

CHAPTER 1: WASHINGTON, D.C.

SUNDAY, MARCH 14, 2021: 14:57 HOURS

Avid was a few minutes early, so he stood at the crosswalk and waited for the stream of protestors to continue past him, marching in the street toward the National Mall where they would all gather for speeches after the demonstration. This march was just one of many, as people took to the streets in protest across the country. They did this even as a pandemic raged around them and thousands of people died of COVID-19 every day after being cared for in hospital hallways, filled to overflowing, their corpses stored in refrigerated trucks. It was a challenging historical period from any perspective, which was why Avid was there.

Another unarmed Black man had been killed yesterday in another city, and the country had erupted, once again. Avid had worked fourteen of these demonstrations in the past year, and was scheduled to work two more in the following week. It had become routine.

He checked the time, noted that Terence Jackson would be approaching now, and searched the crowd for a tall, bald Black man wearing a bright yellow nylon jacket and a COVID mask, holding a sign that said “Black Lives Matter.”

There he was. The yellow jacket made it easy for Avid to spot him. Terence was arriving right on time, with his girlfriend marching beside him and holding up a sign of her own. As Terence moved past, Avid stepped off the curb and slipped into the crowd of marchers, positioning himself just behind the man so he could clearly watch the action unfold, walking immediately alongside the four white supremacists who would kill Terence Jackson at 15:12 hours on March 14, 2021, a few minutes from now.

Avid did not carry a protest sign as he marched. He did not establish eye contact with the white supremacists. He did not shout catchy slogans along with the crowd, and he did not interact with any of the people who surrounded him. He was only there to observe and report on the actual murder, not the march leading up to it. It was not Avid’s job to report on the crowd—other members of his team were positioned at various points along the route to do that. And he did not have clearance to interact, so he ignored everyone but the four white supremacists and Terence, making certain they were never more than a few feet away.

Avid had prepared for this event by studying the contemporary news stories and scanner footage of the protest demonstration before he could “interview” the witnesses a little less than two blocks ahead of where they were marching now. He knew which of the marchers belonged to various white supremacist organizations, and he knew which belonged to Antifa, the anarchist group of self-proclaimed anti-fascists, who viewed themselves in this situation as the guardians of the protestors. He knew which white supremacists and Antifa members were pretending to belong to the opposite group to either get close enough to monitor the opposition, or to incite violence and commit destructive crimes they would later blame on the other side. Both groups were highly aware of one another and kept a tense distance, watching each other for signs of disruption or trouble, prepared to step up and take action the instant it occurred.

That trouble would arise in five minutes and fourteen seconds when Terence would twist his ankle in a pothole. In this explosive atmosphere he unfortunately would stumble and accidentally push one of the white supremacists, who would then lose his balance and react. The two men would exchange

words, which would escalate into shouting and pushing. The offended man and his three companions would grab Terence and drag him into a nearby alley where three of them would pummel him with their fists. The fourth would stab him in the heart with a knife while Terence's girlfriend watched, screaming.

Avid's assignment was to attend this upcoming event and upload his observations immediately following the attack.

Avid Burhan was a Historian who was assigned to the United States, Twenty-first Century Racial Unrest Mission. Last year his team had had a busy summer attending Black Lives Matter protests like this one, and recording violence, looting and murder as it cropped up in various places throughout the United States. The perpetrators of violence were all identified in the historical records and tagged by name, political affiliation, and background information, even though contemporary law enforcement could not identify many of them and would never arrest them. Twenty-eighth century scanner records knew exactly who they were. These people all thought they'd escaped detection, not knowing that there is no such thing as "historical privacy," or that they would be held up, by name, as a shameful example of what not to be long after they died.

Avid's team consisted of Historians who all had facial features and skin tones that did not suggest any particular race or ancestry to make it less likely that they would become the target of violence from anyone who was inclined to attack people of a specific race. Consequently, the white supremacists who walked beside Avid found nothing overtly objectionable about his appearance or his demeanor. Neither did the Black marchers who were scanning the crowd for threats. In fact, they all only barely noticed him, which was the Mitigators' intent. When an assignment involved twenty-first century racial unrest the Mitigators deliberately sent light-skinned mixed-race Historians who appeared to be neither White nor Black nor Hispanic nor Asian nor Middle Eastern because they enjoyed a neutral position that did not draw anyone's attention or, with any luck, anyone's ire. This allowed them to safely mingle amongst, and sometimes interact with, the event participants whose thoughts and actions they recorded.

Avid Burhan wore a burgundy hoodie with "Washington" imprinted in yellow across his chest. He wore an N-95 face mask in deference to the COVID-19 pandemic, even though he was genetically immune to the virus. He was tall and of indeterminate Eurasian ethnicity, with short, wavy, medium brown hair and skin the color of coffee mixed with lots of milk, not dark, exactly, but not quite "Caucasian white." He was a well-built man who appeared to be in his early thirties, and who had a wiry but muscular athletic build that suggested he worked out, or was involved in sports.

He had his hands in the front pocket of the hoodie as he marched. He knew exactly where to look at any given moment from having studied the footage, and was now looking back. He knew precisely which men to watch and where he would find them. And there they were.

Five members of Antifa, who were approaching the scene a few hundred feet behind Avid, saw the violence accelerate and watched Terence being dragged into the alley. They were on the other side of the street and could not push through the crowd in time to stop the attack, but they moved aggressively toward it, squeezing through the marchers, shoving some of them as they went.

Avid moved to one side for safety in anticipation of their approach. They pushed through the crowd shouting, "Move out of the way!" and raced to get to the alley as quickly as they could. Avid followed closely behind them, taking advantage of the path they'd formed in the crowd as they pushed their way through.

The white supremacists had pressed Terence against the wall of a building, and now looked over at the growing, staring crowd that had followed them and blocked the alley's entrance. They clearly saw the smart phones recording them as Terence's head fell forward, so they released him, then turned and ran in the other direction.

The Antifa marchers had now reached the scene, and shoved their way through the crowd and into the alley, pounding the ground and shouting as they chased the attackers to the street on the other side. Another of Avid's team members would be waiting to record the action when Antifa overtook the white supremacists and the two factions met up on the street at the far end of the alley. That aspect of the event was not Avid's concern.

Avid had now successfully slid into the alley, and was standing a few yards away from the victim. His assignment had begun.

Terence was mortally wounded. With the attackers no longer holding him against the wall, he slid down, barely conscious, and then fell to the ground where he lay, unmoving.

"Stand back!" a man shouted as he disconnected his emergency call to 9-1-1 and put the phone in his pocket. He had assumed the role of crowd control, and stood holding his arms out to keep everyone at a distance. "Keep it clear for the paramedics and police!" And then, "Is anyone a doctor?"

People continued to join the congregating crowd around the alley entrance to watch as Terence bled out his life, while his shaking and weeping girlfriend sat on the ground beside him and held his hand to her lips. A teenage girl, also weeping, moved closer to squat beside her and hold her in a side hug.

A woman pushed through the tight, unmoving crowd at the alley entrance, and shouted that she was a pediatrician. She was not the best fit for the situation, but she was willing and available. She ran up, then crouched over Terence and did her best while he slipped away.

Avid remained detached and focused, not caught in the immediacy of the Terence Jackson event, even though he was witnessing it firsthand and was surrounded by people who were reacting in the moment.

In preparation for this assignment Avid had dutifully studied the statements that the victim's family and lawyer would make to local media within the next twelve hours. Their statements would be picked up by Reuters and published internationally, so the entire world would be aware of this murder by tomorrow. He knew those statements word for word, and knew the names of all the members of Terence's entire family. Before he arrived here he had memorized everything. He was tuned into their grief as part of his job, and had telepathically experienced it. He knew everything they felt so he could later describe it all as effectively as possible in his report. He had gone through extensive meditation exercises before this assignment to prevent those emotions from overwhelming him, so he was largely inured to the murder he was witnessing. The drama had no deep and lasting emotional impact for him because it occurred seven hundred and thirty-three years ago, and because he was trained to experience past events dispassionately.

He focused his mind on telepathically reading the people who surrounded him—that was his primary job—and was bombarded by their thoughts and emotions. He could not see the faces of about half of the people in the crowd because these people were wearing pandemic face masks. However, he could read their thoughts and comment on them in his report. To do this he focused on each person and shut out the thoughts and emotions of the others until he had uploaded each report and moved on to the next one, person by person.

Avid began with the people closest to the victim and moved outward from there. His first interview was with Terence's girlfriend. He gave the mental command, "Subject Data." In response, the holographic Alert screen displayed twelve inches from his face, and provided the woman's image and personal information. Avid briefly and unnecessarily reviewed this out of habit. He would not spend much time with her interview because the upcoming contemporary news reports were going to contain much more information than he could obtain from her now. Later in the day she would be coherent and eloquent about her experience, so this interview was just a quick snapshot of her initial reaction.

Subject: Irma Santana Morales. Born: San Juan, Puerto Rico, March 31, 1993. Died: May 1, 2043. Cause: Car accident. Occupation: Hairdresser, nail stylist. Married: October 1, 2015. Divorced: December 13, 2017. Spouse: Vincente Morales, born Puerto Rico November 18, 1989. Children: Cristina Morales, born Washington D.C. May 14, 2016, Dante Jackson, born Washington D.C. April 17, 2019. Event consequences: PTSD. Depression.

He tuned into Irma, now standing shakily upright to make room for the doctor who was trying to stem Terence's bleeding with her scarf. She stood beside the teenaged girl, whose arms were wrapped around her waist and who was pressing close to her.

Avid stated in his report that Irma was suffering from shock. She hadn't processed anything yet and felt as if she were moving underwater in a surreal dream. He gave the mental command, "Save to file, today's local date."

The screen in front of him displayed a list of folder names. He identified and focused on, "Terence Jackson Witnesses." The folder name turned blue when his eyes connected to it. Avid mentally commanded, "Upload" and Irma's personal information uploaded to that folder, along with Avid's observations of her mental and emotional state. It would now be accessible to staff from the Education Project, who would review it and incorporate it into history courses for older children.

His next interview was with the teenaged girl.

"Subject Data," he silently commanded. His Alert Screen displayed her information.

Subject: Adella Santana. Born: Washington D.C., October 27, 2006. Died August 29, 2088. Cause: Cardiac arrest. Occupation: Registered nurse. Married: June 20, 2027. Spouse: Catalina Dixon, born March 2, 2001, died September 14, 2050. Cause: Breast cancer. Children: None.

Adella was nervously muttering expletives to herself as she looked down at Terence and then looked away, focusing primarily on her sister Irma, but frightened because she didn't know how to make it all better. Irma was unresponsive and her eyes were unfocused. Who should Adella call? What should she do? Should she lead Irma away? Should she wait for the ambulance?

"Irma!" she said urgently. She patted her cheek softly. "Come on, Irma." That was the most frightening aspect of this, aside from seeing Terence lying there on the ground in a pool of blood: not knowing what to do. Ordinarily she would have turned to Irma for guidance, but her sister had checked out, and Adella was left to deal with it herself. She pressed her cheek to Irma's and said, "It'll be okay. It'll be okay. It'll be okay." Irma responded with a slight nod and an empty look. Her teeth were chattering, and she was making a noise like a low hum. Adella patted her cheek again and then hugged her tightly.

Avid uploaded Adella's report, then scanned the rest of the crowd for his next subject. There he was! Avid smiled to himself, a little star struck, thoroughly enjoying the moment.

The small, slight-figured Black teenaged male in the backwards red Nationals baseball cap had wormed his way to the front of the crowd and was watching the scene in quiet panic. "This is me," Avid heard him think as he studied Terence on the ground. "This is how I die one day." And then Avid heard, "Is it always going to be this way?" And then, "Does anybody really care? Are we changing anything *at all*?"

The young man was just a few yards away from Terence and could see everything. He angrily, impulsively smashed his Black Lives Matter sign against the side of the building to his right, then emitted three guttural grunts with his face to the sky. He held his hands in fists at his side, and, then stopped to wipe snot from his nose and tears from his eyes with the sleeve of his jacket.

"God damn those fucking assholes!" he screamed.

"Subject data," Avid commanded.

The screen displayed: *Subject: Joseph D'Andre McKenna. Born: Washington, D.C. July 14, 2005. Died: March 13, 2097. Cause: Natural. Occupation: U.S. Senator, U.S. Ambassador to China, U.S. Secretary of State, U.S. Supreme Court Justice. Refer to the Joseph D'Andre McKenna historical file for extensive supplemental information.*

Avid now felt Joseph's hopelessness turn to rage, and transcribed his thoughts into the report. He would fight, the teenager decided in this galvanizing moment, furious and terrified. He would find a way to fight back. That thought generated a notation on Avid's Alert screen that read, "Event Consequences: Refer to the Joseph D'Andre McKenna historical file in its entirety." Avid filed the notation in the supplemental Terence Jackson Event Consequences folder.

Avid mentally uploaded his report to the Terence Jackson Witnesses folder, sending a duplicate copy to the Joseph D'Andre McKenna historical file.

The police arrived and began questioning the witnesses. Meanwhile, Avid reported on everyone within close proximity, uploading his observations one by one.

Two additional white supremacists and one man with sadistic sexual tendencies were enjoying the spectacle. They did not display any emotion as they watched, but Avid could telepathically sense their glee. He uploaded their files with his observations.

Seventeen of the people in the ever-growing crowd would die of COVID-19 at some point during the pandemic. Several had only weeks or months to live. Two of these were contracting the virus at this event, so Avid uploaded those files to Terence Jackson Event Consequences.

A group of teenaged girls of different races in matching soccer uniforms were clustered together, pressed close, in shock, linking arms and holding hands, watching wide-eyed. Three of these would become social activists after witnessing this event, and required uploads to both Event Consequences and their individual supplemental historical records folders. Also uploaded to Event Consequences folder was the PTSD diagnosis of one of the other girls. The rest would effectively push the event out of their minds and only refer back to it as a story they would tell from time to time. They required no further documentation.

Seven people were holding up smart phones and recording the event. One of these turned his camera to the crowd and recorded everyone's reactions, while three others were live streaming on Facebook. Avid felt from them all a sense of detachment because they were using the phones almost as emotional protection against the scene because the phone screens provided distance and made Terence and his pool of blood appear small. However, all had an inflexible sense of purpose equal to that of Joseph D'Andre McKenna. Each person felt as if he or she was making history as, in fact, each one was. The names of the people with the phones would eventually be obscured and then lost, but the video clips they recorded would become a part of classroom discussion for centuries. These were the same videos that Avid had studied in school.

Terence Jackson was dead. The paramedics had arrived just moments after the police, and were strapping his body onto a gurney, which they covered with a sheet and wheeled out of the alley, and then across the street to the waiting ambulance, while police held the crowd back.

Irma leaned heavily on Adella as the police continued to question them.

The pediatrician held her face in her hands for a moment, then slowly walked back to the march with her head down, tears streaming down her face. Her grief was personal, and she was berating herself, unfairly, for failing to save Terence. Avid added that observation of her to her report.

The videographers uploaded their recordings to YouTube, Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram, and then dispersed into the street. The event was over, but the march continued.

"Locate Terence Jackson videos, today's local date." The screen displayed a list of all the websites where the seven videographers had uploaded their footage.

Avid's eyes connected with the files. He gave the command to "upload the videos to the Educator database, today's common date."

The date he was referring to as "today's common date" was August 1, 2754. However, the files would later be copied to the database forty years earlier so that present and future Historian uploads would all be accessible from the outset of the Project. Avid chuckled to think that he was the one to upload the videos that he himself would study in school. He always enjoyed it when that happened.

Avid could now return to the control station.

He displayed his Alert screen and entered a pickup request with his coordinates. The control station's tracking system automatically scanned the area to determine a time and specific pickup point when and where there would be no nearby observers, and then sent instructions back to him. These indicated that he should arrive at Dumbarton Oaks Park after 16:37 hours, but before 16:51 hours when observers would suddenly arrive.

At 16:28 hours the Uber driver left Avid at the entrance to the park. Avid received Alert screen directions to the secluded area where his travel pod would be arriving in a few minutes. He had plenty of time, so he began walking slowly, breathing the fresh air and enjoying the scenery as he took a meandering, casual, unhurried stroll toward the pickup point. The instructions pointed him to a thicket, then told him to push through it and into a clearing, where he saw a small, unmanned travel pod hovering overhead, obscured from the walk path by trees. It scanned and identified him as he approached, and then landed in front of him. The door opened, and he boarded the aircraft. The travel pod rose, then silently sped upward and away at high speed. From the ground it looked like a black streak for perhaps half a second, and then it was gone.

Nobody saw it.