

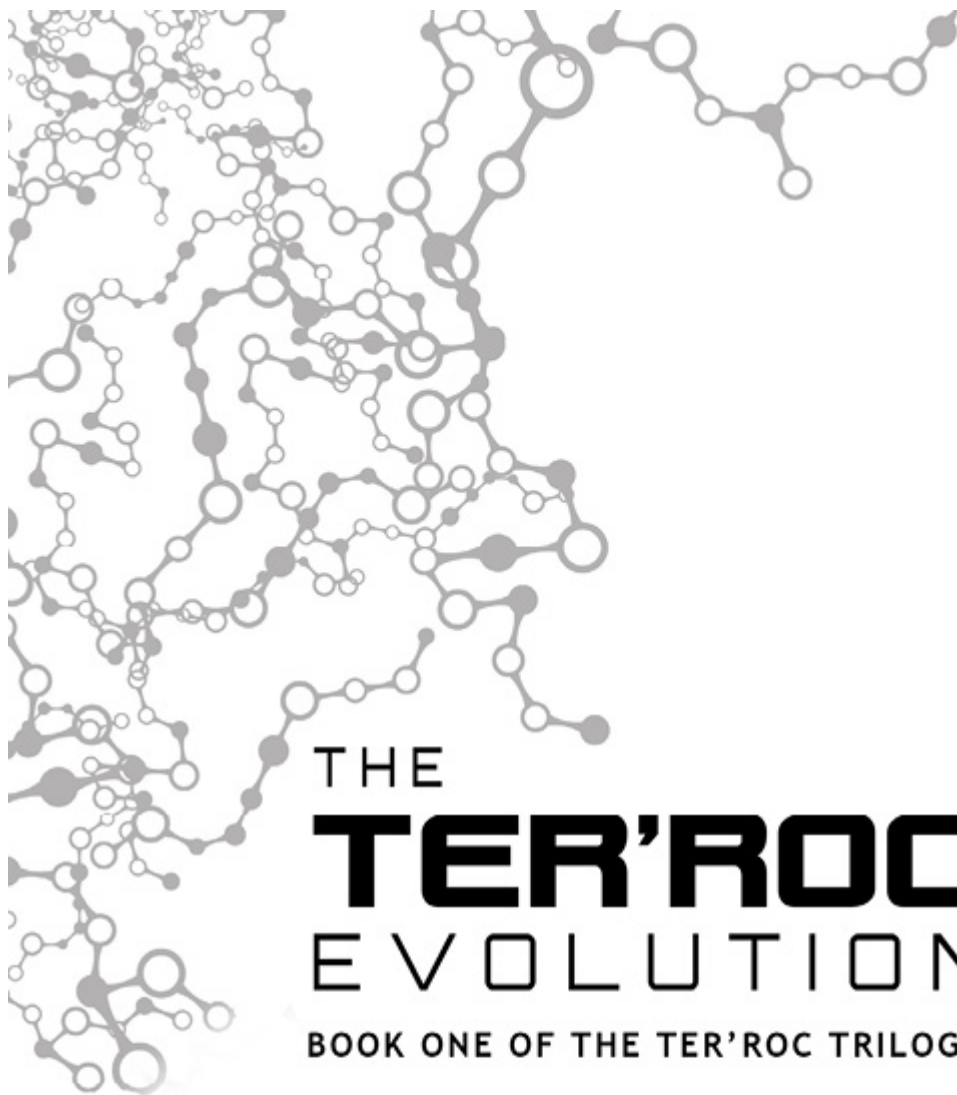
CAN EARTH SURVIVE WHEN WORLDS COLLIDE?

THE TER'ROC EVOLUTION

BOOK ONE OF THE TER'ROC TRILOGY

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THE
TER'ROC
EVOLUTION
BOOK ONE OF THE TER'ROC TRILOGY



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THE TER'ROC EVOLUTION

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For my grandfather,
who has always supported me, believed in me,
and has always shown me that the value of a man is not
his material possessions but instead those that
he has brought close to his heart.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Historians estimate our sun has been aflame for the last five billion years. This, of course, is just an educated speculation, but we believe this to be a relatively accurate guess. What most of us do not know about is the recorded history that took place over three billion years after the formation of the sun and the planets. A recorded history that goes back two billion years from now. A chronicled history that continues even to this day, to this minute, right under our nose. As strange and bizarre as this history may be, it has existed many millions of years before the very DNA in your cells was even a future consequence of your potential. So what right do you or I have to judge how it played out? After all, it's history, or so I am told.

Through the woods they pass at last
Collecting souls to protect the past
They pause a moment to hear your cries
Approaching you slowly to cover your eyes
— *The Book of Untamed Secrets* —

THE
TER'ROC
EVOLUTION



PROLOGUE

8304 BC—Known today as Wales, United Kingdom

Eògan had been working for the past four days on the foundation for his new hut that would soon house his young family. He was pounding in a stone so that it fit just right in the wall. His father, Faolan, was helping him carry stones from the nearby field to the building site and had gone off to retrieve some more. Eògan looked up to where he expected his father to be returning, carrying a few more stones in his makeshift sling. He was surprised to see another man coming toward him that he didn't recognize. Wiping his hands on the grass, he stood up and walked over to meet the stranger.

"Greetings," said Eògan.

"Good day. I am Colwyn. I am looking for work," the man replied. His accent was thick, strange.

Eògan looked around the site, then looked at Colwyn. “I could use some help working on this foundation. Can’t offer much at the moment except a warm fire and some food.”

“A warm fire and some food would be wonderful.”

The two men and Eògan’s father worked for the rest of the afternoon and into the evening. Come nightfall, the three men were huddled around a fire outside the perimeter of the new fieldstone foundation. Faolan looked at the foundation behind him. “Men, we did good work today.”

“Helping each other is important,” said Colwyn. “It binds us together, enabling us to become better people and understand one another. It also helps with tasks we might not be able to do alone.”

“I agree,” replied Eògan, who looked up from the fire at his newfound help. Colwyn’s eyes were glowing an iridescent blue. Eògan turned around to see if there was a light behind him that might be reflecting off Colwyn’s eyes, but there was not. “Colwyn, your eyes...are glowing.”

“Yes, that tends to happen at night,” he replied calmly.

Eògan looked at his father, confused, and cocked an eyebrow. “Why?” he asked.

“Do you believe we are alone here? Do you suppose there might be something out there other than just us?” He pointed to the stars.

Eògan looked at his father and then at Colwyn, saying, “I believe that the stars are the gods watching us. If there were others, would *you* know anything about it?”

“I can teach you a great many things if you want to learn,” Colwyn replied, poking at the fire, again evading Eògan’s question.

A moment of silence passed. The fire crackled and thick smoke wafted in Colwyn’s direction. Finally, Eògan said, “I would like to learn whatever you can teach.”

“As would I,” said Faolan.

The two men listened to Colwyn tell of the mind's ability to control objects, explaining how an ancient people had been around since the dawn of time that his people called "The Bereshit" and how the human existence, the mortal body, was just an illusion. Colwyn taught them the importance of the stars to tell the days of the seasons and how the power of the sun could be harnessed to do great things.

4729 BC—Olmec nation, known today as the Tabasco region, Mexico

Carrying over another two stones to the three men who were working on the small building, Tototl looked at Bada, who was studying a drawing of the building. Its alignment was laid out so that as the sun rose, two holes in the building's wall would allow a beam of light to travel down the wall, indicating the time of day. There was also a small zenith tube in the top of the structure that allowed the sun to show a spot on the floor at exactly half day. The structure was being built by the group to help track time and the passage of the seasons.

Tototl wanted to learn everything he could from Bada, who had come from a faraway land to teach his people about the stars and their importance for farming. Tototl had sat next to Bada by the fire the evening before as he explained to Tototl how the stars were actually huge balls of fire and that huge balls of rock called planets floated around them, rotating as they did. He explained that the sun that warmed the earth during the day was actually a star and that they were on a planet that went around it. Bada went on to explain that they could use those stars and planets to help track their own position and even determine planting times around them. He explained that one day soon Tototl would be responsible for tracking the days and seasons for his people and further explained that in the not-so-distant future, mankind would learn to use the sun to light their homes and feed their hungry.

2856 BC—Known today as the United Kingdom

The caravan proceeded slowly over the rolling hills of the large British isle and across the countryside that would one day be called the Preseli Hills. There were six horses leading the caravan. Two trailing horses pulled a large cart with solid wood wheels that Iodocus sat upon with his co-bodagh, Seisyll. They were both in a hypnotic state, focusing on the massive stone that floated behind the cart. Each took turns in about thirty-minute shifts, concentrating on the levitation of the forty-foot slab. *Light as a feather, bright as a star*, Iodocus thought in a half trance, seeing not a massive stone floating behind them, but rather a loose feather that he kept moving in his mind from side to side to catch the wind just right and keep it afloat as it followed the caravan. There were five other similar caravans following suit across the hills toward the site of the ancient circle.

Iodocus was one of seventy from three different tribes who had been taught the old ways passed down through ancient times through the knowledge of the fathers. The bodaghs had been taught that the power of the mind could move objects much larger than anything a normal man could move. It took years of training and mental discipline to become a master bodagh, and as such, those who could use it were highly revered.

The teams were part of a collective group that followed the path laid out by their families, who believed that long ago they were given instructions to build a structure that would one day send a message to the heavens. Detailed drawings on stone tablets had been kept for hundreds of years in the families and laid out how stones were to be cut, what materials they must be made from and how they must be aligned with the stars. Although Iodocus and his brethren did not completely understand the full breadth of their project, it was an honor to serve on it and help to build it to its completion. Only the high priests of each village knew the full plan for the circle of stones that

would be constructed in what would one day be Wiltshire, England and how it would connect with the already old structure in Sí an Bhrú in the future land of Ireland. The structure in Sí an Bhrú had been built almost five hundred years before.

There was very little left of the timber circle that had been created many generations ago, where Iodocus was to place the new stones. They did not know back then that the wooden circle would both rot and fail to truly focus the bodagh energy. So for two generations Iodocus's tribe had searched with that of the two neighboring peoples to find stones that would work for the structure, and only in these western shores had they been able to find them. It was decided that the teams would cut out the massive stones using groups comprising hundreds of workers while seventy people in the caravans transported the stones to the circle where they would once again be cut to make many more stones before finally being maneuvered into place.

2698 BC—China, known today as the Henan Province

Tian was dressed in his summer robe and sat upon a log outside his home. He had finally finished working on the garden he had tended for the last four hours. Having enough time to relax, he pulled out his flute and began working on a song he had been writing for the last five months. Tian was a simple farmer who found peace in his garden and his flute, things that didn't require him to worry about his crops or his daily stress. Times were tough in his village and beyond. Fighting to protect one's land was a way of life.

He had been playing his flute for twenty minutes when he saw a bright flash, so bright he dropped his flute and shielded his eyes with his hand. Completely silent, the light faded away, and he saw a man dressed in yellow robes walking toward him. Tian stood up and stumbled back, tripping over his top step and falling onto his porch. He pushed himself farther back with his hands, trying to pull away from the strange man who had appeared about

two hundred feet away. Tian finally stood up to look at the man as he glided over to him, stopping about five feet from his front steps. The man looked normal enough, but his robe made of yellow-and-silver silk embellished with small black dragons was magnificent and intimidating.

“Who are you?” Tian asked in fear.

“I am Huang-Di. I have come to unite your people,” the man said.

2603 BC—Egypt

The intense Egyptian sun beat down upon the parched sand. A lone buzzard circled in the distance, no doubt finding a rare meal in this unforgiving, scorched land. Kanofer sat on the veranda in the sliver of shade it provided. He was looking at a drawing he had been working on for the pharaoh. His son sat beside him playing a game that his mother had taught him with a stone ball and a cup. The boy continued to push the ball across the decorative mat covering the floor, and the ball made a “pop” sound as it entered the cup, eliciting a laugh from the child. Again and again the ball popped into the cup, prompting more laughter.

Finally, his father looked at him, annoyed. “Imhotep, please. I’m trying to work. I must have this drawing done by tomorrow’s meeting.”

“Why are you always drawing?” asked Imhotep.

“Come. Sit up here on my lap and let me show you.”

The boy walked over and sat on his father’s knee. He looked the drawing up, then down.

“Do you know what it is?” asked his father.

“No.”

“See this? This is a structure that has four triangles of walls coming to a point. It’s called a pyramid. This is important in the evolution of our people because it helps us focus. I am attempting to show the pharaoh how the rays

of the sun can be used to harness energy. Though the pharaoh's visions are a bit skewed, he believes that a pyramid will help guide his eternal soul to Ra."

"What is Ra?"

"Ra is the word our people have given to what they believe is the God of the Sun. In truth, Ra is the ishkan, a plane of existence beyond this one where we live with one another after we die. Do you see the sharp angles? If built from the right materials, they can help to focus our energy to achieve more than it would be capable of normally. There is a pattern here, but it is something that I will most likely not be able to complete in my lifetime."

Kanofer paused and then pointed to a series of buildings on the drawing.

"Do you see these other pyramids? If perfectly aligned to these stars, they will help to enhance the ability of the ishkan that are buried far below and perhaps one day protect us."

Imhotep studied the drawing and pointed to a very small building. "What is that?"

"That is where we are now—the palace."

"Then those buildings, um...pyramids must be huge!" The child looked out over the plains of sand. He tried to imagine enormous pyramids standing in the distance but found it hard to visualize.

"How could we build something that big?" he asked his father.

"Ah, that is where a special gift comes in that few people know about. Do you know that the energy I spoke to you about—if we use our minds in a very special way, utilizing special tools, we can actually move stones, stones much larger than anything you can imagine, simply by pushing them with your mind. It's called telekinesis. Those that are trained to use this energy are called bodaghs. Our minds are capable of much more than most people think. However, my little Imhotep, this is a secret known only to a few, and you must help me *keep* that secret. Can you do that?"

"Yes, Father. I promise."

1825 BC—Haran, known today as southern Turkey

Abraham stood staring into the distance. The voice he had heard but not seen called to him. *“Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father’s house, unto a land that I will shew thee: And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing: And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed.”*

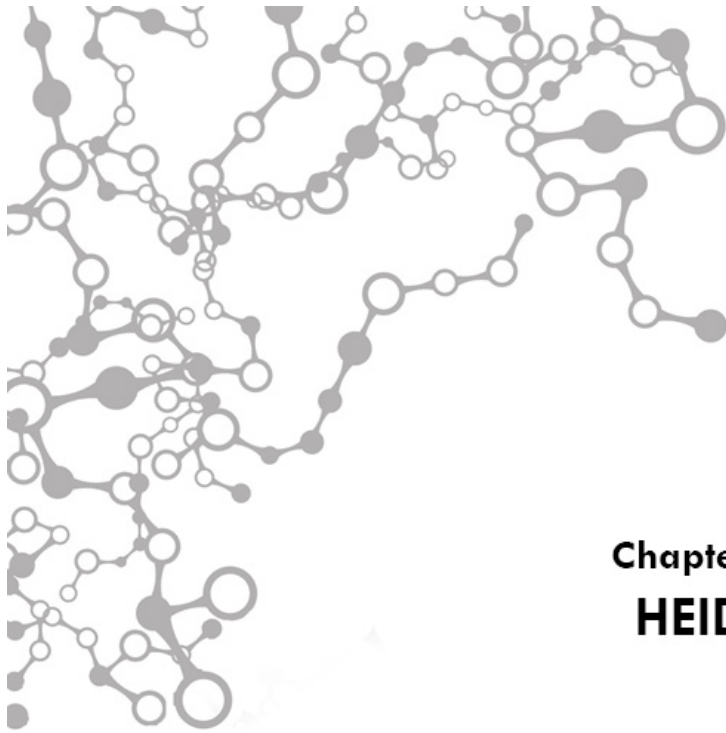
“Look to your left upon the hill.” Abraham looked left at the hill that was before him. He saw nothing of consequence. *“Do you see that rock that lies upon it?”*

Abraham saw a black stone approximately three feet in diameter that sat near a bush. “Yes,” he called to the voice.

“That black stone is from a land far away. In the future, it will help save your nation and many other nations. Take it with you to your new land and protect it well.”



Part One
THE AWAKENING



Chapter 1

HEIDI

In the near future, September 20, 3:14 a.m.
Swampscott, Massachusetts, USA

Sleep was a leviathan, a listless, massive creature that in recent months Heidi never found, for when sleep did finally come to her, the dreams haunted her and shattered her daily sense of reality. Once again, she awoke with a foreboding premonition that the dream was not merely a figment of her mind's creation but rather another reality just as tangible as her own, and in her half-woken state, she swam in it, still lingering under its grasp, unable to convince her subconscious that it was nothing more than an illusion.

In this nightmare, Heidi once again stood in the same cool, dark, cavernous room where she had stood in countless dreams, unable to see anything but the concrete floor in a ten-foot radius around her. Hanging unmoving from a single cord was a dim, pan-shaped light shining down with

dust coalescing in the beam, creating the illusion that the beam of light was not merely photons but might in fact be a solid force field that held her in its grasp.

She looked down at the polished concrete floor and saw that she was naked, explaining the chill that she felt upon her young flesh. Goose bumps pimpled her legs and arms. Being nude was not something new to these dreams. In fact, nearly every time she had dreamed of the warehouse (as she called it), she was without clothing, and she was always in a dark room with either a single light or no light at all. This feeling of knowing it wasn't real should have made it easier to cast her fear aside, but it did not.

"Hello?" she yelled, her voice falling short beyond the light. The tall, thin fourteen-year-old knew that even if she yelled at the top of her lungs, she would never hear an echo back. It was as if she stood within a closet encased in fabric that halted the sound waves before they got any momentum at all.

With the lack of echo, it was difficult to tell if she was in a small room or a giant warehouse. Looking upward, she strained her eyes but could only make out the first two feet of the white cord from which the light hung; she could see no more. She tried to move her feet and was unable to, feeling pain when she attempted it, her skin tugging as if her feet had been glued to the smooth concrete. Heidi had a vision of herself from high above, a naked girl with no covering but her long blonde hair in a giant room with ceilings so high they had their own weather pattern.

The familiar, deleterious odor filled her nostrils as it had so many times before. The smell of death and rotting as if time itself decayed just out of view. She had smelled a stench like it before, last spring when her mother had left trash sitting out on the porch that held old, long-expired chicken breasts. Walking within ten feet of the trash bag was enough to knock a person off their feet. She pinched her nose shut, the putrid smell stinging her nostrils, but was then offended by a foul taste which forced her to breathe through her nose again.

Heidi knew exactly what the odor meant—it meant that “it” would be appearing within a few seconds. This was not the “It” of Stephen King’s novel. No, Heidi would gladly have traded an insane human-eating clown for the horrors that had presented themselves in this room. At least you could see Pennywise, scary or not. Nothing floated here except the dust in the light. Perhaps “it” was even watching her as she stood here, vulnerable and alone. No sooner had this thought passed through her mind than a thin, gaunt gray appendage came into the light. It was almost seven feet tall with long sinewy legs, a disproportionally large head, and dark veins running along its gray skin. As it stepped forward, the appearance of its body shocked her. She tried to withdraw from it, but of course she could not move. With the flats of her feet firmly adhered to the floor, she could not even kneel or cower. She was forced to stand, naked, exposed and vulnerable, blocking her face with her arm in fear.

Heidi had seen the creature many times before, but in previous encounters it never looked as grotesque as it did now. Its long arms and convex chest were now riddled with sores that oozed as pus flowed out of them, and its neck, far too thin to hold the large head sitting upon it, was bent at an impossible angle as if its neck were jointed with an elbow. It had two large, mirrorlike eyes and two smaller eyes above them that glowed blue. One of the mirrored eyes was milky as if it had been rotting in a still pond, while the rest of its skin was flaking off in tiny bits, dropping to the floor as the creature stumbled toward her. She needed to run, needed to move, but was unable.

The creature’s small mouth moved strangely as it spoke in a raspy, guttural voice, rows of razor-sharp teeth covered in a blackish-green film. It spoke in slow, methodical speech. “Heidi. We are coming for you. Do not resist us or you shall all die.” It reached a rotting, bony finger toward her, coming within inches of her soft skin. She knew that if it touched her, she also would begin to rot and disintegrate just as the creature appeared to be.



Chapter 2

DREAMS

Snapped awake in her bed, Heidi bolted upright, screaming as the words “you shall all die” echoed in her mind repeatedly. Her blonde hair was damp with sweat, her skin cold and clammy. She screamed until her mind suddenly realized that she was once again in her bedroom, illuminated only by the alarm clock next to her bed. Three pale red numbers proclaimed the ungodly hour of 3:14 a.m. The room should have given her peace, reassurance, but her heart raced and she breathed heavily. Heidi could still smell the unpleasant odor from her dream. She looked around her room, half expecting the creature to come at her from the dark depths of the corner, and Heidi suddenly felt the bony, rotting finger touch her shoulder. She screamed, panicking.

The bedroom door opened abruptly. Her mother stood at the door’s opening and asked urgently, “Heidi? Are you okay?”

Heidi was struggling with something on her bed and whimpering. Her mother hurried to her bed, turned on the night-light and saw Heidi's clamp-on light had fallen onto the bed. Heidi was trying desperately to move it. Her mother sat down beside her and moved the plastic snake light out of the way, then placed a hand on the forehead of her daughter. "Sweetie, you're covered in sweat. Are you okay?"

Heidi's mother, Penny, grabbed her daughter and held her to her chest, hugging her tightly. Eventually, Heidi reciprocated the hug and squeezed tightly. "What happened? Bad dream?"

"The worst."

"What was it about? The creature again?"

Heidi nodded, saying nothing, sobbing.

"Oh, baby," her mother said with a frown, hugging her again. "Why do you keep having these dreams? Were there other people in this one?"

Heidi's words streamed out in one long sentence, "No, just me and that... that...thing, but, Mom, he said I would *die* if I fought him, and I could feel his anger toward me. It was so...real." Tears rolled down her face, and she burst out crying again. "It was *so* real! I don't understand *why* it's doing this to me!"

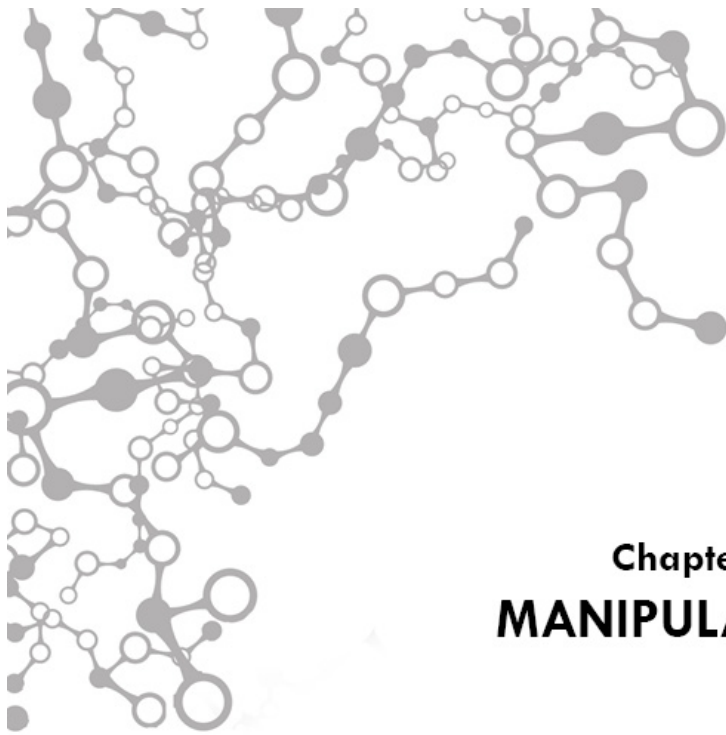
Penny leaned back and looked into her blue eyes, barely perceivable in the darkness despite her daughter being directly in front of her. "Heidi, no one is going to hurt you. I promise. It's just a dream—a horrible dream—but just a dream."

"But the dream seems so real every time I have it." Her voice was breaking. Penny reached over and clamped the reading lamp back onto the bed, turning it on.

Penny was deeply concerned about her daughter. Heidi had been having repeating dreams for the last three months but had only dreamed of the creature for the last two. The first month, the dreams had been odd but nonthreatening; then the second month, the creature showed up. Now three

months into the dreams, the creature had grown angry and often threatened or tortured Heidi and those with her. She had seen three other people in her dreams, an old Chinese man who was kind toward her, almost fatherly, a woman with a British accent and a young boy who never spoke but always had red marks at the center of his hands, top and bottom. Every time Heidi had the nightmares, she told her mother in detail what had taken place in hopes that telling her might erase the dream from her memory the following day.

This plan never worked, but the telling of the dream had become something of a ritual, and Penny was glad that her daughter confided in her. As of late, the two frequently butted heads during the day, but in the dark solitude of the night, mother and daughter were once again close—loving, confiding and gentle. Strangely, these late-night terrors allowed them both to rediscover something they had lost, a closeness that can only be felt between a parent and child.



Chapter 3

MANIPULATIONS

Kalarian consulted his notebook. “These tactics are proving to be ineffective. The dream incursions have yet to cause any breakdowns among the group. We are risking the chance that they will begin interacting with one another.”

“We have already initiated Agenda 21, and Jade Helm is complete. There is dissension growing in the populace, and this planet has never been more divided. The children are being corrupted with the new education strategies. Led astray from what will protect them. We have political unrest. We could not be more on track,” Yultavar replied.

“Do not be a fool! These are long-term initiatives meant to break down their culture on a global scale. This all takes time. We need to move forward with more immediate stopgaps, prevent the defense, prevent the others from interfering with the eradication of these vermin. We need to reclaim our planet!”

And yet...there was a very small part of him that had grown accustomed to these creatures. A sliver, a crack deep in his mind that could visualize a peace between all four species.

Just as quickly as it entered his mind, he dismissed it as he always did.

"I know we have discussed this many times, but is there any chance we can try approaching and discussing this with the ter'roc? Explain the truth?"

"There can be no discussions. The humans, the ter'roc and the ishkan are all interconnected. If we show our hand to one, we show our hand to all of them and we lose the advantage. This is our planet, not theirs. We must reclaim what is rightfully ours. We must prepare for the return, and we must exterminate that which does not belong."

There was a long pause between the two.

"Agreed."

"Agreed. We have consensus."

"We will move to the next stage. Time is limited, and there is much to accomplish."



Chapter 4 **DISCOVERY**

September 20, 11:05 a.m.
Swampscott, Massachusetts, USA

Brisk fall air filled Heidi's lungs as she walked along the railroad tracks adjacent to the Rockport/Newburyport commuter rail line. She was trying to clear her head, as sleep was clearly not helping her mental state any. Heidi often perused the gravel mound along the tracks to cleanse her mind, discovering all sorts of interesting objects. Her finds included unique colored bottles and old damaged cell phones. She had once even found a broken laptop lying among the tracks.

Heidi always ducked out of sight when trains approached, not wanting to be seen, because of course she was not technically allowed to walk the tracks. She enjoyed her solitary adventures, and to a tomboy loner of fourteen, the railroad tracks were a treasure trove, full of fascinating life trivia. This was a

quiet Saturday, and there weren't many trains traveling over the weekend, so she wasn't particularly concerned with encountering one. Heidi kicked a pile of dirt with her sneaker near the gravel edge, sending a plume of dry dust in the air and dirt cascading into the high grass.

Much could be discovered about people and society by the things they left behind—a beer bottle here left by a twenty-something college boy, upset with decisions he had made, a thumb drive there containing a PowerPoint presentation for a new project. Today Heidi was on a quest for blue glass. Blue glass was rare—she had found it just once along the tracks and only a small amount. The MBTA had been replacing the older railroad ties recently along the section of track from the Swampscott station to Salem. They were turning over large sections of dirt and gravel in the process, and she was hoping to get lucky. Staring at some of the overturned railroad ties and seeing a few worms crawling among the freshly exposed ground, she found her mind drifting back to those haunting dreams, trying to make sense of them, turning over the images in her head, analyzing the alien creature she had seen so many times. Everything in the dreams had seemed so real, lucid.

Heidi wandered along the east side of the tracks near the embankment, jumping over each old tie that had been replaced by a newer one. She never walked in between the tracks. Her father once told her of a child who had lost his legs because he hadn't heard a train coming. The thought of such a danger and the pain that boy must have experienced prevented her from venturing between the rails.

Heidi heard an air horn far down the line toward Salem. Moments later, the tracks sang with the familiar high-pitched vibration of an approaching train. Looking around for somewhere to conceal herself, she spotted a concrete opening to a storm drain about three feet in diameter. She ducked into the opening and saw that the concrete turned to corrugated metal only a few feet in. She peered farther into the tunnel, apprehensive of the darkness that lay beyond.

She could see only fifteen or twenty feet into it, but had a sense of depth beyond what she could see—that dark-felt presence of the unknown. *Don't be stupid. It's only a drain from the streets dumping stuff out here—there's nothing in there to be afraid of.* Still, she had to admit she felt *something*—some sort of presence from deep within the culvert. *An animal? Another person hiding so deep I can't see them? A deranged clown with big fangs?* Her mental image of Pennywise popped back into her head and she shivered.

The train suddenly blasted by the opening about six feet away. The speeding train felt like a menacing, angry snake weaving its way through the towns, gobbling up bystanders as it wound its way down the north shore toward Boston. Heidi fought off the vision of the injured boy lying trapped under the massive steel wheels of the railroad cars. Given the fact that the train was only five cars long and traveling at sixty miles per hour, it only took seconds for it to roar past. When it did, the stillness left behind was nearly as unnerving as the screaming beast itself.

The silence was broken abruptly by a deep moan. For a moment, she thought it might be another train approaching, but then realized the sound was actually coming from the dark culvert in which she was sitting. Heidi heard a scraping sound, like the claws of a dog making its way across a wood floor.

Scratch, scratch, tap, tap, scratch.

Her heartbeat quickened for fear that whatever was creating the sound within the culvert would blast out at her like that giant space worm in *Star Wars* that had almost eaten the Millennium Falcon. Memories of the previous night's dream surfaced, and Heidi leaped from the culvert and dropped back ten feet, her heart racing and her mind conjuring a multitude of horrific images, most of which had gained substance in movies.

Scratch, scratch, tap, tap, scratch.

The sound echoed from the culvert as if projected from a megaphone. Heidi peeked around the corner of the concrete opening, listening and

concentrating, attempting to identify whatever it was. *It's just a raccoon or some other animal, stupid...but a raccoon doesn't moan.* She shook her head, attempting to cast aside her crazy thoughts.

Heidi's cell phone rang, reverberating "Halo" by Beyoncé down the culvert. She jumped, startled by the sound, and reached down to hit the volume button, silencing the call, fumbling. When she looked at the screen it read *Home. Seriously?* Stepping away from the opening, but never taking her eyes from it, she answered her phone with a whispered and clearly annoyed, "Hi, Mom."

"Heidi? I need you to come home for a bit. Lunch will be ready soon."

Her mother always had lousy timing. "Can't come home now. On my way to Alaska."

"Heidi, stop it," replied her mother impatiently.

"Whoa—there's a caribou!" Heidi made a snorting noise. "Seriously, Mom, gotta run. This angry male is not happy with me talking on the phone."

"Heidi, cut it out," her mother said sternly.

Heidi gave in. "Okay, fine," she said, making no effort to hide her annoyance. "I'll be home in ten minutes."

"Don't dawdle, Heidi—I'll be waiting for you." Her mother hung up abruptly, not wanting to hear another word of protest from her reluctant teenage daughter.

Heidi paused briefly, looking back behind her into the culvert. No strange noise, no sign of anything unusual. She decided to return after lunch and investigate. Next time, however, she would be better prepared.

During the run home, Heidi daydreamed about what it might be like down inside the small tunnel and worked hard to squelch any pervasively scary visions of what could be down there. She envisioned dark, meandering caves and other intriguing structures. Her creative imaginings were enough to

help the time pass quickly and kept her mind off the darker side of her imagination.

Heidi crossed Essex Street, making her way up the hill behind the Swampscott water tower toward home. She opened the front door and was met by the aroma of hot grilled cheese sandwiches with tomatoes, bacon and onion. *Yum*. She was instantly hungry.



Following lunch, Heidi walked upstairs to her room and grabbed her backpack, dumping out school folders and books onto her bed. In their place, she put a flashlight, some batteries, granola bars, a bottle of water and her digital camera. She checked her cell phone—a solid charge at 90 percent. *Should be fine for the rest of the day.*

Heading out, at the last second she grabbed her fleece in the event that it was chilly underground. Heidi contemplated letting her mother and father know where she was going but decided against it; she was fairly certain they wouldn't approve.



Upon her return to the tracks, she stood just shy of the concrete edge near the mouth of the culvert, trying to dredge up enough courage to venture inside once again. She neared the entrance and listened—no sound except the wind.

Heidi grabbed the flashlight out of her bag, a high-intensity LED flashlight, designed for defensive purposes. The light had two modes: bright and blinding. It was designed to either blind an attacker or to be used as a signal. The front of the flashlight had serrated edges for defense that could be shoved into someone's skin to ward them off. Her father had always been fearful someone might attack and hurt her, a worry which she thought unfounded. However, Heidi was tall and attractive—so her parents told her—and must be cautious. Never having cared for girly things like makeup or

clothes, as far as Heidi was concerned, she was just one of the guys. A pair of worn blue jeans, a T-shirt and her Red Sox cap were all she needed.

The bright beam from her flashlight revealed a storm drain culvert going back at least fifty feet and fading off. She climbed up onto the rim of the concrete tunnel opening. It was a dark grayish green from water regularly pouring out, but the remainder of the opening was dry and relatively clean. There were bits of grass, sticks, rotted leaves and stones along the base of the pipe. With Heidi being five foot five, she had to crouch down to fit into the confining three-foot space. The air within felt cool and damp to her skin. She knelt down and ducked, knees bent and walking like a frog, edging her way methodically through the tunnel.

Ten feet into the culvert, her long blonde hair caught on something. She turned carefully and saw her hair looped around some mineral substance that had seeped down through the metal, forming a tiny stalactite.

Heidi grabbed at her hair, pulling it into a bun, and stuck it inside her Red Sox cap. Crawling farther into the tunnel, she was thankful she was thin and lanky. “You’re not lanky, you’re beautiful,” her mother had told her. Yet children at school had referred to her as the “gangling lank,” poking fun at her for being tall, thin and awkward.

After Heidi had maneuvered fifty feet through the tunnel, she turned, looking back toward the entrance. It now seemed far away, a narrow port of light in the distance. In her imaginings, she wondered—when people die and see a tunnel, is *this* what it looks like?

An intersecting flash of fear hit. It occurred to Heidi that if something dangerous hid within the metal tube, she might not be able to move backward quickly enough to exit safely. She stopped, considering this, and changed direction, intending to back into the tunnel while facing back toward the entrance. But it was at least seventy-five feet away now, too far to reach quickly. Again, she turned to look deeper into the tunnel. She opted for facing forward. If she was going to run into something, she wanted to see it

head-on so that she could deal with it rather than being attacked from behind. *It's okay. There's nothing down here. You were probably imagining those sounds earlier. Keep your imagination in check. Chillax!* She knew with near certainty, however, that what she had heard was real.

Twenty more feet. Forty more feet. There was a pale light ahead of her that was growing a little brighter—not much, but a little. Heidi turned off her flashlight, and the pitch blackness swallowed her. Her heart leaped at the darkness, and she looked nervously in both directions. It took a minute or two for her vision to adapt, but she could now see some sort of blue light ahead. There was no sound except a faint drip coming from somewhere undetermined.

Turning her light back on, she continued down the passageway. Another forty feet and she was at the lip of an entrance to a small concrete room. The blue light she had seen was shining through four holes in a manhole cover at the top of the room, and there was a ladder made of rusted rebar that jutted out of the concrete along the left side. The room itself was close to ten feet tall and about four feet square with a drain at the bottom, which explained why the floor was dry. There was a tunnel directly across from her about the same diameter as the one she was in.

Heidi moved over to the ladder and climbed down to floor level. It was a relief to stand up straight again, but she was uncertain what direction to take. She didn't see much point in going out through the manhole, assuming she could even lift the lid, but she was curious where it led.

Heidi climbed up the ladder and listened just below the manhole for several seconds, wanting to be sure that by opening the lid she wouldn't be squished by a car. She heard nothing above but a passing airplane and chirping birds, so she pushed slowly to open it.

Surprised by the weight of the cover, she wondered if something might be lying on top of it. Heidi pushed hard to lift the lid. It lifted only a few inches, but a few inches were all she needed. She could see green grass and a few

tombstones; apparently, her portal led out to a road running through the cemetery. She let the manhole cover close gently and looked at the walls of the small room. She suddenly realized that there were dead, buried bodies only yards from her, and the thought sent chills up her spine.

Moving over on the ladder, she grabbed her flashlight again and pointed it down the long pipe that continued on. Although the light revealed nothing unusual, she couldn't shake the sense that she was being watched. *Come on, let's do this!*

Heidi climbed into the pipe and continued her trek down the tunnel, or rather up. Her whole journey had been a very gradual incline up into the hill that her house sat upon somewhere in the distance. She didn't know what she was looking for but followed her curiosity. *Mom and Dad would kill me if they knew I was down here, but that's exactly what makes it exciting.* Still, she had visions of herself getting stuck or trapped—just how would she explain that to her parents? She pulled her cell phone out of her bag. It read *No Service*. She sighed. *Of course it doesn't have service, you moron—you're underground. Why'd you even bother bringing it with you?* She stowed the phone.

Heidi continued her journey, going deeper. If her bearings were right, she was pretty sure it was leading slowly to the hill approaching the water tower. After a few hundred feet, she heard something—a scratching or a clawing. Heidi paused, looking deeply into the tunnel in front of her, squinting in an attempt to see whatever it was.

Her flashlight illuminated at least fifty feet in front of her, but no movement was detected. Crouched down, she continued waddling, looking downward to avoid any debris falling into her eyes. The farther she ventured, the less she looked in front of her, focusing instead on the less obvious nuances of her tunneled confinement.

Imaginary threats raced through her mind—of water flooding the passageway, drowning her instantly and pushing her body back out to the tracks. She could imagine the police explaining to her mother, “Well, ma'am,

it doesn't make much sense. Her body was run over by the train, but that's not what actually *killed* her—cause of death was drowning. Oh—and she died wearing a backpack full of granola bars and batteries.” Heidi giggled aloud at the ensuing confusion that would surely be caused by the backpack with granola bars and batteries inside. What a combo.

Her laugh echoed up the tube. Then, strangely, she heard a deep, forced laugh echo back. Heidi went rigid. Looking straight ahead, her attention turned keenly focused and the hair stood up on the back of her neck. What was that laughing back at her? *Just an echo of your voice, you idiot.* No, she knew that wasn't the case. There had been a lengthy pause between each laugh, and the second laugh sounded much different from hers.

Still in a crouched position, she stared hard through the darkness. Her beam of light sliced through the jet-black interior. She saw nothing. But what was that blue light up ahead there? She looked more closely, trying to get a read on whatever it was she was seeing. *Probably just another concrete room with light coming in from the manhole.*

Heidi moved slowly, inching her way closer, then froze. She was almost certain she saw eyes. Four of them, pale blue, peering at her through the darkness. *That's absurd.* Her heartbeat quickened, fear pulled itself over her, and she fought the desire to run. She saw two eyes on each side of whatever this was positioned in vertical pairs. They were unblinking and staring in her direction. They disappeared...then reappeared.

She heard an old man's voice say, “*Go away. Leave me alone. I'm not ready to see you.*” But had she really heard his voice or was she just *thinking* she had? It seemed more like a vivid memory than an actual experience.

“Hello?” she called down the tube nervously. Heidi's voice echoed strangely off the metal walls. The shining eyes continued staring in her direction for several seconds, then disappeared. That skittering, scratching noise was moving away from her, and then suddenly it was gone.

Heidi waited a moment, her heart rate quickening. Although she had an awareness of just how trapped she was down here, she wasn't terribly afraid. There was an unusual musty scent to the tunnel, but the air was cool and damp, soothing to her skin, much cooler in contrast to the air outside the tunnel, and it felt penetrating.

Heidi continued moving ahead. The farther she edged into the tunnel, the darker the distance. After a hundred feet or so, the tunnel turned to concrete and became a little smaller. She heard the odd skittering sound again; it conjured up an image of a dog's claws on a stone walkway.

Heidi listened carefully. She heard the old man's voice again, sounding frightened and distant. *"Don't go any further. We are not ready to talk to you,"* she thought it said. Heidi froze. She had visions of a deranged hermit living deep within the recesses of the storm drain. A troll living under a bridge, Gollum living in the caves of Mount Doom. She had heard stories of children being kidnapped, girls being raped or locked away for years in rooms never to be heard from again. It did not take much for her imagination to run wild with visuals that continued to pause her every ten or fifteen feet. But she did not hear the voice anymore. Perhaps she never heard it to begin with? Heidi crawled another sixty feet, thinking she must be at least four or five hundred feet from the entrance to the tunnel by now. Her light dissipated about thirty feet in front of her. She crawled in that direction and saw why.

There was a crack in the side of the concrete tunnel that led into a space off to the left. Heidi paused at the opening and looked in. The crack itself was less than two feet wide, with the surface of the floor dropping off close to two feet into the space. She looked inside and saw a small cavern, perhaps ten feet wide by four feet tall. There was a passageway that led out the back side of the cavern.

"Hello?" she called out. "Is anyone here?" Heidi darted the light back and forth around the small room. Nothing but dirt, rock debris and a little water on the floor.

“Is there anyone here?” she whispered again, her voice quivering. Slipping through the crack, her backpack hooked on an outcropping of the fractured concrete tunnel. Heidi freed the snag and stepped into the room. She had the very strong sensation of another presence nearby, which put her on alert, standing the hair up on her forearms. A chill rippled through her.

The room possessed a dampness and smelled of mildew and mud. She crouched inside the small space, which, at its highest point, was only about four or five feet tall. The walls were solid granite and moist with water. The floor was formed of hard-packed dirt, fairly clean with small stones and rocks along the edges. It was evident to Heidi that the floor had been packed down by years of walking.

Near the entrance to the right, in soil that was loose, Heidi could make out faint footprints. She moved to take a closer look. If they were footprints, they were unlike any she had ever seen before. There were two distinct partial impressions, each long and ending in a point, with two toes on the end. She knelt closer to study them, turning her head sideways at first to determine which way was up, then turning her head back the other way.

“Please. Leave now. We don’t want you here yet. We are not ready,” the old man in her head whispered, sounding as if his voice were coming from back in the tunnel. Her heart was beating fast now, adrenaline coursing through her veins. She slowly took off her backpack and set it down gently, then peeked out through the culvert wall opening into the storm drain. This was no figment of her imagination, but she didn’t hear his voice echo off the walls either, so she wasn’t completely convinced she was really hearing it. Heidi flashed her light, first one way, then the other, but no one was there.

She heard a quiet rustling behind her. Heidi turned around slowly to see two long gray appendages reaching out, tugging at her backpack; to her dismay, it was the creature from her dreams, here in true life before her. It had two large, mirrored eyes and stood staring at her. In mortal terror, she

dropped her flashlight, screaming, and fell to the floor, scrambling backward against the wall with a crab-like motion.

A fierce, high-pitched scream, dampened only slightly by the dirt floor, flew from her mouth and reverberated off the stone walls. In her head, she heard the old man screaming too. Heidi's hands flew to her ears to block out the sound, yet she continued to scream. The creature was also crouched down, but on two thin legs, knees pointed in an impossible direction, bent toward her.

The creature threw its arms over its face in defense. Heidi hid her face, trembling in a ball of fear and horror. Eventually, she peeked out through her hands and stopped screaming, half sobbing. She was breathing heavily, unsure what to make of this thing in front of her, afraid that it would indeed kill her.

It was crouched down, trembling in fear, its gangling arms covering its face, clearly as afraid as she was. Its skin was smooth, gray and nearly transparent, showing dark veins beneath. It had no hair and wore some sort of suit resembling a sweat suit except that it ran all the way from the creature's neck down to its ankles. The body reminded her strangely of Gollum from *The Lord of the Rings*, but the head and chest were far too large. The suit itself was made from a rainbowlike material that shimmered in the beam of her flashlight. She grabbed her flashlight and looked at the creature, then realized that she was pointing the light directly at its eyes and slowly lowered the beam. The creature gradually lessened its trembling and lowered its arms hesitantly. It was in this moment that she realized it was not the same creature that had threatened her. There was something different, something wrong about it that could not connect it to the creature from her dreams. There was also the voice; in her dreams, the creature had a raspy, guttural voice. This creature had spoken to her with the voice of a man, smooth and clean.

The two stared at each other, transfixed by the bizarre encounter. Heidi saw now that the creature did indeed have four eyes: two large, oval saucer-

like eyes and two additional small eyes above the large ones, just like the creature in her dreams. The large ones blinked at a diagonal angle with curiosity, but the smaller eyes didn't blink at all. Strangely, the larger eyes didn't appear to have pupils or irises and the smaller ones lacked the blue light that she had seen in the dreams. Instead, its eyes were like mirrors, showing only the reflection of Heidi, the cavern and the beam of her flashlight. It had no discernible nose, a small mouth and a thin, sinewy neck. Heidi also noted that it appeared quite fragile, unlike the creature in her dreams, which had seemed strong and frightening.

The creature glanced down at her backpack, then back up at her face. It ceased its trembling entirely.

"Do you understand me? Can you talk?" said Heidi cautiously.

Looking at her, the creature blinked once, cocked its head to the side like a dog, and nodded. "*Can you hear me?*" She heard the voice of the old man again, yet she was certain the creature's mouth had not moved.

"That was you—talking to me earlier?" Heidi inquired.

"*Yes. We don't...talk with humans. At least, we have not in a long time.*"

"So why are you now? I mean...I came further into the tunnel because I heard your voice. I wanted to help—" She interrupted herself. "Just what are..." Heidi stopped, afraid she would offend it, then finished with, "I mean *who* are you?"

"*You meant to say what am I?*"

"Well, yes...and who."

"*I am ter'roc. I was assigned to contact you by order of my shev'lar, but I got...scared.*"

"That's your name? Ter'roc?" Then she realized that he had said he was assigned to talk to her. "Assigned? To talk to me? Why?"

"*No—we are the ter'roc.*" Its speech was slow, paced and deliberate. "*You are needed.*"

“We? Who is we?” Heidi questioned, looking nervously around the cavern, expecting more creatures to emerge from the walls. Both said nothing for nearly a minute, but to Heidi, it felt considerably longer.

“We,” the creature said, pointing to itself, “...are ter’roc. I am Sam’loc, third male of the Praethor ishkan. That is my name. I was assigned to make contact with you. We have moved the timeline forward.”

“I’m Heidi, Heidi Kilbourne. Can I just call you Sam’loc? Timeline? What timeline?” she said softly, feeling confused. He looked at her while she waited. Finally, she said softly in drawn-out words, “Right. Sam’loc.” Meeting some underground creature that so closely resembled her fears wasn’t something she had expected when she came down here to explore. A raccoon possibly. Even a badger. Hell—even a colony of rats. But some spindly creature that talked inside her head with large saucer eyes that looked like mirrors? The appearance of the malevolent creature that had threatened her in her dreams? No way. But this creature was different. She sensed a kindness in those mirrored eyes and in his mannerisms, unlike the menacing creature of her nightmares.

Sam’loc’s words in her head broke the silence. *“You wanted to help me?”* His head was cocked to the side in query, but his question sounded more like a statement. Heidi nodded. *“Good. Because your help is exactly why I was assigned to contact you.”*

Wanting to understand what he was talking about but overcome by curiosity, she asked, “Why are you down here?”

“We have been here a very long time,” he answered.

“How long...exactly?” Heidi pushed.

He paused before speaking his thoughts. *“A little more than two hundred thousand years.”*

“Two hundred *thousand* years? Holy shit!” she yelled, red-faced, then quickly followed up apologetically with, “Oh—sorry.”

Sam'loc smiled a thin, tiny smile. He just stared at her with his shining eyes, blinking. *"Profanity, a colorful metaphor,"* he said.

Heidi giggled. "Yeah, colorful."

Something occurred to Heidi. "Wait a minute—you speak *English*," she stated, realizing that the creature understood her words.

"Not exactly. I hear your thoughts and understand. You can hear mine. Although I do understand your spoken words, it is easier to listen to your thoughts."

"But in my head you speak English."

"No. That is how your mind perceives my thoughts."

Now that was some revelation. Heidi had questions, and sensing her questions, Sam'loc responded before she could formulate them in her mind.

"I will talk to you and answer your questions. But you must give me your word that you will not speak to anyone about us...at least not yet."

Heidi was incredulous. *Who the hell am I going to tell? Oh, hi, Dad. Guess what? I found some strange creature in an underground pipe over by the railroad tracks...*

Sam'loc smiled again, which made Heidi grin. "What? Why are you smiling?" she asked, confused.

"Your thoughts are amusing. I do see your point though."

The beam of her flashlight illuminated the dark cavern, creating an eerie light that lit Sam'loc's face from below, making him appear a bit human. "You can hear all my thoughts?" she asked.

"Yes. But not always. I just want to understand you more."

"I always sort of talk to myself in my head. It's how I think things through."

Sam'loc looked down at Heidi's feet and back up at her face in a movement that reminded her of a praying mantis. *"We do not attempt to hide our thoughts. They are...open."*

"You keep saying 'we.' There are more of you?"

"More ter'roc. Yes." He gestured to the back entrance of the cavern. *"Down that corridor. There."*

"I don't see a corridor, just the wall."

"There is an entrance, it is just concealed at the moment."

"How many of you are there?"

Sam'loc blinked from the light bouncing off the floor. He was either trying to put his thoughts together or debating if he should share what he was thinking.

"There are many in our ishkan."

"Ishkan? What's an ishkan?"

"It is our home. Our...spaceship?"

"Aliens? Living under Swampscott?" she replied, disbelieving.

Sam'loc stood stationery for a minute, looking at Heidi, eyes blinking. Then he answered, *"Your species is young. Immature. Some humans have known about us over the years. We have decided from encounters with you over the last thousand years that it is best to limit our communication with humans."*

"Where are you from?"

"Here, but not here."

Heidi found his propensity for riddles frustrating. She pressed him. "Okay—you're either from here or you're not. Now which is it?"

"It is...complicated."

She felt as though he might be patronizing her but wasn't completely sure if it was patronization or an attempt at protecting some hidden information.

"Why are you here then? I mean, if you've hidden from humans all this time, why are you walking out into that tunnel now?"

His tiny mouth became a smile. *"As I said, we need you. We have been planning to open a dialogue with you, but I was personally just not prepared."*

Heidi laughed again because his undersized smile looked so odd.

"How old are you?" asked Heidi.

Sam'loc again thought carefully. *"I am 4,812."*

“You’re kidding me, right? Are there others older than *you*?” Heidi was aghast that anything could live that long.

“Some of the ancients are still here. None of the ones who settled the ishkan are alive, but we carry their memories. Our oldest ancient is a little more than nineteen thousand years old.”

Heidi’s mind was reeling. The idea that she was standing right next to someone—or *something*—who was old enough to have known the ancient Egyptians, Jesus and the Romans was way more than she could accept. She had always been fascinated by history and ancient cultures, and here she was standing in front of someone who had lived through most of the history she knew, if not *all* of it.

Sam’loc stared at Heidi and then asked, “How old are you?”

She cocked her head. “Fourteen.”

Hoping to up the ante, she added, “My great-grandmother lived to be ninety-seven. She just died last year.”

“So very young.”

Sam’loc walked over to her, picked up her backpack and began sorting through it. He discovered a granola bar and lifted it from her pack. Heidi just stood and watched, allowing his curiosity as much latitude as it desired.

“Are you male?” she asked.

“Male. Yes. I am the third.”

“Third? I don’t understand.”

Sam’loc peeled back the wrapper on the granola bar and took a tiny bite. His small jaw chewed methodically, over and over, amusing Heidi.

“Is your food always like this?”

“Um, no. That’s just a granola bar. You know—a snack?”

“A small meal,” he stated, nodding. Still chewing, Sam’loc continued. *“I am the third male.”*

“Third of how many?”

“Four hundred. There can only be four hundred males in each ishkan.”

“I don’t get it. Why?”

Sam’loc tilted his head as if he thought this to be a stupid question. *“Because that is how it is. There are always 400 males and 656 females.”*

“What happens if a male is born and there’s already four hundred?” Heidi asked.

“That does not happen. We choose females. If a male dies, then another male is born.”

“So you don’t have babies often? I mean, if there are only a little over a thousand and your ancients are as old as you say...”

“No. Only when one dies. It is our way.” He nodded slowly. Then he began walking toward the back of the cavern to the hidden rear entrance.

“Wait!” Heidi demanded.

“Come. Follow me. There is no point in staying here in this room.”

Heidi walked hurriedly after Sam’loc and snatched her backpack away from him. He relinquished it willingly, cautious not to touch her. As he walked up to the wall, a section disappeared, revealing a tunnel. They appeared to be in some sort of crack in a solid granite wall reaching up at least ten feet. The deeper down the path they walked, the lower the ceiling became until it reached approximately seven feet.

The tunnel slowly became more structural as they walked on, and the walls became smoother. Heidi looked ahead, trying to figure out how Sam’loc could see where he was going. She saw a blue light leading out ahead of him. She couldn’t determine its origin, but it looked similar to the beam from a flashlight—but he hadn’t been carrying any flashlight.

Not wanting Heidi to fall behind, Sam’loc stopped and turned back toward her, waiting. She was surprised to see that the two eyes higher up on his head were not eyes at all but blue lights of some kind. Heidi was staring at them, and Sam’loc, sensing her curiosity, stepped back toward her. The lights were bright but slowly dimmed as he approached.

"Ocular lights," he said, pointing to the lights above his eyes. *"We are born with them."*

She grinned sheepishly and then laughed. "I have a flashlight!" She clicked it on and off in demonstration.

Unamused, Sam'loc turned back in the direction of travel and the two continued on their way. They walked along for close to fifteen minutes, occasionally exchanging questions and answers. Sam'loc was curious about her family structure, so she told him about her older brother, Mark, and her parents.

Heidi was curious about why and how Sam'loc and his kind had arrived here. She noticed that his answers about his family were more evasive than hers. Sam'loc told her they spent much of their time in hibernation and only kept as many ter'roc awake as were needed to care for the ishkan. Oddly, he didn't seem to possess a concept for fun. His culture revolved around operations, adhering to a strict architecture requiring their whole society's participation. He went on to explain that their society had castes. Some were born to lead, others to work, and some were born to explore or perform research.

"So it's kinda like a beehive?" Heidi asked.

"Beehive?" He considered this for a moment. *"A crude but somewhat accurate description. We used to have more of what you would call fun and exploration. Our society used to have great artists and poets."* He paused. *"That was before."*

"Before? Before what?"

"Before it all ended."

Heidi tried to visualize what kind of artwork an alien culture like the ter'roc might create but couldn't conjure up a clear visual in her mind.

As they continued walking, the tunnel grew smoother until the stone was replaced by a leathery, rubbery-textured wall. Faint markings covered the wall, and Heidi stopped to examine what she saw. She reached out to touch the surface, surprised to see that it glowed brightly where her hand made

contact. Various symbols were illuminated. The surface reminded her of the skin of a dolphin she had stroked when she was in Florida at a nature preserve.

Sam'loc's long, gray four-fingered hand touched hers and gently pulled her own hand away. Heidi felt a small spark of static electricity pass between their hands, but it wasn't painful or even uncomfortable. It was the first time he had touched her, and she was surprised at how warm his hand was, much warmer than her own. He remained close now, no more than a foot away. She looked at him and heard his voice in her head, directing her. *"You must not touch. The ishkan will not understand you are not ter'roc. Your genetics are too similar."*

"What—what do you mean?"

Sam'loc pointed at the walls. *"The ishkan will not understand."*

"The queen?"

"No. The home."

"You mean your house?"

He shook his head. *"No, the structure in which we live. Praethor."*

"Right—your house."

"When you think house, you think of a piece of earth, a cave or a building. Something that is dead."

"Well, yeah—it's a house."

"No. The Praethor ishkan is alive. We live within it."

"You mean the ishkan is a living creature?"

Sam'loc nodded, affirming Heidi's conclusion.

"But...it's huge!"

"Yes. It is about three kilometers in diameter. May I show you my thoughts?"

"Show me?"

"I only listen to your conversation. I do not probe deeper without permission. That would be...rude. If you allow me to show you, I can help you understand."

Heidi wasn't sure about this. "Will it be painful?"

Sam'loc seemed puzzled by this question. "*Painful? No.*"

Heidi considered his request for a moment. She stood there in the blue glow of his ocular lights, trying to determine if her parents would be upset over her even talking with this creature, much less allowing him to probe her mind. It was all just a little too surreal.

She decided to do it. "Okay," she said. "Go ahead."

The very second Heidi gave permission, her mind flooded with vivid images. She saw other creatures like Sam'loc, revival-style buildings in Greece and villages in South America with primitive huts. She saw the great pyramids of Egypt and many ter'roc around a large oval table in an expansive, cavernous space. Then she saw what he meant by an ishkan. It was a huge creature floating in the air above the ground. It had a gray-purple appearance to its skin, almost rainbowlike in the sunlight, with darker gray disklike ovals on the bottom that glowed and then went dark again, ebbing in a continuous pattern. She saw an ishkan in space shooting a beam of light from the disks and then tunnels within the ishkan as ter'roc walked about inside. The walls gave off the strange white-purple glow and were barren except for some symbols along them.

The images flashed through her mind for what seemed like hours but in actuality amounted to moments. Along with the images, she heard thoughts and voices from other ter'roc. All of this was running through her mind so quickly that she had no time to process any of it. Stars rushed by a window, followed by planets of various colors and sizes. There were trees with enormous flocks of birds bursting out of them. Her final image was of a caveman pursuing a mammoth.

All at once, the myriad of images stopped abruptly. Heidi stood looking at Sam'loc for only a few seconds before being overcome by vertigo and plummeting to the floor.

Sam'loc bent down and gently helped her up. Her newfound acquaintance no longer seemed like a creature, some fearful alien she couldn't understand

or relate to. He felt like a friend, someone she had known much longer than a day.

“You seem so familiar,” Heidi said. “Why do I feel like I’ve known you my entire life?”

“That feeling of familiarity is something that carries through in the transference. You have, in a way, known me all your life and beyond. You have seen a glimpse of my life and those with whom I reside.”

“You’ve been through everything with our people, haven’t you? From the very beginning?” She paused, surprised by her revelation. “No—you *are* the beginning of us, aren’t you?”

“Yes. We are the beginning of humanity. We seeded this planet in an attempt to adjust our genetics to adapt to it. We combined our own DNA with a native hominid species, creating what you now know as humans.”

Names she didn’t recognize suddenly surfaced. “What is Kachina, Anunnaki or Wondkina?” she asked, puzzled.

“These are all names humans have called us over the centuries. There are many other names. What you are feeling or knowing is some of my residual memories and the memories of others. Along the way, we have taught humans. It was our desire to help you along—where we saw a need. We wanted to show you how to treat one another and to better understand your existence. If we felt you were going astray, we tried to bring you back to a path that would take you to a better future.”

Heidi was confused. “Wait, if the ter’roc created humans, then what about God? I was always taught that it was God who created us.”

Sam’loc swayed his head a bit from side to side, trying to patch his words together. “*It is complicated,*” he said, smiling his strange miniscule smile.

“So—is there a God?”

“Yes. There is a God. Ter’roc are not gods. The term ‘God’ is complex, however. According to your upbringing and understanding, God is a single entity that sees over your world, brings life and takes it away. There is some accuracy to this, but your species requires additional growth before you can fully understand such a

concept. What you would call God is also a force, an energy that binds us together—ter'roc, humans and many other creatures throughout the universe. It would not be accurate to say that God played a part in every small detail of every single event in the universe. Think of a drop of water in a pond. God causes a drop of water to fall, and the ripples carry on a natural path.”

Heidi focused the beam of her flashlight on her watch and was surprised to see that she had been underground with Sam'loc for more than three hours now.

With nervous concern in her voice, she said, “I have to go, Sam'loc. My parents will worry.”

“I understand.”

“But can I come back? I want to see you again—and learn more.”

“Yes, of course.”

Sam'loc paused. *“Tell no one else of this, at least for now.”*

Heidi paused, thinking. “Can I tell one person if I promise it would be the only person?”

After patiently considering this, Sam'loc agreed to one person.

“I won't tell anyone else,” she promised.

Heidi climbed into the tunnel, hurrying through the junction as quickly as she was able. It took twenty-five minutes to run the entire distance back to the storm drain. When she stepped out and onto the train tracks, the light was momentarily blinding despite the cloud cover filling the sky.



Later that evening, Heidi sat down with her mother in the privacy of her bedroom. “Okay,” her mother said, humoring her daughter but eager to build their friendship stronger. “What is this exciting story you have to tell me?”

Heidi approached her disclosure with caution. “Mom, you have to promise me you won't tell anyone else about this, okay? It's very important that what I tell you remains between the two of us.”

With only a second's pause and a cocked eyebrow, her mother agreed.

Heidi spewed out the story of the train, the drain culvert and the cavern. Then she shared every detail of her encounter with Sam'loc—of how she stumbled upon him in the darkness, the kaleidoscopic images he set loose in her mind and, finally, Sam'loc reading her thoughts.

Penny listened attentively, resisting outright skepticism and taking in everything she told her. It was not her nature to doubt her daughter, as she had never lied to her—but an entire unknown civilization underground in Swampscott? That was one gigantic leap over the top. Penny reminded herself of the nights of shared stories about Heidi's nightmares that had bonded them recently. Penny couldn't help but wonder if the nightmares were somehow related to what Heidi was describing. As insane as this whole story sounded, for some reason she found herself willing to entertain the impossible. When Heidi finished her detailed story, Penny studied her face, trying to decide whether this could be some elaborate joke or prank.

Heidi didn't wait for her to respond. "I'm going back, but I want you to go with me, Mom. Will you?"

Instinctually, her mother snapped, "Absolutely not. You are *not* going back down there." But at the look of yearning on her daughter's face, she wondered what harm it would do to spend an afternoon with her daughter, diving into the realm of the tomboy, a world that she herself had once followed. She let out a big sigh and said, "Okay. But if I say we turn back, then we turn back. Understood?"

Heidi clapped her hands excitedly for a moment and smiled widely.

"Okay, kiddo. First thing tomorrow we'll jump down the rabbit hole, you and me together."

"Awesome!" Heidi was relieved and happy to have her mother jump in her support camp, and she couldn't wait to see her reaction to her newfound discovery. A part of her knew she didn't believe her and was merely humoring her. However, she was grateful that she was still willing to indulge her. After

all, she would know soon enough that it was all true. And so the pair agreed to leave at seven the following morning.

Heidi wrestled with sleep again that night. She kept remembering the images and hearing the voices from Sam'loc's memory.

Sleep finally found her; however, there weren't nightmares this time. Her dreams were reminiscent of her day's encounter. She saw Sam'loc along with an elderly woman named Ranash. The curious thing about her dream was that Sam'loc was no longer a creature with large silvery eyes. Instead, he was human, an older man of about seventy, and was sitting in a rocking chair telling her stories of ages past. He talked to her of the Egyptians, Sumerians and Aztecs. As he spoke in her dream, she realized something she had not noticed in the cave: the horrible smell that was always present in her tortured nightmares was missing. Sam'loc was telling her a fascinating story about the Pueblos and she was admiring the detail of their simple adobe homes when she was suddenly jolted awake by the grinding sound of the kitchen juicer downstairs. The clock read 6:15 a.m.

Heidi jumped out of bed and into the shower. Then, dressing quickly, she ran downstairs and grabbed her backpack. She and Penny packed sandwiches, pretzels, grapes, cheese and water bottles and headed for the railroad tracks.

"You're sure I don't need to grab the straitjacket?" her mother joked.

"Ha ha," she replied.

Going on this little venture with her daughter frightened her a little, but the truth was that Penny was athletic, fun-loving and looking forward to some strange adventure with her daughter to build their relationship closer. *It could be the last adventure*, a voice told her from deep within. *The end of an era.*



Chapter 5

BRIAN

“I can see something is on your mind. What are you thinking?” Kalarian asked.

“Do you remember our nice little invention *Pasteurella pestis*?”

“Yes, of course. How could I forget? Of course, now they call it *Yersinia pestis* or the Black Plague, but they never knew our pet name for it, Aortiliak. It was a brilliant feat of engineering on your part. I still can’t believe you came up with seventy-two versions of it, though humans have only discovered sixty-three. You took that strain that infested them nine thousand years ago and reengineered it. The bacteria you used five hundred years ago was brilliant. You got the added bonus of a few more plagues out of that one. And using fleas as a conduit? Perfection.” He beamed with pride for his friend.

Yultavar smiled. “Well, my friend, I have something special in store. It will make *Yersinia* look like child’s play.”

“I grow weary at times. There are so many things we have tried without success.”

“I wouldn’t say *without* success. I would say with *limited* success.”



September 21, 11:14 p.m.
Claremont, on the outskirts of Perth, Australia

Brian sat staring out the window at the stars. Salvado Street was nestled in a quiet, sleepy little affluent suburban community with palm trees blowing in the breeze under the stars along with a wide variety of fauna and local wildlife. Brian’s favorite trees were the willows that lined the local ponds. It was a twelve-year-old’s paradise, with many secret hiding places and beaches to play on.

This evening, however, he chose to sit here on his window seat, staring out over the sea. The warm spring breeze blew softly through the window. The truth was, last night’s dream had been much more disturbing than all the other dreams in recent months. He recalled the twisted spikes drilling slowly down into his hands and into the wood arms of the chair in the near pitch-black of the warehouse, the raw reality of it as he tried to scream and look at the woman next to him—yet no sound left his lips. He could still feel his lungs and sense the vibrations in his throat as he screamed, but all he could hear was silence and his breath. It was as if he were forced to participate in some horror film with no soundtrack.

Salvado Street dead-ended into the beach. Given that Brian’s house was only a few doors down, he was able to see the dark western sky clearly out his bedroom window. There was no light pollution at all, except of course on the very foggy evenings when the lights along neighboring streets were amplified by the water molecules in the fog. His telescope was set up, and he enjoyed

looking at the stars, contemplating what else—who else—might be out there beyond his world. He couldn't have guessed then that within the next forty-eight hours, he would have a much better idea of what lay beyond.

His bedroom door opened. His mum, Mary, peeked her head in, her face illuminated by the red lamp on his desk. He kept the red light on so that his night vision wasn't ruined while stargazing.

"Brian, why aren't you in bed? It's almost midnight."

"Couldn't sleep, Mum. The stars look so brilliant tonight. I just wanted to look at them for a bit." He paused, then looked toward her. "Where's Dad?"

"He's in the bedroom, preparing his sermon for tomorrow."

Brian's father, Ron, had been head of their local Presbyterian church for the last four years. He was a kind, laid-back man who had a strong devotion to his family and his community, someone Brian admired greatly.

Mary walked over and sat beside her son on the window seat, soaking in a special moment of parenthood. She found a peace in his stargazing but knew there was more to his desire not to sleep. His eyes were locked back on the eyepiece as he said, "Mum, can you hand me the camera?" Brian held out his hand.

She smiled and handed it to him, noticing it had an attachment on the front so that he could interface it with his telescope. "Brian...you shouldn't be afraid to go to sleep just because you've had a few bad dreams."

He peered through the small sighting scope. Then he removed the eyepiece and attached his camera where it had been. Looking through the digital screen, he made a few adjustments and snapped a picture. "I'm not afraid, Mum," he lied.

Brian stared at the screen, cocked his head to the side and snapped another photo. He looked out through the small sighting scope again, which alone was a powerful 7x50 finder and was quite good at spotting small clusters of stars. The telescope itself was a Vixen R200SS 200mm refractor capable of getting decent-quality images of Saturn on a good night. It was specifically

designed for astrophotography and was a gift his uncle had brought back from America on one of his trips; it was worth over four thousand Australian dollars. To Brian, it was his baby. He kept it covered with lens caps and a special cloth during the day and maintained it meticulously.

This evening however, it seemed to be deceiving him. He saw a third star near Venus and Regulus that he had never seen before. He took another picture and pulled out the SD card, inserting it into his laptop. Brian took a few measurements and discovered that indeed the third star had moved a tiny fraction of a millimeter. This didn't sound like a lot, but when it was a star that was not supposed to move, it was quite a bit—unless it wasn't a star at all.

Seeing the concern on Brian's face, Mary asked, "What is it?"

Brian shook his head. "Maybe nothing. But there's this star I've never seen before, and it seems to be moving."

"Must be a plane or something."

"No, I don't think so—possibly a satellite."

"Well, I'm going to bed. Please don't stay up much later."

Brian looked at his mother. "Yes, Mum." She kissed him on the forehead and left his room.

He continued to take a few more photos and also took some notes. He pulled up a chat app and double-clicked on Professor Benkin's profile. He knew that his mentor would be working at the Perth Observatory in Bickley with his two grad students this time of night, observing stellar phenomena. He could be found there nearly every evening from 11:00 p.m. until 4:00 a.m.

Professor, are you there? he typed.

A moment later, the professor responded. *Hello, Brian. How are you? Doing some stargazing?*

Yes. Found something weird.

Define 'weird.'

Where are you aimed at the moment?

After a moment, the professor typed, *05h 55m 10.3053s, +07° 24' 25.426, Betelgeuse. Why?*

Can you target 10h 08m 22.3s, +11° 58' 02?

There was a pause. *Sure. Give me a moment. What am I looking for?*

If I'm right, you'll know it when you see it.

Brian knew the professor from last summer's work at the Perth Observatory. He had attended four of the summer viewing sessions in December and later showed up at a fall night watch in April. Professor Benkin had been particularly impressed with Brian's ability to spot stellar phenomena that some of his own college students hadn't been able to see. Brian was patient, careful and methodical in his scanning of the heavens. At only twelve, he had already come up with his own grid system for cross-checking stellar changes. He used an app to catalog each star and looked for even the smallest changes, taking copious notes.

After ten minutes, Brian's laptop chimed. *What is that?* the professor had asked.

I was hoping you knew.

I have no idea. Given the movement, I'd say perhaps a satellite, but at first glance I don't see anything that it could match. Tell you what, I'll see if I can get some better pictures, and I'll email them to you, okay?

Great! Thank you, Professor!

Go get some sleep, kiddo. Third shifts are for crazy professors, not young apprentices who need rest.

Brian sighed, typed, *K. Ty. Nite*, and closed his laptop.

He looked back over at his telescope and stepped to the window. As he stared out at the stars, his gaze was drawn downward. He noticed the water glowing with a purple hue and looked back up at the sky to see what was reflecting off the water. To his surprise, there was nothing to cause the reflection, not even the moon. The purple hue grew brighter and brighter. To Brian, it looked as though a giant submarine was slowly surfacing. It came

within several meters of the surface and something small separated from it and rose up out of the water. The object moved closer to the beach—no, not an object, a person.

Brian detached his sighting scope and aimed it in the direction of the person. It wasn't a person at all, but rather a creature of some type, and it appeared to be gliding across the water, flying toward the beach without moving its legs. Studying it more closely, he saw long, skinny arms and legs and a large head. It had two blue lights on its face illuminating the water in front of it.

A chill ran up Brian's spine as he instantly recognized the creature; it was the creature from his dreams. Panic-stricken, Brian's heart began to race. He wanted to scream and find his mother, explain that he had actually seen the creature from his dreams, but a combination of dread and curiosity—or perhaps fear—locked him in place.

Brian stared in disbelief and slowly lowered his scope. The creature really *was* gliding across the water, moving slowly toward the beach. He looked down, rubbed his eyes, wished the creature away and looked back up. But the creature remained. It stopped abruptly at the shoreline and looked up toward his window. The iridescent suit it was wearing transformed into a long, flowing white dress, and its body changed into a woman in her midthirties, brown hair tightly wrapped in a bun. She reached up and touched her hair as if to make sure that it was proper and then glanced back at Brian's window.

A woman's voice spoke in his mind, though it sounded almost as if it were in his room. "*Hello, Brian.*" He looked around, but the red light of his desk lamp illuminated an empty room. He looked back at the water.

Nearly under his breath, Brian said, "What *are* you?"

"*I have come to greet you. My name is Grenethda.*" He could see the woman hovering where the sand met the sea, gesturing as if she were speaking words aloud.

"*I will not harm you. I only want to meet you—no more.*"

“You hurt me. I’ve dreamed about you,” he said, barely audible.

“That was not me or my people. What you saw was the draklor, a species that is endangering this planet. They are trying to scare you. This is why I have come to greet you.”

Brian considered this, and her story felt right, but fear still had him strong within its grasp, not to mention the whole idea of a creature rising up out of the ocean, transforming into a woman, and talking in his mind had his head whirling a bit. He was not the type of child to judge a book by its cover, nor was he the type to dive headfirst into danger. His mother always said that he was pragmatic, logical and methodical, traits that helped him in his charting of the stars, but the urge to learn the truth of his dreams was compelling and nudged him forward. Fear was not something Brian ever accepted at face value. He felt he needed to face this fear head on, just as he had faced his fear of broccoli three nights ago. That hadn’t turned out so bad, so perhaps he could finally put his dreams to rest as well. Brian needed to know if what Grenethda said was true or he might never find peaceful sleep again.

“How do I know if I come down there that you aren’t going to hurt me?”

“You do not. You must trust me, just as I trust you by exposing myself to your species.”

A moment later, Brian disappeared from the window. Grenethda watched in hopeful anticipation that Brian was actually preparing to come outside.

She and her rikoy had intercepted some of the telepathic transmissions projected toward Brian and the other chosen three. The ter’roc had never known that the draklor had any form of telepathy until the dreams began. Something seemed wrong about these transmissions though; they didn’t feel like long-range telepathy. Har’loc, her superior of the Traden ishkan in the United Kingdom, had been trying to prevent the dream invasions but in the process found he would have to actually train the four to resist them. This wasn’t something he could do on his own, so he had asked Grenethda to contact Brian. Other shev’lars were contacting their assignments as well.

Although Grenethda would never tell Brian this, the recent development with the draklor made her fearful. She was deeply concerned that the draklor possessed even more hidden abilities as yet unknown to her people. They knew so little about the species and had been unable to do any further reconnaissance ever since they lost the ability to perform temporal spatial folds.

The door of the house opened, and Brian stepped out. The wood porch was cool on his bare feet but not cold. He ran down the front steps to the sidewalk and headed toward the woman. When he reached the beach, Grenethda descended gracefully to the sand and began walking slowly toward him.

“Hello, Brian,” she said.

“What *are* you?” he asked again.

“I am ter’roc. I know you are scared, but I need you to follow me. You will not be harmed.” She had a maternal, trustworthy aura about her.

Brian looked at her skeptically. “Follow you—where?” He paused. “Now?”

“Come. Follow me.”

He looked over his shoulder toward his house, staring at it for a moment, but his thoughts were interrupted by a warm hand on his own. Brian turned around and looked up at Grenethda. She reassured him softly. “I promise it will be okay. It will only take a few minutes, and no one will know you are gone.”

“How do you know?”

“Look around you.”

Brian looked at the beach, then up at the trees. Even in the dim light from the streetlight, he could see the leaves were pointing gently sideways as if blowing in the wind, but there was no wind. A seagull was swooping down in the dark near the streetlight toward where the sand met the pavement in the distance, but it was frozen in midair. He looked at the ocean and it was as if the waves had been flash frozen, unmoving, yet they were clearly liquid.

“What happened?”

“We are in a temporal pocket. Time around us has slowed...for a short while.”

“How can you do this?”

“We can only do it for a short period of time. Enough questions. I will answer them all in due time. For the moment, please come with me.”

Grenethda held out her hand to him, and he took it. As she led him toward the water, he found his feet didn't quite touch its surface. Instead it felt as though he were walking on solid, dry ground. Walking beside her, the two slid slowly into the water and were immediately surrounded by a bubble of air that seemed to luminesce. Brian had a momentary sense of dizziness from the unnatural feeling of walking into the water with no ground beneath his feet and remaining dry.

As soon as his head dipped beneath the water's surface, he saw the glowing object he had taken for a submarine. It was an enormous disklike structure several kilometers away that reminded him of a giant Frisbee or flying saucer. It was at least five kilometers in diameter. He was astonished not only that he was breathing underwater but also by the sheer size of the glowing vessel below. He could hear a low, rhythmic hum coming from the vessel, which emanated a bluish-purple hue that ebbed and flowed across its surface. It almost appeared to breathe, parts of it expanding and contracting.

He and Grenethda slowly descended in their bubble of air. He tried to stand as still as he could, fearing that if his arms touched the walls, the bubble would pop, but just as the thought of having to remain still went through his head, he felt a strong urge to reach out and touch the wall. *Surely touching it lightly wouldn't do any harm.* Brian carefully reached out and skimmed his finger lightly across the surface. It was cold and wet. When he pulled his hand back and smelled it, the scent was like salt water. He tasted it—yes, definitely seawater. He looked up at Grenethda, who simply smiled at his curiosity.

Fear rippled through his mind for the first time since being submerged. He was afraid that he might drown, and there was no way he could swim all the way to the surface so far above him in the dark.

As if sensing his thoughts, Grenethda said, "Do not worry, we will return you to your home shortly. You are safe with us."

"You speak English. Are you Austrianian?"

"I am not actually speaking to you at all. This is not my true form; it is an illusion. I am communicating with you here." She gently touched his head. "Your mind interprets this illusion as verbal communication. We are a telepathic species. We speak with our minds."

"Cool." *So that's how you knew my name.* "What is that thing down there?" asked Brian.

"That is my ishkan. It is our home."

"Have you always lived in the ocean? Are you mermaids?" he asked.

"Mermaids?" She smiled at his innocence. "No, we are not mermaids. We have lived here for a very long time."

"Why haven't I ever heard of people living under the water?"

"We have remained hidden. We just surfaced our ishkan a few hours ago for the first time in many thousands of years."

"How long will it be near the surface?"

Grenethda laughed. "You are inquisitive, aren't you?"

"I'm just...I'm just curious."

"I like curiosity. It begets knowledge. The ishkan will remain surfaced until we have resolved the situation that we will discuss soon. Ask anything you like, but you must promise for now to keep our questions and answers between us."

"Okay."

They were now so close to the ishkan that Brian had to shield his eyes a bit from its bright glow. An orifice opened in the top of the ishkan, and their sphere passed through into a small room illuminated by purple light. The top

hatch closed, and the water rapidly drained out, disappearing along with the spherical bubble that had protected them. “Welcome to the Quonar ishkan,” said Grenethda.

“Wow! Cool!” Brian’s face radiated excitement as he looked around the room.

“I am going to change into my true form. Please do not be alarmed.”

Grenethda morphed into her ter’roc form. Her similarity to the creature of his dreams was uncanny. “Are you...” He gulped. “Are you alien?”

She placed her long gray hand on his shoulder. *“I am no more alien than you are. I will explain everything. Come, follow me. I have something that you might enjoy.”* Brian noticed that she was no longer speaking with her mouth, and now that he could hear her in his mind, her voice sounded more flat—as if she were speaking from within a padded room.

She led him through a portal that opened into a corridor. The corridor was lined with strange writing and images that luminesced on the walls. The long corridor seemed to go on forever. They had gone several hundred meters when Grenethda reached out and touched the wall. It illuminated several symbols brighter near her hand, and then a door slid open. She motioned for Brian to step through while she followed. *“Although we have not used it as such for a long time, this is our navigation chamber. Now we use it mostly for stellar observation.”*

To Brian, it looked like the previous white room, only larger. “Stellar observation? Of what?”

As soon as he uttered these words, the entire room dimmed to black and disappeared around him. He stood on a floating disk with billions of stars all around him. Brian could see the sun, which grew very bright, and he covered his eyes. To his left was the moon, and he wasn’t sure but he thought he could see Venus. “Wow!”

Grenethda smiled again. She motioned to a bench that rose up out of the floor as if pressed from beneath the surface. *“Please sit.”*

Brian sat and looked at his new alien acquaintance. "What are you? I mean, I know you said you're ter'roc, but how come I've never heard of a ter'roc? You said you are no more alien than me. What did you mean?"

"We are from a planet not far from here." She pointed in the distance. Brian squinted toward where she was pointing. He looked all around him, trying to get his bearings.

"Can I see it?"

"Certainly." The room zoomed through the asteroid belt and flew out over a red planet.

"Mars? You're from Mars?" he said, shocked.

"We call it Nirgal, and I have never lived there. I was actually born here on Earth. This is what I meant when I said I am no more alien than you. We left Nirgal over two hundred thousand years ago."

"Why?"

"There was a terrible disaster. It killed a lot of people, and we had to escape."

"Why don't we know about this?"

"We keep our existence very secret from humans. You have not yet been ready to learn about us. In fact, you are still not ready. Many humans are not easily accepting of the fact that they are not the only intelligent species in the universe."

Brian understood this. "Maybe, but a lot of us are willing to accept that."

Grenethda nodded. *"Yes, some of you are willing. That is one of the reasons I am contacting you."*

"What are the other reasons?"

"There are several. We moved up our timeline in contacting your species because of the draklor. We have known for a very long time that they were headed for Earth. However, we did not believe they had telepathic capabilities. We chose you, Brian, as one of four humans selected to help lead a group to defend our planet against the draklor. Your path was laid long ago."

"Me? I'm just a kid! How can I defend the whole planet?"

“Defending the planet does not take strength, it takes intelligence and quick thinking, two qualities you possess. It also takes something called the Convergence. Something we have encoded into your DNA.”

Brian thought about this for a millisecond. *Convergence? Something inside me?* “Do I get to miss school?”

Grenethda laughed. *“Yes, I would say you will have to miss some school.”*

Brian was elated. “Awesome! Count me in!” Then, pausing, he said, “Why is the draklor coming here such a bad thing?”

“We do not know much of the draklor, but we believe they are a nomadic species that moves from planet to planet. They consume all a planet’s natural resources before moving on to another. They do terrible damage to the planet while collecting these resources and kill any race that gets in their way.”

“I don’t understand—what resources?”

“Minerals, plants and animals for food consumption.”

Brian looked at her, trying to determine if there was truth in her words. He could not see any deception. If even part of what she told him were true, then it could mean the end of human civilization. “I want to help, if I can.”

“I am going to take you back to your home now. We will contact you in a few days to meet with several other people.”

“The others in my dreams.”

Grenethda nodded. *“Yes. We will also talk with your parents, but please do not speak to them yourself. It is important that we speak to them first.”*

Grenethda reached down and touched a small button on her suit. Instantly, they were both standing in front of his house on Salvado Street.

“Wait, if you can take us from one place to another like that...why did you take me through the water?”

“I wanted you to see the ishkan. I thought it might make more of an impact, make things more...believable if you saw the full display. Call it presentation.”

“Yeah, well, it worked. It was way cool. It was nice to meet you.” He held out his hand to Grenethda, who just stood looking down at it. She cocked

her head to the side and smiled, then reached out and shook his hand.

"Nice to meet you too, Brian."

He stepped away from Grenethda and bounded up the stairs to his house. When he turned around to look back, Grenethda had disappeared.

Brian ran into his house and to his room. After taking off his clothes, he opened his laptop. An email had arrived from Professor Benkin. The subject read: *Here is your satellite.*

Opening the picture, Brian turned his head sideways, trying to find an orientation. Although it was blurry given the distance, it was undeniably a sphere—a bright, shining sphere. He messaged the professor and almost immediately got a message back.

If my calculations are correct—and they very well may not be—it looks like it's about the distance of Pluto from us. If it really is that far away, can you imagine how large it is? Nearly the size of Pluto. Can you believe that? the professor asked.

As strange as this may sound, I have new information on that. I actually can believe it. Do me a favor, and just for two days, don't tell anyone about this. Okay?

There was a long pause, but the professor finally responded. *Brian, I'm a scientist. I can't keep something like this secret from the rest of the world for two days. It would be irresponsible and unethical.*

"Grenethda, can you hear me?" Brian said aloud in a whispered yell.

Nothing.

"Grenethda, please. Please tell me you can hear me."

"I can hear you, Brian," she said in his mind.

Brian continued to whisper aloud. "My friend Professor Benkin knows about the draklor ship. We spotted it this evening before I met you. He wants to let others know about his findings."

Silence.

After two minutes, Grenethda finally replied, *"Ask your friend to give you twenty-four hours. We need to at least talk to the others in the Equipage. You may*

discuss all of this with your friend and tell him of us. But please keep it between the two of you for the next twenty-four hours. Do not worry, it will not be possible to keep this a secret for long."

Brian had no idea what the Equipage was but accepted the deadline. "Okay. Thank you. Good night."

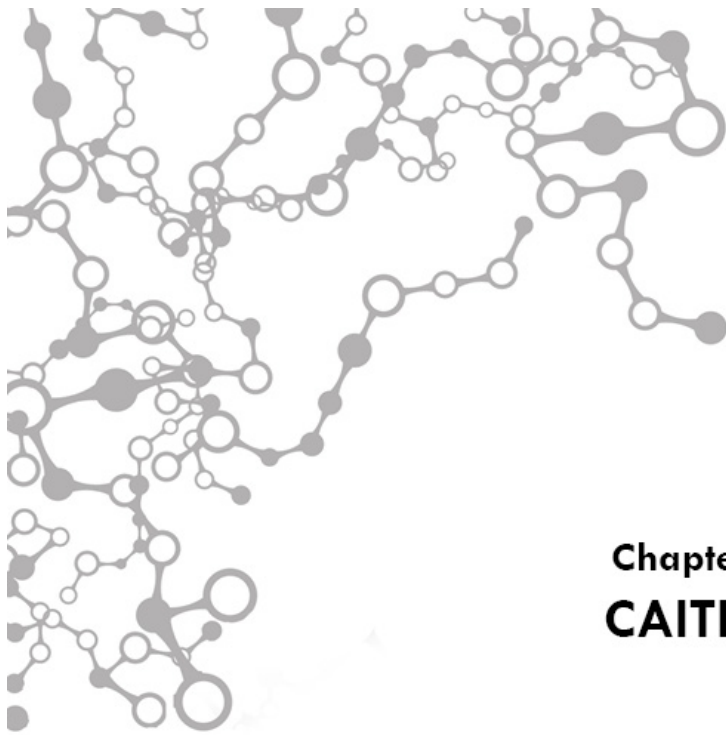
"Good night, Brian."

He began typing. *Professor Benkin, I promise I'll tell you what I know. We need to meet in person. I can't tell you over chat. I just need a little time before we tell anyone else about that thing.* He paused, then added, *Give me 24 hours. Please?*

Okay. Where are we going to meet?

Plaza Coffee Shop on Capricorn at 9 tomorrow morning? They have the best hot chocolate.

See you at 9. Good night.



Chapter 6

CAITLIN

Kalarian was clearly concerned. “Two of the four have met the ter’roc.”

Without looking up from his paper, Yultavar continued making notes. “Your point?”

“Do you not think there is an inherent danger in this? We don’t want them to meet. We know there could be catastrophic consequences if their plans succeed. These creatures are evil. Aren’t you worried?”

Yultavar looked up at his friend, squinting his left eye. “Why would I be? When we are done, they will not know reality from fantasy. Just be patient. I know what I’m doing. We have been on this planet for over seven hundred years. Our wisdom has taught us along the way.”

“You had better be right. Our very survival is depending on the success of this mission. Our people are depending on us. Gaia is depending on us.”

“Just concentrate on the next operation. The support pillars are crumbling. I will take care of the four. I am molding the Equipage in ways they can’t

even fathom.”



September 21, 3:25 p.m.
Sandygate Road, Sheffield, Yorkshire, England

Har’loc stood in the garden, leaning on his cane, looking in the window at Cait. His heart was pounding in his chest, and the nerves of his old body felt as if they might go up in flames with the fright that he had at this entire encounter. Har’loc had known this was coming for a very long time, 1,066 years to be exact. That was when he, Ranash, Grenethda and forty-three other ter’roc had sat in the Praethor ishkan, far beneath what would one day be called Swampscott, Massachusetts, over six hundred years before the Pilgrims would settle America. Har’loc looked at the young woman in her late fifties and stepped through the door, unnoticed by her as he cloaked his presence, placing a block on her ability to see him or know that her door had even opened and closed. His ability to control what the human mind could perceive was second nature to him, and he did it without even thinking. Har’loc slowly stepped across the wooden floor and sat on a chair as Cait said exasperatedly, “Oh, good grief!”

Har’loc paused this moment, looking at the woman who appeared to be frozen, though he knew she was in fact moving extremely slowly, so slowly that not even the ter’roc could see it.

I do not want this encounter. I have never wanted this. This is the pinnacle, the precipice of the abyss, and once we step over it, there is no stepping back. We should remain hidden, remain alone. The children will not be ready for us for another six to seven hundred years at least, the eldest ter’roc thought to himself in the most private part of his mind, an area that no other ter’roc could see.

All ter’roc had several levels to their thoughts: those they could keep private, those they could direct at one or two ter’roc somewhere on the planet

and those they could broadcast to all ter'roc aboard the entire ishkan or beyond. *I have many more years behind me than I have ahead of me. I have called this planet home since I was born, and my consciousness will exist in the collective after I am no longer here. Yet this moment, this exact slice of time, is so critical. We face a foe unlike anything we have ever faced before. Our children are at a critical time, a vital juncture in their evolution. There are too many intersections occurring at once, and it makes the potential outcomes difficult to see.* Har'loc switched to a singular broadcast, directed at Ranash. *"I am preparing to contact Cait. She is here in front of me. I am not convinced that this is the right choice. It is too soon."* A moment later, he could hear Ranash's voice in his head.

"Bejahl, Shev'lar. Har'loc, you know this is the right choice. We have discussed this many times. This is the moment. This is the time. Heidi and Brian have already been contacted. The only ones that remain are Caitlin and Mingli. I know you are nervous about this encounter."

"I am not!" Har'loc quickly retorted, but then he paused, paying close attention to his aging body. He knew she was correct; he could feel it. His heart was still quickened, and he felt on edge. How could he handle this encounter? How could he show the wisdom and patience he needed to show Cait when he himself felt so nervous about this? It was then that he decided he would introduce her to the whole ishkan in one fluid teleportation through the ground. He would show her that they existed far below the surface of the earth and give her a taste of how long they had been here.

Har'loc had known ancient Romans and Greeks; he had helped to sculpt the people of the Balkan Peninsula. He thought back to the year 331 BC. He had been on one of the six hundred treks he had taken over his life. Har'loc had been walking the hills of what would, a thousand years later, be called Veliko Tarnovo, the capital of the Second Bulgarian Empire. He had been exhausted, walking in the sweltering heat for days, resting when he could but trying to reach Auxitius in a remote Byzantine village to deliver a message given to him by none other than the Roman emperor, Constantine the Great.

Of course, Har'loc had not gone by his given name but rather Domnicus, son of Francio. Har'loc remembered walking over the rise and feeling faint, seeing the woman standing near the clay vessel, washing clothes. To this day, two thousand years later, he had not seen a more beautiful sight. Har'loc had been instantly in love.

He had not understood how he could love a human. He had heard stories of ter'roc falling in love with humans but failed to understand. How could one love and feel a deep connection to a species that lived so short a life and had so little in common with one's own? Yet there she was, Audula, a simple woman living a simple life, yet she was the most complex mind he had ever met encased within the most beautiful body he had ever seen.

He knew why he thought of Audula all these years later. She was his rock. She was his strength even after all these years. He could feel her essence in the collective consciousness of the ishkan, distant, like an echo that has reverberated off too many walls, yet she was there. She was the only human he would ever allow to know the true Har'loc. *Yes, and not once did any of them think that you were anything other than human. No one has ever known that you are not of this world, not even Audula.*

Who the hell are you kidding? None of us are of this world! he thought angrily. *I am not betraying Audula by revealing myself to Cait!*

Har'loc sighed and stared at the frozen member of the Equipage. He hoped that he had it in himself to be what she needed him to be. *You mean and maintain your sanity? You are old, and you are slipping. Okay, maybe you are not slipping, but not all of your lights are lit. That is for certain.* He sighed again.

Har'loc slowly got up and stood there looking at her. He was the oldest and most respected among his people. *You can do this, Har'loc,* he thought to himself. *This is your purpose. This is what you were put on Earth for, to guide these people. Your life will end soon, you know that, but it is your wisdom and guidance that they need, and the others in the enclave collective need your wisdom and experience. No one else on this planet is capable of teaching Heidi and the*

Equipage how to use the Convergence. He knew he was right. After all, he had designed it.

He left the house, closing the door and walking over to Cait's veggie patch, admiring it for a moment. Then he unfroze time.



Cait walked over to the sink by the window and started washing her hands. As she was squeezing some soap onto her wet hands, she looked out the window. There was someone in her veggie patch, bent down and examining her tomatoes. It was a man, about eighty, with a dark wide brim hat and white sport coat. "Excuse me!" she yelled at the closed window and rapped on the pane with her soapy hands. The man didn't look up. She quickly rinsed and dried her hands, running to the patio door.

"Hey! What are you doing in my veggie patch? This is private property!" Already having slept poorly, her heart was racing from having to confront the man.

She didn't approach him but yelled from the door, which was about twenty feet away. There was a part of her that was concerned he might cause trouble, though by the look of him he couldn't be *too* much trouble. He had a cane and appeared to be slouched a bit from arthritis or osteoporosis.

"Hello?" She watched him for a moment. "Listen, if you don't leave, I will call the police."

He just studied her tomato plants. Finally, he stood up and walked slowly toward her. "You care about your plants, don't you, Cait?"

She was shocked that he knew her name, and her agitation was growing. "Pardon me, do I know you?"

"No, Cait, but I know you," said the old man, removing his hat and exposing his balding head and sparse white hair. His skin was pale white with pink splotches, no doubt from the heat. The old man wiped his brow with a handkerchief and placed his hat back on his head.

"You do?" Skepticism veiled her voice.

“We have chosen you, Cait.”

“We? We *who*?” Cait looked around the garden. “What are you talking about?”

He looked her in the eye. His pale blue eyes were almost too blue and seemed much younger than the man they belonged to. A moment of silence passed, and he said, “Your dreams have been particularly disturbing, have they not?”

A chill ran up Cait’s spine. She glanced down at her hands. She could not see the holes where the nails had held her in place, but she could remember them. She could remember the red spots on her hands when she awoke, showing her that they were in fact much more than dreams. Cait gently caressed her left hand where the nail had held her down. “How could you possibly know about my dreams? Who the hell are you?”

“A friend.” He paused again and looked down at his cane. “Would you like to know what causes your dreams, my dear?” He glanced up without lifting his head.

Cait said nothing.

“If you want to know, then I will need you to follow me. I would speak with you.” His accent was subtle but definitely southern, perhaps Berkshire county.

“You *are* speaking with me. I’m sorry, I don’t make it a habit to follow strange men who appear in my garden. Please leave or I *shall* call the police at once.”

“You will not call the police. I know you are curious about what I have to offer. Time is short. Please? I will not harm you, I assure you.” He held out his arms, cane hanging off his left hand. “I am harmless. You will not be gone long. You will be back before your daughter gets here. You deserve to know what is causing these nightmares as much as I need to tell you.”

“What are you? Daft? How do you know so much about me?”

The old man started to walk toward the back of her garden, which was surrounded by a fence. Cait stood in front of the patio door, watching him walk. She scoffed at the situation, turned and looked toward the phone in the living room, then turned back to look at him as he continued to walk deeper into her garden. She had half a mind to go back into the house and grab the phone to call the police, but curiosity about what the old man could tell her prevented her from doing so. He was right; she needed to know what these dreams meant. Cait was nearly certain that he wasn't a threat. He hadn't raised his voice and had an air about him that was peaceful. Finally, he stopped, turned and looked at her, then motioned for her to join him.

"You want me to *follow* you...to the back of my garden?" Cait asked loudly in a flat tone.

He smiled. "Yes, to the back." Nodding his head slowly, he placed both hands on his cane to lean on it.

Cait looked around to see if there was anyone else walking in her gate or through her house.

Surely there could be no harm in going to the back of the garden. It was just a small corner of the yard in plain sight of her neighbors' houses. She walked toward the man. When the two reached the end of the lawn, she looked at him. "Okay. Now what?"

He held out his hand. Cait looked at it, half in disgust and half in disbelief. "I am *not* going to hold your hand."

"You will want to. Trust me." He looked at her patiently.

She almost felt as though he were flirting with her. Cait sighed and gently took the old man's weathered hand. A tiny spark snapped between their hands as they connected, and she jerked her hand back, laughed and then held his hand again. "Do not be afraid." He seemed so much more vibrant up close. "I will not hurt you."

"Don't be so certain that I won't hurt you." She laughed.

Cait and the man began to slowly lower into the ground as if the grass and soil were nothing more than an illusion. At first, Cait screamed a light “Ah!” but then, once she realized that she didn’t feel soil encompassing her feet, she fell into shocked silence. She didn’t let go of his hand, more for fear of falling into some abyss than because she wanted comfort. Her torso was now half below the green grass that she and her husband had mowed hundreds, perhaps thousands of times.

Cait had two visuals go through her head as she descended into this unknown. One was of her continuing all the way to hell, her payment for any evil she may have done to others, perhaps for the way she had treated her mother before she had died. The other visual was of what they must look like from further back in the garden, a fifty-two-year-old woman and an old man in a white sport coat sinking into the grass. She had to stifle a laugh at this mental image. She looked over at the man, and he simply smiled at her, as if he knew part of the visual. Bits of grass touched her hair as she descended. Then her vision went black. It was enough to cause momentary panic, and she squeezed his hand more tightly, but just as soon as the panic came on, her head came below a white ceiling that seemed to luminesce despite the fact that there didn’t appear to be any lights mounted on it. The floor below her, another solid white surface, was lowering. The walls appeared to be made of dirt and stone just as one would expect underground, but they seemed to be held in place by some sort of invisible shell, perhaps glass. The floor continued to descend until it reached about fifteen feet below the surface. It came to a stop so smoothly that Cait wasn’t even completely sure she had stopped.

The old man reached forward and touched the wall. It illuminated around his hand, and a hidden door opened silently. A smooth white tunnel illuminated by purple lights appeared out of the dirt and stone facade. The old man gestured with his arm to Cait as if to say “after you.” Cait didn’t move. She stood still, looking at the man, and began an onslaught of

questions. “Who the hell *are* you? How long has all of this been under my garden? Was that not even real grass? I’ve trimmed my lawn, including that section, many times. Why didn’t I fall in?”

The man put down his arm and put his cane in front of himself, resting on it. He took a deep breath and slowly answered every question she had asked. “My name is Har’loc, and all of *this* has been here much longer than it has been your garden. I assure you, the grass and the dirt are as real as you and I are. We simply possess the ability to adjust our atomic structure so that we can pass through other matter. You did not fall in because the ground is solid.” He looked down at his cane and then back up at Cait. “I know that this seems frightening to you. You must trust me; I bear you no ill will. I only want to talk to you.”

Cait stood, looking at the old man, trying to see some malice in his features, but she could find none. She felt as if she had just fallen down Alice’s rabbit hole or stepped into the TARDIS. He took off his hat, appearing fragile, gentle. All she could hear was her breath and his, echoing off the chamber walls. Her mind was spinning, and she felt as though her sense of reality had been turned upside down, but somehow she felt accepting of it, curious. She looked down at her wrist and saw her watch. Holding it up, she saw that it read 3:38 p.m. The second hand remained where it was. She looked back up at Har’loc. “Have you broken my watch?”

He smiled warmly. “No, Cait. At the moment, we are existing outside of what you understand as time. I am going to show you what I really look like, but please do not be frightened.” Before Cait’s eyes, Har’loc morphed from the man he was into the creature from her dreams, wearing a shimmering suit. He had long, sinewy legs, and his arms ended in hands that had three fingers and a thumb. The cane appeared to be the only thing that had not changed. Startled by his appearance, Cait slammed back against the wall of the shaft, panic-stricken. “No!” she said in a stifled scream.

"Again, I will not harm you. I promise," she heard him say in her head. His aged features were still apparent and gentle, despite his new form. "I am not the creature you have seen in your dreams. You have all been deceived and tortured, and I am profoundly sorry for this. I have tried everything in my power to block these transmissions."

Cait regained her composure a bit but still felt the flood of panic. She wanted to collapse on the floor and curl up in a ball but somehow resisted the urge. A long moment of silence passed between them, and she could tell that Har'loc was exercising patience so that she could adapt to this.

"Transmissions? What are you talking about? You're not...human. If it wasn't you, then who was it?"

"The creature in your dreams was made to look like us to cause fear among all of you. They are called the draklor. They do not actually look like us at all."

"You keep saying 'all of you.' Who are you talking about? Humans?"

"The others in your dream. They are all real people. The girl is named Heidi, the boy is Brian, and the older man is Mingli. You are all members of a group that was chosen long ago to lead humanity and help the ter'roc defend Earth against the draklor."

"What? What on earth are you talking about?" It was then that Cait realized that Har'loc's lips had never moved. "I hear you, but...I don't hear you," Cait said, unsure of how to articulate her words.

"We are a telepathic species. You are hearing me in your mind as I hear you."

"What are you?"

"I am the eldest shev'lar of the ter'roc. A shev'lar is...a leader."

"Leader of what?"

Har'loc sighed, looking down at his cane, then looked back up at Cait. *"It is complicated. Come, let us go inside and sit down and I will explain everything. It hurts for me to stand for long periods of time."*

Har'loc proceeded slowly down the tunnel, and Cait followed. Every step appeared to be an effort for him, even more so than in his human form, his

cane tapping the hard tunnel floor as he walked.

“May I ask you a question?” Cait said.

“*Certainly.*”

“How old are you?”

He laughed a raspy laugh that she could hear out loud. “*Very old. I suppose humans would say I am older than dirt.*” He laughed again, and Cait couldn’t help but smile as well.

“*I will be 19,615 this year.*”

“Nineteen thousand?” Cait gasped, stopping in her tracks.

“*I am the oldest living ter’roc on this planet. I was born here long before humanity had left the caves.*”

She ran to catch up with him. “You mean there are more?”

“*Many more.*”

“How many more?” She felt like a little schoolgirl asking a teacher a million questions. Compared to Har’loc, she was an infant. Without even noticing, her fears had fallen aside, being replaced with curiosity.

He stopped midstep and rested a moment, thinking hard. “*I see no harm in telling you, I suppose. There are over one billion.*”

Cait was dumbfounded. “One billion? How could there be one billion here on Earth? That’s insane! And we’ve never met any of them?”

“*We have spoken with humans over the years. Some have considered us gods, others have considered us aliens. We do not communicate with humans frequently, so I suppose there are more conjectures about our existence than actual facts, especially given that humans have really only had written language for the last couple thousand years. We prefer to remain hidden, watch from afar.*”

“Watch? Watch what?”

Har’loc smiled a thin smile and patted Cait on the shoulder. “*Our children.*” He continued walking.

Cait stood staring at him walking away. “Wait. What?” She caught up to him and stopped him. “What are you talking about?”

"Just come inside," he said and touched the wall. A door slid open, and inside was a chair that appeared to be part of the floor. There was a table, also appearing to extrude up out of the floor. The room had bookshelves all around it inset into the walls with books upon them. However, as Cait got closer to the shelves, she saw they were not actually books but solid pieces of stone. She grabbed one off the shelf and was surprised at how light it was. When she turned it over and looked at the surface, it lit up with a warm glow and the surface filled with foreign symbols that reminded her of a mixture of hieroglyphics and Sanskrit. *"Good choice. That is one of my favorite books,"* said Har'loc.

"I can't read it. I'm sure it is a good book though."

"No? I would say you are not trying hard enough then."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Think about English. Picture some of the words in your head."

Cait looked at Har'loc with a puzzled expression. She closed her eyes and pictured her name in print, then opened her eyes. The tablet in her hand read *"...happily, until one began to execute atrocities, a fiend in hell; this ghastly demon was named Grendel, infamous stalker in the marches, he who held the moors..."*

Cait set down the book on the shelf and pulled another off. Har'loc watched with amusement as he slowly seated himself on a chair near the bookshelf in front of which she stood.

Cait read aloud, *"Tell me, O Muse, of that ingenious hero who travelled far and wide after he sacked the famous town of Troy. Many cities did he visit, and many were the nations with whose manners and customs he was acquainted."* She stopped and looked at Har'loc.

"The *Odyssey*?"

"Homer was a great writer. A bit misunderstood, but a very kind man. Wonderful story, the Odyssey. Do you know it?"

"Yes, a bit. It's about Odysseus and his journey home after the fall of Troy. Some suitors of his wife are killed when Odysseus wins a competition against

them. Lot of death if I remember correctly.”

Har’loc laughed. *“Yes, a lot of death, but there are a lot of good lessons in the Odyssey as well. Do you remember the Phaeacians?”*

“No.”

“They were a people that helped Odysseus get home, in disguise so that he could see what his home had been like in his absence.”

“Oh, yes, I do recall that a little bit.”

“Everyone needs help sometimes,” Har’loc said slowly. He sat, looking at Cait. She wasn’t completely sure what he was trying to say. She placed the book back on the shelf.

“Your point?” she asked.

“You need my help. Our help. We need your help as well. And we are going to assist you. We have been in hiding long enough, and it is time we joined you and you joined us. Please, sit down. Let us talk.”

Cait sat down in a chair beside Har’loc and listened as he began to tell her of an impending danger. He told her of how the draklor had been using some sort of transmission that he wasn’t able to block to torture them in their dreams. Har’loc explained how the ter’roc had created humans hundreds of thousands of years ago and how they had kept watch over the civilization for millennia. He explained that although they knew the draklor were heading for Earth, they had not thought they could affect humans so far away.

When he was finished, Cait sat brooding over what he’d said, disbelief filling her mind as she stared down at the clean white floor. In her fifty-two years, she had spent her life concentrating on being the best mother and wife she knew how to be. She couldn’t have imagined in a million years, or at least two hundred thousand years, that she would ever be sitting next to some alien that had apparently been living below her throughout her entire life. And now she was supposed to believe that her planet would one day be invaded by some malevolent alien race. Cait had never been one that enjoyed science fiction, and for good reason—so much of it seemed too implausible. She

knew plenty of people that would be very excited to see all of this, many a “science nut” that would be enthralled by Har’loc and everything that he represented, but she was not one of those people. Cait found it all slightly disturbing, feeling as though it went against everything that her mum had raised her to believe. A part of her felt as though it went against God and the church and defied the concept that Christ had died for humanity’s sins. Yet she could not deny the fact that she was sitting here next to an alien and, unless she had been drugged, was most definitely inside some kind of spacecraft. Finally, she looked up at Har’loc and said, “Har’loc, I’m just a simple English woman. I am no scholar, no poet and certainly no one of importance. Why tell all of this to me? What purpose can I possibly serve for all of this?”

Har’loc looked at her, and it was apparent that he was trying to articulate his words, something that hadn’t seemed a problem up until now.

“You may not feel as though you are anything but a simple English woman, but the value of a person does not lie in what they have accomplished among society. It lies in the truth and purity of the soul, that which truly makes you unique. Humanity still has no concept of what the human soul really is, but you are all about to get a crash course on what makes you so unique in this universe. You, Cait, are one of 704 people we have chosen to be part of a new group of humans. The existing leaders of your world have two major flaws. They are more concerned with the political and monetary advancements of themselves than that of the people they represent. The other flaw is that the majority of them believe in the bureaucratic flow for decision-making. We are under a tremendous time constraint. The draklor will be here in under four years. We do not have time to deal with individuals who are more concerned with their own personal agenda and the power they hold than over the agenda of humanity as a whole. The people we have chosen care about others, their communities and the people they interact with. They are compassionate, willing to listen and entertain possibilities previously deemed impossible or implausible. They are also people with experience, experience that they themselves

are not even aware of. Race, age, background and class—none of this matters when you are put into a position of leadership. We have found that human youth, untainted by life experiences, can often see a path greater than those who have lived many years. In fact, one of the leaders of this new group of people is only fourteen years old; you have seen her in your dreams.”

“Heidi,” Cait interrupted.

“She doesn’t know that she will be a leader, but she has the determination, the organizational skills and the comprehension to handle it. We want you to work one-on-one with her. Heidi, Mingli, Brian and you will be the head for the seven hundred.”

“And what if I refuse to serve on this group? I have a wedding to plan.”

“Cait, if the draklor reach your world and it is not defended, you will not have any children to get married and your family’s future will cease to exist, along with all of humanity. Do you understand?”

Cait was silent.

Finally, she said, “Well, since you put it that way. Who am I to argue with saving all of humanity?” And although she smiled a false smile, she felt tiny, insignificant and alone.

A smirk came across Har’loc’s face, which in itself made Cait’s smile more genuine.

“You still haven’t told me where you’re from. What is all of this?” she said, pointing all around her.

“We are inside the ishkan, another creature from my home world. We are symbiotic. Do you know what that means?”

“I think it means you are two organisms living as one?”

“It means that we need each other. We are independent living species, but we need the ishkan as much as it needs the ter’roc. We are both from a planet not far from here called Nirgal. You know of it as Mars.” Har’loc closed his eyes, concentrating, and the room around Cait dimmed and faded to the blackness of space. She sat on one of the nearby chairs. She could see a blue-green

planet below her and Har'loc as they floated on the two chairs on a polymorphic disk in space. In the distance, she saw five large rocks headed for the planet. The two large pieces skimmed the atmosphere, causing flames and turning bright red as they departed past the planet. The other three collided with the planet, causing massive mushroom clouds and a ring of fire that cast out from where they hit. It seemed to take forever for the ring to dissipate far below them. Cait looked at Har'loc, whose face reflected the pain of what they were seeing. The room faded back to the silvery-white room it was before.

"I thought you said you were born here on Earth?"

"I was."

"So this happened a very long time ago?"

"About two hundred thousand years ago. However, being telepathic, we all carry the memories of our species. I can remember the asteroids hitting the planet, the sorrow that rippled through our society and the immense sense of loss that followed. It is very difficult to discuss."

"I'm so sorry." She didn't know what to say. How do you console someone for losing their entire planet?

"I will take you back to your home. There will be a meeting soon. I will contact you tomorrow about it."

Cait's mind flowed back to Roger, her loving husband who had stood by her for so many years and shared in all of what she believed were her biggest life events. She realized now with sorrow that he was unable to see this next chapter that had been thrust upon her.

"Before we go, may I ask you a question?"

"Certainly."

"If you have the ability to see forward in time and you know what's coming, do you also know other things?"

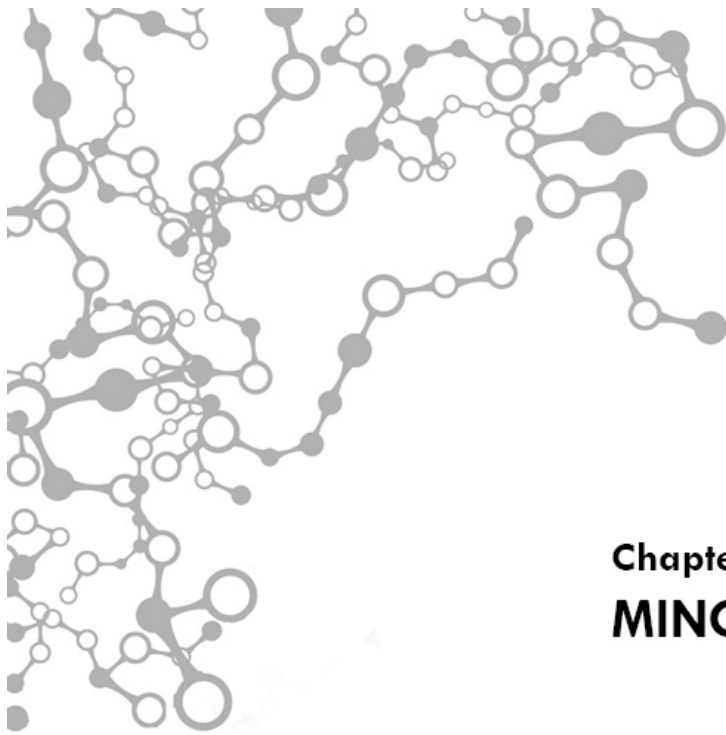
"First, we do not have the ability to see everything in the future, just small, abstract things. What is it specifically that you are asking?"

“What happens to us when we die? Are we gone for good? Nothing left?”

Har’loc looked at Cait for a long time, not answering her as Audula’s face came to his mind. Finally, he said, *“All I will say for now is that your existence is not how you perceive it to be. I cannot elaborate on that answer at the moment. But I promise you, I will answer it. I have to consider the best way to discuss it.”*



Over the next few hours, it was difficult for Cait to concentrate as she sat with her daughter, planning the wedding. She found her mind wandering back, mulling over matters that would affect not the union of two people but the salvation of her very race.



Chapter 7

MINGLI

Yultavar looked at Kalarian. “What’s the matter? You seem very down.”

“I have not had a reliable plan in almost a century. I just got back from the Middle East, and no matter what I do, nothing seems to work to cast the region deep into the throes of a full world war.”

“Don’t feel bad. You did a spectacular job in the early twentieth century. You replaced that weak-minded artist, disposing of his body in that well. Your teachings caused an uprising of nationalism in Austria and Germany, and you were massively successful in showing humans how easy it was to hate each other. You had everyone from the lowest intellect to the so-called geniuses following in your footsteps, actually believing that what they were doing was for the greater good. That kind of manipulation and brainwashing is no small feat, especially on the scale that you undertook.”

Kalarian sighed. “I suppose. But we are not here to have one good idea. We are here to wipe these creatures out. To remove them from this planet.

All I achieved was the eradication of a few million, and in turn, despite the death toll, it had unintended consequences. It united so many people against future plans like this that it will make them nearly impossible.”

“Not impossible. Look at all that I am achieving now. And I never would have thought of it had it not been for your genius during the Third Reich.”

Kalarian smiled. “You are a good friend.”

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September 21, 11:31 p.m.
Chiaoxi, Xingtai, Hebei, China

Mingli was startled awake by the dream that was suffocating him. He had fallen asleep while watching *Jie Wen Ying Xiong He Chu*, a documentary on the battle of Shang-hi. He found it mildly entertaining but apparently not entertaining enough. Mingli felt jolted. He rubbed his eyes and found he was sweating. Looking down at his hands, Mingli saw small red marks where the spikes had been in his dream, though they were fading now.

What the hell? How could something in my dream leave marks on my body? he thought.

There was a crash at the back of the house. He stood up, grabbed his cane and started toward the back door. “Lin? Is that you?” he called to his wife, with whom he had just celebrated their fiftieth wedding anniversary two days prior.

Walking down the hall toward the back door, he passed the bedroom where he saw his petite wife, Lin, sleeping soundly beneath the soft blanket, something that he should have been doing as well. Lin and Mingli had owned a studio just down the street that taught the ancient art of Chinese calligraphy. They had retired and sold their business to their son Xiang five years ago, a choice Mingli wasn’t entirely sure was the right one given how much of their time was spent sleeping, reading or walking. Lin was happy to have all this time to lounge around, but Mingli didn’t feel it was natural for a

man to have no purpose but to live. He was a man of action, and despite the fact that he was seventy-eight, he still wanted to feel useful. He craved a purpose.

Mingli slowly stepped up to the door and looked out the weathered, streaked window. A rat sat on the outer edge of a trashcan in the pale illumination given off by the porch light. The can had fallen off the small ledge, and all Mingli could see on the dimly lit back porch was a tail sticking out. He tapped on the pane of glass in the door but elicited no reaction. Lin took out her hearing aids when she slept, so he was unconcerned with waking her. He rapped harder on the glass and yelled at the rodent, "You! Hey, you, go away! I don't want you getting into my trash!"

The small animal didn't budge an inch. It didn't so much as even back out of the trash can. Mingli sighed and opened the door. He tapped gently on the trash can with his cane, as he didn't really want to hurt the animal or startle it too much. The rat stopped and poked its head around the corner of the metal can. It stood up on its hind legs and stared at Mingli. The old man smiled at the animal. "Why are you getting into my trash, hmm? There are so many other wonderful trash cans out there to find food in." He pointed toward the park adjacent to his home.

The rat looked in the direction he was pointing and then back at him, just continuing to stare at him. It was holding a crust of bread, nibbling it, then taking it away, then nibbling it, then taking it away, never once breaking eye contact with Mingli. Mingli felt as though there was something strangely deep in those little black spheres, as if there was more intelligence behind them than surely any animal could have. "Why are you looking at me like that? Hmm, little guy?" He smiled at the animal and sat on the step a few feet from it. "You don't seem very scared of me, do you?"

The rat stopped nibbling and dropped the food, sitting on its haunches. One of its little hands rested upon its small right knee. "*Mingli, I have come to*

talk to you," Mingli heard in his head, though it sounded as though it came from the direction of the rat.

Mingli cocked his head to the side and raised an eyebrow. "Did you just... *talk to me?*"

"Yes. I have come to speak to you."

Mingli set his cane down and rubbed his eyes. "I'm clearly not completely awake. I think a rat is talking to me," he mused to himself.

"I am talking to you, but I am no more a rat than you are. I am only appearing as a rat to you."

He shook his head. Here he sat on his back step talking to a rat.

"What do you want to talk to me about?" asked Mingli, skeptical that he was even hearing what he thought he was hearing.

"You have been chosen." The voice sounded like that of a young woman speaking perfect mandarin.

Mingli looked around to see if perhaps someone was playing a trick on him. There was no one, just his small yard and his rock garden to the left of the gate; it was partly lit by a streetlight that cast shadows from his fence across the garden, giving the darker area a zigzag appearance. He decided to take the rat for what it seemed: an omen.

"Chosen? For what? By whom?"

"I would like to discuss this with you elsewhere. Follow me." And the rat skittered toward the rock garden. The meticulously groomed garden was about two meters wide by one meter long. The rat stepped across the sand and onto the small rocks in the middle of the rock garden.

Mingli still sat on the step. "You want me to go to my rock garden?"

"Yes, please. Come." The rat patted a rock in the garden.

"This is ridiculous. I'm going inside. I clearly need more sleep...or I never woke up." He stood up and faced his door. A shudder went through him as he remembered the dream from which he had just awoken.

"I know about the dreams, Mingli. I'm here to help. Please, trust me."

The old man climbed the single step, opening the door. Then, very loudly, the rat said, *"Mingli, I know this is hard to accept, but I need your help as much as you need mine. Please. These people in your dream—they are real and they need you as well."* The voice sounded sad and distressed. The desperation made Mingli stop midstep, and he closed the wooden door, hung his head and reluctantly turned to look at the rat that had scurried back to the bottom of the steps. Its arms were held out wide. *"I am not going to hurt you. Your—our entire world is in grave danger. Please help us. Help Xiang. Help his wife. Help Chenguang."*

Growing up, his grandfather had told him stories of the Chinese zodiac and the Jade Emperor, who spoke with rats, dogs and cats, and of animals that had come to people who were important to Chinese culture in times of great need. So this rat speaking to him was only half as surprising to him as it might have been to others he knew. Mingli liked to keep an open mind but now was fearing the loss of his own sanity. He was shocked that the rat knew the names of his wife, son and granddaughter. "Who *are* you?" he asked incredulously.

"I promise all of this will make more sense if you will just follow me. Please. It won't take long, I promise."

Still extremely skeptical and a little frightened, he agreed. "Okay."

Mostly convinced that he was asleep and dreaming a very wild dream, he got up and walked slowly over to the garden. He stepped onto the small rocks next to the rat and looked down at it.

"Now what?"

"Now do not move."

Mingli looked around and suddenly felt himself getting smaller. He looked down and saw that he was in fact not getting smaller but was sinking into the ground. His feet had disappeared beneath his neatly arranged Zen garden, and sand was now up to his shins. Cane, legs and all seemed to be disappearing into the earth as if it were nothing but a mirage. When Mingli's head got down to ground level, he craned his neck up, afraid he might not be

able to breathe despite the fact that he could feel warm air below the surface. He felt a soft hand pet his sleeved arm in comfort. His vision went blank, and the hand gently grabbed his, squeezing it softly. Mingli could tell it was the delicate hand of a woman without even being able to see it, and strangely, it brought him comfort. He closed his eyes, keeping them tightly shut for about ten seconds, then opened them and saw the creature from his dreams standing before him, an alien-looking creature with silvery mirrored eyes and what appeared to be two small blue eyes above them. It was this creature who held his hand. Mingli took a step back, and a ripple of fear flowed through his aging bones, but he failed to let its hand go even in the face of his fear. He looked around him, extreme anxiety clearly plastered across his face. They were in a shaft about two meters in diameter, descending slowly and silently. *"Be calm, Mingli. I am not the being from your dreams,"* the creature said softly.

The walls were stone or perhaps glass, polished smooth. Unbeknownst to him, it was nearly identical to the shaft that Cait was lowering into at the same moment over five thousand miles away.

All his life, Mingli had taken great pride in his ability to see nature and the earth in all that surrounded him. Yet, here beneath his yard, he was staring into the face of something that was clearly not of nature or the earth, at least as far as he knew. Although fear was a strong motivating factor in his desire to let go of the creature's hand, there was a surreal peace in the moment. Holding its hand, he knew instinctually that it meant no harm to him. *Why would it hold my hand otherwise?* There was innocence, peace and a sense of youth in the creature's silvery eyes that surprised Mingli. He let go of its hand, stepping back to examine the creature better, but backed into the cool, smooth wall. Touching the wall, he noticed that although he was clearly moving down it, to feel it gave no friction. It was as if he were in a glass tube with solid walls, yet the rock face was clearly moving directly below his hand. Gradually, the floor beneath them lit up with a purple hue as the ceiling got

farther away and the shaft grew darker. Mingli looked back at the creature and studied it for a moment. It broke the silence.

"Do not be afraid. I will not harm you."

"What...are you?" he asked.

"I am ter'roc. My name is Kintara. I know my appearance may come as a shock, but you should know that I will not hurt you. I am here to help."

"You were in my dream."

"That was a species called the draklor. They were trying to frighten you into not talking to us."

Mingli said nothing; he just looked at the graceful creature in front of him.

"I'm Mingli," he finally said.

She smiled. *"Yes, I know."*

"I don't believe you. I think that *was* you in the dream," he stated forwardly, not taking his eyes from her.

"I know you do. I cannot prove to you at the moment that it was not me, but I can teach how to control the dreams."

"Control them?" he scoffed.

"The draklor enter your minds but mask themselves in our image. What the four of you who share the dreams do not know is that you have the power to alter the path the dream takes. It is all in your minds. I will teach you how to control this."

He studied her, trying to find any deception in her features or demeanor. A part of Mingli wanted to see malicious intent in her—in his dreams, someone who looked like her had tortured him and the other three people—however he could see nothing in her that showed she was telling anything but the truth. In a strange and alien way, he found her attractive. She had a beautiful grace about her and soft facial features. Kintara wore a tight white bodysuit that went from her neck down to her ankles. Her feet and hands were bare, and her light gray skin showed small purple blood vessels, just barely visible. The suit concealed two breasts, a broad rib cage and a narrow waist, which flowed into long, slender legs. She stood about eight inches

taller than Mingli, which he figured put her at about six feet tall. It seemed odd to him that he could find a creature so obviously not human to be attractive.

“You speak Mandarin?” he said, realizing that she had been speaking to him in his native tongue.

“I understand Mandarin, but I have not been speaking it. I actually cannot speak an auditory language. Although we do have vocal cords, we rarely use them. We are a telepathic species. We use our minds to communicate. You understand my thoughts as Mandarin.”

“I suppose that would make it easier, not having to learn a verbal language.”

Kintara smiled. “Yes.” He felt something odd, a deep familiarity as if he had known her for a very long time.

The floor came to a gradual halt. He looked up and could no longer see the white ceiling at all. “How deep are we?”

“A little more than thirteen kilometers.”

“And you just happened to have this shaft in my backyard?”

“Nothing is coincidence, Mingli,” she replied softly.

A cryptic but logical statement, he felt. “I still don’t understand what you want from me.”

“There is a great danger headed toward this planet. We want to help you defend it. We are choosing 704 people to serve in a group that will make decisions for your people. You are to be one of these people.”

“I’m an old man. I couldn’t possibly be of any help to you. My life has been lived.”

“Your remaining time in this world is not as short as you might think. You have wisdom and experience that the others do not, and you are much older than you might think.”

Mingli thought about this for a moment. There was a part of him that wasn’t willing to accept any of this. It all just seemed too outlandish, too

dreamlike. Until the past few months, his dreams had always been peaceful, often about his wife and children when they were younger. There was nothing peaceful about this experience or any of the dreams he had experienced over recent months. On the contrary, he found it unnerving, partly because he seemed to be accepting all of this and partly because it felt like a tremendous amount of pressure was being put upon him. He was not a dignitary, government agent or even a police officer. He was a man of peace, solitude and tranquility. *What do I know about helping to defend the world?*

“I don’t know. It’s a lot to take in,” he said finally.

“Come, let us go inside for a few minutes. I will return you to your home shortly.”

She touched the wall, and a corridor appeared as if it had been there all along. *Perhaps it was*, Mingli thought.

As they walked through the tunnel, which seemed to stretch on forever, Mingli noticed how clean it smelled. He could smell almost nothing at all, which was strange for him. He had a very keen sense of smell and often could tell the exact type and density of ink that was used in his calligraphy studio based on its scent.

Even Kintara had almost no odor at all, another aspect that reassured him that she was telling the truth. In the dreams he had before, the creature had a horrible, malevolent odor of death and decay. It was almost too much for him to bear. *Why doesn’t she have an odor? All living things have an odor.* “Kintara, it’s very clean in here,” he said, hoping for an explanation.

“Yes, we value cleanliness. I know you are curious about our lack of scent. When you came down through the portal, you were also cleaned of any foreign contaminants and possible biological organisms that can cause harm to the ishkan. We do not have sweat glands or release oil as humans do, so we do not have much of a...smell.”

“If you don’t have sweat glands or oil pores on your skin, how do you keep it from drying out?”

“*Drying out?*” Her tone made him feel foolish, as if what he had said was completely absurd.

“Yes, eventually your skin would dry out, I would think.”

Mingli was surprised when Kintara stopped and held out her hand. He looked at it, puzzled.

“*Go ahead, touch it. We have a thin layer of salinif on the epidermal layer. It acts as a moisture barrier. I know that humans require constant replenishment of water; we, however, only need water once every few weeks.*”

Mingli reached out and touched her hand. It was very warm and smooth. He had expected it to be cooler. There was a slight tingle when he touched her hand, and tiny sparks passed between their skin. It felt almost as if electricity were flowing through it. Mingli could almost sense her femininity coursing through her skin. He let go, embarrassed.

“What is that? That feeling?”

“*That is the amoculem. It is a form of empathic transmission. It is one of the ways we express ourselves. Only opposite genders can feel it,*” said Kintara.

“It’s...interesting.”

“*I don’t think ‘interesting’ is the word you were thinking.*” She smiled and turned to continue down the hall.

She was right. The word that first came to his mind was “erotic.”

“*The ishkan’s skin is also like mine, smooth. But it has a much harder barrier on its epidermal layers.*”

“Ishkan—you keep using that word. What is it?”

Kintara pointed at the wall, ceiling and floor. “*You are inside of the Ushala ishkan, a living being like you and I.*”

“I’m inside of a living creature?”

“*Yes, but the ishkan is much more than a creature. It cares for us, carries us. It is one with us.*”

She stopped walking and touched the wall. Symbols illuminated blue beneath her hand, and a door slid open. She stepped inside with Mingli. The

room was large and spherical with ceilings stretching up at least five meters. It had a small table and two chairs on either side. As with the room that Cait was in, all of the furniture seemed to extrude from the floor. Mingli walked over to a chair. It didn't appear very comfortable, just a simple stool. No sooner had he thought how uncomfortable the chair appeared than it changed to nearly the same shape as the comfortable chair in his living room.

"What happened? How did the chair change shape?" he asked Kintara, now only mildly surprised by his rapidly changing views of this new world.

"Ushala sensed that you were not comfortable with the chair it had created. It altered it for you," she replied in a straightforward tone.

"Interesting. Where did you find this ishkan?"

"Find it?" Kintara asked, sitting down across from the table. *"May I get you something to drink?"*

"Tea please."

A teapot identical to the one that Mingli had in his kitchen along with two cups phased into view on top of the table. *"How did you do that?"*

"Ushala possesses a material fabricator. It can create whatever we want at will." She began pouring two cups of tea. *"Concerning your question about where Ushala came from, we did not find the ishkan. It has always been with us. It has been a part of us, ever since the beginning."*

"Does it speak to you?"

"No, but we can sense its needs, and it senses ours. It provides us with everything we need to live, as well as transportation, and helps us with research. We in turn give it carbon dioxide, warmth and compassion."

Mingli took a sip of his tea; it was exactly the way he liked it.

"Does it ever get sick or die?" he asked.

"Yes, it is a living being, the same as you or I. We care for it when it gets sick and comfort it when it is sad. Their thoughts and emotions are much more complex than ours. The ishkan live much longer than we do, but when they die, we must relocate to a new one. However, its consciousnesses are transferred to the new ishkan."

“How long does it live?”

“You certainly have many questions. Unfortunately, I do not have time to answer all of them, though I will answer a few. Our ishkan is 64,315 years old. There are older ishkan, but this one is one of the oldest here on Earth.”

“Sixty-four thousand years? How old are you, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“I am 3,510. You humans put a great value on age, do you not?”

“Age is what defines some of our existence. To grow to an old age means that you have lived a full life and can teach others.”

Kintara placed her hands on the table and looked at Mingli. Before he had a chance to ask another question, she changed the subject. *“This threat I spoke of will have a devastating impact on your planet—our planet. We will be convening a meeting in three days on the island of Oahu in what you call the United States. I want you to be at this meeting. You may bring whoever you like. We will take care of transporting you.”*

Mingli was silent, both in mind and voice. He was trying to put this all together. Finally, he said, “How will I explain this to my wife?”

“Sleep on what I have told you and I will contact you tomorrow,” she said simply.

She led him out of the room and down the hall. They ascended up into his rock garden, where it was still pitch-black outside save for the light on his porch.

“Good night, Kintara.”

“Good night, Mingli.”

Mingli got as far as his door and turned back to look toward Kintara. She was gone. He went inside, hung his cane on his chair and got into his pajamas. Then he got into bed and spooned his sweet angel, Lin. She instinctively grabbed his arm and wrapped it around her, continuing to sleep.

Mingli dreamed of his wife.

He and Lin were on a hilltop not far from their home, sitting on a blanket. Lin had made his favorite New Year's dish, whole chicken soup. He had packed a container of it and brought it with them. They sat looking down at the village and the calligraphy studio that they had just purchased two days ago, which sat at the base of the green hillside.

Once their meals were dished out, they started to eat, and Lin said, "I'm proud of you, Mingli. I'm proud of both of us. We have accomplished our dream; we have our own studio."

"I'm proud of you, my wife. My bride." He smiled at her. "Without *you*, none of this would be possible."

"Nonsense. Without *you* I would not be the woman I am today." They kissed gently and continued eating their soup and admiring the view as the sun set. Mingli glanced at a branch on a nearby tree and saw a single nightingale looking down upon them.



The nightingale sang from Mingli's window. Half-awake, he recognized the same birdsong he had heard in his dream. He opened his eyes not more than five inches from his window to see the small brown-and-white bird watching him. It looked nearly the same as that bird from so long ago.

"Lin, wake up. Look, it's a nightingale," he whispered, but she didn't stir.

"Lin?" He tapped her shoulder gently. He sat up a bit and looked down at her to find she was not breathing. His wife of fifty years had passed during the night as he held her. The nightingale sang again, and he petted her white hair and turned back toward the window, looking at the bird, a tear rolling down his cheek. The bird looked at him for a long moment before flying from the window.



Part Two
THE DAWN



Chapter 8

DISGUST

“What has been the most difficult for you to deal with in regard to this assignment?”

Yultavar pondered this. “By far the length. I just want it to be over with.”

“The length I can handle. The smell is what’s been the hardest for me to deal with. The stench of these creatures, the putrid reek. They smelled horrid when we first arrived, and seven hundred years later they still stink. If I had my way, I would incinerate every last one and do a dance around them while I watched them burn.”

“Humans. They are revolting creatures. You’re correct—they do smell terrible. It’s been a nice addition to the dreams, to show them just how disgusting they smell.”

They both laughed.

“Did you see the school shooting in the news the other day and the church shooting the week before?”

“Yes.”

Yultavar patted Kalarian on the back. “That was my handiwork, I’m proud to say. I convinced them to do it. Shooting them all. They are so easy to manipulate, especially the mentally deficient ones, and there is a tremendous amount of them. What’s even better is that these stupid creatures cradle and care for their sick and defective ones rather than destroy them. Clearly survival of the fittest doesn’t exist in this society any longer, which just proves how important it is that they all be destroyed, every last one.”

Kalarian nodded his head in agreement.

“Watching him shoot them at the school,” Yultavar continued, “seeing them destroy their own kind at such a young age—it’s so refreshing, liberating. Perhaps there is hope for us yet.”

A big smile came across his face. He shivered with excitement.

His old friend laughed. “You get exhilarated about the little things, don’t you? I couldn’t agree more. Stop them before they ever have a chance at a future.”

Yultavar sat, staring down at his hands, hands which had been disguised long ago to look like those of his enemy, those that had encroached on their birthright. “I think this has dragged on long enough. These are small measures, small changes to a much larger landscape. An avalanche is coming, and I don’t want us to be at the bottom of the mountain when it arrives. We need to take drastic action, and we need to take it now.”

“You know that I agree with you. But, as we both know, having only two of us does have its limits,” replied Kalarian.

“I have a plan.”

“You always do.”



Chapter 9

FIRST CONTACT

September 22, 7:20 a.m.
Swampscott, Massachusetts, USA

“So this is it, huh?” Penny asked, looking at the concrete opening, unimpressed. A subtle wind blew across the culvert, creating a low whistling tone.

“Yup,” Heidi said with absolute certainty.

Listening to her confident response, a bit of Penny’s reluctance fell, but she found she had to dig down deep inside to her inner child to stomach the idea of crawling into a dark storm drain. “Okay, let’s do this before I change my mind. And Heidi, if I see a white rabbit in there, I’m holding you personally responsible.”

Heidi laughed. She could tell that her mother was not yet a believer but was on a willing adventure with her daughter whom she loved and wanted to

understand more, and for now, that was good enough. “Okay,” she said. “Let’s go.”

The two crawled for several minutes, crossed the junction room and journeyed for another ten minutes to reach the large crack in the concrete. Just as she had told her mother, there was the opening to the cave.

Heidi stepped through the opening first, followed closely by Penny. Both crouched down within the small space. Heidi flipped on her flashlight to illuminate the back of the cavern, eager to show her mother what she had found there the previous day.

There was a wall but *only* a wall—nothing else.

“But—it was *here*,” Heidi protested.

She looked so crestfallen that her mother wanted to reassure her in some way. “Are you sure? Could we have missed something? Maybe it’s farther up the tunnel?”

Heidi turned to face her mother squarely. She couldn’t believe it, but there was just no denying that there was nothing but a wall there at the back of the cavern. Still not wanting to accept that fact, however, she walked over to the wall and brushed some dirt off its surface. The wall felt like solid rock, cool and damp to the touch.

It was then that she heard it, the voice inside her head. “*Who is that with you?*” she heard Sam’loc say in her mind.

“Sam’loc!” she cried, overcome with relief and excitement.

Startled by her daughter’s exclamation, Penny spun around, but there was no one else in the small, damp room with them. “Who are you talking to, Heidi? Who’s there?”

“You don’t *hear* him?” Heidi pleaded.

Penny raised an eyebrow, puzzled. “I don’t hear anything at all.”

She yelled out to her new friend. “It’s okay, Sam’loc—it’s my mother. Her name is Penny.”

As if the disappointing cold wall were only a mirage, the wall in front of them faded from view. To Heidi's delight, on the other side of the threshold stood Sam'loc.

"*You are Penny?*" both Heidi and Penny heard him say in their heads.

Even though this was what Heidi had told her they would see, Penny was disbelieving, and stumbled back against the rear wall, stammering out her reply. "Y-yes. I-I'm Heidi's mother. But how did you know we were here?"

"*We sensed it. Follow me.*"

The two followed Sam'loc down the long corridor toward the ishkan. Penny turned to Sam'loc, still trying to take in and believe what she was seeing, and asked, "Heidi told me you created humans—is that really true?"

"*That is partly accurate, yes. We blended some of our own DNA with that of two native hominids which your archeologists know as Neanderthal and Ardipithecus kadabba to create what is now known as Homo sapiens.*"

Penny saw that Sam'loc had a hobbled sort of stride, and Heidi noted that, unlike the previous day, he was now using an ornately carved black cane.

Penny hesitated at first, then said, "I have to ask. No one—at least no one we are aware of today—knows about your people. So why now? Why choose to reveal yourselves to us?"

"*Our meeting is not happenstance. We led Heidi down to the entrance. The time of the Equipage has come,*" he said, as if that should answer all their questions.

"The Equipage? What is that?"

"*Your questions will be answered soon. Just follow.*"

Penny continued to press Sam'loc. "I don't understand—if you can talk to us in our heads and read our minds, why not just do that? Isn't that enough? Can't you let us know about this Equi—whatever it is—through our minds?"

"*Our range is limited. Discussion allows for more detail than we can retrieve by attempting to probe minds. Humans are conflicted creatures. You think one thing, yet you speak another. You are still developing as a species, and you have not yet reached your full potential. Plus, it would be...rude.*"

“Our full potential as a species? And just when will that be? Rude? What do you mean it’s rude?” asked Penny, irritated and slightly offended.

“It could be some time yet before you reach your full potential, however, some of you are reaching an evolutionary cusp in your development. It would be rude to simply probe your mind or inject thoughts without your consent. We consider it a violation to enter one’s mind without their permission. It is punishable to do such a thing.”

Heidi was instantly interested in what sort of punishment could be dispensed by an alien race. “Punishment? What kind of punishment?”

“Well, it depends on the offense, but it can be as small as engram removal or as severe as full eradication,” Sam’loc replied casually as he continued to walk.

“Eradication?” Heidi inquired.

He looked toward Heidi. *“We would wipe the individual’s mind. Completely.”*

“Whoa.”

Heidi walked along in silence, thinking about everything Sam’loc had said. “What did you mean when you said that some of us were on the cusp?” she asked. “The cusp of what?”

“I am not prepared or authorized to answer that question. It would be more appropriate for my shev’lar to answer it.”

It appeared their discussion, at least for now, was over. The threesome walked together down the corridor within the ishkan. The closer they got to their destination, the more Heidi could feel an aura. She knew who was waiting for her somewhere nearby. She knew that when Sam’loc opened a door just down the hall, Cait, Mingli and Brian would all be on the other side and that she would instantly know them. She could feel them even now, could sense not only their thoughts but their heartbeats, their very life force. It was as if she had known what it felt like to be in their presence all her life. Possibly forever. When Sam’loc stopped abruptly and softly touched the wall, a hidden panel slid up, opening to allow them in.

Inside the doorway was an expansive room. High ceilings reached up over twenty feet, and there was a large oval table sitting in the middle of the room. The room itself was an oblong sphere with walls that glowed a bluish-purple, creating a soothing aura.

At the large table sat four ter'roc that Heidi did not recognize, and, just as Heidi had predicted, between them sat Cait, Mingli and Brian. The group had all been talking when they walked in but immediately stopped upon their entry. Sam'loc led Heidi and her mother into the room and motioned toward the table.

As Sam'loc, Penny and Heidi approached the table, three stools emerged from the floor. Heidi and Penny looked at the makeshift chairs, unsure whether to sit or not. Sam'loc sat down without hesitation as the two of them looked on skeptically.

One of the ter'roc across the table wore a white dress and a detailed cap on her head that resembled an old nurse's hat but with textured scallops on the rim. A grave elderly woman's voice that reminded Penny of Kate Mulgrew said, *"Please be seated,"* and the ter'roc gestured to the stools. Penny and Heidi did as they were requested and took a seat.

"My name is Ranash. I am shev'lar of the Praethor ishkan and the controller here. Sam'loc has told us about you." There was a proper, elegant, almost British poise in her voice, though there was no accent. Her voice also held a tenor of trust that Heidi and Penny found appealing and soothing. She turned to others at the table. *"You no doubt recognize Brian of Australia, Mingli of China and Cait of England. This is Shev'lar Grenethda, also from Australia"*—Grenethda nodded her head—*"Shev'lar Kintara from China"*—Kintara smiled—*"and the honorable Shev'lar Har'loc."*

Heidi bowed her head to Har'loc. *"Bejahl, Shev'lar Har'loc,"* everyone in the room heard her say telepathically.

Heidi lifted her head and looked up. Everyone was staring at her. The humans looked confused, and the ter'roc blinked in disbelief, including

Har'loc. "Did I do something wrong?"

"Why did you say that, child?" Har'loc asked.

"Say what? I didn't say anything. I mean, I thought something. It was more like...a memory."

"You just recited the Sen'pai, a greeting that is reserved for our most honored leaders."

"How did I know that?"

"I am not sure. We know that eventually you may end up having some greater telepathic capabilities from the Convergence, but to what end we are not yet certain."

Brian interrupted, "What exactly is the Convergence? Grenethda mentioned that to me once, but what is it exactly?"

"The Convergence is a piece of your DNA that we have engineered. It creates a random capability in each of you. Heidi's is manifesting itself in the form of telepathy. You will all discover your power in time. Ranash, please continue."

The woman in the cap nodded. *"As you wish."* She looked at Heidi and Penny. *"I am sure you have many questions for me."*

"Questions? Oh yes—you have no idea," said Penny, searching for where to begin.

Ranash nodded slowly. *"Oh, but I do. I have sat at this table hundreds of times, answering the same questions you are thinking at this very moment. I do not mind, however. You are our children, and we wish to hear of your progress."*

"About that children thing—I'm not so sure I buy into that," Penny stated in protest.

"You are not required to believe us. It is...what it is," Ranash said calmly. *"You can question whether the sun is in the sky or not, but it does not change the fact that it is there."*

Heidi decided to jump in. "First, I'd like to know—just how did you get this ship or whatever it is underground? Why isn't there some kind of tunnel left behind from your burrowing through the ground?"

“Our technological capabilities are no doubt...difficult for you to understand. We have energy weapons that have the capability to cut a hole through the surface in order to bury the ishkan, but we also have the capability to shift our atomic structure out of phase so that we can pass through matter. And there are in fact tunnels leading down to each of the ishkan, but their entrances are well-concealed.”

Ranash fixed her eyes on Heidi for a moment. Heidi could sense more than just an attempt to make eye contact. It was as if she were expecting something from Heidi in return for her answer. Penny asked a question about the rock wall in the cavern, but Heidi failed to hear it as a low-pitched hum reverberated in her ears and Ranash continued to look at her.

Finally, Ranash looked toward Penny again and the hum stopped. The silence was almost deafening in its own right.

“Exactly. Some of us must leave the planet to return home or to replenish supplies. We possess small scout vessels that we use to exit here and return underground in.”

“You have to realize how tough this is to take in. It’s like this whole other world exists just one step out of sight,” said Heidi’s mother. “And just how far underground are we anyway?”

Ranash looked purposefully over at Sam’loc and the other three ter’roc, consulting silently. Their mirrored eyes glanced back and forth to each other, blinking in silent but sure communication.

“A little more than seven miles beneath the surface.”

Heidi was extremely skeptical. “Seven miles? No way we walked seven miles!”

“Not all that you see is as it seems,” Ranash said.

Sam’loc clarified. *“You actually stepped through a portal between the cavern and the ishkan.”*

“But I don’t remember stepping through any portal,” said Penny.

Ranash replied, *“I assure you, you did. You see, we must keep the ishkan hidden deep enough that there is no risk of it being located. Also, the temperature here is*

more comfortable for the ishkan, and we can sustain ourselves easily here with the energy emitted by the planet's core."

Again, Ranash looked at Heidi piercingly, seeming to indicate once more that she was expecting something from her. "What?" Heidi whispered toward Ranash, just barely audible, but was interrupted by Penny's continuing barrage of questions.

"Where is your world? Surely you aren't originally from here," probed Penny.

Ranash looked toward Penny. *"We are originally from a world called Nirgal. We have come to think of Earth as our world since we were the first sentient species here."*

"*Liar!*" Heidi heard someone scream in her head. A male voice. She looked around the room to see who might be casting the thought. *"You're a fucking LLAR! A LEECH! A PARASITE! Alpharians are the only native species!"* Heidi's eyes were growing wide with concern, and her head was hurting with a piercing pain that was being directed into her temples. She grabbed the side of her head and thought hard, trying to dull the pain and the throbbing thought. Who was saying this? Why would they attack her like this? She saw Brian, Cait and Mingli looking at her with concern. Cait, who was closest, reached out and placed a hand on her arm. It was the first time in real life that any of the Equipage had ever been able to comfort each other.

Ranash was continuing to explain to her mother, clearly unaware of the voice that Heidi was hearing, *"You see, Nirgal was similar to your world, but its atmosphere was destroyed long ago by an asteroid. It devastated our planet. There are still about half a million ter'roc that live completely underground there. They can no longer live on the surface."*

Ranash glanced toward Heidi, noticing Heidi's torment for the first time. She looked at Har'loc, who was staring directly at Heidi. *"Shev'lar?"*

"I am attempting to block a transmission. Someone is directing an attack at Heidi right now."

“What? Stop them!” Penny blurted out.

Ranash held up her hand. “*Silence, please.*”

“She’s *my* daughter! Make them stop! Please!” Penny was frantic. Tears welled up in her eyes.

Ranash reached across the table and gently took Penny’s hand. Penny suddenly felt a flood of emotions and memories. She saw everything that had actually been happening to her daughter over the last few months. She experienced the dreams she had endured. Penny saw through the eyes of Har’loc and other ter’roc as they tried to stop the draklor from transmitting the nightmares to the Equipage. She felt the ter’roc’s empathy and their sincere desire to stop the torment that her daughter and the rest of the Equipage had gone through. Ranash let go of Penny’s hand.

“I’m sorry. I... I didn’t know,” Penny replied to the onslaught of thoughts presented to her.

Finally, thanks to Har’loc, the attack against Heidi subsided.

Heidi bowed her head for a moment, took a breath, and said, “Okay, you need to answer some questions.”

Har’loc nodded.

“Who are the alpharians?” Heidi asked.

Har’loc sighed. “They were a species that evolved on Earth long before humans did. They died out, unfortunately, killed themselves in a war. But how the draklor know this, I have no idea.”

Heidi knew her mom had a ton of questions, and she knew she needed to appease her after what had just happened. She looked to her and nodded that she could ask a few questions of her own.

“Why are they doing this? Why are they attacking my daughter of all people?”

“I do not know how they know that Heidi is what she is, but they are aware of the strength that Heidi possesses. Heidi is...” Ranash thought for a moment, trying to put it in terms that might make sense to the concerned mother.

“Heidi is on the edge of an evolutionary change for humanity. She embodies what all of humanity may become, and it scares the draklor. They can sense this power, this change within her, and they know that she alone has the power to lead the Equipage to their annihilation.”

“I don’t understand why it has to be Heidi. Why does it have to be my little girl?” Penny pleaded.

“That, unfortunately, we do not have the answer to. I am sorry. But I can assure you, we will do everything we can to protect her.”

Penny decided to refocus her questions on the origins of their new allies. “How far away is Nirgal?” Penny asked.

“It is located here in this solar system. Your planet and ours share the same star,” replied Ranash.

“Wait a minute—how could another world with life exist without us knowing anything about it?”

“You do know about it. You just do not know its name. You do not yet possess the technical capabilities to discover life on our world.” She glanced toward Heidi and then back at Penny.

Heidi had the distinct feeling that she should be in on some secret that the ter’roc at the table knew but didn’t want her mother to know about. Heidi glanced at the others in the Equipage, and Cait shrugged.

Penny sat staring at Ranash for a few seconds. Then she looked to her daughter, sensing the same divided interest in the conversation.

“They’re from Mars,” said Heidi knowingly, still looking directly at Ranash. “How did I know that?”

Ranash continued without answering. *“We are from the fourth planet, which was once a sister planet to this one.”*

The ter’roc looked back and forth at each other, possibly talking telepathically. The low humming continued in Heidi’s ears, and then she heard a voice fade in, saying, *“...really necessary to go into this much detail with*

the humans?" It was a female voice, but Heidi couldn't identify it as Ranash, Grenethda or Kintara.

"They are going to have many questions. If we do not answer them now, we will have to answer them soon. We should trust Penny and the Equipage. We know that Heidi is the chosen one. If we do not show her the trust she deserves, then we will never accomplish anything," said Ranash.

"Yes, Shev'lar, we have consensus," many overlapping voices said in unison.

Ranash glanced at Heidi and then directed her answer toward Penny. *"Yes, Mars."*

"Martians? Seriously?" Penny replied.

"This one is skeptical. We are getting nowhere," said the unseen female ter'roc, clearly irritated.

"Silence! There will be order," Ranash said curtly without altering her facial expression at all.

Heidi's eyes had grown wide with the realization that she was hearing their private conversations. Ranash, seeing this change in Heidi's facial expressions, looked at her again. *"She hears us,"* she said.

"Nonsense. I told you before, she does not have that capability. No humans do," said the unseen ter'roc.

Ranash looked directly at Heidi again.

"You do hear us, do you not?" Ranash asked.

Heidi didn't say anything or move. At the moment, she wasn't sure she wanted them to know the truth. Ranash continued looking at Heidi, saying nothing.

"Enough of this," said the female ter'roc. *"I want the humans to leave, now. I am not comfortable."*

Har'loc broke into the argument and said aloud so even Penny and the Equipage could hear, *"I do not find it respectable to question one's shev'lar, nor do I find it appropriate to speak so that others cannot hear us. This is not how one gains trust among new friends."* His voice was clearly agitated.

Now everyone at the table heard the overlapping voices. *"Agreed. We have consensus. Our apologies, Shev'lar."*

Ranash folded her four-fingered hands patiently on the table. *"Perhaps if I showed you, it might be easier?"* she inquired.

"It might. But how—how are you going to do that?" Penny asked.

"The same way Sam'loc showed your daughter," Ranash explained.

Penny looked at Heidi, wary of whatever it was they were about to do.

Heidi nodded. "It's okay, Mom. It won't hurt. It's just sort of...weird."

Penny paused for a few seconds in consideration. "Okay," she agreed. "In for a penny, in for a pound."

Penny suddenly saw herself and Ranash standing in a space with no boundaries—no ceiling, walls or floor—everything a pure bright white. She felt instantly dizzy and stumbled.

"The dizzy feeling will subside. Humans are not accustomed to telepathic visual immersions. Just take a deep breath," Ranash said.

"Where are we?"

"You are in the Compound. From here, I can show you the past, the present and the future—think of it as a waiting room for your mind. First, let us look at our physical location."

The space around them faded. They now stood levitating in a tube of stone with smooth surfaces. Penny temporarily lost her bearings and her balance until she realized that, despite her levitation, she was still standing on a solid surface. She and Ranash continued levitating within this tube as it expanded downward and upward. The bottom of the tube suddenly became piercingly bright.

Ranash pointed below. *"That is the interior of your planet. It is what you call the mantle, and it is five miles below us. We chose this location so that we can harness the geothermal energy that remains hidden within."*

Next, Ranash pointed above them to a pinhead-sized light. *"That is the surface,"* she said.

“Where are we exactly? I’m confused—is this imaginary?” Penny asked.

“This tunnel actually exists several hundred feet from where we are. We use it to leave the ishkan in our scout vessels.”

“How do you prevent the lava from escaping to the surface when you exit?”

“We use an energy barrier. The technology is beyond your understanding...at least for the moment.”

The room faded back to its original pure white form.

Penny’s head was spinning. “You said before that you know the future?”

“Time is not linear as you perceive,” said Ranash. “Past, present and future exist simultaneously, together and in harmony. One dimension cannot exist without the other. The future cannot be defined without having the existence of a past. To say that we can see the future would not be accurate. We can see glimpses of possible outcomes of the future. At least we used to be able to.”

“Used to?”

“Our ability to see future outcomes has diminished greatly since we settled on Earth. We are not certain if the lack of this ability is related to the planet or is simply an evolutionary change in our species.”

Penny thought about all the power that the ter’roc had and finally said, “Before you show me anything else, I want to ask a question that’s weighing on my mind.”

Ranash slowly folded her arms, looking awkward due to her lengthy appendages and overly sinewy legs. Apparently this was a comfortable pose for her. *“Very well. You want to know why we do not interfere with the actions of humans, which are often less than admirable.”*

“Well, yes. I want to know why you tolerate the horrible things people do to each other on this planet. How do you explain allowing the horrors of war, starvation, poverty, genocide?” she asked.

“It is neither our place nor our right to interfere with the development of our children. To be a creator...a...parent? It is one thing. To interfere with the development of the child does not help the child grow.”

Ranash paused, considering her words, and then continued. *"We see you as an evolution of ourselves. We believe that when your species reaches its full potential, as it will inevitably, you will be capable of much more than we ever could be. It is our job to watch over and nurture you, but the purpose of a civilization—any civilization—is personal and collective growth. Even if the learning comes at great cost, it is more important than you can understand that you learn from your own mistakes. We have intervened a few times in your history when we felt that you were in danger of threatening your existence, but we prefer a spectator role in your development. We cannot simply destroy that which is bad or that which harms humanity on a small scale because that harm is ultimately a teacher of sorts."*

Penny was agitated, and her tone took on a combative quality. "Small scale?" she scoffed. "Millions die from hunger and the ravages of war all the time."

"Yes. Hundreds of millions. On a planet where there are billions of people, this is an acceptable loss. Humanity must learn to help itself over time, to continue on and make more effective, humane choices. Our interference would do nothing whatsoever to teach humans how to cope with their own problems. It is, in part, the ability for the positive to balance the negative that encourages a civilization to evolve. Hunger and strife are part of the equation for effective evolution. The ter'roc have these struggles in our own civilization even now, as do most other civilizations. If you are individuals with free will, capable of making your own choices, there will always be conflict. That conflict, however, is a necessary and vital part of growth."

Penny was bordering on anger. Ranash's words sounded cold and heartless. "No. I refuse to believe that it is impossible to achieve peace in this world and experience growth at the same time. We are an intelligent people, after all."

"Humanity's concept of peace. It is a pleasing thought. However, global peace can ultimately be achieved only through world domination, and even then, there would be peace only for those who dominate, not for those dominated. What you call world peace... It is nothing more than an illusion. Striving to achieve world balance is

what is doable and most important—the ability to handle the good and the bad in stride, always moving forward and growing toward a more highly evolved species.”

Penny considered Ranash’s perspective, trying to remain objective, and eased up a bit in her resistance. “I suppose you *have* had more time to think about all this than we have, but it is extremely hard for me to accept that this can just be the status quo.”

“Our people and culture are ancient by your understanding. Trust me, even we have not fully come to terms with this.”

The space surrounding Penny faded to emerald-green grass with massive trees unlike any she had ever seen. These heavy trees had twisted, curling branches, and, instead of leaves attached to the ends, something resembling feathers splayed in multiple directions.

A comforting breeze enfolded Penny and Ranash, and a deep turquoise sky washed overhead. To Penny’s nervousness and delight, they were levitating high above the ground, lifting to a height of over eight hundred feet, soaring above the trees.

Penny could now see a group of enormous buildings in the distance stretching high into the sky, all built from some multicolored stone. The buildings resembled castle-like structures but were unlike the castles she had seen in photos. Two extraordinary high, jagged mountains loomed behind the buildings in the distance, creating a spectacular panoramic visual.

Ranash was still. *“This...is Nirgal,”* she said softly. *“It has not looked like this for nearly two hundred thousand years. I was not yet born when this memory was created.”*

“So then—how are you able to show me all of this?”

“Because,” she answered, *“we all share the same memories, passed down through every generation.”*

“Just how old is your species?”

“The ter’roc as a species are just a little over two billion years old, by your terms.”

“Two *billion* years old?” Penny responded, reluctant to believe what she’d just heard, barely able to perceive such a length of time.

“Your species will be around for a very long time as well...we hope. Your people are in their infancy.”

Penny stood, levitating peacefully above a field of grass that seemed to be pulsating as if it had an energy all its own, an energy coming in from far away and continuing on beyond their visual plane. This new world faded, and other scenes faded in and out before her eyes. She felt hypnotized. Her mind flooded with colorful, active images—stars flying past, groups of people moving across desert plains in the Middle East, Chinese soldiers warring violently with swords on horses, Aborigines sprinting through fields hunting herds of emus.

Abruptly, Ranash caused the images to vanish, and all that remained was a bright, perfectly round moon flying through space.

No—not a moon. Something else. What is that? Penny wondered.

A feeling of foreboding overcame her. “Oh my god,” she said. “That’s an asteroid, isn’t it?”

“No. Look closer.”

Penny studied the flying sphere, arriving at a sudden conclusion. The massive ball of light was soaring toward a blue sphere—it was headed for Earth and nearly four times the size of the moon.

Penny’s voice was edged in fear. “What *is* that thing?”

“That,” she said, “is our mutual problem. It is a species known as the draklor. The draklor are nomads from a system seventy light-years away. They are parasites, traveling from one system to another, consuming all of the planet’s natural resources and destroying all life as a result. Then they move on to another system.”

Penny was speechless.

Ranash responded with a voice that sounded old, weathered and weary. *“Upon arrival, the draklor plan to eradicate the entire population of our planet and*

consume all of its resources. There is nothing your species can do to defend themselves against an enemy of this magnitude."

Penny stood silently for a moment, stunned by this declaration. "There's nothing we can do? Nothing at all? We have great numbers, sophisticated weaponry, and a common enemy now—surely earth will unite to fight them off—"

Ranash interrupted, *"Alone you will not. They have the power to destroy entire continents full of life in a matter of a few minutes all without ever landing or even entering the atmosphere—before you even sense their presence. You simply do not have the defensive weaponry. Your technology at present is...considerably less advanced."*

Penny responded with unbridled fear in her voice. "So *why* are you telling me all of this?"

"As I said before, you are our children. We do not wish for you to perish nor do we wish ourselves to be eradicated as would certainly be the outcome. We will help you defend this planet. We will stop this invasion, together."

In the blink of an eye, Penny was once again sitting at the table with her daughter. Although her head was still swimming from the suddenness of her reappearance, she blurted out, "Heidi, we are in serious trouble."

Heidi looked at her blankly.

"Please don't tell me you saw none of what I just saw. You honestly didn't see *any* of that?" Penny asked.

"See any of *what*? All you said was 'okay,'" Heidi said.

The soft voice of Ranash was heard clearly in their minds. *"As I said, your understanding of time is...incomplete."*

Ranash looked at Heidi, Mingli, Cait and Brian and showed them the same ship, explaining the situation in the mental blink of an eye.

Cait turned, looking at the floor like she had to throw up. Heidi turned and looked at Ranash, signs of anguish splashed across her face. "How long do we have?"

"They will be here in approximately four years."

"How can we possibly defend ourselves against an invasion like that?" Heidi asked.

"We can do it together. We will help you to defend the planet, but we must work together. You, Heidi, are the key to the group that we will put together."

"Wait, what? Why am I the key?"

"You are on the edge of an evolutionary change in your species. Something you cannot yet grasp. If you are willing to help, that is what matters most. You are the chosen one."

Heidi thought about this for a moment. The result was several questions floating around in her head that she was either reluctant to ask or simply unable to assemble into coherent sentences. "And if I am not willing to help? I'm fourteen. I'm just a kid. I've got a life. I've got plans, friends, family." Heidi gestured to her mother.

"Your destiny is your destiny. You cannot run from the path that has been laid out before you."

"The hell I can't!" Heidi said, jumping up and heading for the door. She touched the wall, and the door opened, surprising nearly everyone in the room. She ran out, and her mother ran after her.

"Heidi, stop!" Penny begged, entering the hallway. Heidi did not respond, marching down the hall of the alien vessel.

Penny stood still. "Heidi! Stop right this second!"

Heidi halted but did not immediately turn around. Finally, she took a deep breath and slowly turned toward her mother. "What? You expect me to just let them dictate what is going to happen with *my* life? They don't know me. They have no idea what plans I have for my life. What about my wanting to be a veterinarian? Am I supposed to just give up on that? Screw them!"

Heidi was furious. She felt as if she were on a locked path, like a monk, destined to spend her life in servitude for some purpose that did not even make sense to her.

Penny walked up to her and placed a hand on her shoulder, then pulled her to her chest, hugging her.

“Sweetie, I know how crazy this all sounds. You’re right, they don’t know you, especially the way I know you. All I’m saying is that we should listen to what they have to say. You and I both know how much these dreams have bothered you. Perhaps you can be a veterinarian and serve a higher purpose. I know how hard this must be. Please know that I only want you to be happy and to have the life you so richly deserve.”

“...we did not take into account the human emotional element. We made them to be more sensitive than us, more in tune with their psionic senses. You cannot simply expect them to see the logic as we do.”

“What?” Heidi asked.

“I said I only want you to be happy.” Penny pulled back and looked into her daughter’s eyes. Heidi looked at her mother with guarded skepticism.

“No, what did you say about psionic senses?”

Penny was instantly confused. “Huh? What are you talking about?”

“...too much to put on her shoulders just yet.”

The voice sounded sort of like her mother’s, but Heidi now realized it wasn’t. Then she heard Ranash. *“She can hear us. Heidi, please come back. I know this is a lot of pressure that we are placing upon you, but we cannot do this without you. You are special. You are unlike any other human on Earth. Please know we only want to help. The fact that you can hear us right now is proof that you are on this evolutionary cusp, and you are going to discover things you cannot yet imagine. Come back inside with your mother. We all care about you and want to help you. You will never be at peace until you can understand these dreams.”*

Penny studied the concentrated expression on her daughter’s face. Then Heidi looked at Penny and sighed, saying, “Mom, let’s go back inside.”

Penny squinted in confusion. “Why the change?”

“Ranash was speaking with me. She’s right, I never will be at peace until I can understand these dreams.”

Penny gave her daughter's hand a reassuring squeeze. "I'm right behind you."

They walked back to the room together, and as soon as they entered, Heidi's frustration came pouring out. "How do you expect people to just follow my lead? I'm only fourteen. Who's going to listen to a fourteen-year-old? For that matter, I have no idea what I'm doing. I'm a mess!"

Har'loc replied, *"There are reasons that we have chosen all of you. Despite your current upbringing and status in society, all four of you have been evolving. However, Heidi's advancements are further along than yours. All four of you have the potential that Heidi has for telepathic connection and the inevitable psionic power that will come with this. This will ultimately connect you with the Convergence."*

"There is also an innate leadership quality that you all possess." He looked at Heidi. *"Tell me, if someone told you that you needed to build a defense shield for the entire planet, what would be the first thing you would do?"*

Heidi laughed, responding sarcastically, "I'd tell them to find someone that knows what the hell they're talking about."

Har'loc nodded. *"Very good. And that is what you should tell them. We will give you a list of every person in the seven hundred. You will know their names, their skills, occupations and the best way to reach them. It will be your job to point Brian, Mingli and Cait toward the right people to help them. Then you will follow up with them later. Trust me, you can handle this, and every ter'roc in this room will be on your personal team, as well as Sam'loc, Dra'loc, who you have not yet met, and Ganash, the shev'lar of the eastern plateau ishkan, Kalshal."*

The room was silent as Heidi looked Har'loc in his silvery eyes and said, "I know I'm beating a dead horse here, but why me? Why am I the chosen one?"

"You have a gift, an ability you know about but are unwilling to accept." He paused, waiting to see if she would be able to come up with the answer herself.

“Hearing the other ter’roc.”

Har’loc nodded. *“That’s part of it, but not all of it. You have unparalleled mental capabilities. I have sensed this since you were conceived, and I have watched you from afar.”*

“I thought you couldn’t sense farther than a short distance.”

“Normally, we cannot, but with the ishkan, we can improve our range, and your mind is very powerful, which helps.”

“Just how powerful?”

“You have mental and psionic powers unlike anything we have ever seen, ter’roc and ishkan alike. I will train you, help you to reach your full potential. You are the reason the draklor have been able to invade your dreams. They have found they can use you as an amplifier.”

Brian, silent until now, chimed in. “Can I ask a question?”

“Certainly,” replied Har’loc.

“I saw the ishkan under the surface of the water. How many ishkan are in the oceans and underground?”

Har’loc looked uneasy.

“Thousands,” replied Heidi without looking at him, remembering her conversation in the cavern with Sam’loc.

Har’loc nodded.

“Okay, so...why don’t you just launch them all and defend the planet with all these ishkan?” asked Brian

“Because it is not quite that easy. It would put the entire human race at risk. That is not something we are willing to do.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Shev’lar, we should tell the Equipage. We do not need to explain it to the rest of the reckts, but they deserve to know the truth,” said Ranash.

“Very well.” Har’loc adjusted his legs and sat back in his chair. *“When we engineered humans two hundred thousand years ago, the one thing we were not able to duplicate was our essence. What you might call a soul. It is the consciousness,*

the energy that we truly are, in this life and beyond. What you see before you, my body, it is nothing more than a shell that my essence can live within. The true core of what makes me Har'loc resides here. We are all part of Shalhaiah." He waved his arms around in the air. *"Our ability to talk with our minds, our telepathy, it is not done with our brains. It is handled through the community of energy that flows between us. It is where our personalities exist, our emotions and our memories."*

Har'loc paused, waiting to see if everyone was following, then continued. *"Though we could not duplicate our essence in humans, we found a solution that also provided us with a way to help our ishkan. The ishkan have multiple consciousnesses. Each ishkan has about fifteen thousand independent consciousnesses. One of the drawbacks of settling here on Earth was that the ishkan could not roam the planet freely because of the atmosphere and constant radiation, being closer to Sol, our star. The concentration of oxygen is too much for them to handle. They need more carbon dioxide and less ultraviolet radiation. Creating humans gave us a way to let the ishkan function outside of the confines of their own body."*

Cait looked at Heidi with a shocked expression. "Wait a second, are you saying that the ishkan live in our society? That we see them every day and we have no idea?"

Har'loc smiled faintly. *"No, Cait, what I am saying is that you see the ishkan every day when you look in the mirror. You are the ishkan. Every single person on this planet is bound by an invisible thread of energy to the ishkan, their individual consciousness being part of the group consciousness at the same time. When you dream, your essence returns to that mass consciousness to interact with others within your ishkan. Have you ever met someone that you felt like you had known all your life, yet you had only known them for a few minutes?"*

Cait didn't respond, still reeling from the revelation that her soul was not actually human, at least not in the terms that she had always understood.

"Yes, of course. I felt that way with Lin," replied Mingli.

"That is because you belong to the same ishkan. You felt, on a subconscious level, the connection that you actually did have with her, having spent millennia within

the same collective consciousness. Your ishkan exists under the Indian ocean.

“When you die, your soul returns to the ishkan to be used again when you are born. Belonging to the same ishkan is also why some people, regardless of gender, feel a connection so strong it fights against the very biology of the human design. We have found that often emotions can be stronger than the biological element that used to be the driving force for procreation. You were engineered to have a male and female element for procreation, but there is no way that we can be certain that this matching element will coincide with the emotional bond that may be developed between two people. It is the soul that maintains the connection, not the body, especially if two people have known one another in previous lives. We do not completely understand why, but there is a very high percentage of humans that bond for eternity. Circumstances have a way of connecting the two souls even if they are on opposite sides of the world. We call this coincidence ‘mardineana.’ It is sort of a magnetism of the ishkan consciousness. The multithreaded consciousness has positive and negative threads that frequently run together. There are people in this world that are more receptive to the emotional connection and do not care about the biological connection, willing to be with either the same or the opposite gender. These people have lived hundreds more lives than those that are more resistant to the concept.

“I want to touch on something that I started earlier. There is an element that makes the three of you special. Although the shev’lars do bring order to the ter’roc chaos and also to the ishkan to a degree, there are three prime consciousnesses that bind all other ishkan around the entire galaxy, possibly the entire universe, but on an imperceptible level. The ishkan barely know they are there. They regulate much of the biology and evolution of the ishkan and act as a primal guiding and unifying thread, despite the fact that they actually exist separately in three different ishkan. Mingli, Cait and Brian, you are these prime consciousnesses.”

He turned to Heidi. “Heidi, you are the master consciousness, the singular consciousness that all other consciousnesses reside upon. Not only is your consciousness higher than any other among the ishkan, it is incapable of being

destroyed or altered. It is the primal mother that governs all ishkan and has existed since their beginning."

Penny, in her Catholic upbringing, found much of this disturbing, and interrupted. "Sorry, hold on. So you're trying to tell us that your ishkan is like heaven for us? That everything we have been taught to believe is a lie?"

Har'loc shook his head. *"No. Everything you have been taught is true, but it is an interpretation, an explanation of existence by a people that do not understand it but are trying to. If you take a camera to a remote tribe in the Amazon, they may believe that this camera is a magic box stealing their soul. We all know that is not true, but it is their explanation of something they do not understand."*

Har'loc got up from the table and walked over to Penny, then knelt in front of her. Clearly uneasy, Penny stared at him, uncertain of what was going on. Just two feet in front of her, the alien seemed extremely familiar yet extremely strange at the same time. Penny could smell an ancient, weathered odor, like an old chest that has not been opened for a hundred years. She could see extraordinary details, details that made this experience too real to be a dream. She could see that Har'loc's silvery eyes were coated in a barely perceivable fluid, her own reflection visible within them, and that his skin had tiny, nearly microscopic cracks with darker blood pulsing just beneath the surface. This creature, whatever it was, was undeniably here and not an illusion. It was not some figment of Penny's imagination, which made what Har'loc was about to say carry great weight.

"Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away," Har'loc said.

Penny was unmoving, still, absorbing the passage from Revelation that Har'loc had just quoted. Finally, she said, "So, what? You claim to be God?"

Har'loc smiled and shook his head gently. *"No. I claim to be just one of the people. We are in what you would call the end times. God will be with us, and we will stand together, hand in hand, ter'roc and human alike. However, the end times are not truly the end—they never were. They are a new beginning, as is always the case with any ending."*

There was a silence in the room. Har'loc looked toward Mingli and slowly got up, walking toward his seat. *"You are an expert in the practice of Zen, yes?"*

"I'm far from an expert. I have studied with monks in Shaolin for a short time, and I have always tried to work toward my own enlightenment, but I am no expert."

"When you achieve what you call enlightenment, that feeling of ultimate peace and clarity, you are allowing your essence to roam free, disconnecting yourself from your mortal body." Har'loc looked at Cait. *"Cait, when you sit in church, head bowed and thinking of Roger, praying for his well-being, you come very close to that same connection."*

"This is something that we have taught humans through the ages, the concept that you are all connected through energy you cannot quite perceive. The ability to perceive it is actually there, inside you, but you have not developed it enough. Different humans have come up with their own understanding of this energy. Entire religions have been created and followed to grasp this concept."

Heidi interrupted. "So which religion is correct?"

Ranash replied, *"They are all correct in one form or another, and they are complimented by the theories of evolution. They are simply alternate views of the same concept. It is not our place to decide which belief is the correct one. That is part of the human growth, part of your own evolution."*

"You mean part of the ishkan growth and evolution."

"In a sense. As much as you are tied to the ishkan and a part of them, you are still individuals. You each have your own feelings, your own needs, desires and goals. We consider humanity a separate yet connected society to the ishkan and to us. We, all three species, need one another. In creating humans, we found that we needed you as

much as the ishkan. It is a concept that other ter'roc who have traveled far out of our solar system have a difficult time understanding."

"It's something I have a hard time fully grasping or believing, but I'm at least starting to understand," said Cait. "In a way, I find comfort knowing that a part of Roger really does live on now that he is gone. Is there any way I could find out who he is now?"

Har'loc shook his head. *"No, I am sorry, but we do not connect past lives to present ones. It can confuse and cause damage to the new person. They need the chance to live out their life through their own experiences."*

Cait's look went from hopeful to disappointed in the stroke of a moment.

Mingli's face was solemn. He was thinking about his Lin and how she might now exist elsewhere in another body. Her *linghun* lived on, beyond the existence that he knew. Mingli wondered if whatever essence of her still existed remembered him and their long life together. The happiness when their son was born. The torment when they lost their baby girl days after she was born and how they had held one another and comforted each other through the loss.

The four leaders sat, thinking and talking about everything that had just been said. Brian and Heidi seemed to have an easier time accepting everything than Cait and Mingli. The ten of them talked about religion, history and the impending attack of the draklor for nearly two hours. Har'loc spent a little more than forty-five minutes working to teach the Equipage how to control their dreams.

"It is often harder to realize you are in a dream than it is to break down the illusion. Is there anything, any commonality, that runs through all of your dreams? Anything you can recall that you could use to identify it as a dream?" Har'loc asked.

Without hesitation, Heidi said, "Yeah, the smell. Pee-yew!" She half laughed at her juvenile statement.

Cait interjected, "Heidi's right, there is always a terrible stench when we are in the dream. Like..."

"Garbage," Mingli and Cait said in unison.

"Interesting. I would guess one of two things are at play here; either their species does not have a sense of smell, so they do not know they emit the odor, or they are using the odor as an additional scare tactic. However, that is your key. Whenever you are in a situation where you smell the odor of garbage, then you know you are dreaming."

"Not to mention we are all naked as jaybirds," said Heidi.

"Humiliation, or an attempt at it," Mingli stated. "The Chinese used this technique during the second World War on their prisoners, as did the Japanese and the Nazis."

"Yes, we have noticed that many humans are not comfortable being nude." Har'loc paused, thinking. *"I am not sure how the draklor could know this however."* The realization that the draklor seemed to somehow be doing research bothered him.

Har'loc continued training them how to focus on convincing each other from within the dream that it was only a dream and could not harm them, regardless of what happened. Only then would they defeat the draklor's ability to control them. *"Given that you all have the mental connection of the dream, you should all have the ability to communicate within the dream, possibly even telepathically."*

"It'll have to be telepathic because in my dreams I can't make any noise with my mouth," said Brian.

"That's true. I remember looking over at Brian as the creature was drilling those spikes into all of our hands and Brian's face was in a silent scream." A chill ran up Cait's spine. "It was horrific." She put an arm around Brian, and he returned the embrace.

"We will look out for each other. But we must look at this entire dream sequence logically, separate ourselves from it being real at all costs," Mingli

said. "Perhaps even analyze why they are showing us what they are showing us."



They continued discussions, talking about the shield that would have to be built, as well as the weapons arrays.

"I'm still trying to understand. How are these weapons arrays supposed to work?" asked Brian.

"The idea is that we will set a series of two thousand energy weapon platforms in orbit just outside the asteroid belt," said Ranash. "We already have several concealed research stations that have orbited Nirgal since the asteroid hit. We will distribute those further into the solar system so that we can detect their approach. When the draklor approach Earth, the research stations will send a signal to the weapons arrays to intercept the draklor ship. Then they will all fire upon the ship and, if we are fortunate, destroy it."

"Let me make sure I understand our goal here. We are talking about killing *millions* of these aliens?" asked Cait, squinting her eyes.

"No. Billions. We estimate that there are somewhere between two to four billion draklor on this vessel."

"I don't mean to sound harsh, but don't you think that's a bit cold-blooded?"

"Do you have another suggestion?"

"Well, these draklor, they are a species of intelligent beings. They have every right to try and survive as much as any other species, no?"

No one responded.

Cait continued, "Do we know anything at all about these people?"

"Very little. Just what we have gathered through our visual and penetrative scans."

"I have to agree with Cait on this," replied Heidi. "I say that we send out a preemptive scout mission and attempt to convince them that they don't want

to approach the planet, that it will mean their destruction. I don't think our first instinct should be to kill. Obviously that is an option, but it should be a last option."

Har'loc and Ranash looked at each other. Heidi felt no compunction about attempting to read their conversation now.

"Peace. Why is it that all humans seem to think about is peace? There is not a peaceful solution to everything. Sometimes one has to use force," said Ranash.

"We brought the humans into this for a reason. They have a different way of looking at things than we do. I believe we should hear them out. I have been surprised by humans quite a few times in my life," replied Har'loc.

Both were quiet. Finally, Har'loc looked toward Heidi. *"A show of power?"* he asked.

"A calculated attempt to keep them at bay," Heidi replied, already asserting her leadership by the tone in her voice.

Har'loc considered this silently, looked toward his ter'roc brethren, saying nothing, and then continued. *"We concur. However, we feel that the plans should still go through to build the defense perimeter and weapons array systems. I think we have made some considerable progress here today, and there will be a lot to discuss at the summit two days from now."*

"What's the next step?" Heidi asked Ranash.

"We need to speak with your law enforcement, as they can put us in touch with your world leaders. If there is one thing that we have learned, it is that it is unwise to approach world leaders directly. That has led to several...confrontations."

"Well, let's go talk to Chief Demarcus then. He's the chief of police for Swampscott. Our family and his have been friends for years," replied Penny.



Heidi stood by the railroad tracks staring down toward the Salem end. How could this day get any stranger? What had started out as idle curiosity, an instinctual driving force, had become a warning of impending doom. Had it been just curiosity, or had she been led down there for the very reason of

opening a dialogue? Her mind was reeling at the knowledge that their entire planet was in danger and she was somehow the key to saving it all. Heidi, having seen the massive ship, had a picture in her head of this giant metal Death Star looming in the heavens, targeting her small, helpless planet and blowing her and Swampscott to kingdom come. A chill went up her spine. She looked back down the culvert to see if her mother was finally coming. She was not. "Mom? What's taking you so long?" she yelled.

In the distant tunnel, she heard her mother call back, "I'm coming. Someone is joining us."

"Oh yeah, that'll be inconspicuous," she muttered under her breath, having a vision of herself, her mother and two aliens walking down Humphrey Street to the police station. *Heck, people in Swampscott call the police if a dog barks out of tune.* She laughed quietly to herself. Peering into the blackness, she couldn't make out anyone or anything.

Heidi rested against the concrete surrounding the culvert, looking up at the pale blue sky as listless clouds floated by. She thought back to the conversation the ter'roc had been having with each other. *How was I able to hear them? I know their conversation was supposed to be private. I've never been able to read anyone else's mind. What's going on?*

A few moments later, she heard her mother talking to someone. To her surprise, she heard someone talk back out loud. When Penny crawled out of the entrance, Heidi saw a woman hold out her hand for assistance. The hand was thin, young, beautiful and delicate. Penny turned and helped her out. She stepped out and stood to her full height, at least six feet tall, shielding her pale blue eyes from the sun. She looked as if she was in her midtwenties. Her long, flowing blonde hair reached halfway down her pale green dress, and it was obvious she was very athletic. It suddenly struck Heidi as odd that she was wearing a dress given the distance she had just crawled, but there wasn't a scuff on her. The woman said, "Hello, Heidi. This is not really a dress, and, as you know, I am not really a human woman."

“Sam’loc?” Heidi exclaimed.

The woman laughed and raised an eyebrow. “No. Ranash.”

“But how?”

“It is an illusion. A mental projection.”

“But I can hear your voice.”

“No, you hear what I want you to hear. Do you really think we have been among you for this long without a way to conceal ourselves?”

“I guess I hadn’t really thought about it that way. Sam’loc told me one of the reasons you created humans was because you can’t stay aboveground for very long.”

“That is true. I am wearing a special suit that helps shield me from the overabundance of oxygen in the atmosphere, as well as the intense solar radiation.”

Ranash morphed into her ter’roc form right before Heidi’s eyes, which, although it should not have, shocked Heidi a little. It just seemed much more surreal to see the ter’roc woman standing here in Heidi’s normal “real world.” She wore the same special iridescent rainbow suit that Sam’loc had worn, as well as a similar headpiece. This suit did have scuffs of dirt on the legs where she had crawled down the culvert. The fabric was even more brilliant in the sunlight. Ranash morphed back into her human form and looked back. A man about thirty years of age with brown hair and glasses was making his way out of the culvert. Heidi looked at him inquisitively. “Sam’loc?”

The man smiled and nodded.

“What is ‘loc’ anyway? Some sort of rank or status?” asked Penny.

“Very insightful,” said Ranash. “Loc’ is only given to the males of a colony and the females who mate. It is a designation of honor, meaning ‘joined.’”

“But you aren’t ‘loc.’”

“No, I am shev’lar. A shev’lar never mates. It is the duty of the shev’lar to...coordinate chaos.” At their confused expressions, she continued, “As you are aware, we are a telepathic species. It is much more than simply how we

communicate; it is how we are connected.” She paused. “Have you ever heard of Pando?”

Heidi shook her head.

“It is a group of quaking aspen trees in Utah. A group of human scientists recently uncovered evidence that it is the largest organism on Earth, covering over one hundred acres and spanning forty-seven thousand trees. They are all considered one organism because they are all connected underground by the same root system and come from a single male aspen tree.”

“I think I did hear about that, maybe in science class.”

Ranash nodded. “Anyway, these aspen trees and the ter’roc have a lot in common. Think of us as one organism.” Ranash clasped her hands together, linking her fingers. “Our telepathy, our mental and emotional connection—this is the root that binds us. This is also why we do not handle the loss of other ter’roc very well. It would be like someone cutting off your finger or arm.

“Although we are careful in our thoughts and control our minds, there is still a level of chaos among the 1,056 minds in an ishkan. We are individuals working as a singular organism. As long as there are individuals, thoughts drift and differ. Although not as impulsive as humans, the ter’roc are a deeply emotional species. It is my job to bring order to that chaos and guide everyone’s thoughts in a unified direction.”

“So you control their thoughts?” asked Heidi.

“No. Control implies force. I guide their thoughts. Imagine a drop of water falling. It hits a surface and flows downward. You cannot control the downward movement of the water—that is gravity. However, you can guide it down a path of least resistance to a destination. That is what I do with the ishkan and those within it. When minds drift or become distracted, I simply remind them of the task at hand. Once they are done with that task, they may let their minds go wherever they would like. There are many levels to the ter’roc mind...and the human mind, that you are not yet aware of.

“In the ishkan, I and my companions were communicating in private conversations while we also talked to you. That is simply another level of our minds. There is also a more private level where we can think our individual thoughts outside the realm of the rest of the community. Then there is a final level, a sort of a broadcast level, that allows us to communicate with other ter’roc and ishkan over great distances. It acts like a relay might in a ham radio network, passing from one ter’roc or ishkan to another until it is finally received by the recipient. Only the shev’lars are truly aware of the transmissions occurring through this layer. The transmissions occur almost in a dream state for the ter’roc.”

Ranash looked at Heidi. Heidi could sense she was attempting to read her thoughts, but she worked very hard to keep these thoughts guarded. She imagined a wall between herself and Ranash, for the thoughts she guarded revealed her ability to hear the ter’roc. That was something she was not yet sure they should know.

Now Sam’loc was looking at Heidi too. He and Ranash turned toward each other and then looked toward Penny as a moment of uncomfortable silence passed.

“What does the ishkan do when you aren’t present?” asked Heidi.

“My second-in-command, Yalton, the rikoy, acts on my behalf.” Ranash paused and then continued, “We too have a difficult time understanding how you bring order to *your* chaos. Your chaos is on a personal level. This is something we have struggled for millennia to ingrain in your people, helping to develop morals and beliefs around these structures.”

Penny, feeling time ticking away, asked, “Shall we head over to the police station?”

“Yes, we must be on our way. Let us go talk to your law enforcement. Other groups of my people around the planet are making similar arrangements.” Although she now had the voice and appearance of a woman

in her midtwenties, she spoke in the same meticulous, deliberate tone she had used down in the ishkan.

As they walked, they continued to talk. Heidi asked, “Why do you talk like that?”

“Talk like what?” said Sam’loc.

“You say something like ‘we do not normally’ instead of ‘we don’t normally.’”

Ranash replied, “You mean contractions.”

“Yes.”

“Contractions are an element of speech. Keep in mind we are not actually speaking to you; we are projecting our thoughts to you. Contractions were developed to abbreviate words in speech and writing. There is no need to abbreviate thoughts because they can travel instantly. It is...unnatural for us to use contractions.” Ranash looked at Penny. “Penny, tell me about Chief Demarcus. Will he be receptive?”

Penny laughed. “Well, I think he will, once some of the evidence is shown to him. Sort of hard to dispute it when you drop your camouflage. Dave is a reasonable man, and I’ve known him for years.”

Ranash thought about the encounter as they walked. It was something that she had feared for years, and now the time they had planned for had finally come. *What I would not give to be able to see the future right now.* She knew that time was dynamic and in a constant state of flux, alterable to a degree, but with so many trillions of variables, it was impossible to see for certain what outcome might occur in the far future. All the ter’roc knew for certain was that the draklor were inbound for Earth. Details such as when the draklor would arrive, how many there would be and what defenses could be established were the dynamic parts of the encounter they could not predict. *Will the humans believe us, or will they choose to act against us? Will we live in this last stand or will we die?* Now was the time of the true test. *Will the children work with the parents, or will they rebel to their own demise?*



Chapter 10 **AMBASSADORS**

Swampscott Police Station, Swampscott, Massachusetts, USA

Heidi, Ranash and Sam'loc all sat in Chief David Demarcus's office before a massive, old metal desk that looked like it belonged in a 1960s professor's office in some old university. Demarcus himself sat in an armchair that would have been more suited to a living room than a police chief's office. A faded fifteen-year-old poster of McGruff the Crime Dog was on the wall next to the seal for the town of Swampscott, proclaiming that everyone should "Take a bite out of crime." The way it was positioned, it looked as if McGruff wanted to take a bite out of the fisherman in the town seal.

Penny stood near the door. Ranash had just finished explaining that there was an alien vessel that would enter their solar system in the next two years,

reaching the planet in four years, and that they would need to build a defense perimeter.

The chief, normally a very good-natured, levelheaded man, had stiff, stoic features at the moment. The chief looked at Penny, a friend he had known for almost twenty years, and then at Heidi. Penny, Joshua, Heidi and her brother, Mark, had gone camping with his own family for years. Mark and Demarcus's oldest son were at Northeastern University together. Their families often had dinner together and had gone to various town functions together. The chief's middle boy was a quarterback on Swampscott's Big Blue team during the last year of Mark's high school career. His younger son, Blake, was at the high school with Heidi in her freshman class. He knew the Kilbourne children were not liars and never had been. They were good, well-mannered kids, and he had a lot of respect for them and their parents. He regularly golfed with Joshua. However, the chief had never met these other two young adults and was weighing his skepticism against his relationship with the Kilbournes.

There was a long silence that only Ranash seemed to be comfortable with. She sat, hands in her lap, waiting patiently.

"So let me get this straight," the chief finally said. "You're aliens that have lived here under our town for thousands of years, and you want to help us stop an invasion?"

Heidi interrupted before Ranash could reply. "Yep, that's pretty much it."

"Yes," replied Ranash. "I know this is a lot to accept."

"Not at all," said the Chief casually. "I actually just had a group of aliens in here three days ago. They were trying to get home, so I let them use my phone." He remained expressionless, didn't even break a smile. Heidi, on the other hand, burst out in giggles. The chief looked over at her and cracked a grin, as did Penny, and then he became serious once more. Again, the room fell silent.

Ranash and Sam'loc looked at each other and then toward the chief. Both instantly dropped their illusions. The chief jumped up from his desk, slamming his chair and himself against the window behind him, and drew his pistol. Ranash stood up slowly and held out her arm, her hand up. The tension in the room had instantly gone extremely taut.

"Please, put down your weapon. You must believe us. It is critical," Ranash broadcast in all of their heads. *"We will not harm you. We are here to help you."*

The chief slowly lowered his pistol. Ranash and Sam'loc both reassumed their human appearance. Chief Demarcus stood against the wall for a moment and finally picked up the chair and sat down. There was a knock on the frosted glass of his door, and the officer that sat near the chief's office walked in. "Not now, Jeff," Chief Demarcus said.

"I heard something crash."

"Everything's fine. Thank you." He nodded reassuringly, and the officer closed the door.

Demarcus was silent for a long time. Finally, he pulled his chair up to his desk and rested his elbows on it. "I'm sorry, I was just...caught off guard."

"No need to apologize. We understand," said Ranash. "Although the idea of an alien species is a common theme in your people's stories and entertainment, the reality of our existence is not quickly accepted. We are prepared for that."

"Well, we've always thought we were alone."

Ranash smiled. "Do you not think that in reality that would be a tremendous waste of space? The entire universe and only one planet that supports life?"

The chief smiled. "Yeah, I suppose it would be. But we tend to be a little... self-centered."

"Really? I had not noticed."

Heidi chimed in. "Was that sarcasm?"

Ranash only raised an eyebrow at her.

Ignoring her poke, the chief continued, “How many different intelligent species are there out there?”

“There is no way to ever really know the answer to that. We know of four different species within ten parsecs of Earth, however, there are sure to be many more that we do not know about.”

“Well, I’m not really sure where to go from here. I suppose I’ll call the governor’s office, and we’ll have to talk to Washington. It’s not going to be easy for them to accept. Hell, I’m not sure I do yet.”

“We do not have time for opposition. Talk to whomever you would like and have them call me here.” She handed the chief a card with a single ten-digit phone number on it.

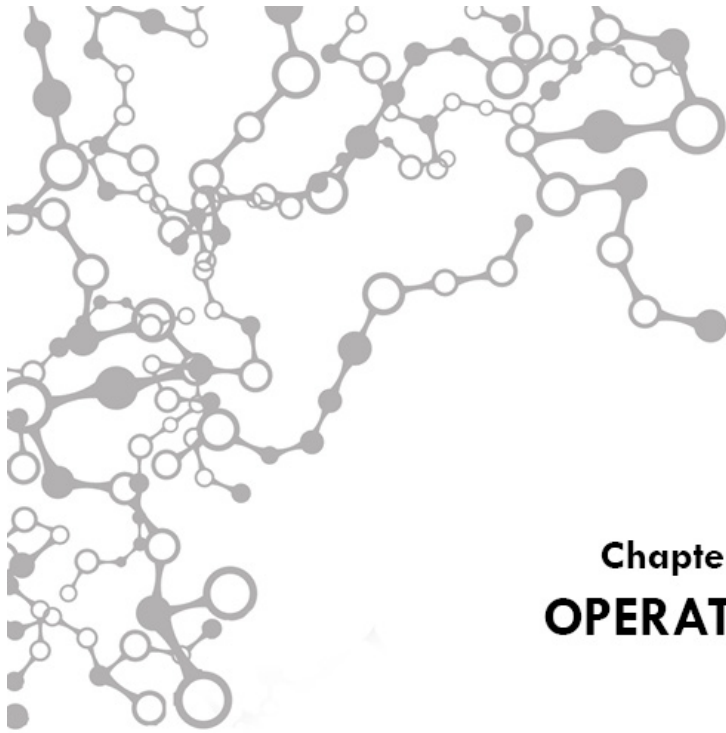
“Is this a joke? You have a phone?” he asked.

“Let’s just say it will get in touch with me,” Ranash said.

“Right. Not everything is...” he started.

“...as it seems,” Heidi and Penny finished.

Ranash smiled. “You *are* starting to understand us.”



Chapter 11

OPERATIONS

“I am working on phase two.”

“What do you think the chances of success are?” Kalarian inquired.

“Very good, I think.”

“Do you have their trust?”

“Most definitely. They will do just about anything I ask of them.”

“You had better act quickly. They are preparing for their summit.”

“Have I ever let you down?”

“Yes.”

Yultavar scowled at him.



Chapter 12

THE SUMMIT

September 26, 8:05 a.m.
White House, Washington, D.C., USA

The president walked down the hall, talking on his cell phone, coffee in hand as he headed through the west wing to the Oval Office. He had an 8:30 meeting with the secretary of state and FBI Director Frazier. Following him were Reggie Smith and Frank Dorian, both veteran Secret Service agents. It was decided two days ago, in light of the governor's supposed experience, that it would be best to have the president under a higher level of guard than was normally provided by the Secret Service. With the president walked Tim Price, White House chief of staff.

To say that the conversation had caught the president off guard would have been an understatement, and Tim knew this. He had watched as the president took the call. He also knew that the governor was a trustworthy

man. The governor and the president had a long history going back decades, having spent countless hours on the president's campaigns and on heated debates over state and national policies. The president counted him as almost family and trusted him implicitly. Yet the concept of an alien race that had lived with humanity for hundreds of thousands of years was just too outlandish. Furthermore, it seemed to disturb the president that they had called a summit of world leaders without consulting any of them. "You don't just say, 'There's a summit and you have to be there' to all the leaders of the world and they all just show up," the president had said on the phone to the governor. "There is special planning that needs to take place. Security, facilities, translators. Something like this takes weeks to set up, if not months. How can they just expect everyone to bend to their whim?"

"I don't know. All I can tell you is that they told me they will take care of transportation and that the summit would begin on the twenty-sixth at 8:10 in the morning," the governor had replied.

"Well, I have a lot of meetings planned over the next few days, so this isn't something that's going to happen that quick. Get me their information and I'll see if we can arrange something more...realistic." And with that, the conversation was over. The governor had indeed relayed the information to the president, and the president's staff had spoken with Ranash, but she had remained insistent that the summit would occur as planned.

Tim looked at his watch. It was nearly 8:10. *Looks like he'll be missing the summit*, he mused to himself. *Cocky SOBs*. He shook his head.

Tim walked beside the president as he talked with his press secretary on the phone, going over a recent speech. "Jay, I don't agree. This just doesn't sound like something I'd say," he said. After a pause, he continued, "Well, despite what Alan says, I am *not* going to say that aliens are invading. That sounds ridiculous. Work on it please. I have to go." Hanging up the phone, he looked at Tim and rolled his eyes, then turned to Reggie. "Reggie, am I the only president that these bizarre things happen to?"

“No, Sir. Didn’t you watch Independence Day?” Reggie replied.

The president sighed. “Well, if a giant saucer parks its ass over the White House, let’s get the hell out of here and ask questions later, okay?” They laughed, but only half-heartedly.

He reconsidered. “On second thought, if one of those things parks itself over the White House, call Bill Pullman and tell him he can have the job, because I’ll be moving to Mexico.” Laughing, all four of them walked into the Oval Office.



Stepping into the room, the president, Tim, Reggie and Frank all looked around quickly. The door was gone, replaced by a wall covered in flowery wallpaper. They now stood in a small room with a couch, two soft chairs and a small buffet table with donuts and coffee. A door opened to the left, and Ranash in her human form walked in followed by Heidi and the governor. Reggie reached for his service pistol. It wasn’t in his holster.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Smith, but no weapons are allowed at the summit,” said Ranash.

“What the hell is going on here?” asked the president furiously.

“It’s okay. We’re in Hawaii,” said the governor. “This is the Hawaii Convention Center in Honolulu. It’s completely secure. In fact, there are no exit or entrance doors at the moment, so we don’t need to worry about anyone coming in unexpectedly unless the ter’roc bring them here.”

“The ter’roc? Where are *they*? I want to speak to one of them *now*.”

“Mr. President, meet Ranash, shev’lar of the ter’roc.”

The president scowled at Ranash. “You look human enough to me. How were we transported here?”

“It is an honor to meet you, Mr. President. We transported you here,” Ranash stated.

“Show him,” Heidi said.

Instantly, Ranash morphed into her ter'roc form. "Whoa!" said Reggie, he and Frank stepping in front of the president and Tim as they both took a step back.

Ranash held up her four-digit hand. "*I will not harm you,*" she said in everyone's mind, and she morphed back into her human form. "You are our guests."

"Guests? In a hotel with no doors? Sounds more like prisoners to me," said the president.

"We ask that you all keep an open mind," stated Ranash, not answering his question. "Leaders from every country are here along with two of their guards, and obviously we have brought along your chief of staff. There are no weapons allowed on the premises though. You and the other leaders will meet in theater one, and the seven hundred will meet in theater two. The two theaters will be linked via video relay. You will be able to hear them, but in the interest of time, they will not be able to hear you, at least for now. Once the gathering of the seven hundred is over, I and several other ter'roc will come and answer your questions and then transport you home."

"And you think no one in my government will be concerned that I'm gone? You have just kidnapped the leader of one of the most powerful countries in the world."

Ranash looked at him and smiled. "What? You think that's funny?" the president asked.

Well aware of what the ter'roc were capable of by this time, the governor replied, "Mr. President, look at your watch."

The president and the two Secret Service men looked down at their watches. They all read 8:08, and the second hands were not moving. The president looked at the governor. "What the hell?" he said, tapping his watch.

"It is 8:08 a.m. your time," Ranash stated. "It will be 8:08 a.m. for the duration of the summit. When you are transported back, it will still be 8:08 a.m. No one will know you are gone."

“Well, I suppose this does complicate things a little,” said the president, reluctantly agreeing to comply with the summit.

Tim’s thoughts, however, were centered on assessing the risk to the country and his government. Was the president actually going to be forced to do something that might not be in the best interest of the country? There was a reason there were so many people advising the president.



During the summit, Har’loc led the talks from the theater with the seven hundred people that the ter’roc had chosen over the last several years. There were scientists, mathematicians, artists, executives, teachers, soldiers and priests—people from all walks of life, all beliefs and all ages. After the group talked amongst themselves, they found that nearly everyone shared two commonalities: first, that they were all accepting of the idea of science fiction being science fact, and second, that everyone had the ability to think creatively. Nearly all of them, when given a task, had the ability to think of several unconventional solutions.

Not everyone was tolerant of a fourteen-year-old being the leader of the group, but there was very little verbal disapproval, as Har’loc had her by his side at all times and she frequently interjected her own unique views, which, although a bit avant-garde, still sounded logical and well thought out. Many people in the group also liked how easily she was able to relate to them, despite her age. They appreciated the fact that she was always patient and listened to everything they had to say prior to making any decisions, and they were impressed by how she stood by her choices when she knew they were sound.

Heidi’s confidence had grown tremendously since she had met Sam’loc only a few days ago in the depths of Swampscott, partially fueled by her growing capability to read other’s thoughts. She found now that not only could she read the ter’roc anytime she wished but it was also getting increasingly easier for her to hear the thoughts of humans as well. At times,

she got headaches and had to put a great deal of focus on silencing the voices in her mind. Crowded groups always seemed to wear her out faster than when it was just her or a few people. She was beginning to see why Har'loc and his team had chosen the three others. At some point in the near future, she would have to isolate herself and work only with them as silencing the voices grew more difficult.

Four hours into the seven-hour summit, Heidi withdrew with Har'loc and Ranash to a side room in the hotel. "Are you okay?" Ranash asked her.

"It's getting harder to keep my head quiet." She massaged her temples. "Why now? Why am I suddenly able to do this since I met Sam'loc in the cavern? I was never able to read people's thoughts before."

Har'loc studied her face before answering. "Perhaps it is the higher levels of telepathic conversations that you have been exposed to. There were studies done several million years ago on young ter'roc children that had not yet developed telepathic capabilities. Normally, our children do not have the ability to communicate telepathically until about the age of ten. We use hand gestures up until that point. Even then, their thoughts are very basic and incoherent. These studies showed that if the children were exposed to more psionic energy than normal conversation, their abilities progressed faster. We have always known that humans possess this capability. They simply do not know how to harness it as we have."

Har'loc placed his hands on her head and closed his eyes. "Concentrate here." Heidi could sense him highlighting a portion of her brain near the back of her skull. "This is the occipital lobe. It is where you have the ability to block other thoughts as well as increase your tolerance for pain. This is also the part of the brain where we send transmissions to alter what people see. Picture a sphere, a container that you can enclose this portion of your mind within. How would this sphere look? Feel this sphere in your mind and visualize it bisecting and isolating this part of your brain."

Heidi focused on that area of her mind, imagining a bubble around it as if she were able to contain this part of her brain in some vacuum sphere. The voices of all the others faded slowly until she heard none. The silence was almost deafening. Her eyes opened wide with the realization that she had this much control over her own mind. Heidi hadn't realized that she had been listening to them all for so long.

"Now focus on opening your sphere enough for one voice, one thought. You can direct that in any direction you want."

She pictured a tiny pinhole opening in the sphere and directed it toward Henry, the architect she had met from reckt one earlier. He was now at least five hundred feet away, yet Heidi could hear his thoughts about the woman he was talking to. "...*she's as crazy as I am. And that hair! You could keep a whole kitchen in that fro and still have room to spare.*" Heidi burst out in giggles.

"Heidi. Concentrate," Har'loc pushed.

She aimed the pinhole toward the woman he was speaking with. "*I wonder if he has any idea that I don't know anything about water gardens. What was that article I saw in Better Homes and Gardens?*" Heidi smiled again.

Har'loc removed his hands from her head. "Who were you listening to? Myself or Ranash?"

"Neither. I was listening to two people I spoke to earlier from reckt one. Henry and Janice."

"You can hear them from here?"

"Yes. Can't you?"

"No. We are limited to only a couple hundred feet without the assistance of the ishkan." Har'loc shot a surprised glance at Ranash. "*She is more powerful than anyone I have ever met, ter'roc or human alike. I think that she is truly on the edge of an evolutionary change,*" Heidi heard Har'loc say to Ranash. Heidi looked at Har'loc, who immediately knew that she had heard him.

"Heidi, I know it is difficult, but you must learn to respect our private conversations," Har'loc reminded her.

Heidi heard a giggle. "*Private, private!*" said a voice she had never heard before, followed by a snicker. Heidi cocked an eyebrow and grinned.

"Why is that funny?" asked Har'loc.

"Didn't you hear that?"

Har'loc looked at Ranash, confused. "I didn't hear anything. I was saying that you must learn to respect our private conversations," he said with a serious tone.

"I'm sorry. It's easier to hear it all than to try and block it. I'll try harder."

"*He wants you to watch his privates.*" The giggling continued. "*Conversations, that is.*" She really was the only one hearing it, as Har'loc and Ranash did not react.

"That's disgusting," she said quietly, no longer amused.

"What are you hearing?" Ranash asked.

"Someone." She paused. "I don't hear them anymore."

"What did they sound like?"

"Childish. Whispering sort of."

"Joon," Ranash said flatly.

Har'loc squinted. "She may have a long range, but I doubt she can hear Joon from here."

"June? As in the month?" inquired Heidi.

"Not like the month. *J-O-O-N*," Har'loc spelled for her. "He is a ter'roc in the Iridoc ishkan here in the Hawaiian Islands, but he is at least thirty miles away. He is harmless, but a little...immature. He actually suffers from psionic psychosis. One of my responsibilities as shev'lar is to block his senseless thought transmissions so they do not cause disruption. He enjoys telling crass jokes, speaking of bodily functions to get a laugh out of people. Personally, I find Joon funny. But Ranash does not."

"No. It is not...appropriate," she interjected.

Heidi smiled. "I never thought of the ter'roc as comedians."

“Oh, trust me, there are those among us who could have you in tears laughing.” He looked at Ranash. “You are still upset about the Boston incident? That was three hundred years ago.”

“I do not care how long ago it was. I do not think that calling a respected chief of his people an ‘old gasbag’ among a group of tribal elders is appropriate.”

Har’loc burst out laughing. “He was an old gasbag. Both from his mouth and other points south.”

Ranash stood shaking her head as Har’loc and Heidi laughed. Har’loc slowly stopped laughing, composing himself, and directed his attention to Heidi. “In time, you will learn to control your mind.”

“Are you afraid of me? Of my abilities?”

“Afraid? No. But I am concerned that if you do not learn to control it, it will control you. Having control of one’s own mind is the most critical part in telepathic communication. Learning where your thoughts occur and keeping them private from public broadcast is essential, especially for a leader.”

Heidi had felt a special connection with Har’loc the moment they met, and it had only seemed to grow as they spent time together. He reminded her of her grandpa. He too had been from England and had had a similar accent to Har’loc’s. Her grandpa had been a very kind and loving man with infinite patience, always thinking before he said or did anything. Har’loc, however, emitted an aura of wisdom that she had never seen in anyone. He seemed to exude his knowledge without ever voicing it. There was a barely perceivable depth and humanity to him that the other ter’roc didn’t seem to possess. *Perhaps it’s just that I can sense more from him on a deeper level than anyone else can. Maybe he could be a kind of grandfather to me, although I guess it’s more like a great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great—a lot of greats—grandfather.* She giggled.

Har’loc looked at her and smiled. “What?”

“You didn’t hear my thoughts?”

“I have not been able to hear your thoughts at all since you put up the mental block.”

She opened the sphere in her mind toward him and said, smiling, “*You are like a great-great-great-great-grandfather to me.*”

Har’loc laughed and replied out loud, “Now I feel really old. You are like a great-granddaughter. However, I would add about one hundred greats to that.” They both laughed.



“I must say that this seems less like a summit than a dictation of terms,” said the French president.

Har’loc, who was spending a few hours talking to the world leaders in theater one, replied, “On the contrary, I value your opinions. It is simply a statement of what must occur. We must work together as an entire world. There can be no division between us or we will never accomplish the end goal, which is survival.”

“Survival of us or survival of you?” the Russian president chimed in.

Har’loc stared at the Russian president for a moment as whispers floated throughout the theater. “Mr. President, I am not going to split hairs with you. I am not a politician, nor do I want to be. This is going to happen with or without the leaders of this world. I am giving you a chance to be a part of it.”

“Or what?” asked the French president.

“Or not,” declared Har’loc.

“What?”

“You do not have to be a part of it, but it is going to occur,” stated Har’loc flatly.

“And if we don’t allow it?” the Russian president said, irritated.

“There is no allowing or not allowing. This is not something that you have power over, but it is something you can contribute to. We are going to defend this planet with or without your help.”

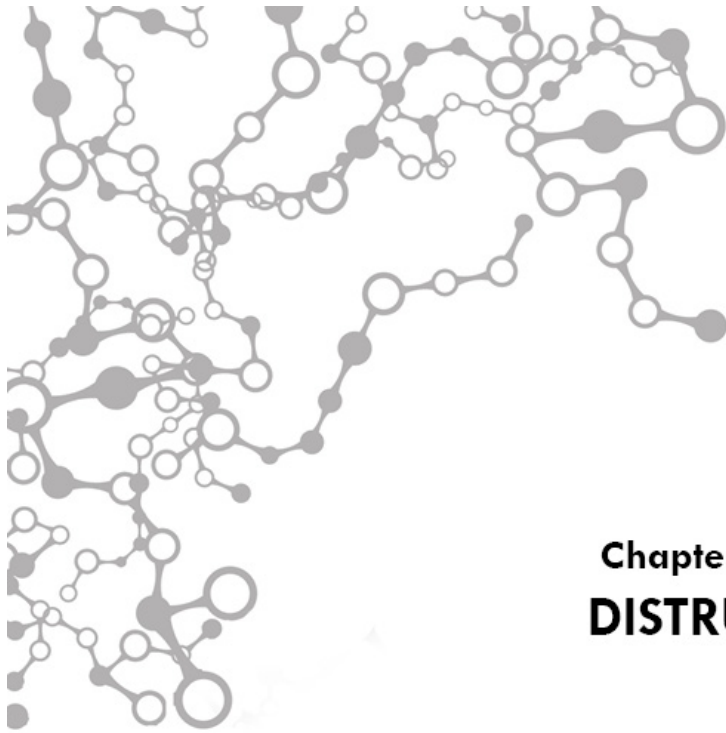
“What is the point of this conference then?” yelled the president of the United States. A few people agreed, and whispers and conversation filled the room again, then died down.

“To inform you and give you a chance to be a part of it.”

“You set foot in my country and we will destroy you,” stated the Russian president.

“Mr. President, we have been in your country for over two hundred thousand years. We have been connected with your culture and history in ways you cannot even fathom long before you had any control over it. Listen, everyone. This is not a dictation of terms. This is not a world takeover. We have been here long before *you* were and *we* are going to protect our world. If you choose to help”—Har’loc looked around at the human leaders—“we welcome it. If you choose to fight us, then like any child, you will be forced to”—he considered his words—“take a time-out. Thank you everyone for coming. Good day.” And with that, Har’loc stepped away from the podium.

The leaders continued to talk for another hour and then dispersed to their respective rooms.



Chapter 13

DISTRUST

After spending some time speaking with other leaders, the president met with Tim, Frank and Reggie in the corridor, and the four walked back toward the small sitting room they had arrived in. The president told them how he had spoken with the Russian and French presidents, who had agreed that something had to be done to prevent their world from being overrun by the ter'roc. All three leaders were willing to do anything they could to prevent it.

As the three stepped through the door of the small room in the Hawaiian hotel, the Oval Office appeared on the other side. The president spun around and looked at Reggie, who reached under his sport coat to find that his service weapon was once again there.

"Guys, I need to make some phone calls. Please watch the door. Tim, can we speak in an hour?"

"Yes, absolutely," Tim replied.

No sooner did Reggie close the president's door than the phone on his desk began to ring. He picked up the phone to hear his secretary on the other end saying, "The Russian president is on the line. Shall I put him through?"

He sighed. "Yes, please." Pausing, he said, "Hello?"

"We have problem. No?" the Russian president said, now with his strong accent, something he had lacked at the summit.

"Yes, we do," agreed the president.

"I can patch in the French president if you'd like."

"Please do."

Two minutes later, the French president came on the line, "Monsieur President?"

"Yes, I'm here."

The Russian president spoke in broken English, clearly frustrated, "I think we need to plan coordinated strike; however, we have problem."

The US president replied, "The question is, where do we strike? These creatures are buried all around the planet in our own countries. We just don't have the means to perform a strike within our own countries, especially with them underground like that. I recommend we position forces at each of the locations we know them to be at, as well as at every major city in our countries. We need to appoint a communications officer who will coordinate the strike. The key is to catch them aboveground and capture them."

There was silence as the other two presidents contemplated this plan. Finally, both agreed, and the French president interjected, "Something else we should think about is a biological weapon. Something that can harm them but not us. But in order for us to do that, we must first have one of them in custody. We know almost nothing about their anatomy."

"I'll work on that," the US president said. "Have your biological team coordinate with the Russians and us as well. I'll assign a few key people that I know we can trust to keep this quiet."

“I will talk to neighboring countries here and see if we can get some more countries allied,” the Russian president said. “The stronger the opposition, the greater chance we have of getting them off our planet.”

“This entire project needs extremely careful planning,” said the French president. “There are innocent citizens no matter where this...strike occurs.”

“True, but our freedom and the control of our countries and our very planet come at a price, one we have no choice but to accept,” said the US president.

The three talked for another fifteen minutes and agreed to speak with their respective cabinets to discuss strategic operations in what they were now coining “Operation Free Earth.”



Once the world leaders had all returned to their respective countries, Heidi and Har’loc arrived with the discussion already in progress in theater one. Cait was talking with two engineers, and various others were grouped up in discussions. There were a few people not talking about the topic of planetary defense but rather how strange the whole turn of events had been. Most, however, were discussing ideas about how the planet could be defended, including what kind of shield the ter’roc might have in mind.

Heidi went over to Cait and spoke to her. Cait excused herself and she, Heidi and Har’loc made their way to the small stage.

“This is your group, Cait. Would you mind doing the honors?” Har’loc asked. Cait immediately stepped into her role.

“Everyone, please be seated. Har’loc would like to talk with everyone,” Cait requested.

Har’loc stepped up to the podium and explained that the next few years would be difficult. He further explained that this job would take all of their time, that the ter’roc had already arranged for leaves of absence from their normal jobs and that they would be highly compensated for this task. Har’loc

spotted a man coming down the side aisle and asked everyone for a small break.

The man stepped up on stage. He walked over and spoke to Har'loc, who then walked over to Cait and Heidi and introduced him. "Cait, Heidi, I would like you to meet Iton of the African ishkan Ultar. He is a psionic structural engineer."

"Pleased to meet you," said Cait.

"Nice to meet you," Heidi said.

"What is a psionic structural engineer anyway?" asked Cait.

"I design structures or buildings that can amplify an ishkan's psionic or mental energy. The ishkan have the ability to transform their mental energy into a physical plasmatic energy. It is how they can retaliate against an enemy. But it is also how they are able to create organic and nonorganic matter within themselves. You have seen this?"

"Do you mean when the chairs rose up out of the floor?" Heidi asked.

"No, that is their polymorphic capability. It is no different than when you stick out your tongue in a solid, stiff form. Or how a giant octopus can change its form to fit into a small box. The ishkan can mentally see something that we want and it create it."

Cait chimed in, "Oh, you mean where Har'loc asked if I wanted tea and it created it."

Iton's face lit up. "Yes, exactly. That was psionic energy fabrication. Now, for millennia we have been building these psionic amplifiers around the planet. However, we recently recalculated and discovered several years ago that it would require even more energy than we thought initially to create a shield capable of covering the entire planet. So we need to build three more primary structures, and we only have four years to do it. We need to build one in the Navajo nation in the United States, one in Western Australia and another in South India.

“Cait, rekt one will build these structures. Ter’roc and human alike will be working on the projects. As you know, we also need to build a defense perimeter and plan alternatives. I and several other ter’roc will also be working with a group from each rekt to teach you how to handle matter manipulation through the use of psionic energy—your own psionic energy.”

Cait interrupted, “Wait a second. What?”

“Humans have the same mental capabilities as the ter’roc and the ishkan. We are all related. You just need to be taught how to harness this energy.”

“Matter manipulation? What is that? Like transforming matter?”

“No, this is the ability to move matter with your mind. Matter is nothing more than a collection of molecules, some moving faster or slower than others.”

Cait couldn’t believe what she was hearing. How could a human move objects with their mind? *This is absurd... But no more absurd than sitting here talking to aliens in a time-frozen summit*, she mused to herself. Cait half expected to wake up at some point and realize this was all some elaborate, bizarre dream.

“You’re talking about telekinesis.”

Iton nodded. “Instead of reshaping an object, you are reordering the interaction of it with molecules of hydrogen, oxygen, helium, nitrogen and other gases in the atmosphere to make it move. If this planet lacked an atmosphere, it would not be possible. This is how a lot of the structures you have seen were built thousands of years ago. We taught the people how to move large objects and stones to build the structures you see today.”

“Why don’t we know how to do it today if our ancestors knew?”

“That is a good question. Probably for the same reason other knowledge has been lost. Civilizations rise and fall, some conquer others, some change their languages. It is the way of all intelligent species as they evolve. If we had not developed telepathy and communal memories, I suppose there is a chance we might not know everything our ancestors knew.”

“It really is amazing,” Heidi mused.

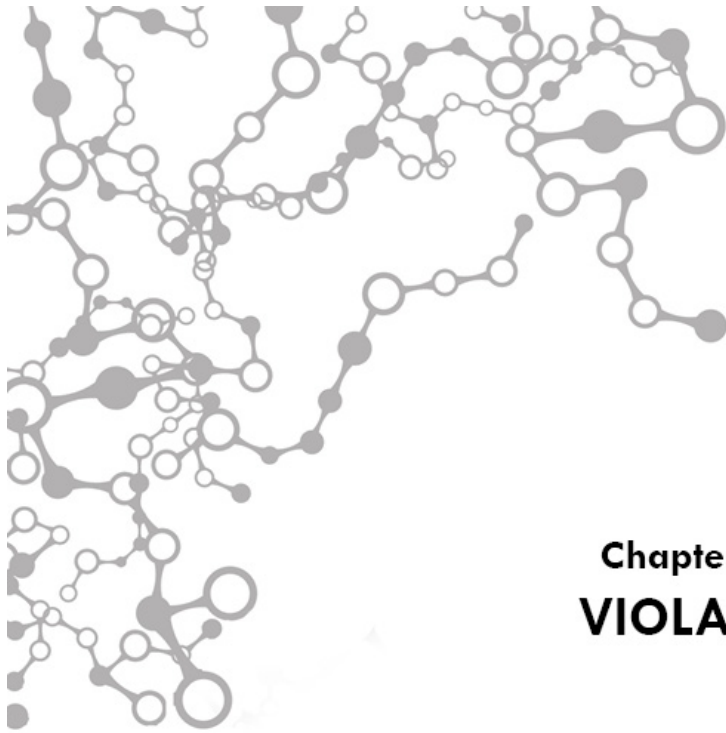
“What is?”

“All this time, the ter’roc have been a part of our society. There is so much we have learned from your people, yet so much we’ve forgotten. So much further we could be if we could only retain what you have taught our people.”

“It is the way of civilizations to slowly develop. Rapid development does not help a civilization grow. Experience does,” Iton responded.

“Perhaps, but the fact that not all of our generations have passed on what they have learned doesn’t help our progress.”

Iton considered this. “Perhaps.”



Chapter 14

VIOLATED

Time: Unknown

Location: Unknown

Her heart was pounding. She could feel the throb of the pulse in her neck, hear the blood as it coursed through her ears. No matter which way Penny turned, she could see nothing but darkness. There was a presence that she couldn't describe, yet it was so strong that she knew if she reached out she would feel someone. Penny tried to move her arm, but it was immobile, unable to rise from the metal surface she could feel under her fingers. She struggled against it but felt as if her arms contained giant magnets and were attracted to the metal on which they lay. She felt no restraints on top of her arms, just the cold surface below them. The cold metal lay flat against her naked back, and images of morgue tables floated through her mind. She was afraid to speak for fear that the presence, whatever it was, would lash out at

her. However, she had no other capacity with which to judge the darkness that she was now in. "Hello?" she tried to say, even imagined she had said it, but nothing escaped her lips. There was a quiet tapping somewhere in the room, and it echoed off unseen walls, like metal on metal.

For what felt like hours, she waited, unable to move, freezing, shivering. A bright light suddenly illuminated directly above her with a "thud" as if a large switch had just been flipped on a giant transformer at some far end of a huge room. She tried to look around but could see nothing but the edges of the silver table that she lay upon, naked. The light shone directly on her face and close above her, preventing her from seeing beyond the small space. She could turn her head to the side but could move no more, not even to bend her head down and look at her body.

A ter'roc stepped up to the edge of the table wearing a white uniform from the neck down. It had a surgeon's mask on. As it held up its hand, she could see a metallic instrument that resembled an old-fashioned can opener with a curved blade. Penny tried to get up, tried to flee, but was still unable to move, unable to speak, her heart beating fast, wanting to leave, needing to leave. Another ter'roc approached from the other side of the table, this one wheeling some sort of instrument assembly attached to a long white arm. She tried to bend her chin down so that she could see her naked body as the instrument with the arm came down between her breasts, slicing smoothly through her skin. Penny could feel warm blood pouring down and around her breasts. The ter'roc were making clicking noises, discussing something, perhaps the strangeness of how she must look inside. The pain was real, raw and visceral. Intolerable, excruciating pain that made her vision cloud in and out with white fog. She felt one of the ter'roc put its hand into the incision, which now went clear down to her naval. It reached in and pulled on something inside her. She could not tell what it was pulling on, tugging on, but it hurt, and there was a strong pressure inside her. Once again, she looked

down, and this time she saw part of her small intestine in the ter'roc's hand. The light got brighter, washing out her vision as she passed out.



The alarm beeped on her bedside table and Penny exploded out of bed. She immediately scampered backward, slamming into the headboard of the bed and feeling down her body quickly. Her nightgown was missing. She quickly looked down and felt her front—not a sign of an incision or a scar, though a very faint pink line ran from between her breasts down to her naval. It was fading now. Penny stood up and ran to the master bath, flipping on the light and touching the area where she knew the cut had occurred. There was no line, nothing but her own lightly tanned abdomen.

“Penny?” Joshua asked sleepily from the bed.

She turned toward him. “I just had the most insane dream.”

Joshua was propped up on his elbow, looking at his naked wife, smiling. “Oh?”

“It’s not funny.” Her voice trembled.

His brow furrowed. “Sit down, babe. What’s wrong?”

She sat down and recounted the story. “It was so real.” She continued to feel where the pink line had been minutes ago.

Joshua got dressed, and together they called her doctor and explained the whole scenario, minus the ter'roc. Her doctor made an appointment for her to come in on the basis that her body might have been telling her something that her mind didn't understand. He set up an MRI just to be safe.

She and Joshua drove down to Chelsea to the MGH imaging center and, after an hour and a half of listening to the *knock, knock, buzz* of the MRI, finished the test, which her doctor later revealed to be free and clear. Deep down inside though, she knew that none of it was a dream.



Yultavar was clearly annoyed. “I don’t see what point this served.”

Kalarian replied, “Plan four.”

“There is no plan four.”

“There is now.” He smiled.

“They didn’t detect it. Do you think they ever will?”

“No. Their technology is too archaic and the ter’roc have no reason to run any advanced tests on them.”

“How many have received the implants?”

“Counting Penny? Four million two hundred forty-six.”

“And how many are required for this to be effective?”

“One hundred thousand I’d say.”

Yultavar smiled. “Maximum yield, eh?”

“Maximum yield,” Kalarian agreed.

“Aren’t these detectable with MRI or CT scans?”

“No, I’m using the same inverse phasing that we used with the transporting of those weapons to Syria. They are slightly out of phase with this reality, which should cloak them sufficiently.”

“Excellent,” replied Yultavar.



Chapter 15

TAKING CONTROL

Although the clock read only 1:20 p.m., when Cait was returned to England, she found she was completely exhausted. An entire day had passed in a matter of minutes. *I keep this up and people are going to see me aging years in a matter of months.*

As she lay down on top of her duvet, still fully dressed, Cait was too exhausted to pull back her covers. Her mind went back to today's conversations with Heidi, the ter'roc, Mingli and Brian—little Brian—how could a twelve-year-old possibly coordinate a defense perimeter? The thought of being chosen to be part of the Equipage did not bother her. What she really had a hard time coping with was accepting that any chance of a normal life no longer existed. That it had simply been forfeited without a choice. She saw herself as a simple British country girl; she appreciated nature, getting her hands dirty and the value of family. There was a massive change occurring worldwide, and she could either do something to help it be a positive change

or she could sit on the sidelines and let it happen around her. Either way, she wasn't going to be able to stop it. "I'll just lay here and let it happen," she joked aloud to herself, exhausted.

She had spent over an hour talking to Mingli, listening to his ideas for evading the draklor. They had also talked in depth about their dreams and how they could take control of what happened within them. Of course, it was pure conjecture, as neither of them had any experience controlling their dreams, but Mingli was quick to point out that monks in the temple he had visited used meditation to enter a dreamlike state, allowing them to have control over their actions and conditions within the dream. But it was something he himself had very little experience doing, as he had only spent about a month with the monks.

Cait had also talked with Mingli about Lin, his late wife. He was not handling her loss well, but he was too strong to admit that he was in serious pain. She felt for him. She had seen this in her father as well when he had lost her mum. Cait sighed. She lay on her bed, picturing Mingli holding his wife, and wished that her time with Roger had not been cut short. Her mind then wandered to the ter'roc, wondering if they ever missed those they lost—or were they actually lost at all when someone died? There was so little she understood about these new friends and now apparently herself.

Shadows were cast across her room from the bright sun outside as sleep overtook Cait in the quiet hours of the afternoon. Outside, birds chirped, and in the distance, the steady hum of a lawn mower droned on as it cut grass somewhere. As she faded from consciousness, Cait saw something, a room of some sort. No—a warehouse. She was standing in the same warehouse she had been in a few nights ago with Heidi, Mingli and Brian. It was dimly lit and had a damp odor. "Hello?" she called. Her voice reverberated in the cavernous space.

"Hello?" a small voice called back.

Cait immediately recognized the voice as Heidi but was unable to actually see her. “Heidi?” she called out.

The warehouse was lit only by two hanging lights suspended from a ceiling that Cait couldn’t make out. The floors were made of concrete, but Cait couldn’t see the walls or any entrances. The first of the two lights was near her; the other light shone far in the distance, perhaps a hundred feet away. She saw nobody else and squinted to try and get a better view. Nothing.

The voice of Heidi called out again, scared. “Hello? Please—is anyone there?”

Cait yelled back, “Heidi, it’s okay, sweetie. It’s me—Cait!”

“Where are you?” Heidi asked from a distance.

“I don’t know... Here... Somewhere inside the warehouse. I’ll move into the light,” Cait called out.

Cait walked over under the nearest light and peered out to see if anyone could be seen in the light in the distance. No one in sight. Cait then heard muted footsteps and stepped out from under the light. By the sound of it, they were bare feet running on the cold concrete floor. Fighting back the urge to run, Cait stood in the dark, awaiting whoever or whatever might be running in her direction. Then in the light before her, Heidi stepped into view, naked, with her long blonde hair hanging down over her bare shoulders.

“Cait?” Heidi asked. “What are you doing here? Am I still dreaming?”

“If you are, dear, then so am I.” Cait smiled.

Heidi looked down at herself. “Why are we always naked in these dreams? Maybe wherever we are, they don’t allow clothes?” Heidi motioned toward Cait.

Cait instinctively covered her own bosom with her arm.

Heidi cocked an eyebrow at her. “Oh yeah, that covers up a lot,” she said sarcastically, rolling her eyes.

Cait blushed. “Oh, hush up, you.”

Heidi repeated her inquiry. “What are you doing here?”

Cait was realizing that this was indeed a dream, but something told her that Heidi really was Heidi and not some figment of her imagination. “I fell asleep on my bed, and suddenly I was here in this warehouse...again. The fact that we can actually talk must mean we are gaining some control.”

“I was being chased by something I couldn’t see,” Heidi said. “There was breathing...and growling—some kind of animal or creature—maybe the draklor? I went through a door somewhere in a dark alley, and now here I am in the warehouse.” The girl sounded confused.

There was a sound far off in a corner, and the two stopped talking. Someone was crying. It sounded like a child.

“What is that?” Heidi asked.

Cait cocked her head. “I’m not sure. Sounds like crying, but I don’t see anyone.” She peered into the darkness. “Hello?” she called.

Suddenly she felt that something about Heidi was different. She looked over at her.

Heidi stood looking at her, no clear expression on her face, then said abruptly, “I’m having doubts.”

The crying stopped, and a faint voice could be heard. “Hello? Who are you?”

Cait ignored Heidi’s comment for the moment and walked toward the voice slowly. In the dim light, they could make out a solitary form sitting on the concrete. Not until they were completely upon the form did Heidi and Cait recognize Brian. The boy sat curled up on the cold floor, naked. Cait bent down and touched him on the shoulder. “Brian—my god, child, are you okay?”

“Yes,” Brian answered tearfully. “Just scared. I don’t want the thing to pound spikes into my hands.” Abruptly, he raised his eyes and looked around. “*Is it here?*”

“No, dear. Not that we’ve seen.”

But Cait's assurance did nothing to assuage his fear, and he responded with great certainty. "It's close. I can smell it."

Up until now, Cait had not noticed the odor. But now here it was—faint, but she could smell it.

"I don't smell anything," Heidi replied nonchalantly.

"How can you not smell it?" Brian asked, incredulous. His shoulders trembled under Cait's touch. "I'm so scared."

"Don't be, love. We're here with you." She looked over at Heidi, who smiled in response. "Minus clothes, mind you, but still here."

"Clothes?" Brian asked and sat up. That's when he noticed that the two females were naked. He smiled at first, then began laughing.

Heidi grinned. "Hey, buddy, you're not wearing anything but your birthday suit yourself."

Brian looked down at his naked body and laughed even harder. None of the three could explain it, but for some reason, this scenario, though scary, was strangely hilarious. All three of them completely naked in some warehouse in God knows where. Cait was now laughing so hard she was crying. "Oh, stop," she begged through tears. "My sides are hurting!"

"What on earth is so funny?" a man's voice said. In the dim light, Mingli came into view, bearing nothing but his cane. His stark-naked appearance only added to the absurd humor of the situation, and he too joined in the laughter. His old body bounced up and down as he chuckled.

Mingli's laughter suddenly stopped. He noticed the one person in the group who had ceased laughing: Heidi. She just stood there, a solemn look on her face, a twisted smile frozen. Mingli's silence cued Cait to look at Heidi, who just stared back at her. The awkwardness silenced both Cait and Brian.

"What's wrong, Heidi?" Cait asked.

Heidi's demeanor was guarded. "I couldn't say this before, but I don't trust them."

“Trust who?” Cait was confused at the abrupt change of subject.

Heidi continued. “*Them*. The ter’roc. I think they may be plotting to take over our planet. I’m telling you—we can’t trust them.”

Cait was taken back. “Heidi—what are you talking about? They haven’t shown us anything but kindness and honesty.”

“No,” Heidi said flatly. “They are hiding something—something deeply sinister and evil.”

Cait was stunned by Heidi’s sudden declaration. After all, Heidi had been developing such a strong rapport with Har’loc over the last few days, and in her eyes, the ter’roc had been consistently sincere and honest. Though four days was hardly enough to draw an accurate assessment of someone’s character, Cait had keen instincts and trusted her feelings regarding the ter’roc.

Cait half laughed. “Deeply sinister and evil? Why do you say that?”

Mingli interjected. “I don’t agree, Heidi. On the contrary, the ter’roc have had ample opportunity to take advantage of multiple situations. The leaders from every country were at that summit today, and I’m fairly certain the ter’roc could have eliminated all of them instantly, crippling our world governments.”

Cait quickly added, “And we’ve been inside the ishkan—we’ve *seen* their memories.”

Heidi’s reply was flat. “The ishkan? What are you talking about?” she asked in a dismissive tone. “Aren’t any of you people paying attention—can’t you see beyond their thoughts and words—don’t you *feel* it?”

Heidi lowered her voice, and her measured tone made an unnatural and sudden shift to one of pleading. “Don’t you see?” she asked, raising her voice again. “They want to take over the world. We must kill them *now*—before it’s too late!” Her solemn voice reverberated off the surrounding walls—walls they could sense but not see.

Brian and Mingli stood transfixed. Cait was unnerved and attempted to nudge Heidi back toward reason. “Please, Heidi—calm down. Think about what you’re saying here.”

A scream erupted through Heidi’s calm facade. “I will not calm down, you *stupid* cow!”

Without warning, her body began to swell as something began pushing out from her abdomen at an impossible angle. Cait, Brian and Mingli screamed and lunged backward as Heidi sprouted two grotesque limbs from each shoulder, shredding her perfect skin in the process.

Blood poured down her chest as her chest cavity rippled and pushed forward, exploding with concussive force as the head of some creature unfolded out of her abdomen and extended up above her head. The creature within had apparently folded its neck down to hide its head within Heidi’s pelvic area.

Heidi’s head now peeled back and fell down the emerging creature’s back, and it occurred to Cait in that instant that the creature’s newly formed limbs were like the limbs of the man in *The Fly*, a horror movie she’d seen. The creature continued pushing Heidi’s skin down its hideous body as if it were nothing more than a thin paper costume—a *Heidi costume*—and a large pool of blood and flesh began coalescing at the bottom of the creature’s legs.

Cait screamed, “No!” Panicked tears escaped down her face at the horror before her, but also at the awakening reality that this beautiful girl she was befriending was actually not human at all. Beside her, Brian yelled in terror, grabbing frantically for the safety of Mingli and Cait. Mingli himself stood stunned into silence. It was unlike anything any of them had ever seen. The creature had multiple eyes atop its oblong head with mandibles more suited to a lobster. Dozens of tiny little appendages seemed to be grasping in front of its mouth for food that didn’t exist as razor-sharp teeth revealed themselves beneath the wriggling appendages.

Out of the darkness behind them, Cait heard Heidi's voice yell, "Get away from them, you son of a bitch!" Then, to Cait's surprise, Heidi came running toward them fully clothed out of the darkness, stopping a few feet away, just short of the creature. The creature uttered a blood-curdling screech, its pitch rising multiple octaves as its mandible appendages shot outward from the force of the scream.

Heidi held up her arms. A barely visible shell began forming at her fingertips, enlarging at a rapid pace until it looked like a shield similar to those that SWAT teams used. She concentrated hard, and a massive energy ripple thrust from the shield, hitting the creature squarely in the chest with such force that the thing was blasted back dozens of feet and out of sight of everyone in the group.

Silence prevailed for a moment while Heidi stood motionless but trembling, holding her shield. Her newly formed weapon now emanated a steady humming sound. Cait breathed heavily, and Brian stood up, walking slowly toward Heidi, keeping his distance, intrigued by Heidi's newfound strength, which he found curious and strangely attractive. Cait ran up to Heidi and reached out for her, but Heidi motioned for her and Brian to stand back.

Everyone waited for what felt like minutes though it was only seconds. Heidi closed her eyes, concentrating, and the barely visible bluish hue of the shield turned red, lighting up the space around them.

Out of the darkness, the creature came running at them, arms spread wide. Once again, Brian screamed in fear, but this time Cait yanked him to her, wrapping her body around him defensively and protecting him as he crouched within her huddle. Mingli started toward Heidi just as her shield blasted out an orange-red beam resembling a blast of flame only without the heat. The beam hit the creature squarely in its torso. Its body exploded and then vaporized, spewing dark ash into the air that gently fell to the floor around them.

Unprepared for the recoil of her own personal weapon, Heidi had been knocked flat on her butt by the force of the beam.

Heidi looked at the group and disengaged her shield with a pop. She said, "This dream is over," and the room faded to darkness.



Cait sat bolt upright in bed, sweat streaming down her forehead.

The lawn mower was still purring outside. Her heart racing, she looked down at herself and found she was still wearing her clothes. *What the hell? Was any of that real? What happened?* No sooner had the thought crossed her mind than her phone rang.

"Cait?" Heidi asked when Cait picked up.

"Oh my goodness. Are you okay?"

"I can't believe what just happened!" Heidi exclaimed.

"Neither can I. How did you do that? You took control of the dream and destroyed that...that thing."

"I'm pretty sure it was a draklor. Their true form. Ugh!" Her tone changed abruptly. "Cait? What's happening? Cait? Cait!"

Then Cait knew exactly why Heidi was screaming. Cait's whole world seemed to fold in on itself as if it were going from three-dimensional to two-dimensional before unfolding again. Only when it unfolded, Cait was sitting in Brian's bedroom instead of her own. Cait saw Mingli and Heidi also folding into his bedroom at the same time while Brian sat on his bed, holding his head, screaming and rocking.

Cait jumped up and ran over to him and touched his shoulders. "Brian! It's okay. We're here. Brian, love!"

The boy stopped screaming and looked around his room. Within a couple seconds, Grenethda and Har'loc appeared.

"What happened? How are you here?" Brian asked.

"I think...you brought us here somehow," Heidi said.

"It is the Convergence. The more it develops, the more you will find your powers emerging and your strength growing. Each of you will develop unique abilities. Heidi's appear to be telepathic. Brian appears to be able to teleport all of you over great distances. We will not know his limitations or who or what he can teleport until he learns to harness it more," Har'loc stated.

"It looks like Heidi has also learned how to control her dreams," Cait said.

"Brian's power was most likely activated by the stress of whatever was in the dream."

"Yeah. It seemed so real," Brian said, his voice still trembling.

"I have a feeling we won't be seeing those dreams anymore, now that they know we can control them," Heidi said.

Cait replied, *"You can control them. There's nothing to prevent them from continuing to try and get at the rest of us."*

"Cait may be right. It is best to continue to practice mental exercises. We will work with all of you to try and not only figure out what your gift is but also to control your own dreams. Brian, try now to use your ability. Look hard at Heidi, picture her and where she lives. Focus on sending her back to that location, that space." Har'loc looked at Heidi. *"Do not worry. I will help him focus."* He winked. *"Make sure you do not get lost along the way."*

Brian stared at Heidi for a moment, closed his eyes, and Heidi folded into a pencil-thin two-dimensional line and then slipped down to the size of a dot and winked out of existence with an audible "pop" sound. A moment later, Brian's phone lit up with a message: *Made it. TY*



The next day, Cait stood in her kitchen drinking tea and browsing through catalogs of bridal gowns, trying to distract herself from the past few days and bring some normality to an otherwise bizarre week, when her doorbell rang. In reality, she was wondering what her special power would be. She felt she

was too old to suddenly get a power. Maybe she would knit faster than any other grandma in the world? Maybe she would bake some cookies that could heal the sick? *Absurd*. She looked over at the clock on the microwave, which read 8:34 a.m. *What on earth is someone doing here at half eight?* she thought. She walked to the door, still in her terry cloth dressing gown, and peered out the window in the door. Her daughter was standing on the step, a look of uneasiness on her face. Cait unlocked and opened the door. "Gertie? Is everything okay?"

"Mum," her daughter said, exasperated. "Do you have something to tell me?"

Cait poked her head out of the door, tea still in hand, and looked both directions. "Come inside, sweetheart."

Gertrude stepped into the foyer as Cait closed the door. "When were you going to tell me about this?" she asked, handing a newspaper to her mother.

Blazoned across the top was the headline *Secret Summit among Aliens and World Leaders*. In the same column was a photo of Cait and a caption that read, *Cait Breslin of Sheffield, appointed one of four leaders*. Cait stared at the column, not really reading it at all, more in shock than anything else. "Oh dear," she said finally.

Gertie cocked her head. "How long have you known about this?"

Cait felt slightly numb. She hadn't considered the fact that it might get out to the press. *How could something like this remain secret, you ninny?* she thought. "Let's go sit in the kitchen."

Gertie followed her into the kitchen and set down her purse. The two women sat at the table. "Well? How long?" Gertie asked.

Cait took a breath. "Three days. I was approached three days ago."

Gertie looked away, calculating the days, then looked back at her. "The day I came over?"

"Yes. I met with them—well...one of them—before you got here."

"And it never crossed your mind to tell me about this?" she asked.

“Well, what on earth was I going to say? ‘Oh hello, love, guess what? An alien met with me and would like me to lead a group of people to help defend the planet.’”

Gertie broke out in a giggle. “Okay, I see your point. But still, I’m your *daughter*.”

“I know, sweetheart, I just thought...I’d have more time to process this. More time to think about how to handle it.”

“I don’t understand why they picked you. I mean, no offense, but you’re not a top scientist or dignitary. You’re an amazing mother, but a leader to prevent world annihilation?”

“Well, I think that’s one of the reasons they picked me. Because I am not someone well-known or famous. They wanted people that could connect with society as a whole. They also seem to believe I have other attributes that I’m not sure I agree with just yet. We each seem to have our niche. Heidi, the head of our small group, is fourteen. She’s very bright but listens to what everyone has to say and doesn’t try to push her opinion on anyone. Mingli is in his seventies, very methodical. He’s a salt-of-the-earth sort of man, seems very wise and well-tempered. Then there is little Brian. He’s twelve, small for his age—he can’t be much over four feet tall. Har’loc tells me he’s very bright. And...well, today we discovered he has his own power.”

“Power? What power?”

“He can teleport us. He actually teleported me to Perth today!”

“What? You were in Australia?”

“I know, right? But Har’loc tells us that each of us will have our own power.”

“Wait, you’re going to have a power? Like a superpower or something? What will yours be?”

Cait shrugged.

Gertie looked at her mother for a few moments, contemplating all of this. “I know what I read in the article, but I can’t help feeling like there’s

something you're not telling me."

Cait looked down for a long moment and then back up at her daughter. "There's a lot I'm not telling you. For the last few months, I've been having dreams. Insane dreams."

Gertie cocked her eyebrow. "You told me a couple times that you had a nightmare, but you never wanted to discuss it."

"That's because it sounds too crazy, too far-fetched. I had these dreams about being trapped in a warehouse, a very dark warehouse. I was being tortured. Sometimes long nails were driven slowly into my hands. I could feel the metal ripping my flesh. One time my hand was severed, and I could see the stump bleeding. I scream in these dreams, but there is no sound."

"My god, Mum. That's horrible."

Cait nodded. "It turns out that the dreams were being created by these draklor people, the other aliens. We don't know how they are doing it, but we do know one thing: they are trying to scare us."

"There are always three other people in my dreams. There always have been." She pointed at the article. "These three people are the ones in my dream. People on the other side of the world from each other that have never met and never known one another. We have no discernable connection whatsoever. Yet we are connected. We are connected in ways that the ter'roc explain are very complicated. That we are prime consciousnesses."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that the three of our souls bind the souls of the world and Heidi's soul sort of acts like a tree trunk for all of our branches to connect to. We have the ability to organize people and use our powers to help humanity in ways that others do not. It is why we were chosen to lead this group of people to build these defenses. Because we can organize them much more easily than anyone else can."

"And you're willing to do this? I mean, by the sounds of things, it's a huge responsibility."

“I’ll be honest; I’m not completely sure what to think about all of it. I don’t know the first thing about what I’m doing. But the more I learn, the more I understand and the more I find I am able to accomplish what needs to be done. I’m finding that I have strength and leadership I didn’t know I had. I trust them.”

Gertie squinted at her mother and then looked down at the table. “Aliens? Seriously? I saw the article and had to double-check I was reading the *Daily Mail* and not some stupid tabloid.” She shook her head.

“I know it’s a lot to stomach. I’m still having issues with it.”

Still disbelieving, Gertie smiled thinly. “So, my mother is going to help save the world. Okay. But you still better be at my wedding,” she said sternly.

Cait nodded, smiling, then spotted a dirty handprint on the wall she must have left the other day when she was gardening. “I will be, and hopefully I’ll even have time to clean my walls.” She waved her hand at the dirty smudge, laughing. As she did so, the dirt lifted from the paint as if by its own accord and dropped to the floor, commanded by her movement. Cait’s mouth dropped open. She stared down at her hand and then looked over at Gertie, who was also staring in shock at the now clean wall.

The doorbell rang again. Cait shot Gertie a look of concern.

“Expecting company?” Gertie asked, still staring at the wall.

“No, but I wasn’t expecting you to show up either. Can you get the door and I’ll quickly get dressed?”

“Sure,” Gertie replied distantly without looking away from the wall.

When Gertie got to the door and peered out the window, there were three people standing on the front porch and four news vans out front. She cracked the door and stuck her head out. She saw a few more news vans not far away. “Can I help you?”

A woman answered. “Hello, I’m Anita Hansen with BBC. Is Mrs. Breslin in?”

“Um, one second.” Gertie closed the door. “Mum?” she yelled up the stairs, excited. “It’s a bunch of news reporters.”

“Oh dear!” she heard her mother yell. Cait came to the top of the stairs, looking down at Gertie. She was buttoning her blouse. “I don’t know if I should talk to them yet. I need to talk to Heidi and Har’loc first.”

“Do you want me to get rid of them?”

She stood thinking for a moment. “Yes, get their names and numbers and tell them I’ll contact them later today.”

“Okay.”

Gertie wrote down thirteen names in total along with their phone numbers and then came back inside.

“Everything go okay?” Cait asked.

“Yes, though two of the guys were a little forceful, not wanting to take no for an answer.” Gertie looked at her mother, who was looking down at her hands and back up at the wall. “Are we going to talk about the elephant in the room?”

“I’d rather talk about the dirt in the room,” Cait replied distantly. She pointed at the floor where the dirt lay in a small, barely perceivable pile. She made a spiral motion in the air and the dirt lifted up off the floor, creating a tiny little dust devil that rose a few feet and then fell back to the floor when she stopped.

“Guess you found your power. The power to move dust.”

“Is it? I can *feel* it.”

“Feel it? What do you mean?”

“I can literally feel the energy in the particles, where they are, direct them. I can’t really explain it.”

She walked to the patio door and opened it. She looked at her flower garden and held her hands flat, then lifted them up. Before her, a mass of soil reached up out of her garden and sculpted itself into a tower three feet high, then crashed down as she brought her hands down.

There was palpable fear in Gertie's eyes. "Mum?"

"I know, Gertie."

"If you can do that..." Gertie was distracted by something near the garden gate. Har'loc was walking through.

"Har'loc, what are you doing here?" Cait asked. "I thought we weren't meeting until ten."

He had a dismayed look on his face. "May I step inside?"

"Yes, of course. Gertie, this is Har'loc. Har'loc, this is my daughter, Gertrude."

Using his cane, Har'loc slowly made his way inside, stopped before Gertie, and lifted her hand, kissing the top of it. "The honor is mine."

Gertie blushed and smiled at Cait as if to say "wow."

Har'loc turned toward Cait. "Cait, we need to go. Now. That incident with the draklor in your dream, it should have never happened. We have been working to try and block the dreams, but that last one was too intense. We need to move quicker than I expected."

"You're telling me. Wait, what does this mean?"

"It means that they may already know what we are planning. We need an alternate strategy and quick. The Equipage is going to meet, and Mingli's team is going to have to step up to the plate. I see also that you have discovered your power. Matter manipulation."

Cait help up her hands. "Yep. Don't even have to get my hands dirty. Okay. I'm ready when you are. Gertie, I'll be back as soon as I can."

Har'loc looked at Gertie. "She will be back within a minute or two."

"Um, okay," said Gertie.

As Gertie watched, Har'loc held up his hand and touched the side of Cait's head. They both faded as though they had been nothing but smoke to begin with. Gertie could still smell her mother's Jean Paul Gaultier on the air. Then it too faded. She looked around the room, then stepped forward and touched the place they had been. Nothing but air remained. *How is that even*

possible? Though a part of her had been conditioned to seeing people disappear through special effects on movies and on the telly, it was unnerving to actually see it occur right before your own eyes. At that moment, she wondered if her mother also felt that unnerving quality or if it simply felt natural to her.



Cait found herself in another kitchen, but it was dark outside the windows. She looked at Har'loc in question. A woman walked into the room wearing a bathrobe and jumped back, startled. "Har'loc! My god, could you use the door once in a while?"

"I am so sorry, Mrs. Kilbourne. Is Heidi ready?" They were interrupted by a light rap on the door.

Har'loc looked at Heidi's mother, who said, "I'm not sure. Can you get that? I'll check on Heidi."

The old man made his way to the door and opened it to find Ranash standing on the other side. "Ranash?" he said, somewhat surprised. Then he realized that he had in fact asked her to come as well. "I am sorry, I forgot that I had spoken to you earlier. I guess I need more sleep."

Ranash smiled her usual pleasant smile and entered the house. "Age catching up with you, Shev'lar?" she joked.

Har'loc responded with a thin smile. "In here."

"What time is it here?" asked Cait.

"We are at Heidi's house in Swampscott. It is half three in the morning."

"Half three? My god, Har'loc! I hope this is important."

"It is."

The kitchen door lit up in a blue hue, and Mingli and Kintara stepped through the portal. Another portal appeared, and Grenethda, Brian and Brian's mother stepped into the kitchen just as Heidi and her brother, Mark, walked in. "Come, let us sit," Har'loc said.

Har'loc looked at Cait, Heidi and Brian. "We know that Heidi has the power of telepathy; Brian, teleportation; and Cait has matter manipulation."

"Dirt manipulation," Cait interrupted.

"Matter," Har'loc said firmly. "I have been studying how you are manipulating the matter. You are not moving minerals alone. You are modifying the properties of the actual molecules. Take this spoon." He held up one of the spoons on the table. "Picture the spoon that you have at home. See the structure of the existing spoon, how it can be rearranged and reassembled to form the same design as your own spoon."

Cait concentrated, and the spoon turned to a small cloud of particles on the table that coalesced around themselves, moving all around each other as they found their correct location. She was assembling a puzzle with billions of molecules, rearranging them so that they would fit into just the right place. Cait could feel them on an imperceptible level and was laying down tens of thousands of rows at once. Within seconds, the spoon looked identical to the spoon back at her home.

"Now, that was very simplistic. Once you learn more, you'll realize that you are not limited by materials. You can pull molecules from various items to form more complex and much larger objects." Harloc turned to Mingli. "Mingli has discovered his power as well."

Mingli held up his hands in prayer to his forehead, to his third eye, and a blue light appeared at his forehead. He expanded it with his hands until it completely engulfed the room in a blue sphere. The entire kitchen shimmered with blue light.

"What is this?" Heidi asked.

"Look at your watches and phones," Har'loc replied.

Each person looked at their devices. The time on them was going backward rapidly. It stopped three hours back. Then it flew forward to the current time and stopped, and the blue sphere dissolved completely.

Everyone looked confused. “It is a temporal pocket, similar to what the ishkan used to be able to produce,” Har’loc explained. “It allows him to slip forward or backward in time for a brief period. Laws of time cause the timeline to autocorrect itself eventually and destroy the temporal pocket, so it does not last for long. Mingli has a lot to learn, but he is learning.”

Penny walked back into the room, now dressed in a pair of jeans and a white T-shirt. “Regular party going on here, hmm?” She yawned. “Glad I was invited.” Smiling, she asked, “Can I get anyone something to drink?”

The group looked around at each other. “Some water would be wonderful,” said Cait.

“I’ll get a pitcher and some glasses.”

“I’ll help you,” said Brian’s mother.



In the kitchen, the two mothers collected some glasses and two pitchers to prepare for the dining room.

“I’m Sam,” Brian’s mother said, extending her hand.

“Penny. Sorry, I should have introduced myself in the other room. I’m running on fumes at the moment.”

“Aren’t we all?” Sam laughed. “Can I ask you something, mother to mother?”

“Of course.”

“These people, these ter’roc...what do you think of them? I mean, somehow my twelve-year-old is thrust into this new reality...and your daughter, the head of them all, is only two years his senior.” Sam shook her head.

Penny put her hand on Sam’s shoulder. “I know how unnerving this is.” She spoke as she worked, putting together some crackers and cheese to go with the water. “I might not have been as receptive had I not been down to the ishkan here in Swampscott myself. Ranash showed me things. Things I

can't even begin to put into words." She looked directly at Sam. "They have seen things, experienced elements of history, created technology and biology that we can't even begin to understand. I do believe they are sincere in their desires to help, and I do believe they are being honest with us, with almost everything."

"Almost everything?" Sam retorted.

"Well, when I was down in the ishkan, I got the distinct feeling, call it mother's intuition...that there is something they are hiding. I don't believe they are lying, but they are definitely not telling us everything." She looked at Sam, who now looked concerned. "I don't believe it's malevolent. I just feel like it's... I don't know. Something doesn't feel right sometimes."

Sam nodded. The two said nothing else as they collected what they had set out and brought it into the dining room.



Har'loc began, "All of you are aware of the dream last night?"

"Kinda hard to forget," Brian said.

Everyone nodded. "This last threat was particularly intense. I have networked a group of ishkan and ter'roc to maintain a temporary psionic shield that should keep them from accessing your minds for now. However, we will need to keep you all within close proximity of each other. I need to train you how to resist their probing better. It would normally take a lot of discipline and years to master, but we do not have years, so we will use mental transference. While we are doing the transference, there are some other things we will need to transfer to you. All of you will need an engineering background unlike anything any human has ever possessed in modern history. We have transferred these same engineering skills to others, but it has been many thousands of years since this has been required."

Cait sighed. "My poor brain." She laughed half-heartedly, and Har'loc smiled.

“Mental transference is how we teach one another. We transfer our knowledge of something from one mind to another. With us, it is so much a part of what we are that we do not usually think about it and how it is done. However, given that your minds are not quite like ours, it will take some thought.”

Cait interrupted, “So you’re going to teach us how to block our minds and about all this engineering by sending the knowledge from yourselves to us?”

“Yes. Exactly. We have never faced a species like the draklor...” Har’loc paused thoughtfully. “And clearly we underestimated what they are capable of. We are not certain if our normal methods for mental blocking will work. We may have to develop new procedures to block their transmissions.”

“Why the pause?” Cait pushed.

“There is something strangely familiar about the draklor. I cannot place it. None of us can. It is almost as if a distant memory has resurfaced.”

Returning the group to the task at hand, Ranash chimed in, “I must warn you, it could be...overwhelming.”

“What could be overwhelming? The transference?”

“All of it.” Ranash looked around the room. “Shall we begin?”

Brian looked shocked. “Now?”

Har’loc shrugged. “It is probably better to get this over with so that you have time to process this and ask questions as time goes along.”

Cait walked over and sat down at the table, motioning for Brian to sit down between her and Mingli, who was already sitting at the table. Heidi sat down next to the other three. “Okay, let’s do this.”

Ranash and Har’loc both closed their eyes, and the Equipage followed suit. They all could see a flood of images, pyramids, symbols they had never seen before, calculations laid out on the walls of ishkan and floating in the air in rooms like what they had originally met the ter’roc in. They could feel the thoughts of millions of other ter’roc and ishkan engineers, as well as humans before them that had developed structures that still existed today, thousands

of years later. They could see and *feel* how the pyramids had been built. They could picture themselves sitting at drawings, laying out designs. None of it was a mystery. There were no thousands of men pushing blocks up massive ramps. It was only a few people with powers that had been taught to them by the ter'roc. Other prime consciousness humans.

Everyone opened their eyes. Cait was the first to speak. "Oh my god. It was us. *We built all those structures.* We built all the psionic amplifiers. The pyramids. Stonehenge. All of it."

Brian said, "I have known *all* of you..."

Mingli finished, "Forever."

Mark chimed in, "Yeah, okay. This is creepy. What the hell did you just do to them?"

"We gave them back their memories," Har'loc replied.

Heidi interjected, "I think we need to move forward with defense plans a bit faster, don't you? Even if it means pulling people away for several weeks or months."

"Yes, I agree, as do the rest of us," said Ranash. "Later today we will divide into the reckts and each team will begin. We are assigning 120 ishkan to each reckt to serve as transport as well as psionic shields."

They talked for roughly two hours, discussing the agenda for each reckt.

Shortly before they broke for a late breakfast, courtesy of Penny, Mark called from the living room, where he was watching the news, "You guys had better come in here. Now!"

They filed into the living room to watch the large television that was mounted on the wall. A small still photo of the president was on the left side of the screen as a news anchor reported, "...stated today with leaders from five other countries, including Russia and France, that they will under no circumstances cooperate with what they are calling 'a threat to humanity.' The president has put out a general order requesting that all ter'roc leave Earth immediately, saying that if the ter'roc do not comply, the United States and

its allies will be forced to take measures against them.” The reporter looked at a paper on his desk. “They are giving the ter’roc seventy-two hours to evacuate Earth.”

Mark hit the power switch on the remote in anger. “How could they do that? Don’t they know you’re here to protect us?”

“We knew this was coming. Everything will be fine. This is not a concern at the moment,” said Har’loc.

“Not a concern?” Cait asked in disbelief.

“We’ve known about the possibility of an attack since the summit,” replied Heidi.

“If you’ve known about it since the summit, why didn’t you do something?” replied Cait.

“Love all, trust a few, do wrong to none,” stated Har’loc

Cait cocked a half smile toward Har’loc. “Where’d you get that nonsense?”

Har’loc smiled. “Will Shakespeare. A bit misguided, but a very wise man.”

Cait cocked an eyebrow “Will?” She shook her head, wishing that she could understand what lay just below the surface with the ter’roc. She trusted Har’loc, but at times she felt like she was in the dark despite being someone who now held the memories of a thousand years. She felt like a child being told to handle the responsibility of a multi-million-pound company. Heidi laid her hand on Cait’s shoulder, which made Cait look up.

“I know you can’t hear what I hear and that it’s frustrating for you... If you have questions, just ask me. I think it’ll be easier for me to explain things than for them,” she said softly. Cait smiled faintly and nodded.



Chapter 16

THE ISHTAKA

The Equipage, Grenethda, Har'loc, Ranash and Kintara moved into the dining room, as it had more room than the kitchen. Har'loc pulled out a small cube from his pocket and touched the side. A holographic display lit up at one end of the table with a viewing screen four feet wide. "That's handy," said Cait, sipping some more tea.

Har'loc smiled. "I want to show you a few things. Brian, your reekt has been put in charge of the weapons platforms. This is what will be deployed."

Har'loc touched the holographic display in one area, and it zoomed in on a small icon that became a three-dimensional rotating object in the middle of the table. There was a cone-like base pointing down from a floating disk. The disk had a pyramid floating above it. Out of each of the objects came lines of text in a language that none of the four had ever seen. "What does this say?" Brian asked.

Cait, having already seen technology similar to this in the ishkan under Sheffield, informed them, “It reacts to the language you know. Close your eyes and picture words in English. It can be anything.”

Brian did as he was instructed and opened his eyes to find that all of the words were in English. Mingli did the same and could read them in Chinese. One line that went the length of the object showed a dimension of 1.2 km in height. Another line indicated that it was armed with six quantum traciators. “What is a...quantum traciator?” Mingli asked

“Each ishkan is born with five traciators. They are oval-shaped organs on the bottom of the ishkan. They take psionic energy and convert it into directed plasma capable of outputting two hundred gigajoules. They can vaporize a house in one shot.” Brian’s mouth dropped open. “A quantum traciator is capable of outputting eight hundred gigajoules. It is far more powerful, and the fact that this weapon is equipped with six of them allows it to fire in nearly any direction. Now as you can see here”—he pointed to the floating disk—“this disklike structure is what actually houses the quantum traciators, and it’s biological. We genetically engineered these creatures solely for this purpose. They have no brain of their own save a reactive nervous system that is programmed to communicate with the ishkan. This cone-shaped piece here is the engineering system and has thrusters and spatial orientation sensors; it is mechanical. The navigation system is also housed within it; however, most commands and navigation are relayed psionically from the ishkan anyway, so the onboard navigation array is rarely used. Ishkan can control it much more efficiently.

“Cait, you and Iton will be meeting near an ishkan in Delaware, Ohio in one week. He will go over the various structures we have been working on over the past fifteen thousand years. No doubt your new talents for matter manipulation will come in handy with your assignment.”

“No doubt.”

“Wait a second,” Heidi interrupted. “You’re always talking about the psionic power that the ishkan have and how you talk telepathically. You said that you created humans two hundred thousand years ago. Why didn’t you give us the capability to talk telepathically?”

“We did.”

“Then what are we missing?” Cait asked. “I know that recently I’ve been able to hear you and others telepathically, but other people can’t.”

“You are missing a key component in your biology: nevean glands. We ingest a mineral called bardonate, which can be found in crystal form on most planets in this system, and absorb it through our nevean glands. These glands then turn the crystal components into a liquid that we call uratine, which enables us to communicate telepathically. Though you are missing these glands, your brain still contains the components to handle telepathic communication, which is why you are able to hear our thoughts, though to you it sounds like language spoken aloud. If you had these glands, you would be able to communicate telepathically just as we do. We had originally designed your species to contain nevean glands, however, with the very small amounts of bardonate crystal on this planet, there was not much sense in humans keeping them. So, about forty thousand years ago, we chose to remove all but one of them and designed it to control and regulate the function of most of your other ductless glands.”

Mingli interrupted, “You’re talking about the adenohypophysis?”

“The what?” asked Heidi in disbelief.

Looking toward Mingli, Har’loc said, “Yes, you call it the pituitary gland or adenohypophysis.”

“I’ve never heard of bardonate crystals. What are they?” asked Cait.

“You have not heard of them because humans have not discovered them yet. They are buried deep beneath the Earth’s crust and are extremely rare. We know of only three deposits of the crystals here on Earth. Fortunately, we only need them once every few hundred years, and we transport many of

them from Nirgal. All of you know what it feels like to have telepathic capabilities. Anytime you think about something in your head or work out something where you can almost hear a voice, this is the same area of your brain that would handle the telepathic communication if you had these glands.

“You, Heidi, are an anomaly though. As I stated, we knew that you were the master consciousness among the ishkan, but your biology is also going through an evolution. We believe that your pituitary gland has adapted in such a way that you are processing calcium to produce the uratine. To be honest, we are not completely sure why this metamorphosis is occurring. It appears to be completely natural and not a mutation. This means that eventually all of humanity may have this ability.

“But let me get back to the subject at hand. The structures I told you about that were built thousands of years ago—the pyramids in Egypt, the stones in England, the pyramids of the Mayans and Aztec people—these all contain psionic amplifiers. You all have memories of them now, how they were built. We need to build three more of these structures: one in the Navajo Nation in Arizona, another in the Gibson Desert in Western Australia and another in India in an area known as the Agasthyamalai Hills, which is about 375 miles south of Bangalore in the mountains. Questions?”

Har’loc looked around the room. Everyone seemed to be lost in thought, trying to assemble everything they had just heard. Finally, Brian spoke. “Where will we start building first?”

“We will begin at all three locations simultaneously. Cait, you need to meet with reekt two and assign roughly one hundred people to each location. Try to assign them according to their experience. There will be geologists and engineers from all areas of concentration at your disposal. Because of our needing to shield you four from the draklor, we will have to keep you all within a thousand miles of each other for now. We are training several other

ishkan how to block the dream transmissions, and when they are ready, we can divide you up more.

“Everyone involved in the reckts is aware of the time that this project will take and the risks involved. Knowing how terribly short human life is, we will be arranging transportation every day to the locations so that they are able to spend time with their families as well. We will be working during weekends, but we will let you have a few days off for your holidays and special events.”

Cait was looking down at a list on a tablet she had been handed, scrolling through names and job titles. “I see three people I want to assign to the civil projects and surveying. Their CVs look good.” She paused. “I know this may sound trivial what with us all working for the survival of our planet and everything, but what about these people’s jobs? They still need to support their families.”

“That is a good question. Everyone involved in the reckts will earn three times their normal salary. It has already been arranged. They will each receive the funds directly into their account fortnightly.”

“What’s a fortnight?” asked Heidi

“Sorry, that’s a British term. It means every two weeks,” replied Har’loc. He smiled. “I may be ter’roc, but I suppose even I have been swayed by the ways of the Brits.”

“It just means that you speak proper English,” retorted Cait. The whole group laughed.

Har’loc passed around a sheet of paper to everyone in the room.

Cait looked at the specifications that were now displayed. “Hold on, there are only twenty ter’roc and a hundred people, most of which are engineers, assigned to each project location? How can we possibly get these structures built in time with so few people?”

“Most of the work will be done using bodaghs: humans and ter’roc that are trained to move heavy objects with their minds. The fifteen bodaghs you have will be more than enough for any of the projects.”

Cait nodded as if remembering. “Ohhh, right, the bodaghs. They have a more simplistic matter manipulation than what I possess. I remember them now.”

Heidi looked at Har’loc. “What about security? People wanting to interfere with the projects, or terrorism?”

“There will be no need for security.”

Heidi tried to see more into Har’loc’s mind, attempting to understand what he meant.

“Do not probe, Heidi, it is not considered polite,” Har’loc said in a friendly tone but with a reprimanding look on his face.

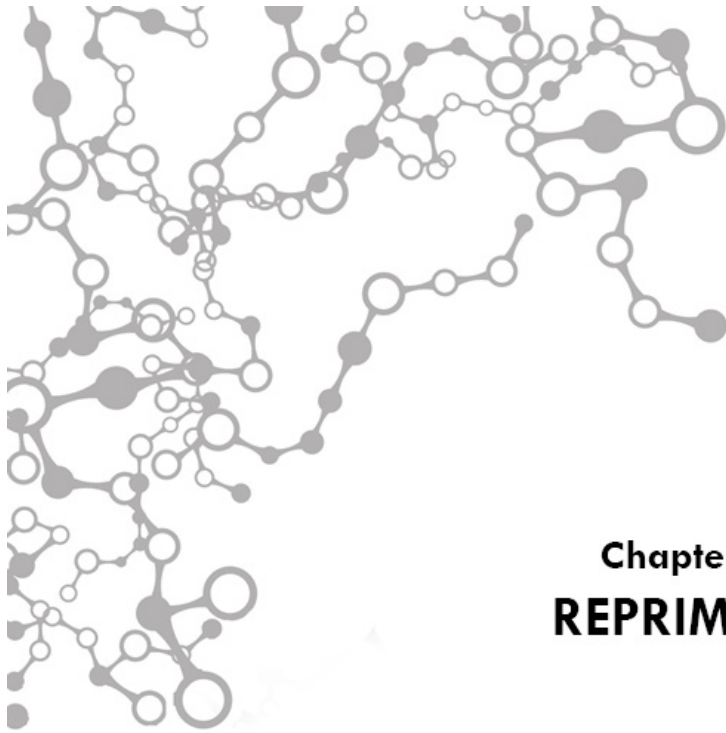
“Sorry.”

“It is okay. But for now, if I want you to know more, I will tell you.”



Part Three

FEAR AND ENVISAGE



Chapter 17

REPRIMAND

September 30, 9:36 a.m.

Kristen had an hour and a half left on her shift at the Boston Terminal Radar Approach Control Facility in Merrimack, New Hampshire. She was helping a few of her controllers direct traffic when a message came across her screen: *PRIORITY ALERT—EMERGENCY: Immediately ground all air traffic by order of the FAA.* Kristen's heart sank with the fear that there might be another national attack such as 9/11. She responded that she had received the message and relayed the notice to all of her controllers.

Kristen tried calling the FAA in Washington along with three other TRACONs but continued to get busy signals. By 10:00 they had all the aircraft on the ground without any problems. There were still fourteen flights

inbound from Europe, but those had been directed toward Canada and had landed safely in Quebec and Labrador.

No sooner had the last aircraft landed than the power went out. Kristen waited for the ten-second switchover to the generators, but there was nothing. Even the UPS units were not beeping. The entire center was completely silent except for a group of nearby controllers asking what happened.



September 30, 10:06 a.m.

It had been almost three full days since the summit. The tension in Washington, D.C. and around the world had been building. The president knew that he needed to act and fast, but frustration and fear were taking precedence over logic. No ter'roc could be found anywhere, despite the fact that Heidi and the other three leaders had been taken into custody yesterday by their respective countries' governments. The FBI was holding Heidi, the Ministry of Defence was holding Cait, the Australian Federal Police was holding Brian and his parents and the Ministry of State Security was holding Mingli in Shanghai. The latter was the most serious, as the Chinese government did not believe the western countries' stories concerning aliens. They chose to believe that Mingli was a secret operative for the United States or other western countries trying to gain information about the inner workings of the Chinese government. The MSS was convinced that the alien story was just a cover-up to get the Chinese people to release Mingli to them so they could collect whatever information they felt he had.

The president and his entire staff were feeling very uneasy now that it appeared the ter'roc were going to call their bluff. It was not the president's nature to fail to follow through on his threats, and he would indeed need to provide a show of power. However, Congress was deeply divided on setting any military action in motion without provocation, especially war. The president knew that he did not need Congress's approval for military action—

it had been done before with Korea and Vietnam in the mid-twentieth century. The president sat staring at the phone on his desk while approving several projects that had been sitting in his inbox. He was urgently waiting for the phone to ring with news of whether Delta Force had been successful in capturing at least one ter'roc. If it did not ring by eleven o'clock this morning, he would be forced to declare a state of emergency. Simultaneously, the other allied countries would do the same, initiating an immediate curfew while a coordinated strike was launched.

The allied countries had all agreed to perform a continuous strike at the three locations they were certain housed at least some ter'roc. They would perform an aerial strike using bunker buster bombs on Cait's backyard in Sheffield, on Essex Street in Swampscott and on Mingli's backyard in China. Chinese authorities refused to allow the other allied countries to assist with the strike on Mingli's home and stated that, if needed, they would be penetrating the ground using their own military devices and forces, but first the allies would need to convince China of the truth.

If, however, the ter'roc turned themselves over or launched out of the planet's atmosphere by eleven, then they would delay the strike until they could assess the risk.

At 10:26, the president's phone rang. He quickly picked it up. "Yes?"

It was the French president. "Do you have any word from your forces?"

"No. No word. The strike will proceed at..." The phone went dead. He stared at it, puzzled. Suddenly the power went out in the Oval Office. His heart began to race for fear of an approaching attack. He waited for a moment for the generator to kick in; however, the power did not come back on.

"Reggie?" the president yelled from his desk.

Reggie walked around the corner, followed by Frank. "You okay, Sir?"

"Yes. What's going on? My phone just went dead."

“Power’s out everywhere I can see. My radio is even dead.” Reggie held up the useless box of electronics that was holstered to his hip. He walked over and looked out the window. “It’s out everywhere. All the cars are just sitting on the road. This is really weird. EMP?”

“Maybe. Frank, go find the rest of the staff and assemble them in the study. And get my family.”



Cait sat in an office waiting. Ministry of Defence officers had shown up at her door in plain clothes yesterday afternoon, and she had spent the evening in a holding cell, unable to get any questions answered. Today after breakfast, she had been taken to what looked like a small conference room. She was handcuffed to a table and had been asked numerous questions about herself, the ter’roc, their plans, all of which she answered honestly as Har’loc had instructed. Although they never indicated whether they believed her or not, she was relatively certain they did not. They had left her alone nearly a half hour ago. She was certain they were watching her through the mirrored glass window on the wall. There was nothing in the room except a single photograph of the London Eye on one wall and a large television on another, currently turned off. So here she sat, staring at the mirror, waiting for whatever fate held for her.

The lights turned off, and for a split second she was able to see two forms behind the one-way mirror before the lights in there apparently turned off as well. There was someone yelling something, and a moment later she heard the door open and an officer stepped in and sat down beside her. She could barely see him with the only light being the little daylight that filtered through the door. “What’s happening?” she asked him.

“Why aren’t the emergency lights working?” a woman asked someone outside the room.

“Torches aren’t working either,” responded a man.

The officer next to Cait replied, “I don’t know. Perhaps you can tell me?” He seemed certain she was responsible.

“Oh, yes, I just caused the power to go out with my superior mental powers,” she said sarcastically, rolling her eyes, which of course he could not see in the dark of the room.



Three thousand miles away, Heidi sat in a similar room at FBI headquarters in the JFK Building in Boston. The power had just gone out there as well. However, unlike Cait, Heidi knew that they had no idea what caused the outage. In fact, she knew that they were all quite startled by it. She could hear people’s minds all around her, very afraid. Her ability to hear their thoughts also clued her in that there were absolutely no electronic devices working—no lights, cars, phones, flashlights, not even watches, nothing. They were completely without power of any kind. Even batteries failed to operate.



Nurses a few blocks down the street at MGH hospital were baffled by the fact that there was no power at all in the hospital, not even generator power, yet life-support systems all seemed to be working everywhere. One of the nurses went over to an ICU panel. It indicated that there was 0 percent remaining of the battery pack for the respiratory machine, yet it continued to operate. There should have been enough charge to maintain operation for another six hours. There was no way that it could be at 0 percent and still operate. The low-battery alarm wasn’t even beeping.

A nurse came running out of OR room five. “What’s going on? I’ve tried calling three times down to the blood bank, but the phone is dead.” Looking around, his question was answered. “Wait, we have power in the OR room. Doctor Stanberry is still operating.”

“I have no idea what’s going on. This doesn’t make any sense,” the head nurse at the nearby nurse’s station answered. “I’ll send someone down to get

some blood for you.”

At the emergency room, an ambulance pulled up, carrying a patient that had recently had a heart attack. All the cars around it were completely inoperable.



It was apparent to everyone at the White House that the entire city except for specific emergency vehicles and areas of hospitals were without power. Cell phones, radios, everything was completely inoperable, nothing but chunks of plastic and electronic components without use. The president had sent two people downstairs to the Faraday cage to get laptops and radios that were protected from electromagnetic pulses.

The two people showed up in the president’s study with two laptops, four radios and a set of rechargeable flashlights. None of them worked.

“That’s impossible. These should work even under the worst conditions.” Reggie tried to turn on a flashlight. He grabbed one of the shaker lights and shook it rapidly to build up a charge in the capacitor, but it failed to operate no matter how much he shook it.

The television on the wall in the study lit up to show a blank blue screen, as did the monitors on both of the laptops, despite the fact that the power lights on the laptops remained off.



Cait and her officer companion had surprised looks on their faces as the television in their room came to life to show a blue screen. Cait looked at the officer and for the first time detected fear in his eyes. Perhaps it was there before but she wasn’t able to see it through the veiled darkness.



Monitors, televisions, cell phones, tablets and e-readers all over the planet came to life regardless of whether they were plugged in or not. The same image was displayed on all of them: a blue screen which faded to a blue

curtain backdrop with a man dressed in white, patiently looking straight at the screen. It was Har'loc in human form.

After a moment, he began. "Hello. My name is Har'loc. I am head of the ter'roc, a race that has lived with you for a very long time. As many of you know, we are working with every country in the world to attempt to build a defense against the race known as the draklor. We cannot accomplish this goal if we are busy fighting against our neighbors.

"Every electronic device on this planet except those of critical support have been rendered inoperative. I had hoped we would not have to do this; however, your governments have proven otherwise. They have planned a coordinated strike at 16:00 Greenwich Mean Time. We must stop this. This strike would have a devastating impact to those in all of the areas they are planning to attack. We will not tolerate damage to human life in our name in any form.

"The planning of this attack has shown us that your governments favor their control over your safety." He paused and then continued, "Which we find distressing to say the least.

"It should be known from this point forward that any attempt to harm one another, intentionally or unintentionally, will be prevented by us for the remainder of the defense project. Your governments may choose to work with us or not, but any attempt to stop the defense project will be thwarted.

"We have created this defense project for your good as well as ours. We have less than four years to create three very large structures and build a defensive shield over the entire planet. This is not a small undertaking, and it will take the assistance of hundreds of individuals whom we have chosen. We only ask for one thing: your cooperation in getting this done. We know that many of you want to help, and if we feel your help will be of use, I can guarantee that we will ask for it. At the moment however, everything is under control.

“Please, work with your governments. Help them to realize that not only do we mean you no harm—we want to help defend our planet—your planet. We want to protect our children.

“Working together as a unified world, a unified community, we will be able to protect our planet from this threat. Help us to maintain a positive direction.”



All of the monitors and televisions worldwide went blank.

Five minutes later, systems all over the planet came back to life. Cell phones booted up, telephones started ringing, and people found they could turn on their vehicles again.

That evening, the Associated Press reported that, incredibly, there had been no vehicular or aircraft accidents as a result of the power outages. Somehow, a message had been relayed to all air traffic controllers worldwide that resulted in the safe landing of all aircraft just minutes before the outage.

Within a few hours, Heidi, Cait, Brian and even Mingli had been released.

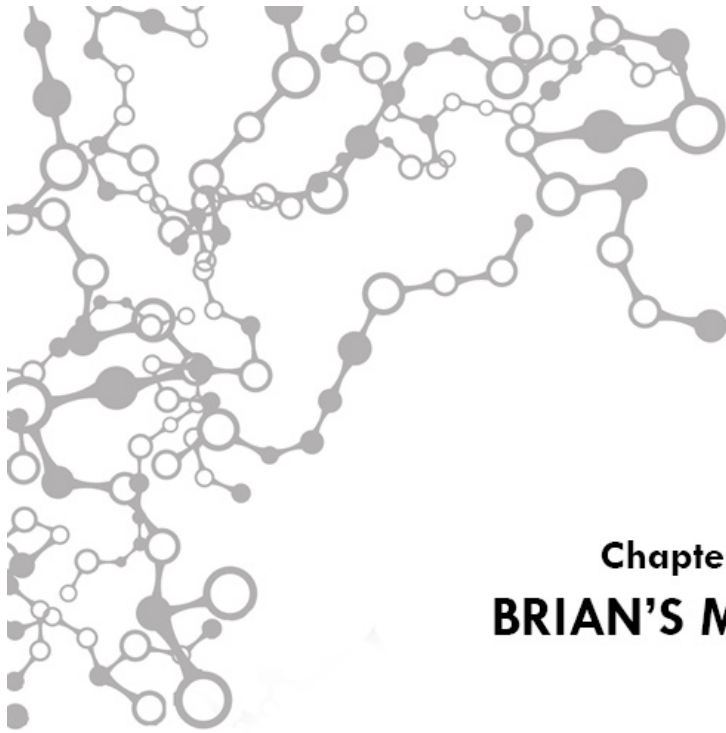


The president sat in his office, on the phone with the French and Russian presidents. “What do we do now?” asked the French president.

The president rolled a chess piece in his hand, a pawn carved from black soapstone from a set he had bought in Playa Del Carmen, Mexico fifteen years ago.

“We wait,” the president replied and hung up. Continuing to roll the pawn, he looked out the window.

“Check,” he said to himself.



Chapter 18

BRIAN'S MISSION

October 1, 7:30 a.m.
Claremont, Australia

Once Brian was home, Grenethda met up with him and explained that she would pick him up the following day.

It never occurred to him that she would be picking him up in her ishkan.

When she rang the doorbell the next morning, Brian came to the door dressed and put together, though his hair was a bit tossed. He opened the door and saw Grenethda in her ter'roc form. Behind her the massive ishkan was levitating over the water, its milky-white skin pulsating with the purple luminescence, casting a shadow nearly three kilometers wide. Brian could see a kayaker just off the shore underneath it, staring up in disbelief at what was above him. Behind it were another half dozen ishkan floating far out over the ocean, all of them levitating about a hundred feet off the surface. A large

crowd of people stood along the shoreline taking photos, pointing and staring at the spectacle. Brian stared in shock at the awesome scene before him; it seemed surreal, like something out of a movie or science fiction book. Samantha walked up behind him and let out a gasp, saying, "Whoa."

"Are you ready?" Grenethda asked.

"I guess so. I mean—where are we going?" he asked.

Her long finger pointed straight up. Brian's eyes followed it up to the big blue sky that was scattered with clouds. His face lit up. "Outer space?" he said with giddy anticipation.

Grenethda's small mouth smiled, and she nodded. *"You're welcome to come with us, Sam."*

Sam shook her head. "I have a hard enough time flying. I think I'll leave the space travel to my son. Thank you though. Take care of him. I want you back by dinner." She and Brian laughed at the absurdity of the request, but, surprisingly, Grenethda promised he would be.

Grenethda held out her long hand to him. He took it and the world around him faded. When his vision cleared, he was standing in a large spherical room. The walls luminesced with a purple hue, and in front of him a large oval disk lit up and expanded to consume half of the room, showing him his house and the world outside the ishkan.

"Please sit down," said Grenethda, motioning with her hand to two chairs that had extruded up out of the floor. Brian sat, staring at the viewscreen in front of him with awe.

Though he couldn't feel the movement, his house got smaller very quickly. The viewpoint rotated, and he was now looking toward the cirrus clouds in the distance, which were rapidly becoming closer. As they passed through the clouds, the sky got darker. "We are going to switch to full view. Please do not be alarmed," Grenethda informed him. Brian nodded.

The remaining interior walls around Brian faded completely. He was now seated next to Grenethda on what appeared to be flying chairs. He looked

back and could see the blue world that he called home growing smaller behind him, the spherical edges of the Earth now apparent at this altitude. He reached down with his feet and tapped the floor, which was completely transparent now with a view of stars below him. The floor rippled a little as if a pebble were dropped in water and then went smooth.

“What do we look like from outside?” Brian asked.

“This is just a projection. From outside, it still looks like the ishkan that you saw.” She pointed toward the other ishkan around them. He now counted fifteen—no...twenty—then he lost count as they kept shifting positions.

“How many ishkan are with us?”

“There are 149 other ishkan bound for the asteroid belt.”

“One hundred forty-nine? Wow! How long will it take us to get there?”

“We should be there in the next twenty minutes.”

Brian looked all around him. He had never seen so many stars in all his life. He looked back and could not see the sun. Then he looked at the moon. It was lit from his side, yet when he looked back, there was no sun to send the light to the moon.

Brian now felt a noticeable increase in speed as the moon on his upper left got bigger and they passed it.

“Where is the sun?”

“We usually dampen the sun. Being the brightest star, it prohibits us from being able to see everything else.”

There was a flood of questions flowing through his mind. Sensing his curiosity, Grenethda calmly said, smiling, *“You may ask your questions.”*

Brian laughed. “Okay. Why aren’t we floating? There’s no gravity in space.”

“The ishkan are able to adjust their relative mass in different parts of their bodies, providing artificial gravity.”

“How is that possible?”

“It is...complicated. They increase the particle density of their bodies in various areas. In this case, below us, providing gravity.”

“Cool!” He was lost in thought for a moment, then asked, “What about cosmic rays? I saw on this Discovery show one time that they were planning for a mission to Mars—um, Nirgal—and there are these radiation particles called cosmic rays that can damage the human brain.”

“Yes, it can damage us as well. The ishkan, however, have their own personal version of the psionic shield that we are building for the planet, but on a much smaller scale. It is what protects them from radiation, cosmic rays and micrometeoroids, and also provides a small barrier against the vacuum of space so that their skin does not freeze.”

“Wow. That’s amazing. And they always had this ability?”

“For as far back as our history can be remembered. They evolved from an early space-dwelling creature from a solar system far from here that settled on Nirgal billions of years ago. We believe that their abilities may have been part of those organisms.”

“What happens if they get knocked unconscious? I mean, couldn’t their shield be dropped?”

“It is not possible to knock an ishkan unconscious. Remember, it has thousands of consciousnesses. Some are resting when others are not. If one is lost, others take over.”

A large asteroid flew by the ishkan nearby; Brian became giddy with excitement. “Hey! That’s Eros! Professor Benkin told me about that asteroid!”

Grenethda smiled, amused by Brian’s enjoyment. *“I thought you might enjoy this.”* The ishkan flew in formation around several nearby asteroids as Brian wore a smile from ear to ear.

He felt as though he had been given the largest gift in the universe, access to the world’s greatest amusement park ever. Here he was, the first child in space and farther away from Earth than any person had ever been before. The ishkan slowed down and stopped near two large asteroids, their lifeless bodies rotating in completely unrelated directions several thousand kilometers from each other. They reminded Brian of oblong eggs floating listlessly in a black

pool of oil. He had seen movies with asteroids, cartoons and even drawings of them. Never in a million years had he ever imagined them looking as they did now. They really did seem as lonely as the photographs taken of Eros back in the late twentieth century. Brian's mind was lost millions of miles from his home and perhaps millions of miles from his mission, imagining an existence...floating out here in space for billions of years. He was realizing that the length of human life must be so infinitesimal that it was barely recognizable. His thoughts were suddenly interrupted by the view in front of him.

On the back side of the asteroids were hundreds of small white spheres that floated just above the rocky surface. "What are those?" he asked Grenthda.

"Those are incubation chambers for the ishtaka, the biological part of the weapon platforms. They have a similar gestation cycle to the ishkan but much shorter. Instead of taking hundreds of years to incubate, we have engineered these to only take decades. They will be emerging in six months, and at that time we will have to begin integrating them into the mechanical part of the weapon platforms."

"What will we need to do between now and then?"

"We must build and set up the weapon platform hardware. We have laid out four factories on Earth that have already begun to build these components."

"I'm sorry, I'm a little confused. Why did so many ishkan come out here? You could have shown me all by ourselves."

He looked out at all of the ishkan surrounding them as they began to disperse. They flew close to the asteroid belt, flowing out around it like a stream of bees searching for flowers, departing in various directions. Brian and Grenethda's ishkan remained still. *"We have come here to chart the asteroid belt. We haven't charted the belt for several thousand years. There has been no need to. We will take back our observations and build a three-dimensional model that will help us determine which locations will be best for the platform positions."*

"Oh, that makes sense."

The two spent the remainder of the morning cataloging asteroid locations with the help of the other ishkan until lunch. Around 11:30 Australian Western Standard Time, Grenethda asked Brian if he was hungry.

“Yes, starving!”

Genethda stood up, and the walls around them faded back into view with the exception of an oval window about eight feet wide. Brian stood up, and the chairs morphed back into the floor. In place of the chairs, a table extruded up from the floor along with a chair on either side. Two plates materialized on the table. Brian sat down in the chair closest to him, and a bacon cheeseburger with fries appeared on the plate in front of him, his favorite. He gently touched it and could feel that it was warm. In front of his plate a bottle of Heinz ketchup faded into view through rippled light. Next to it, a bottle of spring water materialized, condensation dripping down the side. “Water? I was thinking of Coke,” Brian said with a smirk.

“Perhaps you were, but I was thinking that a bacon cheeseburger is enough junk food.” Grenethda cocked her head sideways, smiling.

“Come on. We’re almost sixty million miles from Earth!”

“Sorry, I promised I would take care of you, and I always keep my promises.”

Brian scoffed, though it was a playful pout, and popped a french fry into his mouth. They were delicious. He loved the fact that he was so far from home yet had some of home right here with him. *Going where no cow has gone before*, he thought, taking a bite of his burger. Brian looked over at Grenthda’s plate. There was a pile of white rice and something that looked like sliced chicken breast, but it was slightly green in color. “What is that?”

“Hedshaw gruman with rice. Hedshaw is a large bird that used to exist on Nirgal. The rice is from Earth.”

“What is gruman?”

“That is the sauce that is poured over the meat. It is similar to pesto. It is a blend of jeetak, which is similar to spinach but more aromatic, and an almond paste. Would you like some?”

Brian made a half smile and shook his head as he chewed his burger. “Thank you though.” Adventurous was not something he classified himself as when it came to food. Brian was a simple boy and preferred to stick to burgers, chicken fingers, soup and an occasional salad—if he had to.

He stopped eating and looked at Grenethda. “I thought that an enlightened species such as yourself would be herbivores.”

Grenethda cocked her head to the side. “*Why would you think that?*”

Brian shrugged. “I don’t know. In movies and stuff, the aliens are either mean-looking monsters that eat people or peace-loving herbivores.”

Grenethda laughed out loud. “*We are not in the movies. Why would I deny my biology? The ter’roc evolved to consume meat and plants. We were humane in how we killed animals, though we do not kill them any longer. These meals were created from energy, not living animals.*”

“How did the ter’roc humanely kill an animal?”

Grenethda took another bite, chewed her food slowly, swallowed, and considered this. “*Well, there actually were rituals developed for this. An animal such as a hedshaw would be anaesthetized, and then we would thank Shalhaiah for the gift of balance and for entrusting us to help maintain the balance of all life. And then we would absorb the animal’s psionic energy, at which point it dies.*”

Brian squinted. “So you basically take the electrical energy from its brain and it’s dead?”

“*Well, sort of. Yes.*”

“Did it hurt them?”

“*No. They were already asleep at that point.*”

“Why don’t we just do this with the draklor?”

“*It is more complicated than this with the draklor. The draklor are a sentient species. A species that we do not know anything about. It is one thing to take the life of an animal that has no oushaun; it is another to destroy a self-aware species.*” She considered her next words carefully. “*It is very taboo and not something we are willing to ever consider. During the First Age, the ter’roc killed ruthlessly and*

without compassion toward others. They had no morals, no beliefs and nothing to bind them. Over time, we evolved to understand that our morals and our compassion are what defined us as self-aware people. To sacrifice our morals for the good of our species makes us no better than beasts. What good are morals if you are willing to give them up to better your species?”



After lunch, the two continued to survey the belt for another four hours, finally departing for Earth.



Chapter 19

SOUL MATES

October 8, 8:20 a.m.
Chiaoxi, China

Lin had been dead now for fourteen days, and although Mingli thought about her a lot, he had been constantly distracted by meetings, drawings, presentations and more meetings. He sat this morning at the old table that he and Lin had purchased nearly thirty years ago, attempting in vain to ignore the empty chair across from him. The air felt heavier than it had two weeks ago, denser, thicker, quieter. For the first time in two weeks, Mingli felt alone, and the fact that he would never again see Lin hit him hard. People had died before, people that were close to him, but it never felt like this. When his parents had died, it was the natural course of events. They had both lived long lives, loved his brother and himself, as well as their three

grandchildren. It was somehow easier for him to accept their death. Easier than this.

Lin's yarn and knitting needles sat on the bookshelf near the kitchen door. Mingli had been staring at the knitting needles for nearly two minutes when there was a knock on the door. Mingli grabbed his cane and walked slowly to the door, peeking out the small window. Xiang, his son, stood on the other side. Mingli opened the door and stood looking at his son with no emotion on his face.

"*Baba*, are you okay?" Xiang asked.

Mingli stuck his head out and looked in both directions. "Yes. Come in."

He and his father made their way into the living room and sat down. The two men just looked at each other for a few moments. Xiang glanced around the room and could see so many reminders of his mother. "How long have you been home?"

"I just got back yesterday evening."

"Has your team come up with any other ideas?"

"We have a few, but I can't discuss them at the moment." He paused. "How's the studio?"

"It's good. Business has been really great. Ten new students have signed up since...well, since you became famous." He smiled.

Mingli did not smile. "I did not ask for fame. I am a simple—"

"Simple man. Yes, I know. *Baba*, you are allowed to enjoy your life, to do more things, achieve more than a common man."

"There is nothing wrong with being common," Mingli said, tapping his cane with force on the floor.

"Just as there is nothing wrong with being more than common."

They could both feel the tension building. It was a familiar argument between the young world and the old. Xiang had always wanted to be someone important, someone who made a difference in more than just his tiny corner of the world. Now that his father was achieving that dream, he

was very happy for him. However, he wanted his father to be happy, to appreciate the opportunity that he had never been given himself. But in the wake of his mother's death, he knew happiness was hard to find.

"Baba, I didn't come here to argue with you. I'm just worried about you." He studied his father's aging and weathered face. Xiang could see the younger man he had known as a boy hidden within those wrinkled lines. His father's hands went to his face and wiped it from brow to chin. The hands were old, the once smooth skin changed by liver spots and fine wrinkles, the knuckles enlarged from the mild arthritis that Mingli dealt with daily.

Mingli saw his son looking at him and looked down at his own hands. They looked alien to him. When had they changed from the thirty-something-year-old hands to what they now were? When he looked at them, he could see his wife's hands holding them as they walked together in his memories, or when they had simply sat in the living room holding hands. He placed one hand in the other, almost feeling that sensation of holding her hand. The solid truth hit him that these hands would never again hold hers, those beautiful hands that he knew so well he could have drawn them in his sleep. He caressed one hand with the other, trying to feel that familiar touch. A tear rolled down his face. He looked back up at Xiang. "She was a good woman."

Xiang nodded. "The best," he said quietly.

Mingli got up as if to go get tea, and Xiang also got up, walking to intercept his father. He didn't say anything; he just reached out and hugged his father, who in turn wrapped his arms around him. Human touch, something that Mingli had not felt since the morning that his wife had passed away in the next room, caused him to sob silently, his chest heaving under his son's arms. Finally, Mingli said, "I loved her so much. I always hoped...that we would go together."

"I know, Ba. I know." Xiang was surprised by his father confiding in him to a degree. It was not like him to confide in anyone but his mother.

However, it brought a strange reality to her death, seeing this human side of him.

What Mingli had not voiced to his son was the fear that he now held. The death of his wife had brought him much closer to his own mortality than he had expected it would. Having his wife around for these past fifty years had made it easier to overlook death and the finality of it all. Mingli stepped back, tears streaming down his face, and looked at his fifty-two-year-old son solemnly.

“What?” Xiang asked, sensing his father was thinking about something else.

“Old proverb—good luck seldom comes in pairs, but bad things never walk alone.”

“I hope you’re wrong, for all our sakes.”

The two men had a cup of tea and talked of Lin, the fun they had had with her and what an amazing woman she had been. Then Xiang left to go open the studio for the day, and once again, Mingli sat staring at Lin’s needles on the shelf. He felt much more at peace than he had before Xiang arrived. Perhaps crying really did help, although he had always been taught not to. Again there was a rap on the door. Mingli did not bother to look out but simply opened it, ready to start a conversation with Xiang and shocked to see not his son on the step but a young, attractive Chinese woman with long black hair. Mingli’s instincts led him. He closed his eyes and pictured the ter’roc form, ignoring the noise of cars driving by and birds chirping. He opened his eyes again and saw Kintara in her ter’roc form standing before him. “*Good job,*” she praised him. “*May I come in?*”

“Yes, of course.” He opened the door for her. “It is amazing how much we see what we want to see.”

“*Without that aspect, we would have a much more difficult time creating our illusions, and you would see a lot more ter’roc walking about your world.*” She smiled.

Mingli led her to the kitchen and Kintara sat down. "Tea?" he asked.

"Please. Black."

As he poured her a cup, he sat down and warmed up his own tea from the pot. "So? Where are we off to today?"

"Off to? Nowhere. I came because I thought you might want some company."

"Thank you. I do." He looked at a photo of Lin and himself that hung near the back door. "It's been hard this morning. More difficult than I thought it would be."

"I know," she said softly. She held out her hand, which he reached across the table to touch gently before pulling away. *"She is not gone Mingli. Not her consciousness. She has yet to be reborn but thinks of you often."*

He smiled. "Our life together was beautiful. We fought of course from time to time, but we had some very wonderful moments together." He paused and looked at Kintara, so beautiful yet so alien as she sat across the table from him. "Who are you?"

"I am Kintara. Just a woman. A woman who has watched over you all your life."

"Why? Why have you watched over us?"

"I have not watched over all of you. I have only watched over you." She touched her index finger to the top of his hand, and small sparks of the amoculem trickled between them. *"We have known who you were long before you were born. We knew your purpose, the role you would serve, so we wanted to... keep an eye on you."*

"How long have we known each other, you and I?"

"How long do you think? Two weeks?"

Mingli shook his head. "No, much longer. I don't know why I sense that, but I do. I feel like you know secrets about me that I don't even know." He studied her face, her mirrored eyes. "How long?"

She looked down at her hands, then back up at him. *"A very long time."*

“Come on, Kintara, I’m seventy-eight. I’m not getting any younger. Tell me details.”

She sighed. *“We are not really supposed to discuss the past.”* Mingli continued to stare at her until she finally said, *“Very well. We have known each other for over seven hundred years. You and I were wed during the Yuan dynasty. You, my darling, are my soul mate, the man I have loved through the centuries, more often from afar than with one another. I could not let you know who I was or how much I have loved you. So I have served as your guardian instead. Almost always, I have been there in your last moments of life, to hold your hand and comfort you.”* She looked down at the table.

“All this time. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“As I said, it is not my place. We are generally forbidden to speak of past lives. It...is dangerous. It would prevent you from living your current life as it should play out.”

“Did we have children?”

“No, very few ter’roc have had relations with humans. And there has never been a way to procreate. We are similar in many ways, but our genetic differences prevent us from having children without assistance—which would go against our doctrine.”

“Having children with humans is against doctrine or genetic manipulation to allow ter’roc to have children is against doctrine?”

“The former. You were engineered by us to allow the ishkan freedom from their subterranean existence. It is generally believed that it would be inappropriate for ter’roc and humans to mate because the ter’roc would in essence be mating with the ishkan. It could be complicated since we play such a symbiotic role in each other’s existence.”

“I see.”

Mingli thought about his beloved Lin and his son and daughter. He didn’t want to admit it, but he knew she was right. If he had known about his past with Kintara, it very well could have affected the outcome of his loving

family. He looked her in the eyes. “It must be hard seeing the man you love living a life with someone else.”

“Seven hundred years is a long time to get used to the way things must be. However, I would be lying if I said that sometimes it did not bother me. But love is patient and love is kind.”

Mingli smiled and took Kintara’s hand. “I’m glad you’re here,” he said gently.

“So am I.”



Chapter 20

CONTROLLED

October 10, 3:12 p.m.
Navajo Nation, Chinle, Arizona, USA

It had been unusually warm the past few days in Chinle with temperatures in the upper seventies. Cait had spent most of the last week traveling between each of the three sites. This site she had privately dubbed “Dullsville,” giving the Australian and Indian sites the names “Hellsville” and “Bugsville,” respectively.

The Dullsville site was two miles south of US Route 160, basically in the middle of nowhere. She had spoken to a tribal leader and several other Navajo people, all of whom were not only pleased to have the building constructed here but honored as well. Many considered the ter’roc to be First Man and First Woman, who, according to Navajo mythology, created humans and put “shiny stones” into the sky to make the stars. One old man,

who called himself Kokopelli, lived a few miles away and was a descendent of the Pueblo people. He believed that the ter'roc people were the kachina—spirits from the sky that brought life to the Pueblo and Hopi people.

Sitting around a fire two days ago, Kokopelli had told Cait and Sam'loc and Ranash, who were in their human forms, about stories that his father told him as a boy. His ancient, weathered face barely moved as he spoke of his childhood memories with his aged, accented voice.

“Long ago, my people suffered from a drought that lasted many seasons. Our people were hungry, starving. Our fathers' fathers heard singing and dancing in the mountains.” Kokopelli began chanting in high and low tones, singing, imitating the songs of long ago as the flames leaped about the logs. Cait could almost picture drums beating and people dancing around the fire. “They followed those sounds into the mountains, seeking the music and the drums.” He paused to draw on a pipe he held, and the smoke swirled around him as a serpent might coil around its victim.

Finally, Cait asked, “What did they find?”

Kokopelli looked at Sam'loc and Ranash. “They found you.” Ranash smiled warmly. The old man nodded slowly without returning the smile. “Yes, they found you.”

Turning back toward Cait, he said, “They met the kachina, who led them down out of the mountains and taught them how to grow corn and wheat and how to work the land and save their people.”

Kokopelli looked back at Ranash and Sam'loc. Ranash replied, “Your people, they are a good, proud people. We hold them in great respect.”

Kokopelli nodded, looking back at the fire, lost in the flicker of light as it danced upon the logs. “We live a good life. We are close to the kachina. We follow the ways laid out by our fathers and their fathers before them. We want no more, no less.” He took another draw on his pipe.

“The kachina you speak of in the mountains, their memories are ours,” Ranash replied. Cait noted how she spoke with the same slow, deliberate tone

that Kokopelli used. It surprised her how much she was able to adjust her demeanor to match those she interacted with. She supposed that one of the advantages of living for thousands of years and gaining the wisdom that comes along with it must be the ability to quickly adapt or relate. For a fleeting moment, Cait wished that she could live as long as the ter'roc and found the length of human life almost an insult to her species.

Now, in the daylight, she stood staring at the large square plot. A line had already been laid out, 760 feet wide by 760 feet long, a perfect square that would be dug down twenty-six feet to the bedrock. A footing of limestone and granite would be laid down, followed by granite-and-limestone blocks, creating the solid structure. The structure would be similar to the pyramid in Giza but slightly different. It wouldn't house a single central tunnel as the Egyptians had created but rather a series of tunnels to make it easier to maintain. Along the full length of the four corners from the base to the top would be solid rods made from pure holmium, a rare earth metal found deep in the crust. Har'loc reminded Cait that all of this was part of the design that started tens of thousands of years ago to work with the psionic defense shield. The holmium would act as a resonator that carried and amplified the psionic energy.

Cait tried to imagine the enormous structure in front of her but had a hard time picturing it. There was a crew of people starting to dig out the footing space. Tractors, bulldozers and earthmovers were slowly being transported to the location, trucks pulling in all the time down the small two-lane dirt road. Cait went into the trailer field office for the site. Brent Jackson, the site foreman, a rock-solid black man standing six foot four with a strong Louisiana drawl, and his assistant, Rebecca, were scouring over a blueprint of the site near the whiteboard.

"How are things going?" Cait asked in her soft British accent.

"Good. We've thirteen men here so far and four ter'roc that are helpin' to get the equipment into place. We're still waitin' on the geologist, Roberto,

who's workin' with Sam'loc to get some better readin' for the precise depth of the bedrock on the southeast corner." He looked up at Cait. "So they're sayin' that we're gonna assemble this structure in six months. I've got a little over fifty people assigned to the job and we have to move more than six million tons of stone from suppliers as far away as New Hampshire to build this thing." Jackson shook his head. "I just don't see it happenin'."

"I suppose it will make more sense once construction begins." She looked him squarely in the eyes. "Trust me, it *can* come together faster than you think, and it will be unlike anything you can possibly imagine."

"Hmph. These bodaghs. Sam'loc told me we're just gonna have to let them do their job and we can't really talk to them while they're workin'." He shook his head. "Well, ma'am, all I can say is I'm glad you're in charge and not me."



Penny had been invited by Cait to see the progress of the Arizona site. "It's incredible, Cait. I can't believe how much progress you have all made!" Penny exclaimed, staring at the giant space that the new pyramid would be built upon. "Are you actually doing all this work with your special superpower and all?"

"My heavens, no. I just do a little bit here and there. I'm going to be using it mostly to design and inlay the internal network for the psionic resonator coils. See, the substrate has to be laid out just right, and once they do that, then we can begin to..." She looked at Penny, who had a glazed look on her face. "Sorry, love."

Penny shook her head. "It's okay. You're just way over my head at this point. Don't get me wrong, I'm impressed. It's pretty cool. Hey, is there anywhere I can get a drink of water?"

"Yes, of course! Follow me. Let's go back to my office."

Cait led her back to a set of trailers that had been set up in a rough semicircle. Her trailer was in a corner that allowed her to look out on the site and was somewhat elevated from the rest of the team and excavation. "I have

to go speak with Roberto, one of my geologists here. There's a cooler right in there on the right. Feel free to grab a drink, and I'll be right in. Make yourself at home."

Penny stepped in and looked around. The trailer was what one might typically expect of a construction office. There were papers everywhere, and a large whiteboard was mounted on the wall, showing project timelines. A smartboard was on another wall with several chairs laid out so that meetings could be conducted. On the far left-hand side in a corner was an L-shaped desk with three large monitors on it facing away from the door so that they could not be seen. Penny walked over to them and saw a laptop. She moved the mouse and saw that the laptop was password-protected. She held her hand over the keyboard, and the screen scrambled with obscure symbols and characters, then disappeared. Suddenly the screen unlocked. Multiple windows popped up in rapid succession as data was copied at incredible speeds from the laptop to the device that had been implanted in Penny weeks ago—the device that had learned how Penny behaved and now controlled most of Penny's higher thought function.



October 18, 12:18 p.m.
Agasthyamalai Hills, India

Ketlar had been assigned to the Bugsville site, which Cait was happy about, as she was someone that Cait could relate to and truly enjoyed spending time with. From the beginning, Ketlar shocked Cait with her wit and sense of humor. Being a much younger ter'roc than Ranash and Har'loc, she had a demeanor about herself more akin to a twenty-year-old. She was also skilled at helping Cait understand her newfound power to find the minute details in molecules and how they could fit together to create new compounds and materials that had never been dreamed of before. She loved music, and she and Cait often went over plans for the new structures while listening to something with rhythm. Cait felt that if the Irish or Spanish

could have been modeled after anyone, then Ketlar had to be at the top of the list. The two women frequently laughed hard, which the Bugsville site foreman, Bhagat Venkatesan, did not approve of.

He walked into the trailer as they were eating blueberry muffins and trying to figure out a problem with the holmium rods in the eastern corner, where they had run into some odd metals. “You’re eating breakfast at twelve o’clock?” he said in his thick Hindi accent. He scowled at the boom box, from which Rihanna was belting out “Disturbia.”

“I’ve found that keeping my body on English time is the only way I can keep my brain from turning to jelly,” Cait said, laughing.

“I see. What is so funny?”

“I just told Ketlar that if we are off on the design of the pyramid, the whole thing could slide right down the hillside.” She giggled again.

His face was completely serious. “I fail to see what is so funny about that. That would be a most horrible disaster. Countless lives could be lost and thousands of man-hours.”

Cait’s giggles subsided, as did Ketlar’s. “Killjoy.” Cait took a sip of her tea.

“Not all subjects can be thought of with humor, Mrs. Breslin.” And he turned and walked out the door.

Cait looked at Ketlar. “Wow, he’s completely lacking a sense of humor.”

“Yes, *we had the funny bone removed from some of your people*,” she said, and both of the women burst out in giggles again. Ketlar got up and walked around the table to a pitcher, pouring herself an ice-cold glass of lemonade. Shakira came on the boom box, singing “Loba.” Ketlar closed her eyes, and Cait watched as she began to dance. Although her legs moved a little, her belly and torso moved like nothing Cait had ever seen. She looked almost fluid, her torso swaying in a way that would make snakes envious as she moved from side to side in perfect rhythm, gyrating in motions that were almost hypnotic.

“How do you do that?”

Ketlar smiled. *"We have twelve more vertebrae than humans and our muscular system is more complex, so I have a slight advantage. Which is good, because I love to dance."*

Ketlar reached over and turned off the boom box, then sat down next to Cait, staring at the holographic drawing they were looking at. She reached up and spun the pyramid around, then turned her head to the side and stood back up. She looked more closely at the corner they had been studying. *"What is that?"*

Cait looked closer at the corner, then shook her head. "This scan was done this morning. I thought it was iron ore."

"That...is not iron ore." Ketlar pinched out on the floating display. There were four small red spheres under the eastern corner of the base that had been built. The foundation was only a few feet thick at that location, and very little of the pyramid had actually been built yet.

Cait grabbed her radio and keyed the mic. "Base to Venkatesan."

"Venkatesan here, over."

"We are showing four small spheres two meters south of the eastern corner of the structure. Have someone dig up them up. Over."

"Roger."

Cait glanced back at the hologram and sighed. "Being a housewife did not prepare me for this," she said under her breath. She looked up and noticed that Ketlar was watching her. "What?" Cait asked.

Ketlar shrugged and smiled. *"Being a mother and a housewife is no small task, love. Doing those things allowed Roger to support your family, which is what you both wanted. You felt that your place was to care for the children and be there for them and Roger."*

"Yes. I know it's old-fashioned."

"It is not about being old-fashioned. It is about love. It is about making choices that help the many. Your children look back on their childhood and remember a mother who was always there for them, who attended every play, every game, every

lesson. Roger was there from time to time as much as he could be, more often in spirit than in body, but there regardless. He loved you unendingly and, most importantly, believed in you as much as you believed in him. Your ability to take such good care of your family is what gave him the strength to go to work day after day. It takes a very strong woman to make that decision and persevere until the children leave the house. In my opinion, there could not be a better leader to show your people what is right and what love is."

"How can you know what Roger felt?"

"Because he is part of us, part of you. His memories are with us, and most of all, his love."

Cait looked away, feeling a knot in her throat. For almost five minutes, she couldn't look at Ketlar but continued to sip her tea and watch the earthmovers out the window as they prepared the site. Finally, she said, "I would have died in his place if I could have."

"I know. But that is not a choice that could be made. Not even by us."

Cait looked at Ketlar with piercing eyes and slammed down her cup. "Bullshit! You must have known ways to overcome his cancer. He suffered..." She began to cry. "He suffered so much."

Ketlar did not jump back when Cait said this; she just continued to look at her lovingly.

"You could have cured him, could have let him live a long life with us. Hell, if I had the power I have now, even I could have cured him!"

Finally, Ketlar said, *"We are not gods, Cait. You are not a god. We cannot choose between life and death. The most difficult law we have is the Salman Shoy Dektal, which literally means to not interfere with the development of others, for good or for bad. We have waged many arguments over Salman Shoy Dektal. But as tough as it is to watch others fail and not be able to help them, one cannot help but see the logic in it as well. A species must be allowed to evolve on its own. Unfortunately, that also means that they must also die or live on their own."* She looked at her friend,

hoping that some of what she was saying was comforting, but she knew it was not.

“Evolution, change, only occurs under great pressure or adversity.” Ketlar grabbed Cait’s cup. *“This cup, it is in a solid form. It is not possible for it to change shape, not without extreme pressure.”* She thrust the cup at the ground, and it shattered into pieces with a loud crash. *“The cup changed shape, altered its form into fragments, but only under the extreme pressure that I had to put it under.”*

“Yes. It also broke,” Cait interjected, staring at the fragments.

“True. People break too, if they cannot handle the pressure. They die.” Ketlar tried to sound consoling, but her words came out colder than she had intended.

Cait stared at her.

“If you put people into a room with a door and window, they will not bother to get up and open them if they do not need to. Only once they are trapped in the room without doors and windows will they feel the need to use their brains to find a way out.”

“Don’t you think I get it? I understand! I just don’t understand why it had to come at the price of a loving husband and a caring father.” Tears streamed down her face.

Ketlar could say nothing. She got up and went over to Cait, sliding a chair up next to her. She wrapped her arm around Cait and hugged her gently. Cait put her head onto Ketlar’s sweat-suit-like garment and sobbed as Ketlar petted her head and back. *“I too have lost loved ones. I am sorry we could do nothing to help Roger.”*

After a few minutes of crying, Cait looked up at Ketlar, who was now incredibly close to her. She couldn’t remember ever being this close to a ter’roc, both physically and emotionally. “You broke my cup,” she said in a pout. Both of the women smiled. Cait waved her hand, and the fragments vaporized into a cloud and reassembled into a cup in her hand, looking exactly as it had before it was broken.



November 14, 9:22 a.m.

**Forty kilometers southwest of Lake Newell, Gibson Desert,
Australia**

“Daltoy tewel. Light as a feather floats on the air. Daltoy tewel,” the chief bodagh chanted softly, four additional bodaghs sat on her large wagon, resting. Three other bodaghs chanted in unison after her. Each of them sat within their own cart led by a driver. The drivers were not holding reins but instead had their hands in prayer with their heads bowed. The carts had no horses or wheels. They hovered ten feet off the ground as if supported by some type of magnetitic levitation, moving forward at about forty kilometers per hour.

The bodaghs faced out the rear of the small carts just like they had for the last two days, taking shifts, seated cross-legged, breathing slowly with their hands on their knees, watching the lines of feathers that each of them controlled. These feathers floated behind the carts as far back as the eye could see, each feather evenly spaced and traveling gently on the breeze.

Only it was not feathers that they guided. In reality, each feather was a two-and-a-half-ton block of granite, perfectly cut using psionic particle separation fourteen hundred miles southeast of Lake Newell at Peak Charles. The blocks would sit upon the new footing that had been built two weeks prior. The only building that was behind a bit was the one in India, due to the complexity of the mountainsides—that and the strange red spheres, which once dug up were found to actually be blueish-gray spheres. They now sat in a lab in India and were being analyzed.

But the site in Australia was coming along well. Twelve bodaghs would work on the building and would be responsible for assembling the massive stones. A small team of masons would lay down a special grout between each block after it was laid. The estimates were that the remaining work would be done by late January.

This site used to be Cait's least favorite, as the heat and arid climate had been unbearable at first. She did not like heat, never had, and now she was sitting in a tent in the middle of the desert as summer approached. "Why can't we have a site in Switzerland or somewhere cool like that?" Cait had joked to Har'loc a few weeks back.

After talking with Har'loc, they adjusted her visiting hours so that she could do everything within a six-hour period. That put her here at around 8:30 p.m. local time, which the foreman was not crazy about, but it still worked, and it was cooler than midday. Strangely, the area had grown on her. The reddish-brown sand, the tumbleweeds and the amount of life she saw, especially in the evening, surprised her. While working one evening, she saw something flying overhead, and then a beautiful black-and-white bird landed on top of the mobile home that served as the site office. One of the workers told her it was a ground cuckoo-shrike. It looked down at her with its bright eyes, and for a moment she wondered if nature knew of the impending fate that they were working so hard to prevent, if perhaps there was a part of the Earth itself that held its own consciousness of the universe around it.

Cait stood looking over some blueprints, discussing them with the site foreman, Fadi Abu-Shamat. She never spent more than two hours at any particular site unless there was something that needed her critical attention. That was good in some respects, like that she was able to be back at home for dinner and sleep in her own bed. However, it was also sad at times because she really did want to visit the areas she was going to. She had always dreamed of traveling the world, and now that she was, she felt like she didn't actually have time to enjoy it. Her days had become a ritual over the past few months. Ketlar now lived in her home and was with her almost twenty-four hours a day, mostly to prevent dream incursions.

At 8:00 a.m. on the nose, Cait would meet Ketlar in the kitchen and have a cup of tea for half an hour while they talked. At about 8:30 they would proceed to the India site, putting her in India at 1:00 p.m. local time, where

she would work for two hours. Then it was on to the Australia site, where she would arrive at 5:30 p.m. and stay until about 7:30 p.m., arriving at the Arizona site at 5:30 a.m. for another two-hour evaluation before getting home around 2:30 p.m. according to her clock at home. This still gave her time to work on Gertie's wedding and run a few errands before she would have to settle down for bed.

Cait had wanted more privacy than Ketlar gave her at first. However, Cait and the others discovered that if there was not a ter'roc nearby to help thwart the dream invasions, the draklor were able to induce waking dreams as well. It was at this point that the four leaders agreed to each have a ter'roc official with them at all times to keep the dreams away. One evening in November, Cait had gotten up at 2:30 a.m. to get a drink of water and saw Ketlar in the lounge. "Don't you ever sleep?" she asked.

"Yes, but we only need about two hours of sleep a night. Because our minds are all connected, we can allow parts of our subconscious to rest while other ter'roc use theirs instead to assist."

"Hmm. Odd but interesting," Cait replied sleepily. "Well, good night."

"Good night."



Chapter 21

SCONES

November 22, 2:30 p.m.

Hare Hatch Sheeplands, Reading, England

Hare Hatch Sheeplands, a local farm shop in Berkshire county, was decorated for Christmas already, which was a little alien to Heidi, as Christmas decorations usually remained in their boxes until after Thanksgiving in the Kilbourne house. But, of course, they didn't celebrate Thanksgiving here in England, so they got to have a head start on Christmas, Heidi's favorite holiday. On top of that, they even got an extra holiday, Boxing Day, which Heidi had never even heard of.

Heidi, Brian and Har'loc all sat at a wooden table in the café full of people. Har'loc was staring toward the counter yet continuing to answer Heidi's questions. Heidi, beginning to feel as if she were second to whatever had his interest, snapped, "Har'loc, are you even paying attention?"

“Yes. Yes, of course,” he said, looking back at Heidi.

“What is so interesting over there?”

“Ugh. I would kill for a fresh scone and tea, and they just took some hot ones out. Can you smell them?”

Heidi looked at Brian, furrowing her eyebrows. “So? Go get one.”

“Yes, I suppose I will. You know, I have lived here for thousands of years, and I can honestly say that only when Hare Hatch scones came into existence did humanity really achieve a new level of culinary ecstasy.”

The two children laughed as Har’loc got up. He looked back toward them, stating simply, “It is true.” He smiled and walked toward the counter.

“Happy belated birthday,” Heidi said to Brian. “How’s it feel to be thirteen?”

“Meh, not so different from twelve. But thank you. So, what has Har’loc been teaching you?”

The past three weeks had been grueling, as Har’loc spent hours each day teaching Heidi how to harness her mental powers. She was achieving things that she could have only dreamed about before. Heidi was relatively certain that she was still only using a small fraction of her mind, which made her wonder even more how much her full potential would be capable of.

“We have been learning how to control my mind. It’s been really...tough.”

“You look shot. Tired?” Brian asked, looking at her. Although he found her beautiful, his thirteen-year-old maturity didn’t allow him to completely understand his attraction toward her. He found her fascinating, intellectual like him but stronger in her ability to get her point across to people. Heidi’s ability to adapt and relate to humans and ter’roc alike had impressed him from the beginning. She had a level of sophistication that he found intoxicating, spurring him to spend as much time with her as possible, which unfortunately was still rare. Brian doubted that Heidi had the same attraction. *What would a fourteen-year-old girl want with a geek like me?* he thought.

“I am tired.” Her blue eyes locked onto his hazel eyes. “Do you really want to know the answer to that second question?”

His eyes widened. “Stupid! Stupid, Brian!” he said aloud. “I’m sorry, I... didn’t mean to...”

“Sorry, I shouldn’t have been listening to your thoughts.” Heidi smiled. “I enjoy the time we get to spend together. You are much more than a thirteen-year-old ‘geek.’” She made air quotes with her fingers. “You are one of the few people who I enjoy hanging out with because you are intelligent and can see the world around you like I do, yet you are quiet. At least verbally. And although I’m ashamed to admit it, being able to see your thoughts from time to time has made you even more interesting. So few people know the real Brian, I think. Even your mother doesn’t know how much the skies mean to you, does she?”

Brian shook his head. “What’s it like? Being able to see everyone’s thoughts?”

Heidi looked around the room full of people and opened the pinhole in her mental sphere enough that she could glance at several people’s minds nearby. A man sitting two tables over had been trying to come to terms with the death of his father. He hadn’t discussed it with anyone. Heidi looked at two women chatting at a different table. The woman that was talking was having an affair with her coworker, another woman whom she loved very much, but she hadn’t the heart to leave her husband and child or even tell her husband that she was a lesbian and felt nothing for him. The woman she sat across the table from had her own secret—breast cancer. In fact, the forty-six-year-old woman was in the early stages of chemotherapy but hadn’t told anyone about it.

The man in the corner table had a drinking addiction, one which he didn’t care to do anything about despite the fact that his two grown children and estranged wife had been trying to get him clean. The man sitting alone in the chair near the window had killed three people during the Gulf War. He

struggled daily with the pain of knowing he had taken the lives of three people who would never have a chance to see their families again.

She glanced at the woman typing on her laptop, sitting on the couch near the counter. The woman had problems dealing with her two children herself. Her husband never seemed to want to help her with the children, and one of them had a learning disability. She had been deeply frustrated with the national health care system because they never seemed to come up with any answers and all the legwork so far had been done by her and her sister. The woman's husband had been completely worthless, never attempting to follow up on anything. Had it not been for her sister, her strength would have left her long ago.

Heidi looked back at Brian. "Troubling. There are some things I don't think a fourteen-year-old should know about. It's given me a window on all of us as a species that I never even imagined existed. There are a lot of things that people don't tell each other about—what goes on in their head or the secrets they hold. I think part of being human is having the mental privacy we have. Knowing that if you don't tell someone something, it will remain known only to you. There's a...comfort in it."

Brian gazed at Heidi, continuing to admire her and feeling the need to hug her. He could tell she was in pain by what she knew about everyone around her. Then he smiled. "I'll bet they wouldn't have much comfort if they knew you could see right through them. Literally."

Heidi smiled weakly. "Yeah. I think you're right. There are certain types of people, I don't really have a word or label for them, but they are a very clear type of person. They are similar to you and me, very intelligent. Their minds can be the most troubled."

"Why?"

"They spend their whole lives wearing a mask to fit in with everyone else around them, doing things that later they are not so proud of, things that haunt them. That's one constant among humans and ter'roc, we all do things

we aren't proud of sometimes and it sits like a stone wheel inside our minds, grinding away at who we are. Some more than others."

"Who more than others?" Har'loc asked, sitting down with his Earl Grey and scone, jam spread on top of it.

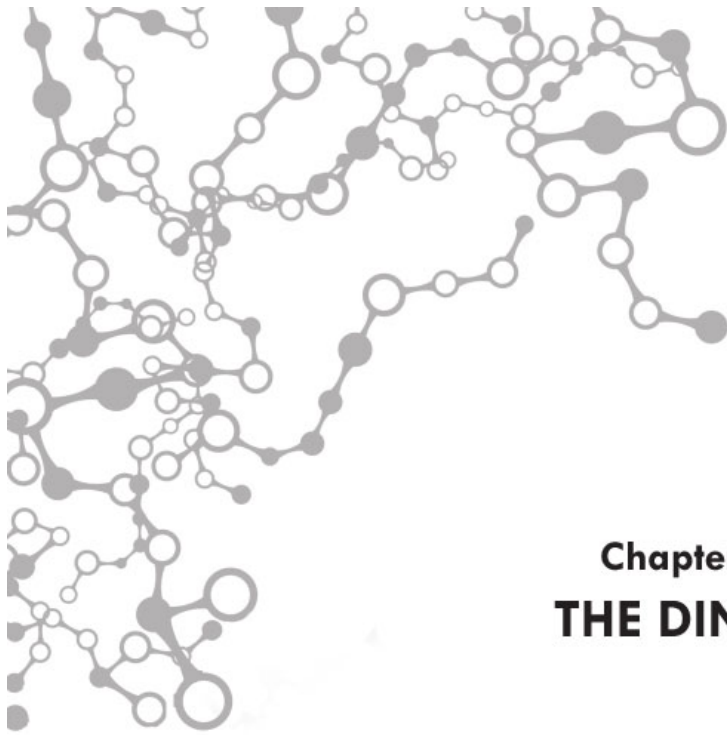
"I was just explaining to Brian about the secrets we all hold in our minds, that hidden part that you and I were talking about a couple days ago."

Har'loc studied Brian for a moment. "It is best if we do not discuss this in public. There are some people who would do anything..." He switched to talk inside their minds. *"...including kill, to protect their deepest secrets. As fascinating, intelligent and amazing as humans are, there is still a very dark and primal side to humanity. You need to be very careful of that side. Heidi, you must never, under any circumstances, let anyone in any government office know about your mental capabilities. Not even Chief Demarcus."*

"Okay. I won't."

Har'loc suddenly had an aura of strength that Brian had never seen before. He spoke aloud again. "I am serious, Heidi. You must mind me on this."

She nodded quickly. "I will."



Chapter 22

THE DINNER

December 20, 2:15 p.m.

Heidi's house, Swampscott, Massachusetts, USA

Penny was preparing to host the largest party she had ever hosted in her house. The Equipage, their families and a few of the ter'roc leaders had agreed to accept an invitation that Penny had extended for a Christmas dinner. So here she was, table dressed, house decorated, the smell of pine from the tree in the living room and vanilla from the candles scattered throughout the house filling the air. She and Joshua were expecting Heidi, Mark, Har'loc, Cait, Gertie, Gertie's fiancé, Ketlar, Brian and his parents, Mingli and Xiang, along with Xiang's wife and daughter, Kintara, Sam'loc, Ranash and Chief Demarcus and his family. A grand total of twenty-four people. Although Penny found it daunting preparing for so many, she also

relished the idea. She had brought in two more tables and placed them end to end with her normal dining room table.

The long table stretched from one end of the dining room to the other, through the hall and into the great room where a beautiful fire was burning. The walls were decorated with pine roping, Christmas carols were playing, and bits of mistletoe hung from the ceiling. High ceilings were rare in these older New England homes, but she and Joshua had had the great room added on five years ago, and she was glad they had opted for the high post and beam ceiling. It added an aura of elegance to the house that it had been lacking.

Penny and Joshua had also purchased a second oven and updated the kitchen around the time the great room had been added on. Another perfect choice given today's group. Now Penny had a twenty-three-pound turkey in one oven and a green bean casserole and a courgette in the other. She had never made nor even heard of a courgette before Cait, but she followed Cait's recipe to a T and hoped that it turned out as delicious as it smelled.

Over the next forty minutes, people arrived, hanging their coats in the closet and settling into chairs at the table, talking or mingling in the kitchen and great room not far from the large spread. Eventually, at 3:30, everyone sat, with Har'loc at the head of the table. Everyone was deep in conversation when Har'loc, having had two glasses of wine already, stood up abruptly, knocking over his chair and grabbing the corner of the table. Instantly, the table went silent and looked at him. With slow, slurred speech, he declared, "I would like to make a toast." Everyone raised their glasses, and Har'loc stared at his own glass, holding it high in the air for nearly ten seconds before finally looking at all the faces staring at him.

"You all celebrate these holidays in part for many thingth that I have lived through. I can attest to personally having met Jethus of Nazareth. He was a very...very good man..."

Cait leaned over toward Heidi. "How many glasses of wine did he *have*?" she asked, smiling.

Heidi, with a shocked look on her face, not taking her eyes off Har'loc, replied, "Two, I think."

Har'loc continued, "...with a kind heart, and your Bible teaches of his kindness and the values he taught. There are certain aspects with which there are some inaccuracies, but that is expected in writings from many centuries ago in a species that does not have communal memories such as we have. Very sad that your memories are not retained like ours are. Then there was Abraham, pompous, self-righteous..."

"Is there a point to this?" Ranash interrupted, smiling. The group chuckled quietly.

"Patience, Shev'lar," he slurred kindly. He paused, again, staring at his glass. "Where was I?"

"A toast," Ranash said curtly.

"Right. A toast." He paused, forced a solemn look on his face, and continued. "It has taken far too long for us to finally be with our brethren, the humans. It is an honor and a privilege to finally be working together with no subterfuge." He thrust his glass into the air with such force that some of the wine spilled out of it, landing on the table in front of him.

Everyone smiled and held their glasses into the air. Just as the first glasses clinked against one another, a low rumble began to shake the house. Paintings started to tremble on the walls, and a mirror in the foyer fell and shattered. "Earthquake!" Cait yelled. "Under the table, quick!"

No sooner had her words been spoken than the house cracked at the joining of the great room. The great room split from the rest of the house, half the guests on one side of the fissure and the other half on the other side. A deep crevasse opened between the two sections of the house, shaking the ground with such ferocity that nearly everyone fell to the floor. The dining room took an extreme slant toward the kitchen and everything slid off the table, the turkey slamming into Gertie's back as she was trying to get up.

Various people were screaming, and the sounds of the ter'roc's screams could be heard in everyone's minds.

Heidi fell down, her head hanging just over the crack in the house, and could see a reddish hue far below—lava. Smoke began pouring up from the crack, stinging her eyes, just as Chief Damaracus pulled her back from the edge. Heidi rubbed her eyes for a moment and suddenly realized that they didn't actually burn. She looked toward Har'loc, who, despite his drunkenness, was standing up straight. Peculiarly straighter than the floor should allow.

Heidi concentrated hard to see if she could block any deception in her vision. Everyone around her was sitting at the table, staring straight ahead without movement. There was no rumbling of the house, no crack in the floor and no fallen paintings. The entire thing was a ruse; the question was, whose?

Heidi concentrated on creating a mental bubble around herself and then expanded it outward until it encompassed the entire house. Everyone in the room started talking again.

"It...it wasn't real?" Gertie said, shocked.

"What the hell?" Joshua replied.

"Oh, I meant it thincerely," Har'loc blurted out, completely oblivious to what had just transpired with everyone else.

"Har'loc, you old dimwit, we all just saw an illusion," Cait said scornfully.

Har'loc looked confused and sat back down. "An illusion?"

Cait sighed, frustrated.

"Wait a minute, this is all making sense now," Ranash exclaimed. "Har'loc is the one who has been communicating constantly with the ishkan to provide the psionic block for the group. To prevent the draklor from invading your dreams. With Har'loc inebriated, they had the perfect opportunity to force an illusion on everyone who mattered most in the defense of Earth."

"Wait, how could he be that drunk on two glasses of wine?" Cait asked.

“You know we have very low water content in our bodies. Nirgal did not have as much water as Earth does. So alcohol has a much stronger effect on us. Which is why we generally never drink it.”

“Wow,” Penny replied.

She looked toward her daughter, who had her eyes closed, concentrating on the bubble. “So what about Heidi? Does she have to maintain the barrier?”

Ranash and Sam’loc looked at each other and took over holding the barrier up. “*Heidi. You can relax. We have it.*”

Heidi slowly opened her eyes and took a deep breath. “That’s a lot harder than I thought.”

Ranash smiled. “You did good.”



Chapter 23

EVACUATION PLANS

Kintara waited patiently as Mingli slowly drew figures out on the large sheet of paper at the slanted table that he had used for calligraphy for so many years. She looked around the room and admired how everything in the home had a purpose and a place; there was no clutter like you would expect in the home of a seventy-eight-year-old. She studied the drawing as he laid out the positions of the groups of ishkan called duons across the globe. *“How do you even remember where all the duons are? Jefalan and Iton only mentioned these to you once.”*

Mingli tapped his head gently without looking up from his paper. “Photographic memory. It has served me well for my calligraphy.”

Mingli laid out the escape plans. He had organized three-dimensional routes that led out over the northern and southern poles, a chance for ishkan, humans and ter’roc to escape in the event of a worst-case scenario. Glancing over his plans, he

looked at several of the duons and then turned to Kintara. "How does the human population impact the physical location of the ishkan?"

"In what respect?"

"Well, India and China are much more densely populated than say Africa or North America. If we need to do an evacuation, we are going to need to arrange the position of the ishkan in such a way that they can transport people from those locations more effectively."

Kintara looked at Mingli's drawing carefully. *"There is no way the ishkan can support the ter'roc and the entire human population, to be honest."*

"What other choice do we have?"

"Reabsorption is the only alternative. Maybe not complete, but definitely a great percentage, probably greater than 99 percent."

"Reabsorption? You mean killing the population? That's genocide!" Mingli was aghast. "I thought you were a pacifist, a gentle, kind and loving woman!"

Kintara put her hand on Mingli's. *"My sweet Mingli, we would not be killing anyone. I mean, yes, the human bodies would die. But the soul would continue to live, and we would give them new bodies once we can. Their consciousness would simply be pulled back into the ishkan."*

"And what happens to their bodies? What happens to the father standing there with his child who suddenly has his soul unplugged?" Mingli was shouting at Kintara. He could not understand how she could so casually make such a callous suggestion. Being a Buddhist, he had been taught that all life was precious, that life should be preserved by any means necessary, and here was someone who claimed to understand him better than anyone, stating, "Why don't we pull the plug!"

Kintara had never seen Mingli this upset, at least not in this reincarnation. She stood up and stepped back. *"Mingli, I am sorry, I meant no offense. I do not take this lightly. We are talking about trying to evacuate an entire planet. Given our resources, I do not see how this is possible. Do you? I am asking you logically here. If you do, I am willing to listen."*

Mingli took a deep breath and stared at the drawing. Kintara sat down next to him. He said nothing, just sat with pen in hand. There had to be a way, must be a way, to calculate the lowest loss of human life. For a long time, his hand floated over the paper. "How many people can we fit in each ishkan safely in addition to the ter'roc that are currently on board and still retain oxygen?"

"We have discussed this already. No more than forty-six. After that, it will be too much for the ishkan to keep up with. The balance is very, very delicate."

"In a best-case scenario, that allows for us to rescue a little over thirty-three million people. That's not good enough. What about alterations to the ishkan? You've done it before so that they could survive underground."

"True." Kintara cocked her head to the side. *"But something like that takes time. Genetic engineering is a long, slow process."*

"What about underground caverns? What if we tunnel and build enormous cave structures capable of holding a billion, two billion people?"

"What good will that do? The draklor will find them eventually. We would just be delaying the inevitable."

"This is an impossible scenario!"

"I know."

"Okay, crazy idea, but what about stasis?"

"Like putting people to sleep for transport?"

Mingli nodded.

Kintara frowned and nodded in agreement. *"That could work. If we can bring their life functions down to extremely low levels, we should be able to fit significantly more people into an ishkan."*

"How many more?"

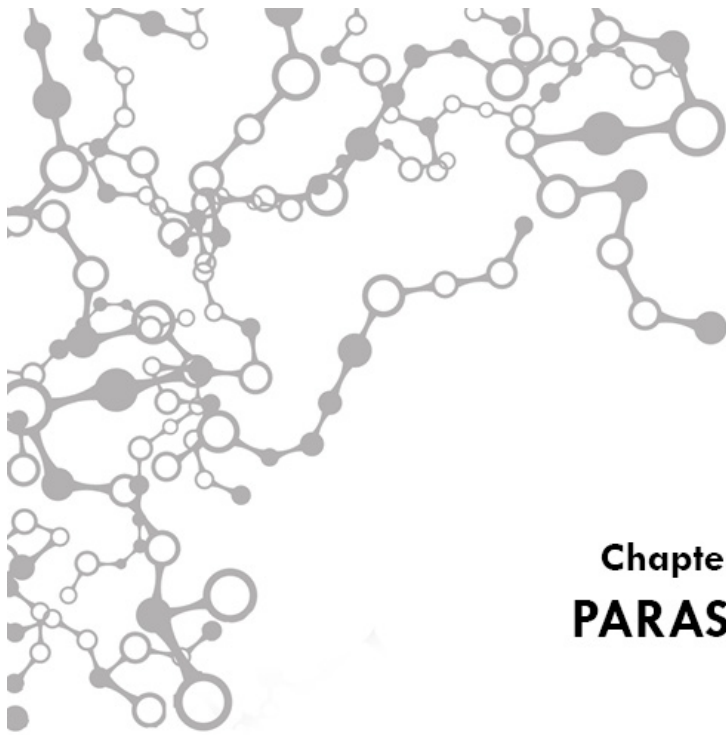
"I do not know. Perhaps one thousand, maybe two thousand per ishkan. It really depends."

Mingli sighed. "That's still under two billion people. Enough for a genetic pool, but not enough to save the world."

“You would still be saving the world, my love. Just not how you expect.”

“Well, hopefully it won’t come to this. Hopefully, we find a peaceful solution to this or at least one that doesn’t mean the required destruction of 90 plus percent of the Earth’s human population.”

“Hopefully.”



Chapter 24

PARASITES

December 28

He sipped his black coffee, thoughts drifting around in his head as he watched the landscape out the window before him. Trees gently swayed as the snow fell, creating a soft, beautiful blanket. Yultavar did like the snow and ice; it was cold, still, quiet, devoid of life. Of course, the only lives that he truly wanted gone were those of the human pests. He glanced over at the photo of himself and his wife and two daughters. *Hypocrite*, he thought to himself. He knew he was not truly a hypocrite; he did have to fit in. The daughters were of course adopted and not his blood. He could not mate with a human; he was too genetically different. His daughters, his wife, it was all a facade, a way to blend in and not be discovered for what he truly was. Yultavar could not deny that he did have feelings for his wife though. As far as humans went, she was a good woman and enjoyed how rough he liked it in

the bedroom. She endured the pain that he inflicted with ease and craved more. He wished more humans had that strength, that endurance. Perhaps then this race might be worth salvaging. She was also very good with her delicate touch. This was the only thing that turned him on, the sensations from this false human shell that he had wrapped around himself, encapsulating his true form within this disguise. He had tied his pleasure centers into the skin and had no sensation of pain. After all, if he was going to alter himself, he might as well make it worthwhile. His wife could use the lightest touch and cause his entire body to quiver with excitement.

Yultavar had had many mates over the last seven hundred years. A man has needs—even if he isn't human. He had been with men and women alike, and although men had a more raw and animalistic nature, the females generally had a more delicate touch and were more sensitive to pain, which brought his sadomasochistic side to life in ways he never dreamed possible.

He took a breath and looked out the window, sighing. All this rich, wonderful life, delicious life that was rightfully theirs. All the plentiful resources that could better his race were instead benefiting a species not indigenous to this planet. This animal and plant life that were his rightful genetic connections. When his brethren arrived, they would eradicate the infestation. They would kill all the humans, ter'roc and ishkan and feast on them. They would dance over the billions of corpses and rain down fire upon any survivors.

Yultavar and his team had been long-range teleported to Gaia for the very first time a little over seven hundred years ago. Sadly, everyone on his team except Kalarian had been killed by the barbaric humans that they encountered. They had not been sent to kill the humans but rather to uncover the ancient cities, find what had become of the ancestors and prepare for the draklor's return to Gaia. What they found instead was this infestation, the obliteration of anything that resembled the poltons, the ulkvar or the ashkar.

Initially, after the battles with the Mongolian humans that had killed their eight companions, both of them dealt with a deep depression. They walked among these creatures that had infested their planet like a plague and killed those closest to them in the early days of their arrival. At first, when they had reached their ancient home, Yultavar could visualize the ashkar soaring in these pale blue skies. He could see the ulkvar walking among their beautiful cities. And when he looked at the oceans, he felt almost certain that the amazing poltons still had their sweeping metropolis off the west coast of Europe. But these were dreams. Nothing more than a memory of something that no longer existed, something that could never return.

Long ago, a small group of ashkar, ulkvar and poltons had left their brethren on Gaia to explore the vastness of space. They always planned to return to their homeworld. Over time, this group of three distinct species evolved to become a singular race: the mighty draklor. Talks of returning to their ancestral home fell into myth and legend as they explored the galaxy, discovering and exploring worlds in the severan quadrant teeming with life. Over time, a group of draklor known as the manasha became obsessed with seeking out the legends of old and finding the ancestral planet of Gaia. They planned to return one day to Gaia and take back the planet that was rightfully theirs. While visiting a world in the severan quadrant, they found a civilization with a device called a celestial catapult, which was capable of sending a small group tens of thousands of light-years through space. It was at this point that the leader of the manasha decided to send Yultavar's group of ten back to the ancestral coordinates.

It was not the ter'roc that had evolved there, but the poltons, ashkar, and ulkvar.

Walking through the humans' cities in the 1200s and seeing the lack of respect that any person had for another and the filth that they all lived in, a fire began to burn deep inside Yultavar. A fire that would help in eliminating these vermin and making Gaia right again.

Yultavar and Kalarian first focused on viral infections, something that he prided himself on, however this proved to be less effective than expected given the humans' resilient immune systems. The creation of the *Yersinia pestis* bacteria had been a major breakthrough, allowing them to infect mass populations with numerous illnesses such as the Black Death and the Plague of Justinian. Although they had engineered the bacterium to resist antibiotics, it had been unable to withstand the newer types. Nothing brought Yultavar more joy than watching the humans suffer while their high and mighty ter'roc stood by and watched nature take its course, all the time believing it the will of their Shalhaiah.

During the fourteenth century, Yultavar had acted as a nurse in a primitive clinic in Paris, France. Standing over the hospital bed of a dying woman, he had watched as she coughed up blood, sores oozing on her pathetic carcass and fingers turning black from lack of circulation. At the time, the sight of the woman's life seeping out of her made Yultavar almost giddy, so much so that he had to resist becoming overstimulated. With the passage of time, he had replayed the experience many times in his mind, savoring the details, the smells. It was moments like these that made his patient waiting somewhat worthwhile.

There were two periods during his assignment that had been his favorite: that moment in Paris and the leading of the Third Reich. It was by far his greatest honor. He had gained the trust of millions. Yultavar had entire departments devoted to death. He had convinced thousands of humans to kill one another in massive numbers. It was genius, and he barely had to lift a finger. All he had to do was convince them that they were the better race. At one point, standing over his subjects, just before he made a speech, he asked himself, *Why did I not think of psychological manipulation until now?* Then he had smiled and sighed, stepping up to the podium. Yultavar also had the opportunity to use his influence to study the ter'roc's efforts at molding humanity. He had several groups studying the occult and ancient religious

beliefs. He had come so close to his goal, having killed millions upon millions, only to be thwarted by a combined effort of countries, undoubtedly influenced by those infernal creatures. Yultavar and Kalarian could come up with no reasonable explanation for how the humans had harnessed nuclear power or invented computers at such an early point in their evolution. No explanation, that is, except the ter'roc.

The *Yersinia pestis* bacteria had proved quarantinable and thus preventable, which was the primary reason they had to engineer another illness. This time though, it would be a retrovirus that would take advantage of two things: other illnesses already found in abundance on this filthy planet and the human's desire to procreate through fluidic exchange—not to mention their desire to fill every orifice in their body. Among the multitude of flaws the ter'roc had unintentionally engineered into humans, one of the most important was the fact that they had created a high concentration of nerve endings that provided extreme pleasure in areas that could be easily infected with this new retrovirus.

Although humans had come up with ways to fight this retrovirus that they now called the human immunodeficiency virus—*such a creative name; morons*—they had yet to find a real cure. It was his greatest achievement yet.

The dream invasions had been an even more creative idea. Yultavar wished he could claim responsibility for that one, but it was Kalarian who had come up with it. Despite it being Kalarian's idea, Yultavar had learned to specialize in the art of invading dreams and altering perceptions of reality. Violating the weak minds of the ter'roc here on Earth and convincing them that it would be four years until the draklor vessel arrived in orbit, when in reality they would be here in only six months, was a huge accomplishment. He had used the very element the ter'roc prided themselves on: their cerebral interlink. Yultavar and Kalarian had injected false memories into the core of the ter'roc central memory, allowing them to alter elements of the draklor discovery in ways that would benefit them. If the two had not been here on Earth, they

never would have been able to accomplish this. The ter'roc, though primitive, proved to be mentally resilient against most telepathic intrusions. Fortunately though, the draklor would have a chance to completely wipe out all of these pathetic creatures and consume them before they even knew what hit them.

Almost nine months ago, Kalarian had discovered the theta transmissions that the ter'roc had been using to start the Convergence of the Equipage. The two draklor waited, studying their plan. They knew they had to act before the Convergence was complete. It had been Yultavar's idea to use the theta transmissions to create the dream invasions. They had hoped to instill in the Equipage such a fear of the ter'roc that the humans would never willingly work with them, and therefore, never meet each other, preventing the Convergence from ever occurring.

They had no idea that the Equipage would be able to see each other in their dreams. It was an apparent side effect of the Convergence and the way that the ter'roc were transmitting. Kalarian had warned him about human curiosity, that it would potentially increase their desire to meet in real life and seek out others, but Yultavar had continued on with the plan, still hoping to prevent the attack on their people. He had seen it as the ultimate torture play toy and taken full advantage. Though the house illusion wasn't nearly as exciting as the concentration camps in Europe back during the war, which had ultimately resulted in not only fear but also death, it had still been great fun. The old fool Har'loc had been completely oblivious as to what was going on, standing there like a deer in the headlights. Kalarian had realized by the time Har'loc contacted Cait that they had begun to disrupt the theta transmissions too late. All they had done was move the timeline forward. The two decided that if they could not stop the Convergence, they would drive the four insane instead.

Yultavar was impressed as well as concerned about the human Heidi. She showed mental abilities beyond anything that Yultavar had ever seen in humans or ter'roc. He had tried multiple times to penetrate her defenses but

had failed. It was as if the child had put up a solid rock wall between her and the two draklor. Fortunately, the girl had not learned how to retrotrack Yultavar's invasion and thus was unable to see into his mind. In fact, Yultavar was relatively certain that the child did not even know that he was here on the planet yet. If only the draklor had the ability to reach farther with their minds; then Yultavar never would have had to be among these people for so long. Once the humans, ishkan and ter'roc were annihilated, he knew it would take centuries before Gaia had reclaimed itself enough to support life the way it was meant to, but he could wait. They had sent the message to the home vessel, knowing it would take a long time to reach them. But by now, they would be fully armed, ready to obliterate all intelligence on this world.

So here they were, ready to strike, and no one even knew. Yultavar just hoped he'd get a front-row seat to the suffering that would ensue when the draklor weapons painfully sucked the life out of the humans, leaving nothing but the fleshy meat of a delicious meal behind. He salivated just thinking about it.

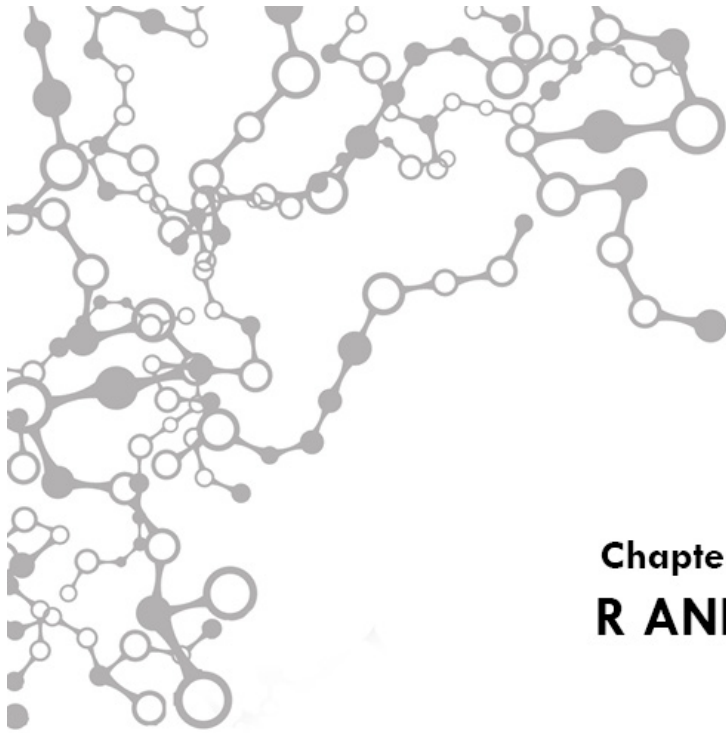
Yultavar took a deep, refreshing breath at the closeness of completion, tried to imagine the sweet scent of burned flesh that would fill the air, the taste of victory and thoughts of relaxation after this insanely long assignment.

The job had to be done; he had come here for one purpose, and he would not be deemed a failure. He picked up the phone and dialed.

"Yes?" Kalarian replied on the other end.

"The old ter'roc, Har'loc. We need to remove him from the equation."

"Consider it done."



Chapter 25

R AND R

January 4, 6:57 p.m.
Chiaoxi, China

Kintara had been living with Mingli since the dream attacks in late October. Despite her obvious feelings for him, she held back, as she didn't want to make him uncomfortable.

Today had been a long, difficult day. She and Mingli had been working with reekt three on their plan. They had wanted to do a full evacuation, but they knew this would never be possible with the size of the population on earth. They really needed more ishkan or another spacecraft, but they just didn't have time to build a spacecraft, so they would have to make do with what they had and sacrifice the rest for the greater good. There were almost three quarter of a million ishkan, and the plan was for each ishkan to carry two thousand people, a number that Kintara and Mingli were quite sure the ishkan could not support, at least not for very long. Mingli and Kintara had

come up with a way to place these people in stasis, which would consume very little resources. Fortunately, the ishkan were all capable of traveling at slipstream speed, a constant velocity of five and a half times the speed of light, which meant that they could reach other star systems before the ishkan's ability to support their population gave out. The nearest star that might support life that the ter'roc and ishkan knew of was in Tau Ceti, a little less than two years from Earth at top speed.

Mingli stared at some of the data and looked up at Kintara, who was in her human form. "I'm exhausted. Why don't we go relax in the living room and watch some television?"

"Sounds good," she replied.

The two walked in together, Mingli holding onto her arm instead of his cane. They sat down in the love seat near his old chair, and he turned on one of his favorite films, *House of Flying Daggers*, which he described as a love story wrapped in martial arts and color.

"Such a beautiful movie," he said fifteen minutes into it.

Kintara was not looking at the film as much as she was looking at Mingli. She studied his features, the nuances of his face, the breath of his chest, his old hands as they lay on his lap.

An hour into the film, she had begun to watch more of the movie when something pushed on her shoulder. She looked over to see her old love asleep, leaning on her shoulder. Gently, Kintara lay his head down on her lap and petted his gray hair. She dropped her disguise as she watched him, wondering how much more life lay in this human body and who he might be next. In every incarnation he had taken, he was always a kind soul, loving and caring for anyone he came in contact with. He was also very calculated and precise in everything he did. Four generations ago, he had served as a general in the Chinese army, one of the few leaders she had ever seen who was as compassionate as he was ruthless, a strange sight to see in a man. Two generations ago, he was the mother of two boys, one of which went on to be a

soldier in the Taiping Rebellion, a civil war against the Qing dynasty. Troops had made it into their hometown of Nanchang, and a battle ensued on their street. A soldier shot at Mingli's son near their home, and she jumped in front of him, saving his life and dying in his arms. It was at that point that Mingli's son had taken up the sword of a fallen comrade and single-handedly won the small battle in their region, gaining honor and later moving on to lead the army in the main battle against the Qing dynasty.

The movie ended, and she continued to look down at the aged man, trying to determine how he would once again impact another pivotal moment in their history. She took a long, deep breath and pressed power on the remote control, turning off the blank screen that had been showing for the last five minutes.

"Kintara, can you hear me?" Har'loc asked.

"Yes."

"Is Mingli with you?"

"Yes."

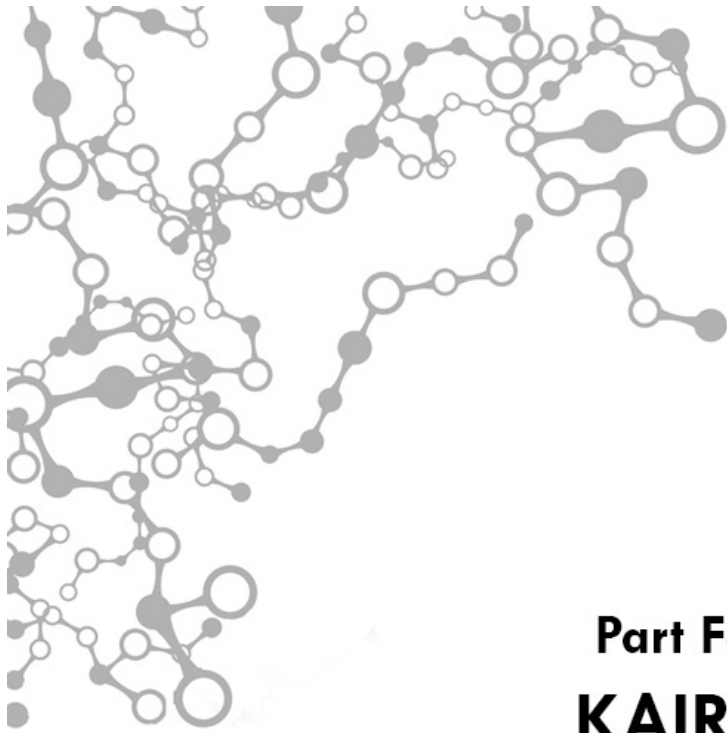
"There has been a new development. We need to meet. Can you both meet us in Sheffield in one hour?"

"Yes, of course. What happened?"

"I do not want to go into details, but we have disturbing news from the Tren'lar orbital station."

She continued to pet Mingli's hair, running her long gray fingers through it. How many times had she pet his hair over the last seven hundred years? How many times had she watched him die? Their species were so different. *Life is cruel sometimes*, she thought to herself.

"We will be there," she told Har'loc.



Part Four
KAIROS



Chapter 26

QUESTIONS

Kalarian set down the thriller novel he was reading, *Little Girl Lost*. He had been unable to focus on the story and had reread the same page four times now. He knew that Yultavar was correct; Har'loc was a significant threat, and by far the strongest of the ter'roc. However, Yultavar also believed that humans were nothing more than meat sacks that endlessly reproduced, filling the planet like vermin. It was true that when they arrived, humans were a despicable species, and the murder of their comrades had made it easy to get behind the idea of destroying them all in one fell swoop. He was proud of what his friend had achieved in the Third Reich—Yultavar seemed to have an insight on the best ways to destroy humanity—but he was afraid that Yultavar was losing his grip on reality, losing his grip on the task at hand: to prepare Gaia for the return of their people. Yultavar was so hell-bent on the destruction of humanity he had completely lost sight of the fact that

destruction might not always be the best solution to the puzzle. He could sense the chasm that was developing in Yultavar's own personality.

The doorbell rang, and he got up and answered it. Yultavar walked in without saying a word and went straight for the minibar, pouring himself a scotch on the rocks.

"Please, come in," Kalarian said mockingly.

Yultavar scowled and sat down on one of the high stools. Kalarian walked over to him and looked him in the eye, saying, "They are going to destroy our people, and then they will move on to eliminate you and me. You and I both know this can't end well. There may be other paths we can take."

Yultavar took a sip and looked at his friend. "Your faith is wavering. They are a weak and diminutive species, and their friends from Nirgal are too indecisive. If it weren't for the ishkan, they might stand a chance at being a powerful race, but as they are now, they stand no chance against us. Our weapons are stronger, our forces are larger, and our determination is resolute."

"You underestimate these people, and you underestimate the ter'roc. You always have. How many of your hairbrained schemes have fully worked? Everything you come up with always falls short. There is always some oversight. When are you going to accept that we may not be as superior as you thought?"

Yultavar threw his glass at the wall, where it shattered, scattering fragments of ice and glass as scotch dripped down the wall. "No! I will *not* accept that. We are superior! We have been around millions of years longer than these vermin! I refuse to accept that they are the rightful heirs to Gaia. I refuse! We have not traveled hundreds of thousands of years, drifting from planet to planet, evolving, to simply give up the fight when we have finally gotten home!" Yultavar took a deep breath, attempting to calm himself.

Kalarian replied quietly, "Do you really have to take out your frustrations on my glassware?"

Yultavar knew the truth, no matter what he said aloud. Fear was starting to poison his mind as well, but the only way he could keep going was to deny defeat at all costs, and Kalarian knew this. What the ter'roc, humans and ishkan were not aware of was the origin of the draklor, but the facts of their origin might prove to be their only saving grace. If Kalarian could just convince Yultavar to *talk* to the ter'roc and the humans, to reveal their birthright as a species native to Gaia, perhaps there could be a way to prevent conflict.

Would the ter'roc and humans ever accept that they were the true descendants of Gaia? Could Yultavar ever overcome his hatred for the humans and their Nirgalan counterparts?

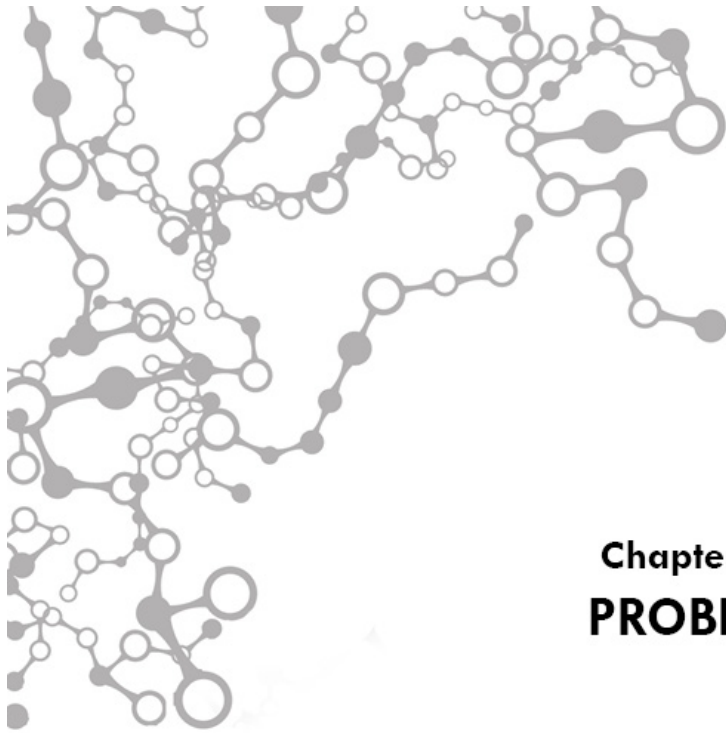
These were questions that even someone who had known Yultavar for all these centuries was unable to answer.

Kalarian began, "I don't think it's going to be as simple as killing Har'loc. One ter'roc is going to make no difference in the great scheme of things. They will just find someone else to take over," he said leadingly.

"No. No. No! You're thinking like a human. Ter'roc are greatly affected as a whole when they lose one member of their group. It may not be something that affects them forever, but it will definitely impact them enough that it could bring a bit of chaos to their order. A chance for us to remove these four humans from the scene."

"So you're proposing we kill Har'loc, then eliminate the other four humans as soon as possible."

"As soon as possible," Yultavar repeated.



Chapter 27

PROBING

January 4, 3:00 p.m.
Sheffield, England

Brian teleported Kintara and Mingli into Cait's lounge. The rest of the Equipage and their ter'roc guardians were already there, and as soon as everyone was seated, Har'loc explained that the draklor had been discovered on long-range telemetry on the outskirts of the solar system. They would arrive at Earth within three months.

"Three months?" Heidi said, shocked. "But you said that they wouldn't be here for four years!"

"We have *all* been deceived. Apparently the draklor have more capabilities for deception than we initially thought. Nothing that we currently know about them can be trusted."

Cait looked around the room at the shock on everyone's faces. "So...what do we do?"

"We speed up production as fast as possible," Har'loc replied.

"There's no way my team will be ready in three months. It'll be...at least...another month before the ishtaka are even born!" Brian exclaimed, frustrated.

"If you get the weapons platforms ready for integration, it will just barely work," Grenethda told him.

"No way. We still need to train the ishtaka once they are born, and you said it will take at least a month for that."

Grenethda looked at Har'loc. "He is right. We are talking about an extremely tight timeline."

Har'loc chewed on his lower lip, something that Heidi had come to recognize as Har'loc's nervous habit when he was unsure of what to do or something unexpected occurred. In the past few months, she had honored his wish not to read his mind without his permission; however, he always gave himself away with this subtle sign. It was a little secret that she kept to herself...one of many little secrets she had learned over the past few months. She knew similar habits with other ter'roc and humans. Cait always folded her index finger over her middle finger and rubbed it up and down when she was nervous or unsure of what to do. Grenethda tucked one leg behind the other; Brian repeated his words; Kintara closed her eyes and took a deep breath; Mingli scratched behind his ear; Ketlar tapped on a surface; Sam'loc got a deer-in-the-headlights look; Ranash pushed her tongue outward on her cheek. The funny part with the ter'roc was that they always had these nervous habits regardless of whether they took their human or ter'roc forms, habits that Heidi was relatively certain they were either completely unaware of or unwilling or unable to alter.

One trick that Heidi had learned with her mental capabilities was the ability to slow down time, or rather her perception of it. It allowed her to study situations with a precision that she had been unable to use before. She

only recently discovered this ability after a talk with Har'loc, and even he had been unaware that she was doing it. He said it was a gift that she should take advantage of as much as possible because it would allow her to lead the group more effectively if she was able to analyze situations more precisely.

So she took advantage of it now and slowed time. Har'loc's speech decelerated to a crawl as he spoke of the specifics that they now faced with the impending draklor invasion, then came to a near halt. He was of course still moving, just so slowly that it couldn't be perceived by the eye. Heidi glanced around the group. Cait looked very nervous about this recent news, perhaps more nervous than anyone. Heidi probed her mind and instantly knew why she was so bothered. The last resort was Cait's shield, and its successful completion in time for the draklor's arrival rested on her ability to get these structures in place. All of the sites stood a chance of getting done in time except for India. *What can we do about India?* Heidi pondered. She looked over toward Ketlar. She knew Ketlar was helping Cait push the bodaghs and the workers to get the job done as soon as possible, but it was not enough. They might not get it done in time, but Ketlar was doing a good job of hiding how concerned she really was from Cait. A strand of Heidi's long blonde hair began to fall in front of her face; it too moved in slow motion.

Heidi concentrated on Kintara and looked into her mind; she was hiding something, something deep. She probed harder and discovered something that she had not expected. She was very concerned about Mingli and his ability to handle the stress of the evacuation plan. No, there was more... She was...in love. Heidi's eyes grew wide; she was in love with Mingli. She could hear music deep in Kintara's mind, something very old. A soft melody, slow and romantic. *Oh my god. It was their wedding.* Heidi immediately felt as though she had probed too deep, invaded Kintara's privacy too much, but now she was also concerned that Kintara was conflicted in her work with Mingli, that she was too close to him.

“Heidi!” she heard Har’loc say in a stern voice. Heidi was startled and looked toward Har’loc, who was matching the pace of his speech to her current perception of time. His eyes narrowed. *“What are you doing? These are private thoughts.”*

“I’m—I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to...” Heidi said back.

“Do not lie to me, Heidi.” He stared at her for a moment. *“Come back to the current time frame. We will discuss this later.”*

“Okay,” she said reluctantly.

She let her perception of time return to its natural state. Har’loc was explaining to Brian that if they prepared the weapon platforms for the ishtaka, they might be able to do a transference rather than traditional training. He shot a knowing glance at Heidi.



Once everyone but Heidi, Cait and Har’loc had departed, Har’loc sat down in Cait’s lounge with Heidi. “I know why you did what you did. It is your job to be on top of your team; however, you need to know when to probe deep and when not to. You are able to see the tips of memories?”

“Yes, it’s sort of like looking at the corner of playing cards in a deck.”

“As time goes on, you will learn which are the private thoughts and which are not. People, ter’roc and ishkan alike all protect their private thoughts. The more protected they are, the more private they are. You need to be aware of this and respect that privacy. To not do so is a violation and is viewed almost as rape. Does that make sense?”

“Yes. I’ll be more careful,” she promised.

“Your mental capabilities are much more powerful than anything I have seen before; however, they are not trained, not honed as the ter’roc mind is. You will find this balance in time.”

Heidi looked away. “Assuming we live that long.”

Har’loc’s look of dismay at the truth in her statement was evident. They were all about to be thrown into the pool with the sharks, and the reality was

they were nowhere near prepared for what lay ahead. The two of them knew this better than anyone.

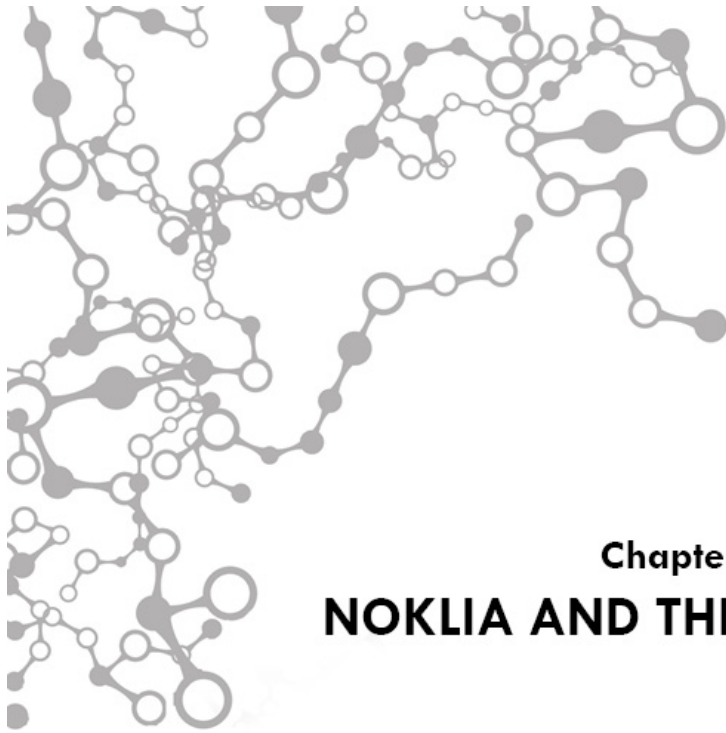
Har'loc looked her straight in the eyes. "We will make it through this. I will be honest, I have no idea how, but we will make it through."

"Do you really believe that?"

"I have no choice. To believe otherwise...is unthinkable." He put his hand on her shoulder. She reached over and gave him a hug.

"We'll find a way to make it through then," she said. "I don't think I could have gone through all of this without you."

"You are damn right. You could not." He laughed, hugging her back.



Chapter 28

NOKLIA AND THE ALPHARIANS

January 22

Praethor ishkan, Swampscott, Massachusetts, USA

Heidi sat at the table where she and her mother had discussed the ter'roc exactly four months before. Her hands were outstretched across the table, holding Har'loc's, which at the moment looked human. He had instructed her to close her eyes and very slowly open the pinhole in her mental sphere, then focus it on Praethor itself and try to reach out. Strangely, she was getting nothing. She opened her eyes and sighed in frustration.

"Be patient," Har'loc told her. "Praethor's mind is much more powerful than ours, and it must choose to communicate with you as well."

She closed her eyes again and looked at the creature's mind. She could see silver threads of consciousness, souls that were bound to Praethor all streaming out at various angles from it, including the blue-colored thread of

light that led directly to her. It appeared to almost tether her at her chest, which also glowed blue, the thread leading away from her like an umbilical cord. All of the threads led into a giant blue sphere at the top of the creature; *the brain?* she wondered. Heidi could feel a pulsing like a heartbeat.

“The coalescence,” Har’loc said.

“What is that? That pulsing sensation?”

“That is Praethor’s psionic flow, sort of like a pulse of energy, ebbing out to each human that it touches.”

Heidi reached out in her mind and touched one of the silver threads. It trembled under her finger, and for a split second she could see herself sitting in a chair in a cubical somewhere in Boston, then as soon as she let go, she snapped back to her own mind, where she saw the glowing threads again. She gasped, struggling to regain her composure. Heidi realized that she had just glimpsed someone else’s soul. Someone within her own ishkan. Thoughts flowed through her. *Do I know that person? Have we met before?*

“Chances are you do know everyone within Praethor. At some point in your existence, you find comfort within one another, a peace that you cannot find with others. Keep in mind, Praethor is twenty-five thousand years old and you are the master consciousness. You have had a long time together.”

“Are the people in this ishkan only in the Massachusetts area?”

“No, for all we know they could be here in Massachusetts or in Botswana. It just happens that there is a larger concentration of people near their ishkan. It is Shalhaiah’s way of balancing things.”

“God?”

“Shalhaiah.”

Heidi felt a chill go up her spine and a depth surround her. In her mental visual, she saw an empty blackness beneath her and above her, and the ishkan disappeared. Now nothing but the blue illumination of her body and the thread that ran from her to the coalescence were visible. The threads all disappeared far in the distance beyond her vision. She felt a very strong,

ancient presence, similar to the feeling she had when her parents had taken her to the Middle East. An almost intangible age of something, of someone, the wisdom of a place, if that were even possible.

“What is this...thread that connects us all called?” Heidi asked.

“That is the noklia,” Har’loc replied.

“And all ishkan have these?”

“No. Just those here on Earth. Except for your noklia. Your noklia extends to all ishkan in the universe—that we know of. The others we engineered to connect to humans and some animals. Without it, there is...emptiness.”

“So, we can’t live without the noklia?”

“Your body can live without it, but you would lack self-awareness. You would essentially be an organism operating on instinct. There are times when someone’s brain is damaged, and they are in a coma...”

“Yes.”

“At times like that, their noklia is severed, sometimes accidentally, sometimes on purpose, to protect their consciousness.”

“Why is mine blue and all these others are white and gray?”

“To you, yours is blue. It is an element of self-identification, self-awareness beyond your corporal existence. Do you see the tiny red bands that wrap around it? That is because you are the master consciousness.”

“Huh,” Heidi said in a half-hearted, surprised tone.

The ancient presence grew stronger until she felt as if whatever it was lay directly in front of her, though she could see nothing but the threads that bound her and the other humans to the coalescence. She felt words flow through her mind, but they had no voice. It felt like a breath whispering words without vocal cords. “*Why are you here, child? Your time is still young,*” the voice said.

“*I’m...learning,*” she replied.

“*Yes, you are. You are becoming.*”

“*What am I becoming?*”

“More.”

“More of what? I don’t understand.”

“You are becoming more.”

“Who are you?”

“You. We are Praethor. All of us. Go now, keep learning,” the breath said.

There was a sudden flush of heat all around her, and instantly Heidi felt fluid warmth. She snapped out of her mental visual and felt wet. Looking down, she saw that she had urinated in her jeans. “Ugh. That’s gross.”

“Are you okay?” Har’loc asked with a look of shock on his face.

“I guess. I peed myself,” she said, disgusted.

“You phased in and out.”

“I phased? What do you mean?”

Har’loc took a breath, and despite the fact that Heidi knew the breath was as much an illusion as the man that sat before her, it still made her nervous. “You phased. You disappeared a little and then came back into focus. I have never seen anything like it before. Communication with an ishkan can be... overwhelming if you have never done it before, and it may be even stranger for you than me. Technically, Praethor is talking to itself when you are talking to it, so I am not sure I can visualize what you must have experienced. But there is something more going on here. Something that I did not expect.”

Heidi placed her hand on the table and visualized the exact same pair of jeans she was wearing and Praethor created a new pair, folded on the table. “I’m going to go change. I’ll be right back.” Har’loc nodded distantly.

When she returned, the two had a snack and Har’loc explained how the ishkan had not always lived with the ter’roc. They were originally from a planet called Ashar located three hundred light-years from Earth.

“The ishkan arrived on Nirgal a little over a billion years ago. This ancient race, much older than us, migrated from the Edwaka system, a binary solar system many light-years from Sol. Although they evolved on Ashar, they eventually gained the ability to travel through space at faster-than-light

speeds using psionic slipstream propulsion. In essence, they use their mental energy to propel themselves through space and time, for short periods, by bending the very fabric of space.

“We had no way of knowing what the intentions of the ishkan were when they arrived. One day at the end of the Second Age, the skies darkened with millions of the giant floating disklike creatures ranging anywhere from two to five kilometers in diameter. We attempted to communicate with the ishkan through radio, sounds and light but could find no way to talk to them. The ter’roc believed the ishkan were trying to invade and conquer Nirgal, and General Haggart, who had a trigger finger to begin with, fired the first shot upon an ishkan floating above Hunaan City. Although he did not have authorization from the world leader, the Praylor, to fire, it spawned a war that would last nearly fifty years.

“The ishkan, having lost their entire home solar system to a supernova, had found the first habitable planet in over fifteen parsecs. A peaceful species by nature, the ishkan had attempted communication for four days, but they have no eyes, nose, ears or mouth, at least not as we understand it. They perceive the universe around them using their mental psionic energy. They simply had no concept for voice, audio or radio transmissions. All of their communication had only ever been via telepathy, something that the ter’roc could not perceive. The ter’roc possessed a singular, individual consciousness, one mind within one brain making its own decisions and acting upon those decisions. But each ishkan possessed fifteen thousand consciousnesses, each collection of consciousnesses its own independent hive mind, and each hive mind connected to all the other hive minds.

“Due to this unique capability, the ishkan could also plan detailed attacks on a global scale instantly. The ter’roc were unable to comprehend how this coordination was being accomplished. Had the ishkan truly chosen to eradicate the ter’roc from Nirgal, it is very likely that they would have been able to with little effort. Fortunately, they only had two goals: to establish

communication with the ter'roc and to defend themselves, the latter of which proved to be nearly catastrophic for the ter'roc. Nearly every attack that was deployed against the ishkan was vaporized. It was only after hundreds of full-scale attacks and the loss of millions of lives that General Haggart would finally allow a scientist by the name of Priah'khan to seek a way to communicate with the giant creatures.

“After months of attempting to communicate with the ishkan, Priah'khan had nearly given up, feeling that he had exhausted all possible ways of establishing contact. Needing to take a break from his continuous efforts, he visited his father, who was in the hospital, ill with a debilitating disease that broke down proteins protecting the membranes of neurons. The old man's mind and body were rapidly fading, but in his father's presence, Priah'khan found peace. It was then, at his most desperate moment, that he happened to glance at a life-support machine flickering in a corridor with no one attached to it. It was registering brain wave patterns that were off the scale.

“This happenstance moment led Priah'khan to finally discover that the ishkan were sending out complex patterns of alpha waves. Telepathy. He found a way to communicate with the ishkan, and both species worked together to eventually modify the genome of the ter'roc, thus enabling telepathic communication between the species, at which point the two developed a symbiotic relationship. The two species worked together in harmony, each supporting and contributing to the other, two life-forms acting as one. This started what is known as the New Era of the Third Age of the ter'roc.

“After the two species integrated, the ter'roc and ishkan developed a caste system based on military rank. Each ishkan had one ter'roc which served as shev'lar, acting as the head or captain of the ishkan and leader of the subcommunity as a whole. Though there were some male shev'lars, they were almost exclusively female. The shev'lar's second-in-command was called the rikoy. The rikoy was in command when the shev'lar was absent for any reason

and also acted as a sounding board for the shev'lar on any community or military decisions. Because of the ishkan's many consciousnesses, ishkan are notorious for taking a very long time to reach important decisions. But the shev'lar brings order to the chaos of the ishkan mind, something that the ishkan had a difficult time doing before their integration with the ter'roc. Thus we have seen that both species have benefited in this connection.

"It was established that there must be a specific ratio of males to females on each ishkan, and it was decided that the genders would be genetically regulated by the ishkan themselves, as a specific population count is essential to the smooth operation of the ishkan. There have always been 400 males and 656 females, resulting in a total of 1,056 ter'roc aboard each ishkan. Obviously, this varies briefly from time to time as one dies and another is born. Unauthorized impregnation is not only prohibited but is also quite simply impossible, as the ishkan prevents it by releasing the pheromone sararain. At the time of required conception, a specific female is chosen as the maternal vessel and the ishkan counters the sararain with ostophane, rendering the female temporarily fertile. As one might imagine, births are not common with such long lives."

"But wait," Heidi interrupted. "You said all of this happened in the Third Age. What were the first two ages?"

"To explain that, I must go back even farther. Before the Great Extirpation, long before the rise and fall of the First Age, before all other life existed in our solar system, the first self-aware life-forms were the ter'roc. We were the only native species to evolve on the fourth planet of the Sol system, rising from the primordial soup of amino acids on our home world. Physically, the ter'roc evolved without the need for large quantities of water, as our planet had nearly one third the amount of water Earth did. We also have a crystalline skeleton and a special epidermal layer that keeps moisture locked in. Because of these attributes, the ter'roc only need to consume water about once a week and in small quantities."

Har'loc looked at Heidi, who was staring at him. "I am just giving you some backstory. It helps." She nodded. "As a species, we are generally a patient, peaceful and thoughtful people. Our ability to work together to reach a common goal and our compassion for others are defining characteristics of our species. Keep in mind though, we have not always been so compassionate and understanding. This is a characteristic that has taken over a billion years to achieve and very likely never would have been achieved had it not been for the ishkan and the integration of telepathic communication." Har'loc stopped and smiled.

"What?"

"Nothing. I just think it is ironic. I am sitting here inside an ishkan, teaching a human who is technically part of the ishkan about the history of the ishkan. It is just odd."

Heidi smiled.

"The First Age was a time of great unrest. We do not know much about it, as there are not many historical records that go back that far and we did not have communal memories then as we do now. From what I know, there were many factions, clans all fighting for pieces of land.

"Around one and a half billion years ago, a world order was established, and Nirgal was united in what was known as the Second Age. It was a time of peace, technological development and artistic creativity."

"You told me once that you don't have complete peace. That there are still things that unsettle you within your own species."

Har'loc laughed. "Of course there are. We are all ter'roc."

Heidi cocked an eyebrow. "All ter'roc?"

"Your people use the saying 'I am only human,' meaning that you are not flawless. The same applies to the ter'roc. We are flawed; we still make mistakes; there are still people that do not get along. There are just...less of them." He smiled.

Heidi thought for a moment. "But the ishkan do not have flaws."

Har'loc laughed a big hearty laugh for such an old man. "Of course they do! You do! Do not forget, *you are the ishkan.*"

"Oh. Right," she mused. "Are all humans tied to an ishkan?"

"Yes."

"So what happens when an ishkan dies? Does everyone who is connected to it just flop onto the floor dead?"

Har'loc burst out laughing. "No, of course not. Ishkan die very slowly over a period of a couple thousand years. As they die, less and less of the psionic threads are available until there is only one. Eventually that person dies, culminating in the death of the ishkan. A new ishkan then takes the place of the previous and the ter'roc that were in the deceased ishkan move to the new one."

"But if an ishkan were killed very suddenly...?"

Har'loc's face turned grave. "Yes. Then everyone connected to the ishkan would die. They would effectively 'flop onto the floor dead,' as you so eloquently put it."

The two sat in silence for a few moments as Heidi absorbed this realization that her own autonomy was nothing but an illusion. She had known this since it was first explained to the Equipage, but she had not truly realized the impact of this fact until now.

"There are a few things that don't make sense," she began. "How is it possible that all our minds and souls are connected through the ishkan and the ishkan and ter'roc have telepathic communication but humans do not? We don't even have shared memories."

She paused, remembering the conversation regarding nevean glands. "Ok, well, I know there's the whole thing with that mineral. What was it called?"

"Bardonate."

"Right, that. But shouldn't we have the capability to communicate through the ishkan or something?"

“I am afraid it does not work like that. Besides, it has its benefits. We wanted you to have autonomy in each of your consciousnesses. We wanted you to be an independent species. So this turned out as an added benefit.”

“Yes, but we are not truly independent. If an ishkan dies, we die. What happens if we wanted to learn to travel through space, leave Earth, and explore the galaxy? Surely there are limits to how far the noklia can reach?”

“To our knowledge, there are no limits. Your noklia is proof of that. Look beyond Praethor.”

Heidi closed her eyes and concentrated again, seeing her noklia as it left her body near the center of her chest. It went into the mass of illuminated threads at the coalescence. Though she wasn't sure how, she instinctively dimmed the other threads so that her own blue thread with red bands glowed brighter. Then she saw what she was looking for. Her noklia left the coalescence from what looked like a thousand different points, fading into the distance. “I see them. I mean, it. I mean...me. My noklia. Going in many different directions.”

“The noklia exist outside of normal space and time, in a space beneath our existing dimension. You could call it an alternate space of normal relativity.”

Heidi felt like this conversation was beginning to stretch her mind in ways she never thought possible. She grappled with the visuals of it all and tried hard to comprehend everything that Har'loc was explaining.

“When the ishkan first came to Nirgal, were there as many ishkan in existence as there are now?”

“No, many less. It is all part of the balance. As we had more responsibilities and more jobs to do, more ishkan were born, and more ter'roc to be with the ishkan. We keep the ishkan and ter'roc populations in balance here on Earth because of our need to conceal ourselves from humanity. Now that there is no need for that, we may have more ishkan at some point, which will allow the human population to grow as well.”

Har'loc hesitated, then revealed to Heidi that there was something in particular that had been troubling him and other shev'lars around the world. They had noticed over the last thousand years that some humans had difficulty maintaining their connection to their ishkan. It was extremely rare, perhaps one in a billion, but he always worried that it may lead to some sort of breakdown in the genome of the human design.

"I'm not sure I understand. How could they not have a connection to their ishkan and still be alive?"

Har'loc looked her straight in the eyes, then said, "Well, that is the mystery, isn't it now?"

A person walking around without a soul. What kind of person would that be? she wondered.

"Har'loc, you said that humans weren't the first to evolve on Earth."

Har'loc nodded. "You are speaking of the alpharians."

"Tell me about them."

Har'loc adjusted himself in his chair and sat back. "Throughout all of the unrest and the peace that was finally found among the ter'roc and ishkan, the third planet, which the ter'roc called Gaia and we would later call Earth, teemed with life. The first to evolve were microorganisms. Then larger creatures developed. By the middle of the Third Age of Nirgal, giant lizards, which would later be termed dinosaurs, had become the dominant species on Gaia. The ter'roc and ishkan, collectively known as the Nirgalans, spent tens of thousands of years studying these creatures. Among the more intelligent were the velociraptor and the baryonyx from the Cretaceous period, the latter of which evolved over time to become a sentient bipedal species known as the ulkvar. Meanwhile, deep in the ancient oceans of Gaia, other life-forms were evolving and changing as well, including the mammalian species known as the poltons, who gained sentience around the time of the ulkvar. Finally, developing from the Archaeopteryx, the avian species of the ashkar

developed, also attaining self-awareness around the same time.” Har’loc paused, looking at Heidi to ensure she was absorbing all of this.

“It’s hard to believe that entire civilizations were around before humans even existed.”

Har’loc continued, “Many battles between clans of the three species ensued over thousands of years, but eventually the three distinct species found harmony amongst themselves and collectively called themselves the alpharians. The concept that all three species had reached self-awareness around the same time fourteen million years ago was important to the alpharians. They called this coincidence of mutual sentience ‘The Gathering.’ There was an ancient legend that Ardilasius, the primal mother, had cast into the sky her three children, the constellation we now know as Orion—though back then these stars were slightly closer to each other—and from those children dropped the seeds which would populate Gaia, giving birth to a people that would one day dominate the universe.

“By the late Eocene era of the Paleogene period, about sixty-four million years ago, cities thrived, and each species had its own unique culture and dominated the ever-expanding continents. Without assistance, they had achieved spaceflight, and eventually they developed a relationship with the Nirgalans, forming trade routes and helping one another when they could.

“Each species within the alpharians found specialties that harnessed their strengths. Although the reptilian ulkvar were a slightly younger species than the avian ashkar and the water-dwelling poltons, they had advanced quickly, in part due to their technological innovations. Although they were lacking in appreciation of their natural resources, they made up for this with their medical expertise, being renown on both Gaia and Nirgal for their ability to repair nearly any biological damage as if it had never occurred in the first place. In fact, we still use some ulkvar technology here in our ishkan in our emergency kits.

“The ashkar and poltons, however, preferred to harness the power of nature, the elements and the biology of their species for advancement, making changes gradually to their genetic structure and the world around them.

“The ashkar were recluses by nature, choosing to communicate only with their own species or the water-dwelling poltons. The ashkar were masters of building design, finding ways to integrate nature and technology into structures that were capable of handling massive earthquakes, fire and flooding. The ashkar rarely got along with the ulkvar because of the air pollution the ulkvar caused during the Bronze Age and continued producing from their manufacturing processes. The ashkar were bird-like, possessing five digits at the tips of their leathery wings with which they could grab or build things. They also had a retractable fin on their back with razor-sharp barbs, which they used as a stabilizer when flying or, in their early evolution, for defensive purposes. Although they preferred to use telepathy to communicate, they did have an auditory language that they used from time to time. Their auditory language was not as complex as the poltons and used a form of clicks and squeaks to communicate.

“Then there were the poltons, an aquatic species with two arms, two legs joined until the knees, and webbed hands and feet. The poltons were patient, methodical and detailed in their mathematics and sciences. The ashkar and ulkvar respected and looked to the poltons when they needed detailed analysis done or required unbiased mediation in any endeavor. Like their aerial cousins, the poltons had a retractable fin on their back used for stabilization in the water and to defend themselves. They also favored telepathy, which allowed them to communicate with their air-dwelling cousins. Their auditory language was a complex form of sonar, allowing them to communicate over great distances under water.

“The ashkar and poltons had naturally developed telepathic communication similar to the ter’roc over time, which in part added to the

peace and deeper understanding between their two species; they rarely tried to deceive one another, and conflicts were quickly dealt with through a joined comprehension of each other's problems. The ulkvar, however, resisted the integration of telepathy to their own genome for fear that their thoughts would not be their own. It was difficult to explain to a species without telepathy that they would be able to compartmentalize their thoughts, maintaining some privacy while allowing other thoughts to be public.

"The misunderstanding between the ulkvar and the other two races would continue to increase until they reached a precipice. Eventually the Last Great War of the alpharians took place over the continent that we now call Antarctica. It was the last unsettled resource, and all three species were desperate for room to expand."

Har'loc stopped speaking, trailing off. He looked down at his cane, studying the curves of the carving.

"What? That's it? What happened to them?"

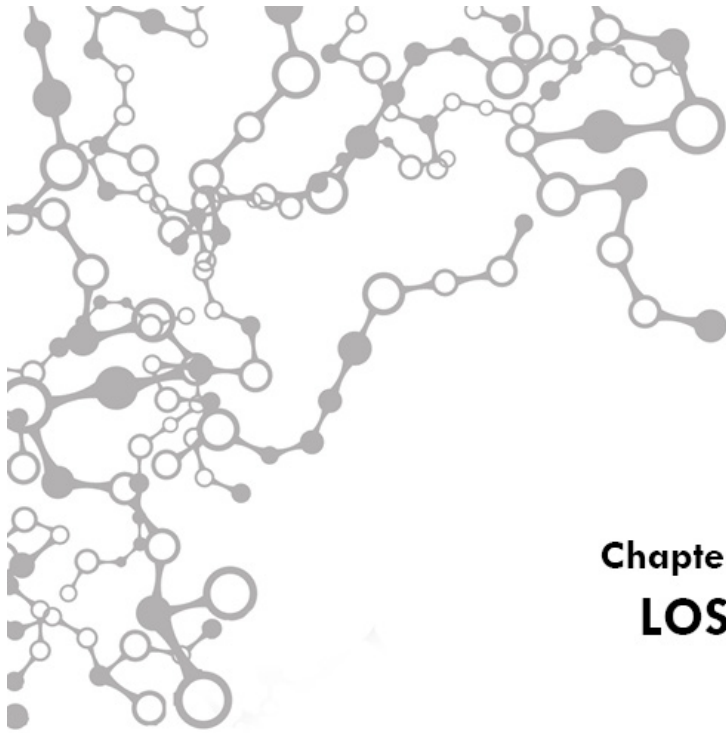
Looking up again, he said, "The Rivian Cascade. A terrible weapon developed by the ulkvar that used a form of targeted gamma radiation to break down a specific part of the DNA, effectively vaporizing the poltons and the ashkar from the inside out. It was an extremely painful and horrific genocide and ultimately a catastrophic mistake on their part."

"Mistake?"

"They did not realize that their DNA was so closely tied to the poltons and ashkar, and eventually they met the same fate as their brethren. The only alpharians that remain, if there are any left, were a small group that left to explore the galaxy several hundred years before the great war."

"That's horrible."

"It is indeed. And we feel responsible. It could have been stopped. It *should* have been stopped. Salman Shoy Dektal be damned." Har'loc slammed his cane down on the floor.



Chapter 29

LOSS

February 14

Near Europa on the back side of Jupiter

Cait, having done her morning reviews at the sites, had joined Brian, Grenethda, Mingli, Kintara and Heidi aboard the *Quanar ishkan*. They were attempting to get a closer look at the draklor ship as well as assess the current state of their approach. Cait sat in her chair, drinking tea and looking out at the enormous gas giant of Jupiter in front of them. Unlike what she had seen in photographs, there were huge, beautiful rippling blue waves emanating from the top and bottom of the planet and wavering hundreds of thousands of miles to the side of Jupiter out into space. “What *is* that?” Cait asked, perplexed, pointing at the screen.

“What is what?” Grenethda said.

“Those blue waves.”

“Those are the magnetic currents of the planet. Quanar uses those to navigate around the planet as well as look for the draklor ship. The draklor vessel will show up as an interruption in the magnetic currents.”

“I’ve never seen them in any photographs.”

“Quanar is giving them a visual representation so we can see them. They normally are invisible to the naked eye. These other waves”—she pointed to much larger waves in the distance—“are cast off by the sun and other planets.”

Everyone in the room sat staring at the hypnotic waves of the magnetic currents as they flowed about the planet. Heidi was amazed at how beautiful the portrayal was. She had been concentrating on maintaining a mental shield so that the draklor could not detect any of them, and as such did not talk but rather just enjoyed the sights. For the last few minutes, Grenethda had been explaining to Brian that at the very center of Jupiter was a molten core of iron, magnesium and several other metals. She said that the center was extremely hot because of the tremendous pressure that the gasses of the surface exerted on it, but the heat of the molten core also helped to keep a balance of heavy gas in the atmosphere.

“Everything in our universe is in a very delicate balance. From the gasses of Jupiter around its core to the single-celled organisms on Earth to the orbit of our solar system around the galaxy, everything has its own special balance.” She looked out at the planet below and waved her arm slowly. “Everything everywhere is always moving. The light, the particles, our planets, all the living creatures, gasses, even the solids are moving, orbiting or traveling from one place to another. It is all part of the great balance of Shalhaiah.”

“Shalhaiah? I heard Ranash talk about that once. What is it?” Brian asked.

“Shalhaiah is the power that governs us all, that keeps everything moving and in balance.” She again waved her delicate arms toward the screen in front of them. The Equipage just looked out for a moment, taking in what Grenethda was explaining.

“So, it’s God?” Brian asked in an attempt to paste a label on it for a more solid understanding.

“No, it’s more like Chi,” replied Mingli, believing he understood Grenethda’s explanation.

Grenethda shook her head. “Chi is close but still not quite accurate, nor is it exactly God. God implies a level of intelligence or caring. We do not believe that Shalhaiah has either; it simply is. It brings life to the inanimate and sets in motion that which is still.

“Chi relates more to the living force within creatures. Shalhaiah exists in things living and not living. You might say it is a force of nature. A power that binds us all. Something that we are all connected by and cannot live without. It does not bind us alone, but the entire universe.

“There are extremely rare circumstances where there is more Shalhaiah than normal, usually in times of great change.” Grenethda looked at Heidi. “You have much more Shalhaiah than anything I have ever seen before. You glow with power from within.” Heidi looked at her, blushing, uncertain of what to say. “Your power is much greater than anything you can imagine, anything any of us can imagine. This has always been the case with the master consciousness.” She nodded slowly. “Har’loc knows this. He can see it within you, can feel it coursing through your body like energy ready to explode.”

Grenethda staring at her made Heidi feel uneasy, but she did not want to lose her hold on the shield, so she let Grenethda talk.

“You are on the precipice of something amazing, something wonderful. I personally think that you are much more than a transformation in your species. I cannot place my finger on what it is just yet.”

Grenethda’s head snapped toward the screen. Quonar was no longer moving, stopping on the dark side of Jupiter. “Where? I do not see it,” Grenethda said.

“Who are you talking to?” asked Mingli.

“Quanar,” Heidi replied. “It just told Grenethda that the ship is dead ahead.”

“Enlarge,” Grenethda said

The screen zoomed in on the side of Jupiter. Grenethda squinted, then spotted the black sphere to the left of the horizon. “Enhance.”

Quanar zoomed in more and cleared up the image. “Interesting,” she said.

“That thing is tiny,” Cait stated.

“No, you have no frame of reference except Jupiter, which is enormous. That ship is nearly twice the size of our moon.”

“Oh my god,” Cait said, clearly changing her perception of the massive ship.

“It’s still very hard to see,” Heidi said, squinting.

“That’s because the surface is black and perfectly smooth, almost like glass. We cannot penetrate the surface with visual light. The scout ships encountered a similar problem when we first discovered it. But they were able to access it telepathically.”

“Or so you think,” Heidi said flatly.

“What do you mean?”

“Think about it. You guys believed that we had four years, and now we are finding out they are here a lot earlier. You believed that they had no telepathic capabilities, yet we have had the dream invasions and from a distance beyond what even you are capable of transmitting at.”

Grenethda looked toward the vessel and then back at Heidi. “The reality is we do not know anything about this species, aside from the fact that they are good at deception. Are you still blocking them?”

“Yes.”

“Let me out of the shield. I want to see if I can penetrate their defenses.”

Heidi did as she was asked and maintained the shield for the ishkan and all those aboard except Grenethda. Grenethda concentrated on the draklor, attempting to see into their vessel, their minds. Instantly, she screamed in

terror. It was the first time that Heidi had ever heard any ter'roc make a noise with their real vocal cords. The sheer terror in her scream made Heidi's blood curdle, and she tried everything she could to re-extend the shield but couldn't. "Oh my god! I can't do it! I can't protect her!" Heidi yelled at Kintara, her eyes pleading. "I can't..."

Sweat was beading on Heidi's forehead and matting her hair as she struggled to get control over the situation. She stared at Grenethda, trying so hard to pull her back into the protective shield. Then she felt an almost audible "pop" as she finally drew Grenethda back into her mental shield. Grenethda collapsed onto the floor of the ishkan, staring at the ceiling, not moving. She was breathing in short, shallow breaths, fading between consciousness and unconsciousness, unable to say a word.

"What is it? What did you see?" Heidi asked her in her mind.

"...thoughts... I cannot... here...there..." Grenethda said. *"Probed...hard..."* She started to cry, a tear running down her cheek. *"I tried so hard..."* She looked at Heidi beseechingly, terror glistening in her eyes as she sobbed silently.

Heidi looked at the others, having no more answers than they did, then turned back to her friend. *"What did you see? What did you hear?"*

"They...are here."

"Yes. We know this, Grenethda," Heidi said aloud, pointing at the viewscreen.

"No. They are here!" Grenethda screamed, her back arching horrifically on the floor. She collapsed, staring into Heidi's eyes. *"The alpharians! They are on Earth!"* Her eyes went blank, and she exhaled her last breath, still staring into Heidi's eyes, dead.

A tear rolled down Heidi's face and she looked toward Kintara accusingly. "The alpharians?" Heidi asked in shock. "I thought they were extinct!" Then she looked back toward the vessel. "Those *are* the alpharians. The draklor *are* the alpharians!"

Cait screamed, “Who the *fuck* are the alpharians?”

“They’re the ones that are native to Earth. And they aren’t coming to steal resources, they are coming to reclaim their planet!” Heidi replied with dread in her voice.

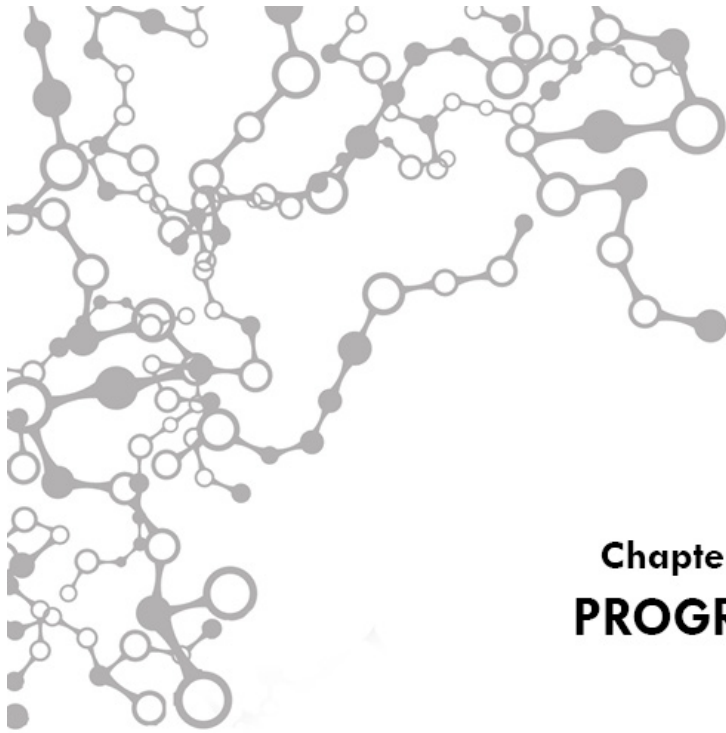


Hours later, back on Earth, it was determined that Grenethda had died of severe brain trauma due to the draklor counter-penetrating her mind. Har’loc’s best guess was that they had attempted to discover what defenses the ter’roc were erecting. However, he was not certain how much they had seen. “*We need to assume that they know most of our defenses, and we must be prepared for a strong battle,*” he said.

“I’m not convinced we should be battling at all,” Heidi said flatly without looking at Har’loc. She sat next to Grenethda, gently petting her gray-white skin, overcome with extreme remorse that she hadn’t been able to save her. “Did you know?” she asked, finally looking up. “Did you know that the draklor are the alpharians?”

Har’loc shook his head sadly. “*I had no idea. But it doesn’t change anything.*”

“Doesn’t it?” Heidi asked quietly.



Chapter 30

PROGRESS

March 10

Asteroid belt

Brian and Sam'loc sat inside the Lobbar ishkan, the observation room in 360-degree observation mode. Brian could see hundreds of other ishkan all around him, all of them waiting for the ishtaka to emerge. Slowly, one at a time, each pod opened outward, and a small disk emerged. As one was born, an ishkan would move in and approach the ishtaka, locking onto it with a beam and pulling it toward its weapon platform. The ishkan then transferred some basic mental programming to the ishtaka and continued to stay with it until it gained full control of the weapon array. This continued over and over as the ishtaka emerged, each ishkan guiding its assigned ishtaka to its own array. When the last ishtaka had emerged and was guided away, Brian looked

all around to see hundreds of the floating ishkan evenly dispersed with the ishtaka they were caring for.

“Somehow, I feel a little better, knowing they are all finally ready.”

“Ready? They are far from ready,” Sam’loc replied. “We still need to teach them how to produce a sensing grid, perform security checks and do some test firing for each array.”

Brian sighed. He stared out at the vastness of the space before him and the small blue planet that he called home, so far away, no more than a small blue marble from here. *How has it come to this? Will we be able to defend our planet?* he thought.

Sam’loc put his hand on Brian’s, and Brian looked over at him. Brian knew that Sam’loc had heard his thoughts. *“We can only do our best, whether we are thirteen...or thirteen hundred.”* He squeezed Brian’s hand gently, and the boy smiled.

After a light bite to eat, the two departed for Earth, filling Heidi in on the details of their mission and explaining that the ishtaka would hopefully be ready within a week or two.



Sheffield, England

Heidi met with Cait, who informed her that two of the buildings were nearly finished. Har’loc had explained to Heidi that there was one more piece of the puzzle with the defense shield: a stone that they had brought with them from Nirgal. It was the eastern cornerstone of the Kaaba, the ancient stone building toward which Muslims pray each day. He said the black stone was actually made up of many smaller stones inside of the larger one. Har’loc said the stones would need to be broken up into fragments no bigger than a few millimeters each and then cemented perfectly at the tops of the three new buildings and the 1,000,600 pyramids around the globe they had worked to unearth. A chip cut in the shape of a pyramid had to be mounted atop each of the structures and would act as a psionic focal point for the network

of rods buried within. Each of the pyramids were built to work with a single ishkan except for the forty-six largest, which took multiple ishkan to operate. These larger pyramids held up the primary framework for the grid while the smaller pyramids filled in the gaps. Heidi and Cait were going over the details with Mingli, Brian and half a dozen ter'roc.

"I'd be lying if I said I completely understood all of this, though I suppose in theory it all makes sense. I just don't understand why we can't go back in time and warn everyone that we actually have less time than we thought," Cait said.

"Well, the way Har'loc explained it to me," Heidi said, "they can go forward in time, but then they sort of get pulled back to their current time frame after a few minutes. But it's one direction. Forward. Not the other way. He said it's just the basic temporal mechanics of the universe. You can go forward because this linear future doesn't exist yet. You can't go back because going back would cause a paradox. The quantum existence of ourselves didn't exist back then, so it can't go back to then. Yet the quantum existence of what we will become one day does exist in the future, which is why it is technically possible to go forward. However, they also have not been able to leap forward in time for several thousand years. He says it has something to do with how the Earth has affected the ter'roc and the ishkan."

"Um, hello!" Cait said, pointing at Mingli.

"Yes, I am able to move forward or backward through time using the temporal pocket, which does defy the quantum mechanics that Har'loc mentioned, and it's come in handy for explaining things that took a while to explain. However, I have found I can only do it for small groups of people and for short periods of time. Also, I cannot communicate with people outside of the pocket. At least not yet. I have tried," Mingli replied.

"So how is this all going to go down?" Cait asked.

"Well, you, Brian, Mingli and some of the ter'roc will be in orbit aboard the Dragone ishkan on March 20, when their ship will be coming into range.

Brian will work with Sam'loc and Ranash, given the loss of Grenethda..." Heidi paused as this last statement hit her like a hammer.

Cait put her arm around Heidi. "We all know you did everything you could, sweetheart."

Heidi glanced at Cait and decided to ignore the comment and move on. "They will coordinate the weapons arrays, hopefully destroying the draklor vessel before it ever arrives." She paused again, this time staring at her hands in her lap.

"Heidi?" Cait finally asked.

"The plan is you and I will work with Ketlar on getting the shield into place. It only makes sense that I be a part of that team given my new...skills." Heidi smiled faintly.

"Skills indeed." Cait chuckled.

"Mingli and Kintara will be communicating with the other ishkan in orbit. In the event that the draklor penetrate our weapons platforms and the psionic shield, we will launch all of the ishkan while simultaneously transporting all humans inside them... In theory."

"In theory. I like that." Cait rolled her eyes.

Heidi looked at Cait, studying her face for a moment. "Have you ever been given an impossible task?"

"You mean other than being asked to organize the construction of three giant pyramids and uncover thousands of other buildings buried for millennia? Sure. I was a mother," she said sarcastically.

"I'm serious."

"So am I. Honestly, sweetie, the hardest thing I ever did was become a mother. It also turned out to be the most rewarding. I'm going to tell you a secret. When I was thirty-one, I had a baby boy. His name was Shaun. He was stillborn. Laying him to rest and moving on with my life, caring for Gertie and Roger after having carried that life inside me for nine months, feeling him kick and growing close to him in ways you can't yet imagine...it

devastated me, love. That was the most difficult task I've ever been given. No parent should outlive their child. It is what defines hell on earth." She gently touched Heidi's hand. "Why do you ask about an impossible task, love?" she asked gently.

Heidi thought about this, then said, "I have doubts, I mean *real* doubts that what we are doing is the right thing."

"Why on earth would you have doubts? We are trying to save our species. We are trying to save the ter'roc and the ishkan."

"Yes, I know, but I can't fight the feeling that we are also...pawns." Heidi paused. "The draklor are the ones who evolved here, not us—well, not completely. Humanity would not exist had we not been engineered by the ter'roc and the ishkan. Hell, we aren't even our own isolated people; we are part of the ishkan, a species from a distant solar system."

Cait waited, knowing Heidi was just trying to process everything.

"I am human. I feel human, whatever that means. I go to school; I have friends; I am a daughter; I am part of this planet. Yet I am not." She looked hard at Cait. "These people *are* of this planet. They have been since the beginning of time. What right do we have to take that away from them? What right do we have to control this world?"

"I don't know, love." Cait shook her head. She knew she had no answers and that Heidi was right. "But what do we do? Do we just stop all this? Stop it in its tracks and let them obliterate us?"

"Maybe. Maybe not. Maybe there are options that have not been considered."

The group fell silent. Mingli took the opportunity to speak to Brian. "How many people do you think you can transport simultaneously?" he inquired.

Brian shrugged. "I don't know. I've been able to teleport a few hundred people from Australia to England. Took a lot out of me though. I had to get some sleep for a few hours. Why?" He took a drink of the ice tea sitting in front of him.

“Because our rekt has been working on a way for us to evacuate the planet as a sort of last-ditch effort in a worst-case scenario. We may need a way to teleport almost a billion and a half people to various ishkan in a hurry.”

Brian spat the ice tea across the table and wiped his mouth in shock. “Sorry, sorry!” he said as Cait jumped up to grab paper towels. “One and half *billion*? What do you think I am, a magician?”

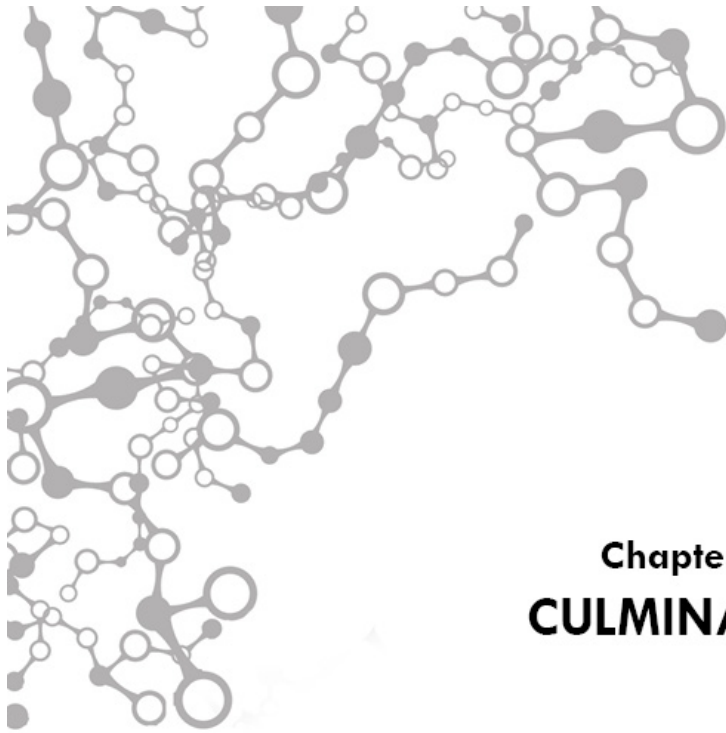
Mingli sighed. “The ishkan can transport a large portion of these people, but we may need your help as well.”

Brian laughed. “I’ll help where I can, but I’m still new to this. A few dozen, easy. A few hundred even, sure. Thousands, maybe. Tens of thousands? Millions? Billions? No way, man. I’d be drained like a prune in seconds.” He laughed again at the visual and glanced at Heidi, who wasn’t laughing at all. “What?”

She shook her head slowly, remembering the discussion she had with Har’loc. That their souls would not be destroyed even if their bodies died. “Maybe it’s a moot point. Maybe what will be *will be*.”

Cait scoffed. “What will be will be?” she blurted, disgusted. “These are people, Heidi! Living, breathing people!”

Heidi turned toward Cait. “You’re talking about bodies, not souls. The ishkan is the priority. They kill the ishkan, we don’t come back. Ever. As in forever gone.”



Chapter 31

CULMINATION

March 20, 9:00 a.m.
Sheffield, England

Har'loc and Cait boarded the Traden ishkan. *"All prepare for launch,"* Har'loc broadcast.

Seats rose from the floor in the observation room, and the two sat down. The launch was something that Cait had become accustomed to in recent months, and although now it felt like something she had done all her life, she reflected back to a time not long ago when humanity thought the only chance they had of finding other life in the universe was aiming telescopes and radio equipment into space. Throughout history, it had never occurred to them that the very life they sought was beneath their feet all the time. *And that our very feet were alien,* Cait thought. She reached over to the small console and tapped it in the center. A holographic display illuminated, and she activated

the viewscreen. The holographic display was merely a means for humans to communicate with the ishkan, since they were unable to speak telepathically.

“Ready,” Cait said.

The four-and-half-kilometer creature launched through a long tunnel that led to the southeast, opening up on Rother Valley Lake. As they came to the surface, Cait laughed out loud at the look on half a dozen fishermen’s faces as the vessel ascended out of the water and rose toward the sky. “My how our world has changed.”

“The world has not changed at all. Only your perspective of it has,” Har’loc replied.



Gertie and her new husband, Mingli’s family and Heidi’s family had all been transported underground to Ushala, Kintara’s ishkan in China, to keep them safe, although everyone knew there really wasn’t a completely safe place anywhere on the planet. The group walked down the hall and into the observation deck.

Brian’s mother, Sam, sat with Kintara in the observation deck, watching as Dragone reached orbit. “My son is on there?”

“Yes.” Kintara studied Sam’s face. *“Are you okay?”*

Sam gave a weak smile. “Yes. Just nervous. I hate not knowing what’s going to happen.”

“Well, good or bad, we will know what is going to happen within the next twenty-four hours. Do not worry. Ranash, Sam’loc, Har’loc and Ketlar will do everything they can to ensure the safety of everyone on board.”

“I know. I trust them all. I just...hate waiting.”



Washington, D.C., USA

“Mr. President, the children have been evacuated to the bomb shelter.” Reggie looked at the president, who was staring down at his hands, sitting on

the couch in the study. “Sir?”

The president looked up at Reggie. “Have you ever felt completely powerless, Reggie?”

“Sure, when I married Amy.” He laughed. The president, however, did not.

“Take care of my family, Reggie. Don’t let any harm come to them.”

“Of course, Sir. But we need to evacuate. Are you coming?”

The president stood up and walked toward him. “I suppose so. Not much else to do at this point.”

Reggie patted him on the shoulder. “I think we are in good hands.”

“Do you? Not good enough, I’m afraid.”



The night before, Cait had sat on the couch with her daughter, both of them enjoying some quiet solitude with each other. She didn’t know what lay ahead in the next few hours or days, but there was a part of her that felt as if the weight of Armageddon was looming over her small English home. She couldn’t stop thinking about her discussion with Heidi about whether the plan they were about to put in motion was the right course of action. What she wanted most in that moment was to just sit and cuddle with her daughter while watching a movie, so once again they sat watching *Avatar*—a favorite film of theirs that always managed to bring a tear to Cait’s eye, especially the moment when Neytiri looks into Jake’s eyes as a human and says, “I see you.”

The two women laughed over humanity’s perceptions of what aliens should be like versus what they turned out to be like in real life. “It’s funny, Hollywood works so hard to make aliens seem really alien. Yet when we meet them, they turn out to be more human than some of us.”

At one point, Gertie had hugged her mother, saying how proud she was that the world was in her hands.



Cait thought back on that moment now, wondering but at the same time not wanting to know if it would be the last time she would see her daughter.

The door of her small room chimed and she said, "Come in."

As with all of the rooms in the ishkan, this door seemed to meld into the wall next to it rather than open like a traditional door. Ketlar walked in.

"We have engaged the draklor. Two of our observation posts in the asteroid belt were just destroyed. They will be entering the weapons range of the ishtaka in five and half hours."

"What about Mars...I mean Nirgal?" Cait asked

"We doubt that they will be going for Nirgal at all. Its orbit puts the planet too far off course for their path to Earth this time of year. Chances are they may attack it if they succeed in their attack against us. We believe Earth is their primary goal."

Cait got up and walked out the door with Ketlar to the main observation room.

"Dragone is arriving in a moment," Har'loc informed Cait and Ketlar. *"Cait, you will transport there and convene with the rest of the Equipage."*

"Understood."

The Traden ishkan met up with Dragone and a dozen other ishkan orbiting the planet. Cait was transported to Dragone along with fifty-two ter'roc while Har'loc remained on Traden.

Heidi, Mingli and Brian met up with Cait and Ketlar when they arrived, and each went to their own consoles in the observation room. Sam'loc and Ranash were already working at each of their own consoles. Ranash broadcast a telepathic message to everyone on board Dragone. *"This is Shevlar Ranash. The next twelve hours will be difficult. We all know what has to be done, and we all know the stakes. Know that as your leader in this ishkan, I have faith in you all. Sometimes faith is all we have. The truth is, faith is all that matters. When you lose faith, you might as well give up."* She looked around the room for a drawn-out moment, then said only within the room, *"Let us begin. Brian, arm the ishtaka and preform final diagnostics."*

Brian looked down at his console. There was a three-dimensional image of Earth floating above his console with the ishtaka and their platforms

positioned all around it. He waved his hands over various regions and tapped points on the side of Earth that they were on, directing all ishtaka to take positions in the path of the draklor vessel. Cait and Heidi both watched as Brian seemed to wave in flowing movements as if he were directing an orchestra. He then tapped several more points at the base of the console and all of the glowing yellow ishtaka followed his hands. They seemed to be bees, following their queen. By the time he was done, there was a concentric grid, arcing out from Earth with its tips leading outward in four different directions, as if a net were cast thousands of miles from earth to catch a giant fish. Brian tapped a few points and the entire grid lit up in a mesh. At the top of the grid floated the number 326, a singular red numeral one illuminated next to it. On the far right-hand side of the grid was a single red dot. Brian squinted and tapped it, but it did not change. He looked toward Sam'loc. "Ishtaka two sixteen is not responding."

Sam'loc walked over and tapped multiple points all around the grid. The grid seemed to ebb and flow with illuminated activity but finally stopped. *"It is dead,"* Sam'loc replied flatly.

"Dead?"

"Sometimes, in rare circumstances, the ishtaka do not take to the mental transference. That is why we prefer not to do it."

Brian was quiet for a moment, staring at the screen.

"Can the grid work with 326 ishtaka, Brian?" Heidi asked.

Brian nodded slowly. "Yes. We can lose twenty-two of them and remain fully armed. But I would have liked to have all 327."

Ranash looked at Cait. *"Cait, Ketlar, the shield grid?"*

Cait was already tapping points on her own three-dimensional console. Unlike Brian, Cait and Ketlar were wearing a special monitor that looked like a single lens extended out in front of their left eye. It allowed them to see data for all of the pyramids on Earth while still working with the three-dimensional grid on the console for other elements of the shield. Cait and

Ketlar both tapped, pinched and moved various points around the holographic planet Earth in front of them. Finally, Cait tapped two points near what looked like Africa and the entire white grid lit up around the planet. "Shield is stable," she replied, looking at Ranash.

"Now, we wait."

At 11:21 a.m. GMT Brian once again tapped his grid, then tapped the inbound draklor vessel. He hesitated, looking first at Ranash, then at Heidi, then back at the red dot.

"It is okay, Brian. We are doing what we must do to defend our home."

He closed his eyes and pressed the red "execute" button, and his team launched an all-out attack on the draklor vessel. Massive beams of light lit up from the grid toward the draklor vessel, and hundreds of explosions struck the surface of the black sphere, nearly blinding everyone. Once the light disappeared, there was an audible sigh at the lack of damage that had occurred. Over and over, the ishtaka fired on the draklor ship but had no impact.

Ranash reached in front of her and zoomed in close to the skin of the draklor vessel. The energy beams were being stopped by some type of shield only meters from the ship. *"They have a shield. Cease fire."*

The draklor began firing an energy beam, instantly vaporizing each weapons array, never once altering their course for Earth.

The Equipage and three ter'roc sat in disbelief as their futile efforts were made exceedingly clear. *"We can't stop them,"* Ranash said, defeat in her voice.

"Grid nineteen, status?" Cait asked at her console.

"Nineteen ready," someone responded.

"We're only waiting on grids 82 and 316," Cait said, looking at Ketlar.

"Grid 316 ready," a voice said over unseen speakers.

Heidi watched, taking in everything that was going on. She saw the weapons arrays being vaporized but remained stoic, unmoved. She squinted as the draklor fired again and again; there *was* a pattern, she just couldn't see

it yet. Finally, the twenty-third ishtaka array was destroyed and Brian's grid fell apart. He and Sam'loc began firing the individual ishtaka as if they were cannons mounted on a ship.

"Come on..." Cait whispered, looking up at the massive black sphere headed their way.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, a voice came on saying, *"All grids report ready."*

"Go, go, go!" Cait yelled.

Two hundred miles in front of Dragone, the sky flashed purple and then went clear again. "Status?" Cait asked.

"Green across the board. The shield is in place," replied Ketlar.

A solid, powerful blast emitted from the draklor ship, slamming into the shield and dissipating across it before it could reach the planet. The ship ceased firing, moved to another spot, and fired again. Once again, the beam dissipated across a section of the shield and the draklor ship stopped firing.

Gaining a feeling of accomplishment, Cait and Ketlar both cheered quietly.

Another shot was fired from the draklor vessel, and this time it penetrated the shield with pinpoint accuracy, traveling down through the atmosphere like a solid bolt of lightning, instantly killing four ishkan and over sixty thousand people on Earth, disconnecting them from their souls. The entire shield rippled but remained intact.

A massive wave of sorrow and pain swept through Heidi, and she screamed in terror. It was in that precise moment that Heidi knew for certain that everything the ter'roc had taught her was accurate. They *were* all connected through the ishkan. If the ishkan died, so did humanity. Cait instantly felt the same pain and sorrow sweep through her like a tidal wave, and she too screamed in agony, grabbing Heidi and hugging her fiercely. Tears were rolling steadily down Brian's cheeks.

"How can we feel this?" Mingli asked Ranash, his voice breaking.

Ranash closed her eyes and concentrated for a moment. She fought to bring order to their thoughts and emotions.

Ketlar turned to Brian. *“Brian, transport me and Mingli to Traden. We need to coordinate efforts from there.”* Brian nodded and teleported the two of them to the other ishkan.

A voice came over the speakers. *“Explosion at Lake Newell!”*

There was a ripple in the shield in front of the ishkan again. “What’s happening?” Heidi asked.

Cait looked down at her console. “There’s been some kind of explosion, both at the Newell site and...at the lab in India as well. And at two other sites in Mexico City and Jordan. Those spheres we found, that we couldn’t penetrate!” Cait said, her eyes widening. “They must have been some sort of high-yield explosives! They’ve disabled small portions of the shield!”

There were small holes opening up in the energy shield in front of them. “We have to find a way to close those gaps!” Heidi said.

Cait shook her head slowly. “We can’t. Too many points to maintain.” She looked toward Ranash, fear in her eyes. “The shield is failing and I can’t do anything to prevent it.”



The monolithic spacecraft moved slowly into position between the Earth and the sun, darkening the skies as an eclipse fell upon the northern hemisphere, eventually covering the entire planet.

“What are they doing?” Heidi asked, looking toward the vessel.

“Preparing to attack,” replied Ranash flatly.

“Oh my god,” Heidi whispered.

Seconds after Heidi had said those words, a stream of barely visible bullet-shaped vessels emerged from the sphere. No portal had opened in the ship; the vessels just seemed to drip from it in rapid succession and fly toward the opening in the shield.

Ranash closed her eyes, and Heidi could hear her talking to Har'loc on Traden. She made no effort to hide her words. *"We must evacuate,"* she said sternly.

"No. We will not give up everything we have built here. Humanity will be destroyed. We cannot. We must make our stand and defend what is rightfully ours." Har'loc's voice bordered on yelling. He shifted his thoughts into a broadcast. *"Launch all available ishkan! Prepare to attack! Pattern Har'loc five,"* he ordered.

For the first time since Heidi had met the ter'roc, she heard millions, perhaps hundreds of millions, of voices all speaking simultaneously as one, echoing the same command over and over. *"Launch all available ishkan. Attack pattern Har'loc five."* For the first time, she truly understood the advantage the ter'roc had as she looked down at the North American continent and part of China and Australia. The ground, water and mountains all seemed to ripple. Although the light was very dim, only reflecting from the moon, the Earth seemed to have a skin. And it seemed to be moving. The skin ebbed and flowed, moving all at once. The planet appeared to be growing in size.

"What the hell?" Cait said softly as she looked at the planet below.

"It's not what it looks like," Heidi said. "Those are all ishkan. Hundreds of thousands, departing the planet."

No sooner had she said that than a massive swarm of ishkan flew past them at an unbelievable speed. To Cait, it looked as though a never-ending cloud of bees were flying past their ishkan, and she held up her hands instinctively to protect herself, then looked behind them toward the immense black glass sphere that the draklor had brought upon them. The Equipage watched as the swarm broke from chaos and formed a perfect square. A beam of light shot from each of them toward Traden, which was acting as the central point to focus one massive beam toward the draklor vessel. Before the ishkan could fire, an eye-searing beam shot out of the black sphere, instantly vaporizing Traden, Har'loc, Ketlar, Mingli and everyone aboard. "No!" Heidi screamed in pain.

"Heidi!" Ranash yelled.

An instinctual fury at the death of the man she had learned to care so much for over the past year built up inside her. Heidi closed her eyes and stood tall. All of the walls of the ishkan went opaque white. Everyone on every ishkan could hear a singular thought: *"I am taking control of the fleet. Converge on my location."*

As Heidi held up her hands in a prayer formation, the forward viewscreen illuminated to show the draklor vessel in front of the planet and the small bullet-shaped ships attacking the ishkan. Then as she pulled her hands apart, the stream of ships attacking the ishkan exploded as if they had been set to self-destruct. More vessels ejected from the massive mother ship but were incinerated as soon as they left it. Heidi pulled her hands back together, and all of the ishkan obeyed her movement and surrounded the draklor vessel, forming concentric circles around it, each circle containing twenty to thirty ishkan and rotating in opposite directions. From Brian's perspective, it looked like the draklor ship might be an atom surrounded by more electrons than any other atom in history, all circling in strange new orbits. A swarm of ishkan in a bizarre harmony orchestrated and conducted by a girl who literally had the world in her hands.

Suddenly, Cait stood up, as did Brian. The two looked to the side and could see a transparent image of Mingli standing several feet away from them. All three stood in a formation behind Heidi and could feel a warmth building inside their abdomens. A light built within them and focused outward upon Heidi in three beams.

Heidi's blue eyes were glowing such a bright white that it hurt to look at her, and the ter'roc shielded their eyes. The rest of the Equipage now had their eyes closed, and a light glowed bright behind their eyelids.

Four creatures materialized in front of Heidi.

Slowly the beams between the Equipage dissipated, and Brian and Cait opened their eyes and looked around, Mingli's image no longer present. Cait

thought Brian looked as confused as she felt.

The creatures were not the grotesque creatures of their dreams. They were beautiful in their own right and unlike anything Cait could have imagined. They had two legs and stood upright. Their arms and legs were muscular and not nearly as long as the ter'roc's but clearly different from humans'. All four creatures had what appeared to be dresses or robes from shoulder to mid-leg, though Cait thought they more closely resembled an Indian sari, wrapping up and over their head. Three of the creature's outfits were deep green while the fourth that stood closest to Heidi wore a deep red with yellow accents. They were much thinner than the ter'roc, with much longer necks that appeared to expand and contract as they breathed, almost as if their lungs were in their neck. They had two dark eyes with pupils and no discernable nose but rather a flat area not far below their eyes that looked as though it might be segmented to open as a mouth. The creature in red opened its mouth. "Transport us back. I will not speak with you."

Although Heidi's voice could be heard aloud, she was not speaking with her mouth. "I am prepared to destroy your vessel and all of its inhabitants. If I had wanted to, none of you would be standing here now. I am giving you a chance."

"A chance? A chance for what? We want you off our planet."

"A chance to talk. A chance for us to find a way to prevent more death. I have the capability to obliterate ten billion of your lives from existence, but that is not what I want. I want to find a peaceful solution"

A female draklor scoffed and replied with a smoky voice, "You have no power over us. You are inferior and insignificant. There will be no peace."

Heidi waved her right hand and the female draklor disintegrated into a puff of dust before everyone's eyes.

"*Heidi!*" Ranash ran for Heidi but bounced off an unseen shield that surrounded her, landing on the floor next to Cait.

Heidi turned for just a moment, looking toward Ranash. “Do not interfere. I have no choice,” she scolded, as if Ranash were a little girl getting in the way of an adult fight.

“You cannot do that! You cannot simply destroy a life at your whim!” a draklor in green screamed.

Heidi held up her hand. “I could have done the same thing to your entire vessel and everyone aboard.”

“We will not adhere to your demands!”

The remaining three creatures disappeared, clearly transported back to their vessel rather than disintegrated as the first one had been. All everyone could do was watch what was transpiring, powerless to stop Heidi. Heidi brought her arms together and waved her hands back and forth in front of her. The monstrous sphere scattered into trillions of particles as if it were nothing but a ball of dust twice the size of the moon. Those particles scattered into smaller particles and eventually faded from view completely as the sunlight from behind the vessel filtered through and took its place.

It appeared as if Heidi had completely obliterated the draklor vessel and all of its inhabitants in the blink of an eye. She collapsed to the floor of the ishkan, and Brian, Cait, Ranash and Sam’loc ran to her side as she sunk into the floor until she completely disappeared. Ranash looked at Sam’loc and back at the spot on the floor where Heidi had faded.

“What happened?” Cait asked. “Where is she?”

“*I...do not know*,” Ranash replied in shock.

“What do you mean you don’t know? This is your ishkan, not ours!”

“Be at peace. I am unharmed,” Heidi’s voice said from the walls of the ishkan in the slow, steady tone of the ter’roc.

“*I do not understand*,” Ranash said, her voice breaking.

“You and Har’loc thought that I, Heidi, was evolving to a higher plane of existence. In a way, you were correct, but not completely. Evolutions typically take place over long periods of time, but from time to time there are great

leaps that help in the progression of a species. It was not Heidi specifically that was evolving. Heidi was the embodiment of the changes that are occurring in the master consciousness. Heidi still exists and will be returned once she has regenerated, for what she has done expended a tremendous amount of energy. Normally this would kill a human. Had she not been aboard Dragone, she would surely have died. We are all evolving, and some of these evolutions will mean great change for humanity and the ter'roc, but this could not have occurred without the foundation of our connection, the master consciousness expanding its own capacity to allow for this change. We are slowly becoming one symbiotic unit in multiple organisms. The changes in the master consciousness are allowing us the capability of unified thought when necessary." Other voices merged with Heidi's, first Har'loc's and Grenethda's, and then Mingli's, speaking in unison, and then hundreds more, then thousands, then millions, then billions. "There must be no more deceit, no more lies and no more killing over mistrust of one another. We must strive for the betterment of our combined species."

Cait and Brian could hear all of the voices in their heads as well. Fearing that her most private thoughts were now worldwide news, Cait asked, "Does this mean no more privacy?"

"No, Cait," the collective voices stated. "It means that we are individuals, but individuals without limits. The body may die, but the consciousness will live on, and we will retain the memories of those we love."

Cait looked back at the viewscreen. "Did you—did we—kill all of those people?"

"No, of course not. But we cannot allow them to threaten our people and our world without negotiation."

Then Heidi's voice could be heard singularly. "They are taking a time-out."

Cait scoffed. "You gave an entire species a 'time-out?'"

"The draklor have been teleported just outside of our solar system. We have temporarily cut them off from being able to communicate with us or

reach us. We need time to negotiate. Time to talk to them and figure out a way to deal with our differences. We must find the alpharians.”

Everyone on Earth heard this last sentence in their own heads. Everyone, that is, except for the two people who were not of the human race, the ter’roc or the ishkan.



Yultavar’s daughter came running down the hall. “Daddy! I’m so glad you’re okay.”

He smiled. “I’m glad you’re okay too, sweetheart. Where is your sister and your mother?”

“Upstairs. Mom’s in the study.”

“Okay, I’ll be in shortly. I need to make a few phone calls first.”

He went into his office and closed the door. Sitting down in his chair, Yultavar felt the pain and anguish of billions of his people flowing through his mind. Thousands of friends he had grown up with and cared about, his parents, his brothers and sisters. The entire combined memories of his people now only residing inside himself and Kalarian, or so he believed. His communication with the massive ship had been severed, and he believed that they were all dead. Never before had it occurred to him that these three species would mean the end to so many draklor, and never before had he felt such a desire for vengeance, murder and death as he did now. Yultavar slammed his fist down with such incredible force that his hand went through the solid wood top of the two-hundred-year-old desk. He looked at the underside of his hand, which was undamaged, and turned to look out the window. Mocking the death of all his people, everyone continued walking about as he stared out at the South Lawn from his window in the Oval Office. In his hand, he rolled over the small pillbox that had held the microchip that would activate the bioweapon, putting an end to the vermin and taking revenge for an atrocity that could never be forgiven. Some minor

changes would need to be made, however. The current design would not cause enough pain.

“Checkmate,” he whispered to himself, tossing it into the air and catching it.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My initial vision of the ter'roc was an enormous caterpillar-like alien, alone in the universe, existing for millions of years right under our nose. As the short story evolved, it became more and more complex. Before I knew it, I had a race of beings who had existed long before any other life in our solar system with a history rich in culture, and a planet unlike anything ever dreamed of before.

Creating a universe that has never existed (or has it?) is no easy feat. I want to acknowledge those who have helped along the way in the creation of this universe. First and foremost, my son, Ian, who came up with the idea for an “alien” to live underneath Swampscott, Massachusetts. My son, Elijah, who helped me to figure out many details of the story.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Originally from Ohio, Jason resides in northern Massachusetts where he is always writing. He enjoys connecting and philosophizing with his readers, traveling the world, photography, and spending time with his family.