

MR. TERRITAFF
DARK MATTERS

A NOVEL

BY
GARY K. WALLACE

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DEDICATION

For Brother Bruce, who introduced me to science fiction. For Brother Victor, who always knew how to make me laugh, and for my daughters, Amy and L.E., who are always by my side, supporting me in everything I do.

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PART I
MR. TERRITAFF

CHAPTER 1

Territaff found her in an alley, propped upright against a dumpster. Her eyes opened, staring with a lifeless gaze, her face distorted by a ghastly smile, likely forced postmortem by her assailant.

He knelt on one knee and studied her with a coroner's detachment. Her high cheekbones and full mouth were swollen and blackened with bruises. Both of her extended hands had defensive wounds of thin cuts and blackened knuckles.

She must've fought a hell of a fight, Territaff thought, pulling a scanner from his black leather jacket. He set it for a humanoid bioscan mode, then ran it down her long and well-defined body. The scanner's small display put her time of death as 0934.23 hours.

He spoke into the scanner, "Cause of death?"

"Systemic shock due to intense electromagnetic discharge," the scanner's automated voice answered.

"Less than two minutes," Territaff said. "I could've prevented this. Dammit! How could this have happened?"

He gazed at her with regret and anger for not following his instincts. Territaff promised himself the next candidate would be one of his choosing, not from the military, someone he could trust to follow his orders and be dedicated to the mission, not their career.

"Cuz," Territaff telepathically transmitted to his friend, who monitored the situation from their cloaked ship orbiting Earth's moon.

"Yes, Terri."

"We've lost Tanya. I found her body. Get her back to the ship before she's discovered. Also, I want a complete area

analysis, then sterilize it."

"Acknowledged. I'm sorry, Terri. I know you had your differences, but you seemed to like her spirit."

"Yeah." He let out a heavy breath. "She didn't deserve this. She was bucking for promotion by trying to impress Cameron and got herself killed for her efforts. What a waste."

"Tanya's death is an unfortunate loss. What are you going to do?"

Territaff thought for a moment as he studied Tanya's empty gaze before closing her eyes. Then he transmitted, *"Search for a new candidate."*

"Are we still meeting with Cameron?"

"Yes. I want to know why he had her following us."

"I've completed the analysis."

"Okay."

"Standard low-frequency pulse-phaser at point-blank range."

"No surprise there."

"However, there's also a faint trace of negative energy."

"Negative energy? Are you sure? How's that possible?"

"There is insufficient data for a cogent hypothesis."

"Make an educated guess."

"I'm sorry, Terri. The energy signature is unknown."

"Understood. Just thinking aloud."

"I see. You've been doing a lot of that lately. Is this related to being back on Earth?"

"Maybe."

"Could you be more specific?"

"Not now. I need a drink and time to rethink our situation."

** * **

Territaff walked for over an hour, searching for the right place. His mind whirled with memories as he passed familiar streets

and establishments. He frowned when he came to the corner drugstore on Lincoln Road. After school, he would go there to buy the latest superhero comic and read it while enjoying a Cherry Coke. It has been remodeled into a super drugstore chain.

South Beach had long given up much of its seasonal allure in favor of its glitzy 1990s makeover. Most of South Beach needed a facelift, but to Territaff's surprise, many old hotels and office buildings were renovated, retaining some of the city's original Art Déco charm.

He smiled when he saw the well-lit establishment at the end of a long block across from the beach. He sensed he was close to what he was seeking. The sign over the double wooden doors read, "Fat Jacks, Established 1918." *Is this the same Fat Jack's I frequented in Key West?*

He stopped outside the doors and listened to the sounds of people and music inside. The atmosphere sounded inviting, so he decided this was a good place to gather his thoughts and reflect on his circumstances.

Territaff paused inside the doors to observe. The lighting was soft and indistinct, lending the room gentle incandescence to escape the mounting tensions. Soft rock music played under the murmurs of voices talking and laughing.

The bar and grill had the same genuine Key West ambiance. Fish nets were strung on the walls. Opened parachutes covered the ceiling with hanging paddle fans, giving it a similar look to Sloppy Joes. It's just like Territaff remembered it. The restaurant was reminiscent of another time and place in his life. He recognized the old wooden bar. The owner must have moved it from the Keys, he thought. He recalled the owner telling him he salvaged it from a hundred-

year-old yacht. Territaff ran his hand over its smooth surface. The wood had a marble-like finish, probably made by a century of oily, rubbing fingers.

Tanya's lifeless eyes lingered on Territaff as he sat on a stool in the middle of the bar. He spun slowly around a few times to absorb the room into his memory. As he completed his third round, he sensed a young server staring at him. He faced her and smiled at her pleasant features.

"May I help you, sir?" she asked, arching an eyebrow.

"Pernod, do you have any?" Territaff said.

"Yes, but we don't get many requests for it." The server gave Territaff a closer look. "Are you European?"

"No, just a tired traveler needing a short break from a tough day."

"And Pernod will do that for you? I can think of better things than that," she laughed.

Territaff liked her warm and friendly manner. He studied the curves of her young, slender body. Her soft, auburn hair and reddish-brown skin accentuated her cheerful brown eyes. He gazed into the server's large eyes. He sensed a strong inner strength within her. Could she be the one? He asked himself.

She felt Territaff's stare. She always had an answer for such looks, but this time, she searched under the counter for a bottle of Pernod.

"How do you like it?" she asked, holding a full bottle up to him.

"In a large glass," he answered, pointing at the oversized wine goblets hanging overhead on wooden racks.

She stretched her long, angular body for a goblet. Territaff caught a glimpse of her shapely buttocks peeking out of the bottom of her short pants, wondering if she was aware of the effect she was having on the male patrons, gathering around

the bar.

“My name is Territaff,” he introduced himself as she filled his goblet. “But my friends call me Terri.”

“I’m Kathy,” she replied, looking up into his eyes.

His eyes attracted her. She studied them with curiosity. They were like two dark orbs shining back at her. She avoided them to take in the rest of his face. She took pride in her keen ability to read people's faces. Her occupation had allowed her to develop the skill over several years of trial and error. Kathy looked closer. His features were subtle, almost indistinct. There were no age lines around his eyes and forehead to guide her. It wasn’t a youthful-looking face. It looked mature but also ageless, perplexing her to near frustration.

Territaff waited for her to conclude her examination before draining his goblet in a few big swallows.

Kathy wrinkled her forehead and asked, “What do you do, Mr. Territaff?”

“Please, call me Terri,” he said, pondering her lovely features. “What I do is a little hard to explain. I guess you could say I’m a diplomatic courier.” He held his goblet up for a refill.

“Sounds fascinating.” Kathy’s puzzled expression changed to one of excited interest as she poured his Pernod. “You must travel a lot.”

“Yes.”

“You’ve traveled around the world, I bet.”

“Oh yes. In a sense, you could say I’ve traveled to many worlds. He smiled and drank a long sip of his Pernod.

“I guess you’ve seen a lot of strange things.”

“Strange and beautiful.”

“I wish I could do that,” Kathy said with a dreamy look.

“Be a diplomat?”

“No. Travel. Get out of this place and see the world.”

“I understand.”

Territaff looked out through the expansive window overlooking the beach. “I don’t know. This doesn’t seem so bad.”

“You think so. Just wait until happy hour really gets going.”

As Kathy was about to leave, Territaff said, “I can tell you a little about some of the places I’ve been if you’re interested.”

“Is that your best pick-up line?”

“You misjudged me. I’m most sincere about that.”

She gave Territaff a sly grin before leaving to serve the ever-increasing number of impatient, thirsty people crowding around the bar.

He followed the homogeneous faces as they came and went. They would mingle and mix, then break into cavorting, intoxicated clusters. The room was filled with bodies pulsating and vibrating with rising sounds and emotions. Territaff had forgotten what an overwhelming aura of want and desire a cramped gathering of humanity generated. He reflected on them as they spoke, drank, and solicited for an evening full of promises never to be kept.

“Care for another?” Kathy asked as her rounds brought her back to Territaff.

“I thought you would never return, leaving me here to decay into a sober cloud of thirsty dust.”

“Really? Oh, you poor soul, let me quench your thirst, but drink a little slower. It’s happy hour.” She refilled his goblet, then resumed her dance around the bar.

Territaff continued to observe with interest, remembering what it was like to be human. An odd-looking, diminutive man walked in and took a seat that opened across the bar from Territaff. Their eyes fixed on one another for a long moment until Kathy approached the man and asked what he was

drinking. He ordered mineral water.

The man sat upright on his stool, staring outward through oversized, round-rimmed glasses. His watery blue eyes were cold and almost lifeless, except for the occasional blink. He gave Territaff a faint smile as Kathy served him his mineral water. He took a thirsty gulp and then turned his attention to Kathy.

Territaff sensed the small man's energy and became concerned for her. He finished his Pernod and held the empty goblet to get her attention.

She came right over to him and whispered, "There's something creepy about that guy."

"Yeah. I got the same vibe when he sat down. Do you know him?"

"No. I'd never seen him before, and I hope he leaves soon."

She cleared off empty beer bottles and glasses from the bar.

Territaff glanced at the man and caught him staring fixedly at him. *Curious*, Territaff became intrigued with the odd little man and went to speak to him. As he approached, the customer sitting to the right of the small man got up and gave his seat to Territaff. The now-standing man gave Territaff a confused look. He was about to say something, but instead took a long swallow of his beer and resumed his conversation with his still-seated friend. He overheard the man's friend asking why he had left his seat. The confused customer shrugged as they looked at Territaff. Territaff gave him an appreciative nod as he took his stool, then leaned close to the man with the oversized glasses.

"Do I know you?" Territaff asked.

"Yes," the man whispered, narrowing his cold, probing eyes.

Territaff considered him, searching within his memory for who he was. When nothing came to mind, he telepathically transmitted to the ship, *“Cuz, do a quick scan of the man seated to my right.”*

Cuz responded with shock, *“It’s Zohleemay.”*

Well, hello, old nemesis, Territaff thinks with a slow smile. “Nice cover, Zoh,” he said as Kathy brought him another Pernod. She glances at the creepy guy and says to Territaff, “Here, you look like you need this.”

After Kathy left, Zohleemay leaned closer to Territaff and said, “I guess the rumor of your resurrection was accurate.” He turns his thin lips into a mocking smile and sips his mineral water. “I must admit that the Venubians are skillful engineers,” he added, “but they’re weak fools and will soon become part of the new order.”

“You have developed some new morphing techniques and improved speech. Impressive.”

“If you want to be impressed, ask your friend,” he paused, “Cuz, to sweep the room.”

Territaff transmitted the request to Cuz.

“There are four morphed Zenti within the crowds around the bar. Transmitting their identities and locations.” Cuz’s transmission had a sense of concern and surprise. *“Terri, their ability to morph is far beyond anything we’ve encountered. Please use great care in executing your next move.”*

“So, what now, Zoh?” Territaff asked.

Intense and unsettling emotions ran through Kathy. She looked up from the drinks she was mixing and glanced at the room. Territaff, seated next to the creepy little man, caught her eye. She focused on the spooky man for a moment. He had a disquieting aura about him. She glanced at Territaff and sensed that his energy was powerful and different.

I can feel you, she whispered, looking away from Territaff. The thought ran a shudder through her. She bit her lower lip in thought. Kathy gets two shot glasses and fills them with Tequila. She kept the shots low while walking to the two men, who looked like they were about to come to blows, and said, "We're having a special on Donatello Tequila." These are on the house." She placed the two large shot glasses in front of them.

Territaff welcomed her distraction and said, "Don't mind if I do. " He tilted it to Kathy, then downed the drink quickly and slapped the empty glass on the bar. Very good." He looked at Zoh, who appeared annoyed and said, "That's most impolite not taking a free round. You're insulting this attractive lady. Live a little and have a shot." Territaff slapped the stiffly seated man on the back and grinned.

Zohleemay gave him a glaring look and regarded the shot glass before taking it to his lips and allowing the clear liquid to flow down his gullet. He placed the glass down, gave Territaff a crooked grin, and said, "Not exactly Klaxon brandy wine, but not bad."

"Would you like another?" Territaff said, looking at the two morphed Zenti, watching their every move. "Your companions look nervous, Zoh. Why are they so antsy? I hope they're not expecting something stupid?"

Zohleemay glimpsed their way. "They'll do nothing unless I tell them to."

"So, if I were to pull out a gun and shoot you in the head, what would they do?"

With a mirthless grin, he said, "They'll kill you along with everybody else in this establishment."

"Why don't we go out to the beach and have a little chat?"

Zohleemay stood. The two Zenti closest to him also got up.

He stopped them with a glaring look, then gestured for the other two morphed Zenti to stay put.

Kathy spied Territaff walking out of the beach entrance with the weird little man. They stopped at the water's edge and stared out into the distance. It was a clear night, and the full moon's silvery glow reflected on the smooth water, giving the scene ironic tranquility. The two men stood close to each other. Their faces reflected the soft glow of moonlight and the dull orange lights from the nearby pier.

Zohleemay took in a deep breath of salty ocean air. His slight frame stood upright as Territaff hovered over him like a giant.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Territaff said.

"This planet has many wonderful resources. More than its inhabitants realize."

"They're learning and growing, and I'll do everything I can to protect them." Territaff's expression changed into an angry sneer as he stared into Zohleemay's smug face.

"You can do nothing to protect your people," Zohleemay said. "I suggest you run while you can. Because the next time we meet, I'll kill you. And this time, Phillip, it will be permanent."

"The name is Territaff. You killed Phillip Mann—remember?"

"What's in a name?" He paused before hissing out, "Territaff? Earthman." He arched a thin eyebrow and curled his mouth into an ironic smile. "How appropriate. They named you for what you are. A lowly Earthman."

"I wouldn't be so confident. These are resilient people who are not as helpless as you believe. But then, your overconfidence has always been your greatest weakness. They'll prevail. Like the Venubians, Klaxons, Kaydens, and

most other worlds, you've tried to conquer and failed. Regardless of what you do. We'll prevail."

Zohleemay turned his bulbous eyes up at him and said, "You've no idea of the forces at work here. We're no longer alone, and you're unprepared for the reign of power, which is about to crush this isolated little pebble of a planet. Everything you know and love will soon be laid to waste, and I want you to see it happen before I kill you."

Territaff grabbed him by the throat, pulling him up close to his face. Their eyes became fixed. Territaff struggled to restrain the rising hatred he had for the gasping, wiry, grotesque within his grip.

"I should snap your neck like a twig and end you now—I want to...."

"Put 'im down," a scratchy-sounding voice shouted behind Territaff.

Territaff turned toward the nervous-looking man, who was holding a small, handheld pulse laser aimed at him. He smiled at seeing the Zenti from the bar joined by the other three.

"I admire your new morphing technology," Territaff said, studying the now-armed group of Zenti that had gathered around him. Reluctantly, he released his grip on Zohleemay, letting him fall hard to the sandy beach. He studied the anxious-looking group for a moment. None of them was taller than 1.5 meters. While there were distinct differences in their overall facial features, they all appeared similar in terms of size and appearance. Dressed in dark-colored suits, white shirts, and thin, solid-colored ties, they looked like throwbacks to 1970s business attire. Territaff realized that the weapon being held on him was the same type that killed Tanya.

"You killed her," he said in a low, angry growl as he faced

Zohleemay. “Why? She was no threat to you.”

“She foolishly got in our way. So, we eliminated her. Besides, she served her purpose—she led us to you.”

Territaff turned and studied the small group of morphed Zenti, who were all looking at him with the same wide-eyed stares.

“You’re all so beautifully dressed that I almost hate to mess you up,” he said, then grabbed two by their collars in each hand and held them tight.

“Now, drop your weapons like good little Zenti,” Territaff ordered through clenched teeth. Their weapons fell to the sand as the aliens hissed and gasped. He pulled them up closer to his face before slamming their heads together, then flung them like rag dolls into the rushing surf.

Zohleemay regarded his struggling men for a moment before snarling at Territaff.

“Go. Run,” he said in a throaty hiss. “Save yourself while you can, but you can’t hide. I will have you and your homeworld. Your time is all but gone, Territaff.”

A thick overcast of clouds blocked out the moon, creating a dismal, shadowy darkness. A sudden flash of intense, white light appeared for a moment, then dissipated in a thin veil that vanished. All the Zenti disappeared. Territaff stood still, almost mesmerized by the light, pondering the phenomenon in confusion.

“Cuz,” Territaff transmitted, “*do a quick scan of the area.*”

“Interesting. I’m reading the same energy signature as before. The pattern is familiar, but I don’t have enough data to identify it definitively.”

“Can you speculate?”

“I can say with some certainty that the phenomenon exhibits characteristics of a negative energy wave but of an

unknown type and origin.”

“Are you implying that the Zenti somehow developed this energy?”

“At this juncture, I can’t imply anything.”

“Good point, Cuz.”

Territaff stared out at the moonlit sea, pondering the dark ramifications of the phenomenon he had witnessed. He looked up at the night sky and mumbled, “We’re in some deep shit now.”

He let out a long, heavy sigh before going back to the bar. Territaff saw Kathy walk in ahead of him. *Oh, Kathy, you saw something you shouldn’t have*, Territaff frowned. *Now, what should I do about it?* It only took a moment, and he smiled inwardly at the thought. *Well, my dear, you’ve unwittingly enlisted in my private little army.*

