



Close Yet So Far

“There it is!” the professor pointed his hand at a long, red object. “It’s so small?” I asked. “What were you expecting?” “Something that’s supposed to grant such power should be impressive, I don’t know, maybe it should gleam, or spark with some kind of radiation, I have no idea.” “This will only amplify your natural abilities.” The professor nodded for me to sit down. “We’ve known each other for twenty years, John, but you don’t know everything about me. My secret was well-kept by your mother.” “And what does my mother have to do with this?” I asked, surprised. “We met thirty-seven years ago.” My eyes widened in astonishment. Could it be that I was his son? That unexplained bond between us... Deep down, subconsciously, I knew I was right. “Yes, John, it’s true. I am your father, and I have to tell you something very important. I hurried to build this and to tell you everything before I leave.” At that moment, as we sat in his office at Stanford University, I didn’t know that in a moment, in an instant, my life would change, and then the fate of the entire world would depend on me. Me, a shy lab assistant—and not a very good one at that—with a bit of a belly, of average

height, with an over-the-top mop of red hair, unable to find my place in the world despite my rather advanced age, was about to become a being whose abilities surpassed the human race.

It all started in the first year of high school, during the intense hormonal processes commonly known as puberty, when I began to have visions. I could see objects, at first hidden but close, for example, I could clearly see the bra of the girl at the next desk, even though it was hidden under a thick sweater (unfortunately, only the bra). Later, I would sometimes see objects in the next room; I saw them in my head, I knew where they were, I could feel them. It's hard to explain; I suspect it's as difficult as describing colors to a blind person. In any case, I could focus and see different things, and over time, places as well.

I remember when I was nineteen, I told my mother about it; I didn't know my father. To my surprise, she wasn't particularly shocked. She said: "He said this might happen." Then she introduced me to the professor. They worked together—she an accountant, he a scientist, a star even, close to a Nobel Prize. He

seemed to know more but didn't say everything, a rather mysterious gentleman who commanded both respect and fear, with a healthy dose of curiosity. "Where are you leaving to? Are you moving to Florida?" I had heard they wanted him at NASA, so I thought he was relocating. "Unfortunately, no. You see," he paused for a moment to think about his words, "I'm leaving forever." "WHAT? WHAT DO YOU MEAN? Come on, don't be ridiculous." I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. I thought he was dying, or that he was about to do something stupid. "I want you to understand me and your mother, of blessed memory." "I understand, it's cool, you know, I always suspected a little. You work together, such relationships can be complicated. You're a decent man, and you were a good father to me, right when I needed one. You helped me understand my abilities. Control them. Suppress them." "The medication you've been taking for so long doesn't actually suppress those abilities. It enhances them. It alters your DNA in a way I've planned. The red object will activate it." My jaw dropped. I hadn't expected that. I stood up, practically shot out of my chair. "What the

fuck?" I shouted, not really knowing what to say. "Am I some kind of fucking experiment?" My face was undoubtedly the color of a beetroot. "No. Calm down." He grabbed me by the shoulders and sat me down. "It's me, that is, your abilities come from me. Just listen, finally. I am not human." If it were possible, my jaw landed even lower. I expected him to shed his skin and for a green, maybe gelatinous, monster to emerge. I wasn't far off. "Then who the devil are you?" "I don't know. I've lost most of my memory. We look very similar on the outside; certain, hmm, differences I had surgically removed." "Those scars from the accident?" I pointed to the marks on his hands, face, and neck. "Yes, there was no accident." He took a photograph from his inner pocket and handed it to me. It showed my mother, of course, and something that vaguely resembled the professor. On a grayish face, besides eyes larger than a human's and rather thin lips, you could see antennae protruding from his forehead! He was dressed in a classic, stretched-out Christmas sweater. They both seemed happy. "We took this picture by the ocean, a year after I arrived here and your mother helped me. She found me by

the sea, barely alive. I don't remember where I'm from or how I got here. What I do know is that I am a different species, though quite similar. I have abilities that you inherited from me." "What exactly can we do? And what were the pills for?" "While studying you, I discovered that your multidimensional glands are much larger and have a denser structure than mine. This is the part of the body that controls time and space. Don't ask how I know that. It seems to me I was a scientist before this life, where I came from. On the inside, you are not exactly human; you are a hybrid." The professor, my father, handed me the red object and instructions on what to do with it. "You must leave now. Goodbye," he said without emotion, yet I could see the glassy eyes of this... Alien.

Dumbfounded, I left without a word. I planned to come see him in the morning and turned back for a moment to tell him so, but he was already gone. He had vanished.

I went home, wanting to get some sleep before work, though I had the feeling I was dreaming the whole time and would wake up with a massive headache. "Fuck, what was I drinking last night?" I thought.

Unfortunately, nothing, and this wasn't a dream. I couldn't fall asleep. I went home, watched a stupid movie about aliens—what else?—attacking Earth, drank a couple of beers, and only then managed to get a little shut-eye. In the morning, I read the letter and the instructions for the red thing. I was supposed to put it in my morning coffee. It would dissolve, and then I was to drink it. It was a trigger, meant to activate the areas in my brain responsible for controlling the multidimensional gland. After a few days of hesitation, I did it. I changed myself, and I changed the world.

I woke up. I opened my eyes. My scleras were filled with blood. My skin was ashen, like a corpse's. Barely, swaying and holding onto furniture, I made my way to the bathroom. I wanted to curse and scream in pain, but I didn't have the strength. My legs were buckling under me as I walked, or rather, crawled. I focused on the bathroom, and suddenly, I was there. I stood for a moment in front of the mirror, trying to get my vision to focus. I thought about drinking; thirst was burning my throat, and a second later, I was standing in the

kitchen by the tap. "Holy shit!" I finally managed to say something. I stood there for a moment until I saw the clock on the stove out of the corner of my eye. "Jesus, work!" I grabbed my phone. "Boss, I'm sorry, I overslept." "Overslept? Man. You haven't been in touch for a week, not answering your phone, we were banging on your door and nothing." "I'll be right there. We'll talk!" And at that exact moment, I was in my room at the office. I saw the astonished faces of the crew and my boss holding his phone, everyone staring at me with wide-open eyes. I was standing there half-naked, in sissy pink boxers, and I didn't know what to do. I wished for time to stop, and to my amazement, it did. By the time my colleagues came to their senses, it was all over. "Why aren't you saying anything?" I asked my boss over the phone, pretending nothing had happened. "Uhhh, John?" "Yeah, it's me. I just called." "You were just here for a second." "What? I'm calling you from home, what are you talking about?" The silence on the other end of the line dragged on. I was almost laughing out loud at the situation. They must have been terrified, not knowing if they had actually seen me or if they were

going crazy. “Are you there?” I asked. “Yeah, yeah, you know, uhuh, there’s no need for you to come in. Don’t come in anymore. You have a disciplinary dismissal in your email. Good luck.” And he hung up. “You fucking bastard,” I said out loud. So many years for crap pay for this company, I was gone for a few days, I could have been in the hospital for Christ’s sake, and they fire me just like that? Fucking hell!

Surprisingly quickly, I mastered this, let’s call it, teleportation. Teleportation isn’t the best word because I saw, or rather observed, the journey from place to place, even though it happened almost instantly. Instant in standard, Earth time, but I flew like a ghost, passing through walls, over streets, in a straight line to my destination. Of course, the first thing I did was get revenge on that damn pharmaceutical company I worked for. A quick jump in a balaclava to the server room—that is, first a jump to a certain factory that produces grenades, and pulling the pin on one in the empty-at-the-time server room took care of it.

I felt power and control. I’m sure any of you would have felt it. A few jumps, and I had cash from a bank, a

new TV as big as half a wall, a Blu-ray player, and a few other gadgets. Contrary to what often takes up half a movie, I didn't have to learn how to use these abilities. I understood them immediately, felt them, knew how to use them. A real superhero, pfft, no way. I planned to live life to the fullest.

I transported myself to a tech superstore, the kind where you have TVs, and a few aisles over, computers, tablets, and so on. I stopped time and, very slowly, in no hurry at all, I went through sector by sector and took what I wanted: a brand-new GPS (who knows why), a new Galaxy phone, a tablet, a stereo system. I wandered around like that for an hour, then I went for clothes. Finally, I dropped by a restaurant, ordered food, and after a few moments, I stopped time, took the food from the kitchen, and transported myself home. The power took me over. I started traveling further, first to other cities, then countries. Breakfast on the Mediterranean—though I decided to pay in restaurants (admittedly with cash from randomly selected banks)—lunch in China, and dinner on a cruise ship. This was the life!

One day, sitting by the ocean and watching the

sunset, I heard a scream. I didn't think; I reacted instinctively. In a dark harbor alley, four young men of Mexican appearance were trying to rape a young Asian woman. "Leave her alone!" I surprised myself with my reaction; I had never been so bold. Two of them were holding her while a third stood up and pulled a large knife from his pocket. "Fuck off, whitey, or I'll widen that smile for you," he said. I had no intention of getting into a discussion. I stopped time. When I resumed it, the guy was standing with his pants down and the knife shoved up his ass. Frankly, I didn't give a damn if they saw me, recognized me, or whatever. With this almost godlike power, no one could do anything to me, I laughed to myself. The reaction of these dregs of humanity was immediate: they ran for it. The girl, of course, wanted to thank me, but I didn't wait. I moved to Cape Canaveral. A rocket launch, now that's a beautiful sight. I'd had the power for a year, and I hadn't missed a single major launch. Day by day, my power grew. I felt that with practice, I was extending my range, but also that after every long jump, I had to rest, eat, and drink. After a jump to the other side of the world, I had to rest for

several hours. And it was after one of these trips that I had to reconsider my invincibility.

“Lieutenant, the Asset has been spotted in Poland. We have a surveillance camera image from outside a fish restaurant in Kołobrzeg. It’s a tourist city on the Polish coast.” “Alright, we can’t screw this up.” FBI Lieutenant Ethan Clark stood behind the dispatcher, observing the camera feed. In the operations room, there were several dozen such stations where agents collected data from various sources, sorted it, reviewed it, analyzed it, and pieced it all together. They had been searching for the Asset for six months. “Attention, get me the Polish bureau on the line, fast,” he nodded to one of the agent groups. “Send in the operators. How long will it take?” “We have three agents in Koszalin; they’ll be on-site in forty-three minutes,” said a red-haired agent in a navy-blue uniform. “The President is on the line,” one of the thirty information operators present informed the lieutenant of the call. On the main operations screen, an overlay of the President’s head appeared over a map displaying current data. “Hello, what’s this

about?” “I apologize for the mode of address, Mr. President, but we’re at level five. International operation in an allied nation.” “Please explain. I grant permission, but I want to know what this is about.”

“About a year ago, strange thefts began to multiply—from banks, stores, even restaurants. To date, the total value is several hundred thousand dollars. The surveillance usually recorded nothing; one moment an object is there, and in the next frame, it’s gone.” “You’re not serious. What is this?” The surprised president propped himself up on his elbow.

“Three months ago, a port surveillance camera captured a situation that was strange, to say the least. The camera recorded an assault on a young woman. A man came to her aid—an ordinary American, quite overweight. Unremarkable. One of the attackers pulled a knife, and in the next frame, he was standing without his pants, with the knife stuck in his rectum, and this gentleman was standing in a different position than before. We’ve reviewed it many times, enhanced it, nothing. The man walked a little way, turned into a side street, and no other camera picked him up. We checked the recordings from the pier and

the waterfront and found him. His name is John Kent. He's an IT specialist, fired from his job a year ago. We've traced what happened since then. A grenade disappears from the inventory of a weapons factory and explodes in the server room of the company that employed him." "Well, that's a clear case, but how does he do it? Some kind of trick? Is he a threat to the nation?" the President pressed. "We don't know. That's why I'm requesting authorization for elimination. Even if we tranquilize him, he could disappear upon waking up." "Does he have a family?" "Unfortunately no, we have no leverage." "Eliminate him. I would not want someone to show up in my office and deliver documents to the Russians..."

In the room located deep underground, the work was frantic. On the screen, dots representing the three agents could be seen approaching the target. The Asset had been on-site for thirty-eight minutes already; he had just received his order and was eating calmly, suspecting nothing. He couldn't have had worse luck. He was recognized by a former coworker, an assistant manager, who had come to his wife's hometown for vacation. He had seen him in the office

a year ago in nothing but his briefs and was later interrogated. He knew they were looking for John, so he acted, hoping for a reward. Unfortunately, the only reward could be death.

The police had quietly cordoned off the area. John, sitting in the restaurant with his back to the entrance, didn't even notice. He was acting like an amateur; instead of sitting facing the entrance to see what was happening, he sat with his back to it, counting on no one recognizing him from outside. Agent One had set up a sniper's nest in the Bałtyk hotel; from his window, he had a perfect view of the restaurant. He prepared his M40A5. For that distance, it was the ideal weapon. He entered the wind and distance settings into his scope and waited. The other two agents were to enter as customers and, from close range, use small submachine guns to eliminate the target and any witnesses. He was the backup. Agents Two and Three walked down Rodziewiczówny Street, dressed like ordinary tourists. They entered the restaurant, ordered food, and sat down opposite the Asset. Agent One observed the entire event through his rifle scope. Once the target was

confirmed, the agents slowly, as planned, so as not to arouse suspicion, reached into their bags—one into his backpack, the other into his briefcase. One was just taking out a laptop, the other a camera to transfer photos. A completely natural, unsuspecting situation. Suddenly, they pulled out their MTAR-21s. Quickly, with trained movements, it took no more than a fraction of a second. They opened fire, but the Asset was already gone. They turned the chair into Swiss cheese. Agent Two shifted his fire to the witnesses. He eliminated the family of the Asset's former coworker and the restaurateur. Agent One saw movement out of the corner of his eye. He shifted his rifle slightly and saw the Asset standing behind a tree in the park, observing the action. He was maybe thirty meters from the restaurant entrance. He aimed his shot; targeting a stationary target from that distance, he couldn't miss. To be sure, however, he aimed for the torso. A distance of less than one hundred and twenty meters; with that energy, the shot had to be fatal. The sound of the gunshot ripped through the area. The Asset fell, clutching his side. "Target hit, agents, get outside,

now!” shouted the dispatcher in the operations room. They saw everything thanks to a high-flying Predator drone participating in maneuvers over the Baltic Sea. The unmanned machine, controlled from a base thousands of kilometers away, transmitted the image with minimal delay. On the screen, they saw the man fall. Despite being hit, he was moving. He hid behind the tree, preventing the sniper from taking another shot. The two agents ran out of the restaurant and sprinted in his direction. The Asset wasn’t disappearing; he was trying to flee, heavily wounded. He was crawling, then after a moment, he got up. Just as they were reaching him, weapons ready to fire, he vanished, only to reappear a dozen meters away. He fell but kept fighting, crawling on his knees. The agents ran again, taking aim. “Hold your fire, I think we’ve got him!” shouted Ethan. “That’s a copy, we have a clear visual, he’s badly wounded. Looks like he was hit in the liver.” The agents approached the target with weapons at the ready, aiming precisely. One from the right at an angle, the other from the left. The man kept trying to get up, disappearing and then reappearing moments later, but closer each

time—first a dozen meters, then a few. Now, he flickered and fell unconscious. “He’s alive,” said one of the agents. “Good. Extraction. We’re sending a helicopter to the beach. A military ambulance is already on its way.”

John lay connected to medical equipment. He was being kept in a medically induced coma. The monitoring screen showed that all his vital functions were normal. If it weren’t for the pharmacological coma, he could have gotten up and walked out just two weeks after being shot. Two doctors and Lieutenant Ethan stood by the table. “Gentlemen, I need a report.” “Well,” began the older man, on whose face the marks of time were clearly etched, “the Asset’s DNA is similar to ours, related, but he is definitely not human.” “His skin is thirty percent denser and contains silicon fibers,” the second man picked up the thread. “His brain is two percent denser, more convoluted in certain areas. And then there are the glands of unknown function located along his spine.” “A mutant? Like in X-Men?” Ethan was reading detailed information about the Asset on

his tablet. "We don't know. He's certainly not entirely alien; he had a mother. We exhumed her; genetic tests confirmed the relationship." "Well, at least his mommy was human. Gentlemen, this must, of course, remain between us, are we clear? I want a detailed report containing all possibilities, from the probable to the most absurd. How long can we keep him here like this?" "Hard to say. We've switched to different drugs; he started to wake up and adapt to the previous ones. You see, this is something we've never had in the agency before. The Roswell subjects were built completely differently, not related to us in any way. Here, we have an organism that could advance many fields of science." "Essentially, Lieutenant, he is not human. We are not bound by any conventions regarding humane treatment. From what we can see, he regenerates sixty percent faster than we do, so we can administer anything we have, including narcotics. He shouldn't die." "And the gunshot wound, has it fully healed?" "Yes. Even though he lost 80% of his liver and a kidney, today there's no trace of it apart from a faint scar. We've limited his nutrient intake to slow his regeneration." "Very well. Goodbye." Ethan left for a

conference. The entire CIA and FBI were on high alert, along with allied agencies. In his view, if there were more beings like this, it posed a real threat to the entire planet. The doctors were waiting for reinforcements. A select team of chemists, physicists, doctors, surgeons, and scientists of all kinds had been assembled in the secret military laboratory where they were to study the Asset. A thirty-eight-year-old Caucasian male.

The room reeked of cigarettes that had been smoked there for years. Smudged windows, dirty walls with traces of mold, barely functioning lights that flickered constantly. A few small tables, a counter, and on it, a pitcher of cold coffee that had been brewed in the morning. A classic gas station bar in the middle of nowhere. The fat man behind the counter, in a stretched-out, once-white undershirt, was rather discouraging to anyone considering using the establishment's services. Yet it was to this very bar that two black Fords pulled up. Several people got out and immediately headed inside. "Is Little Bo Peep lost?" asked a huge man with a square jaw. "She's waiting for her sheep," replied the sleazy bartender.

The men in black suits and hats proceeded to the back room. There, after dialing a specific number on a cell phone and one of them entering a code, a section of the floor opened up, revealing a descent downwards. They went down a winding staircase to a simple, brightly lit corridor. At its end was an elevator door. They took it 30 meters underground. At the bottom, they were greeted by the familiar, slightly musty smell of old air conditioning. "Welcome, gentlemen," Ethan greeted the guests. "Where is he?" asked the big one with the square jaw, who was a head taller than Lieutenant Ethan. "This way, please." They walked in silence. The young lieutenant felt uneasy. He had a lot of power, but the men who had just arrived had all of it. They had full authority and clearances. If they wanted to, they could start a third world war. They passed through the operations and intelligence sector and reached the bulkheads that sealed off the laboratories. "Here we are. Just a warning, the sight might be unsettling." Some of the guests smirked and walked inside. The Asset was lying on his stomach in the middle of the operating room. His back was cut open along the spine, the skin

held back by clamps. The spine itself, its surrounding muscles, and strange, purple growths along it—somewhat resembling poppy heads in appearance—were clearly visible. The men stood around the table. “Is this it?” one of them asked without preamble, pointing to the glands. “Yes, we believe this is what allows him to teleport. Over there,” he pointed to a metal shelf against the wall, “you have several of these glands in formalin. Interestingly, after we cut these elements out, they quickly grew back. There were new ones after just one day.” “How does it work?” one of the men in black, clearly older than the others, asked the question. “This is different physics, gentlemen. We don’t fully understand it; we don’t have a theory that fits. But the interior of this gland has a greater surface area than its outer shell. We’ve measured it hundreds of times.” One of the scientists studying the specimen entered the room. “Greetings, sorry for the delay. Gentlemen, Lieutenant, if you’ll allow me, I’ll continue for you?” “Of course, Professor.” “Agent...” he looked at the square-jawed man. “Frost.” “Agent Frost, these organs are for controlling, altering—we don’t

know for sure—spacetime. They are gateways to other dimensions. If we had such technology, we could control the entire planet and beyond...” “That’s exactly why we’re here. To make sure this doesn’t leak. Do you have a plan for interrogating the Asset? How will you do it without him escaping?” “It turns out that in a very strong electromagnetic field, 108 A/m, these organs, these glands, stop responding to any stimuli. We can wake him up and interrogate him.” “Will he survive it?” “We are constantly fighting his system to keep him from waking up; he adapts to drugs and narcotics quite quickly. There’s no concern.” “Good. Let’s begin, then.”

I felt a pain unlike any I had ever known. I remember watching those two from behind the tree, then trying to escape but being unable to move, and now this. I struggle to open my eyes. Blood is pulsing, veins are throbbing, my ears are ringing. My vision is still blurry, unnaturally colorful. I’m lying face down on some kind of massage table from hell, and the devil himself is massaging my back. I feel it burning with a living fire. I try to move my head and hands, but the

pain is incredible. I lose consciousness, only to regain it a moment later. They are standing over me, my tormentors. "What's your name?" I can barely hear; the sound assaults my ears, the bass at an unnaturally high level. I feel like my head is about to explode. "Joooohnnn," I manage through gritted teeth. "Who are you, what are you?" A moment passes before I understand the question. "I'm an IT guy, unemployed, what's this about?" My senses are slowly returning to normal, sharpening. "Who are you?" the voice repeats the question. It's firm but calm. An experienced man who understands his position. "I'm a human, born in Kansas, you can check." I tried to transport myself, but I can't feel the glands at all, like trying to move a hand that's been amputated. All the while, however, I can feel the flow of time, its current, its pressure. Maybe they blocked the transportation somehow, but my body is probably more complicated than they thought. Let them think they have the upper hand, let them feel it. "We know that," the man leaned down. I see his face, furrowed with scars, a deep, intelligent gaze. "But you're not a human like us. Actually," he suddenly changed his tone, "I don't give a shit. If you

hadn't been stealing, this wouldn't even be an issue." How did they get on my trail? I think about what to say, but I know it's no use. I'm guilty. My conscience had been bothering me for some time already. "Are you planning to keep me here until the end of time?" I began to probe them. "That depends on you, on whether you're willing to cooperate." "What kind of cooperation are you talking about?" The pain in my back was getting worse; their painkillers were wearing off. I had to play my ace, but I was waiting for the cards to be dealt. "You will tell us everything about what you can do, what you're capable of, and you will start working for us." "My dear sir," I laughed, "and how exactly do you plan to control me?" He showed me a photograph. "Do you know who this is, John?" "I think that's Lisa, my girlfriend from college... What does she have to do with this?" I asked, concerned. "I haven't seen her in eight years." "You write to each other, we know. She has children, twins. A boy," he showed me a photo, "Frank. A girl," another photo, "Hanna. They're seven years old, John." The ace. This is the moment. The faces around me froze, the light went out. As I moved my head, I collided

with photons frozen in the air. When time is stopped, sight is useless. Time doesn't flow, light doesn't travel, the eyes cannot see. Nature, however, in creating such a being, found a solution. I don't know how it works, but I see with my mind's eye. Similar to observing things from a distance, a multidimensional image of my surroundings appears in my head. I don't see, but I know what is where. This sense, however it works, allows me to see perfectly in practically any conditions. I look at the one with the square jaw I was talking to, and I see him from every side. I see right through him. It's quite tiring, but I've had practice. I can't transport. The field is working despite time being stopped. I don't even know if time itself stops, or if I am outside of it. In another dimension? I don't know what to call it. I try to get off the bed; pain shoots through me. Only now, with my extra sense, do I see what's happening to my back. My skin is cut open, I'm attached to devices, cables, wires. With great difficulty, I overcome the pain and rip everything off, taking pieces of my flesh with it. I lose consciousness.

When I regained it, a lot of my own, local time must

have passed. My hair had already grown halfway down my now-healed back. I switch off the electromagnets. I return to normal time. "I want to cooperate, but on my terms," I say from the corner of the room, from behind the agents' backs. They didn't expect that, no one in this room did. I see them turning in panic as if in slow motion, the guards aiming at me. "Watch outttt!" one of them yells. "He's got control again!" shouts a guy in a lab coat, and a toothpick falls from the teeth of another guy in a suit standing next to him, who had been chewing on it until now. I stop time, take the guards' weapons, return to the same corner, and I can't wait to see their faces. I stand before them, holding two rifles with the barrels pointing down. The guards look at their hands; one of them faints. One of the agents lunges at me, hits his head on the wall, and falls unconscious, as I'm already on the other side of the room. "Stop, gentlemen, let's talk," I throw the rifles to the ground and hold out my hand with an open palm, a sign of peace. "Halt!" shouted the square-jawed one. "Leave him. Alright, let's talk. Me, you, and Lieutenant Clark," he said, pointing to the suit whose toothpick

had fallen out. They all stood there with red faces, whether from anger or fear, I don't know. We moved to a small conference room. I was hungry as hell. They wanted to bring me something from the canteen, but just in case they tried to drug me again, I asked for a few bucks and jumped 30 km away for a hot dog and a beer. Clearly, they weren't used to this yet, because when I reappeared, they were already discussing how to start the search for me. "Easy, gentlemen, there was a line," I said with a smile. This time, their faces broke into grins too. We had established contact. "I'll start by saying that," I began the conversation, biting into my hot dog, "I really went too far. Besides, you must have realized anyway, because at some point, I did start paying, even if it was with cash from banks, but still. I want to pay it back, work it off. And the things I can do, I suspect, are quite desirable for our country." "I'm listening with great interest," Ethan Clark watched my every move with the eyes of an experienced investigator. He listened to every word. The tough guy in the black suit remained silent. "The government will clear my debts, and I'll have a normal employment contract, a

salary just like any of you.” “You’re joking,” the menacing one joined the discussion. “No, I’ll show you I’m being sincere. What case are you working on right now? Besides mine, of course? Well, Mr. Menacing?” “Frost. Agent Frost.” “Agent Frost, how can I help at this very moment? I’m serious. Unfortunately, I can’t read minds.” “Are you sure about that?” they both asked at once, making me realize just how afraid of me they were. “There’s a maniac on the loose in Philadelphia, planting bombs under kindergartens. Where and when was the last explosion?” “July 12th of this year, at 1:30 PM. He always detonates his charges at the same time. This was the third one. Sixty people died, children and their caretakers.” “May I have a camera?” “Excuse me?” “May I have a camera? I’m asking in English, aren’t I?” The agent took his phone out of his pocket and handed it to me. “It’s got a good sensor. What do you need it for?” “Just a moment, gentlemen,” I said, and then, in one-hundredth of a second, I went from sitting at the table to standing at the table and handing the camera back to its owner. Of course, their jaws dropped again. “Well?” “You have a picture

of the Bomber there. He's a firefighter." They looked at the photos in disbelief. And not just photos—I had recorded a video of him doing it, that is, planting the bomb. "How is this possible?" "To a certain extent, I can appear in, and travel back in, time." "Then why didn't you react, why didn't you stop him?" "I can't influence any time other than the one I come from. It must be some kind of natural defense against paradoxes. I can't travel forward, either. As you can see, my intentions are pure. I could have disappeared and been more careful this time." "I'm sending the photo and video to headquarters," Ethan fiddled with the phone. "We'll see." "There's still the matter of my ex and my potential children." When I said that, I saw hesitation on the Agent's face. It seemed to me he was bluffing, but I had to be sure. "Yes?" he hissed through his teeth. "Let's agree to meet here tomorrow, say 6 PM. I'm disappearing," and I disappeared.

I still had to check on Lisa and the kids. The fact that she was the one who kicked me out didn't matter at all. Finding her was easy, and the children... well, they

existed, but not the ones from the photo. These ones had slightly slanted eyes...

The first two years of working for the government—or rather, for an agency that didn't always play fair with the government—led to a gradual increase in the trust placed in me. Physicists, chemists, and biologists could study me whenever they wanted (well, almost), and I got a great deal of satisfaction from my work. Eliminating a dozen drug cartels, destroying the Iranian and North Korean nuclear programs in such a way that they could only suspect the devil himself, and a whole host of smaller successes made me feel like the right man in the right place. There was one thing I was unable to do. Kill. That is, to eliminate targets.

It was in Afghanistan. Belgian doctors had been kidnapped. Mullah Zakhari's unit had attacked a humanitarian convoy. As the vehicles were entering Highway 1, Afghanistan's main motorway connecting Jalalabad with Kabul, an IED, or improvised explosive device, exploded under the second vehicle in the convoy. Only fragments remained of the truck and

the food it was carrying. The first of the security vehicles, an MRAP Cougar, was successfully hit by a grenade from an RPG launcher. The terrorists approached, taking cover in the uneven terrain and firing on the vehicles. They focused their fire on the military vehicles. For a long while, an exchange of fire ensued. The gunner in the HMMWV swept the Mujahideen positions with bursts of fire, pinning them to the ground. Bullets whizzed by. Bursts from AK-47s and AK-74s riddled the vehicles without causing casualties, though most of the bullets were sent harmlessly into the sky, just to scare them. The Marines who had survived the MRAP took up defensive positions, picking off their opponents with deadly accuracy. Not five minutes into the fight, two fighters were sent to their eternal rest. One combatant, however, decided the outcome of the encounter. An older man with an SVD that remembered the war with the Russians took aim from 200 meters away, hidden behind the withered branch of a tree. In his rifle's scope, he located the gunner. He held his breath and gently squeezed the trigger. The American gunner's head exploded. The soldier,

hit cleanly in the forehead, was thrown backward. The fighters launched a frontal assault. The Taliban's significant numerical superiority quickly ended the skirmish.

I was supposed to cooperate in freeing the hostages. The situation was complicated and tense. One of the female doctors was the mistress of a certain general who had good connections within the Agency.

Otherwise, they wouldn't have assigned me to such a task. Intelligence had an approximate location for where the hostages were being held. I, taught by experience, no longer made uncertain long-distance jumps. I had to rest after each one, and a jump of fourteen thousand kilometers was excessively tiring. That is, the jump itself wasn't tiring, but afterward, I couldn't make another one for a long time.

Sometimes for several hours, so it could be dangerous. After covering such a distance, even stopping time is difficult, which is why we chose the American base in Jalalabad as our destination.

Everything was arranged: an agent arrives, they are to host me, and the next day I go my own way. Of course, I wasn't supposed to transport directly into

the base; I was still secret—that is, my abilities were—so I appeared in what seemed to be an open space. Next to a riverbed, 2 km from the base. After the jump, I saw a fighter standing with his back to me, another next to him, and a third further on. They were walking with their weapons at the ready. Nearby, others were setting up an old Russian mortar. I was as surprised by the situation as they were. Unfortunately, my reflexes, despite the last two years of regular training which had eliminated my beer belly, had not significantly improved. As I stood, I felt, a moment after feeling a blow to the back of my head, with a rifle butt, I suspect.

In the end, I was very lucky. I woke up in some kind of basement. I was lying on my side with my hands tied behind my back. I could smell the stench of wet clay and had the taste of blood in my mouth. I looked around. Five other people lay against the walls, tied up and beaten. I recognized among them Amelia Carter, the aforementioned general's girl, two soldiers, and two other civilians. "Hey, are you alive?" I asked. They looked at me with empty eyes. One of the soldiers, clearly more switched-on, looked at my

commando gear (that's what I was wearing) and asked. "Are you the cavalry?" I winced slightly. "Yeah, this was supposed to go a little differently, but we'll manage." I stood up. "Can you help me untie my hands?" "They kicked you so hard, I thought you were a goner," said Amelia, a sexy woman with hair as fair as wheat. You could see her beauty even under the swelling and bruises on her face.

I had a logistical problem. The mission was supposed to go as usual: I find the targets, or in this case, the hostages, give the coordinates to the special forces, and they take care of it. Unfortunately, they had dragged me here, and I didn't know where I was, had no idea. And I could have escaped; I could transport myself at any moment, but that kind of transport isn't like walking. I wouldn't know the way back, so I'd have to search for this hideout all over again. Of course, it would be easier for me, but here—judging by the prisoners' appearance—matters were urgent. I had to free them myself. Transporting them was out of the question. The field generated by my multidimensional glands surrounded me quite tightly; even a backpack I once wore got clipped. I had to wear fairly

tight-fitting outfits. Most often, it was a special forces uniform with a tactical vest. The multitude of pockets and compartments in it and in the pants replaced briefcases, backpacks, and the like. The soldier, Captain Bill, untied my bound hands, and then I helped everyone else do the same. At first, the plan seemed simple, though it meant revealing my unusual abilities. "Listen, I'm not an ordinary soldier. I'm going to get you out." "How?" asked the second soldier, a corporal. The girl brightened up a bit. It seemed to me she had the most balls of all of them, because I was quite sure she had more than me. If it weren't for these abilities, it would never have occurred to me to go to a war zone. The other two civilians, who turned out to be a driver and a geographer, were in no condition to escape or even hold a conversation. "Well, first of all, this is top secret. I'm a genetically modified super-soldier." I couldn't think of anything better. "Holy shit, we've got a crazy commando here," said the driver and burst into tears. The poor guy completely broke down. "No, look," after which I moved a meter away. "See? No bullshit." I shrugged as they picked their jaws up off the floor. I was starting

to get used to that sight. Unfortunately, only after this noble demonstration did I notice the camera in the corner of the room, mounted near the ceiling. The door burst open with a crash, hinges and all, and fighters began to pour into the room, shouting something in their melodic language. Bill, without thinking, threw himself at the opponents. They, however, opened fire.

I looked around the room, assessing the situation. The rifle bullets had managed to travel half the distance to their target, straight towards Bill, when I stopped time. I checked how many enemies were nearby. Well, three had managed to get in, another four were outside the door, and there were two more on the floor above. Them first, then I'll think about the rest. Well, sorry guys, it's you or me. I took a rifle from one of them, aimed at his head, and... and for the life of me, I couldn't shoot. "Irrational imbecile," I said to myself. I walked around the enemy, thinking it would be easier from behind, but unfortunately, no luck. I tried to squeeze the trigger, but my finger wouldn't budge. I strained so hard that my face turned the color of a healthy, juicy tomato, but still

nothing. My finger wouldn't move. I hadn't expected that. I couldn't kill a person, even at such a crucial moment, and an enemy who had probably given me a good kicking earlier. "I'll start from the other side," I thought. I dragged Bill two meters from his previous position, getting thoroughly exhausted in the process. Hauling a stiff, hundred-kilo body is not easy. True, during a time-stop, gravity doesn't work in its usual way, but it still wasn't easy. I carefully avoided the bullets suspended in the air, which, though now motionless, were charged with kinetic energy. I don't want to know what would have happened if I had touched one. The energy would probably have transferred to me, though without the typical penetration of a bullet, meaning there would be a boom, and I'd be missing a piece of my body... Better not to test that theory. I took the weapons from our captors and pressed them into the hands of our modest group. I disassembled the surplus weapons and hid them in the corner of the room. I returned to normal time. Bill flew against the wall, and the bullets fired at him made large holes in the basement wall. The action unfolded incredibly fast.

The fighters, shocked by the sudden turn of events, who had been running forward until now, began to brake, trying to flee, but this only caused them to trip. They slid in feet-first like a soccer player during a slide tackle. The small, dark basement swarmed with people. Our little group stood around, with several fighters lying in the middle and more at the door. Some had already noticed they had no weapons; others still held their hands in a firing stance. It was similar with our people. The girl and the driver dropped their weapons, fear in their eyes. The geographer assumed a firing stance but held the rifle as if it were a pistol. He must have watched a lot of “Miami Vice” in his youth. The soldiers, fortunately or unfortunately, now reacted according to their training. They might not have understood what had happened yet and hadn’t registered that they were armed, but their bodies, their hands, feeling the rifles in their palms, did what they were trained to do. They opened fire. With short, controlled bursts, they created an Armageddon for the fighters and sent the entire, now-defenseless attacking squad to the Islamic paradise, Jannah. They would probably

become shahids, those who give their lives for their faith, for the fight against the infidels. “Fuck ’em,” Amelia said, picking up a rifle. “I don’t know how you do it, but it’s a good thing you’re on our side,” she said to me. Man, she’s got balls! “Jesus,” said the driver, after which he wretched up bile and fainted. The rest held on. The soldiers took defensive positions by the door, covering each other, and the geographer, following their example, modified the way he held his weapon accordingly. “This is the fucking shit!” he exclaimed. “What should I do?” he continued, looking from me to the soldiers. There was a look of happiness and madness in his eyes. I wasn’t sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing. This small, frail, almost skinny man in round glasses had just transformed from prey into a hunter. I wondered if I shouldn’t maybe take the bullets out of his magazine. We moved out in a tactical formation. I left the weapon; I wouldn’t have used it anyway, and focused on my surroundings. With my special sense, I could see everything within a 100-meter radius, regardless of wall thickness. I gave real-time updates on what was where, and what the threats were. I disarmed the

enemy's subsequent firing positions, but this time, the Marines, forewarned about everything, only tied up the fighters. The entire base, as it turned out, was manned at the time by 43 Mujahideen. Those who hadn't been killed at the beginning, we locked in one of the storerooms. We connected with the base using one of their phones and waited for the helicopters. The outpost was located in the mountains, 20 kilometers from the Pakistani border. Amelia and I were now sitting outside the building where the fighters were being held. The Marines were circling the area, patrolling. The geographer had taken an observation post on a nearby peak, and the driver was fast asleep. The whole situation had clearly overwhelmed him. "You're worse than an atomic bomb," she looked at me seductively, twirling a blonde curl. "Don't exaggerate. Tell me, if I may ask, of course..." "Shoot." "What's the deal with you and the general?" She smiled broadly and began to crawl towards me on all fours, incredibly sexy, her head slightly lowered, red lips, the tip of her tongue licking her upper lip. She shook her head, her blonde hair waving like flames. She touched my knee. "Maybe...

nothing anymore?” she said quietly, in a whisper as sweet as honey. She pressed herself against me. I looked around shyly to see if anyone was watching, but no one had a chance. She gently grasped my neck, wrapped her left arm around my back, and her right hand slid delicately from my knee, higher and higher. With that hand, she began to unbutton her blouse, all the while holding me tightly and this time kissing me passionately on the lips. I was drifting away, my blood was pulsing, the world was becoming distant. Then I felt something cold against my chin...

The agent stood over the man's body, holding a Walther P99 pistol in her hand. The next bullet was meant for the driver, who had been woken by the gunshot. She raised her phone. “Yes?” a low male voice answered in Russian. “Asset eliminated.”

End of Part One