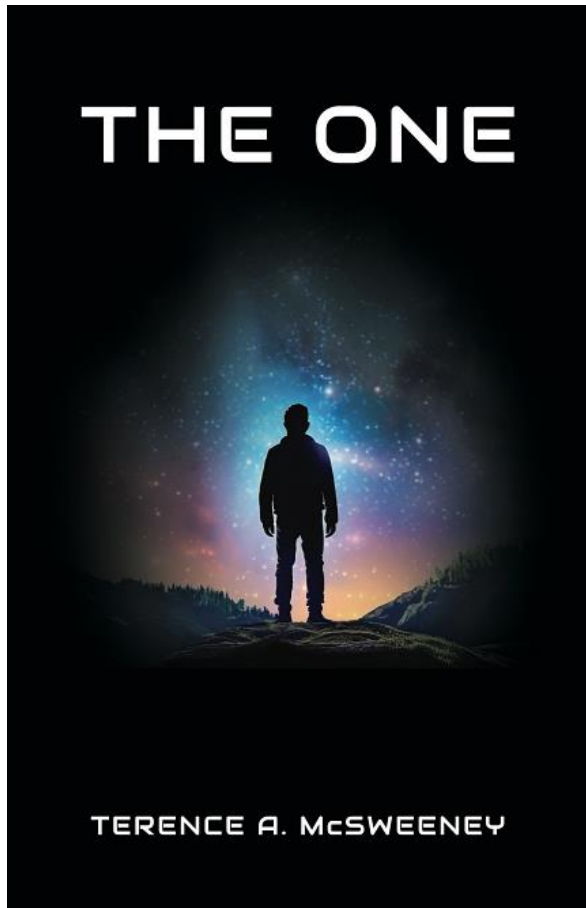




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The One

By Terence A. McSweeney

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THE ONE



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1.

The place was unlike any place he had experienced. The air was a thick, soupy slop. Breathing was a laborious task and Max, who prided himself on his conditioning had grave doubts whether he could survive one more moment. His people were not faring much better, all that is except Francine sitting next to him. She looked well-rested. The truth of the matter was they were all slowly suffocating like creatures in a glass jar without the mandatory air holes poked into the lid. His vision was becoming blurred around the edges, a certain sign of hypoxia. The end was rapidly approaching.

“Maxwell, Max can you hear me?” called a voice that was very far away. Something was put over his mouth. He fought with all his might to break free from it, but soon he felt a cool breeze filling his lungs and he began to recover.

“Wha..Where are we?” he asked the voice.

“We are technically nowhere and everywhere,” replied the voice that was rapidly becoming clearer as was his vision. He now saw the face that made that voice. It was a face of large black oval eyes and a head big enough to hold those eyes.

“Joan? Is that you?” he coughed out.

“Yes Max,” replied Saladza.

“My people. You need to help them,” Max coughed out.

“It is being done as we speak. Sit up and take deep breaths. You will feel better in a few moments.”

“What did you mean we are nowhere and everywhere?” asked Max as he begun to survey the area.

“We are between two parsecs of time. Think of it as an air pocket within an underwater cave.”

Max frowned and said, “Well, this air pocket has no air! How large is this place?”

“It is boundless and featureless. It is also safe. The Houteta, even if they knew where we are would never come here. It is one piece of the Grey technology that they never stole or mastered. We can regroup here and consider our next steps.” From Max’s left side he heard a familiar voice.

“Boss, where the hell are we?” asked Bernie.

“Do you want to tell him?” Max asked Saladza.

“I’ll leave that to you. I need to check on the old ones. I’ll be back shortly and we can collect everyone to work this out.” Saladza then moved off into the fog. Max called back to Bernie saying, “Find everyone and bring them to me. It’s time for a debrief.”

“Aye,” responded Bernie and he went about the task.

As Max waited he took account of the situation. They were safe for now, but would they ever be really safe? He began to break down the problem. They were outgunned, out manned and out of their element. The scenario could not be much worse. He wondered what he would say to his people. They certainly came to the same conclusion and that conclusion was they were screwed. As he thought, his operatives as well as the others arrived and sat down before him. Saladza stood in the back of the group. Once settled, he began the meeting.

“Joan or should I say Saladza will lay out our situation and after that you will have the final say as to which path you will take. None of you signed

up for this and I will not hold you to it. There will be no judgement. I already know what warriors you are. Saladza will you brief everyone on where we are?”

“Certainly, Colonel. Without getting too much into the weeds of astrophysical concepts and theory let us begin with the facts. Time is a dimension and it is a multi-faceted dimension. There are a number of different physical dimensions and between those dimensions are empty spaces. We are in one of those. These spaces are boundless and yet limited. My people found a way to enter them and it saved us from total annihilation by the Houteta. We are safe here, they cannot enter. Now, for the problem. The world time frame that you left is not safe. The Houteta as we speak are attacking and there is no power in that interval of time that will prevent them from conquering the entire planet. I say no power in that interval, but there is a way to prevent this total annihilation from the future. There are three points in time that if we had taken different actions your present and my people’s past would be different. The Colonel here is the central force that can change this with your help. He is who my people refer to as The One. Now, I am going to say something that may surprise you. The Houteta, the Greys and all of you are of the same species.”

There was some mumbling but it was muted as their training demanded. Saladza continued.

“Your people become us in the distant future. You also become Houteta. Our past is not changeable, but for you and The One our past is your future and that is changeable. So, you have three choices. One, you can go back and fight. You will lose. Two, you can stay safe here until your food and water run out, or three you can prevent the conquering of your planet and my planet in your future by going forward. The choice is yours and has always been yours.” Saladza sat down. The mood was grim.

“Not much of a choice,” commented Bernie.

“I have a question,” said Chance. “The mere fact you were sent back here was to find The One. Your people are oppressed so it is obvious that we failed to defeat the Houteta. Can we really win this?”

Saladza smiled and answered, “That is why you were my favorite in the history books. You always asked insightful questions. You did fail. In fact, you failed several times and each time you failed we recorded your actions and made corrections in our approach in the hope that one time you would not fail.”

Chance then asked, “So, you have been here before?”

“Correct.”

“So why do you think that this time will be any different?”

Saladza measured her words and slowly said, “Because, this is the first time that you have the others with you. It is the first time that Sam and his people escaped the Houteta.” She pointed to Sam and his group saying,

“They are the wild card. They are the elusive exponent within the equation that opens up a variety of possibilities. This is the first time that The One and the Revered are in the same time parsec. This is special. This is time altering. This is hope!”

Max then spoke. “What is the way forward?”

The Ancient Ones stepped up and spoke saying in unison,

“There are three points of inflection, your present, the future and our present. What you do within these inflection points can change the future of our species. You must be ready to take action.”

“Take action how?” asked Max.

“That is why we are here,” answered Saladza, “but first you must decide amongst yourselves whether you are willing and that is where we will step back so you can make that decision.” With that Saladza and the Ancient Ones retreated into the fog of the place as the others looked on.

Bernie stood up and said, “Boss, I go where you go. I say we fight these monsters and kick them back to their own time.” Then Francine stood and said,

“I go with The One. It is my destiny and duty.”

Chance looked troubled and remained silent as the others gradually stood and swore their loyalty to the task and the Colonel. Max looked over to his partner and his number one asking, “So Chance, what do you think?”

Chance stood up and answered, “Huh, well I think the whole thing is crazy. We have no weapons, no clear operational guide for the mission and we are totally out of our element. It’s sheer lunacy.” He paused, smiled, and then added,

“I like it. Count me in.” He then clasped fists with Max and said, “But, do I have to call you The One? It’s a bit uppity don’t you think?” It was Max’s turn to smile because knew that his rock stood firmly with him. He turned to Sam and asked, “Are you okay with this?”

Sam answered, “We have seen the future. We have suffered under those monsters. We stand with the Greys. We stand with you. Let’s fix this thing once and for all.” Max nodded and then called out, “Saladza, it is decided.”

The female formerly known as Joan rejoined the group and asked, “So, what is your decision?”

“It’s in your history books. Of course we are in.”

“All of you?” she asked.

“All of us,” answered Max.

“Well then, it is time to leave.”

“Leave for where?” asked Max.

“Where it all begins.”

2.

The group assembled before Saladza as she made adjustments to the displacement device. She turned to them and asked, “Are we all ready?”

“Will we be able to breathe on our own where we are going?” asked Max.

“Yes, we will be entering a physical time dimension.”

“Where are we going?” asked Chance who despite his acquiescence to taking the next step was very unsure about the whole process.

“We are going to insert into a time period prior to the split of humanity. Here we will begin to plan the next steps. Any other questions?” No one raised their voice. They stood stoically waiting. The Ancient Ones had also joined the group. Towering above the others Max could not help but notice how serene they always appeared. He wished he could be like that, but it was not his nature. Saladza nodded and said,

“Alright.” She again turned to the device, pressed its sides, and announced,

“Command Protocol 2825 C.E. Scan entrants and initiate preprogrammed coordinates Alpha 5 DELIOS 578875.”

The device answered: **Acknowledged. Scan initiated.**

An aqua colored light advanced across the whole party and then retreated back from its origin.

Travelers accounted for. Initiation will begin in 00.43 seconds. Destination Alpha 5 DELIOS 578875.

The air began to pulsate around them and then as the device counted down it swirled like a dust devil in the desert enveloping them inside the increased violence of the agitated wind. With each second checked off the air grew warmer and more violent and then when the count reached zero a large circle of light appeared before them. The group was drawn through the opening of that circle instantly and it began to retract. Just when it was almost completely closed the device also was sucked in with a pop.

They found themselves back on Earth, at least that is what it looked like although this version of Earth seemed abandoned. Max thought about what that meant. He looked around as did the others and it was very clear that the inhabitants had long given up on bending nature to their will. Everything was overgrown and unattended to. It was an expanse that betrayed the fact that humanity had given up or become bored with nature itself.

Bernie looked at Max and asked, "Where do you think we are boss?"

Before Max could answer Saladza said, "You know this place as New York City in your time period."

"The Big Apple? No way. Where are the buildings? The trains? The people?" asked Bernie.

Saladza pointed to the ground and answered, "Many meters below the ground."

Bernie swallowed trying to grasp what she said.

"Below the ground?" asked Chance.

"I'm afraid so," answered Saladza. "Humans abandoned the cities as ozone began to thin. They went underground. As a result, they turned inward. They gave up their stewardship of the land and the climate. The

air soon became toxic and those who did not succumb to this poisoning also left the topside. Years passed by and the land built upon itself, returning to its natural state. It swallowed everything until all that was left belonged to it.”

Sam came over and then asked, “Are we in danger here Saladza?”

“That is the ironic thing. When humans disengaged from the surface over many years the Earth healed itself. The air is much cleaner here than your own timeframe. The ozone is thicker and what you see before you is the transformation.”

Max then asked, “So why didn’t the people just return?”

“They lost interest in the Earth and in themselves. It was the beginning of our physical change.”

Sam nodded and said, “That is why the Greys can speak without using their mouths and why your people Saladza underwent such a physical transformation.”

“Precisely and I have taken you here because this is the beginning of that phase. Here we need to set up our base of operations. Here we will begin changing the future, but we must get underground now.”

“What’s the hurry?” asked Bernie.

“The animals.” As if on cue there was movement off to their right side. Max’s radio crackled. It was Calvin. He saw it too and moved further away from the group signaling by radio.

“What do you have, Cal?” asked Max.

“I saw movement off to the right. It was something big.”

“Can you get an image?”

“I don’t know. Do they still have sats in this time period?”

“Only one way to find out,” answered Max.

“Checking now. Holy shit I have an image and it is very big. Wait, there are two. They are close by.”

Max immediately yelled, “Weapons ready!” Everyone with a gun clicked that gun releasing the safeties. There was a loud growl and then a guttural purring.

Saladza then screamed, “Tigeron! We need to move now. Follow me.”

“What the hell is a Tigeron?” Just then a massive head appeared from the woods attached to the largest cat any of them had ever seen. It move like lightening and swallowed Dan Gordon’s head tearing it off his body as that body did a macabre shaking dance before crumbling to the ground. Tim who had been helping his colleague to his feet was frozen in place until Bernie fired off a couple shots and grabbed him screaming, “RUN!” This snapped him into reality and he ran screaming towards the others who were following Saladza. She weaved left and right until she shouted as she pointed, “There. Go there!” It was an opening in the side of a hill. They all ran to it with Trent and Bernie covering their escape. When the last person was inside panting and trying to catch his or her breath Max turned to Saladza and asked again, “What kind of creature is that?”

“It’s a cross between a tiger and a lion, a Tigeron,” replied Saladza.

“Why would anyone want to do that?” asked Max incredulously.

“It is the early days of the Houteta faction experimenting with genes. It is the phase that proved that with the right engineering you can make anything. One hundred years from now they will experiment with the genes of the octopus and you know how that worked out.”

Tim screamed, "Where's Dan? We have to find him and get him safe. He can't walk on his own." Max could see that he was wild-eyed and slowly and softly took the man by the shoulders and said, "Dan is gone."

"But, he.."

"No, he didn't make it," said Max softly but firmly. Tim just looked at him and the truth came crashing down. He fell to his knees and wept. Max let him grieve knowing at this moment there was nothing he could say that would make the situation any better. It sucked and he had to do it too many times before. Max then took command. He called out,

"Chance and Bernie establish a perimeter. Francine be ready if we need your powers. Sam, are all your other people accounted for?"

"Yes, They're shaky but they will come around," replied Sam thinking, *Having a person's head bitten off before your eyes will do that.*

"Alright, we'll wait in here until it is safe." He turned to his guide, Saladza and asked, "What other creatures are out there?"

"There are many Maxwell. It is another reason that my people stay underground." She then, using her finger, drew an X on the cave floor saying, "We are approximately here and we need to get to here." She made another mark. "It is flat land with the exception of here, where we are going. We should remain inside the cave until dawn. The large predators will not be active during the daylight."

Sam then exclaimed, "Those two seemed to not have received the memo wouldn't you say?"

"They are young, pups and they are just learning the ropes."

"You mean they get bigger?" asked Torrez who was still visibly shaken and rubbing his hand over his rifle.

“Much bigger,” replied Saladza. “I will ask the Ancient Ones to stand guard if Max you will allow Francine to help as well. We will be perfectly safe in here and I recommend getting some sleep. Our journey down under the mountain tomorrow is arduous.”

Max nodded and asked, “How far down?”

“A bit over 1500 feet to the first level.” Saladza then nodded and left to speak with the large aliens.

“Alright people. We are safe for now. Get some rest. We leave first thing in the morning,” ordered the Colonel. Everyone found a spot to lie down but Max doubted any would sleep because that’s when the nightmares come and sometimes, they come when you are awake.

3.

It was not customary for his fellow Greys to speak with their mouths but a select few chose to do so anyways. It was the last vestige of their ancestry and although most of the Greys adapted to isolation and introspection, his group were about to take a different path. He was merely a boy when he first had these thoughts. He was caring for pet hamsters when he thought about the relationship. He was the hamsters' whole world. They relied on him for food, shelter, and protection. For most this would be a sacred obligation built on affection for the animals, a compact of responsibility, but for Zeptot I it was something very different. It was all about power. He was their god and as that god he had total control of their existence. For Zeptot, the power was intoxicating, addictive and the more he exercised it over these puny creatures the more he wanted.

He began to experiment. At first, he withheld their food for periods of time and observed. The hamsters continued to go to their bowls. They became confused, at times lethargic which was expected. What was not expected was they became aggressive with each other. Zeptot took notice and began to write down his observations. He then provided food again on a regular basis and the hamsters who now had offspring returned to their former passive nature, that is all except one. This hamster remembered starvation and began picking off the weaker hamsters one by one. She became the leader. She had power over the others and she got more than her fair share of the food. Zeptot thought, *What if he bred her with the strongest male hamster? What would their offspring be like?* He isolated her and a very large male making sure that both were fed larger portions of food on a regular schedule. The two hamsters got along marvelously and bred. The female, Athena, who he named after the Greek queen of the Gods, had six pups. Four were

does and two were bucks. The bucks were larger than the does, but outside of their gender he could see no difference between them regarding the aggression he had seen in the mother. When the pups reached maturation he performed another experiment. He marked their fur and released them into the general population of the other hamsters which had grown to over thirty. What happened next even surprised Zeptot. Within a day the offspring of Hera mated with selected males or females and killed many of the others. They then guarded the food and became fatter as the others began to wither away. The difference in this case was that the ones deprived of food although becoming more aggressive could not overpower Hera's offspring and slowly died. A new order of hamsters was obtained. Zeptot smiled. His conclusion was that the one strongest element required for building a society was fueled by voluntary cooperation but at some point *power* was more important. He looked around at his fellow Greys who were becoming weaker physically as they withdrew from interaction with each other and saw the flaw in such an approach. He also saw one other thing: opportunity. He began to build his power base. He now had the formula. There were others like him who clung to the old ways. They were his people. Then, he picked up Hera and her mate, thanked them with a large meal of lettuce. Then he crushed each with his bare hands. It was time to be a god!

4.

The sleep was fitful for those who could sleep. Most did not. The soldiers did. They were trained to fall asleep when they needed to. As the sun rose and illuminated the cave opening three figures still stood facing outward. Max came over to Francine and whispered, “Stand down soldier. You have completed your mission.” Francine turned and smiled looking no less for the wear. She was still a ball of energy. She spoke to the Ancient Ones but only Saladza could release them which she did within moments.

Max called over his two execs and said, “Have everyone ready to move within the hour. Get something to eat and meet me at the back of the cave in thirty.”

“Aye,” was their response and they moved away to accomplish the task. Max saw that Sam was awake and guarding over his people. He went over to the seasoned vet and asked, “Couldn’t sleep either?”

“No,” replied Sam, “old habits. Commander, what do you think we will find down there?” he pointed to the ground. “I never found anything but death.”

Max could only imagine the horrors that his new comrade had faced and shook his head saying, “I don’t know. Hopefully, an answer to all of this. How are your people holding up?”

“They’re shaken. It’s not every day you see a person you care about torn to pieces. I have to wonder what other nightmares are out there. These Houteta are vicious animals themselves. I’m hoping I did not lead them into the fire.”

"I hope not too. As soon as I have an idea of what our next steps are I will inform you. Better yet, you should be a part of our planning from here on out. We will be meeting in about thirty minutes. I would like you to join us."

Sam acknowledged the offer and agreed that he would be there. Max then walked off looking for Saladza who was speaking with the Ancient Ones. When she saw him approach she came over and said, "We should not stay too long here. There is only a short window before the other predators begin to roam."

"My thought exactly," replied Max. "That is why I would like you to meet with us in a half an hour in the back of the cave." Saladza nodded, but before she left she touched his arm and said, "We will make this right, Maxwell. We will make it right."

They met in the back of the cave and Saladza went over what she expected would unfold for the day. She began, "We are about four hours away from our destination due east. Between us and that is sand, jungle and the ruins. We must be very careful when we cross the ruins. There are those who chose to stay above ground. They are a miserable lot who rob and are rumored to murder their victims. We must strive to make very little disruption. My thoughts are that the Ancient Ones and Francine can be our protection, but they will have to have warning."

Max then said, "Bernie have Calvin and Trent advance ahead of us from each side on high ground to cover us."

"Aye," responded Bernie.

Saladza continued, "The one you call Samuel has military training?" Samuel came up from behind and answered,

"Yes, a few tours in the jungle. It is not an experience I relish."

“You should then brief your group on the need for silence and what to do if attacked. Now once we get through the ruins there is a forest about two miles long and this empties out into an area that was once what you refer to as Central Park. There is a rock outcropping there that my people have carved into. We will find an access there. We will know it by a symbol of a three fingered hand that points the way.”

“What about the bandits? Won’t they follow us?” asked Chance.

“They will not come close to that rock. They are a superstitious lot and they believe that it devoured their kindred. It is very taboo.”

“You said, Central Park. This whole area is Manhattan?” asked Chance.

“What’s left of it,” answered Saladza. “Don’t get sentimental though. It is a very dangerous place and it floods after every major rain bringing in other predators.”

“Why the flooding?” asked Bernie.

“All the pumps that kept the island dry no longer work. Every high tide brings that water to us. It was another reason why my people went underground. The key to surviving this trip is speed and awareness. Always look for danger. It won’t be hard to find.”

“Okay, you know what to do. Get everybody ready. We move out in thirty minutes,” commanded Max and the others except Saladza scattered. When they were gone, Max asked, “What about the Houteta? Where are they?”

Saladza paused and then said, “Maxwell, they are all over where we are going, but in this time sequence they are just Greys. We are early Max. The transition will not begin to take place for another hundred years.”

“And my...father?”

“Not born yet.

Max thought about that and then stated, “But how will we be able to turn things around. None of us will be alive in a hundred years.”

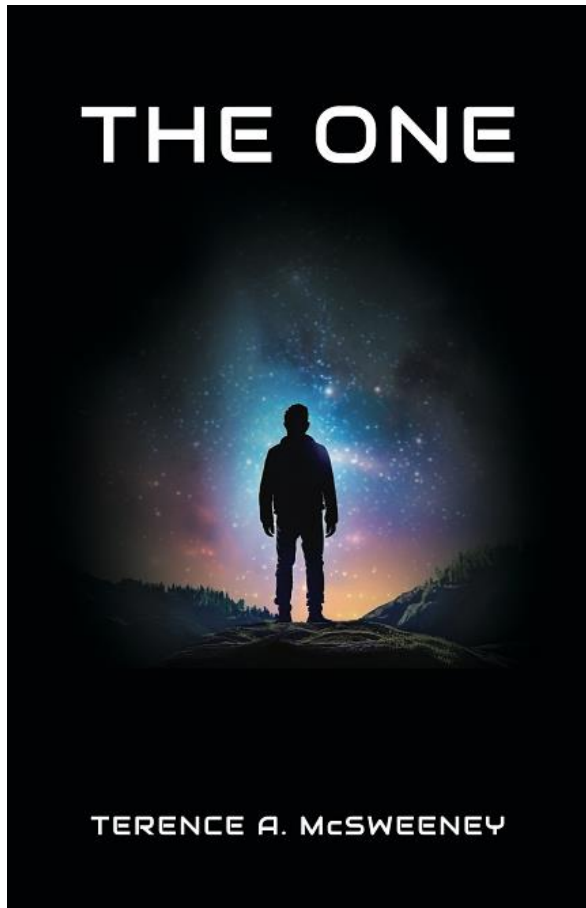
Saladza slowly shook her head and then answered, “That is why I have the device. We will travel to that time after we have made some adjustments in this one.” She could tell that the man who was once a boy that she took care of was unsettled.

“But what if I turn into one of them?”

Saladza placed her hand on his arm and looked straight into his eyes saying, “That will never happen. You are your mother’s son. If it was going to happen it would have happened in your younger years. I know I tested you many times. You are, however, smarter than those around you and stronger but you will not sprout tentacles for hands and more importantly you will not lose your humanity as those animals have. You are more us than them, Maxwell Jones. I promised your mother and I always keep a promise!”

“Will my mother be there in the future?”

“Yes and she will be very proud of the man you became. For now, however, we must make our escape.” Saladza then moved off to attend to other matters. Max shrugged, then followed to gather his team.



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