

Dean Wesley Smith - MIB The Grazer Conspiracy  
MEN IN BLACK: THE GRAZER CONSPIRACY  
A Bantam Spectra Book / January 2000

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For Jim Kiser, Pat Morgan, Bobby Young,  
Shannon Meyer, Susan Bolland, and the interesting years of 1967-1972.  
Memories often return in the most fascinating ways.

Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe.  
—H. G. Wells —An Outline of History

Prologue

9:38 P.M. March 27, 1970 Timberline Ski Area, Oregon

The lights of the city of Hood River spread out along the Columbia Gorge below nineteen-year-old Anthony Davis like a strand of jewels sparkling in the cold night air. Behind him the chair lift clanked as another empty chair swept past the off-load ramp, spun around the big wheel, and headed back down the mountain.

The lights that lit the snow swept off to the left of the chair lift, carving a path of shadow-light, shadow-light on the slope down through the trees to the lodge below. In twenty-eight minutes those lights would be turned off, after the patrol swept the hill for any stragglers. There wouldn't be any, since Anthony was the last one up here. In fact, in the last hour he'd been the only one skiing on the entire hill.

He treasured nights like tonight. They didn't happen often, especially during the height of the ski season. But since most people had turned their attention to baseball or golf by the end of March, he was often the only one on the hill at ten at night, and always the last off the slopes, often helping the ski patrol with their closing duties.

He stood, leaning on his ski poles, studying the small town two thousand feet below and the mass of lights from Portland in the distance. There were very few places on this mountain from which you could look down on the lights of Hood River. He'd found this spot two years before. He skied five nights a week after work and never grew tired of the view on clear nights. He loved the feeling of

standing over the entire world and just watching it. And he loved the intense silence of the nights, as if the laughs and shouts of the skiers during the day had never existed.

He took a long, deep breath, trying to clear the last grease from his nose and lungs with the crisp cold air. His job during the winter was cooking in the lodge. He had grilled thousands of hamburgers over the winter season. Earlier tonight, in preparation for closing part of the kitchen the second week of April, he had helped clean out one of the exhaust fans over the grills. It had been coated with grease so thick they ended up filling buckets with it. He needed this time in the cold, clean night air to clear his lungs.

And to think.

At the moment his girlfriend was mad at him.

That seemed to be a regular occurrence. For some reason they argued just about every other day about something. It was always stupid, and often pointless. But the making up was always fun. The argument yesterday, however, had been about getting married, something he had no desire to do.

The worst thing in his life at the moment was that the draft board was after him. They wanted to send him to Vietnam and he had no idea what he would do. Or could do. He couldn't imagine being a soldier and killing people.

Skiing had been his entire life. On the mountain, on snow, was the only time he really felt alive. Vietnam was a hot jungle on the nightly news where people died. It had never occurred to him that he would do anything but work around ski resorts. And ski. The war in Vietnam seemed so distant, the social and racial revolution in the cities around the country so alien.

And so confusing.

He took another deep breath of the clear mountain air and let the cold push the thoughts back. He would figure all that out tomorrow. Girlfriend, Vietnam, everything.

Right now he still had time for at least two more runs before having to store his skis for the night and head down the curving miles into town in his Volkswagen. And since there weren't many days left in the season, he shouldn't be wasting time worrying about things he couldn't do anything about.

With one last look out over the lights below, he turned and started toward the ski run, pushing off with his poles and skating over the packed surface.

Suddenly a rainbow of colored lights shimmered in the darkness to the right of the chair lift.

"What?" Anthony said, stopping and staring, half leaning on his ski poles.

The lights swirled faster and faster, expanding, seeming to come down from the sky. Other than the clicking of the lift delivering empty chair after empty chair, there was no sound.

Or heat.

Just sparkling lights that spun in the crisp night air.

Suddenly the lights snapped into a shape, forming what looked like a door in the side of a weird-looking dark oval.

"Candid Camera or Twilight Zone, I hope," Anthony said. His voice didn't carry far down the mountain.

Slowly the door opened just above the smooth-packed snow.

Anthony half expected it to creak, or air to go whooshing past him, but nothing happened.

The swirling lights filled the door, so he couldn't see anything through it. But there had to be an inside to that oval.

Anthony knew he should turn and head down the mountain as fast as he could go, but fear wasn't something that usually moved him. At least not while he was standing on a pair of skis. No jump was too big, no run too steep for him. He attacked them all head-on.

So now, at the top of this chair lift, he wasn't about to suddenly ski away in fright, even if he didn't know what had just come out of the night sky to hover near him.

He swallowed the shadow of fear, just as he did when faced with a large jump and stood and watched the swirling lights and weird door, coldly, as if studying how to attack a steep slope.

After what seemed like an eternity, but was actually only a few seconds, a man stepped through the door and onto the snow, sinking slightly. He wore coveralls and tennis shoes. He had dark hair covered with a golf cap. Even in the faint light, Anthony could make out the words BANDAN DUNES across the front.

The sudden appearance of the man made Anthony back up, shoving himself away from the door with his poles. He didn't know exactly what he had expected to emerge from that strange ship, but it wasn't a regular-looking man in coveralls and a golf cap.

"Glad I caught ya, Anthony," the man said in a southern accent. Then he looked around. "Man, it is cold up here on this here mountain."

Now Anthony really wanted to bolt for the lodge and escape from this impossibly normal man, but again he didn't move. Instead he said, "Who are you? How'd you get here? How do you know me?"

The guy shrugged. "None of that matters much at this point," he said. He reached into his pocket, then held something up so Anthony could see it.

It looked like a gas credit card, only larger.

As Anthony was trying to figure out just what it was the guy was showing him, the man put something over his eyes with his other hand.

"Nice havin' ya with us, Anthony."

"What?" Anthony asked. "With you? I'm not—"

There was a bright flash.

From that moment on Anthony had no memory of that last run of night skiing. He remembered having gone skiing that night, but not the last run.

In the lodge he put his skis in his locker and headed into town without even saying good night to anyone in the kitchen.

On the way down the mountain he didn't notice that the only car he passed was a black sedan, speeding up toward the lodge.

The next morning he didn't go back up the hill to work. Instead he called his boss and quit.

Then he walked into an army recruiting office in downtown Portland and signed up to go to Vietnam.

He did two tours in Vietnam and thirty years later was a two-star general.

He never skied again.

Or had any desire to.

Chapter 1

1:38 P.M. May 6, 2001 New York City, New York

There's nothing like a warm, sunny day in early May in New York City. It brings out the people like bees to sweet-smelling flowers. Hordes of people. The sidewalks fill elbow to elbow, everyone walks instead of taking the subway or cabs. Every terrace, deck, and fire-escape landing is covered with a partially clad body enjoying the warmth. But it is the city's parks that take the brunt of

the spring attack, as anyone with a little extra time wants to stroll among the budding trees and inhale the smell of freshly mowed grass to forget the winter just past. MiB Special Forces Agent Jay, formerly New York Detective James Edwards, didn't even know the day had turned beautiful. With his partner, Elle, formally Dr. Laurel Weaver, city mortician, Jay sat at a long metal table, deep inside the gray walls of MiB headquarters in downtown New York. In front of him was the manual on the ritual habits of the Abosins, only one of a thousand alien races that visited or lived on Earth.

Abosins were a new race to Earth, with the first due to arrive in two days for a projected stay of three years. Jay and Elle had been given the assignment of showing them the "ropes" of living among humans. It wasn't a job either of them looked forward to. In fact, Jay had complained to Zed, saying, "What about ridding the earth of the scum of the universe and all that? When did we become tour guides?"

Zed had only snorted and didn't answer, which meant Jay and Elle were stuck. So now they were studying. Actually, they weren't going over the manual in a traditional sense. Instead they were doing what Jay called "absorbing the manual."

The MiB Special Educational Unit called it "Pattern Learning by Cellular Rearrangement."

No matter what the name, Jay hated doing it. He didn't like the idea of someone scrambling anything inside his head, either for pain, pleasure, or learning. As he told Elle, he had "moral objections" to anyone but him killing his brain cells. So he only used "absorbing" when they were pressed for time, which they were with the Abosin situation.

Elle didn't really trust the device either, even though she claimed to understand the principle of its operation. She had tried to explain it to Jay one afternoon, and only succeeded in losing him after two sentences. After that he and Elle just agreed they would use both ways of learning when they needed to. They would submit to "absorption" then test each other with the written manuals, just to make sure they knew what they needed to know.

Jay was just about to quiz Elle on the Abosin eating ritual, a disgusting cross between the way a pig rolls in mud and a female spider eats her mate. Thanks to "absorption," Jay could see in his mind exactly what activities the Abosin engaged in during this ritual, and this was, as far as he was concerned, already way too much information.

Thankfully Zed's voice broke in over the intercom, filling the room without being loud. To Jay, Zed's voice commanded authority. In all his years as a New York City cop, Jay had never had a boss with a voice like Zed's.

"We have a Grazer," Zed said. "Central Park. Containment teams on the way." "On the road, boss," Elle said into the air as both agents sprang to their feet and headed for the door at a sprint.

Jay and Elle didn't even have to ask for specifics about the problem. They had dealt with one Grazer about two months after both of them had joined the MiB Special Services. A Grazer was an alien that stood about the size of a cow and looked like a mad scientist's idea of a cross between a grasshopper and a pig. They were also the dumbest aliens ever to take a ship through interstellar space.

The problem, though, was that Grazers simply loved Earth. There was something in the chloro-phyll in the grass and plants that acted like an intoxicant to them. One sniff of Earth grass or any green-leafed Earth plant, and they would start

eating and eating and eating. Nothing besides getting knocked out or killed could stop them.

The Grazers had another trait that compounded their love of chlorophyll. There was no limit to the amount of food that they could eat. Or at least none anyone had heard of.

That constituted a large containment problem to the MiB Special Forces. Grazer bodies simply grew bigger and bigger and bigger while the Grazer ate, expanding like a child's balloon in the hands of a mad clown. The biggest Grazer on the MiB records had been found by a man named Kay, who had trained Jay. That Grazer had been eating for days and had grown to the size of an elephant by the time Kay shot him. The resulting explosion of half-digested leaves, flaps of Grazer skin, and green alien blood covered a half-block area of the old World's Fair grounds in Spokane, Washington. Jay had thought the slime that had resulted from the exploding bug on his first mission had been bad. Compared with the pictures Kay had taken in Spokane after the big Grazer explosion, however, the bug guts looked almost appetizing.

Out in the Galaxy, Grazers had the reputation of dumb guests who always come to the party, eat too much, and never seem to want to leave. They were mostly ignored. And because of the effect of Earth vegetation on them, they were not allowed anywhere near the planet for any reason. Nevertheless, a chlorophyll-junkie Grazer usually managed to slip in at least once every six months, causing a containment nightmare for MiB.

Elle monitored the police radio bands as Jay weaved their special black LTD in and out of afternoon traffic, headed for the west side of Central Park. Jay swerved into a parking lane, then yanked the LTD hard right through a red light, turning with traffic to the sounds of a dozen cab horns.

"Police problems at the park," Elle said as the police scanner filled her in on the police plans.

"Better tell the boss," Jay said as he shoved a cab to one side and scraped past a bus before running a red light, all this to the accompaniment of more honking and fist waving.

Elle ignored his driving as she punched a button on the dash and Zed's face appeared on the screen.

"Police have ten cars ahead of us," Elle said, relaying the information she had received from the scanner. "Plus they're bringing in a chopper."

Zed frowned. "Understood. We'll stop the chopper from here. And all the news choppers, too. But you'll have to handle the newspeople on the ground. One containment team is on-site, six more are en route."

Elle nodded and cut the connection.

"Coin' ta be a mess," Jay said, cutting the LTD up onto the sidewalk just inside the park entrance and blowing his horn to warn off the pedestrians. Most of them scurried out of his way, but he had to swerve to miss an elderly couple, plowing the LTD through a garbage can in the process.

"You want me to drive?" Elle asked calmly as she worked on the monitor in the dashboard in front of her.

"I'll be gettin' us there," Jay said, accelerating across the grass toward the reported location of the alien. He would, too. Elle was a good driver, but he was better. And he had told her that often. She had disagreed. They had settled on taking turns driving. It was just easier that way.

Ahead, on the far side of a stand of trees, Jay could see a kind of shimmering area of air, as if he were looking through a layer of clear water around the

space. The shimmering always indicated a shielded alien ship.

Jay sighed in relief. A shielded ship meant almost no one saw it land and normal radar couldn't follow it. Shielding didn't prevent alien ships from being detected by MiB orbital scans, but it did keep the level of containment down to only the park and those who had seen the alien.

Jay pointed at it. "We got lucky."

Elle glanced up from her computer and nodded. "That we did." She glanced back at the computer terminal, reading off the information. "There's a carnival out in Brooklyn right now. We'll use the idea that an escaped animal was caught in the park for reprogramming. Make it a trained water buffalo. It says they have one of those out there, if you can believe that. Weird."

Jay just shook his head as he swung the car around a tree and headed toward the mass of people. "Not very original."

"Original is not the point," Elle said.

"At least make it a whale," Jay said.

Elle glanced over at him like he had lost it. "A whale, like in 'thar she blows'?"

"Don'tcha see?" Jay asked. "We got the perfect chance to start one of those urban myths. The whale was washed up through the sewers and learned to eat grass to survive while staying wet in the sprinklers. They breathe air. It could happen." He gave her his best innocent smile.

She just shook her head. "Escaped carnival animal. Harmless escaped carnival animal. Understand?"

"I like the whale better," Jay said as he slid the car to a stop short of the crowd and just beside the shimmering air that was the Grazer ship. Even though he liked his idea better, he knew Elle's cover story was going to be the one they used. The last time he'd come up with a containment cover story Zed had yelled at him for thirty straight minutes. It had been a funny idea to give the entire neighborhood a friendly ghost, but not thirty-minutes-of-Zed-yelling-at-him funny. Who knew how long Zed would yell about a whale in the New York sewers?

Elle relayed her cover story to the containment teams, then they both climbed out of the car and slipped on their sunglasses. They were dressed in the MiB standard black suit, white shirt, black tie, and black shoes. And today, with the bright sun, the sunglasses felt right to Jay.

Jay did a quick check to make sure his Series-4

Atomizer was charged and tucked inside his jacket. Grazers weren't known to be dangerous, but there was no point in taking any chances. One of them might go rogue and it was a good idea to be armed.

It was clear where the alien was. A large mass of people stood around it in a large circle, watching it eat the lawn like a vacuum cleaner sucking up dirt.

The grass was going to have to be replaced in an area three-foot-wide-by-sixty-foot-long. If you didn't know better, you'd think the Grazer was preparing an area for a new sidewalk.

A dozen policemen were already on the scene and Jay could see the first containment team slowly working its way around the perimeter, making sure no one got away without a new memory to replace their experience of an alien. And making sure no photographs survived to document the alien's presence. Two other containment trucks were just pulling up in the trees. Another few minutes and they'd be ready. It would take him and Elle that long to get into position.

Jay and Elle shouldered their way through the crowd and stepped toward the

Grazer. The alien was already the size of a small milk cow. A very fat, grasshopper-legged milk cow that had pink skin like a pig and smelled like stagnant water. No wonder the people were staying back a pretty good distance. Jay had forgotten how vile Grazers smelled.

“Hey, you two!” a cop shouted as Jay and Elle stepped toward the Grazer. “Just where do you think you’re goin’?”

The cop was solid, stood about six feet tall, and had thinning red hair under his cap. His hand was resting on his gun, but he hadn’t pulled it. Jay didn’t recognize him as anyone he used to work with.

“Getting our dog back, Officer,” Jay said, stopping to face the cop. “Hope he hasn’t been too much trouble.”

“That don’t look like no dog to me.”

“Are you insulting our poor dog?” Jay asked. “Fido there has had a really hard life, if ya know what I mean. He hates it when people insult him, don’t you, Fido?” He glanced over at the Grazer.

The cop glanced at the Grazer.

The alien kept eating, ignoring them.

Around them people laughed.

The cop sneered, his face red.

“Sir,” Elle said, stepping past Jay toward the police officer while she flashed a badge. “I’m CIA Special Agent Barbara Hanna.” She flipped the badge closed before he could see too much of it. It was a real-looking CIA badge, but there wasn’t any reason to take extra chances.

Jay gave her an odd look. In all of their first year together, it was the first time she had given a different cover name. He always gave different names, relying on their Carte Noir badges to change with him into what he needed. But she had always stayed consistent until today.

“That poor creature is our responsibility,” Elle said, smiling sweetly at the cop. “Just call it a genetic experiment gone horribly wrong.”

A dozen or so of the bystanders who heard these words instantly took a step back from the Grazer. From the scared looks on their faces, they clearly had memories of those fifties sci-fi movies where the hideous results of botched genetic experiments broke out of labs and ate screaming people. Before he joined MiB, Jay used to watch those movies all the time. He loved them, especially the ones with the big spiders eating entire cities.

The cop swallowed and nodded. “Is it dangerous?”

“We’re trying to determine that now,” Elle said. “If you and your men could just keep everyone where they are, we’ll let you know as soon as we know.”

“Go right ahead,” the cop said.

“Thank you,” Elle said, again smiling sweetly.

“You’re really good at that sugarcoat,” Jay said only loud enough for her to hear as they both turned toward the Grazer.

“I’m a woman,” she said, smiling at him. “We get a lot of practice.”

“Cute,” he said.

The closer they got to the alien, the worse the smell, as if all the toilets in the city had backed up. If there was one thing Jay had learned in his rookie year as an MiB agent, it was that aliens usually smelled. And always badly. So far he had yet to run into an alien that smelled like a rose. Or chocolate-chip cookies.

The Grazer’s stomach rumbled as it munched, swallowed, burped. And then started over.

Munch.

Swallow.

Burp.

The Grazer stripped the grass from the lawn like newlyweds ripped off clothes on their honeymoon night.

Jay moved over and stood in front of the Grazer. "You want to cool your assault on the salad bar and tell us why you're here?"

Between the swallow and the burp, the Grazer grunted the Grazer word for no.

Then went back to eating.

"Man, that's some breath you got there," Jay said, fanning the air in front of him.

The Grazer said nothing.

"If you don't stop eating," Jay said, kneeling so he could look into the four brown eyes of the alien, "you know what we have to do, don't you?"

"Don't care," Grazer said.

Jay stood and stepped back to ease the smell before he choked.

"Five full containment teams in place," Elle said, glancing around. "Let's do this."

"Enjoy your last meal," Jay said to the Grazer.

"Buzz off," the Grazer said in so many words. And considering that the Grazer vocabulary consisted only of two hundred and six words, that was pretty good communications as far as Jay was concerned. He got the meaning exactly.

With Elle at his side, they moved back toward the cop.

"Ready?" Elle asked into her communications link with the containment crews.

"Count off."

By the time the containment teams were finished checking in as ready, Jay and Elle had reached the cop.

"Fido out there has a really bad case of it," Jay said.

"Of what?" the cop asked.

"Stupidity," Jay said. "Terminal, I'm afraid."

"Do it," Elle said into her communications link.

Three small rockets launched simultaneously into the air over the crowd from three sides, whistling loudly as they went.

The whistle made everyone in the crowd look up.

A moment later a bright flash blanketed the crowd and everyone seemed to just freeze in place.

Flash grenades.

They worked on the same principle as the flashy-thing in Jay's pocket, only they were used for crowd situations where it just didn't make sense to use the handheld devices.

A containment-team member moved through the people and handed Jay a megaphone.

"Okay, everyone," Jay said, loud enough for all in the crowd to hear. "The creature you have been watching eat is an escaped water buffalo from the circus."

Elle smiled at him, but he ignored her and went on.

"It was nothing more than that. A simple renegade water buffalo. Now I need you all to turn slowly and move toward a park exit, checking in with a person in a black suit before you go."

As one, the entire crowd, including the cop who had tried to stop them, turned and moved like walking zombies.

The Grazer just kept munching, eating his way toward his own death.



“So now what do we do with Dumbo out there?” Jay asked. He didn’t much mind killing aliens who were threatening him or Elle, or trying to take over the planet. But the Grazer was basically benign, seeming to want nothing more than a good meal. In the past MiB had killed a few and had shipped a few others back into space. And there was no standard method for their removal. At least he hadn’t read about one when he glanced at the manual. Now he wished he had looked at it a little closer.

Elle shrugged. “Let’s ask Zed.” With that they moved back over to the LTD as around them the containment crews slowly gave each member of the crowd a new and different memory of the last few minutes and blocked anyone else from coming in the area, including a news crew that had started to get angry before being flashy-thinged.

“Yes?” Zed said, his face appearing on the screen the moment Elle called for him.

“Containment in place,” Elle said. “Ship was shielded. What do you want us to do with the Grazer?”

“Try to find out why it came here,” Zed said. “Then toast it and get back here fast.”

“Kill it?” Elle asked. “Why?”

Zed frowned and Jay was glad that Elle was the one questioning Zed’s orders this time. Usually it was him. Nice to have the shoe on the other foot for a change.

“At this moment we have tracked twenty-one Grazer ships on the ground in the last thirty minutes,” Zed said. “There may be others already on the ground.”

“Shit,” Jay said. “The invasion of the grass-eaters.”

Zed nodded. “We don’t know how many more are on the way. They’re invading us for some reason and we have to get it stopped at once. See if you can find out why they’re doing it, then kill the cow and get back here. I need you both. Let containment take care of the mess and the ship. Understood?”

“Understood,” Elle said, cutting the connection.

“Invading us?” Jay asked. “Grazers?” It was the strangest thing he had ever heard of.

“That’s what the boss said.” She pulled out her Atomizer and checked it. Then she stared out the front window at the Grazer now alone in the middle of the Central Park meadow. “Got any idea how we’re going to get it to talk?”

Jay nodded. “I sure do. Ever heard of cow-tipping?”

Elle laughed. “It just might work,” she said.

“We need two of the containment team and some rope.”

Elle nodded. “I’ll get them.”

They climbed out of the car and Elle moved off toward a containment truck while Jay headed back across the grass toward the Grazer.

At this point the Grazer had a three-foot-wide swath across the Central Park lawn for sixty paces and its stomach was clearly expanding. And the smell was getting worse, if that was possible.

Jay stopped about ten feet away from the creature and waited for Elle and the containment crew to join him. He didn’t much like the idea of killing this Grazer. He didn’t have any special love for it either. But it just seemed too helpless to gun down in cold, alien blood. Maybe if he gave it a weapon and let it make a move to shoot him, then he could kill it. But he doubted that the poor, dumb space traveler could even hold a weapon, much less shoot it.

Grazers were just the Galaxy’s losers.

Elle moved up beside Jay. “Ready.”

Two containment agents stood nearby with rope.

"Each of you wrap up a hind leg and pull when I tell you," Jay said to the containment agents.

Both nodded.

"Kick it on the count of three," Jay said to Elle as they moved together toward the Grazer.

"One."

They were three steps away.

"Two."

Two steps away. The smell was overwhelming. Jay felt as if he had stuck his head in a public toilet that hadn't been flushed in three days.

"Three."

One more step and both agents used their speed and momentum to plant kicks squarely in the side of the eating alien. Jay's foot caught the beast just behind its front legs. Elle's kick just in front of its hind legs.

To Jay, the alien's side seemed extremely soft, as if he had kicked a large pillow.

The alien let out a combination of a loud burp and a high-pitched scream and went on its back like a fish out of water. Its two large, grasshopperlike hind legs flailed at the air while its shorter front legs tried to get a hold on the grass to pull itself back on its feet.

Both containment agents instantly moved in and roped a hind leg, one pulling in one direction while the other pulled in the opposite direction as if they were trying to split the Grazer like a turkey wishbone. With its legs up in the air and its fat stomach protruding, the Grazer looked like a grotesque, out-sized version of a pregnant woman about to give birth.

"Let me go!" the alien grunted, then let out a loud and extremely smelly burp.

Jay moved around so he could look into the Grazer's four brown, watery eyes.

"I'll think about maybe not killin' you," he said, "if you tell me what you are doin' here."

"Eating," the alien said. "Now let me go!"

Jay pulled out his Atomizer and held it so the Grazer could see it with every eye. "Now, you wanta try that answer again?"

"I tell reason," Grazer said, trying to shake the containment agents loose without luck. "Here to eat."

"But you know this planet is restricted to your people," Elle said.

"You invite," the alien said. "We come to eat."

"Invite?" Jay asked, glancing at Elle,

"Invite," the Grazer repeated, then burped again before going on. "All invited to come. Eat all we want. Let go so can eat."

"And just who sent you this invite?" Jay asked, moving the Atomizer to his other hand right in front of the Grazer's eyes to stress the importance of the question.

"Human wearing black," Grazer said. "Say can eat. Now say can't eat. Not understand."

"Shit," Jay said, stepping back and looking at his partner.

Elle just shrugged, also clearly stunned.

In his first year as an MiB agent he'd been shocked about a lot of things, but that answer rocked him.

"He's telling the truth," Elle said.

"I know," Jay said. Even though he had only glanced at the manuals, he knew that

Grazers had no real ability to lie. That meant that all the Grazer ships that were landing on Earth were not part of an invasion. They were coming by invitation.

But who would invite them?

And why? No one that Jay knew needed their lawn mowed that badly.

Chapter 2

20:16 Universal Time. May 6, 2001 Phillida ship in orbit around Saturn  
Derek Comstock stood on the deck of the Phillida trading ship, staring out at the view of Saturn far below. Unseen winds in the huge planet's atmosphere seemed to swirl and blend the yellows and faint reds of the clouds like a slow-speed blender mixing different flavors of yogurt. Derek had no idea what that atmosphere was made of, nor how the rings of rock and dust and ice that circled the planet were formed. But he had to admit, the view from here, in an orbit just inside the famous rings of Saturn, was fantastic.

Plus, here a ship was impossible to detect by any Earth monitoring system.

He stared at the view again, trying to take it all in at once. In all his years of working for the Earth Expansion League, he had never expected to get off the planet, let alone be orbiting Saturn. This was a real treat that all Earth men should experience, and if he had his way, they'd get the opportunity.

Behind him the Phillida crew rustled as they went about their duties. The Phillida were a race of what he and others around the League called "plant men." Actually, they weren't a plant, yet they were covered with what appeared to be a green, mosslike substance. They bore no resemblance to humans at all, with their six arms, six legs, and a head with twelve eyes mounted on stalks. They rustled when they moved, making the sound of a large person's jean-clad legs rubbing together on a hot summer's day. But around the League, everyone for some reason just called them the "plant men."

Maybe it was because they smelled like potatoes. Derek doubted he would ever eat another potato after this mission was over, since the odor was slowly becoming nauseating. A spudless existence would be a small price to pay to free all humanity from the surface of Earth and get them out into space in their rightful positions among the stars and the races of the Galaxy.

He loosened his tie and unbuttoned the top button on his black suit, letting the ship's thick air get to his skin. He'd worn the black suit of an MiB agent as a disguise while he sent out the invitation to all the Grazers. But the Phillida kept the temperature of their ship just under sauna level and a black suit was far, far too hot to wear for long.

He'd have to change soon. But first he wanted to wait to see how his invitation was received. There was an outside chance he might have to send it again.

None of the so-called plant men were headed his way, so he went back to staring out at Saturn. If all those idiots back in the offices of Schofield & Rose could see him now, wouldn't they be surprised? For fifteen years he'd been an attorney in Portland, during the week going about his dull, routine business. But on weekends he went on his "fishing" trips east into the mountains. Of course, he never fished. He had also never married. For all those years since he'd first met the alien he called "Frank" out on the desert outside of Reno, he'd worked every weekend and every vacation for the Earth Expansion League. The League was an underground secret organization whose mission was to tell one way or another, all of Earth the truth about aliens. Now all those years of hard work were starting to pay off.

"Incredible, ain't it?" Billie Floyd asked as he moved up and stood in front of

the port beside Derek. "Seen it twice. I swear it's prettier the second time around."

Billie was the only other human on the Phillida ship. A southern hick from Alabama, with a third-grade education and the ability to fix just about anything that had an engine in it, he wore dirty tennis shoes, coveralls over a stained T-shirt, and a golf hat with the name Bandan Dunes on it. Derek had somehow managed to put up with Billie the few times they had been together, but not much more. And now, being trapped here on this Phillida ship with him was quickly growing old. As old as the smell of potatoes.

"When were you out here before?" Derek asked.

"Two months ago," Billie said, seeming to smile fondly at the memory. "Can't tell ya why. Secret, ya know?"

Derek knew all too well. One of the ways that the League had managed to survive was by never letting one member know too much about anything other members were doing. That way if one member turned traitor, or got caught, no one else, and the organization as a whole, was jeopardized. It was a smart policy as far as Derek was concerned, but at times like this when his curiosity was aroused, it galled him a little.

"I sure had myself a good nap," Billie said, yawning. "Any news yet?"

"Nothing," Derek said. He almost told Billie he should go back to sleep, then didn't.

"Want me to ask one of them plant men?"

Derek shook his head. "I'll do it."

With one last long look at the beautiful view of Saturn and the rings spread out before him, he turned and moved to the center of the room, heading toward a Phillida. Phillida were one of the top trading races in the Galaxy, a kind of interplanetary alien Wal-Mart. They liked to go into backwater planets, set up exclusive trade agreements, and reap all the profits. The League had convinced them a few years back that if Earth was free, if humans knew about the aliens living among them and were able to join the races in space, the Phillida would harvest the profits of all the trade that would follow.

Since coming aboard, Derek wondered if the Phillida didn't have another objective also. He didn't know why he wondered that. It was just a feeling. But after years of battling in courtrooms, he had learned to trust his feelings. And this time his feelings told him there was much more going on here than he understood. And if he just kept his eyes and ears open, he'd learn about it.

"Is the mission going as planned?" he asked the Phillida standing in the middle of the control room.

The Phillida clicked and clucked back at him in its own language. Derek had learned the language before starting this mission. He couldn't speak it, but he could understand it, just as the Phillida in charge could understand English.

"Twenty-six Grazer ships have landed on Earth," the Phillida clicked at him.

"Only twenty-six?" Derek asked. He was disappointed. The MiB might be able to handle twenty-six. It had been almost six hours since he had broadcast his invitation to the Grazers. Should he do it again?

"Only twenty-six close," Phillida said. "Hundreds, maybe thousands more en route. Three Earth cycles they arrive."

Derek could feel himself smiling. "Thank you," he said to the Phillida, then turned away. Hundreds and hundreds of Grazer ships all landing on Earth at once would be impossible for the MiB to contain. They would be forced to admit the presence of aliens among them. And then Earth could take the first step in

forming a trading alliance with the Phil-lida.

The grand plan was off and running. All the years of work were about to pay off, thanks to the chlorophyll addiction of the stupid Grazers.

He moved back over to where Billie had sat down, his tennis-shoed feet up, his hands on his protruding stomach, his golf hat shoved back.

"It's working," Derek said. "Twenty-six Grazers have already landed, hundreds more are coming in the next few days."

"Perfect," Billie said, smiling. "I thought it would." Out of the side of his coveralls he pulled a nasty-looking alien pistol and pointed it at Derek.

"What?" Derek said, stepping back.

At that moment two plant men rustled up behind him and stopped so he could go back no farther, as if there was anyplace to run to on this alien ship anyway.

"Nasty-lookin' little gun, ain't it?" Billie said, indicating the weapon in his hand. "Shoots real good, let me tell ya. Kinda melts skin, burns everything so there's no real mess."

"Why are you pointing it at me?"

"Your mission is plum over," Billie said, smiling so that Derek could see his rotting teeth. "You made your phone call to da Grazers, now the League can't let you just hang around and get caught and give away the entire plan. You claim to be a smart attorney. I'm sure you understand."

"But I don't know the entire plan," Derek said. "And who put you in charge of this mission anyway?"

"The League," Billie said, smiling. "And the plant men here. And this little gun in my hands. I'd say that's pretty darned good authority, wouldn't you?"

Derek glanced around. The Phillida he'd talked to a moment before still stood in the middle of the control room, paying no attention at all to what was happening. Two Phillida stood behind him, blocking any thought of escape.

"So tell me this, Billie," Derek said, turning to squarely face the gun. "Why will the Phillida let you get away with killing me?"

Again Billie laughed. "Oh, they'll let me just fine."

With his free hand, Billie reached up and took the flesh under his chin and pulled it up and aside, revealing an alien face that made Derek want to throw up. Never in all his worst nightmares had he ever seen or imagined something so hideous.

He choked and turned away, fighting to keep his stomach from spewing its contents all over the ship.

"You see, my stupid human buddy," the alien said in Billie's voice, "the Phillida work for me."

The shot caught Derek squarely in the chest and the last thing he ever heard was the sickening laugh of Billie the alien.

### Chapter 3

2:18 P.M. May 6, 2001 New York City, New York

The news that the Grazer had been invited by some human in black had rocked Elle. She knew it couldn't be anyone in the MiB Special Forces, but if not MiB, then who? Who, outside of MiB, could contact an alien in space, or even know they were there?

Let alone know how!

That last question really had her worried.

Around them the spring day was turning almost hot and she was sweating in her black suit. The two members of the containment team had the Grazer's hind legs roped and pulled apart so it couldn't climb back to its feet. The rest of the

team had finished clearing the last of the crowd and were moving the perimeter back with police help, keeping people and news crews away from the entire area. She took three steps toward where her partner Jay was standing and knelt down in front of the face of the Grazer, ignoring the rotting smell of sewer. Speaking slowly, she said to the alien, "I've got to be sure what you are telling us. It is important."

"Want to eat," Grazer said in its own language. A language that was simple and one that Elle knew completely.

"You can eat in a short time," she said. "But first please tell me how you came to be invited to Earth."

"Already spoke of it," Grazer said.

"Speak again," Elle said. "Was it a human who invited you to this planet?"

"Human. Yes," Grazer said. "Black-clothing human."

"Like we are wearing now?" Elle asked.

"Yes. Look same."

She glanced up at Jay, who, for the first time in a while, seemed almost speechless. Finally he said, "I bet we all look alike to them."

"Yeah, but it was still a human," Elle said.

"Good point."

Elle turned back so that she was again looking into the eyes of the upside-down Grazer. "How many of your people did this human invite?"

"All."

"All?" Elle asked.

"All," the Grazer answered. "Many come soon. Eat."

"We're dead," Jay said. "Shit! Shit! Shit!" He turned and paced away, then stopped after about ten steps.

"Want to eat," Grazer said.

Elle stood and moved back away from the stifling smell of the alien. Sweat dripped down her face and her shirt was sticking to her back. And at that moment she wasn't sure if the sweat was a result of the warm day or of the information they'd received from the Grazer. Jay was right. They were dead if they couldn't stop this.

"We've got to tell Zed and fast," Elle said to Jay.

"You ain't kiddin'," Jay said. "This is one party we gotta cancel before the guests start arrivin'."

"Cut him lose," Elle ordered the containment agents, pointing at the Grazer.

"Let him eat for a few minutes while we find out what to do. Keep him in the trees out of sight of nearby buildings and roads."

"Zed told us to toast him," Jay said as they both took off at a run for the LTD.

"Yeah," Elle said, "and lose our one source of information. How smart is that?"

"Another good point," Jay said.

Thirty seconds later, with the air-conditioning running full blast in the LTD, Jay told Zed what they had learned.

"Invited?" Zed asked, sounding as shocked as Elle had felt. Elle wasn't sure if having the boss shocked made her feel any better.

"You're not pulling one of your stunts here, are you, Junior?" Zed asked.

"Not on something this serious," Jay said.

Zed nodded. "Damn. Invited by humans in black, huh? Who the hell could do that?"

Both Elle and Jay said nothing. Elle figured Zed wasn't asking them for an opinion. Which was okay by her since she didn't have one at the moment anyway.

"Well then," Zed said, "we're just going to have to uninvite the grass-eaters."

“Boss,” Elle said. “How about we go over the Grazers’ ship here. Might find something that would give us an idea who’d try to throw this party.”

Zed nodded. “Do it. Keep the containment in place. You killed the Grazer yet?”

“No,” Jay said.

“Good,” Zed said. “Keep it contained there and out of sight. Most of the other Grazers landed in remote areas and we’re taking them out easily. We just might need that one.”

“Understood,” Elle said as Zed cut the connection.

“You want us to go inside a Grazer ship?” Jay asked. “Woman, are you nuts? You know what it’s going to smell like in there?”

“Like the men’s rest room at a strip bar,” Elle said. “You’ll be right at home, I’m sure.”

What she didn’t say to Jay as they climbed out of the car was that she agreed with him. Entering the

Grazer ship wasn’t going to be a pleasant experience and more than likely it would be worthless. But there was always a chance that they’d find something that would help. And at this point she really wanted some answers. She imagined Zed did also.

The containment crew had the Grazer chewing on grass under the trees near its ship. The police and other containment crews had set up a barrier far enough off so that if anyone did catch a glimpse of the Grazer, calling it a renegade water buffalo wouldn’t appear too farfetched. A very deformed water buffalo, but close enough for the moment. The police were telling people they had to stay out until Animal Control and the carnival people got here. So far the cover story she’d come up with was holding.

Elle and Jay moved over to a nearby containment truck where Pro stood. He was the head of what she considered the best containment crew working for MiB. Pro’s agency name was JayEe, but since he’d been a golf pro before joining up, everyone just called him Pro. He was a solid, powerfully built man who wore his suit as if he belonged in it and came naturally to the authority it implied.

People just sort of automatically followed Pro. Elle liked working with him and his team. Jay did, too. And since Zed knew this, he tended to put Pro with them. The other two members of Pro’s team were KayBe and R’Elle. KayBe was called Captain because he loved to read Star Trek books during his breaks and R’Elle was called Partner as a result of a bet he’d made years earlier with another MiB agent. Captain also looked as if he belonged in his suit, while Partner, an expert in computers and alien weapons, seemed like he would be more comfortable wearing a golf shirt.

“We’re going to need your team’s help,” Elle said to Pro.

“Run now,” Jay said, “while you still can.”

Pro laughed. “What can we do, Elle?”

Elle pointed at the watery area in the trees where the Grazer ship was. “We’re going in.”

“Inside a Grazer ship?” Pro asked, his eyes growing bigger. He turned to Jay.

“She’s kidding. Right?”

Jay just shook his head sadly.

“Inside,” Elle said. “We’ve got to try to find out who invited it here and how.”

Pro shook his head, then glanced up at Jay. “You were right. I should have run.”

“Told ya,” Jay said.

“Oh, quit complaining and let’s get going,” Elle said.

“Not without equipment,” Pro said. With a wave he motioned for Partner and

Captain to join him. Then he quickly explained to them what they were doing. Elle watched as the containment team set to work in their van, emerging quickly with masks and other equipment. Pro tossed one mask to Elle, then another to Jay. "Trust me, you're going to need these. We won't last two minutes in a Grazer atmosphere. More sulfur than just about anything else."

"So how do they breathe out here?" Jay asked.

Pro shrugged. "Beats me. Someone at headquarters could tell you that, I'm sure."

Then he turned to Elle as the five MiB agents formed a circle on the grass beside the ship. "What exactly are we going to be looking for in there?"

"Not sure," Elle said. "We need to find any record of the invitation the Grazer got to come to Earth."

"Invitation?" Pro asked. "The grass-eaters were invited? By whom?"

"A human wearing black," Elle said.

Pro's face went white.

Behind him Captain said, "You're kidding?"

Partner just shook his head in clear amazement.

"Zed is trying to stop the party now," Jay said.

Pro nodded. "Let's all hope he can do it. Partner, you got what you're going to need to download everything off that Grazer computer?"

Partner patted a case hanging from a strap over his shoulder. "I can do it in my sleep," he said.

"Captain," Pro said, "you stay with the Grazer. I don't think the insides of that ship will hold more than four of us."

Elle laughed at the relieved look on Captain's face as he handed Pro a bag of tools.

"Ready when you are," Pro said to Jay and Elle.

"Let's do it," Elle said, heading toward the shimmering air that was the shielded ship.

She reached the edge of the shield and just went through. She knew the theory of shielding, but had never been through one before. It felt like the air was electrified slightly around her. The hair on her arms stood up and her throat went suddenly dry.

In front of her the Grazer ship suddenly seemed to appear, its dented gray sides making it look more like an abandoned trailer than a spaceship. A ramp extended from the side of the ship to the grass. At least the Grazer hadn't started eating until he got outside the shield.

"Weird," Jay said beside her. "You just sort of vanished."

She turned around. She could see Captain and the other two agents near the Grazer, but it looked as if she were looking through a thin film of water. But they couldn't see her.

"Masks," Pro said.

"I'll lead," Elle said, slipping the mask over her head and making sure it was tight over her nose and mouth. Then she slipped the earpiece from the mask into her ear. Each mask had a communications link with the other masks. Easier than shouting through the masks to each other.

"Hope this cuts smells, too," Jay said as he put on his mask and adjusted it.

"Some," Pro said. "But we'll all need new suits when we come out."

"Oh, just great," Jay said. "I just got this one broken in."

"Took three months, right?" Pro asked.

"Six," Elle said. Then, to the sound of chuckling, she headed up the ramp into the blackness of the Grazer ship.



It was not a place she wanted to go.

Chapter 4

21:06 Universal Time. May 6, 2001 Joint Earth Observation Base, Far Side Earth Moon

Beach-Grass-In-Limbo eased back the resting unit that kept him above the floor and turned to face the communication screen that linked the Moon Observation Base with the humans on the surface of the planet. He was a Sashanian, one of a dozen on the base at the moment. And for the next two cycles of the planet he was the acting commander of the entire base. He took his duties under the treaty seriously. And right now his three eye stalks and many tentacles were moving in an agitated manner, not at all in their normal smooth fashion.

He was angry with the humans.

Very angry.

He could not understand why they had done what they had done. It made no sense to his logical mind why any race would want to destroy itself. But the humans were a strange race by any standards. He had known that already when he accepted the assignment here. But this action seemed even beyond anything the humans had taken it into their perverse heads to do before.

They had destroyed themselves.

Just thinking of it tangled his tentacles.

He forced himself to calm. The Human-Who-Called-Himself-Zed wanted to talk with him. He needed to be calm for such a conference with a member of a Race-That-Would-Soon-Be-Dead.

After a moment he massaged the communication screen on, letting the human's face fill the image before his eye stalks. But before the human could growl-speak, Beach-Grass-In-Limbo put his thoughts forward.

"Why do you break the treaty? Why do you invite Those-Who-Eat-And-Are-Worthless to your planet?"

"We did not invite them," the human said, his growl-voice firm. "We do not want to break the treaty. This is a trick of someone who would gain from the treaty breaking."

Beach-Grass-In-Limbo considered these words, then asked, "Who would be in such a position?"

The human growled, "I do not know. But I must beg for your help in stopping the ones you call Those-Who-Eat-And-Are-Worthless from coming to Earth."

This was not at all how the Sashanian had expected the conversation with the human to proceed.

Was it possible such an event as a trick of this nature had actually taken place?

"What would you ask?"

The human showed his teeth for a moment, then growled, "Broadcast to Those-Who-Eat-And-Are-Worthless a message from Earth that they are not wanted and must turn back."

The Sashanian's eye stalks swiveled toward the screen. "Do you have such a message prepared?"

"It is prepared," the human said.

"Send it."

The human made a motion with one of its ugly, thick tentacles and then growled, "Message sent."

"If the message is as you say, it will be sent."

"Thank you," the human growled, bowing slightly as it should to a superior race.

“We will eliminate Those-Who-Eat-And-Are-Worthless who have already arrived here.”

“Understood. But I must warn you and your tiny-minded race that it must surely be, as you would say, too late to stop what must happen.”

“Are you saying that Those-Who-Eat-And-Are-Worthless might not be turned back by the message?”

“Some will continue forward, but our ships will easily turn them away or destroy them. But you clearly do not understand what has happened. You tiny-minded humans are clearly in need of our protection, as it was ordered by the treaty. But now it must be too late. A sad event in the time of the stars.”

“I am afraid I am not understanding,” the human growled.

“The great Sashanian fleet is progressing in this direction, along with other fleets of those who feel you must be protected. We will do our best to hold the others away by our very presence. We will not fight for you.”

“What others are you referring to, O great friend?” the human growled.

All Beach-Grass-In-Limbo’s tentacles waved in agitation for a moment then abruptly calmed. “Your invitation was to the lowest of the low— Those-Who-Eat-And-Are- Worthless.”

“It was not our invitation,” the human growled, breaking into the commander’s time to speak.

The commander continued, ignoring the rudeness of the human. “You have insulted many, many powerful races by inviting such creatures. They must now visit Earth also to feel superior to Those-Who-Eat-And-Are-Worthless. Your planet will be destroyed in the process of many thousands of such visits. I have seen it happen many times before, to many planets and races.”

“The message I have sent to you will not stop such an event?” the human asked.

“It will stop many. Those of us who are your protection will also warn away others who do not dare anger us. I fear it will be far too little and the great Sashanian fleet will not fight for your planet. Many others know this as fact. Sending such an invitation was a mistake from which your people will not recover.”

The connection with the human broke with a flick of a tentacle. It did not feel comfortable to Beach-Grass-In-Limbo to be talking to a member of a Soon-To-Be-Dead race. Conversations with the humans would have to be limited until the extinction process had run its course.

The human’s message was reviewed and sent out at once, spreading through the inhabited universe.

As the commander of the moon base, Beach-Grass-In-Limbo, knew it would be, the message from the human was too little.

Too little and far too late.

Throughout the inhabited universe ships had already started the voyage toward the backward planet Earth, to take their races’ rightful place in the way of things above Those-Who-Eat-And-Are-Worthless.

Every space-traveling race in the Galaxy was above

Those-Who-Eat-And-Are-Worthless in the way of things in the Galaxy.

And there were hundreds of thousands of space-traveling races.

All now had ships—if not fleets—headed toward Earth.

Chapter 5

2:32 P.M. May 6, 2001 New York City, New York

Jay was glad he had put the breathing mask on because the smell inside the Grazer ship was choking even with the protection. It was as if someone had

broken about a million rotten eggs inside a hot tin building and then closed the doors and let the sun thicken the air inside. Elle glanced at him and he made swimming motions as if he were moving upstream in a river of sewage.

Plus the place was darker than a tomb, the only illumination coming from the lights attached to the side of their masks.

“Nice place,” Jay said. “Pro, you know how to find a light switch in here?”

“Sure,” Pro said, moving past Jay and tapping a panel twice. Dim yellow light filled the small main cabin of the ship, causing the odd-shaped instruments to cast eerie shadows. Every piece of equipment or furniture was designed to fit a Grazer’s body shape. Thus the main control panels were placed only a few feet off the ground, while extra equipment seemed to hang at odd angles and seemingly random positions from the walls and ceiling.

“Not sure if that helped,” Elle said.

Jay completely agreed. Not only did the place smell, but it was a cluttered mess. Some kind of grime that felt like oil to the touch coated every surface. Trash and half-eaten plants littered the floor and was piled up in the corners. There were pools of fluid on one side of the room that Jay didn’t even want to ask Pro to identify.

“The trash ghetto of spaceships,” Jay said. He knew from his short glance at the manual that a Grazer lived and died in his ship, leaving it only to eat or find supplies. But how any creature could exist in this was beyond him. In his days as a New York cop he had seen a lot of poverty and filth, but no depth a human being could sink to came close to this. No wonder the Grazers were treated with contempt Galaxy-wide. They were stupid and messy.

“Are all Grazer ships this bad?” Elle asked.

“From what I’ve heard of the Grazer ships we’ve captured over the years,” Pro said, “they all are. Sometimes worse.”

“Much worse,” Partner said. “I trained in one that made this one look clean.”

“Killing a Grazer is like a mercy killing,” Elle said.

“If I had to live here,” Jay said, picking up a scrap of something and dropping it quickly, “I’d want someone to shoot me, too.”

Pro and Partner knelt and went to work on one area of what looked to be the main control board. Pro held the case while Partner attached connecting cables.

While they did this, Jay and Elle explored. Jay had no idea what they was looking for, but they looked anyway. The Grazers had been invited to Earth for a reason and there just might be a clue to that reason somewhere in this mess.

A short hall, walls dripping oil and slick with moistened dirt, led to another room with a closed door. After a quick look around the items stored on the walls and ceilings of the main cabin, they headed toward the door.

“You won’t want to go in there,” they heard Pro call out to them, his voice carrying clearly to Jay’s ear microphone just as he reached down for the release that would open the door. It was a latch about a foot off the ground, right where the front feet of the Grazer could reach it easily.

“Why’s that?” Jay said, standing and looking back into the main room at Pro. The containment-team leader was staring at him while Partner worked.

“Don’t remember your manual on Grazers, do you?” Pro said, laughing.

Jay glanced at Elle and she shrugged. Obviously she hadn’t read all of it either.

“It’s where the Grazer sleeps,” Pro said. “Makes this room look like it was scrubbed with ammonia and steel wool.”

“How much worse can it get?” Jay asked.

“You don’t want to know the answer to that question,” Pro said.

Jay looked at Elle and pointed at the door.

She nodded. “Doesn’t hurt to see it once.”

Jay leaned forward and went to push the hatch open. Down the hall in the main cabin Pro was shaking his head, laughing softly. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Jay flicked the latch to open and the metal door slid sideways into the wall.

Instantly his nostrils filled with a stench even more disgusting than what he had just smelled.

Inside, a yellow light came on, showing Jay a room filled with the rotting corpses of other Grazers.

“Oh, shit,” Jay whispered.

Two or three Grazer bodies were still pretty much in one piece. It was clear—from the positioning of the stinking corpses, and from the fact that this room was clearly used as sleeping quarters—that the Grazer eating outside had been using both of the bodies as organic mattresses, curling up inside their rotting intestines.

Another five or six Grazers in various stages of decomposition appeared to have been used then discarded as beds long ago. Grazer flesh either decomposed much more slowly than human flesh or the rotting here had been slowed by the controlled atmosphere of the room. But not slowed to anywhere near a stop.

The floor of the room was littered with hundreds of bones from more Grazers than Jay wanted to think about. Some of the skulls had been hung on the walls, their huge mouths hanging open as if waiting to eat anything that came within snapping distance.

Elle made a choking sound and both of them turned and shoved back into the hallway.

The door to the cabin slid closed, blocking off direct sight to the horror, but not clearing it from Jay’s mind.

They both turned as one and returned to the main cabin. Jay was sweating and was suddenly very afraid of closing his eyes. Very afraid he would see that room again.

“Understand now why we kill the Grazers and destroy their ships?” Pro asked.

Elle coughed and nodded.

Jay completely understood. Right now all he wanted to do was run, get the hell out of this nightmare ship and then blow it up, along with its grass-eating pilot. But they weren’t done yet, so he couldn’t act on the impulse.

“Sorry you saw that,” Pro said. “MiB uses it to train containment crews when a Grazer’s ship is available. I suppose they figure if we last through seeing that, we can clean up anything.”

“I think they just may be right,” Elle said, her voice still shaking.

Jay completely agreed. If Kay had shown him that room his first day, there’d be no way in hell he’d have taken this job. No way at all.

“Each ship is passed down from one Grazer to another,” Elle said. “So those Grazer bodies are relatives? Right?”

Pro laughed without looking up from his work. “Like the manual says, a Grazer very seldom leaves its ship, even after death. They only live about five Earth years and breed like rats. Chances are the ship’s current occupant is sleeping inside the remains of his mother or father. Maybe both.”

Again Elle coughed, then said softly, “I thought I’d seen it all at the city morgue.”

Jay could think of absolutely nothing to say, funny or otherwise, so he just

stood there and tried to breathe evenly and not close his eyes or even blink.

“Got it,” Partner said, after what seemed like an eternity to Jay.

“Watch the screen.” Partner pointed to a smudged flat surface about waist-high. It flickered, then came to life. On the screen they saw a human wearing a black suit, white shirt, and black tie. He smiled, then said, “This message is to all Golgothas.”

Partner froze the image and glanced at Jay with a puzzled frown.

“Golgothas are what the Grazers call themselves,” Jay said. “I remember that much from the manual. That room just taught me that I’m going to read all the way to the end, though.”

“You recognize him?” Pro asked, pointing to the man on the screen.

“Nope,” Jay said.

“No,” Elle said.

Partner backed up the playback and started over. The man on the screen smiled again, then said, “This message is to all Golgothas. Earth welcomes you. Come, eat all you want.”

The man smiled again and then the message repeated.

“You got that recorded?” Elle asked Partner.

“Got it,” he said.

“Including when and where it was recorded and where the message was broadcast from?”

“Got it all,” Partner said, standing. “Including the type of carrier band it was sent on. Not one of ours, that’s for sure. I can tell that right off.”

“Then let’s get the hell out of this stink,” Jay said, turning and heading for the ramp and the fresh, clean day that lay outside. All he really wanted to do was get as far away from that room as he could. He was going to have nightmares for years simply because he had opened that door.

At the bottom of the ramp he tossed aside his gas mask and walked right through the shield and into the warm sun of the afternoon. Central Park stretched out around him. A few buildings could be seen through the trees. The sun was warm, the air fresh.

Without even pausing, he pulled out his Atomizer and with one shot dropped the Grazer in its tracks, surprising the other agents standing nearby.

Behind him another Atomizer fired, frying the body of the Grazer into so much ash.

Jay glanced around to stare into the sweating face of Elle as she finally stopped firing. Her eyes looked almost haunted.

He understood exactly how she felt.

“Toss that ship into the sun,” Jay said to the two containment agents that had been standing guard over the Grazer. Then Jay turned to face Pro and Partner as they gathered up his and Elle’s gas masks. “Give that information to Captain.”

Jay turned to Captain as Partner handed him the case. “Get it to Zed as fast as you can go. We’ll tell him it’s on the way and we’ll be not far behind you.”

Captain nodded and turned and headed for the truck at a run.

Through the trees Jay saw a fire truck parked along the perimeter. “Captain, on the way out send that fire truck in here.”

Captain waved his acknowledgment as he jumped into the cab of the containment truck and took off for MiB headquarters.

A minute later, as the fire truck rumbled to a stop in the sun, Jay was digging through the trunk of the LTD for new suits for him and Elle.

Two minutes later he, Elle, Pro, and Partner were all standing in their

underwear on the grass, basking in the sun in Central Park as they were hosed down by wonderfully cold, wonderfully clean cold water.

Jay knew without a doubt it would be only the first of many showers he was going to take over the next few days to get the feeling of dirt and sewage and rot out of his mind and off his skin.

He had no idea how long it would take to clean it out of his memory.

Chapter 6

20:16 Universal Time. May 6, 2001 Phillida ship in orbit around Saturn

Billie Floyd stood in the central control area of the Phillida ship and watched the viewscreen as Zed's message was broadcast over and over from the Sashanian moon base.

"We did not invite the Golgotha to our planet. No Golgotha is welcome on our planet. The invitation was a trick to hurt humans. Please accept our apologies for any misunderstanding this may have caused. No Golgotha is welcome on Earth, now or ever."

Zed's stern face started to repeat the message yet again and Billie leaned forward and clicked it off with a pass of his hand. Then he turned to the Phillida and in their clicking language said, "Humans are too stupid to be allowed to live."

The Phillida in charge of the ship started to shake slightly, a sign he was laughing at Billie's comment.

Billie laughed with him for a moment.

Then the Phillida captain said, "For humans, being alive at all is only a temporary condition now."

Billie again laughed in his human voice, then said, "Too true. But I must continue this charade for a short time longer. Put me in touch with my base on Earth."

The Phillida bowed and did as he was ordered.

Billie stepped in front of the camera and the Phillida moved back out of the way so only Billie would be seen. As the link to Earth was connected, Billie's posture changed. Instead of standing straight, he slumped, became a little more agitated.

A woman's face filled the screen in front of him. Her name was Sarah Wallace. She was middle-aged by human standards and had been working with Billie for almost twenty Earth years now. Her hair had slight streaks of gray and wrinkles were starting to fill the corners of her face.

For Billie's race, twenty years was only a brief span, but for the woman it was half of her lifetime so far. He had recruited her from a small town in Utah when she was only nineteen, barely a human adult. He liked getting them young. They were even dumber and believed almost anything he told them.

"Sarah," he said. "It was just awful, let me tell ya."

"What?" Sarah asked, clearly afraid.

"Derek had gone and sent the message just fine when suddenly he went wild, tried to kill a Phil-lida."

"What?" Sarah asked, clearly shocked.

Billie nodded real hard. "Then he tried to run hisself right out an airlock.

He's dead, Sarah."

Sarah covered her mouth, but said nothing.

"The message was sent, though," Billie went on.

Sarah nodded, hand still over her mouth.

"Derek died a hero and that there is how I'm a-gonna tell it," Billie declared.

“That all right with you?”

She took a deep breath. “Fine. Good idea.”

“Okay,” Billie said. “I’m gonna be comin’ back.”

“Did MiB send out a retraction of our invitation to the Grazers?” Sarah asked.

“Just like we thought they would, so we have lots of work to do.”

“I understand,” Sarah said. “We’ll be ready here when you arrive.”

“Good,” Billie said.

He cut the connection, then leaned back and laughed, long and hard. Like a human would laugh. He had impersonated one for so long, it almost felt natural to laugh like one.

But in a very short time humans would be wiped off the face of their planet. The entire ball of rock and water would be all his. And with what he had found thirty Earth years ago buried deep underground, he would be the most powerful and richest entity in all the Galaxy.

He had found what he called the Power.

Pure and simple Power.

But first he had to get rid of the humans, their MiB organization, and all the aliens that watched over them.

He couldn’t use the Power for that. They had to be gone. It had taken thirty years to bring his plan to this point. And everything so far was working perfectly.

A few more Earth days, maybe a week or two, and they would all be wiped from the surface.

And the great Power would be his for the taking.

Chapter 7

3:38 P.M. May 6, 2001 New York City, New York

Jay and Elle headed through the Immigration Center toward Zed’s office. Hundreds and hundreds of aliens and humans filled the vast space, standing in lines, talking, or just sitting and waiting. Much, much busier than normal.

The Immigration Center was the hub of the MiB headquarters. Every alien who visited Earth or lived on the planet had to pass through the cavernlike space.

And it was the job of the MiB to keep track of them all during their stay on the planet. No ship entered Earth’s atmosphere without the MiB orbital tracking satellites following it.

On the surface, it was another matter entirely. A massive screen filled one wall of the room, towering at least three stories high. At a huge control board in front of the screen sat two octopuslike aliens. They were called the twins since their real names were nothing a human could say. Jay knew that for certain because one day last month he’d tried, without success. Zed had stopped him just before he insulted them both by mispronouncing their names. The last thing anyone on the planet Earth wanted to do was insult the twins.

The twins each had eight arms, which were in constant motion over the controls, tracking every alien on the surface of the planet, all the time, thirty-six hours a day. Their long eye stalks jerked, watching the screen in front of them, apparently assimilating all the activity it rendered at once. Jay knew for certain that those eyes didn’t miss much. The twins were very good at what they did.

As Jay and Elle walked by, the twins looked busy, as always. And the lines of departing aliens looked a lot longer than usual. Jay wondered if that had anything to do with the Grazer invitation. He suspected it did.

They took the stairs up to Zed’s office two at a time and didn’t bother to knock

at the open door. Jay knew Zed was expecting them.

Zed's office was above the Immigration Center, a wood-and-glass throwback to the 1970s. He had a huge desk and a notepad, but nothing else in evidence. Jay knew the room was stocked with the most high-tech equipment available to humans.

Surveillance equipment the government could only dream about having.

Zed's office might look like a standard office in any New York building, but from it Zed ran the vast, secret MiB organization assigned the task of safeguarding the planet Earth from the alien scum of the universe. And he ran it with an iron hand.

As Jay and Elle entered, Zed was standing at the window looking down into the heart of the center. He was a stout, middle-aged man who filled out his black suit like a linebacker filled out a football uniform. At the moment his large hands were clasped behind his back, his head down.

Usually Zed had some alien secretary-in-training bumbling or zipping around the office when they arrived, but today it was only Zed.

"Yo, boss," Jay said.

Without looking around at them Zed said, "They're starting to leave in droves. Only going to get worse. Can't say as I blame them. I wouldn't mind going with them."

Jay glanced at Elle, who only shrugged.

In the year Jay had been with MiB, he had never heard Zed sound so downbeat. Zed had seemed worried, although only slightly, only once before, when the bug had taken the Galaxy and the Ach-turians were going to blow Earth from the sky to keep the bug from escaping. Today Zed seemed truly worried.

"Hey, boss," Jay said, making sure his voice was light and upbeat, "want to fill us in on the bad news so we can be depressed, too?"

Zed snorted and turned from the window. "Good job getting that tape out of the Grazer ship. Hope you showered."

"Twice," Elle said.

"Good," Zed said. "Hate that smell."

"New suits, too," Jay said, turning from side to side like a model on a runway.

"I really look good in these things, don't ya think?"

Again Zed just snorted and dropped into his chair, staring at the paper in front of him.

"All right, then," Jay said. "I admit it. Elle looks better in them than I do, but don't quote me on that."

"Well, thank you," Elle said, smiling at him.

"Junior, would you stop cracking jokes and sit down?" Zed said. "We got a serious problem here."

"Yes, sir," Jay said, holding the chair for Elle, then dropping into one beside her.

Jay sat and watched as Zed seemed to be lost in thought for a long half minute, then he leaned forward and looked them both right in the eye, Jay first, then Elle. "Look, I'm going to be straight with you two, so listen up."

Jay only nodded. Zed's intent stare did that to people: made it almost impossible to talk.

"The human race has about one chance in a million of surviving the next week and that chance is you two."

Jay glanced at Elle, who looked shocked, then back at Zed. "Boss, you're not starting this out real well here. You lost us in the second sentence. The part where the human race has one chance in a million of surviving."



“Yeah,” Elle said, her voice cracking a little. “You want to explain. Please?”

Zed shoved himself away from his desk and stood, moving over to the window overlooking the Immigration Center. There, hands behind his back, he gazed into the distance for a moment before starting to speak. “The Grazers are the lowest form of all inter stellar-traveling life.”

The image of that Grazer sleeping room flashed back into Jay’s mind and he could feel himself breaking out into a sweat. Beside him Elle coughed, also clearly remembering. Zed would get no argument from either of them on that statement. Zed kept staring out over the Immigration Center below. “Out in the vastness of space there are hundreds of thousands of space-faring races,” Zed said, “all more technologically advanced than humans. All of them are above the Grazers on the pecking order of things.”

“Okay,” Elle said. “We got that. Go on.”

“The treaty that keeps the human race going forward blissfully in the dark was signed by a few hundred or so of those races. MiB came into being as the human enforcement arm here on the planet, to keep scum like the Grazers off the surface, keep humans in the dark until we all advanced enough as a species to join the big party out there.”

Zed was going over basic history, stuff that Kay had explained to Jay his first day on the job, but clearly the boss was headed somewhere with this, so Jay didn’t interrupt. He just looked at Elle and she shrugged.

Neither of them said a word.

“Some human, posing as an MiB agent, sent an invitation to all Grazers to come to Earth.”

“And you canceled that invitation,” Jay said. “Right? Closed the door on the party.”

Zed nodded and turned around. Slowly he moved back over to his desk and sat down hard in his chair, as if the weight of the world was crushing him. Jay had no doubt it was.

“I talked to the Sashanians on the moon,” Zed said, “and they broadcast a retraction of the invitation. But that will make no difference.”

“Okay,” Jay said, “I was followin’ ya right up to that last sentence.”

“The first invitation pissed off every race in the Galaxy,” Zed said, leaning across the desk and staring at Jay intently. “We invited the scum of all races to our planet without inviting the rest of them. So, basically, they’re all headed here to either crash the party or teach us a lesson in manners.”

“Even though the bogus invitation has been canceled?” Elle asked.

“Yup,” Zed said. “They’re all coming to eat, drink, and take what they want. Hundreds of thousands of races. We won’t survive it. I doubt there will be anything left on the surface of this planet in ten days.”

Jay was having trouble wrapping his mind around the idea of hundreds of thousands of alien races all headed here. Let alone one hundred thousand pissed-off alien races.

“Can’t the Sashanians and other treaty signers turn them around?” Elle asked.

“They’ll do what they can,” Zed said. “They’ll wave their arms and ask others nicely to go away, but it will be like throwing a handful of sand in a river and expecting it to stop the water. It’s not going to happen. And unless we can come up with something on our end, they won’t even bother fighting for us.”

“And that ‘something’ is our job,” Elle said.

“She’s fast,” Zed said to Jay. But there was no smile behind his kidding.

“I heard that from guys down at the morgue,” Jay replied, just to stay in the

spirit of it.

Elle made no move even to punch him, but instead stayed focused on Zed. “What can we do?”

Zed leaned back in his chair. “I honestly don’t know. I’ve got every other agent out working to stick a finger in the dike to hold off the flood of Grazers and other aliens starting to drop in.”

He took a deep breath. “I’ve also apologized to half the Galaxy in the last half hour and called in every favor from every race we’ve ever met to help turn the tide out there. I figure, at best, we have four or five days. More than likely one or two.”

“But we don’t know why all this even happened, do we?” Jay said, finally catching on to what Zed wanted them to do.

“Exactly,” Zed said. “A human sent that invitation. A human who knew about MiB enough to look like us.”

“Why and who?” Jay said. “Those are the really big, important questions.

“And don’t forget: how?” Elle added.

Zed nodded. “I can spare you two, plus one containment team to try to find the answers to those questions on the outside chance it might help.”

“Pro’s team,” Jay said.

“Already assigned to you and waiting for your orders,” Zed said.

“Any idea where to start?” Elle asked.

“Agent Elle,” Zed said, looking sternly at her, “if I knew the answer to that question, wouldn’t you think someone would already be on the road.”

“Understood,” Elle said.

“We’ll figure it out,” Jay said, and stood.

“Junior,” Zed said, “I hope you’re right this time. And I hope it makes a difference.”

## Chapter 8

3:57 P.M. May 6, 2001 New York City, New York

“Well, how’s that for pressure?” Jay asked Elle as they headed down the stairs and made their way through the noise and activity of the Immigration Center. “Up to us to save the entire world. All in two days.”

“If Zed thought there really was a hope,” Elle said, ducking around an alien carrying a large bag of something that smelled like wet dog hair, “he wouldn’t have assigned it to two rookies.”

“Too true,” Jay said. “And he’d have put a dozen teams on it instead of just us.”

“Agreed,” she said.

And she really believed that, too. Zed was the smartest man she had ever met. Her and Jay’s chances of finding anything that might help were worth one team and not one person more.

“Good point,” Jay said, giving a multihorned Imatey with two suitcases a wide berth and catching up to her. “So what do you say we prove him wrong and find something.”

“Fine by me,” Elle said, stopping to face Jay. “Where do we start.”

“Elementary, my dear Ms. Elle,” Jay said, smiling at her with that impish grin he got. “We start with our only lead.”

“The invitation?” Elle said, knowing exactly where he was going. It was the same thing she had already thought of.

“The invitation,” Jay said, smiling at her. He led the way toward a private screening room just off the main concourse of the center.

The room was long and thin, with a table down the middle and windows along one side overlooking the Immigration Center. It smelled of cleaning solution and new electronics. Elle had been in here dozens of times over the past year, studying, getting assignments, watching films about some infraction or other an alien was committing against the rules.

Inside Jay punched a communications link and set up the showing while she pulled the curtains to block out light from the center. Zed was right. There were a lot more aliens suddenly leaving, all looking very much in a hurry.

And no one was in the check-in line. Made sense. Why check into a hotel that was days away from being whacked by the wrecking ball?

Rats deserting a sinking ship, aliens leaving a dying planet, it was all one and the same. Well, she and Jay and the entire human race were going down with the ship, unless they could plug the hole somehow.

She finished closing the blinds and sat down in the chair at the end of the table while Jay dropped into the chair to her right.

Ten seconds later the image of a middle-aged man dressed in a black suit was on the screen that filled the end wall of the long room. Quickly the man ran through the invitation to the Grazers, then it started over.

It was hard for Elle to imagine how such a short little invitation could mean the death of all humanity. But that's exactly what those few sentences were going to mean.

"Okay, first things first," Jay said, freezing the film with the guy's mouth open. "Is this guy human?"

Elle stared at the open mouth on the screen, the man's eyes, his nose, then shrugged. He was a decent-looking guy. The type that could almost be trusted. The type that would fit as a nine-to-five husband, or maybe doctor, or a lawyer. "No way to tell quickly," she said, then punched a communications button on an inlaid panel on the table that hooked her directly to Research. "Let's see if that has already been determined."

"Yes, Agent Elle." A man's voice filled the room almost instantly.

Elle had been down to Research a number of times. The department took up three full floors the size of the Immigration Center below them. As far as she could tell, the seemingly hundreds of people who worked there had unrelentingly thankless jobs. But for some reason, they all seemed to really love it. Or at least the ones she'd talked to had seemed to love it.

"Can we have two printouts of the analysis of the invitation footage retrieved from the Grazer's computer?" Elle asked. "Including any summary findings."

"Coming up now," the voice said.

"Thank you," Elle said.

There was a click and a faint rustle of paper. She reached into a slot in the base of the table and pulled out a small stack of paper. She gave one printout to Jay and kept the second for herself.

"He's human all right," Jay said after a moment of quick reading.

Elle had already seen the same piece of information. According to the page-long conclusion of the study, there was no chance at all that this invitation was made by an alien in a human body. The guy who did the inviting was one of them. A human out to destroy his own race. She wondered if he realized what he was doing.

She stared at the frozen image of the guy filling the far wall. He looked so damn normal.

So MiB.

Black suit, white shirt, black tie.

The same as she was wearing now.

Almost.

His suit collar was thinner than hers. And if you looked closely, his tie seemed to have a faint pat-tern in the blackness. There were differences. The guy was clearly trying to look MiB, but had missed in slight ways. Ways that just maybe gave him away.

The report said that MiB was running a scan of all photo databases to try to find a match, but it would take some time. They had no name at this time.

Elle punched the communications button again.

“Yes, Agent Elle?” the same male voice said.

“How long until the photo database scans are complete on the human on the invitation retrieved from the Grazer ship?”

“Six hours, ten minutes,” the voice said without hesitation. “Unless a match is found sooner.”

“Too long,” Jay said, and Elle nodded.

“Has an analysis of the man’s suit been completed?”

There was a pause. “No.”

“Please do so quickly,” Elle said. “And his tie. I want probabilities of type and brand and likely purchase locations as soon as possible.”

“Understood,” the voice said.

“Good thinking,” Jay said, staring at the man’s image on the screen. “Never would have thought of that.”

“Neither would I.” Elle said, “If you hadn’t left his image up there. See the difference in the lapels?”

Jay nodded. “Sure do. Nice spot.”

Elle leaned forward over the table slightly, staring at the man’s tie. She kept seeing a pattern in it, even though it didn’t seem as if there was one.

“En-large the image of his tie, right above where it tucks into his coat?”

“Got it,” Jay said, working the image controls in front of his chair.

With a flick the guy’s black tie almost filled the entire wall.

“Focusing,” Jay said, working the controls in front of him, pulling the image in clearer and brighter as he went.

“It’s a horse,” Elle said. “Would you look at that.” An image of a horse rearing back was embossed in black on the black tie. Up close, it would be noticeable, but on the invitation to the Grazers it looked solid black.

“You’re right,” Jay said.

Elle again punched the communications link to Research and this time didn’t wait to hear the man’s voice. “Focus your photo database scans on western states if not already done. Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Montana, Wyoming first. Then go Nevada, Arizona, Utah, Colorado, and New Mexico.”

“Understood, Agent Elle,” the man’s voice answered.

“And add into your data that the man is wearing a tie with the image of a horse on it.”

There was a pause, then the man said, “Understood. Thank you.”

Jay laughed. “I think you just beat Research at their own game.”

“Now if they can just repay the favor quickly.”

“In the meantime,” Jay said, “I’m going to run this thing again.”

Elle nodded as the man’s face again started to extend his invitation to the Grazers.

“He’s dead,” Jay said after the entire thing ran a few more times.

She knew exactly what he meant. She had been getting that same feeling watching the film. Anyone who would attempt such a thing would be killed. Whoever was behind this scheme couldn't allow the messenger to survive. A face was too easily tracked, even if the process was slow.

"I think you may be right," Elle said. "That would be perfectly logical."

This time it was Jay who punched his communications link with Research. Before anyone could answer, he said, "Also match the man on the invitation with missing persons' files. Start in the western states."

"Understood, Agent Jay," the voice from research said.

"Well," Jay said, leaning back and smiling. "We got them going in about three different directions. Something should pop pretty soon."

"Let's hope," Elle said. "It's going to be next to impossible to wait very long."

"That is the truth," Jay said. "In fact, maybe we should get some lunch so we're ready to—"

"Agents Jay and Elle," the man's voice from Research said, "we have found a match. Information coming up to you now."

The rustle of paper filled the room as the silent, high-speed printer in the table spit out a page. Elle pulled it out and looked at the face on the paper, then again at the one frozen on the wall in front of them. It was the same face.

"Derek Comstock," Jay read. "Attorney in Portland, Oregon. Last seen four days ago headed into the coastal mountain range to go fishing."

"Bingo," Jay said, jumping to his feet.

Elle beat him to the door. With the fastest suborbital plane MiB had, they'd be in Portland in less than two hours. Two long hours to figure out what they had to do next.

Two hours closer to the end of the world.

Chapter 9

4:41 P.M. May 6, 2001 Portland, Oregon

Spring in downtown Portland seemed to be in full bloom. Bright green trees covered many of the roads in what was called the northwest section, forming tunnels of leaves that shaded the street. Flowers were planted everywhere, along every house, in planters in front of the buildings, at the base of carefully groomed shrubs.

Nothing seemed out of the ordinary and Jay couldn't believe how clean the place was. It was almost creepy, as if littering might be considered a capital offense in this town.

"Never seen a city without trash on the streets," he said to Elle as she wound their LTD past the old train depot and down into the main part of town. Behind them Pro and his team followed in a containment truck.

"Neither have I," Elle said. "Not even a gum wrapper. Didn't know they made such a place. Maybe we're just in a good section of town."

Jay shrugged.

The boulevard they were driving along dead-ended into a street in front of a statue of some strange guy who was standing with his hand tucked into the front of his vest.

"Wonder what he did?" Elle said, pointing at the bronze figure as she drove past.

"Says on the plaque he shot a litterbug," Jay said, pretending to read the sign. Elle laughed.

"I'm not kidding," Jay said, trying to give her his best serious look.

She wasn't buying it. She very seldom did.

They worked their way up the hill. Portland was built in a river valley, at the point where two rivers converged. The larger buildings had been built closer to the water, while the homes seemed to spread up the side of the mountain. They had decided to try Derek Comstock's workplace first, then his home second. Finally Elle pulled the LTD up in front of an old thirties-style two-story house that had been converted into legal offices. A wooden sign stuck out of a flower bed: SCHOFIELD & ROSE. ATTORNEYS.

"Nice place to work," Jay said. "Wonder what made good old Derek run off to Saturn and destroy the world?"

"I'd like an answer to that question myself," Elle said as they climbed out of the car into the warm afternoon air.

In the distance Jay could see a big, arching bridge and the river. This was his first visit to Portland. It was a pretty city, that much was for sure. But he'd still take New York any day, litter or not.

Inside, the reception area was exactly what Jay would have expected from the outside, a former residential vestibule, framed in highly polished wood. A large wooden staircase swept away from the desk where a young woman sat staring at a computer. A half-dozen chairs were arranged around the space with magazines neatly sorted on end tables between them. The place smelled of fresh air and furniture polish.

The receptionist looked up and smiled as they entered. "Can I help you?"

"We're from the FBI," Elle said, flashing a badge and then quickly closing it.

"I'm Agent Place, this is Agent Kincaid. We're here looking for an attorney who works with your firm. A man named Derek Comstock."

Jay was shocked again. Elle had changed their cover names for the second time in two days. Amazing.

Jay watched as the receptionist's face went pale. "Is he all right?"

"We don't know the answer to that question," Elle said. "May we talk to one of your senior partners?"

"Certainly," a woman's voice said from near the top of the stairs. "Come on up."

The receptionist smiled weakly as Jay and Elle marched past her desk and began to climb the stairs.

At the top Jay was surprised when he saw the person that matched the voice. The woman was young, maybe Jay's age at most, and stunningly beautiful, with long brown hair and brown eyes that could melt his heart any day. He couldn't remember when he'd had so strong a reaction to a woman.

Elle reached the top of the stairs first and the woman smiled and shook her hand.

"I'm Kathy Rose," she said.

"Agent Place, FBI," Elle said, then indicated Jay. "Agent Kincaid."

Jay shook attorney Rose's hand and returned her smile. The woman's handshake was firm, yet soft. And there was a lot of intelligence in her eyes.

Cold intelligence.

"You don't mind if I see your ID?" she asked.

"Not a bit," Jay said as he flipped his wallet open, glancing at it to make sure it said FBI and Agent Jay Kincaid. The badges always did. They were another gift from an alien race, like the flashy-thing. No matter what name he gave, or what organization, the badge somehow responded to his verbal command and transformed into the appropriate agency. The MiB Agency called them Carte Noir badges, but Jay just called it his badge-thing.

He handed his ID to the woman and she studied it for a moment, then handed it back with a nod and a smile. As always, the badge-thing had passed the test. She then motioned that they should follow her into a large, comfortably furnished office. She didn't ask to see Elle's ID.

She indicated that they should have a seat in inviting-looking chairs facing her desk, then she went around and sat down in her high-backed office chair. Law books filled a floor-to-ceiling oak bookcase behind her desk and her framed law degree was hung on the wall near the window. Jay noted that there were no family pictures on her desk and no ring on her finger.

She was the perfect picture of an attorney. Jay figured she was almost too perfect.

"We're looking for Derek Comstock," Elle said, sounding very official. "Any information you might be able to give us would be helpful."

Jay watched Attorney Rose's face; it didn't even flinch. The woman was either very, very good, or had nothing to hide. He couldn't figure out which at the moment.

"I've been looking for him, too," Attorney Rose said, frowning. "He went on a fishing trip four days ago, promising to be back for a meeting in two days. He missed the meeting and we haven't seen him since."

"Can you fill us in a little on his background?" Jay asked, giving her his best I-really-am-attracted-to-you smile.

She shrugged. "Not much to fill in. Born here in Portland, went to law school at the University of

Oregon in Eugene. Decent grades, not outstanding. He worked as a clerk for a district judge, then with another firm downtown for about ten years. We hired him three years ago when we wanted to expand. He's always done us a good job until now."

"Wife? Children? Friends?" Elle asked.

Attorney Rose shrugged. "Not married. Never was, to my knowledge. Except for his fishing, he didn't seem to have many passions at all. And few friends, now that you mention it."

"So"—Elle glanced at Jay—"you have any idea where Derek went on his fishing trips?"

Attorney Rose laughed, which made Jay immediately smile along with her. It was that kind of laugh. He couldn't help liking her at the same time as he didn't trust her at all. Weird how he was reacting to this woman. Total attraction, total distrust.

"Not a clue," Attorney Rose said. "But every so often he'd mention Tillamook, a little town over on the coast. So it must have been up in that direction somewhere. Guess the fishing is pretty good in the mountains above there."

Elle nodded.

"I think that's all we're going to need for now," Jay said, standing. "We want to thank you for your time."

She stood and took his extended hand. "My pleasure, Agent Kincaid. Please keep me informed if you discover anything about Derek. Everyone in the firm is deeply concerned."

Jay didn't really want to let go of the attorney's very soft hand, but somehow he managed to do so before he made a total fool of himself.

"We most certainly will," Elle said, standing and shaking Rose's hand. Then with a friendly pat on Jay's back, she turned him and sort of eased him toward the office door and the stairs beyond.

Something was bothering him.

And bothering him a lot.

He just couldn't get past Kathy Rose's looks and put his finger on it.

At the door Elle stopped, did an about-face, and went back to the attorney, handing her a card. "Would you call us at that number if Derek does return? It would be for his own safety."

The attorney nodded, glanced at the card, and then frowned. "You never did say why you were looking for Derek."

Elle glanced at Jay, then smiled at Attorney Rose. "Just trust me when I say it's for all of our own good that we find him. And find him fast."

Elle moved out the door and toward the stairs, going past Jay as he watched the attorney's expression. The woman didn't flinch at Elle's comment.

"Sounds to me like this is very serious," Attorney Rose said calmly, following the two agents to the top of the stairs.

"More than you could ever imagine," Jay said. "Don't be afraid to use that number if you need to."

With that, he turned and left Attorney Rose, following Elle down the stairs and out the front door. He knew exactly what was bothering him now.

That woman was a walking shell, nothing more. And something had clearly made her that way.

Outside, Elle shook her head at him as she climbed in behind the wheel. "Can't get past the good-looking brunette, can you?"

He grabbed the phone and picked it up. "Pro?"

"Go ahead, Jay," Pro said.

"Quickly put a trace on all calls coming in or out of that office in the next twenty-four hours. In fact, I bet she makes a call the moment we leave."

"Understood," Pro said.

Jay turned to see a puzzled frown on Elle's face. "You're the one who gave her my phone number."

"I gave her our phone number," Elle corrected, pulling the LTD away from the curb.

Jay glanced back at the building. Sure enough, Attorney Rose was watching them from the second-story window, a phone resting against the side of her head. This might not even take as long as he thought. She would call her boss immediately and tell him or her that the MiB had come.

"Now, you want to tell me what I missed?" Elle asked.

"You just got to have an eye for beautiful women," Jay laughed.

"Cold women," Elle said.

"Exactly," Jay said. "Empty and cold. Just like Derek Comstock."

Elle looked at him for an instant, then smiled. "Exactly like Derek Comstock."

"Besides," Jay said, "if the world's going to end,

Attorney Rose could represent me at the pearly gates anytime she wanted."

"Yeah, as if you or her are going in that direction," Elle said, laughing.

"It's possible," Jay said.

"But not likely," Elle said.

Jay had to admit, she had a point on that one.

Twenty minutes later they had wound their way across Portland and exited the freeway and were climbing up a hill heading south to Derek Comstock's small house in a nice suburb. It was just like the northwest section: shaded street, meticulously mowed lawns, and everything looking very clean. Tucked off to one side of a major street and hidden under two large oak trees, Derek Comstock's



house looked to Jay like a perfect dwelling for the Brady Bunch.

As Jay walked up the front sidewalk, he had the feeling he was walking onto a movie set. The place was generic to the point of becoming almost surreal.

Everything he was seeing was for show and nothing more. There really wasn't any personality in this house, no details that made it uniquely one person's home.

He doubted they would find anything of importance inside.

As things turned out, he was right.

But they also found no fishing equipment.

No lures, no rods, no reels, no flies.

No frozen fish in the freezer.

And not one fishing magazine in the entire place.

Chapter 10

5:49 P.M. May 6, 2001 Above Otis, Oregon

The shadows of the moss-covered pine trees were long and the mountaintops blocked most of the sun from entering the steep valley. Along the coastal range mountains, the snow had all melted, except in the highest areas. Spring had come late for this area this year.

An old log cabin sat among the trees, hidden by overgrown berry bushes and thick underbrush. Billie Floyd swung open the door to the cabin and walked inside, glancing around to see if anything had been disturbed in his absence. Nothing had.

The room felt almost deserted, even though there were dishes on the counter and blankets on the bed. Props and nothing more, to keep unwanted snoops away. No one had lived in this place for over thirty years.

Billie owned the old log cabin and the six hundred acres of prime timberland around it, stretching down to the river on one side and up into the mountains on the other. He had bought it thirty years earlier, right after he had stumbled onto the presence of the Power while passing this backward little planet.

He opened an empty old medicine cabinet in the small bathroom and then clicked the back of the cabinet forward, exposing a sophisticated control panel. Quickly he keyed in a few well-practiced numbers, then swung the panel closed and stepped back. The wall opened between the sink and the rusted old toilet silently, just enough for him to step through.

A modern-looking staircase led downward into the side of the mountain behind the cabin. Lights were spaced evenly along the walls. He was actually whistling a human tune as he descended the stairs, the door closing behind him, returning the old cabin to its usual innocuous appearance, the perfect shield from intruders.

Two hundred and six steps down, the stairs ended in a long corridor extending back into the mountain. The sides of the corridor were concrete and reinforced by a special mixture of steel and plastic that could support almost any amount of weight. It had taken Billie ten long years, with the labor of humans now long dead, to build this staircase and corridor. And another ten long years to build living areas down here for his new human companions, and even more years to expand the room at the other end, to surround and contain the Power that was there.

But now it was finished.

And his plan to clear the humans from the surface of the planet almost complete.

They had been so easy to manipulate. They had been nothing more than wooden puppets, jerking this way and that when he pulled their strings.

In a few short years, with the humans gone and the other races no longer

interested in this ball of dirt orbiting this weak yellow star, he would be able to dig the Power out of its resting place and return it to the stars, where it belonged. Only this time the Power would be his to command.

He moved into the large room and stared at the shining alloy of the Power, curving away from him in two directions. Every time he saw it, shivers ran through his body, causing the human shell that encased his form to loosen. This time was no exception and he quickly adjusted his "Billie" disguise, then running his hand along the smoothness of the Power's hull, he felt along to his right, enjoying the feel even through the human skin.

Ahead he could see the hatch, the entrance to the Power. Once, far in the distant past of the Galaxy, a race called the Numen had stepped through that hatch and ruled the stars for eons. They were never challenged and their strength never questioned. Their name was now legend in almost every civilization, and they were considered by some to be a race of godlike beings. But, as the legend went, they became so powerful as to merge and become one with the stars. Soon after this mystical event, they vanished, leaving nothing behind except a few relics.

But every race who traveled the stars knew of them, knew of the material they used in their ships, knew that meeting a member of the Numen would be like meeting one of the Galaxy's gods.

He had never thought of meeting a god, or finding an intact Numen ship. Yet he had done exactly that, discovering a vehicle buried here for eons under tons of rock on this backward little world. And the find had been purely accidental. Even with thousands of alien ships coming and going from this little planet on a regular basis, no one had even noticed the Numen material here until he stumbled across it.

He called it the Power, for power was what the Numen ship, flying among the stars, meant. Power for him and for those who followed him. So, for over thirty cycles of this planet, he had slowly dug out the Power, getting it ready to again fly as it had millions and millions of cycles before the humans ever walked the Earth.

Soon the time would be at hand.

"Billie!"

A human voice echoed through the cavern surrounding the Power and he paused. Sarah and three others were moving toward him, smiling.

He let his hand drop from the side of the Power, then moved toward them. It was time to report in, to act human again, to keep his plan moving until the time when he could kill these stupid creatures and fly the Power into space.

He put on a human smile, then said, "Sure is real good to be back."

They all smiled and greeted him and he acted his part, as he had done for thirty years. For the moment he needed them.

But it was only for the moment.

Chapter 11

6:12 P.M. May 6, 2001 Portland, Oregon

The image of Zed's face clicked off the screen built into the dashboard of the black LTD. Jay shook his head at what they had just heard from their boss. He was having a hard time grasping all the details of what was happening.

Grazers, it seemed, were landing everywhere, even though Sashanian warships were blowing many of them out of space before they even got near Earth's orbit. They were completely ignoring Zed's retraction of the invitation.

Two dozen other races had tried to land on Earth, but the Sashanians had turned

them around, too. But, as Zed had explained, those races were “minor” ones coming from the local area. Thousands of “major” races from the Galaxy’s core area were headed this way as well, either one ship at a time or in fleets. And the Sashanians and the rest of the treaty signers would not be able to help stop them.

They wouldn’t even try.

Zed figured they had tomorrow at most. Not much longer.

Jay glanced around. They were parked in front of an old office building near the Portland airport. The building had a fresh coat of paint, fresh flowers along the sidewalk, and air conditioners sticking out of the windows, but it was still clearly a very old government office building.

“Not much time left,” Elle said, commenting on what Zed had just told them.

“We’d better get moving.”

Jay nodded. “It’s time to take the gloves off, I’d say.”

“Agreed,” Elle said.

They both climbed out of the LTD into the warm, dry air of the Portland spring evening. Jay put on his sunglasses, took out his flashy-thing, and headed for the door. Inside that building was General Anthony Davis. The general was the very first person Attorney Kathy Rose had called after her meeting with Jay and Elle. In fact, he was the only one she had called.

They needed answers from the general if he was involved in all this, and they needed them fast. Military types were not known for willingly giving information, and Jay and Elle didn’t have time to deal with any of their tricks. Their MO was simple: flashy-thing the general, get the answers they needed, then move on. Jay liked that idea the best.

The inside of the old office building was in sharp contrast to the outside.

Instead of wood floors, as Jay would have expected, they stepped onto clean carpet, surrounded by pictures of mountains on the walls, and cool, clean-smelling air. A receptionist sat behind a desk, smiling past a pitcher full of fresh flowers. A fairly new computer filled a corner of the desk beside her.

“May I help you?” she asked sweetly.

“Everyone in this city is so nice,” Jay said to Elle, gritting his teeth. Then he turned to the receptionist. “We’re here to see General Davis.”

“Is he expecting you?” she asked, making a motion to flip through an appointment book near her phone.

“No,” Elle said.

“Then I’m afraid he won’t be able to see you at the moment.” The receptionist’s smile hadn’t shifted a fraction throughout.

“Sure he will,” Jay said. He glanced at Elle to make sure she had her sunglasses on, then flashy-thinged the woman.

What Jay called a flashy-thing was actually a Neuralyzer, given to MiB by a friendly alien race. When flashed at a person, it caused them to forget what they had just seen and allowed an MiB agent to plant fresh memories. It could erase years’ worth of memories or just minutes’, depending on how it was set. This woman was going to have a fine half hour or so this afternoon. Fine but forgettable.

Elle opened her phone and without dialing a number said, “Pro, we got one for you. Receptionist just inside door. Soon to be two or more.”

Elle flipped the phone closed and nodded to Jay. He knew Pro and his team would be right behind them to help cover their tracks and give people new, consistent

cover memories.

“Let’s have a talk with a general,” Jay said. “I think we just got an appointment.”

“I’d say that,” Elle agreed.

Jay led the way down the short hallway beyond the receptionist’s desk to a door labeled GENERAL ANTHONY DAVIS. He didn’t bother to knock, but went straight on in, moving to the left out of Elle’s way.

“Greetings, General,” Jay said, not surprised at all to be facing the barrel of a service-issue revolver. The general was still sitting at his desk, the gun resting easily on the blotter in front of him, pointing directly at Jay’s stomach. Jay had no doubt that the man knew how to use it.

He was a thin man, with broad shoulders and dried-looking skin. He wore the standard army dress shirt and his jacket and hat hung on the coat-rack beside the door.

“Looks like we had an appointment after all,” Elle said, moving in and standing beside Jay. “We were clearly expected, that’s for sure.”

“Now that you’ve broken into my office,” the general said, “I can shoot you at will.”

“Maybe,” Jay said, smiling at the general. “Maybe not. But why would you want to?”

“To stop you MiB types from giving our world away to the aliens, that’s why.” That sentence chilled Jay right down to his toes. It was not at all what he expected the general to say.

“What?” Elle asked, also clearly shocked.

“You heard me,” the general said.

Clearly this guy was involved in the invitation to the Grazers. He knew too much to leave this conclusion in doubt. And that meant Attorney Rose was also involved. And who knew how many others? But Jay hadn’t expected the general to just come right out and admit it like that.

“Mind if I close the door so we can talk?” Jay asked.

The general shrugged. “Go right ahead. Whatever makes you the most comfortable in your final few minutes of life.”

“I’m sure getting tired of people telling me I’m about to die,” Jay said.

“Yeah, me, too,” Elle agreed. “Wears on a person.”

Jay reached around and flipped the door closed while at the same time he turned the flashy-thing in his hand so that it was aimed at the general. He flashed it, not caring what length of time it was set for.

For an instant the general froze. Then he shook himself and laughed. “Bet you thought that

Neuralyzer would work, didn’t you? Nice move, too.”

Jay wasn’t sure if his mouth dropped open or what. This general was full of all sorts of surprises.

“Alien, huh?” Elle said to the general. “How’d you get the human construct? What race are you?”

The general laughed. “Oh, I assure you, I’m perfectly human. And I care a great deal more about humanity than you two do, I can tell you that.”

Jay eased his finger to the left on the flashy-thing, increasing the intensity of the flash. The guy had shuddered for an instant on the low intensity. Let’s see how he did on high.

“Oh, so you destroy us with your love,” Elle said, stringing him on. “Sort of sick, don’t you think?”

“The Grazers aren’t going to destroy Earth. They will simply wake humanity up to the fact that there are aliens out there.”

“True,” Elle said, “about one day ahead of the thousand other races who are angry at your invitation coming in here and destroying everything.”

The general started to laugh again.

Jay flicked up his wrist and flashy-thinged the general again, turning the office into bright, white intense light. This time the guy actually froze.

Jay jumped forward and knocked the gun from the general’s hand, then moved to the left as Elle kept him covered with her weapon from the right.

Three seconds later Anthony Davis shook himself and glanced around, getting his bearings. “Again, nicely done.”

“Coming from you,” Elle said, “it’s a compliment I’ll treasure forever and ever.”

“Uh-oh, General,” Jay said, “when she starts a talking like that, you’re gettin’ her angry, and trust me, ya don’t want her angry.”

Elle glared at Davis for a moment, then flipped open her phone. “Pro, we have a Neuralyzer resistant one in here. We need full equipment.”

“You won’t get anything out of me,” the general said, glaring at Elle like a second-rate actor in a bad movie.

“Oh, I think we will, General,” Jay said, smiling. “I don’t know what you’ve heard about our little group, but we usually get exactly what we need from scum like you, alien or human. Makes no difference to us.”

Jay kept the smile on his face and kept staring at the general until the guy finally looked away.

A moment later the door opened and Pro and Partner entered, carrying two briefcases. Jay moved off to one side to give them room, making sure he kept a clear eye on the general at all times.

Within thirty seconds they had Davis hooked up to a headset. The guy wasn’t happy about it, but Pro made sure that wasn’t an issue by tying the general’s hands behind his back and securing him to the chair.

“Okay,” Elle said to Partner, “let’s find out what makes this guy tick.”

Partner flipped a switch and the general’s eyes went wide, then after a moment his face softened. It was the weirdest thing Jay had seen in some time. It was as if someone else had moved in and taken over the man’s face. A nicer person.

“Amazing,” Partner said, staring at the screen in his case. “The guy has been completely brainwashed for thirty years.”

“Thirty years?” Jay said. “Are you sure?”

Partner nodded. “Completely. Over thirty, actually. His core personality is only twenty, stunted and boxed up out of the way of the one controlling the general.”

Jay shook his head in disbelief. This conspiracy had been going on for thirty years. Why would someone plan all this for so long? And to gain what? None of this was making any sense at all. The more information they uncovered, the more questions they had.

“Will he still remember recent events if you break the control?” Elle asked.

“Mostly,” Partner said. “It will all seem like a distant memory. To him it will suddenly be as if he woke up from a long nap and can remember a vivid dream. The memory should get better as time goes on.”

“Then get what we can before we break it,” Jay said.

“Can’t,” Partner said. “We prod any more than I already have and the entire thirty-year control snaps like a dried stick.”

Jay glanced at Elle and shrugged. “Havin’ dreamlike memories is better than

nothin'."

Elle nodded, then glanced at Partner. "Do it."

Partner nodded.

The general's face softened even more, years of age seeming to drop away as his expression grew calmer. Finally Partner nodded and flipped a switch. "The brainwashing is completely cleared."

Pro untied the general and stepped back.

Davis blinked, then opened his eyes and looked around.

"You all right?" Jay asked.

The general nodded. "How'd I get here? How'd I get off the mountain?"

Jay looked at Partner.

"He's taking up right where he left off," Partner said. "That's normal."

"Man, that was some weird dream," the general said, his eyes losing focus for a minute. Then he seemed to notice his hands, then his uniform. "Oh, shit," he said softly. "Oh-shit, oh-shit, oh-shit."

Elle knelt beside the general. "When was your last clear memory?"

Davis kept staring at his wrinkled hands as he spoke. "skiing," he said. "Night skiing. And this weird light came out of the sky and landed near me."

"What year?" Elle asked.

"Nineteen seventy," the general said. He looked at his uniform, then up into Elle's eyes. "Am I really a general?"

Jay was very glad he was standing back at that moment. It wasn't a question he wanted to answer.

"I'm afraid you are," Elle said, both softly and firmly. "Something from that ship brainwashed you and has controlled your every action for the past thirty years."

"Thirty years?" Davis repeated. It sounded as if he was about to cry. "All I ever wanted to do was ski. Why would someone do that to me?"

"Clearly they wanted something from you," Elle said, patting the general's shoulder. "But we've freed you now."

"Well," Jay said, moving over so he stood directly across the desk from the seated general, "if we all survive this, you can retire from the army and ski every day for the rest of your life without a money worry in the world. But first things first. We have to survive this. Who brainwashed you? Do you have any idea at all?"

"Billie," the general said softly. "Billie stepped out of those lights and flashed something at me. I remember that clearly. I didn't know his name at the time, but I do now."

"Anyplace in particular we might be able to find this Billie?" Jay asked.

The general nodded. "In a cabin above Otis, out near the coast. It covers an underground facility. We meet there. Billie lives there, I think."

Jay nodded. "Good. Now let's start over and see just how much you can remember about what exactly is going on. Okay by you?"

Davis nodded again. "I'll try."

"Best we can ask for," Jay said. He glanced at Elle. He didn't know exactly what question to start with. Or even how to start, for that matter.

She shrugged. Clearly she didn't know either.

MiB training manuals didn't provide how-to lessons for debriefing someone who had been brainwashed for thirty years. Jay figured it wasn't something MiB ran across on a regular basis. It certainly wasn't something a New York cop encountered.

So he started from the beginning. He asked the general what happened after he met this Billie on the mountain.

"I joined up," the general said. "Never skied again. Went through two tours of Vietnam, worked my way up to a general."

"And when was the second time you saw Billie?" Elle asked.

"Two years ago," the general said. "I took over the office here, sort of an out-of-the-way assignment, off the base, and he showed up three days later. He flashed me with something and told me the time was getting close."

Jay couldn't believe what he had just heard. This Billie person had brainwashed a young kid and then not returned to see what the kid had turned into for over twenty-eight years. Why would anyone do that? For what possible reason?

And how many other people had he done it to?

The last question made Jay shudder.

He had no doubt that there were maybe hundreds of humans out there who were walking time bombs, moles buried in the population by this Billie.

"Close?" Elle asked. "The time for what was getting close?"

Davis shook his head slowly. "Makes no sense," he said. "Billie said we were close to humans taking their rightful place among the stars. He brought me into what he called the Earth Expansion League."

"Which is headquartered below this cabin in the mountains?" Elle asked.

"Yes," the general said. "There is an alien ship there, too." He shook his head and looked up at Jay. "Did I dream that ship?"

"Probably not," Jay said. "There really are aliens. What did the ship look like? Can you remember?"

"Oval. Strange glowing gold metal that was warm to the touch. Billie called it the Power."

"And it's underground, too?" Elle asked.

"It was buried there for millions of years," the general said. "Or at least that's what Billie told us. He said it would bring freedom for all mankind."

Davis shook his head. "I believed him. How could I believe him?"

"You were brainwashed to believe him," Elle said. "It was out of your control."

"Hang on a second," Pro said. "General, you said something about a ship buried for millions of years?"

"Billie told us that, yes," the general said.

"Did he ever say who made the ship?" Pro asked.

Jay had no idea where Pro was heading with this questioning, but clearly it was important. And when an agent has been with MiB as long as Pro had, he just knew things rookies like Jay and Elle didn't, couldn't, know.

The general shook his head slowly, then said, "Only name I heard attached to the ship was Power. Oh, and Numen."

At the mention of the word "Numen," Pro's face drained of color and he almost staggered back, catching himself on the edge of the general's desk. Now Jay felt like he had seen everything.

"You want to fill the rest of us in on what he's talkin' about?" he asked Pro.

"Please?" Elle said.

The veteran MiB agent shook his head. "I think I better let Zed do that."

Jay glanced at Elle, then at Partner, who just shrugged. Clearly only Pro knew what the general was talking about.

"General," Jay said, "I just have one more question for you."

"Anthony," the general said. "Call me Anthony."

Jay nodded and sat on the edge of the desk. "Are you willing to help us catch

this Billie person?”

Davis replied without a moment’s hesitation. “Absolutely.”

“Even though when we came in here you were going to shoot us because we were MiB agents?”

For a brief moment the general looked puzzled, then shook his head. “I don’t even know what an MiB agent is, except that they wear black suits and ties.

Billie just told us we had to hate them all.” He shrugged. “Sorry.”

Jay nodded. “More brainwashing. Come on, sir. We’ve got a Billie to catch.

You’ve just resigned your commission and are about to take up skiing full-time.”

The light that filled the general’s eyes was like a kid seeing mounds of presents under the tree on Christmas morning. All Jay could do was smile.

Chapter 12

6:37 P.M. May 6, 2001 Portland, Oregon

As they walked General Davis out to the car, Pro pulled Elle aside. “You really need to tell Zed about the buried ship at once.”

“Planning on it,” Elle said, staring at Pro’s face. She had been shocked and mystified by his reaction to the general’s mentioning the word “Numen.”

“I was guessing it was important by how you reacted.”

“Not sure what will kill us first,” Pro said. “The Grazer invitation or the Numen ship—if it is a Numen ship. Either way we’re doomed.”

He shook his head and turned away before she could even ask him what the hell he was talking about.

Elle watched him head toward the containment truck, walking slowly, head down.

He looked like a broken man. Not at all like Pro.

Jay helped the general into the backseat and slipped in behind the wheel as Elle slid into the passenger side.

“We may be in bigger trouble than we thought,” she said.

Jay laughed. “Bigger than all humanity getting wiped off the face of the planet tomorrow or the next day? This I got to see.”

“Wiped out?” the general asked from the backseat, leaning forward so his head was between Jay and Elle. “What’s going on? You didn’t tell me anything about this.”

“Anthony...” Jay turned to face the general. “Your ex-friend Billie and the organization you were involved with invited the scum aliens of the universe to a party on our little planet. You remember that?”

The general nodded. “We called them Golgothas, right?”

“Right,” Jay said. “We call them Grazers. By inviting them, you pissed off about six billion other aliens, who are going to destroy this planet in a few days if we don’t stop them. You help us find Billie and the rest and save the planet and I can guarantee you all-expenses-paid skiing vacations for the rest of your life.”

The general swallowed and nodded. “I’ll do what I can.”

“Good,” Elle said. “For the moment we need to contact our boss. So sit back and relax for a minute.”

General Davis did as he was told and Elle punched up the communications link with Zed. It took a little longer than normal, but finally his image appeared.

He looked harried and grouchy. He was standing behind his desk and Jay could see the Immigration Center behind him. It was in a state of total chaos.

Jay quickly filled him in on the general’s brainwashing and explained about the underground facility in the mountains—at least what he knew about it.

“Go get ‘em,” Zed said, then glanced down at his desk at something. “We had a



report of a shielded Phillida ship landing and taking off in that area a few hours ago. My guess is your Billie is back from his trip to Saturn. Chances are he's an alien. Get me proof of the existence of this conspiracy and I'll present it to the treaty signers. Never know what might happen."

"Zed," Elle said before the boss broke the connection. "There's one thing we haven't told you yet, but Pro says is very important."

"Go on," Zed told her, clearly slightly annoyed.

"There's an alien ship in the mountain hideaway. The general says that Billie and the others call it the Power."

Elle watched to see if Zed had a reaction. He didn't.

"They also said it might be a Numen ship."

Now Zed had a reaction.

And an instant one.

He snapped his finger down on a button on his desk and the connection was cut.

Elle glanced at Jay.

"What was that?" Jay asked.

"Not a clue," Elle said. And although she really didn't have a clue, she had a sneaking hunch she and Jay had just stumbled onto something big.

Suddenly Zed's face again filled the communication panel between her and Jay in the dashboard. "We're on a secure link now," he said. "And my office is secure."

"Understood," Jay said.

Sweat was running down the sides of Zed's face and was beaded on his forehead and he looked as if he was on the verge of a heart attack. Given his size and shape, that could easily be the case. Elle had no idea what would cause their boss to have such a reaction.

"Pro had that same reaction," she said. "You want to fill us in on this?"

"Or at least send us the manual?" Jay said.

"You two never heard of the Numens or their ships?" Zed shook his head in amazement. "We got to train our new agents better, I can see that now."

"Numens?" Jay asked.

Zed snorted. "There hasn't been a Numen alive in millions of years—at least that anyone knows about."

"Wiped out like we're about to be, huh?" Jay asked.

Zed frowned. "Not hardly. Numen civilization controlled the entire Galaxy for millions of years. They were the most powerful civilization to ever exist. They were called gods. Then one day they just vanished."

"Oh, shit," Elle said. "And one of their ships is sitting under a mountain here."

"If that is a Numen ship," Zed answered. "We're more than screwed if anyone else knows it's there. Every race will fight to get it."

Suddenly Jay understood. Forget the minor problem of a giant alien party. Try a giant alien war.

Zed seemed to be staring off into space. In the year Jay and Elle had been a team, working for MiB, he had never seen Zed hesitate about making a decision.

Now he was taking long seconds.

Very long seconds.

Finally the boss looked back at them. The firm, in-control Zed was back in his eyes. "From this moment on, the word 'Numen' is not to be mentioned until I give the all clear. Understand?"

"Gotcha, boss," Jay answered for both himself and Elle.

"Make sure Pro and the team know this, too. Only the six of us will know of this

inside MiB. Understand?"

"Yes," Elle said.

"I'm sending in every bit of help I can find," Zed continued. "I want that ship under our control as soon as possible. I don't care what it takes. Understood?"

"Got it," Jay said.

"Clearly we're dealing with some alien here who knows exactly what he's got in his possession," Zed said. "And wants us out of the way so he can use it. So be careful. He might be ready for you. He only has to hold out another day or so and we're no longer factors."

"We'll get the ship, boss," Jay said.

"Call me when you do," Zed said, and snapped off the connection.

Jay glanced at General Davis, who was sitting in the backseat, looking extremely pale, then at Elle. "Sometimes not knowing shit is just flat better, ain't it?"

She nodded. "I'm starting to believe ignorance is truly bliss."

"Well, Anthony, my friend," Jay turned to face the general. "Think you can take us to this ship?"

Davis nodded. "Not a problem."

Elle opened her door. "I'll fill the guys in about Zed's orders, and make sure they leave a good cover story for the general being gone. We don't want anyone tipped off too early that we're coming."

"I have a sneaking hunch," Jay said, "this alien has been expecting us... for thirty years."

Chapter 13

7:46 P.M. May 6, 2001 Van Duzer Corridor, Oregon

It had taken them just over an hour, with Jay driving the black LTD as fast as he could on the crowded two-lane roads, across Portland and up into the coastal mountains toward the ocean. They had sped through at least a half-dozen small towns, many with Indian names, and now they were on a fairly well-traveled road that worked its way down a large, winding stream. Jay was managing to keep a speed of between eighty and a hundred miles an hour. Next stop, the signs said, was the ocean. But General Davis had said Otis, Oregon, and the location of the buried spaceship was less far away than that, just at the point where they emerged from these mountains.

On the screen Elle had the locations of three MiB helicopters and six more contain-ment teams besides Pro's coming in from different directions. But Jay could tell they were clearly going to be the first on the scene by a good fifteen minutes.

On the way they had quizzed Anthony about what he remembered of the security surrounding the ship. He had managed to recall the code for the security system, which was, he said, hidden in the bathroom. And he said that as far as he knew, there were no cameras surveiling that area. At least he had never seen any below in the living area. He told them there just wasn't much else down there beside the small living area and the ship.

Jay listened but had a hard time believing there wouldn't be surveillance cameras and other high-tech apparatuses to get past.

Just to be sure, he and Elle had decided that they would approach the site in a different car from the LTD. Better and safer to take what precautions they could easily take.

"Rest area coming up," Jay announced. "Pro still behind us."

"Less than a minute," Elle said.

"He did some good driving, then," Jay said, laughing as he swung the LTD off the

road and into the parking lot of the rest area. It was a beautiful spot, alongside the stream. Towering old pine trees blocked what little light was left of the day, giving the picnic tables and rest room an almost creepy look. Jay noticed two other cars in the rest area. One was a pickup that belonged to a guy taking apart a fishing rod, the other a Cadillac containing two elderly passengers.

“Any of your people own a pickup?” Jay asked Anthony.

“Two of them drive pickups.”

“Perfect,” Elle said as Jay stopped beside the guy with the fishing rod.

Elle got out and flashed her badge. “FBI. We need your truck.”

The guy looked to be around sixty, with a soft white hat full of hooks and flies. “You can’t just go taking a man’s truck!”

Elle flipped on her sunglasses and Neurally/ed the guy. “Sorry,” she said to the fisherman as Jay climbed out and flipped open the trunk of the LTD. “No time to talk.”

As Jay loaded guns and equipment into the back of the truck, Elle walked over to the Cadillac and did the same number to the two scared-looking elderly people as she had done to the fisherman.

Anthony climbed out, shaking his head at the sight of the zombie fisherman standing there. “You people really know how to get what you want.”

“With other humans,” Jay said. “But with aliens, we aren’t worth shit.”

“Good point,” Elle said, moving the fisherman out of the way and making sure his keys were in the ignition. Then she went to help Jay load weapons into the back of the truck.

At that moment Pro and the containment truck skidded to a stop beside them.

“Borrowing his truck.” Elle pointed to the guy.

“Two witnesses need new memories in the Cadillac.”

“Got it,” Pro said, motioning for Partner to take care of the fisherman and Captain to take care of the old folks. “What’s the plan?”

“Anthony here is driving the truck up to the ship site,” Jay said. “Then we’re going in. You hang back and we’ll be in touch. If we haven’t contacted you in thirty minutes from the moment we get inside, come in with everything blazing. Until then stay back and out of sight.”

“Got it,” Pro said.

“And bring the LTD up closer,” Elle said. “We might need it quickly.”

Pro nodded. “See you inside.”

“Ready, Anthony?” Elle asked, patting the general on the back. She gave him a little shove toward the cab.

He nodded like a scared kid. “I think so.”

“Good,” she said, smiling at him. “Drive carefully.”

Elle climbed over into the back of the pickup while General Davis jumped in from the other side. Besides their weapons and supplies, the bed was covered in a thin layer of dirt and had three fishing poles strapped to one side.

“No seat belts back here,” Jay said, dropping down so his back was against the cab.

Elle joined him.

The bed of the truck felt hard under his thin pants. Even with only a few miles remaining, this wasn’t going to be a comfortable ride by any means. In all his life he had never ridden in the back of a truck. He wasn’t especially excited about having the experience now.

Anthony managed not to get hit by another car as he pulled out onto the highway

and then accelerated, running the loud pickup engine through the gears. The wind whipped around them, cold and very intense, like a winter's day on Broadway. The wind could really blow in those canyons between the buildings and right now Jay wished he were back there instead of in this truck. He glanced over at Elle. She seemed to be trying to hold herself off the bed of the truck with her hands.

"Ain't this fun," Jay shouted over the noise, smiling as the trees flashed past.

"Sure is," she said. Jay could barely hear her answer over the wind and engine.

After what seemed like an eternity, but was actually only a few minutes, Anthony slowed down and turned off the highway.

Instantly both Jay and Elle lay flat, facedown on the bed of the truck, ready to move at a moment's notice. Elle kept her hands under her to ease some of the shocks and bumps as the truck bounced up the gravel road. Jay just let it ride, ignoring the bumps.

Dust swirled around behind them, some of it settling into the bed. Elle coughed once, then stayed silent.

All Jay could see above the edge of the truck bed were pine trees whizzing past, sometimes turning into a dark green blur as Anthony gained speed, other times becoming individual trees as he jarred down through a creek bottom or around a sharp corner.

He kept watching the trees, trying to spot any cameras looking down on them, but he didn't see anything. And he was sure if Elle had noticed any, she would have pointed it out to him.

Finally Anthony stopped the truck and shut off the engine. Grabbing the Phaser rifle he called Beauty and making sure his Atomizer was in his belt, Jay rolled over one side of the truck and out onto the ground, rifle up and ready to fire.

Elle went out the other side, in much the same manner.

Anthony slowly climbed out of the cab, also looking around.

Nothing that Jay could see moved. The place was quiet. In the distance there was the faint sound of a running stream or river, but nothing else. And the shack looked almost abandoned.

Anthony moved toward the front door of the shack and both Jay and Elle followed, keeping him covered.

Inside, the place had a lived-in appearance, but it was all phony to a trained eye, like the props of a play. No one lived here, that was for sure.

"Staged," Jay said, pointing at the plates.

Elle nodded and pointed to the bathroom, gesturing for Anthony to lead the way.

She went with him while Jay stayed in a cover position so he could watch the one dirt-covered window and the front door. He alternated between doing cover duty and watching what was happening in the small bathroom.

Anthony opened the old medicine cabinet, then opened the back to it, exposing an electronic panel. He glanced at Elle and she nodded.

Slowly, carefully, he keyed in the code.

Then closed the panel.

The instant he finished, a section of the wall slid open beside the old toilet.

"We're in," Elle whispered to Jay. Jay knew Pro was also listening to every word they said.

She pulled Anthony back out of the way. "Thanks," she whispered, pushing him toward the front door.

"Good luck," he said.

Then Jay watched as Anthony headed back out to take the truck the rest of the way down the highway to the coast to a prearranged meeting spot with Pro.

Jay went past Elle and into the wall first, rifle at ready.

Elle was right behind him.

Then the wall slid closed silently, locking them in.

A modern-looking flight of stairs led downward as far as he could see. Lights were spaced evenly down the walls, but there didn't seem to be anything else.

Jay knew without a doubt that if they were attacked in here, they wouldn't stand a chance in hell of winning. He didn't like this.

Not one bit.

Elle quickly put on a mask that allowed her to see any laser trip beams or hidden light sources. After a moment she took it off and shook her head. "Looks clear."

Jay moved down quickly, as silently as he could go. His police training took over in situations like this. MiB did some building-entry training, but nowhere near as much as he had had with New York City police.

Elle followed, checking their backs.

Nothing moved.

Nothing came at them.

He couldn't believe there wasn't a security system in here. But so far there didn't seem to be anything. Maybe, just maybe, this Billie person didn't think he needed much more than the phony shack and the lock in the bathroom.

Maybe he didn't think anyone could ever break one of his people.

Maybe.

Maybe.

Maybe.

Too many chances, too many questions.

And absolutely no choices.

Down they went into the mountain.

Quickly.

One silent step at a time.

Chapter 14

8:09 P.M. May 6, 2001 Coastal Mountains, Oregon

Billie sat on the couch, his human feet up on the coffee table, in the living area of the underground living quarters he'd had built next to the ship. The human Sarah and three others sat with him, making what they called "small talk" about nothing important. Always boring.

Actually Billie didn't much care. In just a short time they would all be gone, he'd be rid of this human construct he'd been wearing for years, and at last he could be alone with the Power.

"I can't believe the plan is working," Sarah said after a moment of silence. She was, at the moment, sitting in a large, overstuffed armchair, a cup of tea in her hand.

The human beside her, a woman named Bright, laughed. "Isn't it great!"

Bright was the youngest of his current human helpers. Billie had seen her walking on a beach down in California ten years before and recruited her, as he had many, many humans over the years. He just never knew when one of his recruits might come in handy in one fashion or another. He had directed and kept track of them all.

Many had ended up serving him in one fashion or another. Many had worn out their usefulness. But since he had recruited hundreds over the years, there was always another to take their place.

Two years ago Bright had become very important among the humans working on

computers. Although an expert as far as human technological resources went, she had barely enough knowledge to help him. He'd brought her here to see if she could understand the computers of the Power. So far they had made great headway. For a human, she was very smart.

Across from Bright was the oldest of his current recruits, an electrical mechanic named Charles who had spent the last six years helping him study the many circuits and controls of the Power. Both Charles and Bright thought they were going to take all the knowledge and great devices they had discovered and share them with the rest of their species. Little did they know their species would shortly cease to exist.

The thought made Billie so happy, he almost started laughing again, which wouldn't have been good if his human-construct skin came loose.

"Soon," Billie said, "this here place will be the most famous place in the en-tire world."

Sarah laughed. "It is hard to believe."

Sarah helped Billie in just about all phases of his operations, and pretended to be in charge of the so-called Earth Expansion League along with General Davis, a pawn Billie had used to make the humans believe that high-level officials in the government were behind the organization.

In reality, there was no Earth Expansion League; all there was, was a bunch of puppets recruited to play parts and make the alleged meetings look bigger and better attended.

Now all Billie needed the three humans around him for was to get the Power started after the rest of humanity was gone. Once the ship was going, Billie wasn't even going to need Sarah and Bright and Charles to fly it.

He would then have everything he needed.

A faint chime filled the room. Sarah picked up what the humans called a phone from the table. Only a handful of his human people knew this number.

She listened for a moment, then said, "Better warn General Davis." There was a pause, then Sarah said, "Good. Thanks for telling us."

She hung up the phone and looked around. "MiB agents were in Portland this afternoon asking questions at Derek's law firm."

"They didn't learn nothing?" Billie asked.

"Nothing," Sarah confirmed. "And Kathy warned General Davis. He's making himself unavailable."

Billie smiled and sat back. He had known the MiB agents would track Derek to Portland fairly quickly. But even with that they were too late. Far too late.

They had been too late the moment Derek transmitted his message. Suddenly Sarah let out a gasp.

"Sorry to interrupt the party," a voice said from behind where Billie sat.

He jumped up and spun around. Two MiB agents stood, Phaser rifles leveled at them.

"Not possible!" he snarled in his native language.

One of the MiB agents laughed. "Seems we know for sure which one is the alien here."

The MiB agent swung his rifle slightly and the next thing Billie knew the human had fired, not even giving him an instant to move.

The blast sent him smashing back against the wall, almost knocking him out, but not quite.

The pain filled his entire body.

Over him his human construct began to melt away like so much putty, dripping

down onto the floor.

Sarah screamed.

“Stupid humans,” Billie snarled, the human words splattering off his liquefying human lips.

“Not as stupid as you look right now,” one MiB agent said. Then he fired again and the world around Billie went black.

Chapter 15

8:15 P.M. May 6, 2001 Coastal Mountains, Oregon

They had made it down the long flight of stairs without a problem and past the gold ship without so much as giving it a second look, except to check to see if anyone was inside.

It seemed empty.

At that point, as far as Jay was concerned, their first priority was to get to whoever was down here, get them under control, and find the Billie person Anthony had told them about. Later they would have time to deal more directly with this possible ship of the gods.

Voices had led them directly to what looked like a small living room, with a television, a couch, five or six chairs, and a small kitchen off to one side.

Four doors led off the other side of the living area, all closed. The faint smell of steak still filled the air from their dinner, but no dishes were in sight.

Everything seemed exactly as Anthony had said it would be.

Two women and two men were in the room as Jay and Elle stepped into the doorway, Phaser rifles ready.

“Surprise!” Jay said.

All four seemed to move at once, three diving for cover. Only Billie reached for a gun.

Jay didn't want to hurt the brainwashed humans if he could help it, but he would if he had to. What he and Elle were after was Billie. And he was easy to spot, golf cap and all.

Billie drew what looked to be a normal Earth pistol and Jay hit him solidly in the chest with a blast of his Phaser rifle, smashing him back against the wall.

“Don't move!” Elle shouted.

The other three froze like statues, staring at Jay and Elle as if they were the most hated criminals in the world.

“On the couch!” Elle said, motioning them to move as Jay quickly searched each of them. Nothing. Only Billie had been armed.

After thirty seconds, all three were sitting together on the couch, looking stunned. They kept staring at the remains of what had once been Billie.

Jay quickly checked the four doors that led into nothing but small, cold bedrooms, then came back into the living area. The place was clearly not meant to hold too many people. Their three prisoners were the only ones down here.

“Remember this race?” Jay asked Elle, pointing at the smoking remains of the alien called Billie. His human construct had mostly melted under the Phaser rifle blast. His golf cap had been knocked off and was currently filled with false human flesh. Jay had never seen anything like it.

“He's—was a Florian, I think,” Elle said, covering their human prisoners while glancing at the alien. “Real scum.”

“Pro,” Jay called into the air, “can you hear me?”

“Every word,” Pro's voice came back in his ear.

“Get the area sealed and get your team down here fast. We're going to need some

help. Three possible humans, more than likely Neuralyzer resistant. One dead alien. Bring only your team and the general.”

“All others stay on the perimeter as per Zed’s orders,” Elle added. “Anyone other than one of us comes out, they have orders to shoot first and ask questions later. We want this site completely contained. Only secured transmissions allowed from this moment forward.”

“Understood,” Pro said. “On the way.”

Jay nodded to Elle, then sat down on the chair beside the youngest woman. She was good-looking in a nerdy sort of way. She looked like the type that sat for hours at a computer without moving. “What’s your name?”

She shook her head, clamping her teeth on her lip.

“We’re the bad guys to them,” Elle said. “Remember? They’re not going to talk.”

Jay shrugged. “True. But I bet they didn’t know old Billie there was an alien.”

All of the prisoners’ gazes immediately went back to the now somewhat smelly remains of the alien. It was becoming clear as the human skin finished melting off that his normal skin color was a faint green, and that he had four eyes on stalks. All four were looking blank at the moment. Actually they would be permanently blank.

“Sorry I had to kill him,” Jay said after a moment of watching the prisoners stare at the alien. “But he was trying to destroy all of the human race and that sort of pisses me off.”

Elle laughed. “You were lucky you got off the first shot. I wanted to kill him.”

“Just faster on the trigger,” Jay said. Then laughed.

The older woman started to say something angry, then obviously changed her mind.

“Like aliens with four eyes, huh?” Jay asked her.

He watched the hatred in the older woman’s eyes turn on him as her face became red. But she remained silent.

At that moment Pro and Partner entered the room, carrying equipment. Anthony, who was accompanying them, stopped cold at the sight of Billie. Then he dropped silently into a chair, his face white with shock.

Captain stopped and took up a guard position in the door.

Pro did a quick scan of the three prisoners with a handheld device, then nodded to Jay.

“Good news,” Jay said to the three on the couch. “You’re all human.”

They all shifted from side to side at hearing that news, glancing at the remains of the alien as they did, then staring with hatred at Anthony.

Pro pointed to the melted form of Billie. “A Florian. Not allowed here. Mostly known for petty thievery and murder. Not a well-liked culture by any of the races.”

“Think that’s going to help Zed convince the Galaxy to stay away?” Jay asked. At this point he was grasping at straws.

Pro shrugged. “Couldn’t hurt.”

Elle nodded. “I’ll report to him.” She picked up their secure link computer from her pack and told Captain to take up watching the prisoners. Then she went out to the area that contained the ship to talk to Zed in private.

Partner set up the equipment quickly on the kitchen table, then put the older woman in the brain-scan device first. Jay thought for a moment they were going to have to stun her to get her to move, but finally she allowed Pro to put the headset on her.

“She’s been under the alien’s control for over twenty years,” Partner said after a moment, shaking his head.



“Under the alien’s control?” the young woman on the couch asked. “What are you talking about?”

Partner shook his head no to Jay. Clearly Jay wasn’t supposed to answer this question for some reason, so he just shrugged and smiled at the woman.

“You’ll understand in a minute,” Anthony told her.

The young woman only glared at him.

“Break the brainwash,” Jay said. They were going to have to break the alien’s mind locks on all three of these poor people. But Jay hoped they remembered enough afterward to provide some help.

The gray-haired woman strained for a moment, then sagged in her chair, her face seeming to grow younger, just as the general’s had. Partner nodded and took off the helmet. The woman looked around for a moment. “Where am I? This is a dream, right?”

“We’ll explain everything to everyone in a minute,” Partner said.

“This way,” Jay said, helping her stand and move over to a chair.

“What did you do to her?” the young woman demanded.

The older woman stopped and looked at the younger one. “Trust them, Bright,” the older woman said. Then she let Jay help her sit down in the chair. She sat there for a moment, then broke into tears, crying softly. Anthony reached over and put his hand on her arm, comforting her.

Jay put his hand on her shoulder gently. What could he say to people who had just realized that over twenty years of their lives had been stolen from them.

There was really nothing to say. He just let his hand rest on her shoulder, let her know someone was there for her, at least for the moment.

Captain forced the young woman into Partner’s headset next. Her mind control seemed to break more easily.

“She was only controlled for about ten years,” Partner said.

“I was on the beach,” Bright said. “This light came out of the sky over the waves.”

Jay couldn’t believe how young and alive Bright now looked. The anger was gone. The years of trained hatred melted away. Too bad more of the hatred in the world couldn’t be deprogrammed like that.

Jay moved across the room and helped Partner stand Bright up and get her to a chair beside the older woman.

“My turn?” the man asked.

“It is,” Captain said, keeping the gun leveled on him.

“I gather that alien was controlling all of us,” he said, “and you’re clearing out the control. Right?”

“Quickly,” Partner said, shoving the man down into the chair and putting the helmet on him. Then without even taking time to set the machine, he flipped the switch.

As with the women, the guy’s face became younger.

Partner looked relieved. “Why the hurry?” Jay asked.

“MiB was programmed in very firmly in all of them to be the enemy,” Partner said. “Having him think of us in any other way might have caused brain damage.”

“Got it,” Jay said. Now he understood why Partner didn’t want him talking to the young woman about what was going on. “Is he all right?” \* “He’s fine,”

Partner said.

At that moment Elle came back into the room. “Zed thinks the information about the Florian might help a little,” she said. “He’s going to try.”

“Good,” Jay said. Then he turned back to Partner. “And what do we need to do

now?”

“For them?” he asked, pointing at the prisoners. “Nothing but help them regain their memories.”

“Orders from Zed?” Jay asked Elle.

“Keep this bottled up tight and wait for his orders.”

“Perfect,” Jay said. They were stuck down here doing nothing while above them the entire human race was going to be destroyed. There had to be something they could do. He just didn’t know what. But maybe the three they had just saved might suggest an idea.

He turned to Partner. “No problem talking to them now? No possible damage?”

“All yours,” Partner said.

“Let me,” Elle said.

Jay nodded and sat on the edge of the couch, the Phaser rifle resting across his leg.

“First off,” Elle said, “some names. I’m Agent Elle of the Men in Black Special Forces. That’s Agent Jay.”

Jay bowed slightly and smiled.

“Containment Agents Pro, Captain, and Partner,” she said, going around the room.

Then she turned to the younger woman. “What are your names?”

“Bright Wilson,” the younger woman said.

“Charles Benson,” the man said.

“Sarah Wallace,” the older woman said.

“Anthony Davis,” the general said, joining in.

“Good,” Elle said. “We’ll get more information later, but first a little history. That all right with all of you?”

“Please,” Sarah said. “Anything to explain what happened to me.”

“From what we have put together so far,” Elle said, “that dead alien there, a member of the Florian race, somehow discovered that ship out there and decided he wanted it all for his own. It might be a very, very special ship.”

“The problem was,” Jay said, “humans, MiB Special Forces, and hundreds of other alien races were already here on this planet.”

“Exactly,” Elle said. “He had to get rid of humanity and the other alien races before he dared try to take that ship away from here. And he needed help to do that.”

Elle went on to give them a quick overview of Billie’s plan as they had figured it out so far.

Jay watched the growing shock on the faces of the three prisoners as they listened to her words.

“So basically,” Elle finished, “the alien races headed this way will destroy Earth in a matter of-days.”

Sarah looked as if she might be sick.

“All to steal a buried old spaceship?” Charles asked. “He’d kill every human for that!”

“He would,” Elle said.

“I’m afraid if those aliens that are headed here because of the Grazer invitation, if they learn about that ship out there,” Pro said, “humanity will also perish very, very shortly. That ship, if it is what we think it might be, is that special.”

Jay laughed. “Yeah, we came here to see if we could find a way to help stop the destruction of Earth and discovered a second reason why we should all be dead.”

“I don’t find that very funny, Mr. Jay,” Sarah said.

“It’s not,” Elle said. “He just tends to laugh when the going gets really bad.”

“Ya ought ta hear my jokes when I’m ‘bout ready ta die.”

Elle just shook her head. “You’re not helping, Agent Jay.”

“Sorry,” Jay said. He glanced around at the four they had just rescued. He couldn’t imagine what they were feeling right now. The last clear memory they had was of events that had occurred decades ago, yet it must seem to them as if only moments had passed. The last several years seemed, as they said, like a long, vivid dream.

“We need to ask you all some questions,” Elle told them softly.

All three nodded.

“First off, do any other humans outside of this place, besides the attorney Rose, know about this ship?”

Sarah slowly shook her head. “She’s the only one. There were a lot more members of the Earth Expansion League, but none of them knew about this place.”

“Good,” Elle said. “What were you doing on the ship?”

“Trying to get it ready to fly,” Charles said.

“I was working on the computer guidance systems,” Bright said.

“What?” Jay asked, actually standing.

Pro also jumped to his feet. “Billie planned to fly that thing out of here?”

Charles nodded.

Jay couldn’t believe such a thing was possible. But if it was, it just might change a few things.

“I think so,” Bright agreed.

Jay looked at Elle, who was looking at him with a light in her eyes.

“You two aren’t thinking what I think you’re thinking?” Pro said.

“If the Florian could fly the thing, why couldn’t we?” Jay asked.

Pro just shook his head. “I know you never got to read the special manual about the race that owned that ship. You might want to check it out before you do anything hasty.”

“He’s right, Jay,” Elle said. “We don’t have enough information.”

Jay pointed at the helmet they had just used to clear the brainwashing of their three prisoners. “That work for a quick absorption session?”

Partner nodded. “I could download the basic information about the Numen race for you.”

“I’m game,” Jay said, sitting down. He still hated this way of learning, but right now he had no choice. There was no time and no library of manuals nearby.

It was either “absorption” or not very blissful ignorance.

Partner glanced at Pro, who nodded.

Partner quickly adjusted the helmet and fit it on his head. “Ready?”

“Fire away,” Jay said, smiling at Bright, “A little more knowledge won’t hurt anyone.”

Pro laughed. “You may come to regret those words.”

Very quickly Jay did.

Chapter 16

1:06 Universal Time. May 7, 2001 Joint Earth Observation Base, Far Side Earth Moon

Beach-Grass-In-Limbo, commander of the moon base and the great Sashanian fleet in this area of space, used two of his many tentacles to pull himself closer to the viewscreen.

He did a quick summary scan of the dealings in nearby space, his three eye stalks moving as a unit at times, at other times working apart.

The data he gathered was not good for anyone concerned with the salvation of the humans.

So far his ships had kept many of the weaker and more worthless races from breaking the treaty with the race of the Soon-To-Be-Dead. And his ship's captains were taking great sensory pleasure destroying the ships of Those-Who-Eat-And-Are-Worthless. No great fleet had yet threatened, but the coming would be soon, from all he could see with his eye stalks.

And now the Human-Who-Called-Himself-Zed wanted to communicate with him again. He said it was urgent, but to a member of the race of the Soon-To-Be-Dead, everything was urgent.

And understandably so.

At that moment another ship of Those-Who-Eat-And-Are-Worthless was destroyed outside the orbit of the ringed planet. Beach-Grass-In-Limbo watched the ship's captain's obvious relish as he came in for the kill.

It gave the commander pleasure to have his captain's experience pleasure. In honor of that pleasure, the commander owed the Human-Who-Called-Himself-Zed another audience.

He flicked on the viewscreen. "Proceed."

The human bared his eating teeth in a gesture known as a greeting by humans. Strange race, humans. He was going to miss commanding this post when they were gone.

"We have discovered," the human said, "that it was a Florian who deceived the great races of the Galaxy and invited Those-Who-Eat-And-Are-Worthless to our planet."

Beach-Grass-In-Limbo prided himself on his ability to remain calm under pressure. But the human's words sent his tentacles into fits of jerking and twisting. He had had dealings with the Florian world. They were called by his people Those-Who-Rob-And-Cheat.

"The Florian is now dead," the human reported in his growling manner. "His motive was to trick the great races of the Galaxy into destroying humans, then take our planet for profit. The great races of the Galaxy should not be controlled by a Florian only interested in profit."

"There is no other motive for Those-Who-Rob-And-Cheat," the commander replied. But silently he marveled at how resourceful this human was. He had learned much of the ways of the Galaxy very quickly.

"Does this information help, O great friend of humans?" the human growled.

The commander forced his tentacles to calm, then focused his eye stalks on the human. "I will form a message and send it with this information. It will cause a few, maybe many of the races who do not like being tricked by Those-Who-Rob-And-Cheat, to turn back and return to their home planets. But not all."

"We will still be destroyed?" the human questioned with a higher-pitched growl.

The commander pulsed his three eye stalks in a motion of sympathy to the human.

"Of course. But my race will do what it can. We are not fond of Those-Who-Rob-And-Cheat. We do not enjoy the treaty being broken by one of their kind. We will do what we can."

"Thank you, great friend of the treaty," the human growled.

The connection was cut and the Sashanian commander pushed himself away from the communication panel. Quickly he composed a message. Then put his personal Note-Of-Purpose on it to put extra pressure on those who knew of his position and his great power.

More races would turn back when they got-the message. Many would turn and attack the Florians for pleasure. The destruction of the planet under his care would be slowed slightly. But not postponed.

Even with this knowledge, and despite their enjoyment of destroying Those-Who-Eat-And-Are-Worthless, the mighty Sashanian fleet and the fleets of other treaty signers would still not fight for the Earth.

The humans were just not worth losing a ship over.

Beach-Grass-In-Limbo put his three eye stalks together in a gesture of deep compassion for the humans. Besides sending the message, it was all he could do.

Chapter 17

8:16 P.M. May 6, 2001 Coastal Mountains, Oregon

Jay hated having facts jammed into his head like ground meat being stuffed into a sausage sleeve. He'd much rather take the knowledge in slowly, one hard-learned fact at a time. But at the moment comfortable reading was a luxury he couldn't afford.

He glanced around the living area at the others. Bright, Anthony, Charles, and Sarah all sat quietly, watching with puzzled and sometimes confused expressions on their faces. After what the four of them had been through the last few hours, after all the years of brainwashing they had endured, Jay understood their puzzlement. He wasn't far behind them on that score.

"Scramble away," Jay said to Partner as the agent flipped the switch that started the absorption process.

Instantly the images of a beautiful and powerful people filled his mind, seemingly all at once.

Numen.

Tall and thin, with two arms and long, flowing robes, they seem to float as they move through beautiful, tall-spired cities made of glass, their faces hidden by the hoods of their long and flowing robes. Their faces are no longer remembered. Only their myth.

Facts: They ruled all of space in the Galaxy with a soft hand and powerful, golden ships. Those ships could destroy an entire planet if the Numen were pushed. No race ever pushed them.

They ruled for millions of years, almost as gods. They were seldom seen and no one ever questioned their authority when they spoke.

Then, almost overnight in the Galaxy scheme of things, they vanished from their home, leaving the races they ruled in a dark age of war and confusion. Fighting filled the Galaxy. Fighting that continues to this day. No one knows for certain what happened to those early gods of the Galaxy. Many believe they still exist on another plane.

Many believe they are still among the stars.

Rumors of their appearance are reported all the time.

Very little of their world survived their disappearance. No ship was left intact. Races are willing to go to war to acquire even the smallest bit of Numen technology.

Jay took off the helmet and glanced at Elle. "We're screwed."

Pro only nodded. "We are for sure, if anyone ever finds out that that ship is here—if it is one of their ships."

"How will we know?" Elle asked. "Wait, I need to get that same information."

Jay stood and handed her the helmet.

She put it on and nodded to Partner, her eyes closed. Thirty seconds later she took it off and looked at Jay. "Amazing."

Jay nodded. "Hard to imagine beautiful aliens, isn't it? I'll bet they even smelled good."

Elle didn't even smile. Her eyes looked distant, still lost in the information she had just been fed.

Jay glanced around at the four people they had rescued. "What did Billie the alien call that ship?"

"The Power," Bright said. "Everyone just called it the Power."

The others nodded. "The race that built it were called Numen," Charles said.

"At least that was what the general told us," Sarah added.

"The general?" Elle asked, glancing at Partner, then at Anthony.

"Just a false command structure," Anthony said, shrugging as if it didn't much matter. "Billie was the one who recruited me. He fed me the information I was supposed to know. Of course, I didn't realize it was coming from him at the time." The general shook his head. "Weird what the mind can believe, isn't it?"

The three other prisoners nodded, lost in memories.

Jay completely agreed. He still had a very clear memory of his first visit to the Immigration Center in MiB and his meeting with the three Vermars who loved their cigarettes and coffee.

"So Pro," Elle asked, "you have any idea how to tell if that really is one of their ships sitting out there?"

"Let's go take a look at it," Pro said.

"How about we all go?" Jay suggested, glancing around at the others. "You folks have been workin' on the ship for years. Help us out with whatever you can remember."

"It's all fuzzy," Charles said. "But I'll try."

"Like a bad dream," Bright said.

Elle waited with Jay until everyone had filed out toward the ship, then she asked him, "What exactly are you thinking here?"

"Honestly," he said, "I don't know. We're stuck inside a mountain with an alien ship while all of humanity gets its ass destroyed because of a smalltime crook tryin' ta cop a ship. I'm just tryin' ta do something. Anything."

She smiled. "Then let's go do it."

"What?" he asked. "The something part? Or the anything part?"

"Both," she said, "sound good to me."

The inside of the main cabin of the ship was round and actually bigger than the living-room area of the sleeping quarters. Captain stayed outside on guard duty near the ship while the rest of them went inside.

Jay was struck by the sleek "clean" lines of the ship's design. Its structure and details were all smooth, curving, simple yet elegant. The walls and floor seemed to be made of the same, golden-tinted substance. Eight different panels with built-in chairs in front of them were spaced evenly around the circular space. It was almost exactly the opposite of the Grazer ship they had entered in Central Park. This one was light, smelled good, and everything seemed perfectly in order, even after being buried underground for a million years.

Bright stood behind one chair, her hands on the back of its soft leatherlike upholstery. "Billie always sat here when we worked," she said.

She pointed to the next chair over. "I sat there, where I could work on the computers."

"This ship has power?" Pro asked, glancing around, seeming to notice for the first time that the light was emanating from inside the ceiling; the fixtures were built in instead of being strung in from outside.

“Sure does,” Charles said. He moved over to another chair and touched a spot on the panel. Every panel around the room lit up with soft lights and odd symbols. Jay damn near jumped out of his skin. In all his life he had never been so thoroughly creeped out before. And why turning on the power to a long-dead ship would do that to him, he had no idea. But it sure did.

“Impressive, isn’t it?” Anthony asked, his voice breaking the hushed air. “First time I came in here with the power up, I remember feeling like I was walking into a sacred church.”

“Many races of the Galaxy would agree with that assessment,” Pro said softly, looking around.

“Let’s just make sure they don’t all come here to worship,” Jay said. The last thing he wanted to happen was that Zed and the MiB forces would succeed in saving the planet from the Grazer invasion only to have him and Elle destroy everything by their discovery of this ship.

Partner moved over beside Bright and just stared at the panel where she had worked on the computers, his mouth open.

The silence in the ship gave Jay goose bumps. He rubbed his arm through his suit jacket to get rid of the feeling. It didn’t go away easily.

Jay glanced at Elle. She was looking as creeped out as he was feeling. There was clearly something uncanny about this ship.

“So Billie-the-alien thought he could fly this thing, huh?” Jay asked, moving over and forcing himself to sit down in the chair Billie sat in.

Amazingly, it felt comfortable to his body, as if it quickly molded to fit him perfectly.

“He said it would fly itself once we had the engines on-line,” Charles said. “I remember that much clearly.”

“Means you four were dead the moment he got those engines started,” Elle commented, standing to one side of Jay.

Sarah snapped around and looked at Elle.

“Sorry,” Elle said, shrugging slightly. “Truth and you know it now. Same thing that happened to Derek Comstock after he sent the message Billie needed him to send.”

Sarah slowly nodded, the memories clearly coming back to her.

“Okay, people,” Jay said, standing and facing everyone. “Here’s the plan for the moment.”

Jay glanced at Elle. “Go ahead,” she said, “if you have an idea.”

“Our assignment from the big boss is to keep this ship under wraps until the world is destroyed or we get other orders,” Jay said. “We might as well make the best of the time. Partner, you and Bright see if you can get a handle on the ship’s computers.”

Partner nodded and Bright turned and dropped into the chair she said she had sat in before.

“Pro, you and Charles see what you can do about the engines. I want to know what it would take to start them.”

Both nodded.

“Anthony, I want you and Sarah to help me and Elle here with anything you can tell us about this ship, the history of it, and how to fly this thing.”

“How about weapons?” Elle asked.

Jay turned around and looked at her. Until she said that, he hadn’t even thought of weapons. And that wasn’t like him at all.

“Remember the absorption session?” she asked. “The manual said these ships had

powerful weapons.”

“She’s right,” Anthony said, and pointed to a chair in front of a panel on the other side of the round room. “That’s why we all called the ship the Power. Because of the weapons.”

“You remember anything at all about them?” Jay asked Anthony.

The general’s eyes looked a little distant for a moment, then he half nodded. “A little.”

“Better than nothing,” Jay said. “Elle, you want to work with him on that?”

“Sure,” she said. “You thinking we might use this ship to try to defend Earth?”

Pro laughed. “Right, one ship against all the ships in the Galaxy. And, of course, the minute the other races saw this ship they would all want it and do anything to get it. So I don’t think that idea would work.”

“I don’t have any idea what I want to do with it,” Jay said, smiling at Elle.

“As Pro said, I don’t think, even if it could fly, there would be any way we could actually fly it. But this beats sitting around and waiting for the world to end, doesn’t it?”

“True,” Elle said.

“Besides”—Jay smiled at her—“what better time to play around in a ship of the gods than right before you’re about to die?”

“Not funny,” Pro said.

“He seldom is,” Elle said.

## Chapter 18

8:27 P.M. May 6, 2001 Coastal Mountains, Oregon

Elle sat in the soft, plush-feeling alien chair, letting its support wrap around her like no other chair she’d ever sat in before. She couldn’t believe that something designed for an alien could be this comfortable.

In front of her the alien weapons-control board was a curved moon, with almost everything set at a comfortable distance from the chair. She had thought the controls would be farther away from her memory of the picture of the Numens. They appeared to have such long arms, but the more she thought about it, the more she realized that it was only the sleeves of their robes that were long. Their hands, just like their faces, were not visible in those learning images she had been fed earlier.

Anthony leaned forward and pointed to a control area on the smooth surface. “I think,” he said, “if my memory serves me, that this brings up a diagnostic of the weapons systems.”

“I’m not sure I should be touching anything here,” Elle said, suddenly very afraid of setting off a weapon by accident and destroying them all.

“Good point,” Anthony said. “That spot is the only button anyone was allowed to touch on this board. I remember that much now, also.”

She nodded. “Go ahead.”

He gently touched the smooth surface of the control board near its upper corner. Nothing happened.

“I’m not sitting in the chair,” he said, laughing. “Doesn’t respond unless the person sitting in the chair touches it.”

“What?” Elle asked, looking up into the smiling face of the general. “The ship has that sort of sensors?”

Anthony shrugged. “I don’t know. I’m just getting bits and pieces of memory. But I tend to remember it worked that way. I wasn’t in here that much, to be honest with you.”

She nodded. If this truly was a Numen ship, anything was possible. She reached



out and touched the same spot Anthony had touched on the smooth surface of the control board.

Instantly a holographic image of the entire ship appeared in front of her, floating over the control panel. It was a diagram in three dimensions of every space in the ship, composed of blue lines that showed the shapes and outlines and doors. Red spots were shown in a dozen places around the holographic ship, clearly indicating weapons status of some sort.

A green spot indicated which chairs around the main room were currently occupied. But it wasn't so much the weapons that startled her, or the image of them, but the outline of the ship itself floating in the air over the board. It showed the big room they were in, plus six more smaller rooms below it.

This was only one of two decks!

She had thought it was the entire ship. Of course the Numen would need places to sleep and eat. What was she thinking? How stupid could she be?

"Jay! Pro!" she shouted. "You better take a look at this. Fast!"

"Amazingly cool," Jay said, moving up beside her. Then he said, "Wait—"

Without really getting anywhere near the holo image, she carefully pointed at the other areas of the ship he had clearly seen, too. Then she glanced up at Anthony. "You know what's down in those rooms?"

"Never been down there," he said. "At least that I remember."

"Has anyone," Jay asked, turning to the others, "been down to the lower deck?"

"Just the engine area in the back," Charles said. "But I went in through a panel under the ship."

"Billie was in here a lot by himself," Sarah said. "I remember a few times I called for him in here and he didn't hear me, but then came out later. So he must have been down there."

"Damn," Elle said softly. There was no telling who or what was on that lower deck.

"Anyone know how to get down there?" Jay asked, drawing his Atomizer.

"Through that panel, I think," Sarah said, pointing to a plain-looking panel between two control stations. "Touch it on the right, about waist-high. Billie said it was never to be opened by any of us."

"Billie's orders?" Jay asked.

"Sort of," Sarah said, a puzzled expression on her face. "I really don't remember who gave that order. It just was sort of a standing order for us to never go down there. Odd."

"Me either," Anthony said. "But I remember it, too."

Elle stood quickly and pulled her gun. The holographic image vanished.

Pro and Partner both took up positions near the door, guns ready.

Their movements clearly spooked the others. But Elle knew they had no choice.

Suddenly there was an area down here that had not been secured.

An area on an alien spaceship.

A secret area that Billie hadn't even allowed the humans to enter.

"All of you get out and wait near the base of the stairs," Elle said. "Move it."

"Pro, you stay inside here by the door," Jay ordered. "Partner and Captain stay with the rest. Something goes wrong I want you all out of here and this ship sealed under a few tons of rock."

"Com links on secure channel," Elle added. "We don't want anyone on top listening in down here."

As they were leaving, Elle sat down in the chair again and tapped the same spot on the control board. Again the holographic image appeared floating over the

board.

She studied the layout of the lower level of the ship. The stairs were clearly shown behind that panel. And the six rooms, two on each side of a short hallway at the bottom of the stairs, one under the stairs, and one at the end of the hallway. No green marks showed in any of the rooms, as the green mark indicated where she was sitting on the main deck. But that didn't mean anything. Jay and the others weren't shown on this display either. Only when a person was sitting down did a green mark light up.

Jay leaned in beside her and studied the layout for a moment, then asked, "Ready?"

"Let's go," Elle said, standing and heading with Jay toward Pro and the door. She wasn't really ready, but they had no choice at this point.

Without hesitation, Jay nodded to Pro and touched the spot on the panel.

It whisked back almost instantly, showing a lit staircase beyond. The stairs were steep, but otherwise normal-looking human stairs, with a soft railing on both sides. Elle could see nothing but a clean hallway at the bottom.

"Back in a minute," Jay said.

"Make sure I don't have to wait up for you two," Pro said, smiling.

Jay led the way, staying to the right of the stairs, his gun up and ready.

Elle followed closely, staying left, keeping her back against the railing on the way down.

Pro kept his body inside the door at the top, making sure it stayed open.

The hallway was empty and clean at the bottom. For a ship that clearly had been buried in rock for millions of years, there was no decay, not even any dust.

Even the air was fresh down here, with a faint smell of ocean breeze. When the Numen built something, they had clearly built it to last and keep working. And they had succeeded.

There were no sign of any doors. It seemed the Numen didn't like obtrusive openings marring the smooth "high-tech" surface of their interiors.

It was clear under the stairs, Elle could tell just by the shape of the short hallway, where the door to that room was, so she pointed in that direction and Jay nodded.

Silently, they moved to either side, then Jay palmed the area about waist-high on the left hand side.

The door whisked back quicker than Elle could even get her gun lowered into position.

"A bunk room," Jay whispered.

"Eight bunks," Elle filled in. Same number as chairs upstairs in the big control cabin. Jay stayed in the door, blocking it open while she moved carefully inside.

The beds were covered by some sort of cloth blankets. They all looked carefully made and about queen-size. Elle was just glad there were no signs of any long-decayed bodies. She wasn't sure exactly why she was expecting that. She supposed it came with the territory when you found a long-buried spaceship. And then again, she had only recently experienced the horror of the Grazer ship.

There were blank-looking areas between each bed and Elle bet they were closets. She moved over and palmed the wall between one bed, keeping her gun at the ready. A section slid back, showing robes.

Numen robes, if the absorption she had undergone earlier was to be believed.

"Shit!" Jay said, seeing what she was staring at.

"Something wrong?" Pro asked in Elle's ear.

“All fine so far,” Jay said. “Everyone stay in position.”

She moved away from the closet and it slid closed. Until that moment she didn't want to think they might actually be on a Numen ship. But it was clear they were.

Very clear now.

They moved down the hallway and Jay touched the wall opening the next room. In it looked to be a shower and bathroom setup, only they were like nothing Elle had ever seen before. It might take her a month to figure out how to use everything in there. Or even find out how to turn on the water.

If the Numen used water.

The next room was also another bathroomlike room. Eight people, two bathrooms.

Maybe the

Numen were a two-sexed race, like humans. There were three- and four-sexed races living on Earth, but with two bathrooms, Elle would bet on two sexes for the long-dead gods of the Galaxy.

The larger room at the end of the hall was filled with comfortable-looking chairs set in groups. A few tables were scattered around the large space.

“Game-and-relaxation room,” Jay guessed.

“Looks that way,” Elle said. “And eating.” She pointed to one table with eight chairs placed around it. The room had a very comfortable feel to it, that was for sure. But there was no kitchen in sight. She bet it was in the wall and perfectly clean.

Four rooms down and two to go. Elle was starting to relax just a little. But she had no idea what they would find in the last two. Bedroom, bathrooms, food-and-relaxation room. What was left?

They opened the next door and the reason for that room was instantly clear: medical. It was sterile white, unlike any room on the ship. Two beds filled the center of the room. Both, thankfully, were empty. No doubt an Earth doctor could spend a lifetime in this one little room, making medical discovery after medical discovery.

Elle felt a massive wave of relief when they opened the last room. It contained four tables, one on each of the four blank walls, plus a chair in front of each table. Nothing else.

No one was inside.

She didn't know what she was expecting, but finding this extra deck had caused her more worries than she had imagined.

“Ship secure,” Jay said, also clearly relieved.

“Captain, Partner,” Pro said in Elle's ear. “Bring them all back in here.”

Elle moved into the last room and looked around. The purpose of all the other rooms had been clear and obvious, but this one baffled her. Four chairs, four desks, one facing each wall. A blank-looking desktop was in front of each chair. There was nothing else in the space except a golf cap sitting on one counter.

One of Billie's golf caps. Clearly the Florian had been in here for some reason.

“Strange room, huh?” Jay said, moving over and putting his hand on the back of one of the chairs. “Movies, maybe?” he asked, pointing at the blank walls in front of each chair.

Suddenly Elle knew what she was looking at.

“You're right,” she said. “Movies. And education. This is a training room, I'll bet.”

Jay laughed. “You just might be right. Wonder how you turn it on?”

Elle remembered what Anthony had said about the panels upstairs not responding

to anyone but the person in the chair. "You sit down," she said.  
"A butt switch," Jay said, dropping down into the nearest chair.  
The desk in front of him became a control panel and on the wall an image appeared.

The image of a Numen.

Talking in the Numen language.

All Elle could do was gasp.

Chapter 19

9:01 P.M. May 6, 2001 Coastal Mountains, Oregon

Jay wanted to jump out of the chair in the last room they had explored, but he ignored his racing heart and forced himself to sit there, the Numen talking on in front of him. So far nothing in this ship seemed designed to hurt anyone.

More than likely this movie he was seeing wasn't going to hurt him either.

A light was shining on him from the wall. And the Numen, a very human-looking alien, was talking to him in a strange language, his robe sleeves pushed back, his hood off his head. A completely different picture of a Numen than Jay had gotten from the absorption of the manual summary. If they all survived the next few days, MiB would have to update their library a little.

Even though there were similarities between the Numen and humans, Jay could still see large differences. First off, the guy had no hair and a very large head. He did have two eyes, but they were also large, almost bug-eyed, and slanted upward. The Numen had no chin and didn't seem to move his lips much when he spoke. He did have two arms, but only four long, multijointed fingers with no thumb. He looked more like the aliens made up in the tabloids than a real one.

Or maybe, the tabloids had known something Jay hadn't known.

The Numen was going on in some language that sounded like a cross between Arabic and Chinese, with a lot of soft clicks added into the mix. It sounded hard to pronounce, but the alien in the picture clearly wasn't straining.

"Can't understand a word he says," Jay said, looking up at Elle. "But that's the closest to human I've ever seen an alien look. Bet that guy is taller than I am, though. And those hands look strong."

She nodded, clearly stunned by what she was seeing, just like he was.

Just then the guy in front of Jay stopped talking.

The light over his head got brighter.

"Jay!" Elle shouted, reaching for him.

But it was too late.

The light seemed to blind him for a moment, then flashed off. And the guy started talking again. Only this time Jay could understand him.

Completely.

The alien was listing possible choices Jay could pick on the desktop in front of him.

"What just happened!" Elle demanded, her hand still on Jay's arm, where she was about to yank him from the chair.

"I'm not sure," Jay said. "I think I was just taught the Numen language."

"You're kidding?" Elle asked, letting go slowly.

Jay watched the Numen image in front of him keep explaining the options the library they were sitting in offered. "Can you understand him?" Jay pointed at the alien.

Elle shook her head. "Are you kidding? Not a word."

At that moment the door whisked open and Pro poked his head inside the room.

"You all right in here?"

“Have Partner come down here with his brain-equipment,” Elle said. “I think Jay here just got a quick absorption lesson from our long-dead hosts.”

Pro glanced at Jay, then left quickly.

“Want to see if I’ve been brainwashed?” Jay asked, laughing. He didn’t feel brainwashed, but he didn’t like the idea of an unknown, ancient, and alien technology scrambling around inside his head any more than he liked MiB technology doing it. Of course, MiB had acquired its absorption technology from some alien race somewhere, so he supposed there was little difference.

Still, he decided it was better to be safe than sorry.

Jay got up from the chair and the guy disappeared. Jay followed Elle outside into the hallway, where Partner was setting up his equipment on the stairs. Jay sat down on the second step and slipped the helmet on.

“How come it is,” Jay said, “that when MiB sticks stuff in my head, no one worries, but when an alien does it, you’re all concerned?”

“Because, my dear Jay,” Elle said, “we know how small your brain is and that makes you, shall we say, a ‘quick study.’”

Pro and Partner laughed.

Jay just pointed at Elle and said nothing as Partner scrutinized his screen for a moment, then shrugged. “Same brain patterns as your last absorption, same everything. Looks normal to me.”

“Nicest thing anyone’s ever told me,” Jay said.

“Notice he said normal not perfect,” Elle said, smiling at him. “But now you can understand the Numen language. Strange, don’t you think?”

“You calling me strange?” Jay asked, trying to get himself to calm down a little. He had to admit, suddenly knowing how to understand an alien language had bothered him more than he wanted to admit.

“Of course I am,” Elle said, smiling.

“This isn’t really that odd,” Partner said. “Our absorption techniques are primitive by Galaxy standards. These Numens were considered the most advanced race ever. Seems logical their educational stuff would be top-of-the-line, too.”

“But is it logical that it would work on us?” Elle asked. She was clearly worried about Jay and fearful of the consequences of brain tampering by an unknown technology. Jay could see the concern on her face, but at the same time he felt okay, undamaged. Or at least, from the inside out, he felt all right. He supposed the four prisoners with Captain upstairs had thought the same thing all those years they were under Billie’s control. This line of reasoning made him shudder.

Partner shrugged. “From what I’ve gathered about this race, they dealt with thousands of other races. Chances are that device was set up to work on just about any walking, talking creature. But that’s just an educated guess.”

“Better than nothing,” Elle said.

Jay knew right then that if he didn’t immediately climb back into that chair, he was never going to do it. He turned and marched into the library, followed shortly by Elle, Pro, and Partner.

Jay dropped down into the chair again and the man appeared.

“Wow!” Pro said. “No one is supposed to know exactly what they looked like.”

“Select a broad category,” the Numen said in his native language.

“Entertainment.”

A green light on the board blinked.

“Medical,” the Numen guide said.

Another green light blinked next to the first. Jay glanced at the markings. He

could understand the Numen language, but he still couldn't read it.

"Maintenance."

Another green light.

"Education."

Then the guy started over.

"I'm going to try education," Jay said aloud. He reached out and touched the place where the education light had blinked.

"Fine," the Numen guide said. "Select the area of interest."

The board in front of Jay changed, the writing changed, the lights all changed inside the smooth surface of the desktop. The Numen said nothing.

Jay waited, but nothing happened. The Numen guide didn't go on.

Jay studied the board, but couldn't make heads or tails of any of what he saw.

"Problem?" Elle asked.

"Can't read the language," Jay said, "and he's—"

The Numen said, "Language. Reading. Fine."

Again the board changed.

"Please select the language desired," the Numen said. On the board there looked to be over a hundred choices. "More selections are available."

"It understood me," Jay said to the three watching. "But do any of you know what their language was called?"

All three shook their heads.

"Great help you are?" Jay said.

"Help?" the Numen said. "Certainly. An image of each race will be displayed here. A light will illuminate beside the choice."

"Numen."

A green light flashed on inside the desktop beside a term he couldn't decipher and the Numen on the screen bowed slightly.

Jay, without hesitation, reached up and touched the green-lit area.

Again, almost instantly, a bright light flashed down from an unknown source in the ceiling and covered him, blinding him just for an instant.

Then it was gone.

"You all right?" Elle asked. Both she and Pro looked as if they were ready to yank him from the chair.

"Would you like to learn how to read another language?" the Numen asked.

Jay glanced at the board. Now he was able to understand everything he saw written there. It all made sense to him now. How it made sense, he didn't know, but somehow his brain had suddenly learned how to understand and read the long-dead language.

"No, thank you," Jay said to the Numen, and stood.

The image flashed off.

"Well," Elle asked.

"I can read their language," Jay said, smiling. "Who's next?"

"Not until I check you again," Partner said.

"You're not going to find anything wrong," Jay told him, laughing. He was actually starting to think this Numen method of learning was a good thing.

Certainly quick and painless.

"Humor him," Elle said.

"Humor it is," Jay said.

He was right. There was nothing wrong. Nothing had changed inside his head except that he could understand and read Numen.

And more than likely, it was right here in this room that Billie had learned

enough about Numen technology to think he could fly this ship.

Thirty minutes later every human on the ship knew how to read and understand the long-dead language of the Numens.

And for the first time in over a million years, this Numen ship had a crew.

Chapter 20

17 D-Units 26 C-Units 21.6 Light-years from Earth

The Supreme Controller of the great Zulla fleet sat in his chair, his four, thick, stumpy legs raised on a foot lift in front of him. His body covered a massive area of the main room of his ship, contained by four walls that kept his bulk from flowing everywhere. Gentle massage machines in his bed worked his thick, pink skin, wiped him down, kept his underside from rotting under his glorious weight.

His giant digestive system rumbled as it always did, comforting him and those around him.

The giant viewscreen in front of him showed nothing but the blackness of space as they sped forward. He found such blackness soothing, a good background for the fattening of his large body.

Two feeders, one stationed on either side of him on extended platforms that were raised over his bulk, dropped the nut fruit from the planet Hansee into his gaping mouth, letting the juices drip exactly a T-unit down his thick chin before wiping them from his fat neck with the softest of fabric. He was so large, only his head extended above his bulk.

He chewed slightly, savoring the taste while allowing most of the fruit to simply slide down his wide throat.

He was the Largest-of-the-Large. The Supreme Controller of a thousand ships, all following him now to a backward little planet called Earthling, or something close to that. It made no difference to him what its name was. The pitiful little race there had insulted His Largeness. They would pay.

“Message, O Largest-of-the-Large.”

The feeders dropped two more nut fruits in his mouth before he allowed himself to glance over his massive bulk at his second-in-command.

The creature still weighed so little that he could move around on his four thick legs, even possibly leave the ship. The Supreme Controller had not left this ship for half his lifetime, which was as it should be. He had not seen his legs in many units of time. But he could remember being so small. He hated to dwell on such unpleasant memories too often.

“Who sends a message?”

“Sashanian commander, O Largest-of-the-Large. Stamped with his importance.”

The Supreme Controller knew of the power of the Sashanian fleet. They were his ship’s match, although he would never admit such a thought even to a feeder. The Sashanian had taken on the task of protecting the creatures before they suffered the full consequences of their stupidity in inviting Golgothas to their planet.

The Sashanian had forwarded the false message from the pitiful creatures declaring the Golgothas uninvited.

“What does the message say?”

His second dropped instantly to the floor, his head down, his giant bulk covering a large area. “I would not dare read such a message intended for only the Supreme Controller of all the gathered Zulla fleet.”

“Of course you would not,” the Supreme Controller replied. But he knew his second had read the message. As a second, he had read all the messages for the previous Supreme Controller. His second would not be performing his job if he

weren't devious enough to do at least that much. And the Supreme Controller had picked his second because he was the most devious of all the Largest. And his size made it easier to keep an eye on him.

"Give me the message," the Supreme Controller ordered.

His second slowly shoved his large bulk to his feet, grunting and straining. It would not be long until his second would be of good size, also. The Supreme Controller must watch his second's girth. Size was everything.

With an extension stick, his second sent the message over the Supreme Controller's massive body to his upper thick hand. The movement sent ripples of skin against his bed's walls.

The message was still sealed. Smart of his second. A good ploy, well played. He let the feeders drop more nut fruit into his mouth, then he opened the message and read about the trick of the Florian.

He read it twice, as protocol dictated, then placed the message back on the extension rod so his second could also read it just once, at least officially.

The feeders dropped more nut fruit into his mouth as the Supreme Controller thought. The puzzling action of inviting the Golgothas now seemed to make sense. And the Florian was dead, as he deserved to be. But turning back now would not show his, the Supreme Controller's, great skills of leadership.

They had traveled too far for his ships, his troops, not to have the enjoyment of destroying a planet.

The Sashanian message did not say that they would defend the earth. There was no reason not to continue. It was such a short distance away now.

"Time of arrival?" the Supreme Controller asked his second.

"Two short feedings," his second replied.

"Good," the Supreme Controller replied, chewing the last of the nut fruit. His stomach rumbled, the sound echoing through the ship. "Our great fleet will be glorious in the feeding."

"As is your wish," his second said.

The Supreme Controller said nothing as the feeders began on the first of the two short feedings. In front of him on the large screen the blackness of space would soon be replaced by the image of the destruction of the Earthlings.

The thought was enough to make any creature hungry.

Chapter 21

10:15 P.M. May 6, 2001 Coastal Mountains, Oregon

Elle glanced over at Jay where he stood in the little kitchen area of the underground living quarters, staring into the refrigerator. One of the containment team had bagged up the remains of old Billie and hauled him to the other side of the ship so he didn't smell up the place. This left the living area almost comfortable, like a good-sized apartment furnished in Early Student decor.

They had spent the last hour exploring the ship's functions, checking out its status, now that they could all read the Numen language. Surprisingly, the ship was almost in operational condition. Except for starting up the engines, Jay was convinced the thing could fly. So was Pro.

Elle wasn't so sure, but she always required more proof on most things than Jay did.

Jay came out of the kitchen area chewing on a carrot as she opened up the secure link between them and MiB headquarters. "Zed's not going to talk to you," he said between bites. "My bet is right now he's buried up to his eyebrows just trying to buy the planet one more night of blissful peace."



“We need to check in,” Elle said. She firmly believed they did. Learning how to understand and read Numen was an important discovery that Zed needed to know about.

It took a moment before Zed’s tired face appeared on the screen.

“Problem?”

“No,” she said, “but—”

“Keep a lid on your location and that ship,” Zed said. “I’ve pulled all of the surface agents out of there, so guard it from below. We got a mess up here.”

With that the link went dead.

“Don’t say it,” Elle said, snapping the lid closed on the secure communications unit.

Jay just shrugged and kept chewing.

She leaned back on the couch and sighed. She hadn’t felt this helpless, this out of control, in a long time. “It’s wrong that we should be down here when we could be out there helping.”

“Got that right,” Jay said. “I’d love to do a little more Grazer tipping.”

“I’d be up for just shooting a few of them,” she said, remembering that Grazer sleeping room. She would never, ever hesitate to kill a Grazer again.

“No argument there,” Jay said.

“Safe to come in now?” Pro asked, knocking on the door that lead out to the ship.

“Safe for the night,” Jay said.

“We’re stuck here, huh?” Pro said.

“Keep a guard on the stairwell and stay put,” Elle said, surprised at how disgusted she sounded repeating Zed’s orders. “Everyone’s pulled out up top.”

“Captain’s already got a dozen alarms set throughout the cabin above and another dozen more on the staircase,” Pro said. “Nothing can come down those stairs that we won’t know about.”

“Great,” Jay said, finishing off the carrot.

“MiB meeting or can anyone attend?” Bright asked from the doorway.

“Come on in,” Elle said, moving the communications unit off the couch and putting it on the end table.

Bright, Anthony, Sarah, and Charles all filed in and took chairs. They looked tired and very washed out. All of them slumped. And considering that Anthony still had his general’s clothes on, he looked even odder slumping like a teenager in a chair.

After the day they had all had, Elle could understand their exhaustion. Plus they were on the normal twenty-four-hour clock and it was getting late for them.

For the MiB agents it was still the middle of their day.

The silence filled the room. None of them seemed to have enough energy left to talk.

“Looks like you four could use some sleep,” Pro said. “We’re locked down for the night, so you might as well turn in.”

“You remember which bedroom belongs to whom?” Elle asked.

They all nodded except for Anthony, who said he had never spent the night here.

“You can use Derek’s bed,” Sarah said to him.

“Thanks,” Anthony said, “if someone could show me which one it was.”

“I’ll show you,” Sarah said, standing slowly, as if she were an old woman. “Any of you need beds?”

“We aren’t allowed to sleep,” Jay said, smiling at her.

Sarah frowned.

“Thanks,” Elle said, overriding Jay. “We’re fine. We’re just on a different schedule.”

Sarah nodded and Anthony followed her into one of the side bedrooms. A moment later she returned, waved a tired hand at them, and moved into the next room over. Both Bright and Charles stood to head to their rooms.

At the bedroom door Charles stopped and looked back at Elle and Jay and Pro.

“Don’t really know how to thank you for rescuing us.”

Elle smiled at him. “We don’t need thanks. It’s our job. Now get some sleep.”

“Thanks anyway,” Bright said. Then both she and Charles were gone, doors closed.

“We need to watch them at all?” Elle asked, turning to Pro, then glancing at Jay.

“Already set up,” Pro said. “Cameras and sensors in all four bedrooms. Captain set it up while we were in the ship. They can’t send out any messages from in there, and we’ll hear and can watch any attempts to do so. But I doubt we need to worry. They’re clear.”

“Glad we’re making sure anyway,” Jay said, putting his feet up on the coffee table and stretching out. “Comfortable little place they got down here.”

“Glad you think so,” Elle said. “I just hope we’re not riding out the end of the world in this bomb shelter.”

“Yeah,” Jay said. “Hope Zed can get this one stopped in time.”

“There’s got to be something we can be doing.” For the first time she realized just how angry she was they were stuck down here. It was her planet out there in danger, other MiB agents needed their help, yet here they were stuck guarding a million-year-old ship that wasn’t heading anywhere fast.

“I wouldn’t know what it might be,” Jay said, glancing at Pro. “But if anyone thinks of somethin’, I’m game.”

“Don’t look at me,” Pro said, laughing. “I just clean up the mess. You two are the hotshots with all the ideas.”

“Yeah, right,” Elle said.

They sat there in silence for a short time, all lost in their own thoughts.

Elle kept coming back to the fact that both Jay and Pro thought the old ship might still fly. Yet they didn’t know anything really about the race that owned it. Or even why it had ended up here in Oregon. What happened to the original Numen crew? How did the ship survive the tons of rock that had buried it without a scratch on the hull? Or had it been put here purposely?

Too damn many questions for her taste.

She liked answers.

Suddenly it dawned on her that she was not without recourse. The answers to her questions were in the ship’s library. And they had the time to try to find some information that might help.

She suddenly stood and headed for the kitchen. In the refrigerator was a bag of carrots. She grabbed two and shut the door. Then taking a small bite of one, she tossed the other one to Jay.

“Come on, there just might be something we can do.”

“What?” Jay asked, catching the carrot and sitting up.

“I don’t know yet,” Elle said. “That’s what we need to find out. And when you need information, what’s a good place to go to get it?”

Jay looked puzzled.

Pro laughed. “Didn’t spend much time in the library as a kid, I see.”

Jay nodded. “Oh, I understand.”

He didn’t sound happy, but he wasn’t objecting, so Elle ignored him.

“Where are the rest of the team?” Elle asked, moving toward the door.

“Partner’s outside the ship,” Pro said, “Captain’s got the stairs and monitor duty. I’ll stay in here and keep an eye out on our friends.”

“You know where we’ll be,” Jay said. His voice clearly showed no excitement.

“Looking forward to getting more brain cells scrambled, huh?” Pro said, then laughed.

Jay pointed to his head. “It’s not much, but it’s all I got.”

“Come on, big fella,” Elle said, also laughing. “Let’s go fill it a little fuller.”

“Yeah,” Pro said, “half a tank is belter than a quarter tank.”

Jay frowned. “Why’s everyone pickin’ on me?”

“Because we can,” Elle said, laughing and shoving him toward the door and the alien ship beyond.

“Good reason,” Jay said.

## Chapter 22

1:17 A.M. May 7, 2001 Coastal Mountains, Oregon

Jay had learned far more than he had ever wanted to know about an alien race after spending over two hours of sifting through the alien ship’s library, picking a topic he wanted to learn, then having the library shove it into his head.

The Numen were a gentle race, who hated fighting. Got it.

The Numen developed massive weapons that could wipe out an entire fleet so no one would ever fight with them. Got it.

The ship they were on was equipped with such a weapon. Got it. Didn’t like it, but got it.

In fact, he didn’t much like any of this, mostly because he had slowly become convinced, no matter what Elle or Pro told him, that he was hurting himself by shoving the information into his brain this way. He knew what the Numen ate, how long they lived, even how they mated, a fact that no matter how hard he tried to forget, just wouldn’t go away. And nowhere on the panel in front of him could he find an erase or delete button.

Elle had told him he was just afraid of learning, period.

That comment had hurt. He’d done his share of learning new stuff over the years.

But sometimes the old ways of doing things were the best. And thinking such a thought made him sound like an old man already. And he hated that, too.

Elle, on the other hand, was going at this as if they had the chance of a lifetime tonight. The old kid-in-the-candy-store description fit her just right.

He hadn’t seen her so excited in the entire year they’d been working together.

Even though they didn’t have a clue what they were looking for.

Or even why.

“Jay,” she said from the chair next to his. “I think I found something here.”

Her voice was hushed and clearly she was shaken by something.

He stood and moved over beside her, glancing down at the topic she had been studying. Numen History. Exodus.

“What ya got?”

“Go back to your chair and take this in.” She pointed at the title. “You won’t believe it.”

“Can’t you just summarize it for me?” he asked, hoping to avoid another head-cramming experience.

She laughed. “Trust me on this one. You want to know this.”

He moved over and sat in his chair. The Numen library guide appeared. Over the

last hour Jay had come to call the guy Bud, and it seemed as if the guy was almost answering to the name.

“Well, Bud,” Jay said, his hands tapping on the control panel, running through the menus he’d become familiar with. “Numen History, Exodus section it is.”

“Numen History: Exodus,” the holograph said.

The white light blinded him, as it always did, then let him go.

Suddenly he knew exactly what Elle had been talking about.

The Numen had chosen to leave their posts as gods of the Galaxy on purpose. And for a reason Jay understood completely. They had become tired of hanging around the old neighborhood Galaxy and wanted to get out and explore. They had built massive ships, planet-sized ships that they could live inside for millions of years in the long trip between galaxies. Their first stop: Andromeda Galaxy.

They had taken along many of their ships, but in the end this became impractical; there were just too many to take. So they began to bury the ships in groups of a hundred on remote, distant planets, leaving them shielded so they would never be found by other races.

Then they had simply piled into their planet-sized ships, all of them, and left this Galaxy on the greatest exploration into the unknown ever undertaken.

“Hundreds of ships?” Jay said aloud, turning to look at Elle. “All armed and ready to fly.”

She was looking at him, nodding. “All here on Earth.”

Jay suddenly thought back to Zed’s reaction to their discovery of the Numen ship. He had known exactly what to do. And had been almost annoyed and afraid that an alien had found it first.

“You think MiB knows where more of these ships are hidden?” Jay asked, standing and leaning against the desktop.

“Of course,” Elle said. “And I’ll bet in here somewhere is the record of where they all are.”

“And MiB would know that, too.”

“Of course,” Elle said. “If it’s in one ship, it’s in them all. More than likely MiB just hadn’t gotten to this one yet. No hurry when something has been buried for millions of years.”

“So old Billie snuck in under our noses. No wonder Zed was so annoyed when we told him what was happening.”

“Makes sense, doesn’t it?” Elle asked.

“All except one thing,” Jay said. “Why hasn’t Zed ever played this card? We almost lost the planet last month with those flowering meat-eaters, remember?”

“But we didn’t,” Elle said. “We saved the planet without using these ships.”

“And what about that bug and those Achturians that Kay and I stopped? Why didn’t he use it then? We were seconds from getting toasted.”

“You—actually we stopped them,” Elle said. “Remember? He didn’t have to play the ultimate hole card.”

Jay just shook his head in amazement. This idea actually had him excited. “Well, he might have to use them today. What do you say we get this ship ready to fly completely? That just might help to have one more in the fleet.”

“Sounds like the best idea you’ve had all night,” Elle said. “So what do we need to do that?”

“Three things,” Jay said, walking back and forth and ticking off the items on his fingers. “We need to know how to get this ship out of this mountain. There has to be a way.”

“That’s one,” Elle said.

“Two, we need to know how to start the engines.”

“That’s two,” she said.

“And we need a trained crew and someone to fly the thing into space.”

“That’s a good one,” Elle said. “I’ll bet we can find all the training we need in here.”

“True,” Jay said. “Looks like it’s time for our crew to wake up from their naps.”

“You thinking we should use everyone?” Elle asked.

Jay smiled at her. “At this point I think we’re going to need everyone we can get to help us. There are eight chairs up there. We might as well fill them all.”

“And we’re not telling Zed, right?” Elle asked, smiling.

“Not until we’re ready to join the rest of the ships in the air,” Jay said. “Or morning check-in, whichever comes first.”

“I love it,” she said.

“So do I,” he said.

And for the first time since they captured the ship, he felt as if they were again finally doing something important. Something that just might help save Earth from the scum of the universe. After all, wasn’t that their job?

Chapter 23

7:36 A.M. May 7, 2001 Coastal Mountains, Oregon

“Zed’s calling,” Pro said, sticking his head into the spaceship’s main door.

Elle glanced around at Jay, who nodded.

They were ready. She knew it. It had taken them all night, but they were trained and raring to go.

Around the spaceship’s cabin five heads turned as Jay pushed himself out of the pilot’s chair. All were at active stations and all knew what they were doing with those stations.

Sarah was at the internal-systems monitoring station.

Anthony was at weapons.

Charles was at the engineering station, and Bright was at computers.

Partner had taken over navigation and Elle was in the overall control seat.

If the time came, Pro would sit in the remaining chair as the ship’s second-in-command.

It had been a long night of learning and practice, but Elle was pleased with their progress. If they had to, they just might be able to get this ship out from under this mountain and into orbit.

With a great deal of luck, they wouldn’t have to. Not playing on this strength was better. Much better. But at least now they had it ready to play.

But the next step was to convince Zed of their idea, of their readiness to fly and join the other ships she was sure MiB had ready. And that was going to be some trick.

Elle moved down the ramp and into the living-quarters area. The secure link had been set up there on the kitchen table, facing out toward the ship. They had planned a little charade for Zed to help convince him and now she was getting nervous about it. Very nervous, actually.

She sat down in the chair and then glanced around at Pro.

He nodded that she should go ahead, so she turned back to the secure link and punched the on button on the laptop-size communications device.

“Sorry for the delay,” she said as Zed’s face appeared on the screen. “We were in the ship. How’s the status?”

“Not good,” Zed said, looking up at her. His eyes had deep circles under them and he seemed just about as overall tired as she had ever seen him. And Zed never really looked tired. Harried, maybe, but both she and Jay had come to believe that Zed never slept. At least they had never caught him at it.

“We managed to keep things contained last night across this country,” Zed said, “but China and Europe are having problems right now. They should hold on and keep it wrapped up, we hope.”

“Hold on for what?” Elle asked. “Are the major fleets turning back?”

“No,” he said blankly, glancing down at something on his desk, then looking up at her. “The first of the big ones will go right past the Sashanian fleet in about three hours. Who knows how long we have after that. I’d say almost no time at all.”

“So,” she said, “you’re telling me the human race is finished?”

“Short of a miracle,” Zed said.

“Worse than last month with the man-eating plant invasion?”

“Much worse,” he said, his voice tired. “What are you driving at?”

“How about the Achturians and the bug? This worse than that?”

“It’s worse,” he said. “Much worse.”

“So what about pulling out your secret weapon?”

Now Zed was really looking puzzled and starting to get angry. Jay usually managed to get Zed angry at him. Elle very seldom did, and she wasn’t at all pleased about it.

“Please explain,” he growled. “And make it quick.”

“What about the Numen ships?” she asked.

“The other races find out about that ship and we’re even deader,” Zed said. Then he laughed. “If being deader than dead is even possible.”

Elle glanced back at Pro, who only shrugged. He had been as convinced as she and Jay that MiB knew about the other ninety-nine Numen ships buried around the world. Suddenly it seemed as if they had been wrong in their assumption.

She turned back to the link with Zed. “Are you telling me MiB doesn’t have a fleet of these ships sitting somewhere?”

Zed blinked twice, then started laughing. “Fleet? Are you kidding? Why would we have a fleet of million-year-old spaceships?”

“Damn, you’re not kidding, are you?” Elle asked. She could feel her stomach twisting and her heart racing. This wasn’t good. Not good at all.

“Why would I kid about a thing like that?” Zed asked, his voice low and very, very controlled. Which meant he was very, very angry.

Elle took a deep breath. Their only real hope now was to push ahead. There wasn’t a fleet of ships, but there was still the one sitting in the other room.

“We have an idea about how to stop the ships that are coming to destroy Earth,”

Elle said. “Take a deep breath and just listen to it. All right?”

Zed frowned, but before he could say anything, Elle turned and nodded to Pro, who shouted, “You can come in now.”

Elle moved slightly to one side as the hooded figure moved into the room and stood where Zed on the secure communications link could see him. To the uninitiated, the figure looked mysterious and a little menacing, a cross between grim reaper and some kind of monk. Actually, though, it was Jay, but she wasn’t going to tell Zed that just yet.

The face was hidden in the shadows of the hood and the figure’s hands were nowhere to be seen. It looked exactly the way the Numen looked in the MiB records.

Then Jay did something he had practiced a number of times during the night. He started speaking in Numen.

“The treaty involving this planet must be enforced,” Jay said. “We, the Numen, will not be pleased if it is not. We will enforce it if we must.”

Elle glanced back at the screen.

Zed’s face was almost white, as if he had seen a ghost, or was having a heart attack. Clearly this image of a Numen looked real enough for him.

“Here’s our idea,” Elle said after Jay stopped his short speech. “We take this ship out of here shielded. There’s so much going on, no one is going to notice.”

Zed’s mouth opened but no words came out, so Elle rushed on. “Then we circle back and come in unshielded from what looks like deep space. We put the Numen ship between the coming fleets and the planet, and Jay there goes into his speech, which says, basically, that the Numen support the treaty and no one should break it. He’s fluent in Numen, you know.”

At just that moment Jay pulled the hood back and smiled at Zed.

Zed’s mouth opened again, then closed, then opened again. Again, nothing came out.

“To answer your questions,” Jay said, stepping forward to stand beside Elle so Zed could see them both, “yes, we can fly the ship. Yes, it is armed and has a weapon on board that can destroy an entire fleet of ships. Yes, we know how to fire that weapon. And yes, we can get the ship out from under this mountain. The Numens left us a way to do it without leaving a crater the size of a football field.”

Zed just sort of stared at them, saying nothing.

Jay glanced at Elle. “I’m gathering here that MiB doesn’t know about the other Numen ships.”

“It doesn’t,” Elle said. “We were wrong.” She smiled at Zed. At the moment she didn’t know what else to do.

“Well, that’s going to be a headache when this is all over,” Jay said, his voice light.

Elle nodded, deciding to play along to break the tension. “Especially the one buried a mile under the Bronx.”

“Yeah, or the one under the Astrodome,” Jay said. “Yow, not a good scene there.”

“If you two are joking, I’ll personally fly out there and strangle you both before the aliens blow everything up!”

“No joke,” Elle said.

“Would we kid you on something like this?” Jay asked, his face very serious. “We actually thought when we discovered that there were a hundred of these babies buried around the planet that MiB had a fleet of these things. We just worked all night to get ready to join the troops.”

Zed leaned back in his chair and took a deep breath. Elle was happy to see some color return to his cheeks. After a moment he said, “Give me two minutes to clear off a few things here, then I want you to start over and tell me everything you’ve been doing. Understood?”

“Perfectly,” Elle said, but the connection had already been cut.

“You think he liked our idea?” Jay asked Elle.

“I think you knocked his socks off and he has to go looking for them,” Pro said, laughing. “I’ve never seen Zed so shocked.”

“He’s going to regret the day he hired us,” Elle said, shaking her head. It was one thing to consider taking a ship into space when she thought MiB had a fleet of the things parked somewhere. But knowing they would be the first to try to

fly one of these ancient vessels suddenly had her very, very worried.

“Oh, you save Earth’s butt and he won’t regret anything,” Pro said, still laughing.

“Yeah,” Elle said. “If. There’s a lot of those little if-words between this idea and saving Earth.”

“Won’t matter,” Jay said. “We either make it work or we’ll all be dead.”

“He has a good point,” Pro said.

Elle knew he did. She just didn’t like the odds suddenly. A million-year-old ship that might not fly going up against fleets of advanced aliens. Suddenly nothing at all sounded good about their idea.

Nothing.

Chapter 24

8:07 A.M. May 7, 2001 Coastal Mountains, Oregon

It took Zed exactly six minutes to get back to them. And when his face reappeared on the secure communications link, Jay was glad to see the old man looking better. He had color back in his skin and he seemed once again very much in control.

“Now,” he said, his voice sounding as it would on a normal day during a normal briefing. “Tell me what you two have been up to?”

Jay and Elle spent the next fifteen minutes explaining carefully everything they had done and learned, with Pro in the background adding details they missed that he thought might be important.

Through all of it, Zed just nodded, letting them talk. But Jay knew their boss wasn’t missing a detail. He seldom did.

“So, now what, boss?” Jay asked when they finished their explanation. “We gonna go give them all a little scare?”

“Not yet,” Zed said. “We’re not taking the chance with your harebrained idea until there are no other options.”

“Remember,” Jay said, “it’s goin’ ta take us at least a half hour to get the ship out of this hole, then fly it away from the planet so we can look as if we’re coming in from deep space.”

“And that’s if everything goes as planned,” Elle said.

Zed nodded. “I understand all that. But you need to understand a few things, too. Humans aren’t allowed to have interstellar spaceships. Or fly them. It was part of the treaty we and a bunch of friends signed.”

Jay laughed, not believing what he had just heard. They and the whole human race were all about to be blown to bits and Zed was still worried about a stupid piece of paper. “I don’t think the fleets of alien scum comin’ here to destroy all us humans worry much about that treaty.”

“Don’t you think I know that?” Zed growled. “But I’m going to wait until the last possible minute before I violate the treaty from our side. There’s still an outside chance the Sashanians and other treaty signers might defend us.”

“So we sit and wait?” Elle asked.

“No,” Zed said. “You make doubly sure that ship is ready to fly and you make triply sure you know how to fly it. If we need it, you two and your charade are going to be humanity’s last damned choice.”

“Got ya,” Jay said. His stomach suddenly felt as if he’d been slugged.

Elle only nodded.

“So go double-check everything,” Zed ordered. “I’ll be in touch.”

The connection broke, leaving the three of them in silence.

“Well,” Jay said after a moment, “we wanted to be able to help...”



“Let’s hope we don’t have to,” Elle said softly. She stood slowly, as if she were tired, and moved toward the door.

“I’m with Elle,” Pro added, also standing.

Jay agreed with both of them. It was one thing to think they were going to fly the ancient Numen ship to help a whole fleet of ships defend Earth, but being only one ship between Earth and fleets of alien ships wasn’t what he had in mind.

He followed Elle and Pro back into the ship, then dropped into the pilot’s chair. The comfortable feel wrapped around him, giving him a false sense of security. He had never flown a plane, or even sailed a ship. But after absorbing the pilot’s information on this ship, he was convinced Billie had been right.

The ship could almost fly itself.

It was going to have to, Jay had a sneaking hunch.

“Okay, everyone,” Elle announced, “we might be humanity’s only chance. So we’re going to practice what we can practice, double-check what we can double-check.”

“And hope we don’t get tapped to go into the game,” Jay said.

“Is she kidding?” Bright asked Jay, her eyes full of worry and fear.

“Afraid not,” Jay said. “Listen up, everyone. We were wrong. The MiB haven’t found any of the other buried ships. This is the first one. If we have to go up against the aliens out there, we do it alone. And the only way MiB is going to send us is if there’s no other choice. Period.”

Everyone around the alien control room was silent. Then Sarah said, “We helped Billie start all this, we can help you end it if this is the only way.”

The other three humans Jay and Elle had rescued all nodded.

“Thanks,” Elle said.

Jay smiled at Bright. If she felt she could do this, then he could do it. It was that simple.

For the next two hours they reviewed every bit of data they had learned and rehearsed every action in the event of every possible contingency Elle, Jay, Pro, or anyone else could think of. Three times Jay had run down to the library to absorb another chunk of knowledge about flying a Numen ship. And he hadn’t been the only one running back and forth between the main cabin and the library. By the time the two hours were finished, Anthony was convinced that all the weapons were armed and that he could fire them if he needed to. And actually hit something.

Charles was sure the engines would start on command, without problems. And the Numen-built ground cover would open them a hole big enough to permit the spaceship to launch.

Bright and Partner were sure they could program the computer course needed to get them off the surface of Earth without being seen, to carry them away from the planet, then to bring them back.

Only thing was, Jay felt he wasn’t so sure he could fly the thing. In his mind he knew he could. It was no harder than moving a small joystick on a video game. And if stupid aliens like Grazers could fly interstellar ships, he could do it, too.

He had repeated that a dozen times over the past two hours.

But in his gut he still wasn’t so sure. He didn’t tell that to anyone. Better to let them think he knew exactly what he was doing, because he was the one steering. They needed to believe him to be competent and confident. After all, they all had enough to worry about already.

“Okay, everyone,” Elle ordered, rising from her command chair. “Quick break and

then get into the Numen robes. We want to be ready to move at a moment's notice."

Jay watched as they all stood and headed for the living quarters. They all looked very solemn and very focused, even Pro and Partner. And those two were trained for dangerous stuff, just like he and Elle were. But this was different.

This wasn't just their own lives or deaths. The whole planet was at stake.

"We have a great crew," Elle said, when only the two of them were left.

"Never thought I'd need a crew," Jay said. "This idea is a long ways from the streets of New York."

"And the city morgue," she said. "Whoever would have thought I'd go from cutting up dead bodies to being the commander of a starship of the gods."

Jay glanced around at the control room he was getting very, very used to. "Ya think humans will ever get advanced enough to develop somethin' like this?"

"I hope so," Elle said.

"But one step at a time, right?" Jay said.

"Right," Elle said.

"First we fly it, then we build it."

"Feels backward," Elle said, then laughed.

"Sure does," Jay said. He didn't want to tell her just how backward it felt to him.

Just then Captain shouted from the living quarters. "Zed's calling!"

"Shit!" Jay said, heading out at a run, beating Elle to the door by just inches.

He just hoped he didn't come running back through that door in a few minutes as a pilot.

## Chapter 25

15:16 Universal Time. May 7, 2001 Joint Earth Observation Base, Far Side Earth Moon

Beach-Grass-In-Limbo watched the monitor in front of him, all three of his eye stalks at full attention.

On the screen he could see the Zulla, the Fattest-of-the-Fat in all the Galaxy, approaching, slowing as they neared the outer planets of the system. Although they had received his message, they were clearly not turning back. Their round, thick, ugly ships seemed to fill all of space, blocking out the stars in many places.

Many other major fleets followed.

The Bonka fleet, with an even larger number of ships, was only two hours behind. Behind them were the Horsanakii, the most powerful of races on this side of the central Galaxy core. There had not been a race as powerful since the disappearance of the Nu-men.

None of them were turning back.

Beach-Grass-In-Limbo knew that very soon the planet below him would soon be cleared of anything of value. No human would survive. It would be a sad day in the history of the Galaxy, to be added to many other sad days of other races who had met the same fate.

He keyed in his command code with one tentacle. His orders went out to his ships, and to the many other treaty ships standing by, helping with the cleanup of Those-Who-Eat-And-Are-Worthless.

The orders were very simple.

"Do not engage. Pull back and re-form. We will soon be going home."

He cut off the command code and again focused his eye stalks on his monitors.

His ships were doing as he had ordered. Soon his job here would be finished.

He regretted it had to end in such a fashion.

Just then a light blinked on his communications board.

He used one tentacle to check it. It was from the human

He-Who-Called-Himself-Zed. There seemed no reason to take such a call, but honor deemed it appropriate to grant the Soon-to-be-Dead one final communication.

He keyed the switch with the tentacle, then focused his eye stalks on the image of the human.

“Are the large fleets stopping?” the human inquired abruptly, without bothering to employ formal speech patterns. Normally the human had maintained some degree of formal speech, but not this time. His lapse was understandable under the present circumstances.

“No,” Beach-Grass-In-Limbo said. “Your gods will soon be greeting you.”

“The treaty means nothing to you?” the human asked.

“The treaty is only as strong as those who defend it,” Beach-Grass-In-Limbo said, his tentacles making soothing motions in the air around his head. “We cannot and will not stand against the coming fleets.”

“Why?” the human demanded. “I know the great Sashanian fleet is strong. The cause is just.”

“True,” the commander said. “But the fight is not ours.”

“In other words,” the human said, “we are not worth losing ships over.”

Beach-Grass-In-Limbo had often been shocked at the blunt perceptiveness of the humans. This was one of those times. “You are correct.”

“I understand,” the human replied.

He paused, then asked, “Have you considered, O great friend of the treaty, that such a negative assessment might be wrong?”

“I have,” Beach-Grass-In-Limbo replied tensely. “It is not.”

“Is there nothing humans can do to stop this?” the human asked, his face full in the screen.

“You are a proud race,” Beach-Grass-In-Limbo said. “Die proudly, also.”

“Understood,” the human said. “But dying is not something humans do easily.”

“Then fight well,” the Sashanian said.

“We will,” the human answered.

This time the human cut the connection.

With all three eye stalks, the commander stared at the blank screen. It was a pity the humans would become an extinct race. There was so much he and others did not understand about them, so much in them to arouse curiosity and reward study.

His ships had all pulled back into position.

The fat ugly ships of the Zulla were about to arrive.

It would soon be over.

Chapter 26

10:27 A.M. May 7, 2001 Coastal Mountains, Oregon

Jay approached the secure communications device and opened the connection between himself and Zed. Gathered around him were Anthony, Charles, Sarah, Bright, Pro, Partner, and Elle. Only Captain wasn't present, since he had drawn guard duty for the stairs and hadn't trained for a position on the ship. One MiB agent was going to be needed to stay behind on the ground and keep people away from the hole they were going to leave when they lifted off.

If they lifted off.

Zed's face appeared. He was angry.

Angrier than Jay had ever seen him.

Behind him the Immigration Center looked deserted. Jay had never seen it so empty. All the rats had left the ship, it seemed.

“They aren’t lifting a damn finger to help us,” Zed said, his voice low and mean sounding.

Jay felt his stomach clamp down into a tight knot. The human race was dead if the treaty signers didn’t help them.

“Nothing?” Elle asked.

“Not one damn ship is willing to stop the coming fleets,” Zed said.

Sarah choked back a sob. “What have we done?”

“Damn,” Anthony muttered.

“How long do we have?” Jay asked.

“The Zulla fleet of about a thousand ships will be in Earth orbit in less than an hour.”

“Then we don’t have much time,” Jay said grimly. “Let’s go try to stop them.”

“I’m afraid”—Zed looked directly at them as he spoke—“we don’t have much choice.

Maintain communication silence and stay shielded until you’re coming in from space. If anyone in all the Galaxy besides us ever discovers it’s humans flying that ship, they’ll kill us. A second time.”

“Understood,” Elle said.

“And good luck,” Zed added.

The connection broke, leaving them all standing there in shocked silence.

Finally Jay said, “You heard the man. We got a planet to save. Everyone to the ship! Pro, get Captain out of here and up to his position on top.”

“Got it,” Pro said, sprinting for the door.

Jay was right behind him, only he was headed for the ship.

Behind him Partner gathered up the communications equipment.

Within fifteen seconds everyone except Pro was swathed in Numen robes, hoods back, sleeves rolled up, and seated in their chairs.

“Secure the hatch,” Elle ordered as Pro came in.

“Got it!” Pro said. “Captain will be on top and in the clear in thirty seconds.”

“Everyone ready?” Jay asked.

Heads nodded hesitantly around the ship. They all looked odd in the Numen robes, as if they belonged in those chairs, yet, at the same time, didn’t.

“People,” Jay said, “look at it this way. We can die when a thousand Zulla ships smash up our homes, or we can die taking some of them with us.”

“How about we not die at all?” Elle said firmly.

“I like that idea even better.” Jay laughed. “Take it away,

She-Who-Sits-In-The-Big-Chair.”

“All systems on and ready?” Elle asked, starting the drill they had practiced earlier.

“Computer systems on. Check,” Bright called, her voice a little louder than it needed to be.

“Navigation systems on and ready. Check,” Partner said, seemingly calm.

“Weapons armed and ready. Check,” Anthony said, sounding like a general.

“Ship’s general systems all go,” Sarah said.

“Engines and electrical on-line,” Charles said. “Engines ready to start up.”

“Shields on-line and ready,” Pro said. “No one is going to see us leave.”

“Ready as I’m ever going to be.” Jay sighed, easing his hands forward to lightly hold the pilot’s controls. The central control was a round ball-like device that was set into the recessed panel. His right hand went around it and he could feel its granular surface, which had somehow been constructed to

prevent his fingers from slipping. The ball moved in all directions. The ship moved in all directions, depending on how he moved the ball.

Simple. Like a mouse on a computer, only the cursor was a spaceship.

He hoped it was that simple.

His left hand was on a slide control for speed. Forward for faster, full back for stop.

Also simple.

In front of him, at least in theory, would be a three-dimensional display when they got flying. It would include the information Bright and Partner would be feeding him from the computers. His course, unless he decided to stray off it, would be marked in the three-dimensional display by a green line. All he had to do was keep the ship on the green line and he was fine.

He had no idea how hard that was going to be. In the simulations given him by the library downloads, it had been easy. But he knew that nothing in real life was ever as easy as simulations.

“Let’s get into space,” Elle said. Then laughed a nervous laugh. “Never thought I’d hear myself say that.”

“I wish I wasn’t hearing you say it,” Jay said.

Pro laughed.

No one else did.

“Open the gateway,” Elle ordered. “Start the engines.”

To Jay’s right, Pro’s fingers did a quick tap dance on the flat panel, then stopped. If all went well, Pro should have started the earth splitting above them.

A slight rumble shook the ship, but otherwise Jay couldn’t tell if anything had happened or not. The tunnel through which they would exit was supposed to be formed by a force field, pushing the earth back out of the way long enough to allow the ship to slide through.

Beyond him in the next chair, Charles moved his fingers on the panel, starting the engines.

Suddenly the ship seemed really alive.

There was no extra noise.

No shaking.

Nothing except the feeling of power flowing through everything.

“Engines on-line,” Charles announced, his voice high and sounding extremely nervous. “It worked. I’ll be go-to-hell.”

“Haven’t heard that one before,” Jay said, laughing.

“Tunnel open and stable,” Pro announced.

Suddenly in front of Jay a holographic image appeared on his screen.

It took him a moment to understand what he was seeing and relate the small scale of the image to the enormity of the reality. What he saw was an image of the tunnel and the shape of the ship. A green line moved from the ship up through the tunnel. A green dot was imposed on the image of the ship.

How the hell was he supposed to get that ship up through that hole?

“Shielding up and working,” Pro announced.

“Okay, Jay,” Elle said. “Get us out of here, slow and careful.”

“Easy for you to say,” Jay muttered, staring at the screen in front of him. He wondered if the sweat forming on his right palm would make the ball slippery.

“Don’t think,” Elle said. “Just do it.”

“Got ya,” Jay said.

She knew him too well.

He was thinking too much, which was getting in the way of the training he had gotten last night. It was like it was on the streets. If he stopped and really thought, he often screwed up. But if he trusted his instincts and postponed thought until later, he was usually right.

He took a deep breath and let the knowledge from the library well upward to the front of his mind.

As Elle had told him sometime during the night: "Don't question. Just know you know how to do something and do it."

It had worked when he spoke Numen for Zed. He hoped it was going to work now. He eased the thrust forward while at the same time moving the ball backward to tip up the front of the ship.

There was no sense of movement at all inside the ship. No sense that the ship was now tipped upward. Weird.

"We're moving," Partner announced.

The ship on the holographic image in front of Jay was moving, the green dot following the green line up through the tunnel that had opened in the earth.

It seemed to take forever, but actually less than three seconds passed.

He didn't bang the ship into a wall, or crash it in the narrow space.

Three long seconds of torture.

Three seconds to get a ship out of its million-year-old tomb and into the air.

The instant they cleared the tunnel the holographic image in front of Jay changed. It was now an image of the planet Earth, with a small green dot showing the spaceship's location on the surface.

But there was no green line on the image.

Jay pulled the speed control back and tipped the ship's nose down so that they were a hovering golden saucer, just off the ground above the tunnel. With luck they were shielded. But just in case they weren't, or if the shielding malfunctioned, they had left Captain to take care of any sightings.

"Great job," Elle said, letting out a sigh of relief. "You can drive all the time from here on out."

"Got yourself a deal," Jay said. "But I need directions."

"A man saying he needs directions." Pro said. "You've shamed all men."

"Funny," Elle said.

"Feeding course now," Partner said.

"Got it!" Bright shouted, clearly excited.

On the holographic display a green line appeared leading from the green dot on the surface of the planet, off into space directly over the North Pole.

"Here we go," Jay said. He took a deep breath and let his instincts again take over. Slowly he eased the nose of the ship up while shoving the speed control gently forward.

Again there was absolutely no sense of motion at all.

The green dot moved along the green line on the holographic image. Quickly they were above the pole and headed out into space. Jay focused on keeping his hands steady and the speed moderate. He wanted to go a ways out, but not too far out.

"Any chance of finding a viewscreen around here?" Partner asked.

"Got it," Pro said.

Suddenly the rounded walls between and above each control station seemed to just vanish as if they weren't even there. Stars peppered the black sky ahead of them.

The vast and spectacular view made Jay jerk his attention away from the holographic image and stare into the blackness ahead.

The walls were so invisible, or the screen images so good, it was as if they were all suddenly just sitting on a platform shoving its way through space, with nothing between them and all of the universe.

Jay quickly forced himself to focus on the ho-lographic image in front of him, not on the stars shown ahead. He knew if he looked back, past Elle and Pro, he would see the disk that was Earth receding into the distance below them.

“Holy shit!” Charles exclaimed.

“Wow!” Partner whispered.

No one else said a word. Jay wasn’t even sure he could hear the others breathing back there behind him. Beside him Anthony sat with his mouth open.

Partner’s mouth was also open and he stared around them.

Bright was looking just plain scared.

If they were like Jay, going into space was not something they had ever expected to do. Even after he discovered there were aliens out there, Jay had never even considered the possibility. And it wasn’t something he really wanted to do, either. His world, his universe, was the streets of New York. And right now he very much wanted to be back on them, chasing a simple mugger. Or arresting a car thief.

Instead he was flying an ancient spaceship away from Earth.

Life was strange sometimes.

Just plain strange.

Chapter 27

17 D-Units 26 C-Units Inside Mars Orbit

The Supreme Controller of the Zulla fleet listened to his stomach rumble, his mouth open as two feeders squeezed the drippings from the Umaxian beetle into his mouth, one luscious droplet after the other. He knew the rumbling had a calming influence upon his staff. They calmed him.

Underneath his massive pink flesh, the massage rollers increased their tempo. They always did this after each of his fifty meals per cycle and he always enjoyed the sensation.

On the huge screen in front of him the images of the pitiful planet called Earth grew larger. They were the first to arrive, beyond a few unimportant stragglers. Even sooner than the mighty Horsanakü, who would not be pleased when they learned of it.

His stomach rumbled and he smiled at the taste and joy of it all.

“Supreme Controller,” his second said, grunting to move into his direct line of vision so his master would not have to move his head. It was a good sign that his second was thinking of such simple pleasures.

“I have good news.”

The feeders ended their course of Umaxian-beetle drippings and began to pour the thick paste of the Sulyts love gatherings into his mouth. He often craved the taste of this delicacy, savoring the saltiness combined with the intense sweetness of the nectar. It was the most expensive food in all the Galaxy and he only indulged his passion for it for a few moments every cycle.

His second bowed and waited until the feeders were done and moved to drop several chunks of Bacon meat into the Supreme Controller’s mouth before he spoke. “The Sashanian fleet stands aside, as do all the others in this region.”

The Supreme Controller waved away the news with one thick hand. “Of course. I expected nothing else. Sashanians are not a stupid people. Just ugly. No flesh and all those tentacles. Terrible creatures to gaze upon.”

“I agree completely,” his second said.

“Of course you do,” the Supreme Controller said.

On the screen the white and blue of the small planet started to be clearly seen. He hoped they would find lots of new animals, new plants to eat here. It would be a glorious day for his fleet.

Suddenly the image of the small planet ahead was washed clear, the giant screen went blank.

“What has happened?” he demanded. His stomach grumbled and he belched in impatience.

Then, just as suddenly, the screen cleared and he was greeted by an image that in all the time he’d spent gaining weight, in all his years of gorging and scheming to achieve his position of Largest-of-the-Large, he had not expected to see.

There, on the screen, stood a Numen, face covered in shadow, hands hidden in the long Numen robe. A god from the Galaxy’s past, millions of meals ago.

Then the Numen began to speak in its long-dead language, a language the Supreme Controller did not understand. He had seen no reason to learn it. But he did recognize the sound of it.

Then the image vanished and the small blue planet was again visible on his screen.

For the first time in many cycles, the Largest-of-the-Large brushed aside his feeders. “Where did that image come from?” he demanded of those within earshot of his giant voice. “And what did it say?”

“It comes from a ship moving in from deep space to a location between us and the planet ahead,” his second replied.

“A Numen ship?” the Supreme Controller demanded.

No one said anything as his second worked to obtain the information from the board in front of him. Then the second moved to a place beside the Supreme Controller and dropped to the floor in complete submission.

“Well?” the Supreme Controller asked.

“It appears to be a Numen ship,” his second said. “The message states that the Numen agree with the treaty protecting this planet and will defend it.”

“What?” the Supreme Controller shouted, actually shifting his bulk from the position he had sat in for more years than he could remember. Under him the moving rollers worked to adjust to his massive movement. Waves rolled over and through the flesh of His Largeness, banging on the walls of his bed.

Again his second hurled his bulk to the floor and kept his eyes averted.

“Put this intruding ship on my screen,” the Supreme Controller ordered.

Instantly the single ship moving into a position between the mighty Zulla fleet and the planet beyond filled the screen. The smooth lines and the unmistakable gold color of the vessel told him at once that it was a Numen ship.

The first Numen ship to be seen in the Galaxy in over a million years. Had they returned?

Had they never left?

And why would they wish to protect this puny little planet?

He had no answers to these questions, and when the Largest-of-the-Large had no answers, it made him hungry.

“Halt the fleet. Hold position!”

His orders echoed over the vast spaces of his ship.

Then he motioned for the feeders to come back in on their extension platforms, reposition themselves over his body, and feed him. He needed food to think. Such decisions as he now faced could not be rushed.



“Fleet is holding position,” his second said from his place on the floor, the information relayed to him through his implants.

“Get up!” the Supreme Controller yelled between large hunks of Dovian snake slithering down his throat. “This is not your fault, you fool.”

His second grunted and somehow managed the herculean task of getting himself back onto his four feet.

The Supreme Controller thought while eating, staring at the golden Numen ship. One single ship stopping his fleet. If he returned to the planet of the Zulla, he would be starved out of his position for allowing one ship, Numen or not, to stop him.

Yet he dared not attack it alone. He knew of the weapons power the Numen ships were rumored to have had. How much more power would a single ship have now, after a million years? He didn’t want to make his people the laughing stock of all the Galaxy by going up against a single Numen ship, and losing.

He chewed on this for a moment, then understood what he must do. “The Bonka and Hor-sanakü fleets are close behind us. Correct?”

“Yes,” his second replied.

“Send them a message that we will wait and let them join in the honor of taking this planet with us.”

“Yes, Supreme Controller.”

After two bites, his second announced, “Message sent.”

“Good.”

His feeders moved to large hunks of fat-dripping Vortonian spider intestines, stuffing them into his mouth every six beats.

“Sir,” his second said. “The great Horsanakü have thanked you for your offer and say they will join us soon. However, the Bonka have refused and have offered their help to the Sashanian defenders of the treaty.”

“They change sides in fear of a single ship,” the Supreme Controller said, laughing, sending waves rolling through the pink wonderfulness of his giant body. “How soon until the Horsanakü arrive?”

“One feeding cycle.”

“Good,” the Supreme Controller said.

“Sir, will the Sashanians now defend this puny world?”

“Of course not,” he said, the rumbling of his stomach growing louder in protest against the interruption of a feeding cycle. “We only worry about one ship and how much new food we can carry back to our space with us.”

“Good,” his second said.

Just then the feeders jammed a large, whole Sanda bird into the Supreme Controller’s mouth and he allowed them to force it down without attempting to chew. He needed the strength it would supply him for the enjoyment that would soon be his.

On the screen in front of him, the single golden ship hung in space, waiting with the patience of the gods.

Chapter 28

11:24 A.M. Pacific Time, May 7, 2001 Just Inside Moon’s Orbit

“We have about fifty incoming calls,” Pro said, scanning his board.

Elle looked at the massive fleet stopped in space in front of them. Because of the Numen ship’s weird viewscreen system, it still felt as if they were just sitting exposed on a platform in space. Very exposed and very weak.

She couldn’t shake the feeling.

For the first few minutes after Jay had spoken his message, the feeling of

victory had sent the spirits of the humans soaring. The oncoming fleet had stopped cold in space. Jay had kidded about how his voice could stop anyone. But the other fleets behind it were still coming.

The euphoria had quickly yielded to so-jfji^ her reality.

They were one ship against fleets.

They stood no chance.

“Who is calling?” Jay asked.

Pro shrugged. “I have no idea,” he said. “I only recognize the Sashanian name from the moon base.”

“The alien guy Zed is always talkin’ to?” Jay asked.

“One and the same,” Pro said.

Jay glanced around at her, but she shook her head no.

“Look,” she said. “At this point we’ve played our bluff. We stand by it and fight if we have to.”

Jay nodded. “Agreed.”

Elle glanced around at the others. Everyone seemed to be doing very well at their post. The only one she had been worried about at all was Bright, but even the young computer expert had remained fairly calm. And Elle had to admit, she was getting used to the feeling of just sitting out in space. It was beautiful in a strange way.

Actually beautiful didn’t even come close to covering it. Spectacular was closer. It was no wonder the astronauts coming back from space when she was a kid always had so much trouble describing this beauty. There was nothing on the surface of Earth to compare to it.

She looked at the shapes of the attacking fleet. It made no sense that such a beautiful place as the Galaxy could have so many really ugly races in it, including the one sitting facing them now.

“Uh-oh,” Pro said.

“What?” Elle asked.

“The Zulla fleet in front of us has invited the two fleets behind them to join in destroying our phony ship and looting the Earth. In so many words.”

“Shit!” Jay said.

Elle didn’t like the sound of that. Their main hope was that the fleets would see their ship, hear their message, freak out, then turn tail and run. Seems that wasn’t going to happen. All they had accomplished was forcing the fleets to join up before attacking.

“Good news, bad news,” Pro said. “The next fleet in line, a race called the Bonka, have turned down the invitation and offered their help to the Numen and the Sashanian in defending the treaty.”

“Good news,” Jay said.

“The next fleet a few hours back agreed to join the jerks in front of us.”

“And that’s the bad news,” Jay said.

“How many ships do they have?” Elle asked. “Can we find that out?”

“Looks like a couple thousand,” Pro said. “One hour until arrival.”

“Plus the thousand ships in the fleet in front of us,” Jay said. “Just great. One against three thousand. I’d say we have about one hour left to enjoy the view.”

Elle stared out at the stars and caught faint images of the ships waiting to destroy Earth. She didn’t like Jay’s attitude, but she agreed with it.

Their bluff hadn’t worked. They needed a plan B, and they needed it fast.

She turned to Anthony. “What kind of weapons does this ship really have?”

Anthony snorted, then looked at her, a haunted look in his eyes. "This really was a ship of the gods," he said. "There are weapons here that could destroy all of those ships out there with one touch on this panel."

Jay glanced around. "You're kidding us, right?"

Elle watched as General Anthony Davis shook his head no. She could see it in his eyes: he wasn't kidding. But the real Anthony, the one they had rescued, was just a kid who wanted to ski. He had said at one point yesterday that he couldn't believe he had become a general in the army. He hated the thought of killing anything.

"Jay. Pro," Elle said. "Go with Anthony down to the library and absorb the information he shows you about the weapons systems."

"Good idea," Jay said. He tapped a button on his board and stood.

Anthony and Pro followed him down the stairs.

If there was going to be shooting, she didn't want a civilian to be doing the killing. It was the MiB's job to rid the Earth of alien scum and they would do it if they had to. Asking a kid in a general's body to assume the task wasn't right and just wouldn't work.

But firing a single weapon at an alien who was trying to kill humans was one thing. Firing and destroying entire ships full of aliens was another. And while she and Jay had downed their share of alien ships over the past year, Elle was now faced with the possibility of destroying an entire alien fleet.

And she knew that if it came down to doing that and saving Earth, she would do it.

Chapter 29

11:57 A.M. Pacific Time, May 7, 2001 Just Inside Moon's Orbit

Jay felt shaken after his session in the library with Anthony and Pro. There was no doubt, none at all, that the ship they were taking their little joyride in could blow the fleet of alien spaceships right out of space. In fact, the ship had about four or five different ways of doing it.

And it could blow up the second fleet that would soon be joining the first one just as easily.

As long as they had this ship sitting up here, there was no chance at all that Earth would be invaded by a fleet of ships.

None.

Zero.

Zip.

If any of them here could pull the trigger.

Jay moved back up the stairs and out onto what appeared at first glance to be a deck sitting in space with counters and chairs in a circle around the outside.

The Numen viewscreen system was so good at making the eye believe the walls and ceiling weren't there that Jay felt as if he was hanging out on a rooftop in the city. The sensation was both disconcerting and really cool at the same time. The highest possible rooftop, with no other taller buildings around it. He'd never actually been up on one like that, but he was sure this was what it would feel like.

Only difference here was that there was no wind and no smell like there would be on the rooftop in the city. Just the fantastic view of space around them and the Earth behind and below them.

Anthony took his old position at the weapons board, but didn't touch anything. Jay had assured him in the library that if any weapon had to be fired, he would fire it. For a moment there Jay thought the general was going to break into

tears, he was so relieved.

Now, after seeing what the weapons of this ship could do, Jay understood Anthony's feelings completely. He flat out didn't want to fire them either.

"Okay," Jay said to Elle, stopping beside her chair to talk. "I see it this way. We have two options."

"One?" she asked.

"We blow that fleet of alien ships out of space, then warn any other fleets that we will do the same thing if they challenge the treaty on this planet."

Elle nodded. "Option two?" Elle asked.

"We wait until they attack, then blow all of them away."

"Weapons are that strong, huh?" Elle asked looking him in the eye.

Jay nodded. "Those poor suckers out there don't stand a chance against us."

"Amazing," Elle said, "and I thought only one ship against fleets didn't stand a chance."

"No, fleets don't stand a chance against ships once built and owned by the gods," Jay said.

"Oh," Elle said.

"Believe him," Pro said. "They don't stand a chance."

Elle nodded.

"I don't like either option," Jay said. "But I honestly can't think of a third."

"I don't like them either," Elle said.

Jay didn't like the two options because both involved the destruction of entire fleets of alien ships. Granted, those ships out there were about to destroy all of humanity, but that still didn't shake Jay's feeling of being a child playing with a loaded pistol. They fire the shot and they'd have no idea what the final outcome of their act would be.

"Isn't there something we could blow up instead of the ships?" Sarah asked from her chair. "Show them how powerful we are without taking so many lives?"

"Option three," Jay said, clapping his hands.

"Perfect," Elle said.

"But we got to be doing it quickly," Jay said.

"Before that second fleet gets into position and we lose option one."

"And what do we blow up?" Elle asked.

Jay turned to Anthony. "I didn't get to the range lessons on these weapons. How far are we good for?"

Anthony shrugged, clearly happier with the idea of blowing up something other than ships. "Mars orbit safely, with any kind of accuracy."

"Wow!" Jay said.

"But there's nothing to blow up, I'm afraid," Elle said, "unless you want to destroy the moon and our friends on the far-side base there."

"Mars has two small moons," Jay said. "Would one of them do?"

"No," Pro said, staring at his screen. "Both on the far side of Mars at this point, plus Mars is on the other side of the sun. Too far away."

"Any asteroids—big ones—nearby?"

Pro studied his board, then shook his head. "Nothing."

"Back to option one and two," Elle said, sighing.

"Damn," Jay said, slamming his hand on the back of one chair. For an instant there he had felt better, but now the weight of this decision was bearing down on him again. He just wished they could contact Zed, get him to make the decision. But they didn't dare take that chance. There were too many alien eyes on them at this very moment.

“How about a game of chicken?” Bright asked, looking back at Jay.

“New option three,” he said, smiling at her. “Just might work.”

“You two want to explain it to the rest of us?” Elle asked.

“We give the fleet out there another Numen threat,” Jay said, flipping the hood of his Numen robe up to make the point. “This time we add a ticking clock whose time runs out just before the second fleet gets there.”

“Exactly,” Bright said.

“And what happens when they call our bluff?” Elle asked.

“We threaten to blow one of their ships out of space every Numen second until they leave.”

Elle nodded. “It just might work. Better than blowing up their entire fleet. But what happens if they start firing first? Can this ship take it?”

Jay glanced at Pro and both of them laughed. “That entire fleet out there could fire at us at once and they wouldn’t hurt this ship,” he said.

“You’re kidding, right?” Partner asked.

“Nope,” Pro said. “He’s actually underestimating the shielding on this thing.

All the ships coming in here wouldn’t even put a scratch on this thing.”

“I’m starting to like this ship more and more,” Elle said, laughing.

“Sort of like our LTD,” Jay said. “Looks simple, but has all sorts of really cool stuff.”

“Okay, everyone,” Elle said, “let’s play some chicken with the big bad aliens.”

“Pro, I need to know in Numen time how long until the other fleet arrives. I’ll set the clock just ahead of that.”

“Seventeen Dons,” Pro said. “About twenty minutes.”

“So I say fifteen Dons and we’re in,” Jay said, moving over and standing by one station of the wall near Pro’s station. The ship’s communication system would send his image from that point, with nothing but a plain background behind and around him. Another cool feature.

But just to make sure, Elle said, “Hoods up, hands out of sight, everyone.”

Jay did the same, making sure his hood was tilted far down in front of his face and his hands were far up inside his sleeves. Over and over in his head he repeated the words in Numen, making his voice low, calm, and clear.

“Ready when you are,” Pro said.

“Okay,” Jay said in Numen.

Keeping his head down, he counted to three as they had done with the first message, then spoke in Numen slowly and clearly.

“The fleet standing off this planet is in violation of the treaty governing this world. You have fifteen Dons to leave or we will take action. One of your ships will be destroyed every MaDon after that point until you leave or no ships remain. It is your choice.”

Jay counted to three, standing very still.

Then Pro said, “Clear.”

“Great job,” Elle said.

“Start the clock ticking,” Jay said in Numen, then realized what he had done and laughed, pushing the hood back.

They were all looking at him with questioning looks.

“You all right?” Elle asked.

“You sounded great,” Bright said. “Kinda spooky, though.”

“Sorry,” Jay said, shrugging. “Method acting. Got carried away.”

“Well, don’t do it again,” Elle said. “I don’t want you turning into a god on us.”

Pro laughed.

Jay just glared at him.

Chapter 30

18:41 Universal Time. May 7, 2001 Joint Earth Observation Base, Far Side Earth Moon

Beach-Grass-In-Limbo could not believe what his three eye stalks had just seen on the monitor. He had been prepared to watch the destruction of a planet he had sworn to guard; instead he had witnessed the return of the gods.

The Numens were back.

Or at least one ship was. But from his understanding of the Numen race, one ship was all that was needed to stop any fleet of ships.

More than enough, actually.

And then They-Who-Hated-All-Violence had stood where he had not dared stand: between the powerful fleets and the planet Earth.

Beach-Grass-In-Limbo's tentacles had become so agitated and twisted when this hap-pened, it had taken him a short calming session to untangle. But his profound embarrassment would not allow him to raise an eye stalk to his heaven for some time.

The Numen had come back to teach the way of peace again, using this backward planet as an example.

He, Beach-Grass-In-Limbo, commander of the Sashanian fleet and keeper of the treaty, vowed he would learn the lesson well, and not fail again.

But the Zulla fleet still challenged the gods' ship, and the prideful Horsanakü were going to do the same.

Such stupidity. It twisted his tentacles, it angered him so much.

Beach-Grass-In-Limbo let two of his tentacles wave in agitation, but managed to keep the others in control. Didn't the Zulla and Horsanakü know of the power of They-Who-Hated-All-Violence? Not even a race as undeveloped as the humans would be so foolish as to stand up to a Numen ship.

But it seemed that a million years of time had dulled the memories of the Zulla and the Horsanakü. But those years had not dulled his race's memory.

Beach-Grass-In-Limbo and his people would stand with the Numen, never against them.

Now the Numen ship had informed the Zulla that they had only a short time to effect their retreat.

This was so like what he had understood of the ways of the gods. They never killed unless they had to. And never more than they had to.

Ever.

It was what made them gods.

Beach-Grass-In-Limbo moved up close to his monitor screen, his eye stalks focused on the task, and sent his order.

"Move all Sashanian and treaty ships into position flanking the Numen ship, facing the Zulla.

"We will stand and fight with the gods."

His order was quickly obeyed.

The great Sashanian fleet moved into position.

Many other ships that were nearby joined the treaty fleet. All stayed back and to the side, out of the way of the gods' ship. It was as it should be.

The gods must lead.

Then, while the Numen countdown continued for the Zulla, the Bonka fleet joined the Sashanian fleet, standing with the treaty and the gods.

Beach-Grass-In-Limbo smiled and made soothing motions as he acknowledged the intelligence of the Bonka commander.

Again he let two tentacles wave. No fleet dared stand against the gods and the combined ships that now supported the treaty that protected the humans.

Yet the Zulla fleet did not leave.

The Numen countdown continued.

His tentacles moved in greater and greater agitation at the stupidity of the Zulla fleet commander.

No amount of pride was worth challenging the gods, They-Who-Hated-AH-Violence.

They could destroy entire fleets, all worlds, if needed.

And he knew they would do so.

He remembered the history.

They had done so in the past.

They would do so today. He knew it.

Beach-Grass-In-Limbo focused all three eye stalks on the monitor and watched and waited, as everyone in all the thousands of ships watched and waited.

It was a time of great tension, of great tanglings of tentacles.

Chapter 31

12:37 P.M. Pacific Time, May 7, 2001 Just Inside Moon's Orbit

"Six Dons left," Pro said.

Elle glanced at him, then out at the fleet facing them. Why weren't they moving?

Why were these aliens being so stupid?

Behind them and on both sides, great metallic Sashanian ships moved into position, facing the Zulla fleet. After a few minutes she knew there must be at least a thousand ships behind and around them. But all the ships clearly deferred to them as the leader and Elle didn't much like that at all.

"Sure feels better not to be alone out here," Jay said, studying the ships around them from his chair.

"Yeah," Elle said, "it does. Except they are all waiting for us to do something."

"We're playing chicken, remember," Jay said, laughing. "Chicken is a game of waiting until the last moment before blinking."

"Well," Elle said, "my stomach doesn't much like the game." Her stomach actually hadn't much liked anything about this flight except the spectacular view.

"I'll agree with that," Sarah said. "And the problem is, we can't blink."

"I know," Elle said. She had been thinking about that very problem. If the Zulla were stupid enough to call their bluff, they would have to start taking out ships, one at a time, every 1.7 seconds. And when that happened, who knew what the ships around them would do?

Chances were it would be a major bloodbath.

If she and Jay made the wrong move here, a lot of beings were going to die on both sides of this fight.

That thought cramped up her stomach even more.

"Five Dons," Pro said.

Around the control room that felt like a sundeck in space, the silence was thick. Not even Jay was his usual wisecracking self at the moment.

The silence dragged on.

More ships joined the fleet behind them.

The Zulla fleet still did not move.

Elle sat and stared at the ships, as if by her very will she could cause them to retreat and she and Jay could go back to being regular old MiB agents on good,

solid ground.

“Four Dons,” Pro said.

“Time flies when you’re having fun,” Jay said.

None of the civilians around the room looked as if they could speak. Anthony, who was still at the weapons board, looked like he was going to sweat himself right into a giant puddle.

“Jay, you’d better relieve Anthony,” Elle said. “Just in case things fire up faster than we want.”

Jay nodded, tapped a place on his board, and stood. Then he moved over and patted the general on the back.

“Thanks,” Anthony said, the relief clear in his voice as he stood and let Jay drop down into the chair.

Elle was glad she wasn’t sitting there. Both she and Jay were responsible here. But she didn’t want to be pulling the trigger on an entire fleet of ships unless she had to.

She was sure Jay didn’t want to any more than she did.

“Three Dons,” Pro said.

“They’re not blinking yet,” Elle said.

Jay shrugged. “Still time.”

The thick, heavy silence again filled the room.

Suddenly the openness of space and the unique viewscreens of the ship seemed to have the opposite affect on Elle. The blackness, the stars seemed to be shoving down on her, pushing her into the seat.

She forced herself to take a deep breath and the feeling receded a little.

But not much.

She sat, breathing steadily as the silence and the blackness of space pushed at her.

Around them the massive fleet was standing poised, waiting for their first action.

In front of them a massive fleet waited to attack them and then destroy Earth.

Standoff.

Draw.

A lot of beings were going to die very shortly. And if they didn’t win, then humanity was going to be added to that list.

“Two Dons,” Pro said.

“Blink,” Jay said to the Zulla fleet. “Blink, damn you.”

“They’re not going to,” Elle said softly. And she knew deep down inside that she was right.

Chapter 32

17D-Units26C-Units Inside Mars Orbit

The Supreme Controller let the feeders slip two giant Beenor slugs down his throat before he looked down at his second, who was at the moment cowering in front of him.

“Only three C-units left,” his second said.

The smaller creature had been reminding him of the countdown every unit since the Numen had started it. It was boring him, making his digestion slow, and that he didn’t like. It was time to take action, to seize the day, fling wide the gaping Zulla maw, and swallow what came with gusto.

“Be prepared to attack on my command,” the Supreme Controller ordered.

“What?” his second cried. “You want us to attack a Numen ship, plus the combined power of the Sashanian and treaty signers’ fleets?”



“Surprise is a very powerful weapon, my dear second,” the Supreme Controller said, ignoring the outrage of having his orders questioned by a junior officer.

“We will scatter them before they are aware of being hit.”

The feeders dropped two more snails down his throat, one after another. Then he looked directly at his second. “Now give the order.”

“I will do as you—” He paused, looked pained, then stared at the Supreme Controller. “Another fleet approaches at high speed.”

Then his second did something that in all the years of history the Supreme Controller had never heard of being done. His second simply screamed, a high-pitched gurgling noise, and dropped to the floor, his mass spread out like a mate in heat, waiting to be mounted by a Larger-than-Large.

The Supreme Controller could see others in the ship’s control room doing the same, dropping to the floor, whimpering as if lost.

“Put the other fleet on the screen!” he shouted, smashing the feeders out of his way.

The image appeared on his monitor.

It was another small fleet of ships coming in very, very fast. Faster than anything he knew of in all the Galaxy. Three hundred, maybe four hundred ships at most.

Why would a mere four hundred ships cause such problems with his second and the others.

Then he understood what had caused his second to scream. And the knowledge caused him to release his bowels far ahead of schedule, emptying fluids in a flood through the units below. Fluids and mass that would take him many units of time to replenish.

“Send the order to retreat at once!”

He actually hadn’t needed to send such an order. All of his ships were already turning and fleeing.

The massive Horsanakü fleet was also turning and racing away as the four hundred new ships took up positions near the first Numen ship.

At first the Supreme Controller hadn’t believed that the gods had actually returned. He would never run away from one ship.

But now he knew for sure the gods were here.

And they had brought an entire fleet with them.

He knew the legends. Not even the combined forces of all the races in all of the Galaxy could stand up to the four hundred ships of the Numen fleet.

And he wasn’t about to be the one to prove that point again.

“Food,” he demanded, glancing out of the corner of his eye for his feeders. “I need food for the long trip home.”

On the floor near his massive bulk, his second continued to sob.

He would need a new second, it seemed, as well.

Chapter 33

12:42 P.M. Pacific Time, May 7, 2001 Just Inside Moon’s Orbit

“We are so screwed,” Jay said, standing beside Elle and staring out at the fleet of Numen ships that had come in and taken up positions around them.

Elle said nothing.

All the ships looked identical to the ship they were in. Only he couldn’t believe there were four hundred of them. And then there was the biggest question of all: where had they come from?

“The Zulla and Horsanakü fleets are running like scared rabbits,” Pro said.

“Earth is saved.”

“Maybe,” Jay said, turning slowly to stare at the Numen fleet.

“Maybe not,” Elle said.

“So what happens next?” Jay asked, more to the ships out there than to anyone in the room.

“I’d say we’re in big trouble for borrowing their ship, that’s what,” Elle said.

Jay laughed. “Well, it was a good idea at the time.”

“Famous last words,” Elle said.

“Let’s hope not,” Jay said. “Now who’s being discouraging?”

She just shrugged.

“Got a message coming in from one of the Nu-men ships,” Pro said. “You want to take the call, or should I say you’re out?”

“Is it secured so none of the other races can listen in?”

Pro stared at his board for a moment, then nodded. “It is.”

Jay slipped off his Numen robe, adjusted his black suit and tie, and then

quickly moved over to the correct place to stand. Then he nodded to Pro.

In front of him the holographic image of a Numen, hood covering his face, appeared.

In Numen, Jay said, “We are honored to meet you. Your quick actions saved our planet and our race. Thank you.”

Jay hoped that thanking them for their help was a good way to start a conversation with a god.

The Numen pushed its hood back. Its large, black eyes seemed to radiate warmth and comfort, even though it was only a hologram. Instantly Jay felt far less fear than he had a moment before.

“We did nothing but return for our ships. The activation of this ship signaled us that it was time.”

“We will gladly help retrieve all the others on the surface,” Jay said.

“Thank you,” the Numen said. “We will need your help, to stay within the treaty that covers the dealings with your culture. You did promise our support of the treaty, did you not?”

“I did, posing as one of you,” Jay said. “And for such actions, I beg your forgiveness. I did it only to save our planet.”

“You and your race have done well for such a remote part of the Galaxy. Your actions are understood. We will honor the promise made on our behalf. One of our number is asking if you understood the power of the weapons of the ship you now stand on?”

“We did,” Jay said. “We hoped never to use them. We worked not to use them.”

The Numen nodded. “Your race shows promise. We will be watching. Now, please follow us into deep space, away from these other ships so that we may maintain the secrecy of your actions. We will return you to your home base shortly under shield.”

“You are more than kind,” Jay said, bowing slightly.

The image of the Numen vanished.

Jay allowed himself to lean against the back of the nearest chair and breathe.

In all his years he had never, ever been so nervous.

Around him the others broke into applause.

“Ten seconds until departure,” Pro shouted.

“Jay, you need to fly this thing,” Elle said. “Remember?”

“Oh, yeah.”

Jay jumped into the pilot’s chair and let the feel of the controls snap his mind back to attention.

In front of him their flight plan was marked by a green line on the holographic display. The other Numen ships in the fleet were marked on the display by blue dots. He just hoped they went slow enough for him to keep up.

“Three,” Pro said. “Two... one... now!”

Jay moved the ball upward and around, pushing the throttle up so that the ship turned with the rest of the fleet and sped into deep space, away from the planet Earth.

“Amazing!” Elle said as the Earth shrank to a point behind them almost instantly.

Around them the stars moved faster and faster as they gained speed, Jay keeping their ship in perfect position with the rest of the Numen fleet.

Then, as his hand eased on the controls, letting the ship move almost on its own, he realized he was smiling.

In all his life he had never imagined doing such a thing as this. But from now on, when fighting a smelly alien, or getting basketball-game tickets for an important visiting dignitary from another planet, he would remember this moment. The moment that he, Jay, a street-smart cop from New York City, had flown among the stars with the gods.

Chapter 34

1:56 P.M. May?, 2001 Coastal Mountains, Oregon

The familiar smell, the roughness of the seats, everything about the LTD felt just great to Jay as they sat and talked with Zed on the secure link. The air-conditioning was running and the sun was beating down through the Oregon trees around them. Pro’s containment crew were in their van parked behind them. Anthony, Sarah, Charles, and Bright had all been flown by helicopter to Portland, where they would be given new memories and cover stories for the time they had spent with Billie.

Both Jay and Elle had wanted to accompany their civilian crew to help them adapt to a real life, but Pro had convinced them that they would just get in the way.

As he had put it, “The best thing we can do for them is return them to at least a part of their old lives in the quickest fashion possible.”

Finally both Jay and Elle had agreed, after Jay had remembered how well it had worked for Kay.

Jay and Elle had given a summary report to Zed of what had happened, even though he’d been following much of it from his office, almost totally alone in the MiB Immigration Center. Only he and the twins had hung around, it seemed.

“I just about peed my pants when that Numen fleet showed up,” Zed said, laughing.

“You?” Elle said. “You ought to see four hundred of those ships up close in space. Scared the hell out of me.”

Jay had to admit it had scared him, too. And talking to them hadn’t helped that much. He had been convinced that he and Elle had committed a deadly sin by taking their ship and that all humanity was going to have to pay for it.

But, as things turned out, they had made exactly the right moves all the way down the line.

Luck. Just plain simple good luck.

“And,” Zed said, “I thought I’d lost you all when you and the entire fleet vanished into deep space. That was some sight on the big board, let me tell you.”

“What?” Jay asked, laughing. “You thought we’d joined up with them? Or that we were kidnapped? Or maybe were going to be punished?”

“All three,” Zed said.

Elle laughed. “We had the same thoughts before they told us what they were going to do.”

Jay had to admit that the flight into deep space had been something he would always remember. He never wanted to do it again, but he was glad he got the chance once.

“So what all happened out there?” Zed asked.

“Nothing, actually,” Elle said.

“True,” Jay said. “A few hundred light-years out, another Numen craft linked up with our ship.”

“In mid-flight?” Zed asked. “Impressive.”

“Everything about them is impressive,” Elle said.

“Also true,” Jay said. “One of the new crew asked us to move downstairs into the kitchen-and-lounge area.”

“Got no argument from you, I’ll bet,” Zed said, again laughing.

“Not a word,” Elle said. “And twenty minutes later there we were, standing outside the car here in the trees in Oregon.”

“Captain was sure glad to see us back,” Jay said.

Zed laughed. “I’ll bet. And Junior, that was one great talk you had with them. I got the meat of it from Pro’s report. I want a word-for-word from you later. But for now, nice job.”

Jay smiled. It was rare when Zed gave a compliment. He wasn’t even going to make a joke in return. “Just told them the truth, boss. Figured that was the safer way to go.”

“And you were right,” Zed said, the smile still rilling his face. “Good policy never to lie to a god.”

Smoke from a cigar slowly curled up along the edges of the picture, but Zed didn’t puff it in front of them. Clearly a cigar was a private moment thing for him.

“You talk to the Numen yet about their other ships?” Jay asked.

“Yup,” Zed said. “They’re going to come back and start getting them in a couple of years. They figure things will have cooled down in this area by then. They want us to guard the ships for them until then. No touching, of course.”

“Of course,” Elle said, laughing.

“Actually,” Zed said, chuckling to himself, “there’s only going to be about ten of us total in all of MiB who know where the ships even are. Or that they even exist.”

“Another classified file, huh?” Jay asked.

“You got it in one, Junior.”

“And I assume the treaty is in good condition now?”

“Perfect,” Zed said. “The Sashanians are bending over backward to help us now. We’re still cleaning up the mess all over the world, though. Which reminds me, there’s work for you two to do near there.”

“No rest for the weary space travelers, huh?” Elle asked.

“Nope,” Zed said, the smile still filling his face. “I’ll download the information on your new assignment to you. Clean it up and get your asses back here.”

“Gladly,” Jay said, thinking about walking the streets of New York again. It would be wonderful.

Zed signed off and Elle picked up the com link that put them in touch with the containment truck behind them. “Heads up, boys,” she said. “We’re back to work.”

“Got it,” Pro said. “We’re right behind you.”

Twenty minutes later, with Jay driving, they had wound their way up an old logging road to a clearing high in the coastal mountain range. There, a Grazer had landed and had been eating for almost two full days. He’d been so far away from civilization that MiB hadn’t cared about him until the cleanup phase was under way. There was no sign of the alien’s ship, though.

“He’s as big as a small trailer,” Jay said, totally disgusted, climbing out of the LTD and staring at the giant alien eating the brush.

“Got any ideas?” Elle asked.

“None,” Jay said. And he didn’t.

“There’s no chance we can stuff him back in his ship,” Elle said.

“Are you willing to try?” Jay asked, shocked.

“Not in the slightest,” Elle said. “I’m never getting near one of those Grazer ships again.”

“Found the ship,” Pro said, coming back through the trees toward them. “About a hundred yards in that direction. Got a tow ship coming in to toss it into the sun.”

“Perfect,” Jay said. “Better take cover.”

Moving back and standing in the door of the LTD, he took out his Atomizer.

Elle opened the other door of the car and stood in the same fashion.

Pro quickly climbed into the backseat and closed the door.

“Ready to uninvite a guest?” Jay asked.

“Ready,” Elle said.

“On three,” he said.

“Three,” she said.

At the same moment they both fired, the image of the rotting carcasses in that Grazer spaceship clear in Jay’s mind. His job was to rid the planet Earth of alien scum and that was exactly what they were doing.

The beast exploded like a kid’s balloon being popped by a pin.

The sound was a sickening kern-thump!

“Duck!” Jay shouted, and dove behind the steering wheel of the LTD, slamming the door closed behind him just in time.

Elle did the same on the passenger side.

Grazer guts, half-digested food, and green slime rained down on the car, pounding it hard for a second before stopping.

“It be rainin’ gopher guts,” Jay said.

“Yuck,” Elle said.

“Good fertilizer for the forest, though,” Pro said.

“That reminds me.” Jay glanced over at Elle as the slime and Grazer fat ran down the windows around them.

“What?” she asked.

He smiled. “We haven’t had lunch yet.”

Epilogue

9:38 P.M. November 27, 2001 Timberline Ski Area, Oregon

Anthony Davis stood on the top of the hill, his skis adjusted comfortably under him on the new snow. Behind him the night-skiing lights bathed the slope in a warm glow. In front of him, a thousand or more feet down through the trees, the lights of Hood River were brighter than he remembered them being thirty-one years earlier. The town was bigger; more people lived along the Columbia River near there, too.

Things had changed. Actually, a great deal had changed, but he was discovering

that he didn't mind so much.

It felt good to be back.

skiing this run, at this time of night, was the last thing he remembered clearly. His doctor had said it was a good idea to return to the scene of the "accident."

Even to the very time.

Thirty-one years before, as a young man, he'd fallen on a night-skiing run and hit his head, changing his personality. After that he had quit skiing, become a general in the army, or so they told him. He had to believe them, even though he didn't much remember. They had pictures.

His doctor had said it was normal in cases like his for his original personality, his original memories, to suddenly return, erasing the years of being a general as if they had never happened. But the accident had taken thirty-one years of his life from him, made him into a different person during those years. It had also given him a very generous retirement from the army, enough to permit him to ski all the time if he wanted.

At least that much was good.

He had decided that skiing all the time was exactly what he wanted to do with the rest of his life. He had spent the summer skiing in Australia, and now he was back here, in his old hometown, on his old hill, night-skiing on the now much-expanded and modernized hill.

But changed or not, it was still his home. And he cherished the memories of skiing here. They felt almost as if they were just yesterday.

Above him the stars shone clear. The night was cold, without much wind.

He stared at the sky for a minute, thinking about what might be out there. Since his original personality had returned, he had had an odd yearning to look at the stars. He didn't know why. He just accepted it, just as he was learning to accept so much else.

With one more long look at the stars, then a quick glance at the valley below, he turned and started down the mountain, to finish the run he hadn't finished all those years ago.

He was skiing.

Life was good.

Everything was as it should be.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

DEAN WESLEY SMITH is an award-winning and best-selling writer. He has sold over forty novels and hundreds of short stories under varied names. Besides his own novels, he has written books in the worlds of Star Trek, Spider-Man, X-Men, Aliens, Predator, Shadow Warrior, and others. He has won the World Fantasy Award and been nominated numerous times for Hugo Awards, Nebula Awards, and Stoker Awards. His most recent Men in Black novel was *The Green Saliva Blues*, available from Bantam Books. Dean lives on the Pacific Coast with his wife, writer and editor Kristine Kathryn Rusch.