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# Slan Hunter

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## *Part 1*

### CHAPTER 1



The world was already falling apart when her first contractions hit.

“Perfect timing—” Anthea Stewart clenched her teeth to stop a hiss of pain, holding her rounded abdomen.

Beside her, driving recklessly, her husband Davis said, “Don’t worry, Anth. I’ll get you there in time.” He took a hard right so that the wide whitewalled tires squealed on the asphalt. “Plenty of time. Don’t you worry about a thing.” The hospital was just ahead. He accelerated.

“Why are you telling *me* not to worry? Because you’re doing all the work?”

“I’m doing every bit as much as I can.” He flashed her a grin so full of love that she forgot

the pain. Then Anthea gripped the handrest as she concentrated on the spasms, the clenching of her muscles, and the restless baby inside her.

She felt a strange, bittersweet anticipation. Soon, the healthy infant she had carried for nine months would emerge into the world. He would no longer be an integral part of her, and their lives would be permanently changed. But Anthea looked forward to it with anticipation as well as trepidation. She would stop being a “pregnant woman” and become a “mother”; they would stop being a “married couple” and become a “family.” The thought brought a smile to her lips. So many changes ahead!

The AM radio blared, laced with occasional threads of static, as the edgy-sounding announcer talked about the current crisis. Davis had turned on the car radio as he drove, hoping for some soothing music for his wife, but the emergency broadcasts were not comforting. “Slan attack imminent. Radar images show the possibility of numerous enemy ships approaching.”

Anthea wiped sweat from her forehead and turned to look at him. Davis was alarmingly pale, disturbed by the tense news as well as having the jitters of an expectant father. He turned the knob again, trying a different station.

“—President Kier Gray arrested. The world has been rocked to learn that their leader was secretly a slan in disguise. The noted slan hunter John Petty, chief of the secret police, has assumed provisional control of the government after making the arrest himself. Several of the President’s cabinet members, also shown to be slans, were killed in the altercation. Gray’s arrest raises the uncomfortable question of how many more of the telepathic mutants might be living among us, completely unnoticed.”

Davis snapped off the radio in disgust. “I guess we’ll just have to hum if we want music.” A slow-moving car driven by an old man hunched over the steering wheel swerved out of the way as Davis rushed past.

“How could Kier Gray be a slan?” Anthea said, trying to distract herself. “I thought they all had tendrils coming out the back of their heads. He couldn’t possibly have hidden what he was.”

“Don’t underestimate how devious they can be. They use makeup, prosthetics, hair pieces to cover up their tendrils. It really is a conspiracy.” He stared intently ahead as he drove. “I wish we’d just wiped them all out during the Slan Wars.”

She squeezed her eyes shut, trying to sound conversational despite the spasms, but she failed miserably. “It’s not ... as if ... we didn’t try.”

The telepathic humans were physically superior, with great strength and improved healing abilities; they considered themselves a master race. Long ago, the mutant slans had tried to dominate and enslave the rest of humanity. Centuries of warfare ensued as brave humans fought slans, defeated them, and drove the few survivors into hiding.

Though the media was rife with rumors about an expansive underground slan organization and numerous concealed bases, only a few loners were ever caught. Sinister slan ships occasionally flew over the great cities on Earth, sometimes dropping off messages, other times just gathering reconnaissance. Obviously, the slans were building their numbers, gearing up

for some sort of concerted attack. No wonder humanity was terrified.

Somehow, though, being with Davis made her feel safe, no matter what the radio news said. Her husband had brown eyes in contrast with her blue ones, dark curly hair as opposed to her straight, strawberry blonde. But Anthea and Davis Stewart were not opposites: They had been soul mates since their first meeting. Some romantics called it “love at first sight”; others talked about chemistry and matching personalities. From the moment she had met Davis, it seemed their very heartbeats had synchronized. They had known they were meant for each other. Now with the coming baby, their love, their family, would be stronger than ever before.

Unbearable affection seeped through the concern on his face like fresh rain washing away a stain. “It won’t be long now, Anth. Just hang on.”

After riding through another contraction, she gave him a strange smile. “No, Davis ... no, it won’t. But I don’t think I can concentrate on politics anymore ... okay?”

Davis raced toward the tall, brown-brick Centropolis General Hospital, turning into the marked driveway for the emergency room entrance. He wasn’t going to let even a planet-sized war get in the way of the medical attention his wife needed. He pulled up to the curb in front of the double doors, then jammed the shift lever into park and opened his door all in one gesture. “Just wait here. I’ll get somebody.”

Anthea was tempted to walk by herself into the emergency room, but then another contraction hit, harder than the previous ones. “All right,” she gasped. “I’ll just wait here.”

Running into the hospital with his hair mussed, awkwardly waving his arms, Davis looked utterly adorable. She knew she would never forget that sight.

Anthea closed her eyes and counted, trying to time the contractions, though it was merely a trick to occupy her mind. She had always been able to shunt aside pain, to concentrate on her body. Did all mothers feel so connected to their babies? It wanted to come out—*he* wanted to be born, and she experienced an inexplicable confidence that the delivery would be smooth. She had nothing to worry about.

Davis returned in less than a minute, pushing a wheelchair. A gangly orderly jogged along beside her husband, scolding him and trying to wrest the wheelchair from him, but Davis wanted to do this himself. The two men quickly helped Anthea out of the car and into the emergency room waiting area. The orderly shouted for a nurse, who in turn shouted for a doctor, and they all rushed toward the delivery room.

Anthea looked up just long enough to see several policemen milling about in the emergency room. A grim-looking, dark-suited man wore an armband with the insignia of the secret police, a scarlet hammer across a web. A slan hunter here in the hospital? Her thoughts were fuzzy, but she realized that if the slans were going to attack Centropolis, many casualties would be pouring into this medical center. Slan terrorists probably thought the hospital would be a good place to sabotage. What if one of them took her baby? She had heard of the terrible things slans did to babies...

The man with the armband was scolding a plump woman behind the reception desk. “I must insist, ma’am. The secret police have the legal authority to inspect all of your admissions records. I want your carbon copies.”

While halfheartedly clacking away on her manual typewriter, she popped her pink gum with a sound like the shot from a toy gun. "Sir, don't you think that if we found a slan in our treatment rooms we would report it?"

"I need to look at blood tests and any x rays. Their internal organs are different from ours, you know. President Gray was a slan in disguise—we can't trust anyone. We have evidence that there may be a new breed of slans, ones that don't have tendrils."

The receptionist continued typing as she talked. "Surgically removed so that they can infiltrate our society better? I assure you, we would notice such scars."

The man from the secret police scowled. "That is not for you to decide, ma'am. These new mutations may even be born without the tendrils. In fact, some of them might not even know they're slans."

The receptionist chuckled nervously. "Oh, come now! How can they not know?"

With a grim expression, the man simply held out his hand. The plump receptionist heaved a put-upon sigh and turned in her swivel chair. She opened a gray metal filing cabinet and pulled out the curling carbon-copy records of all recent admissions. Her expression made it perfectly clear that she thought the secret policeman was wasting her precious time.

The gangly orderly ran back out into the waiting area. "Delivery Room 4 is ready." In a rush, he and Davis wheeled Anthea down the hall. A nurse opened the swinging door, but then she put out a stern hand. "Mr. Stewart, I'm afraid you'll have to wait out here."

"I want to be with my wife." Davis craned his neck to look after her.

"Sorry, sir. Men aren't allowed inside the delivery room. Go wait with the other nervous fathers. Hand out cigars to each other."

Anthea saw his deeply disappointed frown. "Don't worry, Davis. I'll be fine. I'll be here."

He gave her hand a squeeze. "I love you."

"You can prove it by changing more than your share of diapers," she joked. Then the contractions hit again, and she knew the baby was close.

The rest happened in a blur. She was on the delivery table, her feet up in stirrups. The doctor, an older man with owlish eyes behind round spectacles, muttered reassuringly, but the words sounded as if he had memorized them from a script, praises and encouragement that he used many times a week.

The nurses seemed concerned. Even the doctor was tense, no doubt because of the news on the radio. One of the nurses said in a quiet voice as if expecting that Anthea couldn't hear her, "I don't know what kind of world that poor baby's going to be born into. If the slans take over and enslave us all—"

"Enough of that, Nurse! We have our jobs to do. There are no slans here, only this woman and her baby, and I'm determined to see that it's born healthy—healthy enough to fight for the human race, if it comes to that." He patted Anthea on the shoulder. "Now don't you worry, young lady. Just push. I'm going to coach you through this."

She closed her eyes. She and Davis were both fit and strong. She couldn't remember the last time either of them had even been sick. Yes, the baby would be just fine.

"Now, push again," the doctor said.

The nurse leaned closer, encouraging. "Push, honey—as hard as you can."

Anthea did as she was told. It was what her body wanted to do.

The doctor leaned over. "That's perfect. Easy, now. I can see the top of the head. You're almost there."

Anthea felt a compulsion to press harder, not to let up. The rush of increased pain didn't matter. She wished Davis could be there holding her hand, but she reassured herself with the knowledge that he was just outside the delivery room door. She pushed and pushed again, and then she knew the baby was coming. Tears streamed through her shut eyes. With a rush of release, she felt it flow out—her son, a new life, a child emerging into the open air.

"That's it. Here it comes. I have him." The doctor held up a slick, red infant. She heard the baby start to cry as it gasped its first breath.

"Mrs. Stewart, you have a fine little boy—" The doctor halted in mid-sentence. "Good Lord!"

The nurse began to scream.

"How can this be?" The doctor still held up the baby, but now his face bore a look of disgust. "How can this happen?"

Anthea struggled to sit upright. She felt utterly exhausted and drained; her strawberry-blonde hair was plastered with sweat to her head. "What is it? I want my baby."

The doctor looked at her with an expression of horror, his mouth open. Anthea glanced up to see the newborn baby.

He had tiny twisting tendrils coming out the back of his head.

## CHAPTER 2

« ^ »

The President of Earth, leader of billions, commanded a certain amount of respect. For decades Kier Gray had been a strong and charismatic ruler. He led with a mixture of sternness and compassion, guiding the citizenry along a dangerously narrow path between paranoid terror and complacency.

Now, though, as the secret police dragged him down the stone-walled hall, Gray was no longer treated with much respect. Until now, no one had ever suspected the President's true heritage as a hidden slant, his actual alliances, the covert work he had done among the surviving slants on Earth. The secret police grabbed him roughly by the arms and pulled him along. Gray

knew exactly where they were taking him.

John Petty, the chief of the secret police and notorious slan hunter, waited for his deposed leader inside the primary command-and-control center deep beneath the grand palace. Around him, technicians studied cathode-ray tubes, receiving reports from all their operatives.

“Hail to the President,” Petty said with feigned applause. He had short, dark hair, brows that looked like smudges of soot, and glittering eyes like the buttons on his dark uniform. The chief slan hunter seemed satisfied to see the great Kier Gray so helpless.

The guards shoved the President forward, catching his ankles and knocking him to his knees. Petty looked down at him as if he were no more than a discarded cigarette butt in the rain gutter. “We’ve already rooted out and killed dozens of slans working in the palace. Others have fled like rats in the night. Whatever you were planning, it’s over—and I’m in charge now.”

Gray didn’t curse, didn’t protest his innocence, but simply looked up at the bloodthirsty man who had long been his rival. During his long administration, he had weathered numerous conspiracies, assassination attempts, and back-stabbings. Only hours ago he had watched the guards shoot down three of his trusted advisors—true slans—in a shielded cabinet room. All of his quiet plans had crumbled in less than a day; he’d gone from great hope and optimism to this disaster.

Gray recovered his dignity. “I don’t suppose you have any basis for these treasonous actions, Mr. Petty? Or is the rule of law simply an inconvenience you’d rather not bother with right now?”

“Law? Allow me to cite the Emergency Powers Act: ‘In these times of perpetual crisis, any person suspected of being a slan or in league with slans is to be held for immediate questioning. The due process of law is suspended in such cases for the benefit of national security.’ ”

Gray’s anger flared. His secret organization had worked so hard, been so careful ... but not careful enough. Over the years, the President had even authorized quiet assassinations of people who posed a threat, advisors who accidentally discovered too much about the slans. He’d had no choice but to replace them with a small band of loyal comrades dedicated to changing the world and ending centuries of unnecessary witch hunts. He had *thought* his plans were secure...

Petty crossed his arms over his chest. “We caught you meeting with the infamous slan rebel Jommy Cross in your private quarters. We have recordings in your own voice revealing that the slan specimen you kept in your palace, Kathleen Layton, is your own daughter.”

“Where are Kathleen and Cross? Did you just shoot them, like you executed my cabinet members?”

The slan hunter paced inside the command-and-control center. “Oh, we didn’t execute those two—not yet. They’re too valuable. They have been taken to the detention cells in the lower levels of the palace. You need not worry about their welfare.”

*If you aren’t careful, John Petty, Gray thought, you may need to worry more about your own welfare.* Despite his obsessive fear, he would probably underestimate Jommy and Kathleen.

Gray hoped that some of the unobtrusive slans working around the government center had managed to escape and disappear.

When he'd surreptitiously met with young Jommy Cross, Gray had explained the situation among slans and humans. Very few knew that the true danger came from a different group of mutants, slans born *without tendrils*, who had infiltrated society while preparing to launch their takeover. The tendrillless passionately hated both humans and slans and meant to exterminate both rival races, leaving themselves the sole inheritors of the Earth.

Jommy had infiltrated the main tendrillless base on Mars, where he had found startling information about an imminent invasion. Returning to Earth, he had slipped through the palace's defenses to warn the President. After they had begun to make plans, Jommy returned with his own highly advanced car and a deadly disintegrator weapon invented by his father. For only one day, President Gray had believed that he and his shadow government—including Jommy and Kathleen—could change the world.

Then the secret police had arrested them all.

"I myself confiscated Cross's unusual weapons—something he called a disintegrator tube and a ring with an embedded atomic generator. Amazing little things." Petty's lips quirked in a smile. He seemed in control of himself, in charge of the situation, but Gray could sense just a hint of uneasiness in his demeanor. "I gave the items to one of my isolated research teams, but as soon as they tampered with the ring, it dissolved. Now my people have strict orders to exercise extreme caution in their investigations of the disintegrator tube. Once we disassemble it, we'll add it to our own arsenal. *My* arsenal. Hmm, we might even use it to execute you. That would be quite an irony!"

The deposed President rose to his feet, squared his shoulders, and faced the slan hunter. "I'm surprised that I wasn't 'accidentally killed' resisting arrest. It would save you a great deal of time in your coup d'etat."

"A coup? I prefer to call it my transition to a new slan-free government." Petty scratched his blunt chin as he pretended to consider options. "Killing you would waste too much propaganda value. I look forward to hauling you before the world courts, exposing you as a slan, and discrediting all your works, all your supposed peace conferences with the enemy. Somehow, you have had your tendrils removed, or you were born without them—a mutant among mutants!—but I'm positive that genetics tests will reveal slan genes in your DNA."

Despite their vastly diminished numbers, slans were still feared as bogeymen. During his presidency, Gray himself had been forced to play upon that fear because it was the only way to survive politically, but he had managed to remove the teeth from the most vicious proposals.

Petty had stalked around behind the President, but Gray didn't turn to follow him. "You have had your theatrics, but you'll have a far more difficult time proving that any of my actions in office harmed the human race."

"Prove? Simply *existing* as a slan is a treasonous act. You knowingly deceived the people of Earth. I, on the other hand, will be held up as a hero of mankind for removing yet another terrible threat. Slans in our own government, in the presidency itself!" He gave another one of his smiles. "Your scheme is over, Gray. From now on, it's simply a mop-up operation. It will save me a lot of difficulty, and you a lot of pain, if you just confess and reveal how many



members of your cabinet are secretly slans.”

“There aren’t any,” Gray insisted.

The slan hunter rolled his eyes. “Your advisors and cabinet members were sound asleep with their wives or mistresses. We rounded them up and found out that several of them had slan tendrils in the backs of their heads, hidden by prosthetics. We’ve already killed them. Next, we’ll dig through the records to find out who cooperated with your most destructive policies. It won’t be difficult to prove collusion and thereby treason against humanity. You see, I have all the angles!”

When more men came into the command center and delivered their reports, Petty seemed upset, ready to strike the messenger. He turned back to the President. “We’ve just uncovered the identity of one of your main co-conspirators. I never would have suspected it.” He scratched his head. “Then again, it makes a certain amount of sense.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Gray said.

“Your chief advisor, Jem Lorry, has vanished. He disappeared like a puff of smoke, as if he knew what we were planning.” Petty balled his fists. “Could he read it in our minds? Did you send him a telepathic message?”

Gray did not need to pretend his confusion. He had appointed Jem Lorry years ago, after a particularly close assassination attempt. Lorry had served extremely well ever since, taking a hardline stance against slans. He had even proposed an innovative if preposterous scheme to marry lovely young Kathleen. Lorry wanted to breed with her in (according to him) an attempt to water down the slan genes, to gradually erase them over a few generations. Lorry had been very angry when Kathleen rebuffed his advances, but Gray was personally pleased that the girl managed to get out of the trap.

“Honestly, I had nothing to do with his disappearance.” The President was far more concerned about his own survival and even above that, the survival of his daughter Kathleen and Jommy Cross, the hope of humanity. “You should know that Jommy Cross came to warn me—to warn all of us—of an impending attack on Earth. Another group of slans, tendrillless slans, have built a large base on Mars and recently launched their battle fleet against us. The tendrillless mean to destroy us all.”

“Yes, yes, and you and Jommy Cross are our only hope.” He yawned extravagantly. “I’m not buying it.”

## CHAPTER 3

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Lying on the table in the hospital delivery room, Anthea struggled to comprehend what she had seen. Her baby had tendrils! *Slan tendrils!*

Impossible. Completely impossible.

The doctor, seemingly in shock, quickly cut the umbilical cord and tied it off. "Pay attention!" he snapped at the nurse, who stood staring. "Save the mother first. Then we'll take care of ... of that abomination."

"No!" Anthea was weak, but she found the strength to prop herself up on her elbows. "What happened to my baby? Why is—" She tried to make sense of it, but all she could remember was the conversation between the plump receptionist and the man from the secret police. *How can they not know that they're slans?*

Two normal people wouldn't have a slan baby, would they? Anthea couldn't accept that she herself might have been one of those slans without tendrils, and probably Davis as well. Ridiculous! She had never imagined such a thing. They were both healthy, they both healed swiftly, and the two of them had felt a mutual bond that went beyond anything they shared with other humans. *Normal* humans. She felt sick.

"Doctor," she gasped. "What's going to happen?"

He ignored her question as he set the baby down. When he turned to the nurse, his voice was cold and brittle. "Get me a full syringe of hydroxylex-black."

"Yes, Doctor." The nurse looked hardened now, no longer hysterical. "It's what we have to do."

Anthea felt a surge of uneasiness within her. "Davis!" she called, but her voice was alarmingly thin.

The gangly orderly assisting with the delivery finally shook himself out of his surprise. "Doctor, the procedure is clear. We have to report this to the secret police."

"Yes, they're already here in the building," the doctor said, his voice shaky. "Alert security. John Petty himself might want to talk with these two. Make sure the father doesn't leave." He shot a sidelong glance at Anthea on the operating table, as if she were a particularly nauseating specimen. The doctor no longer seemed to consider her human at all. The nurse handed him a long syringe filled with a dark, oily substance.

"What are you going to do with that?" Anthea demanded, struggling to turn. "Answer me!" She heard a commotion outside the doors to the delivery room.

"Don't worry," the doctor said to her with cool reassurance. "This will be quick and painless. Your baby won't feel a thing." He bent over where her newborn baby lay helpless on the adjacent operating table, extending the ominous hypodermic needle.

A surge of panic shot through her heart and mind like a fire siren. It wasn't just her own fear, but something tangible, a wave of panic transmitted by the tendrils of her baby—her slan baby.

The shouts grew louder outside the delivery room, then the swinging doors crashed open. Davis stood there, looking both angry and terrified, his fists clenched. The gangly orderly tried to block him, but Davis knocked him aside with a roundhouse punch. She had never seen him hit anybody before in her life.

"Davis! They're trying to kill our baby." Another blast of emotions seemed to be directed at Anthea and at Davis. The newborn infant somehow understood that these two were his

parents!

When Davis saw the doctor bending over the baby with the long, wicked syringe, he charged forward. "What do you think you're doing?"

Screaming again, the nurse tried to throw herself in the way, but Davis knocked her aside as if she were an empty cardboard box. The stunned orderly had gotten to his feet and staggered out of the delivery room, bawling for guards.

Davis fought with the owl-eyed doctor, grabbed the hand that held the poison-filled hypodermic needle and slowly twisted it away. "You're a *doctor*. You're not supposed to kill people! You're trying to murder a baby!"

"It's not human."

When Davis spotted the tendrils on the baby, *his baby*, he froze. His face became stony and then hardened into a determination that Anthea recognized. When Davis looked like that, no one was ever going to change his mind. "He's my son."

Then, with remarkable strength, he bent the doctor's hand backward, turned the syringe around. The other man gasped and struggled, but Davis easily directed the needle toward him.

Anthea fought to swing her legs over the table, wondering if her husband was using some vestige of ... slan strength that had just now been unlocked within him. Though she was weak from giving birth, this emergency was making her recover faster. Was something awakening inside her, too? Her heart pounded.

The frantic nurse threw herself upon Davis again, but with a backhand he sent her sprawling into the tray of medical instruments. She and all of the tools fell to the floor with a loud clatter.

"I will not let you kill my son." With a flood of strength, he pushed the hypodermic needle into the doctor's throat and depressed the plunger. The doctor's eyes bulged behind his round spectacles. Judging from his gagging sounds and writhing spasms as he fell to the operating room floor, the poison was not quite as painless as the doctor had promised.

Davis looked in horror and disbelief at what he had done. The nurse scuttled back to the wall, hiding next to a respirator machine. "Don't kill me! Don't kill me."

Davis helped his wife off the table. "Can you stand? We've got to get out of here."

She clung to his neck for just a second. She wished she could hold him forever, but knew they didn't have the time. "Our baby's a slan, Davis! They're going to kill him."

"He's still our baby." Davis's grim voice was totally inflexible. "I know they want to kill him, and they'll kill us as well. We have no choice." He snatched one of the hospital blankets and quickly wrapped the baby.

Anthea swayed on her feet, found strength miraculously returning to her. She could stand because she *had* to stand. Her body knew what was required of her. All of her preconceptions and prejudices had changed. She and Davis had never intended to harm anyone. They weren't a threat to human society! And how could their innocent child deserve to die, just because he happened to be born with tendrils?

Anthea had always hated slans because she'd been told to hate them. She'd heard a distorted version of history, and now she wondered how many stories about slan atrocities were merely propaganda spread by people like John Petty.

With each step she seemed to grow stronger. "Let me hold him." She took the blanketed baby in her arms. Just touching the infant seemed to give her more strength. She couldn't tell if it was her imagination or genuine mental feedback from the little child.

Davis quickly led her out through the swinging doors of the delivery room, and they stumbled down the hall. Alarms had begun to sound. A harsh voice over the intercom shouted for security.

A flash of realization went through Davis's head. Anthea saw his expression go from stunned confusion to determination and then resigned anger. "You have to go, Anth." He pushed her sideways to another hall that went in the opposite direction. "Take our baby and run. Hide. *Live.*"

"Davis, come with us!"

"If you don't get away, they'll kill both of you, and I'm sure they'll kill me. I murdered the doctor. I won't get a trial. With all the news about the slans ready to attack, they'll just gun me down and mount my head on the wall of secret police headquarters."

Suddenly, led by the flustered-looking orderly, three uniformed guards came charging toward them with their weapons drawn.

Davis took one glance at her hospital gown, at her weary features and bedraggled hair. He gave her a quick kiss, the most passionate kiss she had ever received. "Go! I'll buy you enough time to find a hiding place. Don't waste it."

"No, there's got to be another way!" In her arms, the baby began to cry.

Without listening to her, Davis ran into the main corridor, shouting at the guards. Anthea moaned, wanting to go to him, wanting to stand beside him, but the baby in her arms was her priority.

She allowed herself only a moment to look at Davis's back as he charged toward the guards, shouting wildly. Though they were armed, the guards were afraid of Davis, as if they expected him to sprout horns from his forehead and call down evil curses upon them. The man from the secret police had joined them. His face was red with anger.

With a hitch in her throat, Anthea ran barefoot away from the delivery room. Steadying herself against the heavily painted cinderblock walls, holding the baby, she worked her way down the side hall, no longer feeling weak—she couldn't afford to feel weak. The infant was calm in her arms, not sapping her strength, not distracting her.

She tried several locked doors and finally found a dark office. Inside, on a coat tree, a doctor had hung a long trench coat, wet from that day's misty rain. At least it would cover her hospital gown.

She pulled on the trench coat and found that it was baggy enough to cover the swell of the baby that she held close. Under his desk, the doctor had a pair of slip-on shoes, comfortable loafers that were too large for her, but she made do. Anthea hoped her disguise would be good

enough to get her out of the hospital. Hurrying—but trying not to look like she was hurrying—she rushed down the hall, averting her gaze when nurses ran past her. Everyone looked terrified and confused.

Alarms continued to blare, and the intercoms were filled with overlapping voices that shouted contradictory orders. Security guards scrambled from room to room, as if expecting to find a slant hidden under every bed. Anthea took advantage of the momentary chaos, praying that Davis would delay the guards and the secret police long enough. Somehow, she still fooled herself into believing that he would get away as well.

From behind, she heard shouts, cries of fear, and then the rapid sharp staccato of gunshots. Four shots, a pause, three more ... then complete silence.

Anthea nearly collapsed. The sounds themselves were like cold, leaden bullets striking her in the back. Part of her heart seemed to die, and she felt an emptiness in her mind. She hadn't realized until now how much Davis had filled her emptiness. Now that feeling was gone. *He* was gone. The guards and the secret police hadn't questioned him, hadn't sent him to trial; they simply gunned him down because he'd dared to defend his baby and his wife.

She felt as if her soul were torn in half. She wanted to run back, to throw herself upon his attackers, to pick up her husband's body and cradle him. But the warm baby in her arms kept her running toward safety. She had to get away. Davis had sacrificed himself so that she and the child could escape. She wouldn't lose that, for his sake.

Despite the alarms, no one knew where to find her. Police would be converging on the hospital from all quarters of the city. Teams would be scouring block after block, hunting for her. They'd assume Anthea would run as fast and as far from the hospital as she could go.

Biting back tears, she followed the exit signs, picked her way down a flight of stairs, and found a door that opened to a large parking garage, the hospital's motor pool. Several cars filled reserved spaces, expensive new models with large tailfins, extravagant hood ornaments, and white-walled tires. Two ambulance vehicles sat parked and waiting.

She had a sudden idea. If they expected Anthea to panic and run, then the safest thing she could do, the best place to hide, would be to remain here close to the hospital. While the slant hunters ranged far and wide, she crept over to one of the two ambulances and opened the back door.

The dim interior contained a soft pad, a stretcher, emergency medications, first-aid equipment—and plenty of shadows. It was a quiet and undisturbed place for her to hide, and recover, and grieve.

Holding her baby close, Anthea crawled inside, quietly closed the door behind her, and held her newborn baby as she wept silently for her lost husband.

## CHAPTER 4



The barred door rolled on its tracks and slammed shut, sealing Jommy Cross in an isolated cell deep beneath the grand palace. Trapped, imprisoned—and unable to warn the rest of humanity of the impending attack. He was completely cut off from any hope of escape. Nobody trusted a slan.

With his tendrils, Jommy could sense that the guards' fear of him was greater than their confidence in their weapons. He considered himself lucky that they hadn't just killed him on sight, as the secret police usually did with slans ... as they had done with President Gray's slan cabinet members.

When he was only nine, slan hunters had murdered Jommy's mother in the streets; she'd sacrificed herself so that her boy could get away and live to reach the potential that his parents knew he had inside him. After his mother's death, young Jommy had lived as a fugitive, first falling in with warped old Granny, who forced him to steal for her. When he'd come of age and discovered the treasures left hidden for him by his dead father, the great slan scientist Peter Cross, Jommy had vowed to discover where the rest of his race had gone into hiding...

From across the hall, just one cell down, he heard Kathleen struggling with the guards. "You have no right to do this! We have the protection of the President himself. We—"

They showed her no kindness. "The President's been arrested. Shut your mouth."

"Better not let her talk at all," said a second guard. "These slans can hypnotize you with a word."

If only that were so... If slans were as powerful as people imagined them to be, neither he nor Kathleen would ever have been captured. Jommy was still reeling from the whole swirl of events.

The young girl had been raised in Kier Gray's palace, a slan specimen to be poked and prodded and analyzed so that the secret police could find ways to fight against a slan insurgency. Though she'd been scheduled for execution when she turned the age of eleven, the President had managed to keep her alive under various pretexts.

No one had guessed that Kathleen was actually Gray's own daughter. After discovering records of a hidden slan settlement, Kathleen had escaped from the palace, running for her life. Though the base was abandoned and empty, Kathleen had taken refuge there while Petty and his secret police launched a large manhunt.

Jommy had found her there in the protected redoubt. With the telepathic bonding of true slans, both he and Kathleen had instantly known each other, loved each other. That short time together in the underground hideaway had been the most perfect time of Jommy's life. Everything had seemed possible.

But Petty's slan hunters had attacked the hidden base, and Kathleen was shot in the head. Jommy barely escaped with his own life. Hardened by grief, sure she was dead, he had gone on a determined quest to find other slans, to understand the strange and ruthless "tendriless" ones who hated both slans and humans, as well as to bring down the hated Petty. When he

finally broke into Kier Gray's palace to warn of the imminent tendrillless attack, Jommy was astonished to find that Kathleen had been healed by ultra-advanced slan medical equipment. Alive again!

She and Jommy had spent a tense but glorious day with Gray and his advisors, working out ways to face the coming crisis. When Jommy had first slipped into the palace, he had parked his high-tech armored vehicle in the forest on the other side of the river near the palace, and he had also left his father's disintegrator weapon there.

Once he knew the President accepted his help, Jommy and Kathleen had returned together to his car to retrieve the disintegrator, which would be invaluable during the fight against the tendrillless. He had hardly believed that she was back, that she was with him again. Even with the brooding danger all around them, they had been swept up in each other's presence. Jommy and Kathleen barely had a moment to experience the joy of their reunion before everything crashed around them...

All the while, John Petty had been eavesdropping on Gray, setting up a trap. When Jommy and Kathleen returned, his secret police had charged in, arresting all of them, dragging them away. Petty had confiscated the disintegrator, killed the other slan advisors, and then took over the government. No one would listen to them about the real imminent threat...

As she struggled against the guards trying to push her into the cell, Jommy could tell the thugs were on the verge of violence. "Don't fight them, Kathleen. I don't want you to get hurt again." His voice was quiet and gentle, but it carried clearly in the enclosed corridors of the prison level; he wanted the guards to hear as well. "These men don't matter. We have greater enemies."

After she let them shove her inside, her own cell door rolled shut with a crash. She went to the bars, but their cells were on the same side of the hall, and he couldn't see her. "We will get out of here," Kathleen said. It was a promise.

"That's up to Mr. Petty and the law, Miss," a guard said. "And right now neither one appears to be on your side."

Jommy longed to stretch his arm through the bars to touch her fingers, but the separation was too great. That was a crueler punishment than the imprisonment itself.

The guard captain stood in front of the bars, glaring in at Jommy. "Don't try anything. We'll have two men stationed here on this level, and these cells were designed to hold the worst political criminals."

Jommy sat down on his cot, looking defeated. The secret police probably had hidden cameras somewhere. "Then obviously, it's useless for us to try to escape."

"Glad you figured that out, Cross." The guard walked briskly away, eager to break eye contact.

Jommy had not given up, though. He wished he knew where his disintegrator weapon had been taken. That invention had saved Jommy's life more than once; no doubt the secret police would disassemble it, analyze it, try to figure out how the weapon worked ... but even Jommy had never been able to decipher his father's intricate invention.

Jommy suspected President Gray was in dire straits of his own right now, facing John Petty. But the arrest of the President wasn't the worst crisis—the attack from the tendrillless slans was imminent. Jommy had risked everything to come to Gray's palace in the first place, to deliver a warning. While humans wasted time and energy hunting down true slans, fearing the wrong enemy, the tendrillless ones moved freely in society, preparing for a complete and violent takeover. The attack would occur very soon. Pleased with his little victory, Petty would not be watching for another danger coming from the skies. Earth would be completely unprepared.

Therefore, he and Kathleen would have to do something about it.

He closed his eyes and felt his golden tendrils move at the back of his head, rising into the air. He concentrated, broadcasting his thoughts like radio signals. *Kathleen, can you hear me?* He waited, felt a tingle, then a familiar presence.

*Yes, Jommy. I'm here. I'm close. But I can't see you or touch you.*

Jommy felt the urgency build within him. *We've got to get out of here. We have to find President Gray, and we have to alert the Earth defenses about the tendrillless attack.*

Kathleen's mind was also in turmoil. *We can't do anything trapped in these cells.*

Kathleen's presence in his mind strengthened him. He looked around his cell, saw nothing he could use as a weapon. He had only a cot, a sink, and a hygiene station; no mirror, no table, nothing else. Though his body was stronger than an average human's, Jommy could not break his way out. The cell was impregnable. Therefore, the weakest point was the human factor. Jommy would have to "encourage" the two guards to open the door.

He sent a thought message, summarizing what he wanted to do. *Kathleen, follow my lead and transmit the same image. It's got to be convincing.*

Together, separated by thick block walls, Jommy and Kathleen sent the same thunderous idea. It struck the two already frightened and suspicious guards. It took Jommy a moment to find their muddled centers of thought. The brains of the two guards were so closed off by walls of paranoia that he could barely get inside. But finally he played upon that irrational fear, sending an image of Jommy Cross using slan strength to tear a hole in the cell wall, ready to escape.

The guards came running. "Open the door! We have to stop him."

"I told you slans were dangerous!"

The lock clicked. The two men pulled the rattling bars aside, expecting to see a gaping hole and the prisoner escaping. Before the deceptive image could fade, Jommy launched himself forward like a boulder from a medieval catapult. He was not a brutal fighter, but he did have great physical strength and the element of surprise. He knocked the guards aside. As they squawked and tried to reconcile what they saw with what they'd been *sure* was happening, Jommy punched them both.

He grabbed one man's arm and yanked him inside the cell. He punched the other guard in the ear and then swung him into a heap atop his partner inside the small cell. Shouting, the two guards tried to disentangle themselves, but Jommy pulled the rattling cell door shut on them, and the lock dutifully clicked home.



He sprinted partway down the corridor. From behind the bars, the guards had pulled out their large-caliber pistols and fired at him, but they could not aim well because of the extreme angle. Out of view, Jommy pressed himself against the bars of Kathleen's cell, and the bullets simply struck the walls, whining and ricocheting. She rushed forward, and he put his hands through the bars to clasp hers.

"I told you I'd get us out of here." Using the outside controls, he worked the simple cell lock, and in moments, Kathleen was free beside him. "Come on. We've got to figure out a way through these levels."

The two began to run, still hugging the walls, out of range of the guards. The locked-up men continued to shout after them, firing their guns several more times, but the bullets hit nothing.

At the end of the hall Jommy and Kathleen found a door that led to a steep set of concrete stairs. Before they could open it, loud alarm klaxons rang out inside the palace, sounding a Level One emergency.

"How could they have discovered we've escaped?" Kathleen said, waiting for another surge of guards to come charging after them. "It's only been a few minutes."

Jommy froze. "The emergency's not because of us. Not us at all." Next, the alarms were accompanied by the bone-grating sound of an air-raid siren. "It's the tendriless slans. Their attack has begun."

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## CHAPTER 5

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Jem Lorry had lived among humans for most of his life, pretending to be one of them. His mind shields were perfect. Strategically placed in the Earth government, working his way up by way of his own intelligence (and the occasional necessary assassination), he became the closest, most influential advisor to Kier Gray. In the sure progress of the tendriless plans, he should soon have been the President himself.

Now, from Mars, Jem was engineering the downfall of Earth.

Here on the red planet, the tendriless had created more than just a strategic base and a hideout. The third breed of humanity had forged an entire civilization with outposts, settlements, and industrial complexes ringing the central canyon city of Cimmerium. From where Jem stood inside the large vaulted chamber, the distant sun streamed through the glass ceiling that covered the whole, expansive canyon. A large armored city crowded the habitable flatlands on the edge of the deep gorge, but the highest-ranked and richest tendriless had built a warren of structures into the stark cliff wall, beneath the transparent canopy.

His people had superior mental capacity to humans, though greatly limited telepathic abilities compared with true slans. No one—not Jem Lorry, not the Tendrilless Authority,

probably not even the slans themselves—knew where or how the tendrillless ones had originated. The true slans had turned against them, launching what amounted to a genocide to eradicate their genetic stepbrothers. Jem didn't know why true slans hated them so much, but the feeling was certainly mutual. He didn't need explanations.

Pleased that the full-fledged attack on Earth was finally about to commence, Jem stood before the seven members of the Tendrilless Authority, expecting to receive well-deserved applause. This entire attack had been his brainchild. He had sacrificed much to reach this point, and he intended to get what he had earned. The council members peered down at him with stony faces.

The Authority chamber was like an ancient Roman arena. When all the tendrillless citizens gathered for primary meetings, thousands would sit on ringed seats staring down at the main podium, listening to petitions and plans, watching the Authority issue its judgment.

Today, though, Jem was by himself in the vast room, staring up at the seven men. He would have preferred a cheering audience; after his guaranteed victory, the tendrillless would certainly applaud his dreams and ambitions. They had waited, lurked, and planned for far too long. Only a few, like the stodgy Authority members, bled away that enthusiasm with "caution" and "patience"—thinly disguised words for "cowardice."

"The initial attack has commenced," Jem announced. "Our heavily armed vanguard ships have arrived at Earth in the past hour. At this very moment, our warriors should be bombarding their cities. It is time for us to launch the much larger occupation fleet. All those ships and personnel will require a week to get to Earth. The victory is all but assured."

"Nothing is ever assured, my son, until it has happened," answered Altus Lorry, Jem's father. The old Authority Chief had a head that seemed too large to balance on the wattled stalk of his neck. His hair was shaggy, giving him a leonine appearance. Altus Lorry was a grandiose leader who had spent his lifetime playing politics among the most influential tendrillless in Cimmerium. But he had no real understanding of the human enemy.

Jem struggled to keep his expression neutral. "I urge you to hear my recommendations, Father. Have I not earned it? I lived for years among humans. I know all the systems we have put in place." He could not entirely hide his impatience. "It's no surprise that after years of living comfortably on Mars, you and the other Authority members have grown complacent. You are afraid of things you need not fear and suspicious of that which poses no threat. You give the humans far too much credit."

Altus laughed without humor. "Better safe than sorry, my son, as you well know."

"Actually, I don't! You have always been safe here, but I have never been sorry for what I did or accomplished." Jem sensed an uneasiness among the Authority members, and it made him angry. If they didn't act soon, their swift advantage would begin to trickle away. "While the first stage of the attack shatters the government and breaks their ability to resist, we must launch the main occupation fleet. We need the big ships and our overwhelming ground forces in place to consolidate our hold on Earth."

Not long ago, Jem had watched as hundreds upon hundreds of sleek vanguard warships launched from Mars, kicking up crumbled red dust, spewing clouds of steam and fuel exhaust. They had risen to the sky and out into orbit, streaking across space like sharks scenting blood.

in the water. The blood of normal humans.

And that was only the first wave of the attack.

The initial volley of devastating bombs would be dropping upon the main cities of Earth right now. At last, Jem would feel vengeance for his people, who had been forced to run here centuries ago and hide. The tendriless would finally get what they were owed. So why delay the occupation fleet?

“Patience, my son.” The old man was unintentionally condescending. “We intend to do so. The occupation fleet will be on its way by tomorrow. Or the day after.”

Jem took a deep breath. The Tendrilless Authority had always been a roadblock to his ambitions. Eventually, before he could accomplish anything worthwhile, he would need to replace the old members with a more proactive group. Or, he mused, he might have to do away with the Authority entirely. Who needed a seven-member council when one visionary leader—a king, for lack of a better term—could do the job much more efficiently?

“Another factor makes our timing impeccable.” Jem had stopped thinking of himself as a petitioner seeking permission. He fancied himself a great general, and the tendriless armies were under his control; he was simply delivering a report to the Authority. “Earth itself is in turmoil. President Kier Gray has just been arrested and exposed as a true slan. Even I never suspected it! The power vacuum weakens them even more. They will barely be able to mount a defense, I guarantee it. But only if we move *now*.”

Jem’s resentment toward Kier Gray was personal rather than political. He had been in love with Kathleen (or perhaps *lust* was a better term, though he used the words interchangeably). He had made persuasive arguments to the President, claiming (falsely, as he well knew) that interbreeding with slans would dilute their mutant traits and make their descendants into “real people” again. Instead, Jem knew that slan genetics were dominant, and he intended to bring Kathleen’s superior powers directly into the tendriless breed.

“What about this man named John Petty, the leader of the secret police?” said Altus. “You have described him as a powerful administrator. Perhaps he will rally the survivors.”

“He’s a thug with a tendency for brutality and excess. The people will never accept him as their leader. After seeing what Petty does, the humans will welcome us with open arms. Ha! I bet they’d prefer to be our slaves rather than live under his boot heel. Launch the occupation fleet, Father, and I will take care of the rest.”

Without waiting to be dismissed by the ostensible leaders, Jem turned his back and marched out of the vast, echoing chamber. The Martian sun streaming through the ceiling of glass seemed very bright, very bright indeed.

## CHAPTER 6



Huddled in the rear of the ambulance, Anthea held the baby close and pulled a reflective

emergency blanket over herself. Poor, brave Davis! The infant stirred restlessly, as if he knew he shouldn't cry even though he felt his mother's powerful emotions with his delicate tendrils.

Anthea propped him up and for the first time looked closely at the newborn's face. His bright hazel eyes were wide open, as if the child could see her clearly and recognize her as his mother. Newborns weren't supposed to be capable of that ... but a normal husband and wife shouldn't have had a baby with slant tendrils, either.

With a curious sense of wonder, Anthea reached out to touch the tiny strands like long threads of nerve fibers, antennae extending from the baby's superior brain. When she stroked the tendrils, they twitched and curled, making both her fingers and her mind tingle. How could she and Davis have had such a potential within them without knowing it? Had her own parents known they were different genetically? Had Davis'?

Anthea couldn't help but feel herself bonding with the infant. He was a blank slate, full of potential but without any experiences, knowledge, or personality. Given the right guidance and inspiration, her son could become a great man. She made a promise to herself, and to the memory of Davis, that she would do everything possible—give up her very life if necessary—to protect this baby so he could grow up and meet his destiny.

She and her husband had never even decided on a name for their son. Anthea remembered a candlelight dinner only a week ago, when they had both proposed names for the baby, alternatives for a boy or a girl. If they had a son, Davis preferred Raymond or maybe William.

"How about Geoffrey with a 'G'?" Anthea had suggested. "Or Elliott? Or Sam?"

"Could you live with Stefan?" Davis asked. "Or how about Leroy? It means 'the king.' "

"No, definitely not Leroy."

The more suggestions they made, the more impossible it seemed to find a name they could both agree to. Finally, at the end of that dinner, Anthea and Davis had set aside the discussion, deciding to wait until she had the baby. When they could actually hold it, look at it, and see its face, they were sure they could choose the perfect name.

Now they would never have that chance. Anthea didn't know how she could bear to choose a name all by herself.

Suddenly, she was startled out of her reverie by shouts and running footsteps in the hospital's garage. "Have you checked everywhere? We can't let the slants escape."

"The one we killed didn't even have tendrils."

"Without tendrils, his head won't make much of a trophy for John Petty's wall. But if he wasn't a slant, then he was a traitor helping them."

Anthea felt the burn of tears, but she drove them back, sitting up just enough so that she could see the round side mirror on the door of the ambulance. In the reflection she could view part of the underground parking garage.

Several uniformed security men spread out, searching, their revolvers drawn. The ominous man with the secret police armband stood at the doorway, looking into the shadows, scanning for any sign of her or the baby. "I will be very disappointed if you allow them to escape."

The methodical security men began to look in the cars. Anthea huddled down, pulling the blanket over her, sending out a desperate thought. *We're not here. We're not here.* The baby seemed to pick up and amplify the message.

She heard footsteps moving along, reports shouted from one man to another. They were going toward other cars nearer the exit ramp, away from her, without even checking the ambulance. She wondered if her son had actually influenced the guards, or if it was just a fortunate coincidence. Anthea held her breath.

Then the terrifying shrieks of air-raid sirens ratcheted up and down the streets, amplified by broadcast systems in the hospital, drowning out even the normal security alarms. The sounds of chaos outside greatly increased; she heard racing automobiles, squealing tires, then a series of distant explosions.

The searchers in the hospital's motor pool parking lot shouted to each other, then dashed back inside the building. Air raid sirens continued to wail, but now they were blurred by the drone of heavy jet engines. Unfamiliar flying craft cruised overhead approaching the heart of Centropolis. The slan attack! Then came the percussive flurry of anti-aircraft fire, large defensive guns that President Gray had installed on skyscraper roofs.

As the gunfire continued, she heard a thin whistle that grew louder and culminated in an ear-shattering eruption. More bombs dropped from above, smashing into the streets, setting buildings afire. Centuries ago, Earth's greatest cities had been leveled in the Slan Wars. Anthea hoped that the rebuilt skyscrapers had been reinforced to withstand an attack. Or had humanity grown too complacent?

Yet another explosion echoed down the block from the hospital. She heard brisk footsteps and more shouts as two men ran for the ambulance. Anthea cowered back down as two rescue squad techs jumped inside and slammed the doors. The driver started the engine with a roar, and the ambulance began to roll forward as soon as his partner threw himself into the seat.

Huddling in the back, she hoped they wouldn't look behind them to see the emergency blanket she had pulled down to cover her.

Its siren bawling, the medical vehicle shot out of the hospital's parking bay and into the chaos of the war-torn streets. The driver turned right and accelerated down the avenue into the city. Explosions peppered the buildings around them; bricks and shattered glass rained down onto the street. Traffic ground to a halt. Swerving cars smashed into each other, and the ambulance zig-zagged past the wrecks without slowing.

A falling bomb struck a car limping along on a flat tire, and the fuel tank detonated so close to the rushing ambulance that the side panels in the back rattled. Screaming pedestrians were running everywhere, trying to flag down the medical vehicle. The driver just drove past the flaming debris. Anthea wondered exactly which injured people the rescue squad intended to save.

The driver slammed the brakes hard just as half of a building slid down into the street, blocking their way. The violent lurch caused loose supplies to clatter forward from storage bins in the back of the ambulance. Anthea nearly tumbled to the floor of the vehicle, and the infant began to cry as the blankets slid off of her. Before she could shush him, before she could grab the blankets to hide them again, both the driver and his fellow rescue squad tech turned

around, staring with saucer-like eyes.

“She’s the one the secret police were looking for! She killed Dr. Elton.”

With the ambulance blocked in the street, both men scrambled out of their seats and lunged toward the back of the ambulance.

Anthea held the baby defensively against her. She should have been weak and exhausted, barely able to move after giving birth only an hour ago. But her body had healed remarkably, and energy sang through her muscles. The unexpected strength had always been there, but it lay fallow. Now that Anthea knew what she was, now that she had a baby to protect, she could feel it awakening.

“Don’t worry, she’s trapped in here,” said the driver. “There’s two of us. We can easily grab her.”

“Careful. Slans can wipe your brain.”

The driver paused to open a first-aid kit, withdrew a long syringe. “This should knock her out.”

His partner blinked. “That’s three times the standard dose! It could kill her.”

The other man shrugged. “The reward’s the same either way, and she’ll be a lot less trouble for us.”

Anthea understood how animal mothers in the wild fought to protect their young. As the driver came close, looking for an opportunity to jab her with the syringe, Anthea reacted. She didn’t think, didn’t even understand what her body was capable of doing. She kicked him hard in the chest—and it was as if he’d tried to catch a cannonball. The man flew backward, struck the windshield with so much force that he crashed directly through and onto the hood of the ambulance. He sprawled there, bloody and motionless, most likely dead. Anthea didn’t care. He had meant to murder her and the baby.

The other emergency tech recoiled, astonished at what he had seen. He grabbed a bright red fireman’s axe mounted on the side panel of the ambulance. “All right. No more playing nice with the slans.”

Anthea turned around and, using the same unknowable adrenaline force, she smashed open the back doors. Carrying the baby in one arm, she bounded out into the streets.

The emergency tech shouted curses after her, scrambled to the swinging door of the ambulance. “She’s a slan! Stop her! Stop her!”

But the streets were full of blood-streaked people running for shelter, while overhead, strange angular spacecraft swooped low, dropping more bombs. Anthea ran out, disappearing into the frenzied battle zone.

## CHAPTER 7



Inside Kier Gray's palace (technically, *John Petty's* palace at the moment) everything was in chaos. Even before the first bombs started dropping, perimeter alert systems and distant early warnings detected the enemies converging in Earth orbit.

"Mr. Petty, sir!" said a wide-eyed officer named Clarke. "There's a full fleet coming in—from space! Unidentified ship designs, definitely military." In the past hour, the chief of secret police had put Clarke in charge of monitoring the defensive systems and scanners in the command-and-control center. With so many dirty slans hidden among the government, Petty didn't trust anyone who wasn't already his own.

The young man bent over his curved screens, flicked toggle switches, and turned knobs to adjust the focus on the cathode-ray tube. Under the sweeping arc of a radar beam, blips showed up. "They're spacecraft, sir, battleships. Backtracking their trajectory ... it looks as if they've come from Mars."

"Invaders from Mars?" All his career, the great slan hunter had been trying to track down their secret bases. He had uncovered and documented numerous slan redoubts, but knew he could not account for the entire vanished race of mutants. Now it all became clear: They must have fled Earth entirely and gone to Mars, leaving only a few stragglers—or spies—behind.

Since the devastating Slan Wars, human society—*pure* human society—had developed television and radar, jet aircraft, but only a fragmented space program, a few satellites and pie-in-the-sky plans for rocket ships. A long time ago, human civilization had been much more ambitious, stretching their boundaries and approaching the stars. The Slan Wars had wrecked all that, knocking human civilization back by many centuries.

But the insidious slans must have maintained their superior technology. All these years they had been hiding on Mars, building up their invasion force.

*Just like Gray warned us!* Before the first slan air strikes, guards had taken the deposed President to a secure holding cell in the interrogation sector. Not wanting to let Gray anywhere close to Jommy Cross, he had kept the President far removed from the other two slans, in a completely different detention level. But Petty hadn't decided what to do next with the prisoners. He had to take care of it himself.

"Mount all of our defenses. Now that we've exposed what Gray really is, the slans must be trying to free him."

"But we only just arrested President Gray," Clarke said. "If these ships came from Mars, they launched days ago—"

"Don't argue fine points with me. Just call out the military."

The technician fiddled with his switches and displayed the incredible oncoming force on the big screen. It took his breath away. "Um, sir—since we've arrested President Gray, and Jem Lorry has disappeared, who has the executive authority necessary? Who's in charge?"

"*I'm* in charge!" He lifted his chin. "It's about time that someone with common sense, a

proven track record, and a hard fist started taking care of things." He sounded as if he were delivering a campaign speech.

Petty paced around the bustling stations in the command-and-control center, ignoring the racket of alarms. "Summon all our troops. Get our aircraft in the skies, put soldiers on the rooftops to man our anti-aircraft guns. Tell them to shoot down anything that moves." He ground his teeth together, then glanced again at the blips on the display. The enemy ships kept coming, as if Mars had an infinite supply.

As the bombs started dropping from the skies, detonating in the streets of Centropolis—possibly all across the world—Petty quickly saw that Earth didn't have a chance against this sort of attack. He would have to take unorthodox action, much as he hated to do so.

His face flushed with frustration, he chose the three largest and most muscular guards. "Follow me back to the President's cell. I'm going to make him see reason. And if I can't manage that, then you three are going to help change his mind." Perhaps they weren't the brightest men, little more than thugs, but Petty would do all the thinking. He just needed someone who could break a few bones, if necessary.

The sheer racket of the alarms probably caused more confusion and fear than the actual attack. Outside, the distant muffled rumble of explosions continued, barely heard over the obnoxious, incessant alarms. The enemy intended a full-fledged invasion, and no doubt they wouldn't stop until most of the city was destroyed.

In the upper levels of the palace, functionaries, staff, and even a few political visitors ran about in a panic. The streets were a stew of chaos. The surveillance cameras and periscope viewers showed much of Centropolis already in flames.

He hurried along brightly lit tunnels and narrow passageways, accompanied by the guards. If John Petty was going to rule the world, he wanted it to last longer than an hour or two.

His guards were armed with blunt-muzzled, large-caliber pistols. One slug fired from such a weapon would tear a hole the size of a grapefruit in a victim; the secret police rarely worried about simply wounding a slan prisoner. Right now, the guards would have to content themselves with using blunt clubs, perhaps even sharp-pointed electrical prods. He needed the "slan President" alive.

The burly guards stopped as Petty faced the other man's holding chamber. Inside, Gray paced and sweated, desperate to get out. Seeing the chief of secret police, he rushed to the bars. "Why didn't you listen to me? You have to let me out."

"I don't have to do anything, but *you* do. Remember who's holding the cards here."

"You'll just be holding a handful of rubble if we don't solve this."

Grudgingly, Petty gestured for the guards to activate the cell's unlocking mechanism. The barred door rattled aside, and the slan hunter stepped into the chamber with his three guards close behind him. "The slans are bombarding our city. Tell me how we fight against them."

"They aren't true slans. They are our step-brothers, tendriless slans bred centuries ago to move undetected among humanity. Now they mean to destroy both races." When Petty gave



him a skeptical frown, the deposed President insisted, "It is the tendrillless ones you should fear, not us. They have infiltrated your news media, your utility companies, your transportation systems."

"You're trying to make me paranoid."

"You had a head start on that all by yourself."

"Why should slans hate other slans, whether or not they've got tendrils?"

"Many shameful acts have been committed by both sides, and all the while humans were blind to it. Samuel Lann, the father of all slans, would disown every one of us if he were here."

A small-statured mousy man dashed down the hall, panting. He wore the crisp gray uniform and a blue armband of the palace service personnel, a courier. He clutched a scrap of paper in his hand. "Mr. Petty, President Gray ... uh, whoever's in charge. I have an urgent message! News." He skidded to a stop and heaved great breaths. His face was red from the effort of running.

The three guards glared at the mousy courier. Petty said, "Well, out with it, man!"

"Jommy Cross and Kathleen Layton have escaped. Those two slans are on the loose!"

The President saw his chance. While the others were startled by the announcement, he lunged from the cot and wrapped his hands around Petty's thick neck. The momentum knocked the burly slan hunter back. "You fool, you've brought us all to ruin! We could have set up defenses in time. Now how many thousands, maybe millions, are going to die?"

Two of Petty's thugs grabbed the President's arms, fighting so hard they ripped his shirt, but finally they tore his hands free from the chief's throat. Petty coughed and choked. Thick red marks stood out on his neck. "How ... dare you!"

"In order to achieve true victory, one must dare a great deal." It was the voice of one of the three brutish guards. He sounded unexpectedly erudite.

Rubbing away his blurred vision, Petty turned to look at the man who now stood in a broad-shouldered fighting stance, his heavy-caliber pistol drawn from its holster. The wide, blunt muzzle pointed directly at John Petty.

"What's going on?" His damaged voicebox allowed no more than a rasp.

The guard continued to act strangely. "Once I kill you and Kier Gray, the humans won't have even a thread of hope. No one can lead them." The pistol never wavered.

"You—you're one of them!" Petty squawked.

"A tendrillless victory is assured."

With an explosive sound, the gunshot echoed in the cell, but the burly guard merely staggered, then stared in astonishment at the wet red hole the size of a grapefruit that had been blown through his chest.

Outside, trembling at the door of the cell, the meek courier held his own gun in shaking hands. The blast seemed to have deafened him, while the recoil had nearly knocking him

backward off his feet. “They ... they said I was supposed to come armed before I delivered my message.” The man blinked, not sure who he was supposed to explain himself to.

Petty dropped to his knees, weak and disoriented. “A slan—among my own secret police!”

“Not a slan,” Gray insisted. “Don’t be an even bigger fool than you already are. He wanted to kill me as well as you. Look at the back of his head. It’s one of the tendrillless.”

The other two shaken guards grabbed the traitor’s head, probed among his bristly dark hair, but could find no prosthetics, no makeup, nothing that covered the telltale signs of a hidden slan.

As the guard lay choking in his own blood, he exhibited great strength, slan healing powers. “You don’t have a chance against *my people*.” Then he died.

Petty glared at the remaining two guards, as if afraid they might pull their weapons and open fire, too. He brushed at the droplets of blood that had sprayed on his clean uniform, then whirled toward Gray sitting on his cot. “You were telling the truth.” It sounded like an accusation. “You were telling the truth! There *are* tendrillless slans.”

“They are the ones you’ve always needed to fear,” Gray said.

Petty backed out of the cell and gestured to his guards. “Get the body out of there, and lock *him* in again.” He turned to the surprised and meek courier. “All three of you, stay here and guard Gray.” This information changed everything. “I have to get back to the command-and-control center. We’re going to need new battle plans.”

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## CHAPTER 8



Jommy and Kathleen ran. Outside, the attack seemed to be growing worse.

The underground levels of the grand palace were a labyrinth of corridors, subterranean chambers, shielded self-contained rooms like small bank vaults. Ages ago, slan conquerors had designed and constructed the immense structure during their brief reign over humanity. After so many subsequent administrations, Jommy doubted that anyone—even President Gray—knew the extent of all the passageways and secret underground rooms.

He wondered if there were also interrogation rooms and torture chambers down here. How often had Gray himself used these detention cells?

Each of the innumerable underground sectors was accessed by a different security protocol. Even veteran workers could easily get lost in the confusing monumental structure that was as large as a small city. The two escapees used that to their advantage now.

After breaking out of their cells, they ran along, peering around corners, dashing down open stretches, trying doors that were either locked or led to empty rooms or simple offices. Klaxons blared and magenta warning lights flashed in the halls, sounding an evacuation,

summoning security, unnecessarily warning of the invasion.

"We have to find President Gray." Kathleen hesitated, then added, "We have to find my father."

"We'll find him." Jommy squeezed her hand. "It may seem an impossible task, but people have always feared slans for our abilities. We may as well give them something to fear."

One large room had windows for walls. Inside, fifteen chairs surrounded a long boardroom table; black-and-white computer screens were embedded in the flat wood surface. "This must be a secondary command and control center." Jommy looked around, perplexed. "But it's empty, not even a backup team. What about the emergency?"

Kathleen studied the room. "The palace probably has at least twenty rooms like this. The government is compartmentalized, everyone with their separate areas of responsibility. The President and his various advisors don't trust each other during the best of times, and now that we're being attacked..." She let her voice trail off. "I'll bet there's plenty that even John Petty doesn't know about the palace."

He was about to continue the search for Kier Gray's location, but Kathleen called him back. She pulled up a rolling chair in front of one of the black-and-white screens. "Wait, Jommy—help me. The two of us can figure out these systems. We'll search for where they've taken my father."

He joined her at the head of the table, looking down at the largest cathode-ray tube. Text scrolled down the screens, reports of damage, estimated enemy strengths, suggested numbers of casualties. Paper tape rattled through a reader and a status report in block letters appeared on the curved screen.

Kathleen flicked toggle switches, then typed long strings of commands into the keyboard. A bird's nest of lines appeared on the screen, and Kathleen turned a knob, adjusting the focus. "There! A blueprint." Diagrams of floor after floor of the huge building complex appeared, all superimposed on top of each other.

She spread them out until she had found hundreds of images, each one filling a full computer screen, each one showing one floor of one wing. She flicked from screen to screen, searching so rapidly that the blueprints became a blur. Thanks to the eidetic memory possessed by all slans, he and Kathleen were able to take a mental snapshot of each image.

Jommy stared in amazement. "I never realized the extent of this place. The grand palace covers the whole skyline of Centropolis. After my mother was killed and I went to live with old Granny, I used to look across the rooftops and see the beautiful palace. It was like something out of a fairytale with its beautiful lights and towers. It made me think of what great things people could accomplish if they worked together ... how much more wonderful it was to build something than to destroy."

Jommy leaned closer to the screen. "But this is unbelievable. What I could see above ground is barely the tip of an iceberg. It spreads down like the roots of a huge tree. There are tunnels and access shafts, like the ones I used to get in here." He glanced sideways at Kathleen. "My vehicle is waiting for us in the forest across the river. If we can only get to it..."

Kathleen toggled to another screen image, then another, still searching for the secret police

lockdown zones. "Not without my father. We've got to save the President. Who else could lead us through this time of crisis?"

Jommy reached over and gave her a hug. "I'm proud of you for saying that." Then he glanced down, disheartened at the hundreds of screens of blueprints. "But how are we going to find him in all this? His cell was nowhere close to ours."

Kathleen rattled her fingers across the keyboard. Metal pins chattered through paper tape. When a tongue of paper spat out from the printer slot, she tore it off, looked at the numbers, then nodded. "At least Petty's men are efficient—they've logged in my father's incarceration. This is the blueprint we need. I'll find the exact sector."

As Jommy zeroed in on the appropriate diagram, Kathleen determined the floor number, the corridor, and even the cell number where President Gray had been taken. Collating through the information in his head, he settled on the best route to get there. "We can take the internal transport cars."

He and Kathleen dashed down the hall, found an exit door that led to a set of steep metal stairs. He counted the floors, looked at the painted numbers on the fire doors, and emerged four levels below. They cautiously poked their heads through the doorway and saw no one, only a single flickering light that marked the internal transport station. Jommy pushed the call button to summon the rapid oval car used for shuttling people throughout the vast palace. Within minutes they heard a rattling hum, and a white egg-shaped vessel swept toward them along magnetic rails.

After the door hissed open, Jommy and Kathleen climbed inside, punched their destination request, and sat back as the bullet car shot along. The two sat close to each other in a brief moment of privacy where they could feel safe, where they could just be together. Jommy knew they should use the time to make plans, to discuss what they would do once they found and freed the President. On the other hand, he just wanted to be with Kathleen, now that they had found each other again. Alas, the swift car reached the destination station much too soon, barely giving the two of them time to catch their breath.

The transport car came to a stop, and the door slid open. "Not far now," Kathleen said.

"Let's hope our luck holds. We'll get him free, soon." Jommy still had no idea how they were going to manage it.

He grabbed her hand, and they dashed out. Jommy half expected to see a group of secret police waiting for them with weapons drawn. One man did rush across the corridor, startling them, but he hurled himself into a room, then slammed the door shut, locking it with a loud click. They saw no one else.

Up another two flights of stairs, they emerged into a complex of cubical offices. People hunched over heavy black telephones, clacked on manual typewriters, and rushed reports and documents to each other. None of the workers paid attention to Jommy and Kathleen. The two hurried past the cubicles, opened another double door and saw a long, straight hallway before them.

Kathleen paused. "That leads to the high-security detention area. My father is there." The hammer-and-web symbol of the secret police marked the wall.

Bright overhead lights gave the long passage a sterile appearance, and six metal doors set into the painted cinderblock walls were closed tight. Isolation cells? Torture chambers? They would be incredibly exposed running down that long hall. Jommy reviewed the memorized blueprints in his mind, but he could see no other way to where they had to go. "It looks like a gauntlet we have to traverse."

As they sprinted down the endless empty corridor, he was sure camera eyes must be watching them. By now John Petty must have learned of their escape and would be searching the whole palace for them. Jommy doubted even the tendriless attack would distract the slan hunter from that.

When they were halfway down the long corridor, far from any hiding place, the double doors at the far end of the hall began to swing open. Jommy and Kathleen threw themselves against one of the recessed metal doors. He tried to turn the knob so they could duck inside and hide, but it was locked. Even using slan strength, he could not break it open.

At the far end of the corridor, three men wearing secret police uniforms pushed through the double doors. All of the men were armed with heavy pistols. Jommy and Kathleen pressed themselves into the small indentation of the doorwell, knowing they couldn't possibly remain out of sight. They were trapped, right out in the open. The guards would see them any moment.

"We have to make them not see us," Kathleen said in a quick whisper that was little more than a hiss. Then she squeezed her eyes shut and concentrated. *Don't see us. You don't see us.*

With his tendrils, Jommy immediately picked up on what she was trying to do. Jommy would have preferred to use one of his hypnotism crystals to enhance the output from his tendrils, but he had lost the last of them on Mars. Instead, he and Kathleen would have to use their powers jointly to send out a camouflaging suggestion. He joined her thoughts. *You don't see us. Don't see us.*

The secret police hurried along the corridor at a brisk pace, intent on their own mission, enthusiastically discussing the crisis amongst themselves. *You don't see us.*

The three men strode directly past them, looking straight ahead, not bothering to glance from side to side. They passed within two feet of Kathleen, but her concentration was fixed. The slan tendrils at the back of Jommy's head waved gently as he continued to send out his thoughts. The armed men reached the far end of the corridor without looking back, and they exited into another part of the palace.

Kathleen let out a long sigh of relief, and Jommy realized he was trembling from the tension. He shook his head in amazement, then grabbed her hand again. "All right, the easy part's over now." The two of them ran to the far end of the long hall, reaching the doors into the high-security sector where Kier Gray was being held.

"We don't have any disguise or any weapons," she said. "We're just going to walk into the secret police zone?"

"I was planning to move faster than a walk." Jommy knew their chances were slim, and he was sure it would only get worse from this point forward. "That last little trick worked very well, and they're awfully preoccupied right now. I can't even imagine what's going on out in

the streets.”

“All right, I’ll think calming thoughts. Don’t let them be suspicious. We need to get close enough to my father that we can fight them. Once we open the door of his cell, he can help us fight.”

“I’m counting on it,” Jommy said.

Steeling themselves, they ran forward. Most of the holding chambers were empty; no prisoners extended beseeching hands through the bars, clamoring to be set free during the tendrillless attack. Ahead on the left, two guards and a mousy-looking courier waited in front of a sealed cell. All three of them were armed with blunt-nosed pistols.

“That’s got to be the right place,” Kathleen said.

She and Jommy marched determinedly forward. He focused on his thoughts. *We belong here. Don’t be suspicious. Don’t raise the alarm. We’re no threat to you. Nothing to worry about.*

The guards glanced at them, then looked away, seemingly dismissing the two. The meek courier appeared perplexed and confused at his whole situation.

*Nothing to worry about. We belong here.*

As Jommy and Kathleen approached, the guards looked at each other again with questions starting to form on their lips, and troubled expressions slowly began to dawn on their faces. It wasn’t working anymore!

Knowing their control was slipping, he and Kathleen threw themselves forward in unison with all the speed they could muster. Jommy seized the first guard’s pistol and shot the second man, while Kathleen knocked away the skinny courier’s arm. Because the man’s hands were already slick with nervous sweat, the pistol slipped out of his grip and clattered to the floor.

Gray reached through the bars of his cell. “Kathleen! Jommy! You shouldn’t be here. You’re going to get caught.”

“No, sir—we’re going to free you,” Jommy said.

Kathleen snatched the courier’s pistol from the floor and pointed it at the remaining two men. “Step away from the bars.”

Jommy found the controls and opened the cell door. Breathless with relief and grim-faced with urgency, Gray stumbled out into the corridor. He said, “Petty has seized control of the government, but he has no clue what he’s up against. We’ve got no time to lose.”

Before they could get away, though, four uniformed guards threw open the double doors through which Jommy and Kathleen had entered. At the opposite end of the security wing, another group of secret police barged in, led by John Petty himself. A trap! Kathleen, holding the pistol in her hands, pointed from the two men they had disarmed, then toward the oncoming guards.

“Don’t shoot, Kathleen,” Jommy warned. From both sides, the secret police closed in.

Gray’s shoulders slumped, and the slan hunter came forward. “Well, well, look at the two fish I caught in my net!” He looked down at the dead guard whom Jommy had shot. “I seem to

be losing a lot of guards today.”

Petty disarmed Kathleen himself. The meek courier looked woefully embarrassed, and the other thug at the cell looked sheepish for having been duped.

The slan hunter shook his head. “We’ve been watching this pathetic little escape attempt unfold. After one of my own guards almost shot me, you didn’t honestly think I would leave your cell unmonitored? You could have spies everywhere.”

“Then what took you so long?” Jommy asked.

“I found it amusing, but time pressure forced me to act. I require your access codes and your command knowledge, Mr. President.”

Gray straightened. “Then you finally believe me about the extent of our current crisis? How deeply the tendrillless infiltration goes?”

Petty looked as if he had just swallowed a lemon whole. “I don’t trust you, Gray, any more than I trust these other two dirty slans. But I have no choice at the moment.” He gestured to the guards. “Bring the three of them to the command-and-control center. Even with all the resources of the secret police, I can only destroy one enemy at a time.”

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## CHAPTER 9

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Even though the enemy spacecraft continued to drop their bombs all across the city, the looters were already out. They wouldn’t miss an opportunity like this.

Ducking instinctively against the concussions of explosions and showers of dust and debris, Anthea ran alongside the trembling buildings in search of a place where she could protect herself and her infant son. She still wore only her hospital gown, the loose overcoat, and too-large shoes stolen from the doctor’s office.

In an upscale shopping district she found several department stores with smashed display windows, brick and stone fallen onto the sidewalk. Before this, Anthea had never stolen anything in her life, but many things had changed. She clung to the baby and picked her way over the rubble, venturing into one of the stores.

A young man loomed in front of her. He had bad teeth, frizzy black hair, and dust all over his face. “This is my store! Don’t you even think about coming in here to steal.” His clothes hung awkwardly on him—a new and expensive leather jacket, suit pants, a formal shirt. She noticed tags still dangling from the garments. He squared his shoulders and leaned closer, as if to frighten her away with his bad breath. “The police have orders to shoot looters, you know.”

“I just need some clothes. That’s all.”

“Steal clothes from somewhere else. Don’t take mine. These are all mine!”

Remembering how she had sent the ambulance driver crashing through the windshield

with a single kick, Anthea knew that she could easily subdue this overblown creep. But she did not want to draw attention to herself, and she was afraid of what she might do to him. "I'll go somewhere else, then."

"That's for sure." The young man puffed out his chest and pretended to threaten her again.

She continued along the street, dodging debris as a nearby building exploded. Four of the angular attack craft swooped toward one of the Centropolis defense planes as soon as it took off, blasting it out of the sky. A fireball erupted in a skyscraper directly across the street, sending a shower of broken windows and shattered concrete. Anthea ducked under the green-and-white awning of a deserted coffee shop as shards of glass rained down, stabbing into the stretched canvas.

Farther down the street, Anthea found another clothing store, as yet unclaimed by scrawny looters. She kicked open the door. Inside the dim shadows, she ransacked the hangers and racks until she found a serviceable dress and comfortable shoes. She also tried on a beige overcoat and rounded up a soft powder-blue blanket for the baby. She wrapped him carefully to hide his fine tendrils.

Now they appeared normal, even if the rest of the world had gone crazy. She felt a faint hope that she and her baby might actually have a fighting chance. "I won't let you down, Davis," she whispered.

Anthea longed to go back to the brownstone apartment she had called home, but after the alarms in the hospital, the secret police would have tracked down Davis's address. They had his body, his wallet. Even during the ongoing attack, the ruthless slan hunters might have sent operatives to her home.

Neither she nor her husband had ever done anything that might threaten the security of Earth, but the secret police weren't going to ask for explanations or alibis. If they found her and the slan baby, they would simply open fire and chalk up the victims as another victory.

She kept looking for a place where she and the baby could hole up and wait. The city itself was on fire. Curls of black smoke rose like chimneys to the sky. Attacking spacecraft and Centropolis defense planes engaged in dogfights overhead.

Then she came upon a building made of thick, reinforced stone. So far it had withstood the air attacks. Chiseled in crisp letters above the entrance were comforting words: *Main Public Library*.

Anthea dashed inside the large building. Due to the attack, all the patrons had fled, and the library was like a hollow mausoleum. The homey, familiar scent of books surrounded them. "Hello?" Her voice echoed among the stacks.

Hearing her voice, a pot-bellied man with a blue-striped necktie strutted out of an office and came to greet them with open hands and a broad smile. "Hello, hello! Welcome to the library."

"Are you open? Can we come in here?"

"Oh, ma'am, we're certainly open for business. Didn't you see the library hours posted on the door?"



“I was afraid with the air-raid sirens and everything—”

The man made a dismissive gesture. “Tut, tut! The library hours are set in stone and have been followed for many years. We can’t change things just because of an external distraction. Is there something in particular you were looking for? A reference book, perhaps? A good novel?”

Relief rushed through her. “Sanctuary. My baby and I need a place to ... to wait out the attack. We can’t go home.”

“Ah, of course. I was hoping you might want to browse the shelves, but you’re certainly welcome here. All are welcome.”

The librarian had large, expressive eyes and heavy jowls that looked like hanging suitcases of extra skin. His straight hair was chestnut brown, but an inch or so near the roots was grayish-white, as if he had once regularly dyed his hair but had given up because it was too much effort. Round spectacles made his eyes seem larger.

“I’m Mr. Reynolds, the head librarian—apparently the *only* librarian who puts his responsibilities above personal fear.” Reynolds scratched the jowl on his right cheek. “As soon as the bombs began to fall, my fellow workers became ill and had to go home. Apparently, something called an ‘air-raid flu.’ I intend to research it when I have a spare moment.” He pushed his glasses up on his face. “Come into the central stacks and my administrative office. It’s safest there.”

They reached a room filled with shelves of bound reference books, neatly organized volumes of records and transcripts. “I keep our history section here. Fiction is on Floor 1, periodicals and study carrels located on Floor 2. Is there anything in particular I can assist you with right now? Since all of my co-workers have disappeared, I have gotten behind on my shelving work. But the patron always comes first.”

Anthea felt intolerably weary. “I’d just like a chair to sit in and maybe a glass of water.” Soon she would have to breast-feed the infant. She had no supplies, no diapers or bottles. *I’m not a very prepared new mother*, she realized. Then again, she hadn’t expected to be hunted down like an animal, or for enemy ships to bombard the city.

Reynolds showed her a comfortable chair and dutifully brought her a cone-shaped paper cup from the gurgling water cooler. She took a grateful sip. Outside they could hear the rumbles of continued bomb strikes.

The librarian looked toward the window with indignation. “The enemy can destroy our buildings and kill our people, but so long as they do not eliminate our books, they cannot destroy our civilization.” He smiled at her. “Without our historical and scientific knowledge, without our great tales and brave heroes, we would be giving up our very humanity.”

*Humanity*, she thought, suppressing a shudder.

He saw the desperation on her face, the helpless baby wrapped in a powder-blue blanket. “Of course I will help you. Stay here, and I’ll do whatever I can.”

Then, as if to spite him, all the power went out. The racks of fluorescent lights died, plunging the stacks into darkness relieved only by the faint light from outside windows. The

baby fussed and cried, picking up on Anthea's own anxiety.

Untroubled, Mr. Reynolds moved chairs and a metal cart like a blind man perfectly familiar with the layout of the room. Before long, he returned, struck a long wooden match, and lit several candles, which he placed in holders on the table. "Always be prepared, that's what I say. I would never want to be without the ability to read."

Carrying a candle in one hand, he rolled a book-laden cart through the stacks and, squinting in the dimness, continued to shelve volumes where they belonged. He piled reference tomes in the middle of a table so that all could peruse them.

Within moments, surrounded by unread books in the glow of candlelight, Anthea felt warm and cozy and safe for the first time in hours. She held the baby on her lap, kissed his forehead. He began to coo and make noises, not crying but simply experimenting with his vocal cords, his lungs.

"I hate to be a bother, but I must remind you that this is a library, ma'am." Mr. Reynolds pushed a battered old book back into place. "I will allow you to stay, but only if your baby remains quiet. We abide by strict rules here."

As soon as Reynolds had half-jokingly stated his conditions, the baby in her arms instantly fell silent.

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## CHAPTER 10

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Guards and emergency-response personnel ran through the halls of the grand palace. Panicked civil servants scrambled for bomb shelters or tried to evacuate from the huge building, streaming to designated rendezvous points. Others frantically grabbed telephones to call their families and loved ones.

Despite the evacuation signal, many functionaries and bureaucrats remained at their desks, deluded into believing that their jobs were important to the survival of Earth. There was nothing they could do, but they remained at their posts transmitting orders, forwarding reports, filing forms, and monitoring the destruction outside.

In the midst of this, Jommy, Kathleen, and President Kier Gray were escorted under heavy guard to the main command-and-control center.

On the main display screens radar blips showed the swarm of invading ships. The size of the battle group was breathtaking. The enemy had been planning this assault for years, decades, even generations while they quietly assumed positions of power on Earth. The tendriless had long held an impossible grudge against both true slans and humans, and they meant to wipe out their rivals.

"Give me a status report!" Petty called. His people inside the control room snapped to attention.

“Sir!” said technician Clarke. “We’ve tried to rally our forces, but it’s mass confusion out there. We can’t establish contact with our main power centers. The landing zones are hopelessly muddled, and we can’t even launch most of our ships. The Air Center control towers are off-line. News stations are making their own announcements without even waiting for official word from us, so the public is completely confused.”

The slan hunter regarded the President as if this were somehow all his fault. For years, staged air raids had sent the citizens of Centropolis into frenzied evacuations. Anti-aircraft guns mounted to skyscraper rooftops prepared to open fire against imaginary slan spaceships. “I thought you had defensive armaments and response squadrons in place.”

“That doesn’t help if the tendrillless have infiltrated our radio towers, the Air Center, and the news media. One or two disloyal commanding officers can easily sabotage the entire plan.”

Clarke looked harried and dismayed as he stared at the readouts. He pressed a bulky padded headphone against his ear, listening to reports as they came in from the field. “Half of our rooftop anti-aircraft guns are non-operational. Several squads assigned to fire at the attacking ships have deserted their posts. Sixteen of the main batteries have failed disastrously—the big-bore guns exploded the first time they were used. Outright sabotage.”

“That is the taste of betrayal,” Gray said to Petty with a bitter smile. “I’m very familiar with it myself of late.” He looked pointedly at the shackles on his wrists.

“We have to fight fire with fire.” Petty stalked back and forth in the command-and-control center. “Launch Earth’s best military forces—now.”

“They still don’t respond, sir.”

“Then shout yourself hoarse. *Make* them hear. Make them respond. Find a way to get us out of this trap.”

Gray stepped up next to Petty as if he could simply resume his role as President. “What about our ground forces? Have the tendrillless landed yet? We need to keep them from getting a foothold.”

“A foothold?” Petty blinked at him. “They’re blowing up every defense we have. We don’t have any way—”

“Contact our space division. As President I set up a full-fledged military force with orbital and even interplanetary combat abilities. I planned ahead.”

The slan hunter raised his dark eyebrows. “A space division? But we don’t have the technology for—”

Gray looked at him mildly. “I’m the *President*. I have access to technologies that the public doesn’t necessarily know about. Even your secret police couldn’t keep watch over everything. Use this command authorization.” He spouted a string of code phrases and numbers. Seeing nothing else he could do, Petty told the technicians to do as Gray suggested.

Across the continent, special sharp-winged ships rose up on lifting platforms from hidden underground bunkers. Heavy circular doors slid aside from unmarked paved areas to expose launchpads. The new ships carried the best weapons that humans had developed over the past fifty years.

During his administration, President Gray had secretly used black money in the budget to build defenses against the threat that he knew was out there, the threat he could never admit publicly. He trusted very few people, but he did use a handful of slan advisors and he did control the strings of many classified programs. While he staged enemy air-raids, while he pretended to receive communiqués from the mysterious leaders of underground slan forces, Gray had built his own space fleet. Just in case.

Wide-eyed, John Petty watched the live images piped into the command center's screens. He was both astonished and delighted to see hundreds of well-armed spaceships ready to launch. *Earth* spaceships.

Gray was pleased to note the man's surprise. "I knew you were spying on my every move, whether I was protecting Kathleen or maintaining the constant state-of-emergency. But I also knew how you were prone to the abuses of power, Mr. Petty. I wasn't going to let you in on all of the emergency preparations."

"Abuses? I did what was necessary."

"If we're supposed to cooperate for the time being, then let's not mince words. I had no choice but to take precautions without your knowledge. I needed some assistance from my small circle of slan advisors, and they designed these ships. It's decent technology, but probably not good enough. Our knowledge is out of date, compared to what all the tendrillless scientists have developed over the years."

As they watched, the heroic human spacecraft leaped into the sky like a school of angry fish, weapons primed and ready to take out the tendrillless vanguard. On the radar screen, the new set of blips rose toward the myriad targets still in orbit.

Jommy was thrilled to see this unexpected fleet of defenders. "For so long, we've been stuck on the ground with our space program decimated. That was why I built my own ship and used it to spy on the tendrillless preparations. I thought I was the only one who could figure it out."

The slan hunter shook his head, seeking a target for his anxiety. "Listen to the boy genius."

Jommy's eyes flashed. "This boy genius has flown away from Earth, infiltrated the enemy headquarters on Mars, and dealt with their representatives. I knew more about this threat than you ever imagined, Mr. Petty. That's why I came back here with a warning."

"And you arrested him," Kathleen said accusingly.

Jommy nodded. "You spent far too much time chasing pebbles while I was trying to stop a whole avalanche."

Petty seemed embarrassed. "I'd watch what you're saying, slan boy. You're still my prisoner."

"Only until the palace blows up around us," Kathleen muttered.

Jommy emphasized his point. "The tendrillless have taken over interplanetary space, and I know they've placed traps there. I ran into a deadly mine field myself during my explorations." He spun to the President. "Mr. President, you should warn your forces about the mines. The tendrillless won't allow you to simply—"

With a cry of shock, Kathleen pointed to the screen. The blips showing Earth's defensive spaceships began to flicker and flare. Over a quarter of them winked out in only a few seconds.

"Looks like they found the mine field," Petty said.

Jommy groaned. "Even I didn't think the tendriless had distributed so many. They knew we had no real space program. What could they have been so afraid of?"

"Slans," Gray said. "They're worried about how much the hidden slans will fight back. They're not concerned about humans."

Jommy stared at the afterimages, knowing that each set of glowing phosphors represented a fully armed ship, now destroyed. Over a thousand human vessels had just been wiped out in a single blow!

But then the Earth forces fought back, blasting away with weapons built into their fleet. Even the human pilots did not know that some of their defenses were secret slan innovations; at the moment, they probably didn't care. Once the pilots learned how to detect and avoid the space mines, they launched into an incredible dogfight, plowing into the vanguard forces. It looked like a snowstorm of symbols swirling in incomprehensible patterns. Ships clashed with ships, and many of the tendriless vessels were damaged or wrecked.

But not enough of them.

Knocking Clarke aside, Petty seated himself in the technician's swivel chair, as if he didn't believe his knees would continue to support his weight. To their continued horror, the blips showing the tendriless fleet looped around and went after the remaining human defenses.

Many of the Earth ships' weapons failed, inexplicably. Their pilots shouted that navigation systems had just shorted out. They flew blind, but still pursued the numerous enemy vessels. Engines gave out, armaments failed to fire, guidance systems died, leaving the Earth space navy helpless.

"Do the tendriless have some kind of jamming system?" Kathleen asked. "Can we get them on line again?"

As he listened to the cries of surprise and frustration—then the static of destruction—Jommy could only conclude that the answer had to do with sabotage. "If you keep this fleet secret from Petty, who was in charge of it?"

"Jem Lorry. My chief advisor." Gray looked deeply troubled. "Who has now vanished. Could he have been a tendriless spy? Could his shields have been so powerful that even I didn't suspect him?" He could not tear his eyes from the screens.

The fleet from Mars still outnumbered Gray's surprise space force more than three-to-one, and the battle swiftly turned into a rout. The Earth ships fought to the last, knowing that they could not surrender. On the screens, blip after blip vanished.

The sweep of the radar arc showed little detail, but Jommy didn't need any explanation as the pinpoint of human spacecraft brightened like stars going nova, then faded into darkness. Dozens more of the tendriless attack ships were destroyed, and then the Earth defenders were gone. Completely gone.

Gray looked astonished. "It's a massacre. I didn't think ... I never knew the enemy was so powerful. Our best defenses are no more effective than leaves blown in the wind. The tendrillless have undermined us, disconnected our weapons, sabotaged our plans."

Kathleen put her arms around her father. Gray's shoulders drooped. He found a seat by one of the empty diagnostic stations and slumped into it, brushing aside the torn rolls of printouts, ignoring the chattering computers that still attempted to analyze the situation. "I have failed us all."

With the ground forces neutralized and the last vestiges of the Earth space navy annihilated, the tendrillless ships were ready to complete their destruction. The inbound ships came down, unhindered now, and streaked across the skies of the capital city. Earth was completely at the mercy of the tendrillless.

Jommy barked his words so loudly that even the stunned technicians and disoriented leaders took heed. "The grand palace is sure to be a target. Now that our defenses are gone, they're going to turn this entire place into rubble."

"The palace is the most secure structure in all of Centropolis. We're ten levels underground, and these rooms are reinforced against any aerial attack," said Petty, though he didn't sound convinced.

"Not reinforced enough. The tendrillless can level this whole structure. Once they've decapitated the government, they won't even need to bother with negotiating peace terms. They'll want to stand victorious on the rubble of the great government center."

Kathleen stepped close. "Jommy's right. We've got to get out of here, all of us."

Despite his handcuffs and his disheveled appearance, Gray still looked presidential. "There is no defeat while we still live. We must escape from the palace—now. We can become a government in exile."

"A government of what?" asked Petty.

"That is for us to define." Looking at his frantic rival, Gray extended a hand, letting it hang there in the air. "I suggest an alliance, Mr. Petty. I know of your plan to overthrow me. I know of your power plays with the secret police. But right now we face an enemy greater than either of us."

Kathleen chimed in. "It'll be the humans and the true slans against the tendrillless."

Jommy boldly pushed his way toward the door of the command-and-control center. "I have a means of escape—my advanced car is hidden in the forest on the other side of the river. Trust me."

"A car?" Petty looked at him in disbelief. "But Centropolis is under attack."

"The *whole planet's* under attack, and the tendrillless won't stop until they've crushed our cities. But my car is armored with ten-point steel and full of new inventions. If anything can withstand the bombardment, that vehicle can. But if we don't act soon, we'll all just be bloodstains in the rubble."

When another terrific explosion shook the reinforced walls of the palace, it was enough to

help make up Petty's mind. Gray thrust his hands forward. "Uncuff me, and let's get out of here." The slan hunter grudgingly did so.

As they left the command-and-control center, Petty yelled for his guards to get to safety. He wanted to be sure that his supporters—the men who would do whatever brutal action he required—were not all killed in a single attack. The slan hunter was sure to need them later on, and he could summon any remnants that remained from around the country.

Overhead, the attacking tendriless forces began their full-scale bombardment to destroy the palace.

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## CHAPTER 11

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Though she was herself a tendriless, Joanna Hillory was not part of the vanguard fleet during the attack. An operative trained to live and work among human beings, she excelled in being a spy, not a soldier. Her people had used her well, and she had helped them set up their plans for this conquest.

But that was before Jommy Cross had changed her mind. Now, remaining behind on Mars, Joanna had other plans of her own.

She was an attractive woman with a full figure, as tall as most men. Her brown hair was kept short and curled, close to her head. She wore clothes that gave her freedom of movement, with few concessions to human standards of beauty. As a spy, it had been important for her to keep a low profile, though her appearance was enough to turn heads and even earn her an occasional wolf whistle from men on the streets of Earth.

While the bombardment continued on Earth's primary cities, Joanna received a summons to stand before the seven-member council in the glass-ceilinged Martian city. Cimmerium seemed practically empty as she walked along the wide balcony roads along the edges of the cliffs. Towers extended out into the sheer gulf of the canyon, rising up toward the flat crystalline ceiling.

Joanna touched a pearlescent ID scanner mounted outside the vaulted doorway to the Authority chamber. Recognizing and approving her, the door controls unlocked with a hiss, then silently swung inward, beckoning her inside. She had always been a favorite of Altus Lorry, the head of the Tendrilless Authority.

Inside the rainbow-filled chamber, dim sunlight was intensified by prismatic angles, flooding the chamber with warmth and reminders of paradise, the way Earth would be once they conquered it.

Centuries ago, during the first Golden Age of Mankind and before the devastating Slan Wars, true pioneers had begun terraforming Mars. Humans had bombarded the red planet with comets, thickened the atmosphere, added liquid water in the low-lying canyons, filling Mare Cimmerium with enough liquid to turn it into a small, shallow sea. They had released

algae and bacteria, which worked on the once-sterile environment for more than a thousand years as the breeds of humanity fought against each other, tried to destroy each other.

By the time the tendriless slans came seeking refuge, Mars was a much more hospitable place. The air was thick enough to capture the sun's distant heat. Water vapor long locked in frozen layers underground began to percolate upward. The bacteria and algae continued to convert hydrated water molecules and break down minerals to release oxygen.

Cimmerium became a complex settlement. Buildings were made from reinforced glass produced by melting the inexhaustible supplies of Martian sand, and before long a shining metropolis clung to the walls of the deep canyon.

While it was comfortable here, the half-terraformed Martian environment was still less hospitable than Earth. In a half-facetious comment, Jem Lorry had once growled a suggestion that President Gray and some of the more intractable humans should be sent back *here* in exile, so they would know what had made the tendriless strong for so many generations.

The biggest mystery concerning the tendriless civilization, Joanna knew, lay in finding their hated step-brothers, the hidden slans, who had persecuted and tried to eradicate the tendriless. All that had changed however, when she'd met Jommy.

Back when she'd been on assignment on Earth, Jommy had broken into the secret tendriless headquarters at the Air Center. On the run from the law, Jommy and an old crone he called Granny had the sheer unexpected bravado to steal a tendriless spacecraft, but Joanna had intercepted them.

Jommy was a clever young man, certainly her equal in strength and mental abilities. She had interrogated him, sure that Jommy worked for a large enclave of true slans, though he insisted he was acting alone, that his mother had been shot dead by slan hunters when he was only nine years old; his father, a great slan scientist, had been killed when he was six.

When Jommy told her that there didn't need to be war between the races, she had thought him incredibly naïve. But his earnestness was infectious, and *he* was fervently convinced. Afterward, the more Joanna thought about what he'd said, the more she considered his plans and his determination to follow them, she actually started to believe that he might have a chance to achieve his utopian dreams.

Maybe the tendriless were wrong, after all. When Jommy was nearly caught again after sneaking inside Cimmerium, Joanna herself arranged for him to get away, to race back to Earth and warn President Gray of the imminent attack. She had remained behind, hoping to convert a few more allies among the tendriless.

That had been Joanna's desperate secret, which she'd kept close to her heart for days now. The Tendriless Authority would command her immediate execution if they suspected her involvement. Jem Lorry had launched his major attack before she could make any headway against his stubborn beliefs.

Joanna had learned not to underestimate Jommy, however. She hadn't yet admitted even to herself that she was in love with him.

As she walked forward to face the council members behind their high bench, she drove back her fear and anxiety. They couldn't possibly know what she had done.



Ahead of her, she heard a shrill, petulant voice challenging the more ponderous, deeper tones of Altus Lorry. "You miss the primary question, Father. The occupation fleet has just launched, but by the time they get to Earth, the vanguard ships and our tendriless ground troops will have completed much of the work. Think about the next step. We must decide whether to leave a handful of humans alive as our slaves and perhaps even experimental subjects—or should we just save ourselves the trouble and exterminate them all?"

"Those are not the only two options," Altus said with maddening calm. "Your hatred blinds you. If we mean to take over Earth, it makes no sense to destroy everything. What is the sense in that? Why should we rebuild from scratch, pick up every broken piece?"

Another Authority member added, "The humans must be resoundingly defeated, we agree, but mass extermination is not logical."

"It would be logical if you'd bothered to live among them," Jem grumbled. "Try watching them every day, smelling them, observing their habits, knowing that you must keep your true identity a secret or else they would lynch you! They are like animals living in a primitive society that long ago went stagnant."

Hearing her approach, Jem turned, and his eyes lit up with a fervor he had kept carefully hidden while playing his political role in the President's palace. "Joanna, you can speak on my behalf! You've lived among them as much as I have. Explain to my"—he struggled with his words—"my esteemed father and his fellow Authority members that we can assure our future only by ensuring that humans are not part of it."

She gave him a calm smile. "How can I speak on your behalf, when you are fundamentally wrong? Such a wholesale slaughter would accomplish nothing but give you a brief rush of personal vengeance." Amused by the shocked expression on his face, she turned her gray-eyed gaze up at the seven council members. "Authority Chief Lorry, you are wise to advocate caution and forethought."

Old Altus gave her a kindly and satisfied nod, while Jem fumed, as if she had just betrayed him.

Joanna continued, "Would you rather spend our efforts consolidating a new government for tendriless slans—or engage in an endless pursuit to eradicate all of the humans in hiding? You would force them into creating resistance cells, possibly even drive them into an alliance with the true slans. Imagine the debacle."

"They would still never be strong enough against us!" Jem insisted.

"Irrelevant. Either way, it would waste a great deal of our time."

Realizing he would never convince them, Jem stalked out of the Authority chambers with a disappointed glare at Joanna.

When she saw how the council reacted to her, Joanna convinced herself that they did not suspect her collusion with Jommy Cross. Her secret was safe.

"Please forgive my son," Altus said. "He has obsessed on humans for too long. I still hold out hope for him, and I give him chance after chance, but sadly we may have to remove him before he causes irreparable damage."

She gave a noncommittal nod. The Authority Chief had always been kind toward her, even to the point of expressing his desire for political matchmaking between Joanna and his son, though she had recoiled at the notion. “You summoned me here, sirs?”

“We need you to take care of a very specific threat,” Altus said. “An important threat.”

“What threat is that?”

“His name is Jommy Cross.”

Her heart skipped a beat, and she was sure she paled, but Joanna fought not to show any reaction. “He is just one slan, a young man presumably working alone.”

“Cross has quite remarkable talents. He was here in our city, as you well know, but he escaped. He escaped *you*, he escaped us, he escaped the greatest security measures in all of Cimmerium.”

Another Authority member interrupted, “That in itself proves he is a danger. Cross returned to Earth in time to warn them of our attack, and it was only sheer luck that political turmoil there kept the humans from preparing themselves. We do not wish to trust to such luck again. Cross must be stopped.”

Realizing she hadn’t been breathing, Joanna inhaled, waited a long second to calm herself, then exhaled. They weren’t accusing her of anything. “And what is it you would like me to do?”

“Take one of our fastest scout ships and go to Earth. In the midst of our assault, we order you to hunt down and seize Jommy Cross.”

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## CHAPTER 12

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By the warm candlelight in the shelter of the library, Anthea held her baby, quietly breast-feeding him as she listened to the buzzing roar of attacking aircraft outside. But she was more afraid of *people* than falling bombs. She closed her eyes and tried to figure out what to do next. She had no one in whom she could confide. The candles flickered, casting a warm but somehow medieval glow throughout the stacks of thick tomes.

Today she had been confronted with the unexpected and unreasoning hatred of total strangers. All her life she had heard news broadcasts about the insidious schemes of “evil slans.” The secret police had spread hatred and fear.

Before, it had all meant little to her. She and Davis were just a normal married couple with good jobs—Anthea in a bank, her husband in a sporting goods store. They’d been happy with each other, and they anticipated a long and fruitful life, looked forward to starting a family.

After the birth of the baby, though, she had stepped on a landmine of prejudice and murderous anger.

When a bomb shattered the stone lion statues in front of the library, the pudgy Mr. Reynolds grabbed two of the flickering candles and gestured for Anthea to do the same. "Come with me. We have to go to the inner vault. There's better shelter inside, and an emergency generator."

Before leaving, he diligently and conscientiously blew out the remaining candles and led Anthea through a maze of bookshelves to an office at the heart of the building. Their flickering lights were like bobbing will-o'-the-wisps.

The walls here were thick and entirely without windows. The baby stirred in her arms, and she bent down to shush him, holding the candle in her other hand. "Is this the rare book section?"

"I have the distinct privilege and honor of being the chief librarian at one of the few designated True Archives commissioned by the government. President Gray himself came for the ribbon-cutting ceremony fifteen years ago."

"What's a True Archive?"

The librarian beamed, delighted to find a willing listener. "During the Slan Wars and centuries of guerilla warfare and wanton destruction, much history has been lost. Most people don't even know what the truth is anymore."

Anthea looked hard at him. "Do you know the truth? About the slans?"

Mr. Reynolds fumbled a little and turned his back, marching farther down the hall into a larger, open lobby. "This library is one of the repositories of genuine information about the Slan Wars and Dr. Samuel Lann. Many of the reports are contradictory, of course. A few are written by eyewitnesses, while some are rather clumsy government propaganda. But that's the way it usually is. With so much information, you have to separate opinion from fact, exaggeration from documentation."

He stopped in front of a great metal door and set his candles down on a small table. The thick hatch was steel-gray, polished to a dull luster, reinforced with riveted panels and a locking mechanism of gears and dials. The combination wheels themselves were secured with a steel padlock. The thick door seemed as impregnable as a bank vault.

"Inside this vault are original papers, some of the notebooks of Dr. Lann and actual correspondence from previous presidents who fought in the Slan Wars."

Since the birth of her unexpected slan baby, she felt a desperate need to know. All of the background material in that vault would reveal the answers. "I'd like to see them. I'm sure it's fascinating."

The librarian seemed befuddled. "Oh, I'm afraid that's not possible, ma'am. Those records are classified."

"But if this is a True Archive, why can't people see the truth?"

"Most people are not ready for it," Reynolds said sadly. "*Possessing* information and *distributing* it are two different things. Even President Gray wanted to control how much the public knew." He shook his head, his jowls sagging like a hound dog's. "From what I heard on the wireless this morning, it seems the President has been secretly in league with the slans all

along. What has he brought us to?"

The distant thunderous rumble of more explosions rattled the ceiling.

"I think there's a great deal we don't understand," Anthea said. "But those records might help us unravel it. Besides, didn't you say there was a backup generator inside? We'd have electricity again, and we'd be safe."

The baby squirmed in his mother's arms and she saw just a hint of the fine golden tendrils rising out like long strands of hair from the powder-blue blanket. She quickly tucked them back.

Reynolds was more agitated now, loosening his necktie. "Only I know the combination to unseal this door, ma'am. I have strict instructions not to open it for anyone who doesn't have Presidential authorization."

"You're the only one with the combination? How can you be sure you remember it?"

"Oh, the numbers are very clear in my mind." Reynolds tapped his forehead.

The baby remained very still as if he had fallen asleep, but suddenly Anthea saw numerals sharply in her brain, as if someone had painted them in bold ink behind her eyelids. 4 ... 26 ... 19 ... 12. She caught her breath as she realized what must have happened. The slant baby had easily read those numbers as Mr. Reynolds had recalled them, and the infant had shared them with his mother's mind as well. Anthea knew exactly how to open the vault.

Making an excuse, the librarian scuttled back to a long wooden table just outside the armored vault door. "However, these volumes are available to the general public, though not often requested, I'm afraid. Many people instinctively hate the slans, but don't want to understand anything about the reasons for doing so. The slans did terrible things to human society, oh yes. The Slan Wars were the greatest holocaust in our civilization's history, like the burning of a thousand libraries of Alexandria."

He heaved a great, grieving breath. "The endless centuries of destruction leveled our cities, brought us down to the level of barbarism. It took the human race a long time to rebuild, and even now our society has returned only to the equivalent of the United States of America back in the 1940s, as calculated in the old-style calendar." He gestured for Anthea to take a seat and began arranging books on the table. "Some of the cultural similarities to that time period are quite striking. It's as if we've been set on a well-worn path. We're following technology, styles, and habits that were forgotten long-ago, but are now coincidentally commonplace."

Anthea arranged some of the books to make a support, like a cradle, in which she could tuck the blanket-wrapped baby. Then she pulled other volumes toward her. "But these books are not classified? I can read them?"

"They're the official records of the Slan Wars. I hope they hold your interest. When all this messy business outside is over, maybe we can submit a request to whichever government is in charge next? I would so enjoy having a real scholar look over the True Archives with me."

"So, you've read them yourself?"

He seemed embarrassed. "Not ... entirely. Just enough to make a cursory inventory. There's always so much to do in the library itself, you know."

“Thank you very much. These will do fine for now.” Anthea found newspaper clippings, reprinted letters, and many books describing the “slan peril” and the “terrible threat of the evil super-humans.” She brought one of the candles closer.

Reynolds made disapproving sounds as he stood in front of a cart full of books. “Some of these are in sections 820.951 through 825.664, right down here in the sheltered area. Will you be all right for a little while?” After she reassured him, Reynolds rattled off with his heavy cart, balancing one of the thick candles to light his way.

Alone now, Anthea opened the books and began to skim them. She had always enjoyed reading, but now—after having the baby, after realizing who and what she was—a key had opened in her mind. She was astonished to discover that in only a few minutes she had completely skimmed—and absorbed, and *remembered*—a full five-hundred-page volume!

The reports carried some surprises, but generally they were the same inflammatory stories she’d been told all her life. She skimmed the spines of other books, selected a second one, and raced through the pages as well, flipping them so swiftly she nearly tore the paper. Then she read a third book, and a fourth. She felt like a dry sponge plunged into a bucket of water.

Anthea learned how the first slan mutations had appeared, babies born with tendrils that amplified their telepathic abilities. They could read minds, influence people; their bodies were stronger.

The most prominent figure in all of the records was Dr. Lann. Some portrayed him as a genius, others as a victim of his own hubris, still others called him an evil mastermind who had caused an evolutionary avalanche that resulted in the deaths of billions. The records were unclear as to whether the slan mutations had occurred naturally, or if Samuel Lann had created a machine or special ray that invoked the changes in his own three children, turning them into the first slans.

Contradictory reports hinted that tendrilled babies had been born spontaneously all around the planet, from civilized countries to rough wastelands. Before long, slans began to appear everywhere. They found each other and bore children. Within a few generations, their numbers had grown great enough that their leaders quietly made plans. Slans infiltrated important positions in government and industry, and then they took over the world, insisting that they were meant to be the masters of “mere humans.”

Anthea shuddered as she continued to read. Nearby, warm and comfortable, wrapped in blankets, the baby seemed capable of absorbing everything his mother knew, assimilating all the new knowledge she learned.

Mr. Reynolds, whistling happily to be doing something productive, trundled an empty cart back into the protected room outside the thick vault door. He took another loaded book cart and went about his business. Anthea barely noticed him as she eagerly devoured the records in front of her...

From the point that the slans had made their first move against humanity, the news reports became much less objective. She doubted any of them was entirely true. Previously, a handful of conspiracy theorists denounced the slans as freaks and monsters. Then, when one hundred thousand slans took over the world, they proved to everyone that the paranoid fears had been correct. The slans *did* mean to enslave humanity.

But the angered humans formed a powerful resistance. The slans might have been supermen, but one hundred thousand could not stand against a vengeful population of billions.

The devastation on both sides was horrendous. As the wars flared up, died down, then burst into flames again, Earth itself was rocked. Eventually, after centuries of bloodshed, the slans were defeated. The survivors went into hiding, built secret enclaves, protected bases from which they could continue their insidious scheming (or so the reports claimed). Some said the slans went out into space, perhaps to Mars, where they bided their time, rebuilt their numbers and prepared for a further attack. Earth's technology had been set back so far, the survivors could not even dream of launching a concerted space program.

Every once in a while, a slan was caught and killed in Centropolis, lending credence to the fears that hundreds or thousands more remained in hiding. The secret police crowed about each such victory, proud to be rooting out the evil infiltrators.

It seemed indisputable that those first megalomaniacal slans had indeed meant to dominate humanity, had tried to take over the world and enslave others. But that was so many centuries ago. Did the few wild survivors still mean such harm? What about the "accidents," like her own baby? Could every innocent child born with tendrils be sentenced to death for the sins of long-forgotten fathers? She shook her head and looked up, startled to realize that she had finished reading fourteen of the books on the table.

Mr. Reynolds had come back, having emptied his carts. He now stood smiling, bent over her baby. He whispered and cooed, stroking the boy's nose, his forehead. Before Anthea could react, he pushed the blanket back, revealing the baby's head. "Look at you. Such a cute little—"

Then he gasped in horror.

The baby's tendrils rose like tiny antennae in the air, wafting as if in a gentle breeze. Reynolds stumbled backward, gaping at the slan tendrils. "Oh, my!"

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## CHAPTER 13

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The tendriless bombers were already on their final approach.

"Deep underground will be the safest," Kathleen said. "Jommy, can we get to your vehicle from there?"

"Yes, there are transverse tunnels." With his perfect recall, he could envision all the tangled passageways and routes from the blueprints he had seen. "I know of an old slan passageway that goes all the way beneath the river."

After the guards and secret police had scattered following their chief's orders, Petty easily kept pace with the other three. Jommy wished the slan hunter had abandoned them, but apparently he trusted the slans to know a better escape than his own people. Petty directed

them to a high-speed lift, but the doors were sealed and the controls refused to operate. The secret police chief pounded the wall in frustration. "We've got to get down to shelter!"

Gray nudged him aside. "This is one of the palace's private elevators, high-security, limited access." He slid aside a hidden metal covering to expose a translucent plate and several code buttons. He pressed his open left eye against the scanner and keyed in a code. A bright beam played across his retina, mapped the patterns there, and confirmed his identity. The lift hummed, then whisked open. "I *am* the President, after all—no matter what Mr. Petty says."

The slan hunter glowered at him.

Jommy urged them all inside, then turned to the control plate. "Thirty-eighth level would be our best starting point." He punched the number. The doors closed, and the private car shot downward.

Only seconds later, the palace was engulfed in a roar of light and fire.

Shockwaves slammed into the descending elevator car, making a sound as if they were trapped within a bronze church bell. The bright ceiling light went out, and the car shuddered to a stop, dislodged from its tracks. More explosions thundered overhead. The walls trembled.

"Brilliant idea, Cross," Petty said in the darkness. "Now we're stuck here."

"We would have all been happier if you'd stayed in the command-and-control center," Kathleen retorted. "Why did you bother coming along with us?"

"I couldn't let three slans get away. That would be shirking my duty."

Trying to solve the problem he faced, ignoring the heated conversation, Jommy felt with his fingertips along the metal wall of the chamber. He found the crack in the sealed lift door. "We have to pry it open, get out of this elevator car, then climb to an access hatch." Gripping with his fingers and palms, he pressed with all his enhanced strength, straining until the doors began to peel apart. "There ... making progress!"

Then, with a squeal and a groan, the stalled elevator dropped farther down the shaft, grinding along its tracks with a spray of sparks. They were in free fall for a moment, plunging out of control. Through the crack he'd been able to open in the door, Jommy watched one floor, then another and another streak past as the detached elevator picked up speed. Then it slammed to a clamorous halt, caught again in precarious balance.

"Have we hit the bottom?" Kathleen asked after a moment of stunned silence. "Why didn't we crash?"

"We're jammed in the shaft again," Jommy said. "But it's unstable."

"We could figure that out for ourselves," Petty added sarcastically. "Maybe we're almost to the bottom."

"There's at least sixty more levels down," Gray said. "I suggest we get out of here before we drop the rest of the way."

Applying all his strength, Jommy wrenched the door open farther. The tracks in the elevator shaft had been knocked severely out of alignment from the bombardment high above.

One of the broken rails had twisted to one side, and the falling car had wedged to an unstable balance. Two feet above them, Jommy saw another hatch that opened to a floor—their way out. “Kathleen, I’ll boost you up. You can open the door from within the elevator shaft.”

She didn’t hesitate, and Jommy was surprised at how easily he could support her weight. As she reached out through the open door, though, the elevator groaned uncertainly. If the car fell now, Kathleen would be sheared in half.

Kier Gray moved to the other side of the elevator to compensate for the weight shift. They all knew the car could drop at any time and plunge screeching and sparking for sixty floors until it struck the bottom like an asteroid impact.

Kathleen stretched out her hand, and with the barest tip of her finger she managed to hit the emergency hatch control. Lights blinked and, with a sedate hum, the emergency hatch slid aside to reveal a corridor well-lit by flickering ceiling lights.

Jommy gave Kathleen another boost, and she scrambled out of the elevator and through the hatch. Once safely inside, she called for her father to come up. As Gray moved to the open door and the emergency hatch, the readjusting weight made the elevator groan ominously again.

Showing no sign of fear, Gray accepted Jommy’s assistance to climb out, leaving the young man trapped in the elevator with the slan hunter. Anxious not to be last, Petty lurched toward the door. He was sure they meant to abandon him—and with good reason. Petty could shield his thoughts well enough, but even so Jommy sensed the building panic in the secret police chief.

As Petty stepped across the floor, the elevator gave a sickening lurch and dropped eighteen inches. The man froze, terrified, refusing to take another step.

Jommy stared at him. “Are we going to just look at each other until the elevator falls to the bottom, or do you intend to move and get out of here?”

Petty didn’t need to be encouraged again. When Jommy offered him a hand, the other man refused. “I don’t need help from one of your kind.” He reached up for the bottom of the emergency hatch in the shaft wall, which was now more difficult to reach. From the safety of the hall, Kier Gray looked down at the man who had overthrown him. A simple slip, a nudge at just the right moment, and the slan hunter would fall to his death.

Nevertheless, Gray grabbed his rival’s arm and hauled him up.

Now mostly empty, the elevator creaked, began to work itself loose from the tracks. “Jommy, hurry!” Kathleen reached down beside her father, both of them trying to grab him, stretching out their hands.

The binding metal began to slip, grinding away the twisted track. With only a second left, Jommy tensed and sprang upward. His leap carried him at least two feet higher than a normal man could have jumped, and he hooked his elbows inside the emergency hatch. Gray and Kathleen seized his shoulders, his shirt, and pulled him into the hall. Jommy squirmed out of the shaft and pulled himself into the corridor just as the elevator jarred loose. When the last obstruction broke away, the elevator plummeted in a wail of sparks and grinding gears, falling down into the depths.



Panting, Jommy recovered and got to his feet. He glanced up. Petty was just standing there, arms crossed, watching, then the slan hunter turned around and began marching down the hall, as if nothing unusual had happened. "Well, now where do we go?"

Jommy studied a numbered plate on the wall to determine where they were. "We still have to go down seven levels." The President again used his ID to provide access to a restricted stairwell, and they hurried down the metal steps, one flight after another.

Petty continued to find reasons to question. "If you're an outsider, Cross, how is it that you found a secure passage to get into the palace? Even my secret police weren't aware of hidden tunnels down here."

"The slans built them long ago. I received information, partly from old records, partly from certain telepathic broadcasts in the palace specifically attuned for someone able to hear them. Someone with tendrils, I mean."

He opened the door at the appropriate level. The hall looked like any other, but inside his head he could detect the thin, dull tone, a guiding beacon his slan senses could pick up. Kathleen looked at him, amazed. "I can hear it."

Gray nodded. "I was aware of these, but I didn't investigate because I feared being observed. I couldn't let anyone—especially Petty—know what was down here."

"Just like you kept a full space navy secret from me?" Petty snorted. "I still should have kept a better eye on you, and on Jem Lorry."

"Lorry isn't one of us," Gray insisted.

"Seems like he did a good job sabotaging the Earth space ships, from what we saw on the battle screens."

Not knowing what trials they might face once they worked their way into the besieged city itself, Jommy wished he still had his father's disintegrator weapon. That invention would provide options they wouldn't otherwise have, but Petty had locked the confiscated device in a secure vault for secret police analysis. It was probably still intact, even with the collapse of the palace, but it could be buried anywhere. Long ago, he had added a tiny tracer to the disintegrator, but he had no time to construct a detector to pick up the signal. Right now, they had to get safely away from the ruins of the palace. And for that, they needed his special vehicle.

Jommy moved down the hall, trailing his fingers along the painted cement blocks. He found a spot that looked no different from the rest, but when he depressed the blocks in a certain sequence, a hidden door slid inward and then aside to reveal a well-lit tunnel that extended a great distance.

"Inside there, not far down, is the old maintenance tunnel that goes all the way under the river. The slans commandeered it for their own purposes a long time ago, and it's been completely forgotten. We can follow it outside and get to the forest where I left my armored vehicle. I'm sure it's still there and safe."

The embedded detectors recognized him as a slan, and Jommy felt a rush of relief. Once Jommy had opened the secret door to the tunnel, Petty did not wait for the others. He pushed

forward, taking the lead. No one but slans had entered this tunnel for many years.

Jommy's tendrils suddenly picked up a shrill vibration, a distinct sensation of uneasiness that built to panic. A Porgrave transmitter, one of the special broadcasters that only slans could hear. The signal focused, and he could understand the words: an automated warning installed by long-forgotten slan inventors. The Porgrave signal shouted in his head: *Non-slan detected. Unauthorized presence.*

Jommy felt a thrumming in the air as retaliation devices swung into action. Also recognizing the signal, Kathleen backed abruptly into her father. Petty, though, was unaware of anything unusual. He strode forward.

*Defense systems activating. Targeting ... now.*

"Petty, look out!" Jommy lunged forward, grabbed the slan hunter by the back of his shirt, and yanked him off his feet.

The burly man stumbled and cried out angrily just as a spiderweb of searing yellow-white beams criss-crossed the air where he had been. A smell of ozone accompanied the whip-crack sound of deadly defenses.

Nonplussed, the slan hunter got back to his feet and brushed himself off, shocked and then angry. "You saved my life." He seemed more upset than relieved that Jommy had saved him. He lowered his voice. "Don't think you bought yourself any mercy from me because of that, Cross."

Kathleen let out a quick, bitter laugh. "If you think mercy is something that can be bought, Mr. Petty, then you don't understand mercy at all."

The slan hunter gave her a dismissive wave. "Oh, you're just angry because I shot you in the head."

They followed the dim passage for at least a mile, trending always upward. Jommy remained alert for other booby traps and defensive measures, deactivating several, though part of him longed to just let the evil slan hunter get himself fried by the systems. It would have been what he deserved, a poetic justice.

"Explain again why we should bring you along, Petty?" Jommy asked, pausing before he deactivated another security system. "As far as I'm concerned, you don't have any redeeming qualities."

Buried far underground, and now lost inside a labyrinth of booby-trapped tunnels, the slan hunter looked alarmed. "You need me. I can be useful."

"Exactly how?" Gray said. "You overthrew my presidency."

"And killed my mother," Jommy said.

"And shot me," Kathleen added. "You haven't done much to endear yourself to us. I say we should just leave him here." She looked to her father for support. "There's a slight chance he could make his way out and deactivate the security systems himself."

Turning pale, Petty quickly said, "Wait! My network of secret police is distributed all across

the country. We have emergency procedures, too—and you can bet they were better prepared than most other people. We always expected something terrible to happen.”

“The advantages of being paranoid,” Jommy said.

“We have contact protocols. I can help you bring them together, maybe mount a resistance. Who else is going to be organized enough to fight for Earth? You couldn’t have a better starting point, once the dust settles here.”

“If he does have that network,” Kathleen realized, “then it’s better to have him with us, where we can keep an eye on him, rather than off by himself where he can turn the secret police against us.”

“If nothing else, he might make a good hostage,” Jommy said. The slan hunter didn’t seem to know whether to be pleased or annoyed with their assessment of his value.

“For the time being, you have your uses, Mr. Petty,” Gray said. “Now let’s get out of here before the whole thing comes down on our heads.”

Finally, they emerged into the shadowy forest, swinging open a vine-covered grate that would have been all but invisible to anyone wandering among the trees. Getting his bearings, Jommy cast around for where he had left the car, then he led them on an hour-long search until they at last discovered the dark machine hidden in the underbrush.

Jommy had never seen anything so beautiful in his life (with the exception of Kathleen). He had designed and built the vehicle using all the best technologies and materials he had been able to put together. Petty had encountered the car once before, just after his secret police had shot Kathleen in the slan hideout. Even so, he had a difficult time pretending that he wasn’t impressed.

Gray went immediately to the vehicle’s door. “We’ve got to get out of here, and it’s best if the tendrillless think we’re all dead.”

They all climbed inside, and Jommy sat behind the driving controls, which were keyed to him alone. The engine powered up, and the guidance responded to his touch. “I can drive us out of here, and fast.”

“But where will we go?” Kathleen called from the back seat. “If Centropolis is under attack and the tendrillless are looking for us—”

“I know the perfect secluded place, a distant valley where we can all be safe.” As he accelerated out of the shielded tunnel and burst into the open smoke-filled sky, Jommy quirked his lips in a wry smile. “I just hope Granny will take us in.”

## *Part 2*

## CHAPTER 14



From his headquarters office in the Martian city of Cimmerium, Jem Lorry received the vivid images from his vanguard forces at Earth. This was one of the most satisfying moments in his life.

Jem played the footage twice more just to savor it, then he picked up the display plate and hurried to show his father and the Authority members. Seeing this, they would have to admit that he had been right all along.

He marched into the cavernous crystal-ceilinged room, where the council members were packing up for the day. With a shout, he made the seven old men turn around. "I have news from Earth, glorious news! I must show it to you."

Altus looked impatient, as if he had tolerated enough from his son, but Jem stepped directly up to the podium where supplicants addressed the tendriless Authority in open session. He plugged in his display plate and transferred the images to the tandem screens in front of all seven members. "Behold the fall of the human government! We have won. It was even smoother and more absolute than I had dreamed possible."

The transmitted images showed the devastation of Centropolis in impeccable detail. At first the cameras tracked across the city streets: collapsing skyscrapers, flaming vehicles, panicked pedestrians. Then the view centered in on the towering palace. Like a flock of hungry raptors, the tendriless attack ships zeroed in, exchanged orders, then swooped down in perfect formation. Their bomb-bay doors opened to drop load after load of weapons on the grand structure.

The detonations occurred simultaneously, shockwaves crashing against each other, reinforcing and amplifying the destruction. Flames roared to the skies. Ornate and spectacular towers that had stood as landmarks for centuries now toppled into rubble.

A hundred stories tall, highlighted with crystalline spires, parapets, and remarkable architecture, the ancient slan-designed palace collapsed under the bombardment. The Presidential quarters, the administrative chambers, staff rooms and records vaults, formal dining halls and galleries lined with state portraits. After the palace collapsed, secondary detonations spat out bright orange flowers, columns of black smoke and plumes of debris. The images zoomed in on the burning rubble and smoking pit.

Jem stood tall, supremely confident. "Right now, every surviving human in the city is staring in despair, weeping for what they've lost. Even I didn't expect their defenses to crumble so easily, though I did take care to make their small space navy ineffective. I'll bet President Gray was quite surprised."

Altus scratched his chin as he watched the replaying images. "We expected more resistance from Earth because we thought the true slans would come out of hiding at last. Are you sure there has been no sign of them?"

"None at all. If anything could flush out the snakes, this should have done it. It is time for the Authority to face the only possible conclusion: *There are no more true slans*. We've heard rumors for so long, but they're just that: rumors."

“Rumors? And what about Jommy Cross or Kathleen Layton?”

Jem covered his pained expression at the thought of Kathleen. With her true slan genetics and Jem’s tendrillless bloodline, their offspring would certainly have been superior. But she had rebuffed his advances. What a fool the girl had been! No doubt Kathleen had been inside the palace when it was destroyed. His lips pulled down in a bitter frown. She could have been with him.

“The only slans left are insignificant throwbacks, one or two genetic mistakes. They belong in a museum with other extinct species.”

Altus said, “You draw sweeping conclusions from a relatively small amount of evidence.”

One of the other Authority members added, “We can’t be too careful.” The other old men nodded, mumbling to each other.

A flush of anger came to Jem’s cheeks. The Authority—and his own father—seemed intent on stalling every bit of progress he made. “Our irrational fear of the slans has set us back by centuries! We were so sure they were hiding, building great weapons, preparing invincible defenses against us. We wasted generations establishing our fortified city here on Mars, building an invincible fleet. We laid down an extensive space mine field around Earth orbit to guard it—and from what? We’ve squandered a fortune and years of effort building bastions against an enemy that doesn’t even exist.”

“Thank you for your interesting report, my son. We will draw our conclusions once we’ve received a report from our operative on the scene.” Altus switched off the display plate, and his fellow Authority members did the same. “She should arrive soon.”

Jem blinked, feeling left out. “What other operative? I am in charge of this strike.”

“Joanna Hillory. We have already dispatched her to Earth.”

“On what mission? How dare you go around me?”

“We are the Tendrilless Authority. We decide what is best,” Altus said in a patient voice. “We sent her to find Jommy Cross, whom we consider to be our largest threat. After we have interrogated that outlaw slan—by whatever extreme means necessary—we will discover all we need to know.”

## CHAPTER 15



The sleek armored car raced toward the outskirts of the city, escaping from the holocaust. Behind them, the palace was completely destroyed. Overhead, enemy spacecraft continued to criss-cross the sky in search of targets. Once they had leveled Centropolis, the tendrillless attackers would spread out to the fringe areas, the smaller cities and towns. The invaders would not leave the job half finished.

Jommy drove through the late afternoon, dodging rubble, and continued to accelerate. The thick tires hummed across the cracked and blistered pavement. His reflexes were sufficient to dodge stalled cars, an overturned wagon, even a wide crater made by a stray bomb.

"Jommy, are you sure we'll be safe where we're going?"

"I can't guarantee we'll be safe anywhere, Kathleen, but we've got a good chance." His fingers danced across controls on the dashboard, illuminating a map. "It should take us about five hours to get there."

"That's assuming the roads and bridges along the way aren't blown up," said John Petty from the back.

"If there are obstacles, we will deal with them," Gray said.

"Obstacles?" Petty said. "I'd say the end of the world as we know it is a pretty substantial obstacle!" Then the slant hunter slumped back into silence.

Jommy's special car hugged the ground, moving almost as fast as an aircraft. After they left the outskirts of the city and headed toward the farmland and forested hills, he began to feel safer.

The car roared along isolated roads, making steady progress on the map projected on his dashboard. The ranchers and farmers who lived in the rolling countryside had holed up in storm shelters and root cellars, hiding from the interplanetary attack. No one else moved about. The sun would set soon, and then they would be safer.

His unusual vehicle, moving alone, inadvertently called attention to itself.

Red lights flashed on his sensitive detection systems, and from outside he heard a whining tone. He gripped the steering mechanism and looked around wildly. "Proximity alert. Something coming closer." Flipping a toggle switch, he shifted the ten-point steel of the car's roof into its transparent phase so that he could look overhead. "There!"

Three dark craft swooped down, the blunt-nosed tendrillless cruisers. For many years in his youth, he had seen similar fast vehicles launched regularly from the rooftop of the Air Center. "They've spotted us."

"Worse—they've *targeted* us." Kathleen craned her neck.

Plunging like hungry hawks, the tendrillless cruisers dropped focused explosives. The bombs blasted craters on either side of the country road, coughing up thick plumes of dirt and smoke. Jommy swerved, squeezing more power from the engine, but even with all his technological improvements, he could not make the car go faster.

The tendrillless bombers curved upward in a graceful loop, as if to show off their aerial maneuvers, then they came back down like a trio of executioners' axes. They would never let the car get away.

Jommy narrowed his eyes, his senses alert. He had to time this very carefully. Once the tendrillless ships dropped their next array of focused bombs, he needed to react perfectly and unexpectedly. The invaders cracked through the air, and the cluster of bombs dropped down exactly where the car should have been.

Jommy swerved, spun the rear tires, and hoped he had built sufficient clearance into the armored vehicle. The car bucked off the paved road, kicked up gravel as it went over the shoulder and through the shallow ditch. He didn't slow for an instant, but careened across the fallow countryside into the roadless rolling fields and grassy hills. Dirt and corn stalks flew up in a roostertail behind him. Ahead, past a small marker fence, he saw a thick line of dark trees, a patch of forest that had regrown after the old Slan Wars.

As he hit boulders and ruts, soft dirt and gravel, Jommy had a hard time maintaining his grip on the steering controls. At full speed, he dove through a small pond, hoping it wasn't too deep. Muddy water gushed in all directions, and then he was clear, arrowing straight toward the line of trees and, he hoped, shelter.

The tendriless bombers had turned about again and raced after him, launching another volley. Coughing explosions left fresh craters in the field, but the tendriless were overreacting. Jommy continued to dodge, spinning the wheels right and then left.

Petty, who had not properly strapped himself in, was thrown sideways into Kier Gray. The deposed President shoved him away in a tangle of arms and legs.

As the woods loomed in front of them and the tendriless ships closed in, Jommy knew he would have to crash and dodge his way through the trunks, grind underbrush with his wheels, and hope the armor could withstand any impacts.

One of the dropped bombs exploded right behind the vehicle, and the concussion threw the car several feet in the air. After they crashed to the ground, Jommy spun and swerved, still accelerating toward the forest.

Flying low, the first enemy bomber streaked past the car, its pilot furious at having missed. He skimmed just above the speeding vehicle, as if he meant to smash the car's roof with his landing wheels.

Tall trees loomed up like a wall directly in front of the attacking craft. The tendriless pilot pulled up frantically, but too late. Unable to clear the treetops, the attack craft scraped the high branches, which ripped out the underbelly. Hurling out of control, the tendriless fighter reeled, arced around, and plunged like a missile into the ground.

While the others in the car cheered, Jommy couldn't let his attention waver for a second. He drove headlong through the small marker fence and into the line of trees. Once in the forest, he was forced to slow, threading his way through the randomly spaced trunks. Branches crashed and crunched beneath him. He caromed off a thick spruce, ripping away a great chunk of bark, then he lumbered through a gully, spraying dry leaves. Ahead, the forest was even thicker.

The two remaining tendriless bombers soared over the treetops, still searching. Now that their comrade was dead, Jommy knew they would never give up. The canopy was dense enough that they could not easily see the car, but they must have some kind of technological scanners that could pick up the heat of his engine or the ten-point steel of the vehicle's armor.

He knocked down a small tree, which did not even damage the reinforced fender. The gauges showed the engines overheating. He crunched along, plowing a path through the woods, all the while knowing he couldn't hide.

The two invader ships came back over the treetops in a methodical search pattern. When they spotted the car and homed in on it, they dropped another volley of aerial bombs. They meant to destroy the whole forest if they needed to.

Jommy saw them coming. "Hold on! We can't get away from this." Despite himself, he closed his eyes, hoping the armor would be sufficient against the destruction.

Like fireworks, a dozen explosions erupted through the woods. Fireballs knocked down trees; blast waves snapped trunks like toothpicks. All around the car, tall pines and oaks toppled. Boughs smashed across the car's roof and hood. A towering pine crashed immediately to their left, scraping and scratching with its needle-filled branches. A thick, shattered trunk fell on top of them like a sledge hammer, burying them.

But the car's armor held.

As the fire continued to swell and trees fell all around, the car was trapped under the avalanche of broken wood. Completely trapped. Even when the trees stopped falling, the blaze increased in intensity, rapidly becoming an inferno that spread through the forest. The car was immobilized, caught in the heart of a furnace.

Jommy shut down the systems. "There. We're completely safe."

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## CHAPTER 16

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As the librarian stared at her baby's exposed tendrils, Anthea's own thrill of fear was echoed and doubled in her mind. The newborn somehow knew that he had been discovered—and instinctively understood the danger to both of them.

"Oh, my!" Mr. Reynolds took a half step backward. He raised his hands in a warding gesture, as if afraid he had touched something that might contaminate him.

Anthea tried to come closer. "Please, Mr. Reynolds! It's not what you think."

His eyes wide and round, the librarian jumped, as if he wanted to bolt out into the streets, regardless of the danger. "Not what I *think*? I think it's a slan baby!" He blinked several times, gaping at the child. "Yes, indeed, I'm sure it's a slan baby."

"Believe me, we're no threat to you—"

Outside, thunderous explosions made the walls shudder. The candles threw uncertain light and strange shadows.

The librarian made a quick move and dashed around the table. "Help!"

Anthea bounded in front of him, drawing strength from what she had been through, from what she knew might happen. She picked up one of the heavy tomes on the table. Without thinking, she swung it hard and bashed him on the back of the head. The hardcover hit his skull with a loud thump. Reynolds let out a heavy "oof," then sprawled face first on the



polished floor. His round glasses bounced off his face and clattered to one side.

Anthea knelt beside him, her heart pounding. "I didn't mean that! I'm so sorry, but you didn't give me any choice."

The librarian groaned, though he remained unconscious. Anthea touched his head, then the pulse at his neck. "I think you'll be all right." She looked at the book with which she had hit him, noted the irony. The title was *The Hidden Slan Threat*.

On the table, the baby had turned his head so he could see her. She felt the continued strange connection with him. Her infant son seemed very aware of what was happening, and she felt a wash of secondhand relief coming from him, confident that his mother had taken care of the threat.

Anthea hated herself for hurting Mr. Reynolds. She had never been a violent person. She worked in a bank! Before today, she had never struck another person. But she had seen the doctor try to kill her newborn baby, and her own husband had been gunned down trying to protect them. When she'd fled, more people had tried to kill her. The city had been bombed, and now Earth itself was in the middle of a war. Anthea was fighting not only for her life, but for their child's as well. A slan child—a slan born from two apparently normal people.

She had been driven to do many extraordinary things this day, and she feared she would be forced to do many more.

In order to stay safe, she had to keep the librarian out of her way. Finding strength, she rolled Mr. Reynolds over, picked up his hands, and began to drag him down the slippery hall. Either through adrenaline or newfound physical strength, Anthea pulled the heavyset man along without difficulty. Conscientiously, she picked up his eyeglasses, folded down the bows, and tucked them into his pocket. She didn't want to inconvenience the man any more than she had to. Knocking him unconscious was bad enough.

The librarian's office was just outside of the archives wing. She could tie him up there, and she needed him safely out of the way before he regained consciousness. She hated to leave her baby alone even if the room was not far away, but she could sense that the child was in no immediate danger.

Inside the librarian's office, stacks of books and periodicals were on Reynolds's desk, on the floor, on top of filing cabinets. Neatly lettered labels on colored index cards identified each stack. Plastic wrappers and open cardboard boxes indicated that the man did much cataloguing of his new acquisitions here. For a large city library, Reynolds didn't seem to have very much staff. At the moment, she was glad that no one else was in the large building.

On a special table were five old books, dog-eared, their spines cracked and dust jackets torn. But they had been lovingly taped and bandaged, the bindings reglued. She could picture Reynolds spending hours under his bright desk lamp, like a surgeon performing an operation on these beloved and well-read tomes.

She wrestled Mr. Reynolds into the chair behind his desk, then looked around for something to tie him with. When nothing obvious presented itself other than cellophane tape on the desk dispenser, she removed the librarian's blue striped necktie and quickly lashed his wrists to the chair arms. Then she unthreaded the laces from his black Oxford shoes and used

those to tie his ankles in place. When that didn't seem terribly secure, she also used the full roll of tape.

When he groaned, she felt sorry again for what she'd been forced to do. It seemed so unfair. Reynolds had been kind to her. She didn't want to hurt him. She had never wanted to hurt anybody—but the slan hunters had certainly changed that. With herself and her baby at stake, she couldn't trust anyone. But Anthea loved her baby far more than Reynolds could ever love his books. The man would be safe enough here until someone else rescued him.

Anthea took a sheet of paper from the desk and quickly scrawled a note. "I'm very sorry. We didn't mean to hurt you. I did not ask for this, but I had to protect my child. I hope someday you'll forgive us."

Rummaging in his desk drawer, she found a set of keys in a red envelope with a hand-written word. *Archives*. For the padlock that secured the combination wheels? She took the keys. Even without thinking, she knew she would have to open the vault and discover what secret information the government had hidden from the public. Why didn't they want anybody to know the truth about the slans?

She ran back to the thick vault door and its heavy combination wheels. The padlock itself couldn't have been more than a minor deterrent for anyone determined to break in, but it was one extra time-consuming step. She removed the key from the red envelope, inserted then twisted it. When the padlock popped open, she removed it with one hand and set it aside.

The large combination wheels that locked the heavy vault were ready for her. In her mind she remembered the combination Mr. Reynolds had so vividly recalled, the numbers that her baby had detected with his slan tendrils. 4 - 26 - 19 - 12.

The baby's bright eyes watched as Anthea turned the first wheel, felt it clicking through numbers. She stopped at the mark for 4, ratcheted the next wheel into its appropriate position, then the third, and finally the fourth. She heard a humming inside. It wasn't just a simple gear lock: She had activated an entire mechanism. Pistons and deadbolts rose up and down, pulling aside, clicking into place, and with a hiss like a tired sigh, the vault door moved out of its frame.

She bunched the soft blanket to prop the infant's small head as she picked him up from the table. Holding the baby, Anthea stepped back as the thick barrier groaned open. The hinges and heavy hydraulics seemed well-lubricated and maintained.

She wondered how often anyone ever studied these archives. Considering the security Mr. Reynolds had mentioned and how few curiosity seekers the government allowed, she doubted very many had read the information contained within.

But now she intended to.

## CHAPTER 17

With Jommy's car buried under the inferno of collapsed trees, he had sealed off the vehicle's environment systems, opaqued the windows, and switched on the air scrubbers and recyclers. Then he sat back to wait.

He reassured his companions. "This may look like a normal car, but it's practically a battleship on wheels. The armor is sufficient against any temperatures a mere forest fire can generate. The self-contained air systems can last for a day underwater, so they'll easily filter out a little smoke. It might get a little warm in here, but I prefer to call it cozy."

"Have you ever tested it under those conditions?" Petty asked, clearly uneasy.

"Not exactly, but you can trust my calculations."

While the forest fire burned for the next three hours, the car was buried in a furnace of coals. Though the interior temperature became uncomfortably warm, the four occupants were never in real danger. By the time night had fallen, the blaze had begun to die down. The barricade of fallen trees and branches that had buried them was now little more than a rubble of charred logs and ashes. Even if the two enemy bombers had circled the spreading inferno, keeping watch, they would have departed by now, confident they had destroyed their quarry.

With the last vestiges of the blaze still shimmering against the purple night, Jommy activated his engines again, cleared the front screens, and slowly crunched their way through the live coals, emerging with a spray of sparks like an orange blizzard. As they drove out of the now devastated woods, the car smoked, covered with soot and ash, but it made it out to the fields, across the bumpy ground, and back to the paved road.

Jommy raced forward again, back on their way, this time under the cover of a starry night. The car's sharp headlights sent lances ahead of them.

"I told you Jommy could do it," Kathleen said.

From the back of the vehicle, John Petty began to laugh with relief and delight.

By morning, they had reached open country far from Centropolis, passing over a line of hills and into a broad and beautiful river valley. The landscape was green and peaceful, with a smattering of widely separated ranch houses and farms.

"It's lovely." Kathleen rubbed weariness from her red eyes as she watched the buttery-yellow sunrise come over the hills. One of the larger mountains was distorted, half collapsed, as if a great force had smashed it down.

This valley had always been a sheltered place where he and a hypnotically modified Granny had built a sanctuary for themselves. Jommy explained to his companions that he had spent four years building underground laboratories, an arsenal, even turning the interior of a nearby mountain into a fortress. But the tendriless had already struck here, using a gigantic attack vessel to melt part of his mountain fortress in search of his underground laboratories and industries.

"I don't recall hearing about any tendriless attack," Petty said, looking at Gray. "How could something like this be kept quiet, especially from my secret police?"

"The tendriless controlled the news media, and they *wanted* to keep it a secret," the President said.

"I first bumped into one of the tendrillless when I was just a boy, not long after my mother was murdered." Jommy pointedly looked behind him at the slan hunter. "At the time I was thrilled, since I'd been looking for other slans. I knew I couldn't be the only one. I naïvely assumed the tendrillless would be happy to see me. Instead, they tried to kill me."

Petty said, "So, even the great Jommy Cross can make a mistake."

Kathleen glared at him. "The more I'm around you, Mr. Petty, the more I wonder why exactly we've taken you with us."

"You need me. I still control a sizeable force of the secret police, if I ever get in touch with them."

"We need a lot of things, but I've learned to live without them," Gray said. Petty became quiet.

Jommy continued, "When the tendrillless tracked me to this valley, I boobytrapped my extensive laboratories so the enemy couldn't get their hands on my technology. It was the only way. I left everything behind ... everything and everyone." He had sent Granny to safety in their armored ranch house while he fled in his ship, luring the tendrillless after him.

He hoped that at least some of his notes and equipment were intact at whatever remained of the old ranch. He'd already begun to imagine how he might rebuild what he needed. Once he got a transmitting station up, President Gray could make world-wide broadcasts, rally the surviving humans, even establish a government in exile. And Jommy could create the arsenal they needed to fight back in an outright war.

As he drove down the narrow country lanes past other houses, farmers and ranchers looked up and waved congenially. He felt warm inside as he remembered how much he had loved this valley.

"It certainly seems a friendly place," Kathleen said. "Isolated, peaceful."

"I helped that along a little bit. In the years I lived here, I used my mental skills and hypnosis crystals to gently guide my neighbors in their thinking."

Petty seemed indignant. "So you used your mind powers to brainwash them."

Jommy frowned back at him. "On the contrary, after generations of propaganda and lies, I used my powers to *un*-brainwash them."

Driving smoothly along a lane and then up a gravel drive lined by maple trees, they arrived at a ranch house. It was a small affair, painted red with white trimming, but Jommy knew that the walls, roof, and floors were made of reinforced steel. The decorative shingles on the roof had been patched. The familiarity of the place made Jommy grin.

He parked the car on the gravel pad in front of the house's big garage. The potted geraniums by the front porch were overflowing with bright coral-red flowers. Tulips planted along the front of the house blossomed in bright colors, and a small vegetable garden sported rows of beans, corn, potatoes, onions, and carrots—just enough for one person. Several feral-looking chickens squawked and ran along the front of the house, pecking at insects.

Jommy climbed out of the car with Kathleen beside him and saw how the vehicle had been

battered and scraped. Considering what it had been through, though, it seemed in good shape. Petty and Gray stretched their legs, taking deep breaths of the fresh, clean valley air. The slant hunter rubbed his finger along the hood, smearing a long track in the soot. He wiped his blackened finger on his dark jacket.

Jommy took one step toward the front door of the house when someone yanked it open. A rail-thin old woman stepped onto the porch. Her skin was wrinkled and leathery, her gray hair pulled back. She wore an apron and a drab work dress. Her eyes were like a crow's, black but bright, flickering from side to side.

He grinned, raising a hand. "Granny!"

Without acknowledging, the old woman reached inside the door and came back out with a loaded shotgun. She raised the barrel, glaring at Jommy, glaring at them all, and aimed directly at him.

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## CHAPTER 18

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Joanna Hillory's ultra-fast ship soared across interplanetary space from Mars to Earth. She would cover the distance in a fraction of the time that the lumbering occupation fleet required. She had only a few days to complete her mission—to find Jommy and make an emergency plan—before the main tendrillless forces reached their target.

As she streaked past them in space, Joanna gazed at the impressive armada of tendrillless battleships: giant wheel-shaped vessels powered by internal cyclotrons, bristling with atomic-powered weapons. Each gigantic craft was loaded with ground assault vehicles and the bulky equipment needed to crush any remaining resistance and establish an invincible presence. The heavy vessels carried most of the population of Cimmerium in a great exodus to occupy conquered Earth.

As she sped past the occupation fleet, Joanna transmitted the special signal that verified her business for the Tendrillless Authority. In a flurry of messages, the captains of the giant vessels wished her luck while making brave claims about how much damage they intended to wreak upon human civilization. She sent a gruff acknowledgment, feeling a knot in her chest, and flew onward.

When she made her final approach to Earth, she encountered a treacherous debris zone in the orbital lanes. A great battle had taken place here. Had the humans found some way to mount a space defense?

She saw blackened ships hanging dead in space, their hulls ripped open, cockpits and propulsion engines torn away by explosions—either from the tense dogfights or from detonation of the space mines. Hazardous shrapnel consisted of drifting hull plates, globules of molten metal that had solidified in the frozen vacuum.

Using the sensitive detectors aboard her scout ship, Joanna scanned and then projected a

three-dimensional map of all the obstacles, including the remaining tendrillless space mines in orbit. Carefully avoiding collisions, she studied patterns among the wreckage, trying to piece together what had happened. When she studied the ruined hulks more closely, she could not identify the ship design. One hull fragment, though, had colors painted on it and she recognized the insignia. A secret human fleet. Astonishing!

For the past century, humans had made only minimal attempts at resurrecting their space program, which had once flourished during the First Golden Age of mankind. The very idea of President Gray building enough ships to pose a threat to the tendrillless was absurd. And yet the humans had indeed managed to launch their own space defensive fleet. The brashness and bravado amazed her.

For a long time now, tendrillless had controlled the airways, industries, and communications centers on Earth. Somehow Kier Gray had managed to create a significant space force without anyone—not even her—knowing about it. Did the humans have unexpected help? Slan collaborators, perhaps?

Joanna knew that the Tendrilless Authority was far more worried about the true slans. Jommy Cross had proved how frightfully talented others like him could be. Now that she had thrown her lot in with Jommy, she needed to reconcile her loyalties—and in the middle of a war.

Looking at the wreckage all around her, thousands of shards glinting in slow revolutions as they caught the light from the sun, she admitted that the human space fleet had failed, but they had caused great damage to the tendrillless ships.

Finalizing her approach, Joanna spotted a few spaceships from the vanguard fleet still cruising around the battle zone. While bombers and small fighters continued to pound the cities below, vanguard scouts patrolled the orbital zone, waiting for the main occupation force to arrive, hunting down any last human spaceships, alert for any last-ditch tricks.

Unexpectedly, her communications apparatus picked up the steady, rhythmic beacon of an S.O.S. signal. As she maneuvered her ship toward the source of the beacon, Joanna realized that it was a distress call from a lifepod.

One of the human defenders had somehow managed to eject an escape pod! As the lifepod drifted along, the lone survivor aboard begged for assistance, but all of his comrades were eradicated. He had no chance for rescue, with Earth completely under fire.

Uncertain what to do, Joanna followed the signal, homing in on a small ellipsoidal container. The automated beacon droned on, calling attention, pleading for someone to come and help.

Joanna imagined the bravery of this soldier. She had seen enough of human society to know that the man would have been terrified of the inhuman slans, but he would not have known any difference between the tendrillless ones and the “snakes.” Even so, when his planet was in danger, he had climbed aboard one of the Earth spaceships—far inferior to the advanced tendrillless vanguard fleet—and launched into orbit to fight against the enemy. What folly! The soldier was either a hero, she decided, or a fool.

“Is anyone still alive there?” she transmitted, closing in on the drifting lifepod.

"Yes, I'm here!" came a shrill voice, a young man's. "Captain Byron Campbell, sole survivor of my ship. Gunner and navigator both killed in the explosion. Please, I need help."

"How is your oxygen?"

"My recyclers are still operating. I can last for another day or two. Please bring me back to Centropolis. The fight must still be going on down there." Joanna couldn't believe his naïveté. "My squadron flew up to engage the enemy, but the dirty slans had planted mines throughout orbit. Booby-trapped our whole planet! Most of my fellow ships were destroyed. Filthy cowards."

Around her in space the drifting debris could not convey the scope of the massacre. "Captain Campbell, Earth has already fallen. No one will rescue you."

"But there's you."

A lump formed in her throat. Before Joanna could respond, another ship streaked in, one of the sharklike vanguard scouts. "Commander Hillory, I apologize for not intercepting you sooner! Welcome to Earth. You'll find that everything is in order. We have taken care of most of the distractions. I'm sorry for this one. Just a loose end to tie up."

Campbell's voice cracked, full of betrayal. He shouted at Joanna. "You! You're one of *them!*"

The vanguard ship swooped in and opened fire with a blaze of energy bolts, disintegrating Captain Byron Campbell and his lifepod. Joanna caught her breath, but did not speak out. The damage was done. The man was dead, the lifepod destroyed.

"I need to get down to the surface," she said, cold and businesslike. "I have orders from the Authority." She watched the burning debris of the lifepod, chunks of glowing metal slowly drifting apart. "I don't require an escort, so long as you guarantee me clear passage to Centropolis."

The vanguard pilot transmitted a verification, and she plunged down toward the main cities of Earth. In the turbulence of war she wasn't sure how she could ever find Jommy Cross, but she had an idea where to start looking. She and Jommy had already begun to make plans during his last hours in Cimmerium, but now all those had fallen apart, thanks to the impatient and brash violence of Jem Lorry.

She *had* to find him if she had any chance of stopping this disaster. She was sure Jommy was the only one who could pull a solution out of the air.

With a sinking heart, Joanna cruised over the smoldering ruins. He was down there somewhere, and she knew he must still be alive. Tendrilless ships criss-crossed the air, hunting down any remaining resistance, though Centropolis looked sorely beaten. Rooftops had been blown apart, anti-aircraft guns and defensive measures entirely removed from the equation.

Zooming in closer, she was dismayed—yet not entirely surprised—to discover that the grand palace had been utterly leveled. Now, nothing remained of it.

Joanna set down her ship in the vicinity. This was where she would concentrate her search. Amidst the continuing explosions and the chaos in the streets, no one gave a second glance to her small craft. Angular invader ships still scattered occasional bombs to maintain the heightened state of fear.

Joanna stepped out of her craft, brushing curly brown hair from her forehead. It had been some time since she'd breathed the fresh air of Earth. Curls of smoke from burning buildings rose into the sky, adding a sour, raw smell. She stood in the rubble and looked toward the collapsed fragments and the burned-out zone.

Nothing could have survived that devastation.

In her heart she wanted to believe that Jommy had found a way out. But even if he had, how could she link up with him? He wouldn't know that she was searching for him, or that she had come to Earth at all. How could she find out for sure?

As she stared around the obliterated palace, she had no idea where she should start to look.

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## CHAPTER 19

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"Not one step closer," the old woman said. The barrel of the shotgun in her hands did not waver. "You have a lot of nerve to come back here. Granny intends to protect her home."

Jommy smiled at her, unintimidated by the weapon. "I believe it's *my* home, Granny. I paid for it."

"My home!" She swung the shotgun around, pointing at all of them. Petty dove for cover behind the car, while Gray stood next to his daughter, placing a protective hand on her shoulder.

Through his tendrils Jommy sent questing thoughts, soothing emotions. During the four years he had lived here with the old woman, he had done much work to alter her personality, to smooth over the corruption in her twisted mind. He had changed her into some semblance of a normal human being, but she had been through much recently—and he hadn't been around to reinforce his work. The old woman certainly didn't know how to show compassion—at least not naturally.

"Granny, is this any way to say hello?"

"I would prefer to say goodbye. Or better yet, rest in peace."

Still smiling, Jommy was sure he could do this. No one in the world knew Granny and her weaknesses better than he did. The greedy woman had manipulated him when he was just a boy, coerced him into committing many crimes. But she had also saved him from killers like Petty. He had owed her a debt of gratitude, though by any reasonable measure, he had already paid her back a thousand times over.

"Well, for my part I'm glad to see you alive and healthy. After the tendriless almost destroyed this valley, I wasn't sure just how you had recovered."

The old woman cackled, still gripping the shotgun. "Oh, Granny's good at surviving. Do you have any idea how much misery you put her through? How much work it was to rebuild



this house?"

In all the time he had known the old woman, Granny had been allergic to physical labor. He stepped closer until the shotgun barrel was only a few feet away, still pointed directly at his chest. "And it looks like you did a fine job."

"Damn right I did." Four of her chickens strutted around the yard in front of them. One scuttled under the big car. "I went through a lot of hard times because of you, Jommy Cross." Maintaining her huffy act, she glared at Kier Gray and Kathleen. "And if one slan wasn't enough to cause me misery, who are all these people? Are they slans, too?"

Petty barely poked his head up from behind the car. One of the chickens pecked at his ankle, and he cried out in pain, kicking at the bird. Feathers flew as it ran squawking toward Granny.

Jommy extended a hand behind him; Kathleen came forward and took it. "This is Kathleen Layton. She's the love of my life." The young woman blushed.

Granny grew misty eyed for just a moment, then forced her wrinkled face into a scowl. "How sweet. And what about the other two? And you better impress me. Otherwise, why should I keep you here on my property? Granny's got enough shotgun shells for all of you."

"That man cowering behind the car is the great slan hunter, John Petty, chief of the secret police."

Granny grinned with her papery lips. "Oh, Mr. Petty! I've admired your work."

The slan hunter blinked at her, then stood to his full height. Ashes and soot from the car smeared his chest, cheeks, and jacket.

"And this is Kier Gray, the President of Earth," Jommy said. "Is that impressive enough for you?"

Cradling the gun in the crook of one arm, Granny fumbled in a pocket of her apron and withdrew a ten credit note, flapping it to unfold the paper. She held it up with her bony fingers, stared at the portrait on the money, comparing it with Gray. "Yes, that's him all right. You haven't aged a bit, Mr. Gray."

The President couldn't shake Granny's hand because she was gripping the shotgun too tightly. Jommy could tell the old woman was relaxing, but she wanted to maintain her semblance of power for as long as possible. It was Granny's way.

"From what the wireless says, he's not President of much anymore. I wasn't surprised to hear about those evil slans attacking. I always knew there were thousands of them just waiting to come after decent, law-abiding humans."

"They aren't slans, Granny. They're a different breed—"

"They're all slans to Granny! And I wouldn't be surprised for a second to find out that you and all your ilk were behind this."

Kathleen looked indignant. "We most certainly aren't! We've been hunted down. The grand palace is destroyed."

“Don’t excite yourself, Missy. This is a peaceful valley, and I intend to keep it that way—through force of arms if necessary.” She looked down at the shotgun, then finally rested the stock on the porch beside her. “And having you folk here increases Granny’s danger. Who knows how many people are after you? Could be angry mobs, could be assassins ... maybe more slans, maybe even secret police.”

Then her eyes got that familiar greedy gleam. “Hmm, on the other hand, there’ll be a big reward for you. Could be enough money to put a nice addition onto the ranch house.”

Gray’s rich familiar voice was very regal. “I’ll make you a proposal, ma’am. As the President of Earth, I could dredge up a ransom a lot larger than any reward offered by those hunting for us. Consider it your reward for services rendered.”

“It would be more money than one woman could imagine,” Petty said.

She turned her steely glare at him. “Granny has a very good imagination, Mr. Petty.” The wheels were turning in her head. “But if the world is overrun by slan traitors, how can even *President Gray* pay me anything? Sounds like your wallet could very soon be empty.”

The President turned on his charm. “Think of it this way: If the world is destroyed by our enemies, how could you spend a reward even if you have it? It makes much more sense to help us out, and then send us a bill.”

Granny considered for a long moment and then, in a fluid motion as fast as a snake striking, she reached down and snatched up the chicken pecking around the flowers at the porch. She lifted it into the air and wrung its neck. The bird barely had time to squawk.

“All right, you can stay for supper.” The old woman grinned. “Then I’ll show you how I welcome my guests.”

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## CHAPTER 20

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Once she entered the library’s archive vault, the lights came on automatically, powered by the emergency generator. The stale air had a metallic flatness of recyclers, filters, and dehumidifiers.

Anthea saw a maze of wonders, historical treasures beyond her wildest imagining. Even with her new speed-reading ability, she had a lot to study. Standing inside, she just stared for a moment; her baby’s small hazel eyes were hungry, looking around him.

Metal shelves were stacked high with bulging and yellowed boxes of documents. Books bore red-and-white *Classified* and *Restricted Use* stickers; many of the volumes seemed incredibly old. One small table held a stack of polymer-coated papers, preserved newspaper clippings from when slans had first appeared. Some clippings quoted outspoken supporters, while others declared that these new “terrible mutants” posed a severe danger to humanity. The dates on the newspapers came from a different calendar entirely; she couldn’t tell how old they really were.

After finding a safe and comfortable place for the infant to rest, Anthea turned her attention to the old records. When tendrilled children first began to be born—unexpectedly, it seemed—they were treated as freaks, oddities, and misfits. By the time the public began to suspect the powers of the new race, a flood of slans had been born all around the world. Was the emergence of mutations an accident or part of a carefully coordinated plan? The records were unclear on that point.

As the first generation of slans grew to adulthood, the reports became darker and more disturbing. New radical groups formed, in particular a masked and black-robed society calling itself the Human Purity League. Bloodthirsty vigilantes, they hunted down and lynched slans.

Some brave first-generation slans acted as spokesmen on television and radio talk shows, begging for understanding and acceptance. The spokesmen claimed that slans did not choose to be what they were, but that they could not give up their birthright. They simply wanted to live in peace like any other human, to go about their business.

Their detractors, however, insisted that “slan business” was to destroy “inferior” humanity much the same way that modern man would have hunted down and eradicated Neanderthals. “How can a slan not feel this way?” claimed the leader of the Human Purity League. “They must believe themselves to be superior—and if they believe themselves superior, then all humans need to be concerned.”

This attitude sparked protests from militant slans, who retaliated against the prejudice and persecution by standing up for themselves. “We *are* superior. We are the next step in human evolution. Why should we be ashamed of our skills and abilities? We should use them, not hide them.”

Absorbing information as swiftly as she could sift through the records, Anthea read with growing horror. In four separate incidents, black-robed vigilantes dragged outspoken slan advocates out of their homes in the middle of the night, then drugged them into a stupor to dull their mind powers. The Human Purity League hacked off the tendrils of the advocates, then hung the victims from lamp posts or trees as an example “for all good humans to follow.”

These terrifying acts drove many slans into hiding. Slans went to back-alley clinics to have their tendrils surgically removed so they could live quietly among human society. Entire networks and underground railroads sprang up to give these “neutered” slans new identities in safe places.

Saddest of all, Anthea thought, was one small article reporting (with no particular significance) that a large percentage of those shamed slans who had chosen the illicit tendril-amputation surgery exhibited an extremely high incidence of suicide afterward. Approximately eighty percent of those desperate enough to take such measures chose not to survive with dulled senses and mental blindness; they killed themselves within months.

The Human Purity League began to sport clean-shaven heads as proof of their tendril-free scalps. Flagrantly bragging about their actions, the Purity League insisted that anyone with long hair—male or female—had to be hiding something. Their thugs knocked down people in the streets and forcibly shaved their heads. Very few of their targets turned out to have tendrils, but this did not stop their antics.

Anthea felt a tightening in her gut as she continued reading. She already knew how history

would turn out, and now she could see the events escalating toward a full-scale war between slans and normal humans.

Pushed into a corner, slan activists began to fight back more aggressively. They formed support groups and protective societies. They met openly where they thought their large numbers would guarantee them safety. But in a particularly appalling incident, the Human Purity League surrounded one such hall where they claimed the evil slans were plotting the overthrow of Earth. They barricaded the doors, barred the windows, then set the whole building on fire, burning to death over three hundred slans.

That had been the tipping point that turned slans entirely against their human persecutors. From there, it had only grown worse and worse.

Trembling with all she had learned, Anthea realized that very few people alive knew this truth. Humans still exhibited an undiminished hatred toward the mutant race. No wonder the true slans (if any of them still remained) lived in desperate hiding.

Weary of the sickening reports, Anthea stretched her legs and moved along the shelves, pulling down boxes and poking among the other paraphernalia. She found dusty devices, strange laboratory equipment that looked antique while at the same time futuristic. The sealed items were labeled merely “unknown slan weapon” or “dangerous slan mind-control device.”

In one cabinet she found an old-fashioned video viewer and canisters of tapes. “S. Lann recordings: Original statements. Highest Security Access.” Doctor Samuel Lann, the first investigator—some said the *creator*—of the slans! She knew she had to watch the tapes.

She lifted the viewer and brought it back to the table where the baby still lay, wide awake. She spent several minutes deciphering the player and loading the old and brittle tapes. She feared the tape might snap as it rattled through the viewing mechanism, but she had to learn what Samuel Lann had said in his own words.

Once she activated the power switch and heard the wheels clattering, jumpy images began to flicker on the screen. She saw a handsome man with dark-brown hair, wide-set eyes, high cheekbones, and a square jaw that denoted confidence and trustworthiness. He seemed defiant yet patient as he faced his questioners. She realized that this was Lann and that these were interrogation tapes. Even back before the Slan Wars, there must have been an organization equivalent to the secret police and the slan hunters.

“Why do you fear my children?” Lann said. “I love them. Two fine daughters and a son—triplets—who happen to have been born with an unusual birth defect. They’re no threat to you.”

The interrogator said in a gruff voice, “Anyone with powers such as theirs is a threat to us. Anyone who has the ability to control minds must themselves be controlled before they harm our government or our population.”

“But they’re just children, barely fifteen,” Lann said mildly. Even Anthea could tell he was hiding something.

“They are *weapons*, living weapons that could be turned against us if we do not control them.”

Another voice, a woman's, spoke up from outside the field of view, "And how many others like this are there, Dr. Lann? How many children have tendrils? We've heard reports from other countries—countries that *you* visited. Wouldn't you like us to bring together these other mutants, just so we can give them proper medical care?"

Lann wasn't falling for it. "Ask the other parents. How can I judge how many have been born?"

"Born? Or *created*, Dr. Lann?" said the male voice.

"What are you suggesting?"

"In your laboratory we found and confiscated many devices, strange machines that had the ability to alter human brains."

The woman continued in a soothing voice, "Your research is well-known, Doctor. You are quite prominent in the field of mental enhancement."

"Yes, I have made a career of studying the nature of the human mind, of memories and knowledge. My dream is to record and share those components that make up a person's history and personality."

The male interrogator seized on the comment. "And did those diabolical machines also expand the brains of your children, mutate them into these powerful creatures who can manipulate thoughts? You could be manufacturing enhanced humans, putting your own fingerprints on the evolution of the race."

"Don't be absurd." Lann laughed at first, then saw that the others were serious.

"We know you have the capability," the woman added.

"No one has that capability. I may be a genius in my field, but not even my children—who are far smarter and more imaginative than I am—could concoct such a bizarre conspiracy of using mind machines to produce a whole new race of human beings. Surely you can see that's ridiculous?"

"What we see, Dr. Lann, is that your three children have powers we do not understand. We've already received reports from our counterpart agencies that an alarming number of others just like them have begun popping up in the most unlikely places. Children born with tendrils—"

The woman interjected, harsher now, "Or perhaps innocent babies were exposed to unusual rays produced by your machines, which caused the tendrils to grow. Are you seeding them around the world, Dr. Lann, trying to create a quiet revolution?"

"Of course not."

There was a long silence, and finally the interrogators decided to let him go. "You watch yourself, Dr. Lann—because we'll certainly be watching you."

With a shudder, Anthea removed the tape and put in the next one. Beside her, the baby was fully alert. When she looked at her little boy, she experienced a poignant understanding of how Dr. Lann must have felt upon seeing his own three children born with strange tendrils.

Was he surprised, or intrigued?

There was no record of the woman who had been mother to those first three slant children. Had the mother been normal, or a secret slant all along? Maybe the race had existed far longer than anyone suspected. Had that long-forgotten woman—or Dr. Lann himself—been exposed to some strange chemical or mutagen? She doubted she would ever know.

In the next interrogation tape, Dr. Lann looked haggard. Purple bruises surrounded one eye, and a bandage covered his forehead. His clothes were rumpled, even torn, but his face held a murderously defiant spark that hadn't been there before.

"By being so outspoken, you call attention to yourself, Doctor," said the interrogator, a different one than before. "If you don't want to be singled out for our special attentions, then you shouldn't speak on the behalf of these dangerous mutants."

"Someone has to," Lann snapped back. "Someone needs to be the voice of reason. Obviously, it won't come from your new secret police organization." A stiff gloved hand struck him across the face. Lann spat a mouthful of blood and saliva at his interrogator. "You have no right to hold me here. I have committed no crime."

"You have attempted to destroy the human race. That's a significant crime in our book. Mutants are cropping up everywhere—it's a veritable plague! I doubt we could possibly stop the spread now, even if we exterminated all of them before they have a chance to breed. They keep appearing even from seemingly normal parents."

"I have nothing to do with that," Lann said. "It's the next step in evolution. Why fight it? Embrace it, for the betterment of the human race."

"There's nothing natural about it. Everyone knows of your machine for transforming babies into telepathic monsters. You use your rays on pregnant mothers and newborn infants, causing them to develop tendrils."

"That is absurd propaganda. Everyone 'knows' about it only because of the lies you and your organization have spread." Another slap across his face. Dr. Lann didn't even seem rattled.

"We know your son and daughters have barricaded themselves inside your fortress lab. One can only guess what they're doing in there. Is it true both daughters are pregnant? Who is the father?"

"None of your business. We have done nothing wrong."

"Then why won't they let us come in and inspect?"

Lann sneered at the interrogators. "Because you've already proved yourselves to be prejudiced oafs. You wouldn't understand what you find. You could easily plant evidence."

"If you cooperate, Dr. Lann, perhaps we'll be merciful."

"I think this interview is over." Lann struggled to stand up, but the gloved hands shoved him back down into the chair.

"It's over when we finish asking you questions."

But Lann clenched his jaws, crossed his arms over his chest, and refused to say another word. The tape ran for several long minutes. The interrogator prodded and provoked him, but he would not answer. Finally the recording ended.

Anthea could only stare. This information had been kept from the public! How could the government have sealed away such details from everyone? It was as if someone—someone in control—*wanted* the plans to remain hidden.

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## CHAPTER 21

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While the chicken was roasting in the oven, sending savory smells throughout the house, Granny showed the fugitives their separate rooms and allowed them to clean up and rest. But she had other business with Jommy.

As he followed the old woman, he suspected that she had a scheme up her sleeve. Even though he had worked to adjust her corrupt attitudes over the years, she could easily have reverted to her villainous old self. At the moment, however, he had few other choices.

Spry with eagerness, Granny walked around to the back of the house, where she pulled up the wooden door to the root cellar. Instead of the traditional smells of dirt, cobwebs, and old vegetables, Jommy saw bright lights, tiled walls, and metal stairs leading to one of his underground chambers. “I thought you might like to see this—I salvaged a few scraps. Important scraps.” Her eyes glittered. “I’m sure it’s worth something to you.”

Jommy looked around in amazement and confusion. “But I triggered the self-destruct myself, just before I led the tendrillless away from here on a wild-goose chase! I gave you a hypnotic instruction.”

“Yes, you did, but Granny’s mind found a way around it.” She propped her hands on her bony hips. “And I had a devil of a time saving some of your papers and blueprints and designs. I had burns and blisters on my face and hands for weeks!”

“But why would you do that? It was dangerous, and foolish.” He stepped ahead, amazed to see so many intact boxes and shelves. He had expected it all to be destroyed, and he couldn’t keep the appreciation and admiration out of his voice. “You saved so much of my work.”

She snorted. “It could have been valuable. I always intended to sell it, but I wasn’t sure how much it was worth. I didn’t want to be cheated. Everybody wants to cheat Granny.” She narrowed her eyes. “And what’s it worth to you now, Jommy? Take a look around.”

She led him into a chamber where she had stacked a pile of singed lab notebooks along with some of his personal inventions, instruments he used for testing circuits and improvising power sources. With a flourish, she opened a metal cabinet full of small components, valuable micro-generators, and a host of other devices the world had never seen before.

Jommy was grinning. “It’s a starting point for me to rebuild everything, Granny. But it’s still missing a great many of my records and notes. Most of those were burned, I’m sure.”

“Oh, they burned all right. But Granny has more. Not everything was lost.” Her expression was very devious. “During our four peaceful years here, when everybody liked each other in the whole valley, I used to sneak into your laboratories at night. I copied many of your notebooks—and you didn’t suspect a thing!” She cackled. “It was just a precaution. Common sense, actually. You would have done it yourself. Maybe old Granny’s figured out how to block your slant mind probing, eh?”

“Very risky, Granny. If the tendriless got their hands on this information—”

She pointed a scolding finger at him. “Don’t you get all high and mighty, Jommy Cross. It was a bit of insurance, and if you were to leave me—which you *did*—then I had something I could sell. I was sure there’d be many buyers for these notes and blueprints.”

“So why didn’t you sell them?”

Now the old woman looked away. “I was afraid to. What would I say? ‘A slant criminal left me these designs because I sheltered him for so long?’ I would have been arrested by people like that John Petty you brought into this house.”

Jommy knew the old woman was right.

“So now you owe it to Granny. I’m an old woman with modest needs. I don’t have to be filthy rich, but I wouldn’t mind a little wealth here and there.”

He knew Granny would never be satisfied. Only her constant, greedy dreams of having *more* kept her going.

She took him through several of his old laboratory rooms, which were cluttered and dark. The walls bore serious burn and smoke marks, and half of the lights didn’t work. She’d used his precision testing room to store canned vegetables and sacks of sugar, flour, and beans. It would take him quite a while to clean and set up his lab again, but it was quite a head start.

Granny led him with her stiff-legged gait down the tunnel that went under the ranch house to one of the outbuildings. “This way. One last thing. Extremely impressive. And valuable—very valuable.” Her chuckle turned into a dry cough.

They climbed a set of metal stairs. Granny flicked a switch to activate the lights, then raised a hatch to the small hangar shed Jommy had built. He climbed out onto the sealed concrete floor and just stared. “It’s still intact!” His fast rocket-plane, which he had built for his special explorations.

“Not just intact, young man—it’s fully fueled and ready to launch, just the way you left it.”

He startled the old woman by throwing his arms around her in a hug. She felt like a sack of sharp elbows and ribs and shoulder blades. “Granny, you may well have helped save the world. That must be worth a very large reward. I am very impressed.”

\* \* \*

The next day, with Kathleen sitting beside him in the well-lit laboratory chamber, Jommy carefully cracked open the first of his father’s notebooks in the stack on the table. He didn’t want Petty close to him while he looked at the papers, and President Gray had left the two of



them alone, preoccupied with possible plans to draw up a defense of what remained of civilization on Earth.

Jommy had slept for only a few hours the night before, too excited to lie around in bed. Kathleen also got up at dawn, looking refreshed and beautiful. Granny brought them a pot of strong coffee, and the bitter roasted scent drifted into the air. She had also cooked a big breakfast of fried eggs and potatoes, which Gray and Petty gladly devoured, but Jommy was too anxious to get to work in the laboratories.

"This is very interesting stuff," Kathleen said, scanning the records as she sat beside him. Granny had copied many of the documents onto fresh paper, but they devoted their initial efforts to the original records. "Your father's conclusions are ... remarkable."

"He was killed when I was only six, but he placed these volumes in storage for me, to help me reach my potential. But they weren't just gifts—they were clues, his way of showing me what I could become. I wish I'd known him better." He heaved a sigh.

Kathleen picked up the bottom journal on the stack, the one most severely singed around the edges. Granny must have pulled it directly from the flames. She turned the brittle, brown pages, looking at Peter Cross's tight, neat handwriting. As she flipped from one page to the other, she frowned, then held one page up to the light. "Jommy, look! There's something more here. I thought it was just a stain, but..."

Leaning close, he saw faint lines and scrawls, diagrams and symbols that might have been shadows of letters etched into the paper. "Thermal-response ink. The heat from the fire must have activated it."

"It's all just gibberish. Can you decipher it?"

"If my father created the code, then I can translate it. It just might take a little while."

"And help," Kathleen added, "which I'm glad to provide."

Jommy picked up the other notebooks, carefully warmed some of the pages over a small flame, and saw that many of the pages did bear secondary messages. Messages for *him*. Peter Cross's notebooks were already so full of unexpected details and incredible revelations that he would never have thought to look for additional information.

But the information he found between the lines were even more amazing.

Jommy and Kathleen worked intensely for hours, transcribing the symbols onto clean sheets of paper. Jommy set up graphs to decode the messages, while Kathleen scrutinized them, remembering all the intensive schooling Kier Gray had given her at the grand palace. Back then, many detractors had complained about the waste of time and energy in educating a slant girl who was due to be executed on her eleventh birthday. But the President had insisted. She knew a great deal about encryption and secret messages, more than the palace workers ever suspected.

Jommy finally discovered a connection, figuring out that one of the symbols indicated a letter in his mother's name and another in Jommy's own name. From that point, they possessed a key to part of the alphabet, and by translating bit by bit, unfolding incomplete words and filling in blanks, they picked up speed. Jommy and Kathleen vigorously cracked the

code, both of them grinning, their slant tendrils waving as they shared telepathic excitement. They laid out the real message Peter Cross had hidden in his journals.

Jommy read the lines of text, barely daring to breathe. "It's directions to my father's main laboratory. A major slant base containing technology far beyond anything I've ever invented. It was there that he did his greatest work."

"The diagrams are a map, and these numbers are geographical coordinates." Kathleen eagerly leaned over his shoulder, reading. Jommy felt her nearness, smelled the faint perfume of soap on her skin, and a great warmth filled him. She picked up on his thoughts and let her fingers trail down his shoulder as she kept reading. "It sounds like the greatest repository of slant knowledge in the world. Look here." She pointed. "He says it includes machinery and stored energy sources dating all the way back to the time of Samuel Lann himself."

"Maybe that's where the other slants are hiding. We could sure use their help. That place could be the key!" He looked up at her, suddenly frowning. "But now I've lost my father's disintegrator weapon, thanks to Petty. My father left it for me. He considered it his greatest, most dangerous weapon. With the tendrillless taking over the Earth, we have a huge fight ahead of us. We'll need every advantage we can get."

"Can you build another one? I'll help—"

"The technology is beyond even me, and my father didn't leave the designs. He considered the weapon to be too deadly for anyone but his own son. It could have been our greatest advantage." He squeezed her hand.

"No, Jommy. *We ourselves* are the greatest advantage. The disintegrator was destroyed along with the palace. You'll have to learn to do without it."

He caught his breath as an idea occurred to him. "Not necessarily. I placed a locator tag on the weapon." He gestured to the metal cabinet against the wall. "I can modify some of this equipment to pick up the signal. I could easily trace it, even if it's buried in the rubble of the palace. If I find the disintegrator, then we can hold our own—and take back the world."

She looked at him puzzled, not sure what he meant. Her tendrils waved in the air.

"I'm going back to the city. I intend to retrieve it, no matter what it takes."

## CHAPTER 22

« ^ »

The last of the Samuel Lann records were a hodge-podge of media reports and news items. Wanting to know more, to know *everything*, Anthea viewed them all, drinking in the horrifying details.

One clip blared that the dangerous Dr. Lann had escaped from custody and interrogation. A squat, angry-looking man spoke to the reporter, "Our security is tight, but his mutants possess abilities against which we have no defenses. It's clear to me that Dr. Lann's own

corrupted children were involved in the breakout. They twisted our minds, hypnotized us so they could free their father." He sounded quite indignant.

"This proves two things. First, this implies that Dr. Lann is indeed guilty of everything we suspect him of doing. If he had nothing to hide, as he insists, why would he escape? Second," the man pointed now at the camera, "it proves that these slans are a genuine threat. Look what happened here! With such mind powers, they could walk into any home, rob our families, assault our wives, kidnap—or even *mutate*—our children! Be afraid of them. We should all be very afraid."

The next clip showed a large building completely engulfed in flames. Fire vehicles and army troops had surrounded the structure, but did nothing to quench the blaze. The emergency personnel stood back and watched, waited, like predators. They didn't seem to be there to help.

Finally, a lone man broke out of the doors and ran away from the blazing laboratory. His clothes were on fire. He waved his hands, screaming. Anthea recognized Dr. Lann himself. Instead of helping him, though, the soldiers raised their rifles and shot him in full view of everyone. Lann's body jittered as a dozen bullets struck him full in the chest. Then he collapsed to the pavement.

"Do not approach!" a military commander shouted through a bullhorn. "There could still be some danger." The cordon remained in place as the uncontrolled fire raged through the laboratory. No one came within twenty feet of Dr. Lann's still-smoldering body.

Watching the records, Anthea felt sick.

"His three children are in there," bellowed the incident commander. "They're a bigger threat than the doctor is. If they come out, your orders are to shoot to kill. Don't give them a chance to twist your minds. Remember, these are *slans* we're talking about. They could hypnotize you into opening fire on a comrade. We can't risk that. Slans are a danger to all humanity, and they must be wiped out."

But the laboratory building continued to be consumed by flames; the roof collapsed, timbers fell, but no one else emerged. Having seen what had happened to their father, Anthea couldn't blame them. The son and daughters of Dr. Lann were doomed, either way.

The brittle tape footage jumped. Anthea could feel her baby's agitation as he drank in the knowledge. She sensed an undertone in the air of the archives vault, a humming that grew louder. Before she could wonder about the strange background sensation, though, the next footage showed the same laboratory complex in daylight. The building had burned to the ground; only skeletal beams and blackened construction blocks remained.

Grim-faced workers sifted through the wreckage. Their cheeks were covered with soot, their eyes irritated from smoke as they reported to the commander. "There are no further bodies, sir. We've sifted the ashes. Dr. Lann must have been the only person inside the building."

"How could that be? We *know* the children were all in there. That's why they made this place into a fortress. They barricaded themselves so we couldn't get in."

"Commander! Over here!" one of the workers called.

The incident commander ran over to where three men wearing gloves and insulated jackets shoved a smoldering wooden crossbeam aside to reveal a previously hidden metal hatch. "Is it a safe room? Are they holed up in there?"

One of the firemen laughed scornfully. "It would have been a pressure cooker in there. We might have a few well-done slans inside."

They undogged the hatch, opened it—and the commander cursed to see a tunnel leading down into a catacomb of passageways. "You two men—go down there. Follow it! See where it leads."

The excavators looked at each other in nervous concern. "But what if the slans blast our brains?"

"Then shoot them before they have a chance." The incident commander shook his head, letting out a heavy sigh. "I doubt you'll find them, though. The slans went through a lot of trouble to build this barricade. They wouldn't leave themselves with no escape."

A few moments later, the men came back up looking defeated but oddly relieved. "Sorry, Commander. The tunnel leads to several escape hatches that open directly into the city streets. Those three slans are long gone by now."

The commander chewed on his lip. "Then why didn't Dr. Lann escape with them?" He scratched his head. "He must have sacrificed himself so that we'd keep thinking the others were inside. He bought time for his children to get away. Now those dangerous slans are loose." His eyes took on a far-off, frightened look. "Who can tell what they'll do now?"

The tape ended, and Anthea was left with a strange sense of foreboding. Though those events had occurred many centuries ago, they felt real to her.

Her baby was restless, perhaps reading her own mood. She realized that the bone-jarring hum had grown louder and louder. The signal seemed to come from the back of her head, in her ears, rattling her teeth. However, when she concentrated on it and tried to listen more closely, she could hear nothing.

Anthea understood with a jolt that it wasn't a tone any human could hear. A secret signal? She turned, eyes widened, and looked at the baby. His fine tendrils were waving like antennae, picking up a transmission meant only for slans—and passing it on to her.

Her son couldn't move, but he transmitted his need. She had to follow that sound, find out what was making it. She looked on the equipment shelves, found the strange and indecipherable devices that had been confiscated and sealed so long ago. She was sure the secret police had no idea what it was they had taken.

One of the stored devices turned out to be the source of the piercing hum. It was labeled as "Unknown Slan Mind-Control Device—never tested." The humans must have been too afraid to toy with it.

Instinctively, Anthea understood which buttons she was supposed to push on the long-quiescent device. The humming gadget began to vibrate in her fingers. Status lights illuminated, and the needles on gauges swung over to their maximum markings. She saw a fuzzy image form, but not with her own eyes. It was the face of a man, but it seemed distant,

coming to her in thoughts instead of visions. *Her baby* was doing it!

The man talking looked like Dr. Lann, but subtly different. His son, probably, one of the first slans. “If you are receiving this, then I know you are a slan. For our own protection, we have attuned this Porgrave recording so that only those with tendrils can receive it. Those foolish humans who have caused us so much harm and pain will never know how much vital information we transmit right under their noses. All slans, hear me—you must understand who you are, know your destiny, and help gain revenge for the heinous crimes that have been committed against our new race. It will be war.

“We do not know how our fight will proceed, whether or not we’ll be victorious, but we must lay plans so that battle can continue for as long as necessary. Our father was the first to see the potential in the race of slans, and he was murdered for his support of our cause. Blind and prejudiced normals harassed him, interrogated him, and then they set his lab on fire. They shot him down while we watched.”

The blurry face smiled. “But we all knew his conspicuous laboratory was primarily a sham. A diversion. We did very little real work there, but all the humans were afraid of it. Our real laboratory was a completely different complex, well-hidden. There, our father did his ground-breaking work with mental enhancement, brain recordings, and studies of thought processes. All of his real equipment remains there, a true fortress, a place where we slans can build our defenses. In this recording we will implant the location of that secure hideout. The machinery, records, and primary mind imprints of our great father are there. Use what you find, if you can. Help us win this unjust war.”

Anthea suddenly knew where to go. The picture was clear in her mind. She couldn’t explain any coordinates or directions, but she *knew*.

Even though this strange telepathic beacon had been made centuries before she was born, she felt confident. She went over to her baby, smiling. “Thanks to you, we know of a place now—a place where we can be safe.”

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## CHAPTER 23



Kier Gray watched as Jommy packed up the armored vehicle and said his farewells. The President admired the young man’s dedication and drive, though he was concerned about the dangers he might encounter in the war-torn city.

“This is a great risk you’re taking, Jommy. We’re safe here for now, and we can start to rebuild the government in exile with anything and anybody we can find. Are you sure it’s wise to go back to Centropolis?”

“Mr. President, once I recover the disintegrator weapon, we can stand against this invasion. We can’t just hide here.”

“Isn’t that what slans are good at? Hiding?” Petty said rudely, and Granny smacked him

across the back of his head. The slan hunter spluttered in surprise.

While Jommy prepared to depart, Petty had grudgingly admitted that his men had taken the disintegrator weapon to a protected sealed vault for his researchers to study in safety.

“Why are you being so cooperative?” Jommy had asked suspiciously.

“I was always cooperative—just not too happy about it.” The slan hunter’s brows furrowed. “With a weapon like that, we could withstand the tendrillless even if they track us down here on the ranch. It just might save my skin.”

With the mind block he had learned over the years, Petty made it impossible for Jommy to read his true thoughts. The secret police chief almost certainly meant to seize the disintegrator for himself as soon as he had the chance, but Jommy would never let that happen.

Kathleen hugged him before he got into the car. “Be careful. I should be going with you—”

He was sorely tempted. “I can’t risk losing you again. Even if the immediate attack has ended, it’ll be dangerous back in the city.”

“Then let me help!”

“I’ll do my work better and faster this way—but I’m not alone. We have a connection through our tendrils. Your mind and my mind. You’ll know that I’m safe, and I’ll sense you thinking about me.” Jommy climbed into his car and sealed the doors. When the engine roared to life, he drove off, leaving his friends behind.

Gray watched him go, sent his hopes with the young man, then rounded up the others to get down to work putting together the shreds of a government.

They monitored news reports using battery-powered radios and a short-wave transmitter in Granny’s sitting room. Eyewitness accounts claimed that slans were behind the continued bombings of Earth’s largest cities, even though the attacking armies had no tendrils that anyone could see. No one challenged the claims, thanks to propaganda distributed for years by tendrillless rebels. One account claimed that *John Petty* was himself a disguised slan and had seized the presidency so that he could launch this attack upon all humanity. The timing couldn’t possibly be a coincidence, the commentator observed.

Petty couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “That’s absurd!”

“The public has been trained to believe absurd things,” Gray said. “You did it yourself.”

“Yes, my secret police were actually quite good at that,” Petty admitted. “Disinformation is a simple and commonly used tactic. If you give people enough crazy stories, they won’t believe the truth more than any other lie.”

“And now you’ve been beaten at your own game,” Kathleen said. “How are we going to convince the population of the truth, that the *tendrillless* slans are their enemies and they should rise up against them?”

“That would trigger another whole round of Slan Wars,” Petty said. “Do you want more centuries of endless bloodshed? We’d never see the end of it.”

“Or,” Gray continued, “we can suggest a meeting with the tendrillless leaders. They have a

vendetta against slans, and there's cause for grief on both sides, but maybe they'll listen if we tell them the true story. I doubt they even know their own origins. The only way we all win is if we can work out a peace, a way for us to live together in prosperity."

"Sounds like you're dreaming," Petty said.

"Jommy managed to make it work here in this valley," Granny interrupted. "I've never seen so many good neighbors."

Kathleen sat next to her father. "But what *is* the true story of the tendriless? Why do they hate the slans so much? Where did they come from?"

Gray sighed and leaned back in his chair. "It's a long story."

"Oh, then I'll make coffee." The old woman came back in a few minutes with a reheated pot of bitter old brew.

Petty slurped his coffee, then winced at the taste. "And what about yourself, Gray? You don't have tendrils, yet you seem to be on the side of the slans, not the tendriless. You're obviously a spy, an infiltrator—but which side are you on?"

The President accepted a cup, thanked Granny, and searched in his mind for the proper spot to begin. "During the long dark ages of the Slan Wars, slan geneticists decided that for the survival of our race they had to breed a new offshoot that couldn't be detected by outsiders, slans that had no tendrils. But consequently, the tendriless had none of the superior telepathic abilities of true slans. They were sleepers, like dormant seeds planted in the recovering society."

"What happened to all the other true slans?"

"They went into hiding somewhere. I don't know the details, since it was so long ago. But many more of them survived than was apparent."

"Not after my men rooted out the ones you kept in the grand palace." Petty chuckled. "That diminished your numbers quite a bit! And my secret police are probably still hunting them down."

Granny poured more hot coffee into Petty's cup ... and onto his hand, and onto his lap. He yelped. The old woman walked away with an innocent expression, which broke into a smile.

Gray continued, "As vigilante groups killed anyone with tendrils, my forefathers began to create slans that still had the same mutant genes, the same physical strength, but genetically designed to manifest no tendrils, not for several generations. Their telepathic abilities were dormant. Originally, when we infiltrated them into human society, the tendriless were supposed to know what they were and what their mission was."

"Spies among us," Petty muttered.

Granny waved a stern finger in front of his face. "Let the man talk. He's the President."

"He's been deposed."

The old woman said with a smirk, "Until you have *your* picture on a ten-credit bill, Mr. Petty, you'd better listen to him."

Gray continued, "The tendriless offshoot could live as humans, among humans, and act as humans. Because of their superior intelligence and physical strength, the tendriless wouldn't take long to work their way into important positions, running governments and industries. Before the normal humans knew it, slans would have a tight hold on society. By the time the tendriless began to have true slan babies again, once the genetic clock brought the chromosomes back to the forefront and they bred true, our disguised sleeper agents would have made another slan war impossible. They would have created an environment where slans and humans really could live together."

"Sounds like that whole idea backfired." Granny slurped her own coffee.

"The tendriless convinced themselves that we had betrayed them, that we had robbed them of their telepathic abilities. By depriving them of tendrils, they felt as if we had"—he searched for a word—"castrated" them in a way. They claimed that we had stolen their birthright. And so, when true slans came to teach them what they needed to know, the tendriless turned on them. They declared open war and killed any true slan they could find. That erupted in a terrible slaughter—and it's never stopped."

Kathleen gave him a puzzled frown. "But if the tendriless were indistinguishable from normal humans, how could they know each other?"

"Oh, they could still sense the differences," Gray answered. "Jommy found that out when he tried to approach them as a young boy, thinking they were allies. And because the tendriless were as intelligent as any other slan, they developed devices to detect us. They could track us down, ambush true slans. Many were murdered before we knew they had this ability. In turn, some radical slans declared open war on the tendriless. And it got worse from there."

"People never seem to get tired of killing. It's one of the things we do best." The old woman gulped more coffee. "This is good. Maybe I should go burn another pot."

Gray, Petty, and Kathleen all spoke out in a quick chorus. "No, no thank you. We've had enough."

The President leaned back in his chair. "Numerous tendriless lost contact with each other over the centuries. Plenty of their descendants don't even know what they truly are. And right now, all across the race, the dominant genes are beginning to manifest themselves. Once embedded in their chromosomes, the modifications can't be changed. Even the militant tendriless who want to destroy all true slans are beginning to give birth to babies with tendrils. In another generation or two, they'll all be true slans."

"Then they would have killed us all for nothing," Kathleen cried. "By killing us, they'll be killing themselves. If we could just explain to the tendriless leaders what happened, they'll stop trying to exterminate slans and humans."

"If they'll listen to us," Gray said.

The secret police chief made a rude noise, then cringed as if expecting Granny to smack him again.

"I'm still the President. I'll try to contact the leaders of the tendriless." He turned to the old woman. "I can use the equipment in Jommy's laboratory to boost the signal and build a powerful transmitter. I'll hold out an olive branch to the tendriless. Then it'll be in their



hands.”

\* \* \*

Gray, Kathleen, Granny, and even Petty worked together to erect a tall signaling tower on the roof of the back shed. Announcing himself as the President of Earth, Commander-in-Chief and head of the legitimate government in exile, Kier Gray transmitted a bold message to Mars, where they knew the tendrillless had established their base. He hoped his words would fall upon receptive ears.

Gray requested a peace conference, a summit to discuss the current war on Earth. He was careful not to phrase it in terms of a proposed surrender, though he was sure the tendrillless would view it as such.

Then they waited. Because of the sheer distance between Earth and Mars, a signal would take hours to cross space and come back. Even so, someone monitored the shortwave constantly, waiting for an answer. The Tendrilless Authority would be surprised, even horrified, by Gray’s revelations. They would argue and disagree, but the tendrillless scientists were intelligent enough to discover their own proof. With the invaders bombarding cities and setting up occupation headquarters, Gray hoped the enemy council would at least give him the benefit of the doubt.

Petty took his own shift waiting by the shortwave. He was grudgingly cooperative, even helpful. Gray found it suspicious, and he wondered about the slan hunter’s true motives. The secret police chief had been trying to gather his scattered operatives into a full-fledged defense, but so far claimed no success. The President would have to rely on diplomacy, because he had no military strength to fall back on.

Finally, at three o’clock in the morning, the crackling answer came when a sleepy Kathleen was waiting at the radio, missing Jommy. “This is Authority Chief Altus Lorry representing the tendrillless slans on Mars. We have received and considered your message. Your claims are as unexpected as they are unbelievable. However, it is the feeling of this council that we should give it due consideration. Therefore, we will send a representative to meet with you and hear your case. After so many centuries of betrayal and distrust, you should expect no more than that.”

Kathleen frantically answered. “Of course. We accept! I will have President Gray transmit his suggestions to you.” She switched off the unit and ran through the house to wake everyone up.

## CHAPTER 24

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Under the great glass sky-ceiling of Cimmerium, the woman sat by herself on a red-rock balcony. Peaceful, she looked out over the deep dry canyon, then turned her face upward and closed her eyes, basking in the distant sunshine. Her light brown hair had grown back in

bristly patches, not long enough to be attractive but sufficient to cover the large scars on her scalp.

Ingrid Corliss had been dead, or at least brain-dead, after a terrible spaceship accident on Mars. Tendrilless medical knowledge had restored her, regrown the damaged parts of her brain, and returned her to some semblance of life. With conditioning, mental priming, and careful therapy, she had reached the limits of what her people could do for her. The doctors had said that Ingrid would never be normal, that nothing could be done.

Until Jommy Cross came.

While infiltrating the city on Mars, Cross had found the injured woman. He had disguised himself as Ingrid's husband and used that deception to gather vital information about the tendrilless plans for taking over the Earth. And, though he didn't have to, he had helped to put her brain back together...

Now, in the quiet and near-empty city, Jem Lorry stepped up behind the too-peaceful woman, frowning. He could see what she must be thinking. Cross had a way of manipulating people, brainwashing them into forgetting how evil he was.

Ingrid opened her eyes. She stiffened when she saw him. "I'm aware of what you want, Mr. Lorry, but I can't help you. I don't know where Jommy Cross is."

"You don't know—or you refuse to tell us?"

She languidly reached up to scratch the scars on her scalp. "I won't lie to you—I have no desire to see him caught and punished."

"Sympathizing with slans is treason, Mrs. Corliss."

Her eyes lit up with anger. "You don't understand, do you, Mr. Lorry? Jommy Cross gave me my life back. He restored my mind. I would still be a vegetable were it not for him. He had no obligation to help me, and no reason to. The tendrilless mean to destroy him and all true slans. Why should he care about me? And yet he did."

Jem wondered what it would feel like to strangle her. "Friendship and bleeding-heart dreams have no place in politics. That young man doesn't even know his own powers. He must be stopped."

"I owe him an obligation I can never repay. Given what he did for me, can you truly believe that every slan is bad? The evidence does not lead to that conclusion."

"The evidence I have is centuries of true slans killing the tendrilless, preventing us from achieving a rightful place among the superior races of humanity. You know they bred us without tendrils to prevent us from having powers like theirs. And then they began to kill us off, one by one."

"I believe there was killing on both sides, Mr. Lorry. So we should condemn Jommy Cross and all other surviving slans for the sins of the fathers? Why not trace the crime all the way back to Samuel Lann?"

Jem looked over the sheer drop to the bottom of the dry red gorge. Though the filtered sunshine was warm enough, he continued to feel a chill in his bones. His father was a doddering fool, the Authority members were passive and ineffective, and now this woman, a

tendriless, seemed to be siding with the enemy.

"If you think we have nothing to fear from the true slans, then you haven't realized the insidious ways they continue to strike at us. In the past two months, sixteen babies have been born with tendrils in Cimmerium—*here*, on our very doorstep! Somehow the slans have been transmitting their mutation rays to Mars. That's the only explanation." He pointed a stern finger at her. "Of course we couldn't allow those babies to live. They would have grown up to be spies among us, so we quickly destroyed them. Their parents have been arrested and are currently undergoing detailed genetic profiling. I suspect they were true slans all along, surgically modified to fit in among us."

"You're paranoid, Mr. Lorry."

"I'm a realist." He stormed away.

Unbothered, Ingrid Corliss lay back in the sun and closed her eyes, continuing to heal.

\* \* \*

The Tendriless Authority had called an emergency session to talk about the news they had just received, the unexpected proposal from the President-in-hiding on Earth. When Jem barged in, uninvited, his father looked down his nose at him. "You are not a member of this council, my son."

*But I certainly should be. And one day after Earth is conquered, no one will deny me my right.* He forced a respectful expression on his face. "But I'm sure I could help, given my background. What is the basis for this session?"

His father scratched his neat white beard. "We've received a direct communication from President Gray requesting a summit. He's provided some rather disturbing historical information that explains a great deal about our background. It even explains the babies recently born with tendrils."

"We already have an explanation for that. Anything Gray says is bound to be a trick."

"Nevertheless, we should consider this carefully. Gray has requested that we send a delegation to hear what he has to say."

Jem leaned against a stone column, casual in front of his leaders. "It's bound to be a trap. You do not know Kier Gray the way I do, Father. None of you Authority members do. I worked with him for years. If he truly is a slan, then he was working against us all along. As President he pretended to be human, while plotting against his own kind. If he'd known I was a tendriless among them, he probably would have hurled me from the highest tower of the palace." Jem smiled. "Fortunately, there aren't any towers left."

One of the old men said in a creaky voice, "Nevertheless, President Gray has revealed historical explanations that makes us question many of our preconceptions."

"Take it with a grain of salt," Jem said. "Gray is trying to save his skin. He's working with Jommy Cross, as far as we know."

Altus seemed intrigued, and expected his son to be as well. "Ah, but hear him out, Jem. It

makes a great deal of sense.”

He listened with horror, disbelief, then anger as the council members repeated the story of the origin of the tendrillless. Gray suggested that the entire tendrillless race was a mere temporary offshoot, never intended to survive for more than a few centuries. The very idea appalled him. Worse, his own father and the Tendrillless Authority seemed to believe the ridiculous notion. Gullible fools! It was obviously a trick of some kind, an excuse to lull the tendrillless into doubts.

He saw only one way out. Covering his true mood, Jem bowed formally. “Father, this summit meeting will be very important, and it must be done with exquisite care. Perhaps I have been overly hard and aggressive in order to protect our race, but I can be cautious as well. I know Gray’s mannerisms and schemes, and I can spot a trap. Please allow me to go to Earth as your representative.”

Bleary-eyed Altus perked up. He seemed pleased with his son’s apparent change of heart. “A mutually beneficial solution will be best for all of us. Listen to what Gray has to say.”

Smiling carefully, he bowed. “If it is not a trap, then I am willing to consider alternatives. No one knows Earth better than I do. I can handle this.”

“We never wanted the option of complete annihilation, as you well know,” Altus said. “Make us proud.”

Inwardly furious with the soft passivity of the Authority, he went to the transmitting center and opened a channel. “This is Jem Lorry. By now, President Gray, you will have realized that I was a tendrillless slan working in your own government. My father is the leader of the Tendrillless Authority here in Cimmerium. He has delegated me to work out the details of the summit.” He paused, considered his words carefully. “I am skeptical about what you have said, but I will listen with an open mind. Tell me how to meet you, and we’ll proceed from there.”

When enough time had passed for a return signal to be received, he paced the floor, waiting and annoyed. The responding voice that came over the transmitting system, though, was a complete surprise to him. “Lorry, you’re a bastard! You worked with me, and you worked with the President, and you fooled us all. You were a snake in our midst.” It was John Petty.

Jem wished he could have seen the great slan hunter’s face when he’d learned the President’s chief adviser was a tendrillless turncoat.

Then Petty surprised him even more. “We are two of a kind, Lorry. It galls me to be here with the President, who has revealed himself as my greatest enemy. You and I have something in common—we each want to get rid of Kier Gray, so listen to me well. We’ll set up this summit, but I propose a double-cross. I’ll deliver Gray’s head on a platter.”

Jem’s eyebrows shot up. At first he didn’t trust the suggestion, but he and Petty had known each other for years, both of them ruthless and ambitious. He had to admit that a double-cross sounded like Petty—a way to turn the tables on the government in exile, to kill off Gray, his slan daughter Kathleen, possibly even Jommy Cross. It was an opportunity he simply couldn’t pass up.

Hoping that his signal would not be intercepted by the wrong person, Jem answered immediately. The slan hunter should still be there at the communication console awaiting his

answer. “I like your proposal, Petty. What I really want is to destroy President Gray and eliminate the government. Despite what my foolish father says, I have no interest in suing for peace with slans or with humans. Why should I? We’ve already won. You’re a realist. Maybe I could find some way to make accommodations for you and a few other human beings. I’m willing to compromise.”

Jem smiled to himself as he signed off, knowing Petty would accept the terms. It was all coming together. And once they had everything set up, Jem thought, why stop at just a *double-cross*? This meeting would be the convenient answer to everything.

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## CHAPTER 25

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When Jommy arrived back in Centropolis, cautiously dodging debris and trying to avoid detection, he saw that the grand palace wasn’t the only thing utterly destroyed.

He had driven through the night, keeping his vehicle out of sight whenever possible. Hidden in the darkness, Jommy had seen bright signal lights overhead indicating the flybys of bold enemy spacecraft. Parked under a dense stand of trees, he sat waiting in his dark and silent car until the tendrillless patrols passed out of sight.

Though the airships were a threat, he knew these were just scouts, not outright attack squadrons. With Earth’s defenses already crushed, the bombardment of cities had stopped. The invaders’ vanguard forces expected no further resistance from the vanquished people of Earth.

But Jommy and his friends still stood against them. He had his father’s notebooks; he had superior slan technology; he had President Kier Gray. Unfortunately, Kathleen’s father had not been able to contact any of his slan operatives from the old government, and Petty could not reach his secret police, who—he claimed—could form an organized resistance. One of Jommy’s other hopes for this mission was to find the hidden enclave of slans in ruined Centropolis, the ancient highly secure hideout his father had marked in his logs. He knew some of his people must still be alive, and they had to be willing to fight.

The remaining slans had certainly been driven into hiding, but what had once been a superior race couldn’t have been so utterly exterminated. But where were they? Why hadn’t they fought against the invasion? Could it be that the true slans were even more afraid of the tendrillless? Jommy knew he wasn’t the only one willing to fight for his planet.

He’d been striving to find the lost slans all his life. If a large population did survive, he doubted they were anywhere on Earth—and if they *were* still here and had chosen to do nothing, then perhaps he didn’t want to know them after all...

When the night sky was clear again, Jommy drove his car along the deserted roads. At last he arrived at the outskirts of the main city as the first light of sunrise painted the east with colors of blood and fire.

The streets of Centropolis were a mad turmoil of collapsed buildings and hollow-eyed survivors. Fires had gone unchecked, and entire blocks had burned down. For all their military superiority, the tendriless had not attempted to mitigate the wanton destruction. They could have assured their victory with far less carnage. Did they really want to take over Earth if they left nothing but a charred ball? It made no sense.

As he drove along, always wary, Jommy understood that the desperate survivors might not be rational. They had gone through two days of hell, and at the very least would try to take his vehicle from him. Though the controls were keyed to operate only to his touch, the mob wouldn't know that. He would have to shed a great deal of unnecessary blood in order to defend himself—and they weren't his real enemies.

Hoping to prevent that, Jommy found a quiet alleyway full of long shadows cast by the intact buildings. With the extra awareness from his tendrils, he listened to the static of frantic thoughts and fear, but sensed no one watching him. He drove the already-scuffed car into a partially collapsed shed structure, then quietly piled debris around the hood and roof. The camouflage wouldn't bear careful inspection, but most people glancing at it would assume the car had been buried during an explosion.

Taking careful note of the car's location, Jommy trudged out into the dangerous streets. He wore nondescript clothes and carried only the small tracking device that would help him locate his disintegrator tube, wherever it might be buried in the palace rubble.

As the morning brightened, he passed people going about the business of survival. They pushed wheelbarrows, carried rucksacks full of canned food or jewelry. Looters ran in and out of stores, breaking open display cases and ransacking cash registers. Pale and frightened faces stared out of darkened windows.

He heard sporadic gunfire, screams, and laughter. One man ran past him with long chickenlike strides, carrying three overstuffed bags filled entirely with colorful hats. Jommy couldn't understand what the man was doing, but a second red-faced man chased after him, yelling, "Give those back! They're mine. Bring them back!"

Moments later, somebody shot at Jommy. He dove out of the way as ricochets peppered the pavement and the building walls next to him. He couldn't see where the shots were coming from or whom he had offended. He got to his feet and ran out of range.

Across one main thoroughfare, someone had strung barbed wire and built a rough barricade of old furniture, a refrigerator, and automobile parts. A huge sign bore dripping red letters that said MY TERRITORY. Three mangled bodies were strung on the barbed wire like gruesome trophies. Jommy chose an alternate route.

When he finally reached what had once been the grand palace, he saw only a wide rubble-filled crater. Somewhere buried inside that wreckage, hopefully close to the surface, was his powerful, one-of-a-kind weapon.

"Like finding a needle in a thousand haystacks," Jommy said aloud. "But at least this particular needle has a locator beacon." He held out his tracking device, and tiny flashing lights indicated the scan of the area, the search for a signal.

Smoke still rose from the pile of rubble, curling out from hundreds of fires still smoldering

in vaults and smashed office levels below. He climbed over the debris like an explorer in a dangerous new mountain range. He found thick reinforced walls broken in half, leaving jagged edges like the teeth in a skull.

He balanced on fallen blocks, then climbed on top of a battered metal desk half-buried in the rubble. From there, he pointed the tracking device into the wreckage, turning in a slow circle. Nothing but gray static filled the screen. Leftover thermal signatures from cooling girders and simmering fires masked the signal.

Jommy ventured deeper into the rubble, walking precariously on fallen blocks. He poked into dark and dead-end passageways that looked like dangerous mine shafts, hoping to catch just a flicker of the signal on the detector. Once he determined the weapon's location, though, then he would be faced with the even more difficult task of digging it out, perhaps under a mountain of debris. That would put his slant physical strength and his engineering ingenuity to the test.

By noon, painted with sweat and dust and soot, he sat down to rest, trying not to be too disheartened. As he propped his elbows on his knees, he suddenly caught a faint signal on the device's screen. Startled, he pointed the nose of his locator device downward, increased the gain, and picked up a louder ping. When he made his best guess of the location, he pocketed the device and used his bare hands to shove the fallen rock plates aside. Uprooting a broken metal pipe, he used it as a lever to pry away more heavy debris.

With no one around in the bombed zone, he dug down with renewed energy and enthusiasm, scraping rubble, gravel, and broken plaster away. Then he found an armored hatch. Confirming that the locator signal came from the chamber behind the hatch, he continued to dig until he uncovered a massive door, sealed and locked. He couldn't believe the detector had picked up any signal at all through such an obstruction.

After another hour of tireless excavation, Jommy realized that he had found an entire isolated chamber, like a self-contained bank vault—just like Petty had said. The armored chamber had remained intact even as the rest of the palace collapsed around it. Now the cubical vault rested in the rubble, tilted at an angle, like a treasure chest buried in debris.

Activating the detector again, Jommy saw that the static was thinner, the signal stronger. Yes, the vault's thick metal walls had blocked much of the beacon, but the disintegrator tube was definitely inside the chamber. He had to find a way to open the heavy door! Now that he had a chance, he had hope, and that was enough to keep him going long past the point where he would normally have been exhausted.

At last, when he had cleared all obstructions from the door, Jommy considered his options. The vault door weighed several tons and was held secure with thick pistons. However, despite its bulk, the motors and the lock were controlled by a simple spring-loaded hydraulic mechanism.

Completely focused on his task, Jommy tinkered with the dead controls. He needed only a power source to activate them, and then he could short-circuit and bypass the vault's standard combination. For him, this was child's play.

Now that he no longer had any need for the hand-held locator device, he removed the back plate and exposed its circuits. Pulling out the tiny power source, he inserted and adapted it for

the vault door's security controls. He was rewarded to see the lights on the locking panel glow green and amber. Jommy pulled more wires from his tracker, cross-connected them, then hooked the detector to the motor controls for the large locking wheel.

Powered again, the locking bolts slid aside, making the sealed chamber vibrate. The motion caused the whole self-contained vault to shift and settle where it rested precariously in the unstable rubble. Jommy knew that if the rubble pile collapsed beneath him, he—and the vault—could be buried in a giant cave-in. He fought for his balance, ready to leap free at the last moment.

Then the thick locking bolts finally thumped into place, and the door unsealed itself with a hiss. Thick, lubricated cylinders heaved the massive barrier on gigantic hinges. Because the vault box lay tilted backward, the door lifted against gravity, then ground to a grudging halt, leaving a gap barely two feet wide.

The shifting rubble stabilized, and the ground beneath Jommy's feet stopped trembling. He approached the laboratory chamber cautiously. Wafting from the thick darkness of the interior, he could smell stale air, spilled chemicals, burned circuitry. The disintegrator tube would be in there.

Moving anxiously, Jommy squirmed through the gap and climbed partway inside, fearing that the uncertain pistons would release their hold at any moment. Even though the jury-rigged power source kept the controls active, the several-ton door could easily slam back down. He slipped inside quickly, dropped to the tilted floor, and squatted, catching his breath. Still not safe, though: If the door crashed shut now, he would be trapped in a tomb.

Jommy fumbled his way forward, straining to see details in the darkness. Then he tripped on something and crashed to his knees. Catching himself with palms flat against the metal floor, he found himself staring face to face with a pallid corpse.

The man had been smashed, his face bruised, his eyes open. Jommy scrambled backward and bumped into a second dead man. As his eyes adjusted, he noted that both men were wearing the armbands of the secret police. Both looked like broken dolls, tossed about in the tantrum of a hyperactive child.

Jommy realized what had happened. Though the vault walls were impregnable, this whole room had crashed down during the intense bombardment of the palace. To the men sealed inside, it would have been like being in a barrel going over a waterfall. They had been smashed to a pulp.

The slice of daylight shining through the open door provided just enough illumination for him to make his inspection. Forcing himself to ignore the corpses, Jommy searched the debris. His tendrils gave him no advantage; in the thick-walled vault, he could sense nothing around him, nothing outside. A table lay overturned among smashed bottles; papers were strewn like the feathers of a startled chicken. Wall brackets had snapped, tumbling and twisting metal shelves into piles. Jommy flung the shelves aside with a loud clatter, searching for his disintegrator.

With a distant rumble, the shaking vault continued to settle, and the floor tilted at a more substantial angle. Jommy scrambled to keep his balance. Three unbroken canisters and a metal pipe rolled down to the low point of a back corner. Then, as the room came to rest at a new



unstable point, he spotted the slender, polished tube that had saved his life so many times. His father's weapon!

With a wash of relief and a sudden flood of urgency—something from his slant senses, even here in the thick-walled vault?—he knew he had to get out of there. He grabbed the weapon and worked his way up the steep and slippery floor, past the scarecrowish corpses. Victorious, with the disintegrator in one hand, he worked his head and shoulder through the door gap, then balanced on his elbows. He had done it!

As he blinked in the low light of sunset, cradling the weapon, he heard voices outside, other people moving through the rubble. Nearby. Treasure seekers must be looking for valuable artifacts and antique treasures in the palace ruins. He hadn't sensed them from inside the thick-walled chamber.

As he oriented himself and turned, in the cramped gap, he felt a tingling, sensed someone very close—and then hands grabbed his shoulders from behind. A man was standing right on top of the partially open vault door above him. "Here he is! I told you I saw someone up here."

Caught halfway in and out of the door gap, Jommy struggled, but the metal floor and walls were slippery and he couldn't get a solid grip. People rushed forward to grab him. To his dismay, he dropped the disintegrator weapon as he tried to wrench himself free. He heard the tube clatter back down among the debris.

More scavengers clutched at him, wrenching his arm. Someone wrapped fingers in his hair and yanked it with a painful tug. "Hey, look at this. He's got tendrils!"

"Tendrils! He's a bloody slant!"

"Looks like we caught ourselves one of the enemy."

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## CHAPTER 26

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Now that Anthea's head was filled with wonderful, horrible knowledge from the library's "true archives," she knew what she had to do. Long ago, the children of Samuel Lann had built a large subterranean hideout right under the noses of the humans. The Porgrave message said that it had been designed to last for centuries.

That was where she would go.

The baby rested comfortably against her chest as she hurried down the corridor from the vault room. Before she could leave the great stone building, however, Anthea heard a ruckus coming from Mr. Reynolds's office. "Help me, somebody! Is anybody out there?"

As she heard his plaintive tone, a lump formed in her throat. So many people had been awful to her since the birth of the baby, but not Reynolds. What sort of person was she turning into? Did she have to leave the poor man there, helpless? With all the turmoil in the city, there would be looters, marauders—and no police or rescue workers. What if Mr. Reynolds starved

to death because she had tied him up, left him with no chance of escape.

She swallowed hard, hesitated, then made up her mind. When she stepped into his office, he flinched when he saw her. "Don't hit me again! I won't hurt you."

"Right now you'd say anything to get yourself free."

He hung his head. "Yes, in fact, I probably would. I don't understand who you are, or what you want—"

"I just want to live in peace, to get from day to day without strangers trying to kill me!"

"But you have a *slan baby*, madam. Even if I wanted to, how could I harm you? Can't you just ... manipulate my thoughts? Why not brainwash me so that I won't even remember you were here?"

Anthea marched toward where he was tied up in his chair. "Now you listen to me, Mr. Reynolds." She showed him the back of her head, and though he squinted without his glasses, he could definitely see that she had no tendrils. "I'm not a slan. Neither was my husband. But somehow I gave birth to a baby with tendrils. Don't ask me how." She turned back around, let him take a good look at the infant's innocent face. "I never expected this to happen, but I am not going to give up my baby. I will not let him be harmed by lynch mobs of ignorant and prejudiced people. We're getting out of here, to safety."

"But ... but, ma'am—I didn't threaten him in any way."

She crossed her arms. "I saw the look of horror on your face."

"Probably more a look of surprise. I've never seen a slan baby. In fact, we don't get many babies in the library." A look of alarm crossed his face. "Wait! If you're going away, please don't leave me tied up like this!"

Though she tried to be stern, Anthea simply wasn't very good at looking tough. "It's your lucky day, Mr. Reynolds. I've decided not to."

"My lucky day..." he groaned.

She took the eyeglasses from his pocket and set them on a filing cabinet in the far corner of the room. "I just want a head start." She unbound both of his arms. "You can free your own feet. By the time you get out of this chair and find your glasses, we'll have vanished into the streets. It won't do you any good to chase after us."

"I have no interest in chasing after you, Madam! You'd just beat me up again. I wish you'd asked for my help instead..."

She felt a twinge in her heart. "I feel the same, Mr. Reynolds. But the sad fact is, if you helped me, you'd be putting yourself in danger, too." She winced at the memory of poor Davis, how he'd been killed so that she and the baby could get away. As she turned to leave, Anthea hesitated at the door of his office. "You're a man of books and of learning. Don't let prejudice and ignorance get the best of you. In fact, why don't you go into that archives vault and take a good look at those reports from the Slan Wars? Learn the truth. There's plenty of blame to go around, for humans and slans alike. Protect those records. Someday, they might help us all understand each other."

She left out of the room, not even feeling the need to hurry. She could see something trustworthy in the librarian's round eyes.

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From the mysterious Porgrave transmission, Anthea had an instinctive grasp of how to get to the safe underground base—if it still existed. Slans had apparently hidden there for many generations, and the old redoubt had been built to last for centuries, maybe even millennia, as a stronghold. However, Centropolis itself had changed a great deal after such a long passage of time and the long rebuilding from the devastating Slan Wars.

Anthea had faith it would still be there.

Leaving the shelter of the library, she discovered it was a new morning, though the city was a chaos of still-burning fires, collapsed skyscrapers, smashed cars, and crushed bodies. Anthea spent most of the day picking her way through the streets, hiding from anyone who might see her. In normal, civilized times, no one would have refused to help a mother and her baby; now, though, she looked like a victim, an easy target. And if anyone should notice the baby's tendrils ...

When she finally stood at the supposed entrance to the hidden underground base, she fought back her disappointment and surprise. Maybe it had been a wild-goose chase after all.

The small, old building was nondescript, intentionally designed so that no one would give it a second glance. A small sign in the window said that it was a "Museum of Sewing Machines"—a legitimate-sounding place, but one that would not entice great crowds of visitors. Even with the blast marks and rubble in the streets, this structure remained intact and untouched. Anthea realized that the building was incredibly old, deceptively ancient, and reinforced to the point that it must be virtually indestructible. The small, quiet museum had probably existed in this spot since the days of the Slan Wars.

Looking around furtively, Anthea scurried over to the Museum of Sewing Machines and found the door unlocked. That seemed strange to her, but then she realized that the mobs had many more tempting places to ransack.

The current owners of the small building probably didn't even know its connection to the ancient slan hideout ... or maybe hidden slans watched over the building. She clung to that hope. If there were others, she could take safety among them. They would help protect her and the baby.

"Hello?" she called into the shadowy lobby. No one answered.

On tables and in transparent cases, strange contraptions were on display, spindles and pulleys, specialized industrial stitching devices and models used by homemakers from days past. One battery-powered demonstration unit slowly bobbed up and down, pumping its needle endlessly through a patch of cloth like a mechanical mosquito.

"Hello?" She crept around behind a desk where an attendant would have waited fruitlessly for paying visitors who never came. She found a small file room, a broom closet, a cold coffeepot and a packet of stale crackers, which she wolfed down, but no hidden passage that led to the underground vault. Of course, if this secret had endured undetected for centuries,

the door or hatch would be well hidden. She wandered back out to the display room, at a loss for what to do next.

The baby was restless in her arms, and she felt a thrumming inside her skull. Another Porgrave signal was coming from here, a pinpointing beacon like the one transmitted from inside the archives vault. The infant could not speak, could not direct her, but she could sense things through him. Anthea was not entirely on her own.

The vibrations seemed strongest in the main museum room, surreptitious scanners or detectors that no human would notice. She continued to search, tapping on walls, looking for hidden doors. She walked from one old sewing machine to the next, from the bulky and old-fashioned to the sleek and modern.

Anthea felt drawn again to the battery-powered demonstration model that continued pumping its needle up and down. When she touched it with her outstretched hand, she felt a thrill of *rightness* about this machine. The baby's tendrils waved in the air, and the beckoning signal grew stronger. She heard a click, as sensors detected the baby, accepted him.

The sewing machine stopped, and Anthea froze as well. Then she heard a whirring release, and the display stand moved slightly. She stepped back, fumbled around, and realized that the whole podium rested on a clever pivot. When she pushed it, the stand slid easily on lubricated tracks to expose a hatch in the floor—the entrance!

As she bent down with the baby, a metal covering whisked back to reveal a ladder leading down into a narrow chamber. Weak-kneed with relief, Anthea wrapped one arm around the baby and painstakingly made her way down seven rungs until she found herself in a small metal-walled room. She could make out no doors or hatches. A dead end.

Overhead, the covering slid back into place, sealing her inside. With a whirring noise, the sewing machine display case pivoted back into its normal position. She held the baby against her; this felt like a trap.

Anthea could find no controls, no windows, no posted instructions. "Well, now what?" she asked, a rhetorical question.

Then the whole room fell into a stomach-lurching plunge. Cables hummed and the walls vibrated as the elevator shot downward. In her arms the baby cooed and gurgled happily, sensing no danger.

Because the machinery still worked, because of the well-maintained sewing machine museum overhead, she was sure they'd find another population of slans inside the underground base. She would ask them for help. She could be at home among the other refugees, who would protect her.

When the elevator finally stopped, one wall whisked aside to reveal a huge, warm, and well-lit cavern. Anthea formed her most welcoming smile and stepped out, carrying the infant and expecting to be greeted by a group of slans, people who would help her, protect her baby, and explain everything to her.

Instead, she found only skeletons.

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## CHAPTER 27

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As the angry mob grabbed for him in the wreckage of the palace, Jommy was precariously caught in the vault door gap. He had dropped the disintegrator, and now hands clutched at him, seizing his arms, his hair. He tried to let himself drop back down into the chamber, but somebody grabbed his collar, dragging him back up.

If he struggled too much, Jommy feared he might jar loose the tracking device wired up to the door mechanism, and then the thick pistons would release the heavy door. Or, the whole armored chamber might collapse into the unstable rubble. As a trick, he went limp, forcing the scavengers to drag him out; they would underestimate him, believe he was weak. As soon as he was free, though, he flew into a frenzy.

Jommy punched the nearest man with strength that surprised his attackers, knocking him back head over heels. Then he flung two more far away as they threw themselves on him. Like a pair of rag dolls, they tumbled into the rubble, smashing into the jagged stones. One slipped and fell into a wide gap, dropping deep into the unseen lower levels; a rumble of a cave-in accompanied his fall, cutting off his screams.

The murderous scavengers circled, wary now. "Dirty slan!"

"Careful, he might fry your brain."

"You didn't have a brain to start with, Jerome."

One scrawny man who wore several layers of mismatched clothing was much more interested in the vault Jommy had been investigating. Ducking away from the fight, the scrawny man shouted, "Looks like a treasure room! I bet he was hiding something in there. Slan treasure." He started to crawl headfirst into the vault.

Jommy fought each attacker that came at him, but more and more people swarmed over the rubble, at least a hundred, all of them carrying makeshift clubs and pipes; a few had firearms, but they did not shoot. Jommy could tell they wanted to tear him apart with their bare hands.

When a man jumped on his shoulders, Jommy clawed to get the attacker away. A red-haired man sprang at him as well, but Jommy spun, knocking him with the other attacker's thrashing feet. Pinwheeling his arms, the redhead stumbled against the door controls and knocked loose the device that powered the unlocking mechanism.

The scrawny treasure hunter had crawled halfway through the gap, peering into the darkness of the chamber. When several tons of vault door dropped shut on him like a mammoth guillotine blade, he made a sound more like a cough than a scream. On the outside, separated from the rest of his body, his legs kept twitching.

Several of the scavengers stepped back with expressions of queasy disgust. Two men began to laugh like hyenas at their comrade's misfortune.

Jommy slugged an oncoming attacker in the chin with enough force that he heard both the

man's jaw and his neck snap. Then he snatched up chunks of rock at his feet and began to throw them like cannonballs, smashing several more scavengers in the face. But still they kept coming, swinging their clubs, closing in.

Jommy couldn't possibly fight them all. A heavy pipe smashed down on his left arm, numbing it from the elbow down, and another caught him a glancing blow on the temple. He reeled, but kept fighting.

A square-shouldered man with a scabbed cut on his left cheek drew a long knife and came at the stunned slan. Jommy threw another sharp-edged chunk of rubble at the knife-wielder, but his aim was off and the burly man ducked to one side. Jommy held up both fists, ready to fight, barely keeping his feet on the shifting ground.

The knife-wielder was apparently the leader of the mob, judging from the way he barked orders and how the others deferred to him. The rest of the mob backed away to let the leader have his chance. He slashed designs in the air with his dagger, taunting Jommy. The scavengers hooted and chuckled roughly, enjoying the show, while more vermin streamed over the ruins of the palace, coming from side streets. While Jommy defended himself from the dancing blade, more attackers seized his arms—far too many for him to throw off. The leader with the knife just smiled, letting the others do the work for him.

One of the scavengers swung a wooden club that struck Jommy squarely in the forehead. The blow would have killed a normal human, but even Jommy's slan strength was not enough. His legs went limp, and he fought to remain conscious. The men surrounding him laughed, grabbing his arms and holding him.

"What shall we do with him, Deacon?"

"Hey! I've got an idea! Let's break him into little pieces, just like he chopped Thompkins in half." The scavengers glared at the partial body severed by the falling vault door. The detached legs continued to jitter, as if impatient to be on their way. The redheaded man squatted beside the lower half of the bloody torso, clearly wondering what might be inside the vault, but unable to open the door.

Deacon, the knife-wielder, was unimpressed. "If he'd been busy fighting alongside us, he wouldn't be in two pieces now. Thompkins got what he deserved." He tapped the dagger tip against his cheek as he considered possibilities. Jommy then noticed the leader wore a gruesome necklace from which hung several discolored and shriveled strips of flesh. They were unmistakable. *Slan tendrils*—as trophies!

Still struggling weakly, Jommy cursed his stupidity. He should have been watching more closely, aware of other dangers. He'd been so excited to find the disintegrator at last, and the thick vault walls had shielded him from outside thoughts and senses. He'd forgotten about the human mob mentality.

"Shall we take turns killing him?" said one heavy browed young man. His voice was eager and high-pitched.

"We can only kill him once, Jerome. Don't be stupid."

"Oh. I meant kill him partway, lots of times."

Deacon fingered the blade. "As long as I get to keep the tendrils." He stroked the disgusting strands at his neck. "I hate slans as much as the next man, but I do like my collection." Jommy could barely focus on the man who paced around him, toying with his knife, drawing out the moment. "As much as I'd enjoy torturing this snake for the next week or so, there's too much loot to be had. So let's get on with it."

Jommy found a surge of energy, fought furiously, and threw off two of his captors. Then someone pummeled him again with the thick, wooden pole. He staggered, barely able to think straight. The pain rang in his ears.

"Knock him down and turn him over, then hold him real still." He stroked the discolored tendrils on his necklace. "I don't want to get ragged ends."

The men did as they were instructed. Jommy barely remained conscious. "I'm not your enemy," he croaked. "You don't need to hurt me."

The scavengers snickered and guffawed. "Oh sure, slans aren't our enemies. The whole city's blown up around us, but that was a slan gesture of friendship, wasn't it?"

Deacon bent over with his long knife, whispering in his ear. "You slans think you're superior to us because of your tendrils. They give you some kind of super mind powers. Doesn't seem fair to me. I think you should feel like one of us mere mortals for a few minutes before you die." Deacon yanked Jommy's thin golden tendrils, pulling them straight.

A sudden icy fear plunged down Jommy's back. "No, don't!" With heroic strength he nearly knocked aside the four men holding his shoulders.

Deacon made a quick slash. The knife blade cut swiftly, severing the tendrils in a single sweep.

Jommy felt an indescribable blaze as if a lightning strike had gone off in his mind. The pain was incredible. He felt suddenly blind. Deafness roared in his ears and in his thoughts, but he could still hear laughter echoing in the background. He heard a low moaning sound that warbled higher, then lower, and he realized that it was his own voice expressing his agony. He couldn't move, couldn't fight any longer. He felt utterly helpless.

Deacon stood up with an evil grin, holding his hand high. In a clenched fist, he held twitching fleshy tendrils. Tiny droplets of blood oozed out of the amputated ends. He waggled them in front of Jommy's glazed eyes.

Jommy groaned, seeing only red confusion. Deacon and his gang could easily kill him now. He couldn't find the will inside of himself to resist.

"Pathetic." The square-shouldered man stepped away, satisfied with what he had done. The rest of the mob came forward to finish up. Awash in agony, Jommy tried to face them, to fight one last time.

Then they looked up into the sky, shouted, and scattered in all directions. A shadow like a giant hawk swept over the debris of the palace, then explosions rocked the rubble nearby. Jommy squinted, saw one of the tendriless ships cruising very low. The pilot took potshots at Deacon and his mob, like shooting fish in a barrel.

As the unexpected attack continued, Jommy crawled into the uncertain shelter of a fallen

wall. The tendriless pilot could easily have targeted him, but instead seemed interested in blasting away at the frantic scavengers as they clattered through the shifting rubble of the collapsed palace. Some of Deacon's men shot their firearms at the ship, but its hull was far too tough.

Groaning, feeling little more than his pain and his absolute loss, Jommy crawled and staggered, trying to get away from all the various enemies who wanted him dead. He ducked into a black crevice, out of sight, as the tendriless ship came back around, searching for him.

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## CHAPTER 28

« ^ »

Back at Granny's ranch, Kathleen waited anxiously for the summit meeting, now that Altus Lorry and the Tendriless Authority had agreed to the terms. She had done everything possible to be of assistance to her father, but until the emissary ship arrived from Mars, she and Gray had little to do but wait. If the President could talk sense into the tendriless leadership, convince them of what had really happened in their history, her father just might cement a peace between humans, slans, and tendriless. It was their best chance.

Despite all the turmoil and uncertainty, Kathleen knew she could count on Jommy to get through, to find his disintegrator if it was at all possible—and to investigate the slan hideout from the maps in Peter Cross's logbooks.

She had felt a pure love for Jommy as soon as they'd been reunited; their thoughts, their hearts, were linked through their tendrils. Slans could know each other's minds, could look inside each individual soul. She knew Jommy was a good person, and she knew she loved him. From the moment they had encountered each other in that first slan redoubt, years ago, it seemed as if she and Jommy had lived a lifetime together.

But then the slan hunter's bullet to her head had crashed everything into silence. Some long time later, after a slan medical miracle had helped her recover, Kathleen was amazed to find herself alive but dismayed to be without Jommy. Completely separated, cut off. She knew he had to believe she was dead. For a long time she had been so miserable, but when they were reunited in the grand palace, all her agony had passed away like smoke in a rain shower.

Missing him, she busied herself in Granny's kitchen, helping the old woman bake apple pies to welcome the representatives for the important meeting. "You mark my words, girl, once they taste Granny's apple pie, they won't have any further thoughts of war and killing in their minds. I might even sell them the recipe—if the price is right."

Kathleen was better versed in politics and scientific studies than she was in cooking, but she enjoyed working beside Granny, rolling out the dough, peeling and slicing apples, sneaking a few bites whenever the old woman wasn't looking. When Granny thought Kathleen was paying no attention, she snatched a few bites as well.

When the pies were in the oven, filling the house with a delicious cinnamon-sugar aroma, Kathleen went out to the hangar shed and studied the rocket-plane Jommy had built. She



instinctively understood the controls, the design. Jommy's genius never ceased to amaze her.

Also waiting for the tendriless emissary to come, her father wandered around the ranch house and found her in the hangar. "A splendid machine, isn't it? If only we could find the lost slans, we could have a whole race of people building advanced vessels and weapons like that. With such geniuses at our disposal, no tendriless would dare threaten Earth. They might just as well hide in their Martian city and never show their faces again."

"Given the chance, Jommy could probably do all those things by himself," Kathleen said, forcing a smile.

Gray detected something in her voice. "You're concerned about him, aren't you?"

"Of course I am. I know how dangerous the city is and ... and Father, I love him."

"I didn't need slan tendrils to figure that out, Kathleen."

She blushed. "I suppose it's obvious." She turned from the silver rocket-plane, noting the red fins and the personal symbol Jommy had painted on its side. "I'm going back to study his father's notebooks. Maybe I'll learn something there."

While the President went off to plan his negotiations and prepare for the meeting as much as possible, Kathleen entered the brightly lit underground rooms. She looked at the encrypted diagram again, studying the tremendous headquarters that the slans had used in the original wars.

She stared at the designs and notes, amazed at all the work one man had done while trying to protect his wife and young son. Peter Cross had sacrificed everything for them, and then Jommy's mother had also been killed. How many more sacrifices would be required? They had already paid such a high price.

Thinking of Jommy, she tried to sense him with her tendrils. Their connection was strong enough that she detected him even far away, though she couldn't capture specific thoughts. An uneasiness tingled through her, and with a gasp she understood that this was more than just a flickering contact. This was strong emotion, a powerful urgency—Jommy sent his panic out like a beacon. Or a scream!

Was he trying to contact her, or was he just afraid—or in pain? Kathleen closed her eyes to concentrate, and her tendrils quested like antennae to pick up any thought he might be sending. She caught a flash inside of her mind.

Yes, Jommy was in danger, struggling. Many men, punching him. He fought back, but more attackers came—and they had weapons. She sensed a flicker of a knife, a gleaming blade that burned a perfectly clear image in her thoughts.

Someone touched Jommy's tendrils, lifted them away ... and then as clearly as if a siren had blasted in her ears, she felt a slash of pain as hot as a molten wire.

Unable to stop herself, Kathleen screamed. Suddenly all of Jommy's thoughts, all awareness of his presence, went black and silent. The afterimage of pain inside her head still throbbed.

"Jommy!" she cried aloud. "Jommy!"

She quested out, but received no answer. No thoughts whatsoever. Just silence.

She was completely cut off. Sobbing, she ran out of the laboratory room and up the stairs, shouting for her father, for Granny, for anyone who would come to her. As tears poured down her face and the memory of the pain continued to pound in her head, she ran into Kier Gray.

He grabbed her. "What is it? Kathleen, tell me, what happened?"

"It's Jommy. Jommy's dead!"

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## *Part 3*

### CHAPTER 29

« ^ »

On the sheer edge of the red-stone balcony overlooking the glassed-over canyons of Mars, Jem Lorry stood with his old father. The head of the Tendrilless Authority had a calm smile on his face, as if content just to be next to his ambitious son before Jem's departure to meet with President Kier Gray. He was glad of his son's apparent change of heart. To an outside observer, it might have looked like a tender father-son moment.

Jem wanted to kill him.

Even with the urgent need to cement their victory on Earth, the old man did not seem inclined to hurry. Altus was calm and confident that everything would work out exactly as it should. Jem, however, understood that things worked out only when someone with drive and vision took charge of the reins of history.

"A beautiful view, is it not, my son?" Altus said. "Look at the white rocks, the rusty cliffs, the red dust. We tendrilless have been here in Cimmerium so long, I think the need to see red has supplanted my desire for lush greenery."

Jem had always wanted to see red. Blood red.

Even though the wide Martian canyon was covered over with a transparent roof, the enclosed space was vast enough that breezes wafted up from side canyons, air currents moving about from the exchangers, filters, and processing machinery. Far below lay a bone-dry riverbed from ancient days, a ribbon of broken rocks. It seemed a very long way to fall.

"I would be happy to let the humans have this place instead of us. Let Mars be their new Botany Bay. Since you don't want me to kill them all, that seems a perfect alternative. Exile the few surviving humans here and have them scabble tooth-and-nail for an existence."

Mildly, the old man looked at his son. "Come now, Jem, when have you ever had to fight 'tooth-and-nail' to survive? You had a comfortable life. You don't fool me with your imagined hardships."

"Imagined? I know what those people are really like. Primitive, prejudiced, easily led by propaganda. They're a danger to themselves, and they deserve the punishment that we'll impose on them. I don't know what else Kier Gray expects."

Altus seemed troubled. "You are supposed to arrange a peace, negotiate acceptable terms."

"Negotiate? Father, they are broken and defeated. They have very little leverage. We should be able to get what we want, for the good of the tendrillless."

The older man heaved a long sigh. "Perhaps you aren't the best choice to go to this summit meeting after all, Jem. I'm afraid you may not approach the matter with the same goals as the Authority."

He felt a moment of panic. "No, Father, you can count on me. You know I have the bright future of our race in my heart. I will do what's best for all of us."

Altus considered. "Maybe we should wait until we hear from Joanna Hillory before we make any brash decisions. She'll have reached Earth by now. If she's found Cross, then the strategic balance has changed."

Jem tried to control his impatience and temper. "If you were going to kill Cross, I should have been the one to go there. In fact, I can make that my priority, after I've dealt with Kier Gray and his summit."

Altus scratched his beard, pursing his lips. "The more I think about it, maybe I should be the one to go talk with President Gray personally. He and I can resolve this war."

"The war is *over*, Father, even before our occupation ships arrive. Someday you'll recognize what I have accomplished and grant me the reward I deserve."

The old man patted him condescendingly on the shoulder. "Now, Jem, don't feel bad. Of course I am proud of you. You're my son. But right now I can do a better job. I'll suggest it to the Authority. I'm very sorry, son."

Jem lashed out. "If you had spent years on assignment there, cut off from your heritage, living in their squalor, you'd think differently about humans. You can't know what it was like to be among them."

The old man remained silent for a long moment. He clutched the decorative rail with his sinewy hands and leaned over the drop-off. Like a playful child, Altus worked up a mouthful of spit and let the droplet fall, watching it drift downward in the low gravity, bounced along in the air currents until finally it disappeared. Smiling, he turned back to his impatient son. "Actually, I can, Jem. You see, in my younger years I, too, served on Earth. I was part of the initial spy organization that helped set up and infiltrate the humans' Air Center."

Jem reeled backward. "You were on Earth? Impossible."

"Why is that impossible? You think me so incompetent?"

"I just didn't think you had ever set foot away from Mars. That you would—" He cut himself off before he finished his sentence. *That you would ever leave your comfortable council chair and do anything active with your life.*

"My experiences were not quite so horrific as you make yours out to be." Altus continued to gaze out at the stark cliffs, reminiscing. He actually had a *smile* on his wrinkled face. Jem wanted to strike him, to wipe off that beatific expression, but he held himself silent to hear what his father would say. "I worked among them, lived among them, talked to them. It was very difficult at first, pretending to be a mere human and knowing their unreasonable prejudices against the slans. I had to parrot their words so no one would suspect me."

"Of course you did, Father. We tendrillless hate the slans as well."

"The humans don't even know of the existence of tendrillless. I felt sorry for them in their ignorance. But life there wasn't so bad. We made great progress setting up newspapers and radio stations, silently taking over their communications so that we could manipulate their fears. It was easy for us to help them because we did everything so much better than a mere human could. They thought we were geniuses. The hardest part was never letting on how smart we really were."

"That's what I did," Jem said. "That's how I became the President's chief advisor."

"Yes, yes." Altus didn't sound interested at all. "I wonder if it's possible that President Gray knew who you were all along and simply didn't let on. Your mental shields are some of the best I've ever seen, but he's a smart man. Gray may have figured it out."

"Don't be ridiculous! It was because of my talent and skill that no one suspected."

"Even so, you were with *him* all that time—did you ever suspect Gray is a slan, even a rogue tendrillless? Or were his mental shields even better than your own?"

Jem scowled but didn't answer.

"At any rate, I found some things quite admirable about human society—their music, their congenial friendship, ah, and some of their gourmet foods. Nothing like what we have here on Mars. You blinded yourself with hate, and that is not the mark of a good diplomat." Again, that annoying paternal pat on his shoulder. "You see, Earth is where I met your mother. She was another worker in the communications towers. Oh, she was beautiful, had such a musical laugh. She had chestnut-brown hair and large blue eyes, a delicate chin. Your features remind me of her very much."

Jem tried to grasp what his father was saying. "My mother was also part of the operation? She was one of the tendrillless slans sent to infiltrate the cities?"

"No, no." Altus chuckled. "She was one of *them*, a human. She was very sweet. I wish you could have met her."

Jem choked. "You're lying. That can't be."

"Your mother was the best thing I found on Earth, kind and caring. She played a musical instrument, a stringed device they called a guitar, and her voice was like gold. She and I liked to dance. We must have spent three or four nights a week out in clubs and ballrooms. We even won a prize once. Hmm, I think I've still got the ribbon in my quarters somewhere. I took it with me when I left Earth after your mother died."

"This can't be!" Jem searched inside himself as if he could suddenly discover a fatal flaw, a hitherto-unsuspected weakness in his genes.

“Oh, it is, Jem. You’re only half-slan, you see.”

“That means I’m half-*human*.” His stomach roiled and he felt as if he was going to vomit. “I’m half-human!”

“It’s nothing to be ashamed of, my boy. You can’t help who you are. In fact, we can use it to our advantage after I go to Earth. Don’t worry, I’ll bring you there in due time. We would seem the perfect go-betweens in creating a new world order. You could have a good deal of interim power. Ah, your mother would have been proud—”

In a fury, Jem whirled and struck his father in the face, making the old man snap backward in stunned surprise. A large red mark stood out on his left cheek. “Calm yourself! I won’t stand for this sort of behavior.”

Jem roared and grabbed his father by the collar, screaming in his face with such force that spittle flew onto his cheeks. “You betrayed our race. You fell in love with a weakling human. You slept with the enemy.”

“She was your *mother*, Jem.”

“I will never accept that.” He felt cold steel within him. “And you are no longer my father. You’re a traitor. I will never let you go to Earth in my place.”

With strength fueled by adrenaline and anger, he lifted the old man. Altus seemed no more than a large rag doll in the low Martian gravity. Without taking time to think, merely following his instincts, Jem hurled his father over the guard rail and sent him falling into his beloved Martian canyon. His thin terrified wail vanished into the background breezes.

Jem stared for a long moment, shaking after what he had just done, not from horror or grief, but merely surprised at how he had reacted. The old man had certainly deserved it; he would have ruined everything. Worse, if the news got out that Jem was half human ...

He silently vowed to keep his heritage a secret. Certainly his father would never have told such an embarrassing fact to any of his peers. No one need ever know about his tainted blood.

He leaned over the deep, breathless drop, gathered a mouthful of saliva, and then he, too, let a long droplet of spit drop into the void. He was just full of impulsive decisions today.

Jem made his way back to the Authority chambers. It would be a long time before anyone discovered what had happened to old Altus, and by that time he would be long gone to Earth, where he would have consolidated his rule.

Inside the crystalline meeting chamber, all alone, he climbed to his father’s traditional seat and lounged in the comfortable chair behind the impressive bench. Then he rang the prominent summoning tone, knowing the other Authority members would rush to the emergency meeting.

The group of old men arrived, hastily straightening their robes, donning their ceremonial caps. They looked up to see Jem Lorry sitting in the middle of their high bench and no sign of Altus anywhere. From his high position, the younger man looked down upon the other council members. “I am prepared to depart for Earth. I just wanted you to know that I’m on my way.”

After today, all the tendrillless would be willing if not eager to follow him, despite the blood

on his hands. The proof would be in his strength of rule. “I am going to meet with President Gray—and I will accept his surrender.”

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## CHAPTER 30

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The pain and emptiness did not go away, but after an infinite falling moment Jommy found the strength to endure. Even as he heard the humming engines of the tendrillless scout combing the wreckage for him, searching for him, Jommy discovered a lifeline within himself: He thought of Kathleen, beautiful Kathleen, and somehow he found the resolve to raise his head up. To *survive*.

Sharp agony was like a spear in the back of his head. He gasped and let himself collapse breathlessly onto the rubble, struggling to hide in a dim hole. The scout ship had driven away the murderous scavengers, but he did not dare let himself fall into the hands of the tendrillless.

He could feel the biting scrape of rough stone on his cheek, discovered raw skin and a bit of blood marring the concrete debris, but that was a mere distraction, a tiny whisper compared to the bellow of hurt inside his head.

The mob had slashed his tendrils off! It was as if they had lopped the wings off a bird or pulled the fins from a fish.

When the sounds of the enemy ship finally faded, giving up the search, he got to his hands and knees and coughed, but each jarring motion, each inhaled breath, sent more thunder through his brain. He fought against passing out, and then he retched, squeezing his eyes shut. His body was wracked with tremendous waves, but he crashed through them like a small boat against a hurricane.

With the mental silence yelling inside him, he could hear the blood rushing behind his ears. But he strained to hear something else, anything else, afraid he might pick up the noises of laughing scavengers returning for him, knife-wielding Deacon and his brutal gang. How long would the tendrillless ship frighten them off? They had left him alive, but maybe he was better off dead.

Jommy bit back a moan and forced himself not to follow that line of thought. He was *still alive*. He was *still himself*, with or without his tendrils.

He opened his eyes into the fading light of dusk. The sky was a darkening blue with a scudding of clouds and finger-paint smears of smoke from the burning buildings. All of his senses—even the normal ones—were different now, blunted. He felt shut off. When he got to his feet, his balance was gone. Jommy reeled like a drunken man and then stumbled once more. He fell back onto his scraped hands, then with a grunt of effort, he stood up again, swaying but managing to remain erect.

Weaving, he made his way through the rubble, barely able to see, hoping the scout ship wouldn't return. He accidentally found shelter, the corner of a collapsed room, and he curled

up behind a fallen block of structural stone, shuddering. And night fell.

He had been born a slan. All his life he had unconsciously depended on his tendrils, like a cat used its tail for balance. Every waking moment the slender fibers in the back of his head had picked up the signals of thoughts, the endless droning babble of other people, other minds. It was like the background noise of the ocean in a coastal village, always there, soothing and comforting. He hadn't even noticed it—and now it was entirely gone.

His dreams and thoughts were like fever visions, recollections and hallucinations. Jommy remembered going to sleep when he was just a little boy. His mother had sung him lullabies, but she did more than just give him the soothing music of her voice; her comforting thoughts wove a nest around him, letting him know he was *protected*, that she would always be there for him. Everything had changed when he was nine years old—and now he was faced with an even greater shift, a handicap.

Without his tendrils, Jommy felt both blind and deaf.

After fearing it for so long, he gingerly touched the back of his head and felt the raw stumps. The nerve endings sent a rocket of pain through him. He drew his fingertips away, saw only tiny specks of red. Though Deacon had sliced him, Jommy's slan healing powers had halted the bleeding. He was in no danger from the injury, at least.

But now what was he to do?

Next morning, after a dizzying and pain-wracked night without sleep, he picked his way forward, stumbling again. The palace wreckage shifted with an ominous patter of falling stones and sliding rubble, and he knew he could fall through at any moment.

"I am not helpless," he said aloud, then repeated it to reinforce the thought.

He blinked and looked around, trying to see in the growing dawn light. All of his senses and impressions seemed muffled, muted ... useless. But he reminded himself that this was how normal human beings lived every day, and they managed to survive without enhanced senses or telepathic powers. Yes, he *could* smell rock dust and old sooty smoke. With his ears he *could* hear the sounds of distant aircraft cruising overhead.

But he no longer had the ability to sense Kathleen in his head. He had lost that connection with her. *Forever*.

He staggered through the rubble. The secure vault containing his disintegrator weapon was sealed again, and he had no way of defending himself. Another failure! He had come so close, but he couldn't find any means to retrieve the disintegrator now. He was too weak. He didn't know what he could do.

In all of the desperate situations he had encountered, Jommy had never felt so powerless. Previously, he had been so cocky, so sure of himself, never doubting that he would find a way out of any trouble he might encounter. Now all he could think of was to get back to the serenity of Granny's ranch, where he could be with Kathleen, where he could heal ... though he would never be what he was before.

Disoriented and still in great pain, he could barely remember where he had hidden his car. He paused in a bombed-out street, holding onto a twisted iron girder. He squeezed his eyes

shut, forcing himself to concentrate, dragging the memory to the front of his mind, until he knew which direction to go. He slumped against a scarred wall, his knees trembling.

He felt dull and listless, unaware ... and when the sharp-edged shadow fell over him from a descending tendriless scout ship, he leaped to his feet. He hadn't even heard it coming! The enemy had found him! Jommy was entirely exposed, out in the open. He looked around, but could find no place to hide.

The tendriless craft's hot landing jets blasted up gravel in the debris-filled street. Jommy began to run, but he overcompensated. He didn't see a broken cinderblock at his feet and he tripped, sprawling into the sharp shards. He got to his knees, crawled along, then lurched up so he could run again. The tendriless scout landed directly in front of him, blocking the street.

Jommy fell backward, turned about, and tried to scramble away in the other direction. The scout ship had weapons mounted in its nose. He was surprised the pilot didn't just open fire on him. Panic yammered through him as he heard the door open. Someone stepped out.

"Jommy," a woman's voice called. "Jommy Cross. I know that's you."

He recognized something in the timbre, the tone, though he could feel nothing, pick up no vibrations or thoughts. He turned to find a woman running down the ship's ramp, rushing toward him. Joanna Hillory.

When she reached him, her face was angry, relieved, anxious. "I've been looking for you! I drove away that mob in the palace, but then I lost you. I was just thrilled to know you were alive. I've been searching—"

He faced her, trying to look strong and brave. He thought he had already convinced her that true slans did not have to be the mortal enemies of the tendriless, but she had been unable to stop the devastating attack. "What do you want, Joanna? Your tendriless have followed through on their threats. Look what they've done. Look at what's happened to Earth. Are you proud?"

"I didn't want to be part of that, Jommy, and you know it." She took his arm, helped him forward. "I couldn't stop the initial attack, but we can still do something. We can still work together."

"Good," he said bitterly, bowing his head to show her the small bloody stumps on the back of his skull. "Because I'm one of you now. I'm a tendriless."

\* \* \*

She led him aboard her ship, where she cleaned and bandaged his wounds, gave him metabolism enhancers, and applied healing ointments so he could recover. From her expression and her movements, Jommy could tell that she was revolted by what the mob had done to him. Though the tendriless were perfectly happy to kill slans, this sort of abominable torture was beyond her comprehension. "Jommy, I'm so sorry."

He lay on the cot in the tiny medical alcove of her scout craft. "There's nothing you can do." Her medical packs could not grow back his tendrils. "Why did you come here after me? You should have stayed on Mars, stopped their plans."



“The Tendrilless Authority sent me to search for you. They’re afraid of you, Jommy. They say you’re the most dangerous man alive.”

“I don’t have any powers, not any more.”

“I was happy to accept the mission, Jommy. I knew I could track you down. I picked up a tiny slan signal from the area. I wasn’t surprised that you came back to the ruins of the palace—otherwise I would never have found you.”

“I should have stayed with my friends, helped the President.”

“Do you know what they’re planning? Kier Gray has requested a summit meeting, trying to put an end to the hostilities.” She explained the message she had received en route. “The Authority is going to send a representative, and it’s Jem Lorry. I don’t trust him. He’s going to set a trap, somehow.”

“Lorry? I don’t trust him, either,” Jommy said.

Jommy sat up, deciding he had rested enough. Driving away the remnants of his shocked sadness, he reached a brave conclusion and looked at Joanna, wondering if he could count on her, if she would support his work. Even without his tendrils, he had his mind, he had his physical strength, he had his “normal” senses.

“I am still a true slan—and I have work to do.”

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## CHAPTER 31

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With her link to Jommy brutally severed, Kathleen felt as if she had fallen into a black hole. Grief was like tar all around her. Now she understood all too well how much pain and misery Jommy must have gone through after *she’d* been shot, after he had spent years believing she was dead.

Her whole body felt numb. She wasn’t cold: just empty, lifeless, as if someone had cut a huge hole in her heart.

In Granny’s ranch house, she sat at the kitchen table, and her father took a chair across from her, angry at what had happened, sympathizing with his daughter. With a clatter of dishes, the old woman rummaged in her cupboards and brought out a small china plate adorned with a goldenrod flower design. She scooped up a piece of the still-warm apple pie, added a dollop of ice cream from her icebox, and presented it to Kathleen.

Despite the delicious smells, she looked up at Granny. “I’m not hungry.”

“Of course you’re not. But this pie is soooo good, Granny knows you’ll want to taste it. Be the first, and tell us if it’s good enough to serve to those important dignitaries who are on their way.”

“Jommy’s dead. A piece of pie isn’t going to solve my problems.”

The old woman cackled. “Good food often makes things seem a whole lot better. Just like money does.” She grinned. Her teeth were crooked.

Petty lounged against the kitchen wall, completely unsympathetic. “We’re going to have to do another load of laundry if that girl keeps going through handkerchiefs.” He sidled over, got himself a plate from the cupboard, and moved to the freshly cut pie.

Granny yanked it away from him. “Don’t you dare.” She put the pie on a high shelf.

Because her father was also a slan, even without tendrils, Kathleen could sense his thoughts and his presence, but the connection was not the same as what she’d shared with Jommy.

“I know how you feel, Kathleen. I lost my wife—your mother,” he said. “Though we kept our relationship a secret. There’s so much you don’t know about me.”

She blinked at him. “But you raised me. I know all about you. I’ve read your biography.”

“That was just a manufactured biography. President Kier Gray had to have a completely clean slate, an untarnished reputation. The truth about me was the most classified secret in my government. I had to make sure people like *him*,” he jabbed an elbow in the direction of Petty, “would never discover who you really were. If they used that information against me, everything I was secretly working toward would fail.”

“If you were so good at covering up embarrassing details, Mr. Slan President, how come you didn’t just hide your brat?” Petty said.

Gray ignored him, focusing only on Kathleen. He reached out to wipe the tears from her face. “I was born without tendrils, though my parents explained my heritage. I knew about the tendrillless, knew what they were, and they prepared me for the future. They taught me how to have an absolutely impenetrable mind shield. Not even another tendrillless could sense me, unless I wanted them to.

“But when I was thirteen, my mother and father disappeared—I assumed they’d been caught, so I ran. I changed my identity and made a new life for myself ... exactly as they had taught me to do.

“Years later, when I was a young man, I met your mother. It was an accident, but for slans there are no real accidents. I’d spent my life covering up my identity, and so had your mother. She was a true slan, with many ways of using wigs and hats and scarves. The old days of shaved heads and the Human Purity League were far behind us, and slans could get away with it now.”

“Obviously we’ve grown too lax,” Petty said.

“I met her in a flower shop. Your mother loved flowers. Her name was Rose.” He smiled wistfully. “She worked there, taking care of the blossoms, removing the wilted ones, watering the plants on the shelves, using a mister on the ferns. I came in to get some flowers ... tulips, I think, or maybe daffodils. It was springtime, and I wanted to cheer up the old widow who lived in an apartment down the hall from me.”

“How sweet,” Granny said.

“Fortunately, there were no other customers. When I walked in through the door and the bell jangled, your mother looked up at me. It was like an electric current passed between us. She didn’t have her mind shields in place, expecting nothing. I must have been careless, too. We ... *clicked*.”

“Love at first sight?” Though she didn’t realize what she was doing, Kathleen took a bite of the apple pie, letting the spicy sweetness fill her mouth.

“More than that. You know what it was like when you first encountered Jommy. Even though I was normal in all external appearances, a slan can know another unshielded slan—even a tendriless one—instantly and instinctively. Your mother and I recognized each other for what we were. I don’t think either of us breathed for a full minute. She came around the counter, setting down the flowers she’d been arranging in a vase. She went to the door of the shop, turned the lock, and drew the shade.” He took a long breath. “We were married two days later.”

Slans rarely needed to go through a long courtship process; they clicked like a key in a lock. “Jommy and I should have gotten married,” Kathleen said.

“Rose and I lived quietly together for several years, drawing no attention to ourselves. We taught each other many things, but we didn’t have other slans to interact with. We were just by ourselves. She worked in her flower shop, and I took a position in the information archives in the Ministry of Communication.

“Those were the happiest times of my life. When Rose finally got pregnant with you, we were content and satisfied. Unfortunately, because we were both slans, we couldn’t risk seeking medical attention. I could pass for a normal human, but not Rose. If she went to a doctor during her pregnancy, they might run some kind of test. They might discover that the baby had tendrils. They might find out that Rose was a slan.”

“So you did it all yourselves?” Kathleen asked.

“These days, home delivery using a midwife is as common as a hospital birth, especially out in the country. Because my Rose was strong, we were sure we could handle it. We read everything we could. We were ready.”

His shoulders slumped. “What I didn’t know, though, was that my poor Rose had terminal cancer. In retrospect, I now see a thousand little signs that I should have noticed, but we were too focused on her pregnancy. She gave birth to you, a perfectly healthy little girl, but the delivery was difficult for Rose. She barely recovered, and that was when I realized something else was terribly wrong with her. But she wouldn’t let me take her to a doctor. I tended her at home, and I took care of you.”

“You must have been exhausted,” Kathleen said.

“I needed every ounce of my slan strength. Poor Rose lasted longer than any human would have, considering the severity of the cancer. I knew from my own diagnosis and some medical equipment that I purchased through anonymous sources that her tumors were growing and that they were inoperable. Even bringing her to a hospital would have done no good at that point. Rose would have been exposed, and surgeons aren’t inclined to do their best work with a slan patient—unless they’re curious and wanted to do a few experiments.” Bitterness edged

his tone.

“You were eighteen months old by the time your mother was near death. I begged Rose to let me take her to the hospital. There had to be some chance, though I knew in my heart there wasn’t anything we could do. Finally when the pain became unbearable, she acquiesced—but she forced me into a bargain first. I dropped her off at night in the emergency room. I never gave my name or hers. She was just a ‘Jane Doe.’ You weren’t even with me, Kathleen. They had no reason to suspect that we had a little girl.

“Over the years, Rose and I had met many kind and wonderful humans. I prayed now that whoever tended my dying wife might be a kindly nurse or an altruistic doctor, someone who would recognize her pain and help her. Though I had to go, to stay out of sight, Rose remained connected to me through her tendrils. I could sense her with our special bond. I could feel what was happening to her, though she herself had dulled her mind and body with painkillers. When the medical professionals in the emergency room discovered that she was a slant, there was quite an uproar.”

“I’ll bet,” Petty said. “They should have called my secret police right away.”

“One doctor did,” Gray continued, his voice like a razor. “They gave Rose a bed, realized there was nothing they could do for her except to alleviate her pain, and so that’s what they did. The secret police came, prodding her, interrogating her, attempting to rip information from her brain in her last moments of life. But she clung to the promise I’d made, and she found her own sort of peace.”

“What did she make you promise?” Kathleen asked.

Gray fell silent for a long moment and swallowed twice, gathering his thoughts. “I knew she didn’t have long. I took you to a conservatory, a large greenhouse filled with flowers. That was what she wanted.

“Rose regained consciousness before she died. Even without tendrils, I could sense her in my mind. I held you in my arms, little girl, and we stood among the roses, the tropical plants, the beautiful orchids. She could see them through my eyes. Despite what the secret police were doing to her, she could share my thoughts. Those were her favorite things in all the world, and even though I longed to be with my darling in her last moments, I gave her something better. I smelled the flowers, the sweet perfume that she loved so much. It’s the last thing she experienced. When Rose died, it felt like a cold wind passing through my soul, and I held onto you very tightly.”

In the moment of openness, Kathleen could sense that her father had lowered part of his impenetrable shield, letting her inside for the very first time. She picked up on his emotions, his bright memories, his love for her. And some of the distant, blurred recollections overlapped with her own vague memories.

Kathleen was crying. “I remember that. I remember the flowers, but I wasn’t sure what they meant. It was when I was just a baby.”

“It wasn’t until long after that I tracked down her body. I wanted to give her a proper funeral, but the secret police had already taken her for dissection. After that day, everything changed.” Gray’s voice became hard now. “I decided I had to make a difference. I couldn’t just

allow slans like Rose, like you, to live like rats in hiding.

“Since I had discovered Rose, I knew there must be more slans, though no one guessed where they might be hiding. After I lost my parents, I had no further connection with any of the organized tendrills. So I went to work with grim determination, all by myself. With my job in the communications ministry and with full access to the informational archives, I built a detailed and impressive history for myself. It was masterful. No one could find any flaws or mistakes. And then I launched my political career.

“I did find other slans, eventually. We arranged meetings, extended our influence, and made our plans. Because I could pass so easily among the normals, they wanted me as their champion. I built my network, manipulating, strengthening, growing. Using slan skills, nudging the thoughts of certain followers, I built a campaign organization—but I kept my personal life intensely private. No one knew about you, Kathleen.

“I won my first three elections by landslides. My career was meteoric. When many of my supporters, and even several defeated rivals (whose minds I had manipulated), supported me as a dark-horse candidate to be the next President, I felt sure I could accomplish what I needed to do.”

“But what about me?” Kathleen said. “I remember someone taking care of me, an ... uncle?”

“A kindly blind man watched over you. I paid him well,” Gray said. “Either he never knew you had tendrills, or he didn’t mind. You were smart enough to take care of yourself. I thought everything was set.

“But on the day of the election, in my finest hour after I had won the office of President, secret police raided the old man’s home. Someone had tipped them off that he had a slan girl there. The blind man couldn’t defend himself. He didn’t know very much about me, but he could probably have revealed enough. Fortunately for us, I suppose, the secret police thugs killed him before they could interrogate him. They captured you—and then I had to act. I risked my political career, my best chance for changing the whole world, but I had to find a way to do both. You are my daughter, Kathleen. I had to take the chance and save you.

“As the newly sworn President, I issued a decree, announcing that in order to understand the slans and whatever threat they might pose, we needed to study them, not just react with automatic fear. I insisted that you be kept in the palace with me, where you would be safe and where, unfortunately, you would be scrutinized every moment of your life.”

“Then why did you originally agree to let her be executed on her eleventh birthday?” Petty asked. “It makes no sense.”

“That was a concession I had to make at the time. I had many years to work around that loophole, and as you can see, it didn’t cause a problem, ultimately. But now look where we are. See how much has changed?” He reached over, picked up the fork, and took a bite of pie. Granny looked on, as if hoping for a compliment.

“I still miss my Rose. Sometimes I can hardly bear it. Even with my power as President, I’d gladly surrender it all just to have a quiet, normal life with my wife and daughter.”

Petty, still pouting at the flaky pie that Granny had denied him, grumbled. “Sentimental

crap.”

With a swift movement, the old woman swatted him again on the back of his head.

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## CHAPTER 32

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Alone inside the secret slan redoubt, Anthea counted eleven skeletons. Three were sprawled on the floor; others had collapsed into piles of bones beside desks and laboratory tables. Sensing her disappointment, confusion, and uneasiness, the baby boy squirmed and began to whimper.

Anthea picked her way among the skeletons, looked at the grinning teeth, the empty eye sockets. Several of the rib cages were broken, the bones shattered and blackened. All around, she found discarded weapons, bullet casings, and empty charge packs. Black marks stained the tables, floor, and walls. Chunks had been blasted from the high rock ceiling, and bullet holes stitched a zig-zag pattern across a chalkboard that hung askew.

A terrific battle had occurred here, a shootout—but with whom? And how long ago? Was there some sort of civil war among the slans, or had the secret police discovered this place and ambushed the hiding slans? She doubted she would ever know the answers.

She strained her ears, as if there might still be fading echoes, but she heard only the hum of buried generators. The lights were strong and steady, never flickering. The air smelled clean, though with a faint metallic odor and thankfully without any residue of the decaying bodies.

Had the skeletons been here since the days of the Slan Wars, centuries ago? She looked down at the sprawled figures, wondering if they might be the last remains of the children of Dr. Lann. She didn't think so.

She picked up one of the unusual energy weapons on the floor—a stunner?—and saw that it had been completely discharged. She couldn't use it for her own protection, should slan hunters threaten her here.

After her initial surprise, Anthea cautiously explored the large chambers, calling out, but finding no one else there. The redoubt was completely empty, completely silent.

She found fresh running water and sanitary facilities, several rooms with comfortable beds, clean clothes. In a dining area she discovered a wealth of preserved packaged food. After recognizing slightly old-fashioned brands and label designs, she concluded that someone *had* occupied this place within the last few decades. The food was still good, and she ravenously ate a wrapped chocolate bar. If necessary, she could stay here a long time.

At last feeling a warmth and contentment she hadn't experienced since Davis had rushed her to the hospital—on what she thought would be the happiest day of her life—Anthea realized how utterly exhausted she was. She sat in a chair and kept herself awake long enough to nurse the baby, who sucked greedily. He must have been starving as well.

Barely able to stay awake, Anthea chose one of the soft beds and took just enough time to pull out a blanket and a pillow. She lay back, cradling the baby against her, and fell asleep within moments.

\* \* \*

Later, rested and refreshed at last, she arranged a makeshift crib for the baby and then turned to the first order of business: removing the grim reminder of the skeletons. These bones weren't just random garbage that she could sweep up and toss in a trash bin. Every one had been a person, probably an unjustly persecuted slan. She imagined that they must have died fighting, as heroes.

Finding a pair of gloves and some empty boxes, she gathered each of the remains and reverently put them in separate containers, like makeshift coffins. She didn't know what else to do. Someday, there might be a way to identify these people and bury them properly so they could rest in peace. After she had quietly tucked away each of the boxes and cleaned the dark stains, she felt drained.

Now, she could devote her full attention to investigating the place that would be her refuge during the war above. The buried complex was quite remarkable with laboratory equipment that far surpassed anything she had seen in the library archives. The tall, blocky units with spinning tape feeds and blinking lights were obviously powerful computers. Thick electrical conduits ran through the walls, distributing power from generators that must have been located in a deeper grotto.

In a separate control room, she found a throbbing device studded with crystal rods and vacuum tubes. It glowed blue-white with energy, crackling as tiny sparks discharged across electrodes and thrummed through conduits into the ceiling. A signal generator? It seemed to be sending out a pulsing message—but to whom? The system itself must have been designed by those long-ago slans, perhaps the original children of Samuel Lann, or maybe the more recent inhabitants who had died in the shootout. Either way, was there anyone left who could receive such a transmission? Were there still slans out in the wreckage of Centropolis? Staring at the machinery, she didn't know how to respond to the signal, how to listen to what it might be saying.

As she continued her explorations, Anthea realized that the whole underground facility had been steadily changing ever since she and the baby had arrived—powering up, *awakening*. When the Porgrave sensors had recognized the arrival of a slan, dormant systems began to come online again.

The slan scientists in this base, whoever they were, had created technology capable of detecting members of their race. Anthea realized that if such sensors had fallen into the hands of the secret police, then no slan would ever be safe. The inhabitants of this base would have given their lives to protect that invention.

In the laboratory rooms, she found neatly stacked notebooks, records signed by a slan scientist named Peter Cross. In addition to the hand-written logs, she also found a recording loop and a viewer similar to the one she had used in the library archives. She installed the reel and played it, seeing Peter Cross in person. He was a handsome man with bright eyes, dark

curly hair cut short, and a high brow. He made no effort to hide the fine slan tendrils that dangled at the base of his neck.

Cross spoke at length into the recorder about complex technical matters, describing how slans were again using this ancient base, though he feared the war was over and lost, for all intents and purposes. Cross described the treasure-trove of forgotten discoveries he had found here upon reopening the underground redoubt, including a series of Samuel Lann's investigations about "original memory transference" and "baseline life-recording technology."

Then Peter Cross looked directly into the imager. His blue eyes seemed to stare right out at her, and Anthea felt his words tug at her heart. "I will never stop my work," he vowed. "Not until I succeed in making a better world so that my wife and baby son no longer have to live in fear."

When the recording ended, Anthea nodded silently and solemnly to herself. "That's something we can all wish for."

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## CHAPTER 33

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Inside the sleek spacecraft, Jommy recovered, sleeping as if in a coma, then feeling weak and disoriented when he woke. Counting on Joanna's help, he tried to think of a way they could save Earth and prevent the extinction of both humans and slans. Both of them felt a sense of urgency, knowing that Jem Lorry would be meeting with President Gray soon. Worse, Joanna told him the ominous main occupation fleet from Mars would arrive within days.

As she checked her systems, Joanna glanced up to see a flash of fire as an explosive projectile came flying toward her ship. "Jommy! Someone's shooting at—" She didn't have time to complete her warning before the explosion struck the side hull. The metal plates buckled inward, and fire tore open the wall.

Jommy staggered to his feet, feeling angry and helpless. He saw the ragged scavengers outside, coming closer. "They didn't take long to creep out of their hiding holes." The looters had scavenged firearms from civil defense armories and from the cold, dead hands of civilians who had tried to defend themselves. Now they closed in on the landed tendrillless craft.

Joanna ran to her cockpit systems, struggling to power up and fire her small battery of defensive guns. Three brief shots rang out, and the bright bursts scattered the attackers outside, giving them a brief respite. Joanna got her engines activated, and the damaged ship shuddered. With a blast of rockets, the scout heaved itself a few feet off the ground.

The angry scavengers shot whatever weapons they had managed to cobble together. Before she could lift the ship out of reach, a thrown grenade took out her rear engine, causing the ship to spin. The spacecraft's rear smashed into the wall of a nearby building, bending one of her guidance fins.

Jommy gripped the back of Joanna's pilot seat for balance as the ship collapsed back to the



ground, raking the street with a flare of screeching sparks. Oily black smoke poured in from the engine compartment. Joanna looked at him, stricken. "Looks like we're not taking this ship anywhere."

Though broad spiderweb cracks obscured the cockpit window, he could see tattered-looking people closing in from all sides. He recognized some of them, saw their scrapes and bruises, the angry expressions on their faces—in particular one man with sharply squared shoulders and a fresh cut on one cheek. *Deacon*. He must have recognized the scout ship that had attacked them before he and his people could finish with Jommy...

Jommy reacted with instinctive loathing, and a red undertone of anger suffused his face. "That's the man who cut off my tendrils."

Deacon's gang seemed to realize that they had snared themselves big prey. Jommy imagined how the scarred gang lord would use the captured enemy craft to consolidate his power, swooping along the streets and assassinating rivals. At the front of the advancing crowd, Deacon waved his dagger in the air as he ran forward. He seemed to think nothing could harm him.

The spacecraft's remaining engine groaned and whirred. Smoke polluted the air in the compartment. "If that man wants to capture my vessel intact, he's not showing much restraint." Joanna flashed a grin as smooth as broken glass. "And I plan to show even less restraint." She opened fire with the ship's energy weapons.

The dazzling beams struck Deacon squarely in the chest, turning his entire body into a cloud of reddish mist, shattered bone, and greasy smoke. He disappeared in mid-shout.

The other scavengers scrambled to a halt. Four of them dropped their makeshift weapons and ran away in a panic. Another hurled an empty pistol at the side of the tendrillless ship; it struck the hull with a harmless clang. Then the whole mob vanished into the shadowy streets like cockroaches fleeing a bright light.

"They won't cause us any more trouble." A faint undertone of disappointment rode on the tendrillless woman's words.

Jommy lurched back to the engine compartment and used flame extinguishers to smother the crackling fire. Joining him to inspect the damage, Joanna shook her head. "The energy cells are cracked. The ship's ruined, completely ruined."

His brow furrowed with concern. "We can't stay here. Exposure to those cracked cells can be more hazardous than facing a desperate gang." He pulled on Joanna's arm. "I hope you didn't intend on going back to Mars any time soon."

The woman's face showed a mixture of conflicting emotions. "I'm not returning there until we've got a viable resolution to this unnecessary war. I'm staying at your side, Jommy."

Earlier, when she had helped him escape from Cimmerium and grudgingly admitted the possibilities of his idealism, he hadn't been sure how to read her. Like many of her race, Joanna had developed tight mental blocks that kept him from sensing her innermost thoughts. But he suspected that she was more than intrigued by him, more than perplexed by his strange optimism. Even though she was aware of his bond with Kathleen, Joanna actually seemed to be in love with him...

“Jommy, what were you doing at the palace? What were you searching for when that gang found you, when they cut—?” She stopped herself.

“I came to the city to find something—something vital.” He reminded her of his father’s disintegrator weapon, which she had previously seen him use to great effect. “I know exactly where it is. I found it. I had my hands on it—then those scavengers came.” He lowered his head, then drew strength from his resolve. “Come on. We’ve got to retrieve it. I’m not going back to the ranch empty-handed—especially if Jem Lorry’s going to pull one of his tricks.”

Before abandoning the wrecked scout ship, he and Joanna stuffed supplies into a pack, though they found it difficult to see and breathe in the thickening smoke. Since he had already activated the locking mechanism on the door to the vault that held his disintegrator, he knew exactly what sort of equipment he would need. Joanna also packed two small hand weapons. Though they had once been on different sides of this conflict, he was glad to have the tendriless woman at his side.

“Joanna, if we don’t get out of this, if we can’t end the tendriless war, then I am at your mercy. You can claim me as your prize and take whatever reward or promotion that’s your due. At that point, it won’t matter anymore.”

“It’ll always matter, Jommy. You said it yourself.” He answered with a faint smile. Perhaps he truly had gotten through to her after all.

They exited the smoldering wreck and trudged away, never looking back. The scavengers could have the broken hulk with its poisonous smoke and radiation that leaked from the destroyed engines.

As sunset threw long shadows across the streets, bonfires began to blaze in cul-de-sacs and alleys. A few candles and kerosene lanterns shone behind broken windows, where people huddled around the light and warmth. It would be another dangerous and harrowing night for the survivors in Centropolis.

He and Joanna stalked toward the site of the palace, both of them sensing that unseen eyes were watching them. They clambered over stones, dodged girders and broken glass.

In twilight, they finally reached the battered vault that lay like an egg in a nest of shattered debris. When he saw dark bloodstains spattering the stones, Jommy wondered how much of it was his own.

Joanna found the discarded bottom half of the man Thompkins, who had been severed in two by the slamming vault door. Untroubled, she kicked the loose legs, knocking them aside with a wet ripping sound so she could reach the vault door controls. “I wish people would pick up after themselves,” she muttered.

Jommy was pleased to see that his dismantled tracking device still dangled to the controls by a few loose wires. “We better open the vault door, retrieve the disintegrator, and get out of here as fast as we can. It’ll be dangerous negotiating our way out of this crater in the dark.”

“Especially if we have company again.” She peered warily into the shadows.

Struggling to function without his tendrils, realizing now how much he had relied on them, Jommy removed the necessary equipment from his pack and installed a new power source to

run the vault's pistons. His fingers felt thick and clumsy, but he managed to rig the mechanism and charge up the weary motors of the security door. Once again, the pistons hummed, and the tilted door groaned partway open until the hinges jammed.

From inside, they heard a sliding, wet thump, and Jommy realized it was the top half of Thompkins dropping the rest of the way into the vault.

Suddenly, all around them in the dimness, hundreds of bright torches appeared, surrounding the crater. In the thrown firelight, the people looked like scarecrowish trolls, a wild tribe closing in on two victims. Without saying a word, Joanna dug in her pack and withdrew her hand weapons. Gunshots rang out from the scavengers, and bullets ricocheted off the rocks next to Jommy and Joanna. One pinged off the partly opened vault door.

"This isn't going to be as easy as I thought," she said.

Painfully aware of his lost tendrils, Jommy said, "Those are either Deacon's men, or a new gang's already moved into town."

"It seems I created a job opportunity for a potential new leader." Joanna slowly turned around, took aim at one of the capering figures, and shot him dead. Her moment of triumph was short-lived as a volley of responding shots peppered the rubble around them. She ducked behind a large chunk of concrete. "Maybe we should come back at a better time."

"Never. Not while we're this close."

A rocket-launched explosive detonated nearby, sending a spray of rock splinters and clattering pipes and broken glass. Jommy hunched behind the tilted wall of the displaced vault chamber.

Joanna looked for another target and coolly took a second shot, which sent one of the torch bearers scrambling away, his bobbing light like a drunken firefly in the darkness. She snapped at Jommy, "Get inside the vault, find what you need to find, and then climb back out. I'll hold them off as long as I can."

"Not good enough. There's no time." With his shoulder, he knocked Joanna backward through the partly opened door. She fell into the vault, and he heard her clatter among the broken shelves and scattered debris.

"What are you doing? It's dark in here!" He heard her trip and let out a gasp. "Hey, how many bodies did you leave lying around?"

Another grenade hit, exploding against the back of the vault. He heard shouting and screaming, more gunfire. A swarm of angry scavengers boiled over the rubble, coming closer. He could see their snarling faces in the torchlight.

Jommy scrambled in through the gap, hoping the door's pistons would hold just a few more seconds. Before he dropped inside, he seized the blinking device attached to the locking mechanism, then yanked it free. As he dropped down, the immensely heavy door slammed shut with a hissing groan, sealing them inside the impregnable vault in total blackness.

Next to him, he heard Joanna breathing hard. From outside, the scavengers' banging and pummeling sounded oddly distant through the thick walls.

“Well, we’re safe now. We can spend the night here.” His voice seemed disembodied in the rich darkness. “There’s just one problem. We can’t open the door from the inside.”

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## CHAPTER 34

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As commander of the victorious tendrillless forces, Jem Lorry had no need to disguise who he truly was. Not anymore. Now that his meddling father was out of the way, now that Jem had command of all the invading armies, he returned among the lowly humans like a conquering hero.

He came alone to the summit meeting; it was his way of showing that he did not consider President Gray or his pathetic resistance cell to be a threat. And he did not intend any “peaceful negotiations,” as Altus Lorry and the Tendrilless Authority had suggested.

While his swift expedition was on its way, John Petty had transmitted a subsidiary message. “I’ll guarantee your safety, Lorry. You and I both want this meeting to go the same way. Once Gray and the slans are out of the way, we can divide up the spoils.”

The secret police chief was a fool to believe that, but Jem allowed him to be a fool. Petty was so good at it.

He landed his solo ship in front of Granny’s ranch house, ruining part of her vegetable garden. Jem wore a full formal uniform of the tendrillless army, a dark blue shirt fastened with crystalline buttons, trousers with gold piping and crisp creases. Raising his chin, he stepped away from his ship and looked coolly at those who came to meet him. He did not bother to offer a gesture of respect to the deposed President. He had spent too many years serving Kier Gray, offering his counsel and biting back anger when his own plans were ignored. “So, Gray? I’ve come representing the slans.”

“The *tendrillless* slans,” Gray said.

Jem looked down his pointed nose. “It seems we are the only slans left.”

Petty came out on the porch to stand beside the President. He looked meaningfully at Jem, who gave a slight nod, as the slan hunter seemed to expect.

When Jem spotted Kathleen Layton, he assessed her with his hungry eyes. At one time he had desired her greatly, but the shine was gone. The slan girl looked much less attractive than he remembered—her skin was pale, her cheeks sunken, her eyes red from crying. He wondered how he could ever have found her to be beautiful. Perhaps he had wanted her primarily because she was forbidden. It must have been just a passing and meaningless physical attraction.

When Granny ushered them inside her home, Jem looked around for the others he expected to be there. He could easily handle John Petty, as well as President Gray himself. But even his foolish father had recognized that Jommy Cross was one of the greatest threats. “Where’s Cross?” It was a pity; he had wanted to catch all the rats in one trap.

"Jommy's dead." Kathleen used her bitter tone to slash at him, as if she blamed Jem for whatever trouble the young slan had gotten into. He wouldn't believe the death of Jommy Cross, however, until he saw the troublemaker's body with his own eyes.

Granny had set up her formal dining table, complete with a checked cloth and a vase of fresh flowers. With a clatter of dishes, she brought out small dessert plates. "My best china, for the special occasion." Granny frowned at Lorry as she served apple pie, scooping out flaky slices onto the dessert plates. "This was Jommy's favorite." She hesitated a moment, then busied herself. "I've got a pot of fresh coffee percolating. It'll be ready in a few minutes." Before she left the room, she added in a stern voice, "Mr. Lorry, I don't care how powerful you think you are, but you are a guest in Granny's house, and you will behave with respect. I don't trust anyone who invades my planet."

Lorry could barely hide his amusement. "A conqueror of a world can do whatever he likes, ma'am."

"Granny's got a shotgun in the closet if you get out of hand. Don't you forget that." She walked off into the kitchen.

Petty quickly sat down, as eager for the pie as he was for the anticipated double-cross. President Gray took a formal chair at the head of the table and gestured for Jem to sit on the opposite end.

The President still wore the same rumpled suit he'd been wearing during his imprisonment and escape. For this important conference, his protocol attendees consisted of an old woman and his daughter. Kathleen picked up a pen and pad of paper to document any treaty or agreement they negotiated. Jem found it very amusing.

Before Gray could say anything, Jem abruptly began. "We tendrillless have already conquered Earth. I agreed to come here, Mister Gray—" he intentionally refused to use the title of President "—in order to accept your surrender. There's little I can do to save your life now, but perhaps if you cooperate, I can take Kathleen Layton under my special protection." He smiled at her; she glared back.

"The tendrillless have demonstrated superior military strength," Gray admitted. "You worked secretly for years, made your plans, and then launched a surprise attack. No doubt if tendrillless write the history books, you'll portray it as a heroic effort. But there is no need for the violence and bloodshed to continue."

Jem let out a bitter laugh. "Maybe you should review the history books, Gray—the unwritten history. Refresh your memory about what true slans did to humans during the wars, and then what they did to the tendrillless."

"I already explained it to the Tendrilless Authority," Gray said in a brittle voice. "Even the tendrillless will soon begin to give birth to true slan babies again. Must you eradicate us all just for your petty vengeance?"

Thinking he had heard his name, Petty looked up and wiped pie crust crumbs from his mouth.

Jem steepled his fingers. "My father repeated some of your silly fairy tales, but I don't believe any of it. I'm sorry he couldn't be with us." He hadn't touched his pie, thinking it

might be poisoned, but then he realized these people would never try such devious means. This pathetic attempt at diplomacy was their only chance. He took a bite and had to admit it was delicious.

"It sounds like you came here to argue rather than negotiate," Gray said sadly.

"I never came here to negotiate. I just wanted to look you in the face one last time before I destroyed you and took over the Earth."

Granny walked in, holding a silver pot. "Coffee, anyone?"

Jem stood, checking the time on his wrist chronometer. "Come with me outside. There's something I want you to see."

Petty jumped to his feet. He thought this was all part of the plan, but the slant hunter would soon learn differently. They would all learn.

Jem had agreed to come in a solo craft, but he had gathered a full squadron of attack ships that would even now be streaking in over this valley. He had no interest in compromises. He didn't need to make any.

As they all stepped out onto the porch, looking up in the open air, Jem could already hear the drone of approaching engines and the arrival of heavy military craft.

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## CHAPTER 35

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Trapped inside the sealed vault in the palace ruins, Jommy leaned back in darkness so thick that he seemed to breathe pitch black each time he inhaled. He could still hear the muffled noises from outside along with Joanna's increasingly urgent questions. "What were you thinking? How are we going to get out of here?"

"Would you rather have let them tear us to pieces?" he asked.

"We had a few weapons, not to mention superior physical strength. We could have made it quite a battle. Those scavengers are cowards at heart."

"We could have killed dozens of them. This way is better. Less bloodshed."

Their voices bounced back and forth in the blackness. "Do you know how many stone-cold corpses I bumped into after you knocked me in here?"

"Two."

"Two *and a half*. I found the top portion of Mr. Legs out there. I felt his shoulders, ran my hand down his back, and then he just ... stopped. Like one of those matinee adventure movie serials—*to be continued*."

"At least you're finding humor in the situation."

"I'd find more humor if I could have a little light and some clean rags to wipe off my hands."

Jommy worked his fingers blindly, fiddling with the small tracker device he still held in his hands. The indicator lights were like the tiny bright eyes of a green lizard. "Considering how dark it is, this is as good as a flashlight."

The first thing he could make out in the faint glow were the pale forms of the dead bodies. Joanna saw them too. "Oh, yes—much better." Her voice was sarcastic.

They sat together listening as the noises outside gradually faded, the scavengers giving up. Jommy had known the gang members would not stay long, realizing they had no way to break into the shielded laboratory vault. Once he was sure they had gone on to search for other prey, he used the minimal light of his device and his sharp eyesight to rummage around on the floor. He pushed one of the metal shelves aside, moved scattered papers, and rolled an empty chemical bottle away.

"Looking for a deck of playing cards?" Joanna asked. "I'm pretty good at gin rummy."

As he continued to crawl on his hands and knees, he cut his palm on a shard of glass. He had to delay his search while he picked the sharp pieces from his bleeding hand and dabbed it with a rag he found. The bleeding stopped quickly. "Remind me to use your medical pack when we get out of here. No telling what toxic chemicals the secret police might have stored in this laboratory."

Joanna just groaned. "Right. *When* we get out of here."

Jommy finally found what he was looking for in the corner where the steel wall met the steel floor. His hands wrapped around a smooth cylinder that fit so familiarly within his palm. "Ah, here it is." He felt a rush of pleasure because he had succeeded without relying on his slant powers.

"Did you find a deck of cards?"

"Better. It's what we came here for in the first place. Move our packs out of the way and get behind me. I don't want you in the line of fire."

She moved up behind him, leaning close, perhaps too close. Her voice was right in his ear. "Now I see what you were thinking of all along. Does the weapon ricochet?"

"No." At least he didn't think so. He depressed the firing stud.

A misty white light lunged out like a shout of destruction. A wide chunk of the thick vault simply vanished into vapor, leaving a gaping hole. "There, I made us another door."

He gathered his pack and walked through the gap into the night, barely needing to duck his head. Outside, even the stars seemed to be hiding behind a veil of clouds, but after the utter blackness of the vault, the two of them could see perfectly well. Far off in the wreckage, he could make out a few fires. The largest bonfire looked to be where Joanna's ship had crashed. No doubt the scavengers had stripped it down to a bare hulk and now used it as their camp, oblivious to the toxic fumes.

"Shall we take my car?" Jommy asked, hefting the disintegrator tube.

He unerringly led her back to the obscure alley and the half-collapsed shed under which he had camouflaged his vehicle. He and Joanna cleared the debris from the car, and she looked at its battered appearance. "Looks like you've been through some rough driving."

"I didn't have time to get a wash." Using the special thumb lock he had installed, he opened the access door.

"I'll be happy enough to get out of Centropolis," Joanna said. "I had quite a head start on Jem Lorry. We should be able to get to the ranch before he tries anything."

"I wouldn't count on it. And we're going to have to do some quick explaining about you—as a tendrillless spy, you won't exactly be welcome at Granny's ranch with President Gray and John Petty."

When he sat in the driver's seat to check out the systems, a persistent droning blip caught his attention. It was part of the instrument panel he rarely used, and now he saw that the car had picked up an unexpected signal. An emergency signal.

As Joanna loaded their packs into the back, he focused the scanners, scrolling across his screen and trying to pinpoint the source. Long ago when searching for slan hideouts, he had installed specially designed systems to detect important slan broadcasts, coded Porgrave messages beyond the range of any human or tendrillless technology.

Joanna leaned in, curious about what he was doing.

Now his systems had locked onto a loud beacon. He had not heard the signal when he first drove into the city two days earlier, but now the pulsing was strong and undeniable. Some hidden slans were sending out a distress call or an announcement.

"It's the location of a slan enclave. An active one!" Tracking it, he compared the pinpoint with the car's stored guidance maps as well as the details in his own memories. Jommy grinned when he realized that the signal originated from the same place his father had marked on the secret-ink maps.

Then the astonishing signal came through the car's analytical systems, broadcasting to both Joanna and himself, a voice that Jommy vaguely recognized from his distant past. "My name is Peter Cross, a slan scientist. If you are receiving this signal, you have been identified as bearing slan characteristics in your genetic profile. We need you. Your race needs you. Please follow this signal. I hope you will find us."

Jommy swallowed hard. He knew his father had been killed when he was only six years old, but the clear voice, the encouraging words ... "We have to go there first."

"What about the summit meeting? Jem Lorry is bound to lay a trap."

He felt an ache in his heart, thinking of Kathleen ... and then imagining the large slan enclave, perhaps people who had known his father. "I don't think President Gray or John Petty will let their guard down for an instant." And, even with the disintegrator, he felt weak and ineffective without his tendrils.

But if he could bring back a full army of hidden slans, other weapons or technologies—then they would have a fighting chance. And the slan hideout was right here, while Granny's ranch was almost a day's dangerous journey away.



He turned to Joanna. "Help me mount the disintegrator in the nose of the car. We're going to have to do some tunneling, take the direct route."

After he and Joanna installed the disintegrator, they strapped themselves into their seats. Jommy activated the engines, turned the weapon's beam downward, then burned a glassy hole through the ground in front of him. Considering the location of the signal, he would have to go deep.

He drove forward, carving a direct passage toward the secret slan base.

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## CHAPTER 36



Standing on the porch, eyes wide with betrayal, Kathleen watched the hornet shapes of deadly aircraft swoop over the line of mountains. The military ships were heavily armed, their wings steeply angled, their engines roaring. The armada looked sufficient to obliterate the entire valley.

"As I said, these negotiations are over." Jem Lorry sounded very smug, not even bothering to look at the oncoming ships. He activated a signaling device on his wrist. "I can't afford to leave you alive, Gray, to become a rallying point for any annoying resistance movement." He smiled at Petty. "And the great slan hunter is as helpless as the rest."

The ships closed the gap in seconds. Granny had already bolted back inside the ranch house, but Kathleen couldn't tear her eyes from the oncoming squadron. Projectile launchers clicked into place, and the black hollow eyes of gun barrels turned toward them.

John Petty seemed to consider the whole thing a joke. "That's not exactly true, Lorry. I knew you would try to trick me, so I played both sides against the other." He shaded his eyes, then pointed to the sky. "Look at the insignia closely. Those aren't your ships after all."

Standing close to her father, Kathleen recognized the ominous symbol of a scarlet hammer against a web. "It's a secret police strike force!"

"Yes, I used the wireless to contact them while you were all asleep. I arranged for this ambush." Petty whipped out a large-caliber pistol he had hidden inside his black jacket. "Lorry, you're as dead as the rest of these people."

Jem's face contorted in disbelief as Petty's ambush force dropped a flurry of explosive bombs that pattered around the perimeter of Granny's property.

"That's just for practice. Call it an opening move." Petty held the gun steady as he backed out into the middle of the wide-open yard, where one of the smaller ships could find a landing spot and pick him up. The secret police squadron circled back, coming in for their full attack run. Petty raised his hand, signaling the pilots overhead.

Kathleen turned to her father, trying to drag him back into the house. "We can get

underground. Jommy armored the house, reinforced the tunnels—”

“That won’t save you. None of you has a chance against the tendrillless.” Lorry began to grin. “Ah, here we are.”

Over the western line of hills streaked a second swarm of ships that headed straight toward the secret police squadron. The new ships purred rather than roared, using different propulsion technology, but they looked just as deadly.

Before the secret police could retrieve Petty, the squadron spun about at the last minute to defend themselves against the oncoming enemy ships. Their large-caliber guns blasted lead projectiles through the air, stitching fiery impacts against the tendrillless attackers. One of the new ships spun out of control, its fuel tanks in flames, and crashed like a meteor into the ground.

Petty dodged out of the way of the explosion, looking just like one of Granny’s panicked chickens. Angrily, the slant hunter pointed his pistol toward Jem Lorry and began taking potshots at his arch-enemy, who bolted for the corner of Granny’s house, crashing through her rose bushes.

Flying in tight formation, the newly arrived tendrillless engaged the secret police ships. The invaders’ weapons were hot cutting beams that gutted Petty’s squadron. More explosions blasted the ground. Two secret police ships erupted in a cloud of smoke and metal debris.

Flown expertly, both sets of dogfighting ships raced and dodged like swordsmen in a deadly duel. A near miss blew off the corner of Granny’s roof and mangled one of her gutters.

Kathleen grabbed her father’s arm. “Come on! To the hangar shed before it’s destroyed. Jommy’s rocket-plane!”

Gray immediately understood. “There’s no better time to learn how to fly than right now.”

“Granny! Come with us!” Kathleen shouted back at the house.

Petty shot twice at them as they ran to the hangar shed, but then he ran out of bullets. He cursed at his gun, then gestured wildly in the air, trying to direct his own ships to bombard the house. Instead, one of the tendrillless craft began strafing the ground, kicking up hot divots around him. The secret police chief ran for his life toward the split-rail fence, cursing over the roar of battle.

As Kathleen and her father raced to the hangar, she saw a defiant Granny emerge from her home. The old woman stood on the doorstep holding her shotgun, then she marched down the sidewalk, pointed the shotgun up at the attacking ships in the air, and unloaded both barrels. She didn’t seem to care which side she was aiming at. “Who said you could bomb Granny’s property?”

Her blast peppered the underbelly of one low-flying ship, and smoke began to boil from its engines. Granny busily plugged more shells into her shotgun while the two sides in the dogfight circled and dropped their bombs. She fired another round at the oncoming ships before the whole yard exploded around her. The crotchety old woman vanished in a splash of flames and dirt.

Gray yanked Kathleen’s arm, dragging her along. “Come on! We couldn’t save her.” He

shoved aside the rolling metal door of the hangar shed.

Jommy's sleek rocket-plane looked like a bird of prey, fully fueled and ready to go. Kathleen scrambled up the metal-runged ladder into the cockpit while her father operated the motor that ground open the corrugated metal roof. By the time he swung up beside her into the cockpit, she was already scanning the controls.

The engines coughed to life, then simmered, building up power. Exhaust shot out in expanding conical plumes that boiled white inside the hangar. She studied the gauges. "Warming up. Another five seconds."

Gray disengaged the landing clamps, and the rocket-plane began to move forward, unable to contain its own energy. "We're ready to launch." He looked up from the readings. "I wish I had coordinates to tell you, Kathleen. I wish I had an idea of a safe place we could go."

"I know where to go." *Another gift from Jommy.* She reminded him about the secret slant hideout that Peter Cross had described in his notebooks. The exact directions and coordinates were burned indelibly in her mind. "Jommy would want us to go there."

She hit the launch button, and the rocket plane burst like an arrow out of the hangar shed. They streaked away, startling the opposing squadrons of tendrillless and secret police. Below, the bombardment of the ranch continued. Over half of the ships were now knocked out of the skies and lay in smoking wreckage amid the burning conflagration of Granny's house. Even the armored walls and roof couldn't withstand it all. She saw no one alive down there.

Before any of the ships could target them, the rocket-plane raced toward freedom across the sky.

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## CHAPTER 37

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Anthea held her baby on the comfortable cot, alone but at peace. She tucked one of the dark gray blankets around her, then drifted off to sleep, dreaming about her husband.

She smiled as she dozed, wanting to stay with Davis and his infectious grin, wanting to forget all the things that had happened. She could never get the echoes of those final gunshots out of her head. With some part of her, she knew that the tiny boy had joined her like an eavesdropper in the dreams, getting to know his own father...

She awoke restless. With the bright, steady lights in the underground chamber, she couldn't tell whether it was day or night outside. Maybe she would never see open daylight or breathe fresh air again.

Anthea showered and dressed, putting on a new set of clean clothes she'd found stored in bins. After being on the run, dirty and weary, she finally began to feel refreshed, able to consider the future. She and her baby might have to spend years here, live out their lives in an unknown hideout. This complex had all the necessities she and the baby could ever ask for. Except for a real life. She couldn't just surrender like that.

She found a communications monitoring room full of visiplates and speakers tuned to numerous channels. Anthea listened to emergency reports, gathering background on the attack. In the past couple of days, she had been so frantic to save her baby, on the run from slan hunters and looters, that she'd never received explanations about the unexpected war that had engulfed the Earth.

The base's sensors and radar systems had detected a much larger occupation fleet approaching from Mars. Panicked-sounding broadcasters railed about the impending slan attack, an insidious plot that had been brewing for decades if not centuries.

With all she had learned from the library archives, however, Anthea couldn't believe that the surviving slans would choose that course of action. There had to be something more behind this devastating conflict.

When she came back into the sleeping area and saw the contented baby among his blankets, she felt an odd thought echo in her mind, a soothing confidence. Though the infant didn't even know his name, he somehow assured her that *he* was the key. Even a child, the right child, could solve such dire problems, given time. Anthea didn't know what to think, but she smiled down at her little son.

Suddenly, proximity alarms began to ring, warning systems coming alive. A grating noise ratcheted like a washboard on her nerves. Anthea didn't know what to do. The deep hideout had been discovered! Someone had hunted them down.

She turned away from the deafening alarms, only to see something even more incomprehensible. One of the hideout's steel-armored walls began to shimmer and grow hot, and then it melted in front of her.

With the baby safe in the other room, Anthea ran to grab one of the strange stunner weapons that she had taken from the skeletal bodies. After experimentation, she had found only one of them that still had any charge left—but she would use it to make a good accounting of herself. A last stand.

She stood bravely, holding the weapon in her trembling hands as the rest of the wall dissolved into a curtain of boiling rock and metal steam. Something large and dark came rumbling through.

## CHAPTER 38

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With the disintegrator beam playing ahead of the car, Jommy drove into dense strata through new tunnels of his own making. A straight line down into the secret base, where he hoped to rally hundreds of surviving slans.

They followed the beacon signal, listening to the repeated recording of his father's voice. The car rumbled along fused rock, going deeper and deeper. Jommy was eager to find the underground slan society, to reunite with a whole settlement of his people and convince them

to help save the Earth.

If necessary, he would act as their leader, convince them to gather their weapons—maybe they all had disintegrator tubes, like his own. Together they could rush back to the summit meeting at Granny's ranch and make a show of strength that Jem Lorry would never suspect. With sufficient persuasion, they could make the tendriless come to terms that would allow survival for all the races of humanity.

Rarely in his life had he known so precisely where he was supposed to go. The first slan hideout he'd discovered, years ago, was full of wonders, heavy machinery, and stored records, but it was empty of the people he so desperately sought. *Somebody* had to be in the tremendous complex up ahead, since someone had activated the distress beacon. He counted on finding new allies who could help him and explain what had happened to the rest of the slan race.

Jommy broke through a thick curved wall and drove his car forward, switching off the front-mounted disintegrator weapon. If necessary, he could always collapse the tunnel behind him to seal and protect the buried redoubt again. For now, he felt this was the only way he could get to the hideout swiftly enough.

Once he drove the car into the giant underground complex, melting through the steel plates, he brought the vehicle to a halt. He and Joanna emerged from the car filled with a sense of wonder, expecting to find a large greeting party.

Instead, he faced a haggard-looking woman pointing a weapon at them. One woman. The rest of the facility seemed deserted.

Jommy stepped forward, raising his hands, trying to be calm. "You have nothing to fear from us." He took a gamble. "We're slans. This is a slan place."

The woman had hard blue eyes and an intelligent expression. Her hair was strawberry blonde, her cheekbones high, and her nose pointed. Her lips barely moved as she spoke. "Prove to me who you are."

But Jommy no longer had tendrils, and Joanna had not been born with them. "I understand your fear. My parents were both slans, and both of them were killed by the secret police. I know what it's like, whatever happened to you."

Joanna remained at his side. "Tell us what you're doing here. How did you find this place?"

Her grip on the weapon was unwavering. "I received ... instructions. An ancient beacon calling me here."

"And so did we. I followed the signal, a homing message that comes from here. It originated with my father." He saw her expression change. "His name was Peter Cross."

"Peter Cross?" Her shoulders slumped, and she finally lowered her weapon. "And I'm Anthea ... Anthea Stewart. I have a baby, a newborn. He's got tendrils. I don't know how, because neither my husband nor myself are slans. I don't understand it."

Jommy felt his heart swell. He stepped forward, looking at the amazing expanse of the underground complex. "I had hoped to discover other slans here, but maybe I'll find what I need regardless."

\* \* \*

After they had introduced themselves and briefly told their stories, Joanna busied herself in the communications room to study the progress of the approaching occupation fleet. Meanwhile, Jommy explored the remarkable base. Each step he took through the amazing chambers and laboratory rooms filled him with awe and anticipation. He felt he could learn something important from each document or piece of machinery. Though he was disappointed to find no large settlement of hidden slans, the other wealth of information was significant.

Anthea came up behind him, standing at a doorway. "I have something to show you. Something from Peter Cross."

He hadn't even noticed her watching him. He felt so helpless and blind without his tendrils. "Yes!"

She led him to the table where she had arranged a video viewer and a stack of old film loops. She activated the player and stepped back while Peter Cross gave his moving speech. Jommy listened with tears in his eyes, looking again and again at the image of a man he barely remembered. His mother had told him that her husband had been killed when Jommy was only six. Fortunately, she and the boy hadn't been with him. On the projected image, Jommy could see echoes of himself in the older man's handsome face.

The recorded voice sounded achingly familiar, much clearer than in the Porgrave transmission. "I will never stop my work," Dr. Cross said. The words struck directly at Jommy's heart. "Not until I succeed in making a better world so that my wife and baby son no longer have to live in fear."

He played each one of the recordings three times, though he had instantly memorized them. He found his father's voice and his image to be strangely comforting and compelling.

Marshalling his courage and his determination, Jommy went to the boxes of bones that Anthea had gathered. She had been careful to mark the location of each body and noted any details. Jommy could only imagine the battle that had occurred here.

He stopped in front of the box that, as far as he could tell, contained what was left of his father. He looked down at the skull, trying to imagine the man's features. After all his searching, Jommy was finally at home, but this wasn't the home he had been looking for.

## CHAPTER 39

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The pulse beacon continued to send out its insistent signal, calling any slans, but Jommy had begun to lose hope that more of his comrades would arrive. It would be up to them.

Before he could plan his next step, he and Joanna needed to assess all the equipment and weapons available in the redoubt. How could it help President Gray? He couldn't begin to

understand the large banks of twirling discs and blinking lights, the powerful generators and the purported “life imprint” machinery that dated back to the days of the first slans. He studied his father’s notes again, thought about the single disintegrator tube he possessed. Though it was a formidable weapon, it wasn’t enough to take back an entire conquered planet. He needed far more help than that.

But where were all the slans?

Together, the three of them listened to the staccato radio reports and wireless bursts from small groups of survivors. They told horrific stories of human renegades and tendrillless squadrons who shot humans for the mere sport of it. As usual, everything was blamed on the “evil slans.” Anthea wept, as much for her murdered husband as for the future of her baby.

Joanna tried to comfort her. “I wouldn’t believe all those reports, Miss. For years the tendrillless distorted and manufactured news reports. They’re doing the same thing now. Notice nobody is reporting about the tendrillless? Not a single broadcast.”

Jommy called them over to a large set of external screens in the monitoring room. The slow-moving force of enormous wheel-shaped battleships cruised inexorably closer, atomic-powered disks filled with armaments and tendrillless soldiers. The images were crystal clear, disturbingly close to the approaching armada. It was enough to strike cold fear into any observer.

Anthea’s face was gray with dismay. “You mean the fleet that attacked us in the first place was just a ... a warmup exercise?”

Joanna’s lips formed a bitter smile. “The tendrillless have been planning this takeover for a very long time. They didn’t just want to win the battle, but to exterminate every one of their enemies.” She spoke as if she no longer considered herself part of her race.

Jommy was puzzled by another question, though. “Where are these images coming from? The tendrillless wouldn’t be broadcasting this, and it’s certainly not a news broadcast from out in space—” He turned dials, scanned through the available visiplates, then he smiled. “These are our own satellites, watchdog probes. The true slans must have put up a monitoring network as well! Look, these pictures are from sentry probes beyond the orbit of the Moon.”

The great slow ships cruised by, filling the view, not knowing—or else not caring—that they were observed. Each vessel looked large enough to swallow a building. The decks were marked by twinkling lights.

Joanna measured the speed and finished her calculations. “They should be here within two days. That’s what the Authority projected.”

“Then that’s how much time we have.” Anthea sounded determined rather than panicked. “What are we going to do?”

Jommy decided he would scour through all of his father’s laboratory notes, maybe race back to Granny’s ranch to get the rest of the journals—and bring Kathleen and President Gray with him. Perhaps all together ...

Suddenly new alarms screeched through speakers in the underground base. He and Joanna scoured the numerous visiplates, switching to local scanners and trying to discover the source

of the warning. In the past when this underground base had been fully occupied by slans, whole groups must have monitored these stations, constantly manning the hideout's defenses.

Joanna finally discovered the reason for the alarm. "It's another ship approaching, Jommy... high-technology configuration, an advanced model that I've never seen before."

"A secret tendriless weapon? Another air raid?"

"It doesn't look like something the Cimmerium shipyards would build." She worked with the visiplates, trying to switch through any still-functioning cameras implanted in the city buildings, though many of the lenses were now dark, buried under the rubble of collapsed skyscrapers. "Ah, here it is!"

Finally, she locked on and increased the magnification as a silver and red ship streaked in, burning hot like a spear point just taken out of a forge. "Looks dangerous—and it's homing in on our location—no doubt about it!"

Anthea's face was both frightened and angry. "Have we been discovered?"

The image sharpened as the ship turned about and fired blazing orange retrorockets to slow its descent. As it lowered upon a pillar of fire into the ruins of the city very close to the base's access point, Jommy laughed with blessed relief. "We're not under attack! That's a rocket-plane—my rocket-plane. I left it in a hangar at Granny's ranch."

On the screen, the rocket-plane had landed and, as it cooled, the hatch opened. A thousand questions filled Jommy's mind as his heart swelled. He saw Kathleen and the President emerge and immediately guessed that something terrible had happened at the summit. He didn't know why they had come here, or what they had been through, but now they had two more allies.

He was already sprinting toward the hidden lift and its controls. "I'm going up there myself to meet them."

\* \* \*

Safe again deep below ground, Jommy held Kathleen in his arms. The girl felt wonderful. "I thought you were dead, Jommy! Oh, I was sure of it—your thoughts were cut off. The last image was pain, such agony that I couldn't stand it! And then nothing."

When Kathleen had seen that his tendrils were sheared off, she began to sob and clung to him even more tightly. He squeezed her and tried to calm her shudders. Her tendrils were alert, able to pick up any thoughts—but he was a blank to her. He would always be a blank from now on. She still felt the emptiness, though he was right there in front of her.

But then she had looked at him with her beautiful eyes, and she kissed him. "At least you're alive, Jommy. That's better than anything I'd hoped."

Down in the redoubt, Joanna watched the reunion with proud resignation. Jommy could tell she still had deep feelings for him, but the tendriless woman knew he would never love anyone but Kathleen.

President Gray had shadows under his eyes. He looked more defeated now than at any time



since John Petty had exposed him as a slan. At least the slan hunter was no longer with them.

"I'm glad to see you alive, Jommy, but this is a bittersweet reunion, to say the least. The summit meeting was a disaster. I had hoped to find some common ground, but the tendrillless had no interest in common ground. I explained about the tendrillless slans and how all of our babies born within the next few generations will have their tendrils again."

Both Jommy and Joanna listened eagerly to the story. Anthea also responded with amazement to hear the truth about the tendrillless, that she and Davis had been among them, entirely unknowing.

"I take it Jem Lorry didn't believe you, then?" Joanna said with a smirk. "I'm not surprised—*there's* a man who embodies the worst of tendrillless prejudice. A long time ago, he and I were matched."

"What does that mean?" Kathleen asked.

"We were genetically programmed to marry each other. The Tendrilless Authority had studied our parentage, and they selected me for him, and him for me. Fortunately, we both had to complete many years of service before we were approved. While Jem infiltrated the government here, I worked with tendrillless operations in the Air Center. Fortunately, I got to know the man well enough to abhor him. Even though we supposedly had the same goals, if we'd been married, I would have killed him on our wedding night. I could not stomach Jem Lorry."

"Not many of us could," Kathleen said. "He wanted to ... to *breed* with me as well."

"I would say he's inhuman, but he'd take that as a compliment," Gray said. He explained about Jem Lorry's treachery, and Petty's double cross, and the attacking squadrons of tendrillless and secret police ships. "It was a massacre. We barely escaped with our lives."

"Granny's dead, Jommy." Kathleen lowered her gaze. "She went out trying to defend her home. She used her shotgun—"

Jommy hung his head. The twisted old woman had forced him to do many terrible things, but she had also saved him in her own warped way. In the last few years, as he had guided her away from corruption, she had begun to redeem herself.

Gray continued, "If you hadn't left your rocket-plane in the hangar, we would have been part of the rubble there, too. The whole ranch is destroyed. There was nothing left but burning wreckage when we flew out of there."

When Kathleen lifted her chin, she looked very brave and Jommy loved her more than ever. "At least Lorry was killed, a victim of his own treachery—and Petty, too."

Jommy could find no sadness in his heart upon hearing that news. "One less slan hunter to worry about."

Then, from outside the main chamber, they heard a rumble and a crash. Jommy spun toward the large-bore tunnel that his disintegrator had burned through the ground. A small armored vehicle with thick tires rumbled down the passage and crashed out into the middle of the base. Jommy and his companions scrambled for safety as the armored vehicle fishtailed to a halt. Jommy saw the hammer-and-web insignia of the secret police on its side.

A battered-looking John Petty kicked open the vehicle's door and barged out. He stood up, his black jacket torn and bloodied, his face smeared with soot, his hair wild. He glared at Gray and Kathleen, and when he spotted Jommy, his expression became an even more twisted look of displeasure. "Doesn't anyone *ever stay dead*?"

"Speak for yourself," Kathleen said.

The slan hunter reached inside the vehicle and dragged out another body, dumping it unceremoniously on the sealed stone floor of the hideout. As the body flopped face down, arms sprawled out, Jommy could see that the man had been shot in the back.

It was Jem Lorry. Joanna looked at the body, but without grief.

"No, he's not a present for you," Petty said. "He's a trophy for me. Maybe I'll have him stuffed and mounted in my own base from which I'll guide the recapture of Earth—for humans.

"I killed Lorry while the tendriless continued to attack the ranch. I shot him just to spite them! I grabbed one of the secret police vehicles that had already been deployed, but its driver was shot in the crossfire."

"So you just drove off?" Jommy asked.

Petty shrugged. "I expect the fighting's mostly done there, now, though I don't know who would have emerged as the winner."

"Secret police traitors or tendriless invaders—I'm not sure I prefer either side," Gray said.

Jommy glared at the slan hunter. "How did you know to come to this base?"

Kathleen turned quickly to Jommy. "I didn't tell him. And he couldn't have read your father's notes or translated the code."

Petty seemed amused. "Why go through so much trouble? I've always known about this base. In fact, my secret police and I extracted plenty of useful things from right under your nose, President Gray."

Jommy marched toward the slan hunter, who ducked back into his armored vehicle and emerged holding a powerful pistol. "Not one step closer, Cross. I've been aware of your mind tricks all along."

"Mind tricks? You don't have to worry about those anymore," Jommy said.

Petty noticed his severed tendrils at last and let out a loud guffaw. "Well, there's a bit of poetic justice!"

Jommy would not be swayed, though. "This was my father's lab, and we learned about it from his notes and records. *So how did you know about this base?*"

Holding his weapon, the slan hunter looked at them coldly. "Yes, it was your father's lab, and that's how I know about it. *I killed your father.*"

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## CHAPTER 40

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The revelation came louder than a gunshot in Jommy's ears. A crimson static formed around his vision, closing in like thunder clouds made of boiling blood. He finally forced words out of his tight throat. "I already had plenty of reasons to hate you, John Petty, but now you've given me more than enough rationale to kill you." He stalked forward, consumed with a sick rage.

Jommy had never learned the exact circumstances of his father's death. His mother had said that he was shot in the back, but she refused to speak more of it. Jommy just remembered being on the run with her for three years as she tried to keep her little boy alive at all costs. Peter Cross had made it possible for them to survive.

"Yes, I killed him." The slan hunter swung the pistol in his right hand, aiming directly between Jommy's eyes. He found the young man's reaction to the revelation hilarious, as well as his current inability to fight back. "My secret police and I massacred all the slans in this secret base. It was one of the last mutant nests that we had to eradicate. Why do you think you found only empty enclaves in all your searches? Because my secret police knew about them all and wiped them out! We ransacked them, left a few of them as bait. Believe me, any slans still left alive after the raids—like you and your mother—were basically irrelevant to us."

Jommy took another step closer, as if Petty's weapon couldn't harm him.

Gray was cooler, spoke in a harder voice. "And how exactly did you manage this, Mr. Petty? As chief of the secret police, you were working for me. Why did you not give reports to your president?"

"Oh, it must have been in a memo somewhere ... or maybe I just forgot." He grinned. "Peter Cross knew he was hunted. All slans knew they were hunted, and we spent years trying to track their movements. We managed to kill the occasional slan loner, which gave us great publicity, but we just couldn't seem to capture one alive for a suitable interrogation." He looked at Jommy. "But we got wind of your father's movements and staged an elaborate trap. We set up an ambush with more than a hundred secret police, because we knew what a challenge he would be." Petty's eyes took on a far-off gaze as he remembered his glory days.

"When we finally spotted him, we closed in, cutting off what we thought were all of his routes of escape. Finally, when we had a good shot, I ordered one of my snipers to take him out. But you slans are fiendishly difficult to kill." He shook his head. "Cross took the bullet in his shoulder. He was bleeding badly, but he made his way into one of the tall buildings. We followed him, but he somehow got into the basement levels, then took a lift to a high floor, then ran back a dozen flights of stairs, found a fire escape.

"At first the blood droplets made him easy to track, but his gunshot wound healed so swiftly we lost that advantage. Three of my secret police cornered him in a garage just before he was about to dash into the streets. Cross killed all three of them, broke the necks of two, stole their weapons, and shot the third. Quite impressive, actually."

"So my father got away," Jommy said, grimly pleased.

"In a sense, yes. But that was part of the plan. I was never so gullible as to believe we would actually catch him so easily."

"Easily?" Anthea cried. To a woman who had lived a normal life in Centropolis, the brutal tactics of the secret police were a revelation. "Against a hundred fully armed men?"

"Yes, easily. These are *slans* we're talking about, lady. That's why they're such a threat to our way of life."

"Your way of life," Joanna said with a sniff. She still looked willing to fight for Jommy, even if he did love someone else.

"What do you mean it was part of the plan?" Kathleen pressed.

Still seething, Jommy maintained his silence, looking for an opportunity to spring upon the slan hunter and disarm him.

"The sniper's bullet contained a micro-tracer. I intended for him to escape, because as wounded and frightened as he was, Cross fled to the protection of his other slans. Oh, he dodged us for more than a day, leaving false leads, eluding the obvious trackers that I allowed him to see. All the while, though, we had the signal so we could follow him. He went right to this laboratory base."

"Even so," Gray said, "this is a fortress. The slans held it for centuries out of the view of normal humans. You couldn't just have walked in."

Petty smiled again, waving his pistol. "That was when the second fortuitous event happened. I had decided to make a full frontal assault, even if it cost me a few hundred men. A small price to pay for eradicating the last slan nest." He shrugged. "But we didn't have to do that. Once we knew where Cross had gone underground, we were able to set up careful surveillance. After weeks of constant monitoring, a young slan, barely thirteen years old, slipped away from the hideout late one night. We'd been waiting for an opportunity exactly like that. We sprang our trap.

"We exploded a canister of sleep gas directly in front of the kid. It would have knocked out an elephant, but it barely slowed him down. His reflexes were dulled, but still he fought. We dropped electrified nets on him. More than a dozen of my slan hunters piled on to the fight. It took three more anesthetic darts to bring him down. A thirteen year old! We whisked the kid away to our interrogation chambers. Armored vaults, sealed self-contained rooms inside the grand palace where my scientists could do their classified work. Even President Gray didn't know about them." Petty smiled.

"Yes, we discovered one of the vaults in the rubble." Joanna Hillory gave him a cold smile. "We even found people still inside—two-and-a-half of them, to be exact. They weren't in very good shape."

"And what did you do with this captive?" Gray demanded, getting back to the discussion.

"We tortured him, of course. We used every extreme interrogation technique we knew, and finally we broke the kid's will. Your father and his fellow slans didn't even know they had a traitor in their midst."

"How ... how did you break him?" Kathleen asked. "What did you do to the poor young

man?"

"We used drugs and sleep deprivation. We tested sonic pain-amplifiers. But the most effective thing was to apply raw electrical wires to his tendrils. The shock proved quite excruciating. After two days of that, the slan boy was a puddle of jelly, willing to do anything we demanded, ready to believe anything we promised him."

"You're a monster," Anthea growled.

"I'm a success story. That was exactly what my job entailed—wasn't it, Mr. President? You always turned a blind eye when it served your purposes."

Gray didn't answer.

"The traitor provided us with the access routes and security codes we needed. We staged our great assault, fifty of my most trusted slan hunters, fully armed and ready. I also had a backup plan, five hundred officers ready to come charging in the event we started to fail. But that wasn't necessary. Our young traitor did his job perfectly, opening the way for us. The slans thought they were safe, cozy in their beds, when we barged in. Ah, it was wonderful!"

Jommy didn't take his eyes from Petty, but Anthea looked around the large chamber, the burn marks and bullet holes on the walls and floor. "So you just killed them all," she said, barely a whisper.

"I won't say that it was easy. The slans put up one hell of a fight—I lost twenty of my men—but gunfire eventually brought them down." The slan hunter turned his grin toward Jommy. "I remember your father. He was hard at work in his laboratory trying to understand the antique machinery of Samuel Lann. Demonic machinery. Who knows what strange apparatus that is?" He indicated the tall humming equipment. "Cross was one of the last to fall, and I was quite impressed at how well he fought, considering he had a bullet lodged in his shoulder."

Gray crossed his arms over his chest. "Quite an operation, Mr. Petty. How come I never heard about it?"

"I'd intended to make a grand announcement, to show the world how the slans were still hiding among us, but then I realized how much I could learn from this underground base, so I kept the operation under wraps. We removed the bodies of my men, but left the dead slans where they were. Bait. We knew the slans would come back, eventually."

"But you left all this technology here," Gray said. "Why didn't you report it?"

"We had already found plenty of slan redoubts—like the place where Jommy met Kathleen."

"Where *you* shot her dead," Jommy said.

"Oh, stop complaining about that. She's fine now. The truth is, my teams had already analyzed so many of the hideouts, we knew what to expect. My experts spent days down here studying notes, copying technology, but most of it was incomprehensible. Just like all the other places. Eventually I just left this place behind. The slan bodies were beginning to smell, and it was hard to concentrate on the work." His face contorted in a grimace.

"You just left them here to rot?" Kathleen was appalled.

"It helped maintain the veracity of the scene. I maintained a careful watch on the base. It was like a piece of cheese in a mousetrap, and I knew that sooner or later more slans would come." He gestured to all of them standing there. "Now look at the mice I caught! I just didn't expect that the world would end in the meantime."

Even without his tendrils, Jommy had been tempered by his ordeals, like fine steel. He squared his shoulders and looked the slan hunter in the eye. "Using traitors, and torture, and overwhelming weapons—you seem to be extremely good at beating people when you have an unfair advantage."

"I'm extremely good at *winning*. That's what counts."

"So you can't win in a fair fight, that's what you're saying?"

"It's never a fair fight against slans."

"It's a fair fight now." Jommy pressed forward so close that Petty had to step back, still holding up his gun. "My tendrils have been cut off. I have none of the mind powers you're so afraid of. It's just me and you. Your secret police killed both of my parents. You shot Kathleen, the woman I love." He raised his fists. "Will you fight me now?"

Petty laughed yet again, but this time it had a nervous undertone. "Why on Earth should I do that? I've already won."

Joanna let out a sarcastic snort. "A strange way to define victory—your planet taken over, your government disbanded, your cities destroyed, and your secret police force wiped out, while you hide here, underground. Yes, Petty, it sure sounds like you've won."

With a defensive snarl, Petty set the pistol down on a lab table next to his armored vehicle. He turned back to face Jommy. "She's right, you know, much as I hate to admit it. There isn't really a point anymore. I killed Lorry, but the tendrillless are still coming. We can't fight them, and we're all going to be wiped out before long—but I'll do this for my own satisfaction." He lifted his fists, too. "I don't need anything but my bare hands to put an end to you once and for all, Jommy Cross."

Jommy held the slan hunter's gaze. "Whenever you're ready."

They slowly circled each other. Joanna and Kathleen stepped back toward the armored car. Anthea watched warily next to Kier Gray.

Jommy knew that the chief of secret police had thorough practice in hand-to-hand fighting, while he himself had never been formally trained. However, Granny had turned him into a scrappy young man who could take care of himself. Right now he wanted nothing more than to wrap his hands around Petty's throat.

He punched, ducked as the other man swung back, then withdrew to hold up his guard. With a sneer, the slan hunter said, "Why so fancy? This isn't some formal boxing contest." Then he threw himself headlong into Jommy's abdomen, butting with enough force to knock the wind out of him.

Straining to catch his breath, Jommy pummeled him on the back. The two men grappled,

broke apart again, then flung themselves upon each other. Jommy didn't have his tendrils, no way of using his abilities to read Petty's thoughts for a hint as to the moves his opponent might be planning. He defended himself with animal fury.

Petty crashed a fist into Jommy's left eye, and an explosion of pain made him reel backward. He shook his head to clear his vision, but his eyelid began to swell, puffing shut.

Petty slashed with an open hand and curled fingers, trying to use his nails to jab the other eye, but Jommy caught his wrist. He pulled, practically wrenching his opponent's arm out of its socket, and tumbled the other man to the floor. Shaking his head again, Jommy regained his balance. He stood back and allowed Petty to get to his feet again.

The slan hunter stood up, flexing his sore arm, and gave Jommy a curious look. "Following rules and niceties? What's your game, Cross?"

"You think fighting fair and being honorable is a game? I feel sorry for you, Mr. Petty."

That angered the slan hunter, who flung himself upon Jommy again in a flurry of pummeling fists. Several hard blows caught the young man on the shoulder, in the chest. One even glanced off his chin, but Jommy struck back, a quick rabbit punch to the middle of the man's chest, another to his abdomen. Then, as Petty tried to recover, Jommy hit him again squarely on the jaw.

The slan hunter staggered backward—and tripped on Jem Lorry's body. With his feet knocked out from under him, he sprawled flat on his back, cracking his head on the hard floor.

Jommy pounced, putting one foot on the fallen man's chest, glaring down at him. "I should just kill you, Petty. You deserve it. But I've defeated you—that's worse. It doesn't matter how long any of us lives now, because you know you've been bested by me."

The slan hunter worked his jaws as if looking for words to spit. Jommy glared at him one last time, then took his foot off the man's chest. "It's over. Nothing will bring back my parents or undo all the harm you've done, but I've had my revenge."

Petty glowered as he struggled to get up, to gather his dignity. Then, moving with the swiftness of a striking rattlesnake, he reached into the lining of his tattered black jacket and yanked out a second pistol, one of the weapons favored by the secret police. "Maybe none of us will survive—but I'll certainly survive longer than you."

Only a few feet from the slan hunter and his pistol, Jommy tried to dive out of the way. The sound of gunfire was deafening inside the underground slan hideout. Kathleen screamed, rushing forward.

Then John Petty twitched, spasmed, and slumped face-first to the stone floor. His gun clattered on the ground, and his head lolled to one side. He blinked his eyes in shock. A great wound on the side of his chest pumped blood. He gasped and gurgled.

Kathleen set his other weapon back on the table. "It's what he deserved," she said matter-of-factly. "It's what he did to me."

She ran up to Jommy, throwing her arms around him and gave him a hug nearly strong enough to knock the breath out of him again.

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## CHAPTER 41



The gigantic tendrillless occupation fleet was still on its way. Earth didn't have a chance.

Jommy and his four companions gathered in the surveillance room to study images from small slan sentry probes that drifted in space beyond the Moon. The bright lunar backdrop filled most of the visiplates, its barren landscape reflecting golden sunlight. The mountains and craters were scorched by unfiltered solar radiation during the half-month of day and frozen by impenetrable cold the rest of the time.

As Joanna worked to adjust the views on the visiplates, he marveled at the extreme resolution of the pictures being transmitted from so far away. It only made the heavily armed enemy fleet seem more terrifying.

"They're passing the Moon now." Joanna looked up at her companions. "That means they're ahead of schedule. They'll be here in less than a day."

"How can we possibly stop them?" Kathleen said. Gray, Anthea, and Joanna all looked just as hopeless.

Jommy wracked his brain, hoping to pull a miracle out of his hat. Even slan technology wouldn't help them now. If his father or any of the surviving slans had been capable of stopping a force so powerful, then they would never have needed to hide underground for so many years.

As rank upon rank of attack ships cruised by, huge atomic-powered wheels, Anthea was more intent on the round, dark lunar craters. She leaned closer to one of the large viewing plates. "Look, something's happening on the Moon."

Jommy saw that, indeed, as the armada cruised over the stark lunar landscape, the circular gouges scooped out by ancient meteor impacts began to shift and change. Unexpected lines of orange sliced across the crater bottoms, as if the rocky floor were cracking ... splitting open.

Then craters all across the surface of the Moon began to glow and *open*. Joanna exclaimed, "The crater floors are artificial!" The neat fissures widened, spreading apart as camouflaged doorways to reveal a huge and mysterious complex beneath.

"Those aren't craters at all," Kathleen said. "They look like—"

"They're hangars," Jommy cried. "Hidden *hangars*."

The tendrillless occupation force reacted in a flurry to the remarkable and unexpected changes below. Their formal ranks broke apart as the gigantic atomic-powered ships took evasive action.

After the artificial crater floors yawned open, enormous warships climbed out like moray eels hidden in a coral reef. A few tendrillless ships opened fire without further



provocation—and without effect. The strange vessels continued to launch by the hundreds, thousands, then tens of thousands.

Kathleen was frantic and confused. “What are those ships? Who are they?”

“This is not possible,” Gray said in barely a whisper. “I never suspected!”

Jommy couldn’t keep his grin hidden. “You know who they are, Kathleen. It’s no wonder even John Petty couldn’t find them. No one could find them! They chose the most unexpected, the best possible hiding place. That’s where they’ve been all these years—*the true slans!*”

After being defeated in the centuries of war, the bulk of the true slans had simply vanished. Everyone assumed that the defeated race had been wiped out, with only a few stragglers living in fear of their lives. But in reality, they had fled to the Moon, using their knowledge and ingenuity to tunnel deep underground. Looking at all the open craters, Jommy could barely comprehend the scope of their vast civilization.

“They’ve been busy all this time,” Jommy said with admiration in his voice.

Warship after warship launched out of the huge crater hangars, arced gracefully around in lunar orbit, and utterly overwhelmed the occupation force from Mars.

Several of the panicked tendriless ships continued to fire, but their weapons had no effect on the exotic armor of the lunar fleet. Instead of retaliating, the true slan warships simply blocked off the invaders and prevented them from proceeding to Earth.

Joanna was both amazed and agitated. “Those slan ships can easily wipe out the tendriless fleet. They should remove the threat. It’s the obvious thing to do.”

“Obvious perhaps ... but maybe not the correct action,” Gray said. “The true slans know that the tendriless are our brothers, too.”

“More like prodigal sons,” Kathleen pointed out.

The lunar warships sent out energy bursts that dampened the power fields of the invading fleet, shutting down the tendriless ships and deactivating their weapons. The entire invasion force hung silent and helpless in space. To Jommy, it seemed like a patient parent dealing with a child having a tantrum.

While the true slan ships corralled the defeated occupation fleet, several warships from the Moon streaked off at incredible speed toward Earth. The true slans’ engines were obviously far superior to anything the tendriless had used.

Even before the emissaries arrived, the leader of the true slans commandeered all transmission bands. He broadcast stern words across every radio, every communication line, every wireless set. The words boomed out, clear and final. “We demand a cessation of all hostilities. We will allow no more of this destructive war between tendriless slans and humans. We are all bound by our common humanity, regardless of our genetic differences.”

On one of the visiplates an image resolved to show a distinguished older gentleman with a silvery gray beard, a high brow, and neat hair. He stood on the command deck of one of the lunar warships. Distinctive tendrils were plain from the back of his neck, fine fleshy threads that extended longer than his hair. Jommy thought he looked strangely familiar, though he was

sure he'd never seen the man before in his life.

"I have detected a clear signal transmitted from a primary slan base, and I will go there immediately. I wish to speak to any government representatives, any leaders who have survived this unfortunate conflict." The man leaned forward and introduced himself. "I am Commander Andrew Cross."

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## CHAPTER 42

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While President Kier Gray prepared to face the slan delegation from the Moon, Jommy felt a knot in his stomach. He was about to meet his own grandfather.

With Jem Lorry dead on the floor, Joanna volunteered to speak for the Tendrilless Authority. President Gray was ready to tackle the rest of the negotiations himself, deciding to deal with the remnants of Petty's secret police later.

Commander Cross arrived in the underground base with ten slan emissaries. Cross wore a black military uniform with gold piping, crisp creases, and a panoply of complex awards and badges. The other delegates were a mixture of politicians, scientists, medical staff, and tactical experts. All the true slans had long, healthy looking tendrils; secure beneath the craters of the Moon, they had never needed to hide what they were. Jommy knew instinctively that a flurry of silent thoughts must be flashing back and forth between them, but he was cut off from them all.

Commander Cross's eyes flicked from side to side, inspecting the underground laboratory and base. He extended his hand toward Gray. "Mr. President, it's a pleasure to meet you in person, at last."

Gray smiled. "Occasional messages and secret couriers aren't good enough any more. I'm glad your people finally decided to come out in the open."

"You knew where they were?" Kathleen asked, surprised. "You knew the slan civilization existed all along? I thought all those widely publicized slan messages and the unmanned drones were fake!"

"Not all of them. I was aware that someone spoke for the true slans, but I didn't know any concrete information until now. The main populace of slans remained in hiding. I was only aware of a few solitary slans, some of whom worked with me in the grand palace. Others accomplished quite a bit all by themselves." Gray shot an encouraging glance toward Jommy. "Like this young man."

Jommy drew a deep breath and stepped forward. "Commander Cross, it's my pleasure to meet you. My name is Jommy."

The older man's eyes lit up. "*Jommy Cross?* You're Peter's son. You're alive!" Throwing aside his military reserve, Cross wrapped his arms around the young man and clapped him hard on the back. "But why can't I sense you? You're a true slan, just like your mother and father—"

He turned Jommy around, then looked with a sick horror at where his tendrils had been cut off. "What have they done to you? Oh, Jommy!"

As Jommy explained in a halting voice, he felt great emotions bubbling up within him, both excitement and sadness, hard determination and total exhaustion.

Cross stepped back and looked appraisingly at his grandson. "You're safe now, Jommy. You're all safe." His lips quirked in a smile. "As you might have noticed, we've brought enough reinforcements to see that everyone behaves. Our ships will root out any last tendriless resistance and stop the continued destruction."

"But what took you so long?" Kathleen asked. "The tendriless attacked days ago. Most of our cities are already ruined."

Andrew Cross hung his head. "I am ashamed that we didn't take action sooner. We slans are much longer-lived than normal humans, and after so many generations, so many centuries, hiding had unfortunately become a habit for us.

"Centuries ago, after the great breach between the tendriless and true slans, we went underground in our complex on the Moon. We faced many difficulties in those first few years. Lunar resources are scarce. We had to manufacture water and air, scavenge metal from meteorites beneath the craters. While the original wars had knocked Earth's civilization back to a level from many centuries before, we were able to build our base and develop our technology. If the humans had known we were hiding on the Moon, they would have devoted every resource to a space program. Nothing like an enemy to focus the attention of a government! So we maintained a low profile.

"Recently, when the tendriless war started, we watched by tapping into news broadcasts and wireless transmissions. We had known for some time that the tendriless were infiltrating your political systems and your communications, but still we did not act.

"Some true slans insisted on letting the factions hammer it out for themselves. They insisted that we shouldn't get involved, that we had no debt to either side. When the great air-strikes began and your cities fell, those same isolationist slans wanted to let you all destroy yourselves while we remained safe on the Moon. They were willing to abandon any true slans remaining on Earth." He hung his head. "I knew that my son Peter and his wife had been killed long ago. We thought the same thing had happened to you, too, Jommy."

Jommy felt a lump in his throat.

"A large group of dissenters—including myself—demanded that we take measures to save our human and tendriless step-brothers. Sadly, we were out-voted. But when we detected the clear distress signal emanating from the base here, I had the leverage I needed. I showed the proof, called for another vote, and my isolationist opponents backed down. That was when we launched our raids."

"What distress signal?" Anthea asked, carrying her infant in her arms. His tendrils waved in the air, as if he could sense the other slans in the chamber. "Is that what my baby and I triggered when we found this empty place?"

"It was just you and your baby? The base was empty?" Commander Cross said, amazed. "You did it yourselves? Only two of you?" The slan delegates, the scientists and politicians,

looked up at her. Cross's disbelief began as a chuckle, then grew to full laughter.

"What's so funny?" Anthea asked.

"I argued that there must be a whole enclave of true slans. Hundreds if not thousands! I convinced the isolationists that we'd have an entire resistance movement here, ready to go."

"You do have a resistance movement," Jommy said. "The five of us."

The commander grinned. "And if you're anything like your father, Jommy, I should not underestimate you."

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Gray motioned for the slan emissaries to sit at a long conference table in the underground chamber. Anthea, who was the most familiar with the layout and the stored items in the secret base, found food and drinks for them, then went to nurse her baby.

"Now this is the way a summit meeting is supposed to be," Kathleen said with a bittersweet smile. "I miss Granny and her apple pie, though."

Jommy felt a pang, trying not to keep a score of how much he had lost in recent days.

Commander Cross laid out his plans, which were already set in motion. "We will certainly encounter hot spots of tendriless activity for some time yet, even without Jem Lorry to provoke them. Some of the invaders will still fight, but it's a lost cause. They will realize that eventually. I just hope we can impose peace before too many others die."

"We'll be a long time counting all the casualties," Gray said. "The people—slans, tendriless, *and humans*—require strong leadership. They need to see that we are united and intent on rebuilding."

"The tendriless will never stop fighting," Joanna pointed out. "They can hide so easily among humans."

Cross gave a mysterious smile. "After this day is over, they shouldn't be much of a problem. I guarantee they won't have any further interest in killing slans. They'll have nothing to complain about." To his astonished audience, he and the slan scientists explained what was at that moment happening in Cimmerium.

A squadron of advanced technological vessels had already launched from the Moon toward Mars—research probes bearing a new sort of transmitter, a ray generator developed by slan geneticists.

"What kind of rays?" Kathleen asked.

One scientist, a man named Dr. Philcroft, said in an awed whisper, "*Mutation* rays!"

Anthea was the one who piped up. "Mutation rays? Like the ones Dr. Lann supposedly used to create the first slans? But that was just propaganda—no truth to it at all. I've studied the tapes and records in the archives. Slans were a natural mutation."

"We know, but it doesn't have to be that way. In our lunar base we had many centuries to

expand our medical science. What was originally imagined as a wild rumor, we were able to turn into reality. Slan geneticists did indeed create a device that would do exactly what the ignorant mobs accused Dr. Lann of doing. Recall that the tendrillless hated us in the first place because they felt we had denied them their rightful powers. Thus, we found a means to activate the latent genetics frozen in the tendrillless slans. They always had the potential within them, but it was masked. Within a few generations their children would be born with tendrils anyway. So, we just accelerated that schedule.”

Commander Cross picked up the story. “We fitted our scientific ships with transmitters to disperse those mutation rays widely, and those vessels are flying over the glass ceilings of Cimmerium even now. Every tendrillless soldier in the occupation ships has already been exposed.” He grinned. “The results should be quite readily apparent.”

“You mean the tendrillless on Mars are even now—?” Jommy tried to fit all the pieces together.

“Yes. The mutation rays are engendering the growth of tendrils. The Tendrilless Authority and all the people remaining in Cimmerium are rubbing the backs of their heads and finding quite a surprise. Everyone aboard the occupation ships is doing the same. They’re all true slans now.”

Jommy pictured what must be happening in the Martian city and aboard the giant wheel-shaped vessels. Tiny strands would emerge from the backs of their heads, growing like fine antennas. They would suddenly be able to pick up each other’s thoughts—and what chaos that would cause! But the newly awakened tendrillless wouldn’t know how to use their new skills. It would be a cacophony in their heads and an uproar in Cimmerium.

Kathleen shook her head wryly. “If Jem Lorry were still alive, I can just imagine the expression on his face as he transformed into one of his most hated enemies.”

“And he would suddenly know just what everyone else thought of him,” Joanna added.

“So, you see, there is no longer any need for conflict because the two parties can’t tell each other apart,” Cross concluded.

Jommy touched the back of his head, gathered the courage to ask his question. “And what about me? Can you regrow my tendrils? Can I be a normal slan again?”

His grandfather shook his head sadly. “Alas, it isn’t the latent genetics to be triggered in you, Jommy. The mutation rays won’t do anything to you, or to humans.”

“We don’t know how to convert humans yet, but the key is at hand, I’m sure.” Philcroft looked at one of the other slan doctors, who nodded.

Kier Gray responded with a tired smile. “People can always find a reason for conflict, Commander, but you’ve just removed one of the largest ones.”

Joanna looked from the military commander to the slan scientist. “You mean ... I won’t have to be tendrillless anymore, either? You can transform me as well?” She scratched the back of her head as if searching for delicate tendrils there. “I’ll know what it’s like?”

“You have the genes,” Dr. Philcroft said. “All tendrillless slans do.”

Anthea was also intrigued, holding up her baby. “Even those of us who didn’t know we were tendrillless slans.”

\* \* \*

While the political delegates worked with President Gray to hammer out the details of an interim government, Commander Cross sat with Jommy and Kathleen.

“I miss your father terribly,” the older man said. “He was such a brave and brilliant young man. Peter and your mother insisted on staying on Earth even though we could have brought them—and you—to safety on the Moon. But Peter was too dedicated to his work, and your mother refused to leave him. She clung to her hope. They both wanted to make a better world for you.” Commander Cross shook his head. “I’m so sorry that I couldn’t keep them safe, that I couldn’t protect *you*, Jommy. I can’t imagine what it must be like to lose your tendrils.” His voice quavered.

“I survived,” Jommy said, sitting straight, “and I’ll continue to survive. Those tendrils defined what other people thought of me, but they didn’t define *me*.”

“What was Jommy’s father working on that was so important down here?” Kathleen asked. “We have his disintegrator weapon, and we read many of his journals and lab notes.”

“Peter was laying the groundwork for the return of the real slans and the conversion of the tendrillless, but he knew it wouldn’t be easy. He understood that slans had to defend themselves in the meantime, which is why he invented that horribly destructive disintegrator. He was a good man, Jommy.”

Jommy smiled. “I remember that much.”

Anthea walked in holding the baby boy. Commander Cross looked at her, his tendrils raised and waving; he seemed to be in contact with the infant.

“That child is a sign that the waiting is over. More and more true slan children will be born again. This is the start of a new order, a new hope.” His brow furrowed. “But that baby is so young, what psychologists call a *tabula rasa*—a blank slate or empty vessel, just waiting to be filled.”

Anthea kissed the baby’s pink forehead. “Maybe he’s waiting for a safe and happy life.”

Suddenly the scientists shouted from across the underground chamber. Dr. Philcroft’s voice rang out clearly. “Commander Cross, come quickly! And Jommy, you too—this is important. You’ll never believe what we found!”

## CHAPTER 43



Inside one of the underground medical labs, the slan scientists had discovered equipment they

had not expected to find away from the lunar complex.

“This is some of the best slan medical technology that we’ve developed,” said Philcroft. “Peter Cross, or someone with him, must have built them according to our designs from the Moon. And the machines are still operational.”

Kier Gray had also come running, hearing the urgency in the scientists’ voices. “That’s the same sort of technology we used to save my daughter.” He gave Kathleen’s shoulder a warm squeeze. “Otherwise she would never have survived the bullet wound in her head. But with a slan miracle device like this, we brought her back. I was sure the only such machine on Earth was destroyed when the tendriless leveled the palace.”

“I saw the tendriless use that technology in Cimmerium, too. They reconstructed a woman with a severe head injury.” Jommy looked at Dr. Philcroft. “But why the sense of urgency? You called us in here—”

Philcroft blinked his eyes. “Don’t you see? It’s a *reconstruction* device.” Clinically, the doctor touched Jommy’s head, turned him around to inspect the scabbed-over ends of his severed tendrils. “We can use it to grow your tendrils back.” The other slan doctors agreed. “Given this equipment, it should be a simple enough procedure.”

Kathleen threw her arms around Jommy. He had not dared to hope, not even imagined a miraculous solution. “I’m ready right now,” he said. “Let’s not delay.”

The reclining medical chair had armrests and an array of probes, mirrors, crystals, and a dishlike metal cap that lowered over Jommy’s skull. It looked like a bizarre torture device that John Petty might have created.

Dr. Philcroft adjusted the equipment. “Just lean back. We’ve already run diagnostics, so there’s nothing to worry about. You’ll hear a pulsing sound and feel a tingling. I doubt it’ll hurt ... much.”

“It could never hurt as much as when they cut my tendrils off.” He closed his eyes, and Kathleen took his hand.

The slan medical specialists discussed the various settings and readings; the machine was already powered up. Lights blinked furiously, and the crystals glimmered. Jommy could indeed feel throbbing transmission pulses like tiny electric ants crawling over the back of his head and inside his brain. He imagined his cells dividing furiously, healing, growing. The reconstruction device worked with incredible speed.

“I see them!” Kathleen cried. “It’s working.”

As the seconds passed, the room illumination seemed to grow brighter to Jommy, and every background noise became clearer and sharper. Moment by moment, his senses increased by orders of magnitude. The new-grown tendrils spread out, questing, drinking in impressions.

Philcroft and his companions clucked excitedly amongst themselves. Then a shift happened in Jommy’s mind, and he felt his primary sensory input starting to come from the back of his head. Suddenly, beginning as a whisper that grew to a roar, he could hear other thoughts, fresh impressions.

And there, like a bright light at the end of the tunnel, he found Kathleen's mind and her heart. They were connected again, mentally reunited at last. He felt a surge of love.

Philcroft switched off the machines, and Jommy sat up, breathless. He was healed—aware, and alive, and *intact*. He gingerly touched his tendrils, then Kathleen's. He climbed out of the chair and drew a deep breath. "For all the misery and prejudice I experienced because of these tendrils, I'm certainly glad to have them back!"

\* \* \*

For the rest of the day, President Gray, Commander Cross, and Joanna Hillory made joint announcements to the public at large. The three of them worked carefully to reassure the survivors in the cities. They described their plans for rebuilding Earth and creating a bright future for everyone, with peace among the races.

Meanwhile, now that Jommy's tendrils had been healed, the slan scientists were intrigued by the rest of Dr. Lann's ancient equipment, which had been installed so long ago down here in the secret base. They devoted their studies to understanding the brain-pattern records and mental storage devices, mounting intact dataspools on the bulky generators. "Even we haven't concocted innovations like this." Dr. Philcroft ran his finger along the transparent covering that shielded a set of spinning information disks.

Anthea Stewart, feeling safe but somewhat lost, took care of her baby and tried to plan ahead. She entered the research room, watching Philcroft and his unsuccessful attempts to activate the strange, ancient device. When Anthea brought the infant close to the great machine's embedded detectors, though, the datadisks began spinning faster, lights flashed. The machinery hummed with furious energy.

Philcroft cried out to his partners. "Did you do that?"

"I didn't touch a single switch! It responded by itself."

"It can't activate spontaneously—there must have been some trigger." Then the men looked over at Anthea.

"I didn't do anything!" She set the baby down in his blanket to keep him safe from the machinery. His tiny tendrils were questing in the air as the old machinery spun and buzzed.

"The sensors detected a new presence," Philcroft said. "It's the baby."

Anthea remembered how the Porgrave signal in the library archives had activated because of her baby, how the whole underground base and its locator beacon had awakened from dormancy when she had carried the child inside.

The pulsing continued. The slan doctors rubbed their own heads. "Can you feel it? A targeted transmission, but I can't understand it."

Suddenly, the machinery stopped, the datadisks halted, the lights went dark on the control panels.

"Did it short out?" Philcroft said.



“No, I think ... I think it was just finished.”

Anthea glanced back down at her baby—and to her astonishment he lifted his head and looked around with hungry curiosity. Using his small hands, he propped himself up, sitting in his blankets. His tiny lips curved in an amazingly adult smile.

Then, in a perfect voice, he said, “The memory storage and transference worked perfectly. *I am Samuel Lann!*”

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