

CHAPTER ONE

The Neptunian ripped off Tacita Pruvál's pink-and-blue polka-dot bikini top and tossed it onto the soggy deck, then sank his fingers into her ample breasts. She let out a moan and placed her hands on top of his, her palms tickled by the tufts of wiry green fur sprouting from his knobby knuckles.

"Tacita, Tacita," he murmured, "why are you trying to destroy me?"

His beady yellow eyes were riveted to her tits and he didn't see the look of fear flash across her face.

"Whatever do you mean, Serrak?" she said innocently.

"You know very well I have an important rendezvous in Rio, from which I stand to make a cool million dollars, yet you hold me here, flaunting your curvaceous body before my eyes. You tease me, you tempt me, you taunt me. I am like putty in your hands."

He pressed his brutish face against her downy cheek and stuck his scaly tongue into her left ear as his maroon swim trunks tented, the bulge poking at her squirming rump.

"Sure doesn't feel like putty to me," she said.

"Oh Tacita, my little temptress, my luscious cream pie, you are driving me mad! I must have you! I must! I cannot endure any more!"

She deftly extricated herself from his clutches and stood up, wriggling out of her panties and draping them around his neck.

"Where are you going?" he said as she headed for the stern.

"I'm just getting some K.Y. Jelly out of my bag."

Serrak eagerly doffed his trunks, revealing his massive, turgid dong.

"Hurry, my darling," he said, leering at her backside as she bent over and reached into her cranberry Louis Vuitton handbag.

"Huh," she said. "It's not in here. I must have left it back at the hotel."

She straightened up and started to turn around, then gasped and pointed excitedly at a beer can floating atop a nearby whitecap.

"Oh look! It's the Antikythera Mechanism!"

"The what?"

"I've got to grab it before it sinks to the bottom of the sea! It's worth a fortune!"

"Uh..."

Before he could stop her, Tacita dove over the side of the speedboat. Her slim arms and shapely legs churned powerfully at the choppy water, and soon she was safely out of range. She turned around, treading water and smiling at Serrak, who was leaning over the gunwale, grasping it tightly, his cock throbbing with lust, his bestial face contorted with frustrated longing.

"Bye bye, Serrak," she said, and pinched the bionic cuticle on the pinky finger of her left hand, sending a radio signal to her discarded panties.

KABLAMMA!

A ball of fire and smoke burst forth from the garment, blowing the Neptunian and his speedboat to bits. Chunks of fiberglass and flesh and metal pelted the water around Tacita, and a cylinder head from the Evinrude motor plunked down only a few feet away from her as a fine red mist drifted through the air, mingling with the roiling smoke and leaping flames.

Tacita began swimming toward shore as cabin cruisers and motorboats and sailboats converged on the carnage. A few boaters noticed her and immediately altered course; the race was won by a black Champion manned by a pair of college-age boys, one dark haired, the other

blonde, with gleaming white smiles set in suntanned faces. Tacita took one look at their rock-hard bodies and kindly accepted the outstretched hands they offered.

“Are you alright?” the dark one said, his eyes zeroing in on her well-groomed pussy as she climbed over the side.

“Yeah,” she said. “Thanks for giving me a lift.”

“No problem,” the blonde said, holding a hand casually over the big lump beneath his red-and-blue M.Nii trunks. “My name’s Chet.”

“And I’m Biff,” the other one said, making no attempt to hide his own bulge. “What’s yours?”

“Pruval,” she said. “Tacita Pruval.”

“So what happened, Tacita Pruval?” Chet said, nodding at the disaster in the distance.

Tacita shrugged. “I don’t know. A man offered to take me for a spin on his speedboat and everything was cool – until he stopped the boat, claiming he was out of gas. He did his best octopus imitation but he wasn’t my type so I took the plunge. Maybe something on board got ... overheated.”

Biff smirked. “I can see that happening.”

“Too bad about the boat,” Chet said, glancing at the smoldering flotsam floating atop a flaming, slowly spreading oil slick. “That was one nifty piece of marine machinery.”

Biff leaned in closer. “So the guy wasn’t your type, eh? What exactly is your type?”

Her violet eyes roamed over his buff chest and sinewy thighs. “Well-built college boys with lots of staying power and no hang-ups. Know anyone who matches that description?”

“Can’t think of a single one,” he said, and leaned forward, his lips fusing with her own, his hands grasping her massive melons.

“Hey wait for me,” Chet said...

Twenty minutes later, Biff and Chet lay flat on their backs, utterly spent, their limp, gooey cocks lying atop their bellies, their eyes glazed with satiation. Tacita took one last look at them, sighed wistfully and dove over the side, swimming toward the beach as the boys’ seed streamed out of her pussy and butt, to be gobbled up by a passing school of hungry minnows.

Biff struggled into a sitting position and looked around dazedly before spotting her in the water.

“Hey, Tacita! Where ya goin’?”

“Sorry boys, I’ve got things to do.”

As she neared the shore she tapped her belly button three times, activating her Instapparel app, and a small aperture opened in her tummy, spewing out a substance resembling silly string that wrapped itself around her body, solidifying into a bikini top and panties -- the non-explosive variety.

A crowd was gathering on the beach, gawking at two Miami Beach Police patrol boats that were rushing toward the wreckage, and no one paid any attention to Tacita as she waded out of the surf. She made her way to a parking lot behind a closed crab restaurant and sat down on a bollard, then twisted her index finger, causing a flesh-colored panel in the palm of her right hand to slide aside, revealing a touch screen. After sending a brief text message, she switched to her Angry Candy game to pass the time.

Ten minutes later, a scarlet 1968 Ford Mustang convertible with cream interior pulled up and Tacita climbed in, smiling at the driver.

Raoul Lopez was devilishly handsome, with a rakish mustache and curly dark hair, and he was wearing a perfectly tailored white suit, as usual, despite the heat. He shifted the car into gear and they roared off, heading for downtown Miami.

“Report,” he said.

“Scratch Mr. Rolor and his boatload of coke.”

Raoul grinned. “Good work. He was clever, that one, smuggling drugs inside fake bananas concealed within the sleek hull of his powerful speedboat. But now his foul cargo has been consigned to the depths, leaving one less dose of poison to course through the troubled bloodstream of America – those mean streets of the inner cities where desperate youth cling to whatever comforts they can, and the posh suburban enclaves of bored elites who’ll do anything to forget their shallow, jaded lifestyles. We’ve cut one head off the Hydra, but there are more, many more. And I won’t rest until this city, this country, this world, is free from the taint of narcotics in every vile form!”

“Well put, Raoul. As usual. And now it’s on to Rio. And Basir Rillet.”

Raoul lit a Winston and took a puff. “Sorry, Tacita, but Rio’s off the schedule for now.”

“Why?”

“Something else has come up that’s far more important.”

She arched an eyebrow. “Oh? What could be more important than cleansing the bloodstream of America’s mean streets and posh suburban caves from the jaded poison of desperate narcotics, or whatever you said?”

“You got the gist of it, but never mind all that. GOTCHA has received word from reliable sources that SPECTRUSH is about to unleash another diabolical plot upon an unsuspecting world.”

[GOTCHA -- the Government Organization of Technological Commandos on High Alert. Tacita had been with them for a little over a year, following her abrupt departure from Interpol.]

[SPECTRUSH -- the Society for the Perpetuation of Evil Crap That Really Undermines Society Hellishly. Its members were former agents of Smersh, Thrush, Specter and the KGB who quit their respective organizations and joined SPECTRUSH because of the superior health insurance plan.]

“Oh no!” Tacita said. “What are they up to this time?”

“All we know is the code name of the operation. Cobalt Falcon Deltoid.”

“Catchy. So what do you want me to do?”

“An informant named Braden Grimes has vital information about the operation. He’s gone into hiding, using the name Zebulon Cornwallace Pecksniff.”

“That’s a weird one. Why didn’t he pick some ordinary name to attract less attention?”

“In his present location, a name like Zebulon Cornwallace Pecksniff *is* considered ordinary.”

“Oh. Where is he?”

“Ravenspurn.”

“Where’s that?”

“No place. The town no longer exists. But it used to be in Yorkshire.”

Tacita’s heart sank. “Oh no. You don’t mean...”

“Yes, Tacita. I’m afraid you’ll have to use a portal again.”

She made a face. Time travel gave her a stomach ache. “Can’t this Grimes guy -- or Pecksniff, or whatever he calls himself -- come to Miami?”

“No, it’s safer if he stays where he is.”

“What’s the address?”

“The building has no address, but you can’t miss it. It’s the biggest one in town. Big and black. With ‘Ravenspurtn Insane Asylum’ written on the keystone above the gate in discreet lettering.”

“Insane asylum! Why would he hide out in a place like that?”

“He felt it was the perfect fit. You see, he was one of the agents who worked on Operation Linguini Bravura Pekingese.”

“Was that the fiendish plot involving an insanity gas that SPECTRUSH planned to drop into the air conditioning ducts in the senate office buildings last year, except we blew up their laboratory before they could finish their experiments?”

“Yes. Grimes was inside the lab at the time and managed to escape, but he got exposed to the vapors – not full strength, but enough to mess up his short-term memory and other mental functions. But it also gave him a conscience he hadn’t had before. He started brooding about all the horrid things he’d done as a SPECTRUSH agent, so he decided to defect. But his rationality is a bit ... fragile at times.”

“Terrific. So the key to this case is an inmate at an insane asylum.”

“They call them guests.” He reached into his pocket, took out a glass vial and placed it in her hand. “Take this with you. I’ll help.”

She gazed at the bottle, shook her head, stared out the window.

“I never should’ve left Interpol,” she muttered, drawing an amused glance from Raoul. They both knew damn well she hadn’t “left” Interpol; she’d been sacked -- for moral turpitude.

Raoul slowed the car as they passed through a copse of Cyprus trees, then hung a left, heading up a dusty, rutted road toward a ramshackle farmhouse next to a turnip field.

“The portal’s here?” she said.

“Yes. It showed up about four months ago and the farmer called the county extension office, which called the sheriff, who contacted the state patrol, who brought in the FBI who alerted the CIA who reached out to us. The farmer’s name is Migor Rashuns and he’s pretty excited to be working with GOTCHA. He’s a bit of a fanboy -- in fact, he wants to be an agent himself. We’re humoring him, letting him send in an application and read some training manuals, but he’s hardly GOTCHA material.”

He stopped the car and honked the horn -- three short beeps, one long, two short, three long. A roly poly man dressed in dungarees came waddling out the half-hinged door of the farmhouse, clutching a leash attached to a monstrous dog with two heads – one a mastiff, the other a chow.

“What the hell is that?” Tacita said.

“Yet another grotesque byproduct of man’s folly, I’m afraid. He came from a puppy mill located on the site of an old toxic waste dump.”

“I was referring to the dog.”

“Be nice, Tacita.”

“Aren’t I always?”

“Let’s not get into that.” He extended his hand. “Good luck.”

“Aren’t you coming with me?”

“No, I have a few errands to run. But I’ll be back later to pick you up.”

“You’re leaving me alone with this guy?”

“I’m sure you’ll be fine.”

“That’s so reassuring. Thanks a lot.”

She climbed out of the car and smiled at the dog, who gave out two bloodcurdling growls in stereo and bared two sets of drool-dripping fangs.

“Hush, Rufus Dufus!” Migor said, jerking the dog’s chain. The dog closed its mouths and lowered its heads, eyeing Tacita with malevolent red eyes as Migor lumbered toward her.

“How do, ma’am. You must be Agent Pruval.”

“The one and only. Where’s the portal?”

“Inside.”

He led the way to the farmhouse, stepped up onto the saggy porch and opened the wobbly screen door for her, ogling her body as she passed by and stepped inside.

The couch on the far side of the room had red leather cushions mended with duct tape, and the lopsided, homemade coffee table had welded beer cans for legs. An ancient Philco TV with rabbit ears sat atop a cart with a shelf underneath full of old TV Guides and Blockbuster Video cases. Four strands of thickly encrusted flypaper hung from the ceiling near the windows, whose torn screens had also been mended with duct tape. There were three doors on the far side of the room. One was open, and the grungy bathroom beyond made Tacita cringe. The other two doors were closed. The one on the left was a few inches wider at the top than the bottom, and dark blue instead of brown. The surface of the wood was strangely rippled.

“There she be,” Migor said. “Showed up about four months ago and it really pissed me off because I had one of them Fathead pictures of Drew Brees up on my wall and now it’s gone, except you can see a smidgen of Drew’s helmet right above the door frame. I tried to open the darn fool thing but it wouldn’t budge, so I figured there was something screwy about the whole business and I gave the county extension agent a holler and she came down and...”

Tacita tuned him out, focusing on the door. Although it appeared to be made of solid wood, she knew it was actually a highly compacted energy field spawned by a device called the TimeTutor, which had been developed by Dr. Venton Caspinger, the famed chronologist. There were dozens of such portals scattered around the world and they served as access points for hundreds of “time slots” -- patches of the past, copied from the main time-frame of the universe, which students could visit to observe historical events first-hand, along with the prelude and aftermath. Since the slots were only copies, and reset themselves once in awhile, there was no danger of the students mucking up the past, but the portals themselves had an unfortunate tendency to change locations without warning, so a student who entered a portal in Omaha might find themselves exiting in downtown Detroit or the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. For this reason, the Department of Education had banned the TimeTutor as a teaching aid, and shortly thereafter Dr. Caspinger had mysteriously disappeared. No one else could figure out how his device worked, let alone how to fix the glitches, but that hadn’t stopped other government agencies – and criminals – from using the invention for their own devious ends.

Tacita had no desire to use the cockamamie gizmo but she had no choice, so she heaved a deep sigh and tapped the TimeTutor icon on her palm screen, bringing up the “TT” logo, with the usual blurb at the bottom: “Thank you for using the beta version of the destination selection app for the TimeTutor historical education tool. Would you like to check online for a newer version?”

She clicked “No” and the main screen came up. She scrolled through the currently viable time slots and selected Ravenspur. The door swung open. Shimmering gray mist lurked beyond.

Migor came up behind her, standing way too close; he smelled like Ben Gay and Redman.

“Well I’ll be a monkey’s uncle,” he said. “Ain’t that the queerest thing!”

Usually Tacita was reluctant to step through portals, but Migor’s close proximity changed all that. She practically leapt through, leaving the farmer and his yucky house far behind.