

SEVEN DEADLY SINNERS

The Gardeners

A Novel by Fred McKibben

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Author's Note

Parts of this novel are set on Uor, a small planet in the Milky Way galaxy some 987 light years from Earth. The Uorian language is, of course, quite different from Earthly languages, although the differences are probably less than readers imagine, with many similarities to Indo-European words. The reason for that will become obvious as you read this book.

For the convenience of readers, common terms and descriptions in this book are stated in Earthly languages. For example, I refer to months, days and years rather than using the Uorian “ora”, “ira” and “ura”. In addition, it might be helpful to know the Uorian calendar has ten months rather than twelve. Each month has thirty-five days except Qo and Ethos, which have thirty-six.

To any Uorians reading this work, I apologize for the inconvenience.

Fred McKibben

Prologue

June 14

Peace Island, South China Sea

Seven heads ducked behind a row of shrubs as the beam from the search light came back around. When the light had passed, Alex raised his head a little. Forty yards to the four-foot concrete wall where Rogers' men had set up their defensive position to take advantage of the slightly higher ground. Outside the searchlight's beam, a quarter moon provided only minimal light. To their left, Alex could hear the sound of soft waves rolling along a small beach, and he could see the moonlight reflect off the foam as the little waves rolled onshore.

"Thirty-seven minutes," Alex said.

"We can get in," Cool Jackson said, "but we'll take some losses."

"Even if we get in, we have to get Fulcanelli past Lucy," Alex observed.

"I thought you'd figured all that out before we got here," Jackson said.

"I figured something would come to me."

Cool turned to regard Alex. "You really are just an accountant, aren't you?"

“Yep,” Alex said.

“Well, we don’t have much time to strategize,” the ex-cop said. “So, we gotta do something whether it’s smart or not.”

“Yep,” Alex said again.

“So, what are we gonna do?”

“Me and Fulcanelli are going in,” Alex said.

“I thought you didn’t have a plan.”

“I didn’t until just now,” Alex said.

“What do you want us to do?”

“Draw their fire,” Alex said.

“That shouldn’t be a problem.” Jackson rolled his eyes.

Alex signaled Fulcanelli to follow him and started at a slow crawl toward the little beach.

“Where are you going?” Sara Shaw whispered as he crawled by her position.

“I’m taking Fulcanelli,” he said. “We’re going to find a way in.”

“I’m going with you,” Sara said.

“Too dangerous.”

“It’s plenty dangerous right here,” Sara said. “Besides, I know my way around that place.”

Both ducked behind the shrubs as the searchlight came over again. “OK,” Alex said. “Let’s go.”

BOOK I

HOT TIMES IN THE GARDEN OF EDEN

Chapter 1

Qo 4
Uor

Black boots were barely visible below the hemline of the flowing purple robe as the tall man strode toward the mansion, his thick black hair hanging loosely over his shoulders. Long strides made quick work of the marble pathway leading to the villa. The day was pleasant, with a light breeze from the north moderating the heat of the day. The white marble mansion before him glimmered in the afternoon light as it sat in the midst of lush gardens and manicured lawns.

The massive front door swung open just as he reached it, and an aging Prolot motioned him inside. The servant was less than six feet tall — small even for a Prolot — with thinning gray hair. Gold piping lined the edges and sleeves of his light gray robe, indicating a high position among the household staff.

“Your brother is in the observatory, sir,” the Prolot said.

“Thank you, Martin,” the man said, as he crossed the large foyer to a hallway on the right. “Bring us refreshment, Martin,” he added.

The visitor entered the observatory without knocking. It was a large octagon-shaped room with window-like structures on four walls. They weren't windows, but were communication panels for observing and managing the vast commercial and personal holdings of the room's owner, who stood before one of the panels at the far end of the room.

"Ares, how nice to see you. You look well, my brother," the room's owner said. In fact, the brothers looked remarkably similar, which was not surprising since they were twins. One's hair was a little shorter, but otherwise they looked very much the same, except for the eyes. The visitor's eyes were so dark that they were almost black, while his brother's eyes were bright and blue.

"I don't feel well, Apollo, I'm bored," Ares said as he moved to a chair indicated by his brother, Apollo.

A look of concern came over Apollo's face. Boredom was a serious condition among Noblers, the class of Uorian society to which the twins belonged. The Uorians had wiped out almost all diseases and major health problems thousands of years before, so it was not unusual for Noblers to live for five thousand years, or longer. However, the Uorians had never quite figured out how to avoid boredom as their lives went on day after day and year after year. In fact, suicide was the leading cause of death among Noblers.

"You're far too young for that, Ares," Apollo said, as he took a nearby chair. "You should never have gotten involved in politics. It's nothing but bickering and grandstanding and nothing ever changes. It must be incredibly frustrating for you."

"Yes," he said, "we are still arguing about the same things we were arguing about when I first joined the council. And that was a thousand years ago."

At that moment, Martin entered the room carrying a tray with two glasses filled with a light orange liquid. He looked much older than the two brothers did, although, in reality, he was younger than they were. The genetic mapping for Prolots was different than for Noblers, and

they rarely living beyond two thousand years. Without speaking, Martin presented the tray to each of the brothers to take a glass of the liquor and left the room.

When the door closed behind him, Ares picked up the conversation, "The Supreme Ruler constantly reminds us of the danger of a Protol rebellion, and yet they never rebel. Nothing ever changes."

"We pay the Protols well," Apollo said, as he took a small sip from the glass.

"You pay them well, Apollo," Ares replied. "Most of the others pay them just enough to keep them from rebelling." Ares took a sip of the orange liquid. "Excellent Uzo Apollo. I may have several of these."

"I thought you were enthralled with golf. The last time we met, it was all you talked about," Apollo said.

"It's an infuriating game, Apollo. Be glad you never took it up."

"We have many enterprises," Apollo said. "You could manage a business."

"We both know I'm no good with business," Ares said. "That's why I went into politics in the first place."

Apollo stood and walked back across the room to the place he had been standing when Ares first arrived. He stared at the panel for a few seconds, then turned around to face Ares.

"We should have another contest with Eden," Apollo said. "You always enjoy them. Politics and intrigue can be fun when you have some control over them." Eden was the name of the garden Apollo and Ares had inherited from their father, Zeus. It was a rocky planet almost a thousand light-years from Uor.

"Yes, that's true," Ares said. "They always seem to thrust themselves into wars and chaos. I so enjoy it."

"I don't understand why you love to watch them destroy themselves," Apollo said. "The Garden could be so much more pleasant if they could just avoid that sort of thing." He glanced sidelong at his brother. "Especially if they weren't so *encouraged* to it."

Since their father had first shown the Garden to his

sons, the slow but relentless advance of art and technology had fascinated Apollo, while the wars and political turmoil that always seemed to erupt on the planet had equally fascinated Ares.

“Their toys are so primitive, Apollo,” Ares said.

“Of course it’s primitive, Ares, but still it is fascinating to watch the excitement of discovery.”

“So, what shall the new contest be, Apollo?” Ares asked.

“Well Ares, this is my idea.”

Apollo walked back across the room and again took the chair across from Ares. “Have you followed events on Eden?” he asked Ares.

“Occasionally,” Ares answered. “It’s been quite boring of late.”

“Boring?” Apollo said with a quizzical look. “There is constant conflict among their religious groups and their ethnic groups. There are conflicts all over the planet!”

“Minor skirmishes,” Ares said. “Nothing exciting.”

“Well, Ares, there are some very important things happening right now, and how those things turn out could lead to global war. I’m talking about the thing that’s happening with the climate. It’s becoming warmer, and that will eventually lead to ocean flooding in some areas and bad weather patterns in other areas. They will have massive crop failures, which will result in global conflict for the remaining resources. Doesn’t that sound exciting to you?”

“It would, except that it will take too long to be interesting.”

“That’s where our contest comes in, Ares,” Apollo said. “We speed up the outcome.”

Apollo paused as the door opened and Martin entered the room with fresh glasses of Uzo. He placed the new drinks on the nearby table and put the empty ones on his tray. Without speaking, he left the room and closed the door.

“Here’s what I have in mind,” Apollo continued. “According to their calendar, it is now the twenty-second

day of March. On the fifth day of April, which is sixteen days hence, the largest and most powerful nations on Eden will have a meeting to establish a framework for reducing the effect of the warming and to get as many nations as possible to agree to such an idea.”

He paused for a moment and then continued. “So the contest is this: If my side can convince most of the political leaders of the planet to adopt a resolution calling for a reduction of the gasses that are causing the warming effect, I win. And if they don’t adopt such a resolution, you win.”

“And what is it that I win?” asked Ares.

“Ah, if you win, then Eden will be plunged into a long period of wars and conflicts over its diminished food supply,” Apollo said.

“Yes, but as I said before, that will take so long that it won’t be any fun.”

“That’s where we come in to speed up the outcome,” Apollo responded.

“How do we do that?” Ares asked.

“By giving them knowledge of course,” answered Apollo. “I’ve been studying some ancient documents, and I have found two variations of an old technology that could drastically affect the Edenites in a very short time. These are very ancient technologies from our point of view, but they would represent huge advances for the Edenites.”

Apollo paused and took another sip from his drink, then continued. “The first is a Graffon particle energy storage device, an atomic battery if you will. It can store enormous amounts of energy in a space the size of a sokur ball with almost no risk of nuclear accidents. They could energize their homes and transport devices with these batteries. It would virtually eliminate the dangers from the warming.

“The second technology is also a Graffon particle device, but this one can be made into a highly destructive weapon. With a bit of knowledge they are easy and cheap to build. Practically any nation or group on the planet

could build them.”

“Very interesting, Apollo, and I suppose the winner of our contest gives the technology of his choice to the nations or groups of his choice?”

“Yes, Ares. If you win, I assume that you will give them the destructive device, and then you’ll have the wars and turmoil you like so much. And if I win, I will give them the atomic battery, and they will cool down, literally, and maybe enter a long period of peace and progress.”

“Alright then, this is becoming interesting,” Ares said. “How will we determine the winner?”

“I suggest this,” Apollo responded. “Their warming problem is mostly caused by spewing gases and particles into their atmosphere, but so far they have not shown the political will to slow it down. I propose that if by the end of April, according to their calendar, nations representing at least ninety percent of these emissions agree to adopt a program to reduce such emissions, we shall declare me the winner. And if nations representing at least ninety percent of those emissions do not adopt such a program, then you win.”

“Fine,” Ares said. “What are the rules?”

“The usual,” Apollo answered. “You will use G2802 to advance your side, and I will use G2801 for my side. They may each recruit one Edenite to help them. It will be up to each Gardener as to how much information to disclose to the Edenite. Of course, they may also entice other Edenites to help them, but they cannot disclose their purpose to more than one. In addition, as usual, Gardeners won’t be permitted to use outright bribery or violence. And finally, the emissions regulations need only be approved by the designated time. They don’t have to take effect.”

Apollo emptied his glass and looked at his brother who was smiling for the first time since the visit began. “I see from your smile that you are pleased, Ares,” he said.

“Of course,” said Ares, “I can’t lose this one. There is no way that the Chinese and the Americans will both agree, and you need them both to get to ninety percent.”

“I see that you have been following events on Eden a bit more than you let on,” Apollo said.

Ares nodded and continued to smile.

“Will you stay for dinner, my brother?” Apollo asked.

“No, Apollo,” he responded, “I have some work to do.” With that he stood, bowed gracefully to his brother and left.

Chapter 2

March 24

Tampa, Florida

The need to pee forced Alex Clark awake at ten minutes to seven. Through a slight crack in the blinds, he could see that it was just turning light outside. Florida mornings had a way of coming on slowly, especially in springtime.

He vowed to hold it a few more minutes and pulled the covers tightly over himself, missing the warmth of a body next to his. It had been almost a year since Linda announced she wanted a divorce and Alex had moved out of the house in North Tampa, but he still was not accustomed to sleeping alone. *Maybe I should get a dog*, he thought. Of course, the apartment complex didn't allow pets.

Finally, he could wait no longer and got out of bed. After the toilet, he went to the kitchen and started the coffee maker. He drank only decaf now. Even though he still loved the kick of caffeine, not having to deal with acid reflux was better, and since dropping caffeine three years earlier, the reflux had subsided.

Alex was 42 years old, and at 5' 10" and 170 pounds,

he had managed to keep himself in relatively good shape. His exercise schedule was haphazard at best, but except for a little bulge around the waist, he was pleased with himself. His short brown hair was thick around the sides but a little thin on top. He didn't consider himself handsome at all, but he was very comfortable with his appearance.

He looked out the kitchen window at the beginning day. The sun was now just above the line of condominiums across the water on Harbor Island. The air was clear, indicating the humidity was low. The weather report said that it would be clear and sunny with a high in the low seventies. It would be a great day for a ride.

He glanced at the clock on the TV cable box. It was just 7:30, so he had time to work for a couple of hours. Working from home had always appealed to Alex, but it had turned out to be a lot more intense than he had thought. Sometimes he wasn't sure whether he worked at home or lived at the office. It seemed he worked more hours than ever, and that was saying something.

Two years earlier, Alex had launched *The Progressive Pelican*, a website on which he wrote daily articles examining the latest political and social goings-on in Tallahassee and Washington. Alex's commentaries usually came from a progressive angle, but he considered himself very much in the mainstream. At least, it was the mainstream, as he believed it should be. He chaffed every time a reader left a comment on a blog post that labeled him as a "tax and spend liberal", or a communist conspirator. He supported a fair allocation of the tax burden, and he would have allocated spending differently than was currently being done, but he was very much in favor of fiscal and budgetary restraint. He favored sensible taxing and sensible spending.

Before launching *The Progressive Pelican*, he was a senior accounting manager for a middle-tier cellular telephone company based in Tampa. However, when one of the mega carriers bought the company, Alex lost his job. As he began his search for a new job, he also started tinkering

with the blog to keep busy. Job opportunities proved to be rare during the economic downturn, but the website began to draw some attention and actually to make a little money. By the time Linda asked for the divorce, *The Progressive Pelican* was bringing in about half the money they needed to live on. The rest still came from their savings, which was diminishing quickly.

Now, another year later, traffic and membership on the site continued to grow steadily and *The Progressive Pelican* produced enough income to pay his bills and provide child-support payments to Linda for their daughter Kate. There was little left over for entertainment, but Alex could see that he would be able to support himself and Kate, and that in time he might make a good living. He had come to accept *The Progressive Pelican* as his chosen profession, and he doubted he would take another corporate job if one came along.

He ate a bagel and had another cup of coffee as he poured through the two dozen or so websites he reviewed each day. He gathered opinions, comments, and news from the left, right, and center, and made notes in a hardbound black notebook as he read. He was always interested to see what the topic of the day would be. Logically, he thought there should be a random mix of ideas and topics. To the contrary, it seemed that each day had a theme, and the blogs and news sites were all in on it. One day the theme might be gun control, and the next day it might be charter schools or health care. Today's theme, as it had frequently been of late, was the European monetary crisis. The bloggers on the right said that it was clearly the result of socialist tendencies of the European nations, while those on the left argued that it was purely the result of the slow economy and reducing the social safety net would only make matters worse. In addition, there were those in the middle who believed societies should draw ideas from both right and left.

At a few minutes after nine o'clock, Alex set his notebook aside and closed the computer. He wanted to get up to the bike trail, enjoy a nice ride and lunch, and be

back in time to watch the NCAA playoff game at four o'clock. Alex wasn't a huge basketball fan, but this was Florida, his alma mater, against Kentucky, one of its most hated rivals.

It was an hour drive from Alex's apartment on Davis Island to the Ridge Manor trailhead on the Withlacoochee bike trail, an abandoned railroad track that the State converted into a paved trail for cyclists, roller skaters, and hikers. It stretched forty-six miles through rolling hills, cattle ranches and citrus growing lands. There were a number of trailheads along the way so riders could take on anything from a short three or four-mile ride, to the full ninety-two miles end-to-end and back.

For his ride on this day, Alex planned to ride the eleven miles from Ridge Manor to Istachatta and then back to Nobleton where he would have a hamburger and a beer at the Nobleton Inn before returning to Ridge Manor. The entire ride should take about three hours, and he would be back in plenty of time to watch the game.

On the drive to Ridge Manor, he drove through some of the most beautiful countryside in all of Florida. He had driven the route many times, but he still loved how the land changed just to the north of Tampa. The parking lot at the Ridge Manor trailhead was almost full when Alex arrived. A gorgeous Saturday in the spring always drew many people to the trail. Just as Alex parked his four-year-old Ford, a group of young riders on expensive bikes and wearing racing gear went by. Alex chuckled to himself. To him, there was nothing competitive about bicycling; the ride was a nice way to be outdoors and get a little exercise.

Instead of the sleek black bike shorts and colorful jerseys the speed bikers were wearing, Alex wore a pair of khaki shorts and a faded golf shirt, along with an old pair of New Balance running shoes and no helmet. He knew he should wear a helmet, and he always made Kate wear one when she rode with him, but he loved the open air, and

had ridden this way his whole life. He sometimes wondered how kids of his generation had survived into adulthood with mothers who didn't make them wear bike helmets and let them play outside without supervision.

Alex unloaded his twenty-year-old Fuji bike from the car carrier on the rear of the Ford. He set the GPS tracking app on his cell phone, mounted the bike and started riding north. He'd only gone a short distance when he realized he had forgotten his iPod, so he turned around and rode back to the car. A few minutes later, he was back on the trail, this time with the Eagles' *Learn to be Still* in his ears.

A mile up the trail he met an older man and woman riding south on recumbent three wheel bikes. It seemed to Alex that those low, sleek tricycles had really exploded in popularity the last couple of years, especially with older riders. The couple nodded pleasantly and continued along their way.

Alex usually rode alone, unless it was his weekend to have Kate. But their daughter was with Linda on this weekend. He considered himself an open-minded individual, and he had several gay and lesbian friends, but he still was not completely comfortable with the idea of Kate growing up in that environment. It didn't seem to bother the ten-year-old at all, though.

Alex reflected on the series of events, as Linda had described them. Carol Quest had been Linda's divorce attorney. A month after they finalized the divorce, Carol called Linda and announced that she could no longer represent her in legal matters, and then she asked her out to dinner. The call had been a complete surprise to her since Carol had never been anything but professional during their attorney-client relationship. She accepted gladly, but with a twinge of apprehension.

After their third date, the apprehension had diminished, and Linda could see herself in a long-term relationship with Carol. She and Alex were selling the house, so when Carol asked her to move into her large colonial in Old Carrolwood, Linda accepted, contingent on

Kate's approval. Of course, Kate didn't know all the details, but she understood that they would have to move somewhere, and she liked the big house in Carrolwood. She also liked Carol, who showered her with gifts and clothes.

Alex was still processing those thoughts when he wheeled up to the Nobleton Inn for lunch. The roadhouse was a short distance off the trail but was a popular stop for riders, and when Alex pulled up in front of the restaurant, four bikes were already parked in the bike stand. He lodged the front tire of his ancient Fuji into the bike stand, went inside the restaurant and took a seat at the nearest empty table. The other bikers had finished their meals and were settling with the waitress.

As soon as she finished with that group, she came to Alex's table and dropped a menu in front of him, "I'll be right back to get your order," she said.

Alex didn't really need the menu. He knew what he wanted.

"What can I get for you today?" she asked when she returned.

"I'll have the hamburger with mayonnaise, lettuce, tomato and onion," he said, "and onion rings on the side."

"And what to drink?" the girl asked.

"A Yuengling," Alex responded.

Alex turned his iPod back on and waited for his meal to come. The Eagles *Long Road out of Eden* picked up where he'd stopped it. As the song ended, Alex looked up to see a tall man of perhaps fifty enter the restaurant. His brown hair was neatly groomed and showed only tiny bits of gray. The casual attire looked more attuned to Saturday at a lawyer's office than a roadhouse far from the city. He looked at Alex, then walked straight toward him.

"Mr. Clark," he said. "May I have a few words with you?"

Alex felt a flash of apprehension. He looked at the man for a several seconds, searching his mind for some hint of recognition but could find nothing. "Do we know each other?" Alex asked at last.

“Not yet,” the man responded. “My name is Jack Goodman, and I want to ask for your assistance.”

“How do you know me?” Alex asked. “And how can I help you?” He made a conscious effort to look the man in the eye, but his gaze wasn’t returned. In fact, the man seemed to stare into space and for a moment Alex wondered if he was blind.

“A few weeks ago you wrote an article about climate change in which you speculated that the heating of the planet might cause crop failures and other problems that could lead to global warfare. You probably have no idea how accurate your predictions are, but I do, and I want you to help me prevent this catastrophe,” Jack Goodman said, taking a seat across the booth from Alex. Still, his gaze didn’t change.

“I did write that,” Alex said, “but I didn’t mean that the danger is imminent. It might take decades to get to that point. My point in the article was that we need to start thinking in terms of reversing the trends soon.”

“Yes,” Jack Goodman responded, “I know that was your meaning in the article, but I am here to tell you that the danger is much more imminent than you believe. In fact, if some things don’t happen by the end of next month, the danger could be irreversible.”

Just then, the waitress came to the table with Alex’s order. “Do you need a menu, sir?” she said to the new arrival.

“No, thank you,” Jack Goodman responded.

“A beer? Something to drink?” she asked.

“No. Nothing,” he answered.

“What do you mean?” Alex asked the man after the waitress left. “We’re decades away from coastal flooding. The weather has been bad lately, what with all of the hurricanes, tornadoes and droughts, but it isn’t catastrophic yet.”

“Things are happening right now that could significantly change life on this planet, Mr. Clark,” Jack Goodman said. “It might be a very good thing, or it might be a very bad thing, but either way it will be determined by

the thirtieth of April.”

“Who are you?” Alex asked. He did the math quickly in his head. Thirty-six days. “And how do you know about these things that are happening?”

“I work for the good of humankind,” the man answered.

“What the hell does that mean?” Alex asked. “Are you from the government?”

“We’ll meet again tomorrow at the Starbucks on Kennedy, two PM. I’ll be able to give you more information then.” With that, he stood up and walked to the door and out into the beautiful Florida sunshine.

As soon as the door closed, Alex remembered he had lunch plans for the following day, so he hurried to the door to tell the man he could not meet him at two o’clock, but there was no sign of anyone in any direction. He walked around to the side of the building to check the other parking area. No one there, either. “Well,” Alex muttered aloud to himself, “I have no idea how to contact you, so I guess you will find out tomorrow that I can’t make it.”

On the ride back to Ridge Manor, Alex couldn’t stop thinking about the strange encounter with the man named Jack Goodman. How had he known that Alex would be at the Nobleton Inn at precisely that time? Where did he go when he left the restaurant? Moreover, why did he need Alex to help him? After all, there were world-famous scientists and politicians who were working to slow greenhouse-gas emissions. Why did this man want Alex and not someone better known? Unless of course, there was something illegal or dangerous about what Jack Goodman wanted to do.

The more Alex thought about it, the more confused and curious he became. He really wanted to know more, but he also wanted to protect himself, in case there was something illegal or dangerous about what Jack Goodman

had in mind. He wondered for a moment if this could be some sort of scam, but then he realized that he would not be a good mark for a scammer since he had very little that anyone would want to take. In addition, there was something strangely legitimate about the man.

Chapter 3

March 25

Tampa, Florida

Alex entered the Starbucks at ten minutes before two. He wanted to get there a few minutes early so he could see Jack Goodman arrive. Still curious about how the man disappeared so quickly the previous day, he ordered a decaf latte and took a seat by the window facing the parking lot. It was early afternoon on a Sunday, so there were very few patrons in the coffee shop and only four cars in the parking lot. Alex figured that he would easily see the man arrive.

At a couple of minutes before two, Alex got a text message from Kate.

Going to see Miss Carol's new horse.

He sent a quick response, and looked up from the cell phone. Jack Goodman was standing beside the table, preparing to take the chair opposite him. Alex quickly glanced to the parking lot, where he saw the same four cars as before.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Clark,” Jack Goodman said.

“Good afternoon,” Alex responded. *He must have walked here*, Alex thought. There were plenty of neighborhoods and hotels nearby. On the other hand, maybe he had been in the restroom when Alex arrived. However he had managed it, he was standing there now.

“I’m glad you decided to come today. I know it was a difficult decision, but I am sure you will be glad you came,” Goodman said, as he sat down.

“OK,” Alex said. “Tell me why this is so critical. And why me? There are plenty of people working hard to stop climate change, working a lot harder than me, in fact. People like Al Gore, for instance. Why not go to someone like him?”

“Excellent point, Mr. Clark,” Goodman responded, “Mr. Gore is a very strong advocate for our cause. The problem is, of course, that he is a prominent Democrat, and Republicans will automatically be opposed to anything he favors. That’s just the way it is in your political system. You, on the other hand, are completely unknown, and they won’t dismiss you automatically.”

“I certainly am unknown,” Alex quipped.

“Mr. Clark, do you believe that humans on Earth are alone in the universe, or do you believe there are intelligent beings on other planets?” Jack Goodman asked.

“Well, it seems probable,” Alex replied. “Just based on the numbers. I mean, there are billions of stars and planets out there, so I think it’s very likely some of them have life on them. But we’ve tried for decades to communicate with anyone who might be out there, and we haven’t found anyone yet.”

“So, if I told you that I came here from one of those planets, would you believe that?” Jack Goodman asked.

“No,” Alex replied. “Even if they’re out there, I believe they’re too far away to travel here.”

“I didn’t think you would,” he said, “but I would like to tell my whole story, and then you can decide whether to believe me or not. It’s a long story, so you may want to get another latte.”

“Do you want something too?” Alex asked.

“No,” he replied.

“First of all, I am not a living thing,” Jack Goodman said when Alex returned with his fresh latte. “What I am is difficult to explain to humans because your technology is so primitive. The best explanation I can give you is to think of me as a hologram, but imagine how that technology might advance in ten thousand years. You could say that I am an atomic hologram. Obviously, I have mass and I have enormous computing power, but I can shrink the mass to subatomic size, and I can travel great distances virtually instantaneously. I use the name Jack Goodman, but the people who made me refer to me as G2801.”

Alex’s immediate reaction to this statement was disbelief along with a sizable portion of apprehension. The guy might be crazy, and he might be dangerous.

“I can see that you are having difficulty with this idea, so I must provide you with a demonstration,” Goodman said. “Tell me about some object in your apartment and where in the apartment it can be found.”

Alex wondered if the calmness of the man’s demeanor should be reassuring or frightening. He wanted to get up and run away, but at the same time, he wanted to know more.

“There’s a black, hardcover notebook on my desk. It’s in the office.” Alex used the apartment’s second bedroom as an office. There was a daybed for the times that Kate spent the night.

At that moment, the lights in the coffee shop blinked slightly. It was just for a split second, and it seemed that no one else in the place noticed it. Then Alex saw that Jack Goodman was pushing something across the table to him. He looked down and saw that it was his black hardcover notebook. The ballpoint pen he left clipped inside was still in place. He flipped open the notebook and saw the notes he had written just before leaving for Starbucks. He didn’t

know if this guy was from outer space or not, but he certainly had some good tricks.

“Actually, the notebook is only a holographic image,” Goodman said. “I can’t transport physical objects. The original is still on your desk where you left it. Now should I continue my story?”

“Yes,” Alex replied in a soft, puzzled tone.

“I arrived on this planet a little over 50,000 years ago. I came from a planet called Uor, which is almost a thousand light-years from Earth. Uor is in an area of the galaxy where star formation took place millions of years before your own star was formed, so Uor is quite a bit older than Earth. I was sent here as part of an experiment the Uorians were conducting. They called it ‘The Garden Project’. They chose that name because they were ‘seeding’ other planets with humans like themselves. They studied the nearby universe looking for planets that would support human life, and they eventually found six such planets. They built spaceships that could travel across the great distances, and they created machines like me to be caretakers on the distant planets. They referred to us as Gardeners, and our function was to assist the human populations as they developed on the Garden Project planets.”

“They sent humans to Earth?” Alex asked. “Are you saying that humans came here from some other planet?”

“Yes,” Goodman responded. “But they weren’t mature humans. They were frozen embryos. The length of the trip would have been very difficult for mature humans.”

“Wait a minute,” Alex said. “You are saying that there are humans like us on this other planet.”

“It would be more correct to say that you are like them,” Jack Goodman said.

“How long did the trip take?” he asked. Alex still didn’t believe the story, but he wanted to hear it all.

“In Earth time, the trip took about 1,375 years,” he responded. “Four vessels were launched, but one was lost on the way. The other three all arrived safely 51,433 years

ago, and the human population on Earth today is descended from the 9,000 embryos that were on board those three vessels.”

“Why would they colonize planets and not provide them with the technology and knowledge they already had?” Alex asked.

“That was the point of the study,” Jack explained. “They wanted to observe how human populations developed such things as agriculture and science.”

“So, we’re just some science experiment for aliens?” Alex asked.

“Not any longer,” Goodman responded. “The study ended thousands of years ago as the Uorians lost interest in such things.”

“So why are you still here?” Alex asked.

“Oh, I can never leave,” Goodman replied. “I am programmed to stay in this place forever. Anyway, I still have duties here. You see, when the experiment ended, the Uorian government sold off the rights to the various planets, including this one, to private investors. So now I work for the individual owners of this planet, which they call Eden.”

“The Garden of Eden, that’s clever,” Alex said. “So you’re saying that Earth is owned by some rich fat cats on this planet something?”

“Uor,” Jack Goodman said.

“Uor, OK,” Alex added sarcastically. “And now this fat cat wants to protect his investment against climate change?”

“Not exactly,” Goodman responded. “The owners have no expectation of financial gain from ownership of Eden. It’s mainly for entertainment. The fat cat, as you call him, was a very wealthy Uorian nobleman named Zeus, and he bought Eden to entertain his two young sons, Apollo and Ares.”

“Wait a minute,” Alex protested. “Are you telling me that the ancient Greek gods are real?”

“Apollo and Ares are certainly real, but they are not gods. Zeus committed suicide long ago, but he was not a

god either,” Goodman added. “But I can certainly see why the Greeks were confused. Zeus and Apollo were very interested in what they were doing and probably interfered more than they should have.”

“Interfered?” Alex questioned. “What do you mean?”

“They, through me, participated in their affairs somewhat — gave them bits of information about mathematics and science, ideas about laws and governance.”

“I see,” Alex said. “What happened after Zeus died?”

“Apollo and Ares inherited Eden. That was in 212 BC by your calendar.” Goodman stated.

“And they’re still alive?” Alex asked in astonishment.

“Very much so,” Goodman responded. “Uorian Noblers, that’s the class to which Apollo and Ares belong, can live for thousands of years. Apollo and Ares are 3,120 years old now, and they are in their prime.”

“Uor must be a fantastic place,” Alex said. “Tell me about it.”

“In many ways, Uor isn’t so different from Earth,” Goodman said. “There are continents and oceans, big cities and small towns. There are industries of many kinds, and farms and ranches, also.”

“Interesting,” Alex mused. “So if money isn’t the reason, why do these guys care about climate change on Earth?”

“Very simple. It’s a contest, a game between Apollo and Ares with certain events on Eden to determine the winner,” Jack Goodman explained.

“A game!” Alex said in astonishment. “You’re kidding?”

“I assure you I am not kidding,” Goodman said. “And I can also assure you the stakes in this game will have a huge impact for life on this planet.”

For the next thirty minutes, Jack Goodman gave Alex a detailed outline of the contest and of the potential consequences for Earth.

“I am Apollo’s servant in this matter, and I am asking you to help us. Will you?” Jack Goodman said to Alex.

“Why are you helping Apollo and not Ares?”

“Another like me will be Ares’ servant,” he responded.

“There’s more than one of you?” Alex asked.

“Yes,” he responded. “As I said earlier, there were three space vessels that made it to Eden. Each vessel carried a Gardener, such as me, and 3,000 human embryos. We had birthing chambers and nursery facilities on the vessels, and, over the next 100 years or so, we hatched and released the humans. We gave them rudimentary training in language and tools and what to eat, and eventually each group would blend into the previous bands.”

“So, someone — or something, just like you — is trying to keep us from winning this contest?”

“Yes,” Goodman responded. “G2802 will be assisting Ares. She — G2802 usually appears as a woman — will also recruit an Edenite to help. G2803 will not be participating in the contest.”

“So, this woman — this G2802 — is telling somebody the same story that you’re telling me?”

“Not necessarily,” Jack answered. “She may not feel the need to tell them anything.”

“Why are you telling me?” Alex asked.

“We have the more difficult task,” he answered.

“You can say that again,” Alex said. “This meeting is in two weeks, and you need both the Americans and the Chinese to sign on.”

“It will be a challenge.”

“And if what you say is true, if we fail, it could mean weapons of mass destruction all over the planet, in addition to the effects of climate change.”

“True, but if we succeed, your energy problems could be solved forever.”

Alex thought about that for a moment. “Incredible fortunes would be made,” he said. It would dwarf the fortunes made from oil.

“I’m sure,” Goodman responded.

“Where is this meeting to be held?”

“The meeting will take place near the city of Manaus,

in Brazil,” Goodman answered.

“Never heard of it,” Alex said.

“The city is in central Brazil, in the heart of the Amazonian Rainforest.”