month and M.COM needs an experienced station manager.”

He caught Haile's less than subtle inference. “Do you think...I mean...could I apply for the job?”

Haile smiled and replied, “You have an interview the day after tomorrow with J.D. Hemphill, vice president of operations.”

When the first call dropped it created a domino effect.

“She's returned,” Neil alerted Johnny and watched the last blip that represented the phone call on the spectrum analyzer screen disappear.

Johnny gripped the arms to keep from falling out of his chair.

“You ready?” Neil said.

*ASMARA'S ANOMALY*

He rubbed his eyes and said, "I'm always ready to chase after a skirt. Boss, what should we call her?"

"I don't know."

"You're the station chief. You need to name her."

He looked at the plaque on the wall. "It's fitting that we call her the 'Asmara Anomaly.'"

"Good choice," Johnny said and peered at the spectrum analyzer. "All five calls have dropped."

Neil unable to conceal his excitement said, "Ladies and gentlemen, the Asmara Anomaly has arrived."

Johnny gave a thumbs-up.

"Let's go outside. But first, turn off the M.COM carriers so we don't get confused between our own frequency transmissions and the anomaly."

Johnny tapped at the keyboard on the computer linked to the equipment. "Done," he said, with a final poke on the enter button.

"You bewitching bitch," he crowed. "We're going to find out where you call home."

Johnny gave out a hoot.

Outside the operations center, on a fold-out table on the well lit pavement, Neil tuned the spectrum analyzer to record the anomaly. Johnny, a prop on a science fiction movie set, pointed the Yagi antenna in the general direction of Asmara.

He looked at his watch. "Last time she appeared for thirty minutes. We may have roughly twenty minutes to find her." A small blip danced in the middle of the spectrum analyzer screen above the noise floor like a sloop on a stormy sea. Neil adjusted the spectrum analyzer gain to maximize the amplitude of the signal.

"Commander Cody is energizing his ray gun," Johnny said.

"I'll be recording the different waveforms," Neil said. "I can see a signal wave form that could be our anomaly. Let's pan you're antenna slowly, ninety degrees to the left."

He watched as the signal level remained unchanged while Johnny panned to the left, in the general direction of the new Chinese earth station.

As a sanity check he would eliminate the obvious. "Where do you think the azimuth of that Eritrean military base is from here?"

Johnny pointed. "The base is in the general direction of Asmara, over there."

He maximized the settings on the analyzer. "Okay, go ahead and pan in that direction."

Johnny slowly panned in the other direction and then Neil had him do a quick to verify what he knew.

“As we suspected, I don’t see evidence of the anomaly on the ground.” he said and pointed up. “Let’s check the satellite up there.”

Johnny hooted again and twisted his body to point the antenna in the direction Neil had requested.

No change. He judged the approximate area of the M.COM geostationary satellite, which hung over twenty-two thousand miles above. “Johnny, aim it up in the sky to about where my finger is pointing.”

“Okay, here she goes boss.”

He noticed a slight increase of the signal amplitude on the analyzer screen. “Keep going west,” he said, eliminating the satellite.

Johnny, with the antenna slung high over his shoulder, grunted. He resembled a modern *Rodin* creation.

The signal slightly increased in amplitude and Neil yelled, “Stop.” He waited a few seconds until the amplitude stabilized on the screen and then said, “Johnny, pan it down and to the right.”

The signal level just decreased.

“Wait, the other way. Pan it upwards and to the left.”

The signal level slowly increased and the envelope widened, splashing across M.COM’s commercial frequency spectrum. Now they were getting somewhere.

The Yagi antenna did not have the signal power or gain as the huge dish antennas. “Keep going,” he said, “slowly.” He had no doubt that this was the anomaly. It couldn’t hide on the monitor.

“Johnny, stop there,” he snapped.

Neil squinted to view the scant changes of the waveform on the screen. “Okay, go to the right, now,” he said.

“That’s it, a little more.”

“Now tweak it down...more...more...stop...perfect.”

“Boss, you owe me four hundred Nakfa,” Johnny said, “Look up in the sky—the origin of the Asmara Anomaly.”

His eyes followed Johnny’s dreamy words into the inky starlit heavens.

The antenna pointed directly at the moon.

The year is 2017. At a remote East Africa radio station, an American engineer discovers a radio signal anomaly originating in outer space, which disrupts telecommunications worldwide. NASA launches a team on Easter Sunday, who disable the anomaly, but discover a prophecy of doom.

Asmara's Anomaly

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