

REVIEWS FOR TONY RUGGIERO'S GET OUT OF MY MIND

"4½ STARS "Fantastic writing! Mr. Ruggiero has written realistic characters that make your mouth drop. I found Mr. Ruggiero's book *Get Out of My Mind* to be well-written, fascinating, creative, and gripping. I loved it. I'm positive any lover of science fiction will be crazy about this book."

--Jennifer LB Leese, A StoryWeaver Book Review

"Populated by intriguing, colorful characters and dizzying plot twists, *Get Out of My Mind* is a thoughtful commentary on present day politics and a darn entertaining romp through the future."

--John Patrick Schmitz, Editor of *The Door to Worlds Imagined*

4 STARS "In his debut as a novelist, Tony Ruggiero has written an exciting plot with strong characters that genre fans will devour and will demand more Council visits to other worlds."

--Harriet Klausner, SimeGen Book Reviews

4 STARS "I was captivated as I flipped the pages to uncover Copolla's plot, Leumas' plan to stop him, and the effect of the two humans, Greg and Sarah, on the outcome of this intergalactic game of cat and mouse."

--Michael Thal, Scribes World Reviews

"This book is a wonderful throwback to the good old days of pulp fiction. Trekkies in all their incarnations and *Farscape* Aficionados should revel in this one. Those who like their SF upbeat with good triumphing over evil should take a peak at this."

--David McKinlay, Word of Mouth SF Book Review

5 STARS. "This is a fresh and intriguing story that opened with a bang and grabbed me from the first page. Sarah and Greg's first meeting is in an ingenious and brilliant setting which sets the benchmark for most of the rest of the story. Tony Ruggiero leads the reader deeper into the mystery with a sure hand. He includes the science fiction elements seamlessly in the story. The budding romance between the characters is treated delicately and without the story tipping over to romance, which is the case with many science fiction stories with a romantic aspect."

--S.M. Sam, Timeless Tales



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Part One

GET OUT OF MY MIND

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C H A P T E R O N E
C O P O L L A



“Just have them killed and begin the indoctrination!” the voice boomed impatiently. “We will not waste any more time debating this issue!”

All heads turned toward the Honorable Copolla, leader of the United Council for Developing Worlds, as he regally strode to his seat. He took slow, calculated steps, so that each delegate could take note of his ominous appearance. His large humanoid shape commanded a height of well over seven feet. His body was a large mass of pure muscle that conveyed an immediate sensation of power and strength. His face, made of a substance that resembled quartz, glistened in the light and was as unmoving as stone. His eyes were red and glowed with an intensity that looked like fire.

He walked forward, his long robes flowing with self-importance and prestige, his position flamboyantly displayed for all to recognize. He approached his seat, the biggest in the Great Hall. From here, he would sit and listen to the discussions of the members; on many occasions, he sat without a single comment throughout entire sessions. On others, he thundered his rulings, leaving the delegates quivering in their seats. His quietness was sometimes mistaken for aloofness, but he was a being who could formulate plan upon plan while not missing a sentence of discussion.

The delegate from planet Ross 154, a child-like humanoid figure with barely enough flesh on its body to hide its skeletal frame, asked timidly, “How can you be sure they are the ones? I am very concerned that the movement to install members to this Council from this primitive planet is very premature. They are by far at the lowest end of development compared to any other planet that is a member of this Council. Furthermore, the indoctrination process is very tricky, and could compromise the initial contact agent, Leumas. I feel the Council should re-visit this issue. The charter states that—”

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“The Leader of the United Council of Developing Worlds has decided!” Copolla thundered, his strident voice echoing throughout the cavernous hall. “They have been selected as the next members. It is done!” He spoke with finality. “The Sol system has been under our influence for far too long now. It needs its own species to contribute to the decisions of its destiny. There will be no further discussion on this issue!”

The delegate from Ross 154 sat quickly as Copolla addressed the delegation again, this time in a more subtle tone. “Members of the UCDW, my distinguished colleague from Ross 154 has brought up an important issue regarding the planet Earth.” Copolla looked around the room, staring with a piercing gaze that no member would meet. “I have personally looked into this matter and carefully reviewed the Council’s recommendations.”

He lifted his hands to emphasize his point. “The opportunity to make history is before us. This planet, Earth, even though we all agree it is very primitive, has great potential to provide valuable insight into its own development and serve as an example to other planets that we are currently assisting. I feel very strongly that we are doing the right thing.” He continued with what he hoped was a sincere smile on his hard, carved face. “I have carefully looked at this from all angles, and that is why I have assigned our very best to handle this case. You all know that Leumas is one of our best initial contact agents. I have the utmost faith in his ability to successfully indoctrinate the two new subjects, who I have assisted the Council in selecting.”

The delegate from Ross 154 looked imploringly at the other members, hoping that someone would join him in questioning the validity of the order. No one stood. He was on his own. He prepared to speak; he took one more look at Copolla’s piercing red eyes burning through him, and decided to remain silent.

Copolla smiled. “If there is no further business then, this meeting of the United Council of Developing Worlds is concluded.”

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C H A P T E R T W O
LEUMAS



“Council Report. This is initial contact agent Leumas’s report on the Planet FRA-232. The mission was highly successful and the species very receptive to joining the United Council for Developing Worlds,” Leumas said as he ran his fingers of his webbed hand through his thick blonde hair. He turned toward the mirror, bending slightly so he could check his appearance.

Tall and at exactly the appropriate weight for my height, flat stomach and nice buns, he thought. He smiled, admired his brilliantly white teeth, his blue eyes and the perfectly centered dimple in his chin. He used his hand like a comb and worked a few strands of his hair back into their place. Smiling, he winked at himself and then chuckled.

“Where was I?” he asked as he turned away from the mirror. “Oh yes, minimum influence was required, which is indicative of the well-developed mental powers of the inhabitants of the planet. Special note. The Council needs to revise standard indoctrination procedures.” He began raising his voice from the earlier level. “If I had followed them to the letter, we would have insulted three quarters of the planet and lost any chance of bringing them into the Council. The procedures are not flexible enough to meet the requirements of agents in the field. This is my second or third request,” he added sarcastically. “Leumas, initial contact agent, Alien Affairs Branch, report concluded.”

His webbed fingers moved along the desk console, checking readouts on the progress of Council actions as he completed the documentation of his last assignment and logged it into the upcoming queue actions of the Council for review.

“That’s it. I’m finished,” he said, as he sat and kicked his feet up on the desk “Now I need some quiet time.”

From his desk, he had a clear view through the window of the surface of planet Zire.

“The colors are so pretty,” he said, as he looked out the window. “So pretty and so deadly. So unlikely and unimaginable a combination,

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but ever so true in life, where things do not always appear what they actually are.”

He continued to stare out into the beautiful but deadly atmosphere of the planet through the secure window. Somehow, he found it relaxing to watch the highly toxic colors that swirled in individual torrents as savage winds whipped them in all directions. The heavy levels of radiation that still lingered in the soil brought about the colors as the wind lifted them into the atmosphere; the resulting chemical reaction was the miraculous show that he now watched.

Residue radiation posed the greatest problems in the early years following the Great War. It had taken centuries for the radiation levels to dissipate on Cortazon, his home world several light years away. Over this span of time, it led to strange deformities, both physical and mental, among the survivors on the planets. Today, most of the effects had been weeded out by generations of new births and by controlling the major genes but, every once in a while, something managed to sneak through the less apparent or hidden genes. It was perhaps from that poisoned gene pool that Leumas had received the ability to apply influence or, as others called it, mind manipulation.

Discovered at an early age, Leumas was taught to control these powers and use them toward the betterment of the Council. Today, the power to influence was less a natural occurrence than a synthetic one accomplished through surgery. Unfortunately, the high levels of radiation required for the surgery were extremely dangerous, and the operation was only performed when absolutely necessary for Initial Contact Agent recruitment.

His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of an entry request to his office.

“Now what? Can I not get a moment’s peace around here?”

Aggravated at the disturbance, he got up and stomped to the door ready to scream at whoever was there. He placed his palm on the unlock mechanism and the door hummed open.

In the corridor outside his office in the alien affairs complex stood a messenger from the Council. Leumas recognized the uniform worn by a Comoran, a scaled reptilian alien, which stood about five feet tall and weighed several hundred pounds. He immediately wanted to

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comment on the terrible color combination and the poor tailoring of his uniform, but the thought vanished when Leumas saw the gold envelope in the messenger's hand; instead, he bit his tongue and said nothing. The envelope was the special stationary used only by Copolla. Leumas felt his stomach lurch with anxiety, and he wished he had not answered the door.

"Thumbprint, please," the messenger hissed as he held out a small device. The Comoran saw the look on Leumas's face and seemed concerned about difficulty in delivering the letter. "Thumbprint, please," he said again.

Leumas's first thought was that he should refuse the letter, but decided that would only add to his problems later on. He shrugged, then raised his hand and pressed it to the device to verify his authenticity and receipt of the letter at the same time.

"Thank you," the messenger said, quickly handing Leumas the letter. He turned to leave, his short, armored tail almost striking Leumas.

Leumas buzzed the door shut and returned to his desk, noticing that the view outside the window was no longer as appealing as it had been only moments ago.

"It can only be trouble," he said to the empty office. "I should have seen it coming; it's long overdue. Copolla has been waiting for just the right moment and the perfect assignment to discredit me."

He let his breath out in frustration and hesitantly broke the golden seal to remove its carefully folded document. He handled the one page carefully, as if the print would jump off the page and attack him. He read aloud, slowly and clearly.

"You are to immediately depart for the planet Earth to begin the indoctrination of two humans specifically chosen by the Leader of the Council. Pertinent information has been sent to your ship's computer. This mission is of the utmost importance and timing is crucial if we are to protect this race." It was signed Copolla, Leader of the United Council for Developing Worlds. He finished reading and placed the piece of paper on his desk.

"Earth? Where the heck is Earth? Never heard of it before. What kind of trick is this? Now he's sending me to places I haven't even heard of before. It's a trap...I know it! This is just like something he

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would do!” Leumas shouted, picking the letter back up from the desk, wadding it up into a ball, and throwing it up into the air. He paced back and forth for several minutes trying to calm his mind. He knew he had to be rational about this and try to figure a way out as numerous scenarios played out in his mind.

He knew Copolla would have surmised that he might refuse the mission; he always had a backup plan to everything. In his thoughts, he played out the scene.

“If I did refuse the mission against the Council’s wishes, he would use that to discredit me. He wants me to get blackballed with the Council; he knows my followers are growing and someday I might be able to rally enough support to challenge him.”

Staring upward as if pleading, he said aloud, “I have to find a way out. I need more information.”

He strolled by the mirror, checking his appearance out of the corner of his eye, and suddenly stopped. One of Leumas’s special attributes was the power to change his physical appearance for extremely short periods of time. Like his influencing ability, this was the result of radiation from his home world. He practiced this form changing as he stood in front of the mirror sometimes, a kind of game that he played for amusement and distraction. Now he slipped into the mood easily, and changed his form for a momentary diversion from the problem at hand.

First he appeared as a Cumlagen, an alien species that was humanoid in body but possessed a head like a fish. He moved his lips and marveled at the smooth circular motion so common among aquatic life forms. Then he changed to a Wertin, a reptilian species that he found to be rather revolting after watching them eat a meal. He grinned into the mirror, displaying large teeth that clicked sharply as he moved his jaws in a biting and snapping manner.

This ability was by far the key to his success in interacting with many different races, resulting in the accomplishments that brought him into greater standing with the Council. While he was in his Council offices, he generally kept his own humanoid appearance, his only non-human attribute being the subtle webbing between his fingers. He changed back into his humanoid shape and moved away from the mirror, still

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not feeling any better, his mind preoccupied with his thoughts about what action he should take.

The directive from Copolla was to indoctrinate two specific human beings from the planet Earth. He assumed the dream sequence to introduce the two subjects had already been initiated on the humans. This first part of the process was the trickiest; the attachment between the two subjects had to be formed, and their alibi for removal from the planet was next. This alibi consisted of their simulated deaths, the only sure way to remove any suspicion of possible kidnapping or foolish alien abduction. At the proper place and time, their life functions would be restored, and they would move into phase two of the process.

“Damn it!” he exploded, annoyed at the Leader’s presumptuous move before he had even looked at the prospective members. “Too good even to consult your expert, are you, Copolla? Or is this you and the Council getting even for some of my remarks about the way things have been running around here?”

He heard in his mind the statements he had made to the Council on the subject of indoctrinations. His ideas were often considered borderline radical because he didn’t subscribe to the standard operating procedures of the Council. He believed that each situation called for a creative and spontaneous action based upon the scenario. Too many regulations and too much red tape led to problems and botched indoctrination attempts, but no one else had been willing to say anything about it. They were too scared of Copolla to openly defy him, and Copolla would not agree to anything that Leumas suggested.

Bringing himself back to the problem at hand, Leumas knew he would have to review past reports to see what kind of progress this planet Earth had been making over the years. He found it odd that he hadn’t even heard of Earth before, or that efforts were currently underway to bring them into the Council. *Probably more closed-door policy-making*, he thought. He left his office and headed to the planetary archives located only minutes from his office to research the planet.

Normally, the halls of the Council chambers would echo with his off-key whistling, which annoyed the other members; of course, that was why he did it. But his whistle was silent today because the halls were deserted which, in itself, was not usual for this time of the day.

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The calm before the storm, he thought, as his grip on the envelope tightened until it crumpled under his strength. He silently cursed Copolla as he made his way through the halls of Council chambers and on to the protective tunnels that connected the archive facilities with the Council.

“I must be more of a threat to Copolla than I thought,” Leumas said aloud softly. “If he wants me out of the way, then he must fear that I’ll discover what he has in mind. Why not just get rid of me as some others who have opposed him, some of whom have mysteriously vanished? He’s playing a very dangerous game, and I don’t want to become the pawn. I must learn what he knows.”

As he reached the archives and made his way to the records area, he was overwhelmed at the facility. It always amazed him, so much information contained in such a small area. He presented his identification card to the scanning system and was directed to the information-gathering hub. He sat down at a records retrieval unit and began to call up the historical data regarding the planet Earth.

“Authorization Code please,” the computer barked at him in its monotone voice.

“Authorization Leumas, sequence one-beta-nine-omega,” he responded to the metallic voice that had requested the information.

“Verified. Access approved,” the flat voice stated as the information displayed itself on the screen. “You may now open the file and choose a selection from the index. If you should require any additional service, please do not hesitate to ask.” Leumas thought that the metallic voice had a condescending edge to it. He chuckled as he realized he had to be imagining this supposed personality trait of the computer.

He opened the electronic file and selected Earth: Historical Background. He looked for the entries on past planet contact or studies. His assignment would bring him into direct contact with two Earth humans, and he thought it best to become familiar with past observations and analyses of the planet and its inhabitants. The first entry displayed on the screen and he began to read.

“In 1936 (Earth Standard Years), Eva Braun (1910-1945), who was the mistress of Adolf Hitler (1889-1945), was placed under the influence of the United Council for Developing Worlds (UCDW).

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Her selection was based upon her relationship with Hitler, a dictator of probable position to effect great changes in the development of the human race; specifically, on the European continent, in a country called Germany.

“Subconsciously, she was provided the stimulus to apply suggestions to him to cause decisions based upon Council forecasts that predicted the people of Hitler’s country had the potential to become a leading economic, cultural and industrial center in the European region. They possessed the drive and initiative to lead the continent into a new era, and the Council felt that other countries would follow suit and spur tremendous growth in many areas. The most important area was the space exploration program, where they felt other countries would quickly adopt Germany’s concepts and improve on them.

“Unfortunately, the Council misinterpreted Adolf Hitler’s personality flaws too late. By the time they realized Hitler’s ambitions were fueled by his desire for conquest and his paranoia, Earth’s Second World War had gotten out of control. Hitler had taken his power and abused it to the point of annihilating millions of innocent people that he considered inferior.

“On April 30, 1945, Eva Braun was influenced to strongly suggest to Hitler that he commit suicide, and that she join her new husband in death shortly thereafter. The subsequent fire that burned their bodies beyond recognition eradicated any evidence of wrongdoing on the part of the Council and Copolla. Braun and Hitler’s bodies would be forensically unidentifiable, erasing all possibilities of anyone finding evidence of sub-neural tampering, which could indicate that alien influence had been applied. Several other attempts were employed to correct the catastrophe, but those, too, had failed. Reference: Earth Files 0005Z through 0089X.”

“I’ll be damned,” Leumas said. “They really screwed that one up royally. But why does Copolla want to go back now? Surely he doesn’t want to bring his past screw-ups back out into the open for others to see? Why? Why? Why?”

He went back to reading the report. “Earth was abandoned to mend its wounds in its own fashion, according to local traditions and customs. The Council deemed the operation a complete failure. Subsequently,



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a motion was filed to begin an overhaul to correct such deficiencies in the Council's methods, and procedures for personality analysis and alien performance predictions were put in place to avoid future disasters."

Leumas removed the micro disk from the reader and reached up to rub his tired eyes and massage his forehead. He could feel a headache slowly beginning to grip his temples as more and more questions arose in his mind. He looked down at his personal wrist timepiece, a gift from his good friend and most trusted assistant Greta, and realized that he had been in the archives for well over an hour. He forced his mind to interpret what he had seen so far.

Earth's inhabitants, the humans, couldn't possibly have come along far enough since this Hitler massacre to warrant membership on the Council. The incident had only been about sixty Earth years ago. The planet should probably be left alone for... maybe a hundred years before contact was attempted again. It just didn't make any sense. This whole thing was a great big mystery.

Leumas quietly cursed under his breath, "Why me? Why me?"

He returned his gaze to the screen as he pressed the key to continue. No further information appeared.

"That can't be all!" Leumas was disappointed and skeptical. "There has to be more information available than this. If we've had past contact, there should be reports, background information, agents assigned, and bacteria studies. Computer, bring up all additional files mentioned in this report," he said with an authoritative voice.

"Unable to comply," the flat metallic voice returned, with no emotion.

"Why not?" he demanded, his frustration growing very quickly.

"Unable to comply to your request by the direction of the UCDW rules of protection and security concerns for safeguarding sensitive data," the voice stated, as if Leumas should already know that.

"Computer, my clearance allows me access to ALL information in regards to cultures and any initial contact with them."

"Unable to comply to your request by the direction of the UCDW rules of protection and security concerns for safeguarding sensitive data," the emotionless computer voice repeated.

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Leumas found this continuous rejection more than a little annoying, a hindrance to his meticulous research. His stomach acids began to churn.

“Computer, have the Archival Custodian or anyone else who would be able to answer my question respond to this location in person immediately!” he directed, his anger now eroding his reason.

“Acknowledged. The Custodian will be here in forty-five seconds,” the flat voice said.

Leumas glanced up from the screen as movement caught his eye. A humanoid figure was approaching. The figure was short and compact, with strands of long gray hair drifting in any direction they chose. He wore a long, white jacket whose pockets were stuffed to overflowing with various items.

“My name is Robise. How may I be of assistance?” the old man said in a curious tone, eyes squinting as he tried to focus on the face of Leumas. He removed spectacles from his pocket and placed them on his large, wrinkled nose. With vision restored, his face broadened with a smile as he recognized the frequent visitor to his humble establishment.

“Initial Contact Agent Leumas, I am honored. It is good to see you again. I continue to hear much about you and your work,” he said with sincerity. Leumas acknowledged the recognition with a slight bow of his head and turned to the subject at hand.

“I would like to access these reference files,” he stated evenly, as he showed the small man the case report’s file number. “I tried to access this information but, for some reason, I am being denied entry,” he said and waited for the old man’s reaction.

“Let me see.” Robise’s rough old hands danced with amazing quickness across the electronic screens. He remained silent for several seconds after he keyed in the information, his thick eyebrows drawn together. Finally, he turned toward Leumas.

“I’m sorry, but that information is simply not available,” he shrugged.

“I know that!” Leumas said, his anger returning. “But I want to know why. The report says those files are here, and I want to see them. I have more than the necessary clearances required.”

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Robise moved closer to Leumas, and whispered in a conspiratorial voice, “I don’t know where they went, but I can tell you this...” the custodian paused as he looked around the facility. When his gaze settled back on Leumas, he continued, “The order came directly from the UCDW. One of their ‘special agents’ came here and removed all the files. He had a directive signed by Copolla himself.”

“Copolla himself, huh?” Leumas said, stroking his chin as he mulled that thought over, feeling not a bit surprised. “That makes this even more, well—interesting.” He smiled wanly. “Why do you think they did that? Have any ideas, Robise?”

The old man smiled as well. “I, as well as those who have preceded me, have been in this facility for a very long time. Many life forms don’t realize how important it is to keep a record of all the things that happen. There is more to history than anyone would ever suspect. Sometimes, history records things that others wish did not get recorded, things that they choose not to remember. Do you understand what I am trying to say?”

Leumas nodded his head in agreement. “Do you think you would remember what this special agent looked like?”

“Maybe.”

“You wouldn’t by any chance have a copy of the information that was removed, would you?” Leumas asked, hoping for a positive response.

“Maybe,” the old man replied again, a thin smile highlighting his face. “Where can I reach you?”

“I’ll be out of touch for a while. I’ll contact you.”

“Fine. Going on a trip?” Robise asked.

“Yes. I’m going to Earth.”

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C H A P T E R T H R E E
G R E G C A R L S O N



Greg suddenly awoke and found himself in a nightclub reminiscent of the late 1940s. He blinked his eyes, hoping that it would go away and be replaced with the usually unmade bed or the clothes-covered floor of his apartment. But the bizarre surroundings remained the same. At least he was a constant; he was still Greg Carlson, he thought, although everything else had changed, right down to the clothes on his body.

Gazing at the surroundings, he guessed at the 1940-ish date from old photographs he had seen in books and magazines of the speakeasy establishments of the period. It was furnished with small round tables, topped with miniature lamps with shades that dangled streams of glittering red plastic beads. Perfect white linen tablecloths reached to the black-and-white checkered floor. His sudden realization of having known the details of such an establishment made him wonder if in fact that had something to do with what he was now seeing. Was his subconscious mind providing the details for this dream? But was it really a dream—he wasn't sure. Yet the only answer for what was happening was that he had to be dreaming. How else could all of this be happening? But how often did one realize that very thought while actually dreaming? That you were actually awake in your dream?

His hand reached out and touched one of the tables. Its cool, hard surface felt just like it should, confirming its physical existence. This surprised him. He tried to remember if he ever had a dream where he actually was able to perceive everything around him as if he were wide-awake. He didn't think so. He touched himself and felt the pressure of his own warm hand on his arm. *How the heck can this be? What is...*

A strange feeling of electricity in the air interrupted his thoughts. He could almost feel his hair strands beginning to stretch upward, there was so much static in the air of this place. Something was going to happen. He wasn't sure how he knew that, but it was the only thing he was sure about at the moment. He also felt that he didn't need to

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be nervous or scared; whatever was going to happen was going to be a “good” thing.

Suddenly, a crowd materialized around him. The people were all dressed in period clothing of the Forties. Greg began to walk toward them; perhaps he could learn something and possibly end whatever it was that was happening. He hesitated as he noticed that most of the people who had materialized were gorgeous and seductive looking women. At that point, he virtually lost control of what he was doing as his mind blended into some kind of scripted event, as he consciously remained a casual observer to the play.

A thought formed in his mind with such clarity and certainty causing him to blurt out, “They’re all here for me.” His body shivered at the mere thought of all these women. “Of course, that’s it. Why else would I be here?”

He felt as if his body no longer belonged to him as it strutted across the floor in his fashionable clothes, the baggy pants billowing with each step; his tight-fitting shirt accentuated his one-hundred-sixty-pound muscular, five-foot, eight-inch body. His dark hair, every strand perfectly in place, shimmered in the light and added a golden aura to the dream-like quality of this experience. He almost felt embarrassed by the thoughts and words coming from his mind and mouth. Yet there was this uncanny attraction that seemed to grow as the dream went on.

The crowd parted magically as he walked through their midst. They appeared to glow and shimmer as he neared them, like ghosts drifting between points of solid and gaseous states. They came from all around just to shake his hand. He felt the warm touch of flesh against his palm. But something told him, or somehow he knew, that these glancing touches were just empty shells of air, and this only seemed to reaffirm that there was somebody else here that he had to meet. Someone very special and he was meant only for her, not any of these others.

A gorgeous and voluptuous blond-haired woman stepped up to greet him.

“Hi, Greg. Remember me? I’m Karen. I bought you a drink once.” Her voice was so high, it almost sounded like a squeak. She placed her hands lightly on his shoulders as she moved closer, her face only

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inches away from his. He could smell the too-sweet perfume that radiated from her.

“You were so kind, you...spoke to me,” she said breathlessly. “Remember? I gave you my chair and you said, ‘thank you.’”

“I’m sorry, but no, I don’t remember you,” he said apologetically, yet his voice hinted of a new-found arrogance as he stepped away from her hands and her warm grip, his own actions again surprising him. Although his body moved around her, his eyes remained fixated on her loveliness, chest high.

“Oh, thank you! You are just too kind!” she said, nearly in a swoon, as he brushed past her. She stared down at her hands as if this mere touch had made them golden. She turned them over and over, and then hugged them to her body in ecstasy, pushing her breasts to the brink of expulsion from her clothing. He continued to walk on, shaking hands with everyone, not having a clue who any of them were.

A spotlight appeared from somewhere out in the darkness and encompassed a sole woman who sat at the bar. She appeared to pose there, her back to him. In this view, he could catch glimpses of her carefully taking tiny sips of her drink. He immediately stopped and gazed in awe at this woman. *She is the one*, he thought. *She is the one that I knew would be here.*

She wore a simple black evening dress that flowed over her body, accentuating her curves in all the right places. As he studied those curves with intent interest, he felt goose bumps suddenly arise all over his body. He stared at her hair that shimmered like black silk hanging past her shoulders, wanting so much to touch those strands of black loveliness before they disappeared into the darkness outside of the spotlight.

He squared his shoulders and stepped up to where she sat on the barstool, a ravishing sight. He knew why she was here. She was waiting just for him, nobody else, just him. He had never felt so sure about anything in his entire life. As he reached her barstool, the room fell eerily quiet.

He gently placed his hand at the base of her barstool, noticing even more how the black dress clung to her body. He inhaled deeply and let her perfume tantalize and tease his senses. It affected him like one who

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is addicted to a drug and has just found a bountiful quantity. He had to have more, and more. His head became giddy as his mind searched for the perfect words that would entice this woman to be his. Words that would make her simply melt into his arms. He felt no control as his smoothest voice spoke warmly and seductively to her. “You look like you’re waiting for someone. Someone like me. Well, I’m here now. You and I have a destiny to fulfill. We will go to the stars together and experience things that others have only dreamt about.”

The woman slowly began to turn toward him. Time felt as if it stood still as he watched her face slowly rotate toward his plane of view. Then, suddenly, without even the slightest hint or warning, her face disappeared and was replaced with darkness.

He screamed, “No! No! I must see your face!”

But the darkness kept coming and he knew it would keep him from her, his woman. As he plummeted into the darkness, he screamed again.

“Damn it, that hurt!” Greg shouted, as the box of files he was reaching for fell from the shelf, glancing off the side of his head. He held onto the ladder with one hand as he rubbed the spot on his head with his other hand as the box continued its gravitational trip, ending with a resounding w-r-u-m-p as it hit the floor.

“Damn it!” he shouted again, but the pain was not as bad as the disappointment he was feeling at not seeing the face of the woman in his recurring dream. This time he had gotten closer than ever before to actually seeing what she looked like.

As far as the box taking a whack at his head, he knew he had no one to blame but himself. This incessant daydreaming he was experiencing was getting worse. At first, it had just happened when he was sleeping, but now it was taking over even his conscious moments. Not that he minded about the women, or really just “the woman,” in the dream. But that box weighed a good fifty pounds and, with the height and speed, it could have caused some serious damage, possibly even killed him, if it sent him hurtling off the ladder to the hard cement floor.

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Well, *what's done is done*, he figured, as he continued to rub the knot on his head for a few seconds. Finally composed, he climbed down the ladder. When he reached the bottom, he noticed the time on his watch, and was relieved that it was time to call it a day. *This is a good thing*, he thought. *Especially with the way things have been going lately*. Who would have thought that working in a Naval Reserve Records Center in New Orleans would be such hazardous duty. But it wasn't like this usually. Only recently had the bizarre near accidents been occurring. In fact, it was a strange coincidence how his clumsiness appeared to be getting worse as the dreams became more intense and frequent. This was something that required serious thought over a beer as soon as he got out of here.

He hurriedly made his way to the time clock, probably the quickest thing he had done all day. As he stood before the almighty guardian of time and money, he became fixated on the archaic time machine and the manila punch cards all arranged neatly in their little slots. He had never realized how he was just one cardboard slip of paper among the many, with nothing special about it, no individuality.

"I need a change before I become lost in the pile. I'm meant for greater things or, at least, something other than this," he said out loud, catching a few stares from other workers waiting impatiently to punch out as the last stroke of the clock indicated the exact hour. He removed his card and let the mechanical teeth bite into it. He winced at the solid thump of the machine as if it had done bodily harm to him, then quickly placed his card back amidst the myriad of others, and headed for the elevators. He punched the "down" button of the old elevator, and waited for its steely doors to open. He jiggled his car keys in his hand as he waited impatiently, still seeing the herd of uniform manila time cards in the back of his mind. "Just lost in the crowd," he muttered, as his thoughts drifted back to the dream, where he was an individual who garnered attention and who obviously had some self worth. Still, it was very strange. Why was he having these dreams, these images of going to a bar to meet a woman? Why was she so important?

The chime sounded and the doors of the elevator slowly opened. As he automatically stepped forward, he suddenly dropped his keys, and bent to pick them up. As he grabbed them, he instinctively looked

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forward and felt his heart jump in his chest. Instead of staring into what should have been the elevator floor at this angle, all he saw was the darkness of the elevator shaft.

“What the hell?” he exclaimed, as he continued to peer into the empty elevator shaft. He moved forward a step and gazed in; it was a straight shot down the dark abyss. He would have been killed if he hadn’t dropped the keys and stopped to pick them up.

People began to huddle around trying to see what was happening, the infamous disaster rubber-neckers. The corny jokes were already starting to flow.

“I guess you have to understand the *gravity* of the situation,” someone sniggered, shortly followed by another. “You could really have gotten *the shaft* there, fella.” “*Oops* is forever,” a man said, elbowing him to indicate that it was all in good humor. Greg had to admit he didn’t see anything amusing about what had almost happened.

Finally an overweight, dreary-eyed security guard slowly sauntered over to the rapidly forming crowd and, having conducted a thorough investigation by looking down the shaft and determining that there really was a problem, he sealed off the elevator shaft with yellow caution tape.

The guard turned to him and said, in a cigarette-harsh voice, “Good thing you looked in there before you walked on, cause that would have been a good seventy-five foot drop. Your butt would have been *New Orleans Gumbo* after that fall.”

Greg laughed politely with the guard, although he didn’t see the same humor in the situation. He muttered agreement with the guard’s assessment and thought it might be a good idea to maybe take the stairs down instead of waiting for another elevator. As he proceeded down the steps nervously, the earlier thought returned to him about all these “almost accidents” that he was having. This made him feel extremely conscious of possibly falling down the stairs, so he cautiously trod down each step, one at a time, slowly, just to be safe. He did not subscribe to the old expression that when it’s your time, it’s your time. His life might not be very exciting at this stage of the game, but it was still a life, and he wasn’t in any hurry to see it end.

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Nearing the door that led to the parking lot, thinking he was safely almost out of the building, he nearly tripped over a suddenly untied shoelace. He shook his head and bent down to tie it, nervously laughing and wondering if that could have caused another mishap.

Suddenly, there was a loud crashing noise. His head snapped toward the sound. The door that led to the parking lot had swung open violently, without warning. It looked like the mechanism that held it in place had broken, causing it to smash into the adjoining wall with such force that a piece of cinder block had chipped off and a severe crack appeared in the remaining block. If he had not stopped to tie his shoe, he would probably have caught the full effect of the crashing door. *Deja vu?*

“Jesus!” he cursed under his breath, as the realization hit him. “What the hell is going on around here? This place is falling apart at the seams!”

He cautiously stepped around the door, still shaken, and moved rather quickly to the safety of the outdoor parking area. Out in the sunlight, he stood and let the warmth soak into him; it seemed to help him regain some of his composure. He started to walk slowly, enjoying the late afternoon sunshine of April, knowing that the weather would soon turn into the usual unbearable heat and humidity so typical of the New Orleans area.

Finally feeling somewhat relaxed, he let his thoughts wander aimlessly, trying to find something else to focus on other than the near-mishaps. This usually worked for him because when he dove into his thoughts, he might be looking directly at someone as if he was listening to what they were saying, but his mind would be centered on some other plane out in space. He closed his eyes momentarily, as was customary in the calming process, and then opened them.

To his shock and surprise, he was back in the 1940s-era bar again, standing next to the woman at the bar. The spotlight he remembered earlier was now bathing them both in a bright white light and slowly moving. She was still looking away from him, her face hidden from his view. But the rest of her was there, in the wonderful shape and form he remembered. As he tried to think of something to say, her mysterious voice reached out to him.

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“Tell me about yourself,” she said, her voice warm and inviting. “Tell me about your life.”

Greg knew full well that he had been standing in the parking lot a few seconds ago, but he could see none of it now; only this place and this gorgeous woman. He struggled with what or which reality he was in, but as earlier, a sense of calm settled over him, and he felt so relaxed that he didn’t want to be anywhere else at the moment.

“Who are you?” he asked.

“I asked first,” she murmured, still denying him a glimpse of her face. “You go first, now, please. I want to know all about you.”

His soul melted at the warmth of her words and her voice. “Well, where shall I begin?”

“At the beginning,” she said and lightly laughed.

“I grew up in New Jersey,” he began as his eyes scanned every inch of her. “Went to school there, not that there was anything exciting about that.” He raised his hand to block the spotlight. It was beginning to interfere with his view of the woman and he felt an annoyance with whoever was changing its location.

“Friends?”

“Friends? Well, not a lot. Heck, I wonder if anyone from high school even remembers me. They didn’t even know I was there. No senior prom, no sports jock, just plain old me.” He closed his eyes tightly to block out the bright spotlight that had changed its angle again to glare into his face. He shifted position his position but the light followed him as if it was intentionally preventing him from seeing clearly.

“Don’t let the light bother you,” she said, her face still turned. “I’ll bet you had a lot of girlfriends.”

“Not exactly. I remember getting a bad start, and I think it dampened my whole outlook toward dating. I asked this cheerleader out on a date. I think I was thirteen or something like that at the time. You know, she wasn’t the best-looking girl in the school, but she still was kind of cute in her own way. She turned me down flat, in front of a bunch of kids in my algebra class. That was embarrassing.”

“Her loss,” she responded, reminding him of what his father had told him after that incident.

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“My father told me the same thing,” he said, as this thought, tied to another by the closeness of time, brought back memories of his father’s sudden death just a few months after this event. “He died not too long after that.”

“I’m sorry,” she said sincerely.

“I was devastated. My dad had always understood me. We could always talk things through, regardless of the sensitivity of the subject. When he died, I became very depressed. Mom tried hard to help, but I really missed the conversations Dad and I used to have. He always seemed to know how to make sense of things. Hell, he could probably even figure out what was happening to me now with all these almost-accidents.”

“Don’t let those concern you right now,” she said, as she sipped her drink. “They’re just distractions.”

“Distractions? You know about them? But how can you? You’re just a dream in my mind, some kind of fantasy that I’m living.”

“Me, just a dream? Oh, no, I’m as real as you. But let’s not talk about that right now. Tell me more about your father,” she said.

Greg detected a subtle firmness in her voice this time. He wanted to talk to her about what was happening, but her voice was very persuasive, so he continued about his father. “After my father died, I felt there were so many things I didn’t know about him. I asked Mom about the past, but she admitted that there were some things even she did not know about him, particularly about his past before they met. She told me that the past didn’t seem to matter when you were in love.” He smiled at that memory. “Mom passed away a couple of years after Dad, and that left me with parts of his past littered with holes that I have never been able to fill,” he said, the frustration evident in his voice.

“It’s difficult to face the future sometimes without understanding the past,” she said.

“Yes, you understand,” he agreed. “Most people don’t feel that knowing about the past is important.” He was pleasantly surprised to see she felt the same way as he did.

“Of course. Please, go on.”

“Well, through these hardships, I completely retreated into my shell, and didn’t show my face anywhere for quite a while after that. I bounced

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around to my mother's relatives for a while, but never seemed to find a home that felt...you know...just right. That was another strange thing about my father; there were no relatives of his that we knew of. They had been killed in some terrible transit accident or something."

"You sound as if you didn't believe him?"

"It's not that I didn't believe him, but it was a bit odd. Anyway, I floundered around for a few years until I realized I wanted out of New Jersey, and maybe wanted to see the world. So I enlisted in the Navy. I only did a short stretch in the military because that was about all I could stand. It was good in some respects; I did get to travel, but the constant cleaning and the folding of clothes thing got out of hand. Let's see - how did they put it? 'I lacked the self-discipline.' That was the comment on the last evaluation I received. What they really meant was that I was basically a slob. And I have to admit, I couldn't argue a bit with that assessment."

"You don't seem like that type," she said, her voice still mesmerizing him with its sound. "You are searching for a purpose. Many go through the same thing and then, one day, they find what they are seeking and dive into it with passion."

"I suppose that could be, but I obviously haven't found that purpose yet," he laughed.

"All in time," she answered. "But please, go on. I am intrigued with your story."

The spotlight increased in intensity, its glare further distorting his vision. He squinted his eyes and raised his hand to block its brightness. With the light in his eyes, he could barely make out her image.

"Please finish your story. I want to know all of it," she said.

"After I received my discharge, I ended up staying where I had been last stationed, here in New Orleans. I found work humping boxes of records. It was a job, and it kept me in food and rent. That was about all I needed for the moment."

"You want a challenge, don't you?"

"A challenge?" he asked. Suddenly a sound began, a whine that was getting louder every second. "What's that?"

"Don't worry," she said. "That is your destiny coming for you."

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“My destiny?” He asked as the sound increased to the point where it became painful to his hearing.

“Yes, destiny—the one that we shall share together.”

The sound was almost on top of him, and he couldn’t decide whether to use his hands to block the light or the sound.

“What’s happening?” he shouted frantically over the unbearable noise.

“Just be calm and relax. You are relaxed, aren’t you? That’s why I am here, to prepare you for your journey and your destiny, the one that we shall face together.”

Then, as suddenly as it had begun, the light and noise stopped, and she turned to face him. She had the most beautiful face he’d ever seen, so warm and friendly, features that were so smooth and enticing that all he wanted to do was touch and caress them. Then everything was gone and there was only silence and darkness.

“What happened?” the burly police officer asked as he sorted through the crowd of spectators that encircled the body on the ground. The paramedics were putting their equipment away. One of them looked toward the policeman and shook his head, indicating that the man was dead.

“I don’t understand it. I was backing the garbage truck out of the pickup area, and all my lights and alert sirens are working fine,” a man said, pointing to his large truck. “I never saw this poor fella but, for the life of me, I can’t understand why he never saw or heard me.”

“Witnesses? Did anyone see what happened?” the officer asked.

“Yes, sir, I did,” a young woman said.

“What did you see?”

“It was the strangest thing,” she began. “He,” she pointed toward the body, “was just standing there and he was...smiling. He had the most contented look that I have ever seen in my life. He just stood there as if oblivious to everything around him.”

“Anyone know his name?”

“His name was Greg... Greg Carlson.”

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C H A P T E R F O U R

SARAH
MCCLENDON

Sarah McClendon aligned the paper clips on her report, small side facing in and two inches from the left side of the paper. The folder which contained the report was brand new, labeled, typed and dated neatly. She flipped each page, being careful not to crimp or crease any of them. She glanced over every word for the third time in the past hour, checking to make sure she had not missed anything. No smudges, no fluctuations in ink contrast. Finally satisfied, she closed the folder and placed it off to one side of her immaculate desk.

She checked the clock, smiling to herself; the report was not due to her boss for another twenty-four hours. She was quite proud to submit her findings ahead of schedule, as usual. *Mr. Gordon will be pleased*, she thought. He commented constantly about how well she had been doing in the short time she had been working for the company. Just thinking about those comments made her feel warm inside; she lived for those types of compliments.

She decided to take the report to her boss now, instead of waiting any longer. She picked up the folder, being careful not to scrape the fingernail polish from her conservative-length nails onto any of the pages. She stepped around the desk to check her appearance in the full-length glass panel that separated her work area from the rest of the office.

She was slender and physically fit, and had long black hair that went midway down her back which she brushed religiously each night before she went to bed. She was light-skinned, but used that to her advantage with her choice of clothing to contrast with her dark hair and eyes. Her face was smooth with well-defined cheeks, her lips full but not too large, her nose slender and proportioned to her face.

As her eyes inched their way down the image in the glass, she stopped, her eyes widening because, to her dismay, she noticed unsightly

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wrinkles in her skirt. She knew immediately that she would have to correct them before leaving her work area, especially before she went in to see her boss with the report. She reached into her lower desk drawer, removed the wrinkle remover and plugged it into the nearest electrical receptacle.

While waiting for it to heat, she sat in her chair and swiveled it so she could get a view of the blue sky and clouds through the only window that was on this floor of the building. She needed to compose herself for her visit to Mr. Gordon's office. She felt a little out of sorts today because her sleep had been interrupted by a disturbing dream last night. The beginning alone had disturbed her, just because of its location. She had actually been in a nightclub of all places! Even worse, she was sitting at a, well, a bar, and alone! Sarah thought, appalled. She would never be caught dead in a bar of any kind. Still, she remembered thinking that the 1940's motif did have a certain charm to it.

Either the lack of sleep or the charming ambiance of the setting caused her to drift back to the scene in her thoughts. As she opened her eyes, she found herself sitting at the bar, just as she had been in her dream. Surprisingly, she did not feel alarm; instead, she felt an unusual calm settle upon her.

Her eyes watched as a man strutted across the room, his pant legs billowing as he moved, greeting many people. He seemed to be very popular, especially with the women, she thought almost with some sort of well, almost—jealousy? That was silly. She didn't even know him; she was sure of that much. But people certainly seemed drawn to him for some reason. Something—something about him keyed a feeling in her mind. She just couldn't put her finger on it. Maybe he had been a business acquaintance that she had met and subconsciously the image of him had imbedded itself into her mind. Yes, *that was probably it*, she thought, dismissing any possibility of an unexplained event.

For a fleeting moment, she had felt his eyes upon her and she knew that he was heading toward her. Feeling shy, she turned away from his approach and concentrated on taking tiny sips from the drink in front of her. She had wanted to give the appearance that she did not want to be disturbed.



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She nervously smoothed the folds of the black evening dress. *What will I say if he tries to converse with me?* she thought, panicked. *I could talk about work. No, that wouldn't do.* Sarah heard her mother's "I told you so" voice ringing in her ears from their numerous discussions of how she lacked social skills in dealing with men.

He put his hand on the back of her stool. She could hear him inhaling deeply as he stood directly behind her.

"Tell me about yourself," he said, his calm voice enticing.

"Me?" she asked coyly.

"Yes," he answered. "I want to know all about your fascinating self."

She blushed. "I wouldn't know where to start," she said, as she continued to look ahead and not directly at him.

"You pick a place and time," he offered.

Sarah felt a rush of thoughts enter into her mind. Oddly enough, the predominant thought was her mother's warning. "No man will marry a woman who is a perfectionist. They will say you are too 'picky' to live with. Always criticizing. Can't please anyone but yourself."

"That's not true," the man said, startling her. "Being a perfectionist is an amiable trait to possess."

"My dad would tell me the same thing," she said. "He would smile at me and say not to worry about it, to just be myself, always."

"You loved your father a lot, didn't you?"

"Yes. I loved him immensely," she said, feeling an emotional swell within her. "I was very saddened at his premature death. I wished that we could have had more time together. He understood me so well that he always seemed to have the solution, regardless of the problem."

"But you're troubled about something else, aren't you?" His voice was so soothing that Sarah just wanted to keep hearing it.

"Yes. I always wanted to know more about the past, his past."

"Tell me about your past," he asked, his voice inviting her to continue.

"Well, as you already know, I am a bit of a perfectionist. I've been this way throughout my school years from grammar school to college. I am an extremely hard worker and I graduated at the top of my class in high school."

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“You had many admirers, didn’t you?”

“Not exactly. I was ‘a wallflower,’ the one never asked to the dances. But that was okay with me. I knew I looked nice and had an amiable personality and all, but I had a different set of priorities that drove my life. A relationship wasn’t near the top of the list, at least not for a while anyway. When I was in college, I threw myself into my work and ignored everything else around me. Because of these efforts, I graduated with academic honors and a degree in Business Administration, with an emphasis in marketing,” she said proudly.

“But you wanted to be more social, didn’t you?”

“Yes, but I knew there would be time later.”

“But you weren’t sure, were you?”

“No. But no one can be sure of the future. I just knew or felt that there would be a later,” she said, and paused, wondering if she should look toward him.

“Please go on.”

“I had glowing recommendations from my teachers, and I landed a good job in New York, working for an up-and-coming marketing and consulting firm. I was determined to work my way up to the top, no matter how long it took, or how much work I had to do.”

“Who were you trying to prove it to? Yourself or your father?”

“I don’t know, maybe both. All I knew was that I had to keep going and, being a perfectionist, I always tried to be prepared for every possible situation.”

“But something happened this morning you weren’t prepared for, didn’t it?”

“Yes, but how did you know—”

“Tell me,” he said softly before she could finish her question.

“Well, after parking my car across the street in the company’s lot, just as I do every morning, and crossing the street in my normal place, a big delivery truck came barreling down the road straight towards me. My first instinct was to leap in the opposite direction, but I slipped and fell. The strange thing was that if I had leapt in the direction I intended, the truck would have run me over for sure. It was as if the truck had anticipated my thought of jumping and swerved in that direction. But slipping and falling the other way actually saved my life.”

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“Sometimes the planned or anticipated reaction is not the best,” he interjected. “We become creatures of habit, and that could lead to our downfall.” He paused before continuing. “I’m sorry; I didn’t mean to digress. Please, continue.”

“I placed a call to the police to report the incident. But, since I hadn’t gotten a license plate number, and the description fit a lot of trucks in New York City, chances of finding the driver were pretty slim, according to the police officer. He tried to explain that the driver probably just woke up and didn’t see me. It was just one of those freak accidents, you know, nothing ‘intentional.’”

“Do you feel better now that you have talked about these things?”

“Yes. Yes, I do. That’s what you intended, isn’t it?”

“Yes. I wanted you to be relaxed, to feel at ease with yourself before we go on.”

“Go on? But isn’t this just a...dream?” she asked.

“A dream? No, it isn’t a dream. This is your beginning. Our beginning.”

Sarah didn’t understand what was happening but, strangely enough, she really didn’t care either. She hadn’t felt this calm in a very long time, especially with a man.

Suddenly, the dream appeared to pause for a moment, and she was halfway back in her office, but not totally out of the dream. She could hear his calm voice soothing her from the scene in the Forties bar and, at the same time, she was in her office preparing to remove the wrinkles from her clothing with the wrinkle remover.

Due to the distraction of her thoughts by the man in her dream, she didn’t see that the device was smoking, not from the steam, but from an electrical overload. As she picked it up, the man in her dream said, “*Look at me. I want to see your face.*” She turned and looked into his kind face and became lost in his dark eyes.

Her whole body suddenly surged with an electricity of anticipation unlike anything she’d experienced before. Then everything winked out in her mind and she plummeted into darkness.

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The police officer examined the electrical device that was now charred almost past recognition.

“Never seen anything like it,” he said to the medical examiner, who was covering the woman’s body with a blanket.

“Yeah, it is a bit bizarre,” the examiner said. “You would think the body would be charred as well. But it’s not. Not a burn on it.”

“Did anyone see it?”

“Yeah, a co-worker in the outer office was coming in as the power kicked in,” the medical examiner said as he reviewed his notes.

“Open-and-shut case then?”

“Well, that’s the strange part. I can’t find any sign that the device malfunctioned. Everything checks out. It’s as if the electricity just leaped into her through the device.”

“A fluke?”

“I guess that’s what I’m calling it. The other thing was that the co-worker said she saw the woman’s face just as it happened and that she had the strangest look of calm on her face when she was dancing with the juice.”

“Wow, this is a strange one. And such a shame,” the officer said.

“How old was she?”

“Mid-twenties.”

“What was her name?”

“Sarah. Sarah McClendon.”

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CHAPTER FIVE

THE PICKUP

Leumas was orbiting the planet Earth as he casually observed the visual displays aboard his personal Council ship, the *Blessed*. This small, but powerful ship was easily hidden from any radar system that the planet could muster so he was free to navigate at his leisure without fear of being detected.

He spoke into the ship's recorder, "Our mission is to pick up the bodies of a..." Leumas fumbled for his report printout. "Uh...a Greg Carlson and Sarah McClendon."

There's a mouthful, he thought. He preferred the galactic method of one single name for most transactions, with full names and titles for official documentation purposes only.

He continued his report. "Indoctrination process phase one completed as per information provided to me by the Council, even though the report was very sketchy in details," he said in an overly sarcastic tone. "Both humans have become acquainted with one another. I am proceeding with pickup for return to indoctrination lab. Prognosis for success is..." He stopped in mid-sentence as he realized he could not comment about what he did not know because of the lack of information about this species. "Never mind! The heck with it—recorder off!" He shouted as he threw the report over his shoulder.

"There is something to all of this, I know it. What is it that Copolla is trying to do?" he asked, as if reasoning it aloud would bring him the answer while he sat and stewed. Minutes passed. Still nothing came, and he knew that now he would have to forget Copolla and the subversive tactics he was using. Whatever was going on, these two humans were innocent of any wrongdoing. It was his job to complete the initial contact and help with their transition to whatever may await them. He sat back in his seat and thought of tranquil things until he felt relaxed enough to continue.

The first step of the indoctrination process had been completed. The deaths of both subjects had been duly noted and recorded within the

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Earth system. Now he would retrieve them from their holding facilities and begin the re-growth and rejuvenation process that would restore their bodies and minds to the time before their deaths.

Okay. First stop, New York. After all, ladies first, Leumas thought with dry humor, glad that he could find something amusing amidst his gloom. His ship, tied to his thoughts by a mental link, registered his request to begin their descent to the New York City Hospital where Sarah McClendon's body had been taken. The agents who had orchestrated the dreams and accidents that Greg and Sarah had experienced had forwarded all the pertinent information regarding the location of their bodies, along with a very basic description of Earth society.

During the transit from Zire to Earth, Leumas confirmed the data via Earth technology called the media. It was easy to tap into their system and find out anything anyone wanted to know. Shaking his head, he thought this planet would be a cinch for any other alien race to take over, but as long as it was under the watchful eye of the Council, its inhabitants were safe. *Or were they...*

The *Blessed* notified him that the desired destination had been reached at the appropriate time. It was early morning, Earth time, when activity seemed to be at its lowest point. The computer relayed information about the hospital's functions and the appropriate attire required for him to infiltrate the facility without being noticed. The white lab jacket and green hospital garments materialized in the synthesizer.

Leumas wrinkled his nose at the clothing. "Green is just not my color, but I guess it will have to do." Once he had the clothing on, he checked his identification badge, which stated in bold red letters that he was a "Donor Collection Official." He quickly printed out the complete pile of paperwork that was needed to pick up a body, according to the intelligence files he had been given. As the mound of paper collected in the bin, his eyes widened. *Geez, all this paper! No wonder they're so far behind,* he thought sarcastically as he collected the pile of paper and prepared to depart the ship.

The *Blessed* had landed in a grassy area next to a tall white building. The ship had the ability to blend into the environment background, effectively hiding it from any human's sight. Leumas exited the ship

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and entered the hospital, maintaining his mental computer link to the ship that fed him the data needed to locate the subject, and just in case he should need assistance.

He approached the sterile counter of the hospital that had a big sign that read, "Information," and placed his paperwork in front of a woman who sat behind the desk. She didn't look up, concentrating on her own mound of paper on her desk. He quickly glanced at the nametag that hung on her white uniform.

"Good evening, er... Nurse Rachel Johnson," he said and smiled. "I am here to pick up an organ donor, a Miss Sarah McClendon. I was notified that she is under maintained life support awaiting pickup."

The nurse glanced through the paperwork, and then looked up at Leumas over the top of her glasses. Leumas shuddered when he saw her stern features, the tightly drawn lips, the small beady eyes and the hair that seemed to want to explode from within the confines of the little white hat she wore. He remembered a creature from Sentaur Seven that looked similar to this woman, but what really caused him alarm was what he remembered what they were abhorred for: eating their mates.

"Well, this looks all in order, but I still have to call and get clearance from the legal department to release the body, as you probably know. Right...honey?" she said as she stood and looked at Leumas from head to toe. A smile arose from her thin lips and stretched her skin tautly. Leumas thought her face might crack if she didn't put it back the way it was.

"Legal Department. Well...certainly." Leumas said. He watched as she picked up the telephone, and her eyes looked at the large circular timepiece hanging on the wall.

"Wow, I forgot it was so early, or late depending on how you look at it. I'm new on the graveyard shift," she chuckled.

"Graveyard shift?" Leumas asked.

"Yea you know, midnight?" Nurse Johnson said as she winked at him.

"Of course," Leumas said although he didn't know what this woman was talking about or what the gesture she had just performed with her eye was. He thought perhaps if he returned the gesture, things might

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move a little smoother. He emulated the wink she had given him. The woman smiled again and her eyes fluttered quickly. Leumas suddenly realized he might have just made a serious mistake.

“I’ll have to call the supervisor at home,” she continued. “This may take a while. You’re not in any rush, are you hon? I have to ensure that all the t’s are crossed and all the i’s are dotted, you know. Have to do it just the way it’s supposed to be done. That’s the way I feel about everything, you know. Take the time and do it right.” She slid her tongue across her teeth and then smiled again.

Leumas felt a chill cross his spine as he realized that there might have been a flaw in his procedure. He quickly understood that he was going to have to...how did these Earth people put it? *Oh yes, improvise, and fast.*

“Please, Nurse Johnson,” he began in what he hoped was a charming Earth voice, “I am in well, uh, a hurry, and these organs are needed by, you know, a lot of people. I have a 12-year-old girl who, if she doesn’t get a kidney in a matter of hours, might not make it.”

“I didn’t know. Why didn’t you say so earlier?”

He placed his hands over hers for emphasis, and pleaded, “I couldn’t live with myself knowing that she may have died because of some last minute legal mumbo-jumbo.”

“Neither could I,” she said. “But rules are—”

“How about while you get that permission, I go ahead and load the donor up for the trip,” he said as he tried to make his eyes reflect a human look. What was it called? That’s right, puppy dog eyes. The nurse couldn’t resist as he poured it on.

“Sure hon, go ahead,” she said, smiling. She called two orderlies to bring the nice man the body to help speed up the process. While he waited, Leumas had the *Blessed’s* computer scramble the hospital’s phone system to ensure there would be no calls to the legal department or to anyone’s home, for that matter. Nurse Johnson received a constant busy signal.

“Well, that’s really strange,” she said with a perplexed look, as she returned the telephone to its cradle for the fifth time. “Must be something wrong with the phone system. Well, I tried,” she shrugged, signing off on the document. “Here you go,” she said, smiling as she

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handed the paperwork back to him. “Oh and here’s a little something for you,” she said as she handed him a small card.

Leumas examined the card. There were a series of numbers written on it and the name, Rachel. He looked back at the woman and was about to ask for clarification about the numbers, but when he saw the hungry look in her eyes, he just smiled at her and kept his mouth shut.

Thankfully, Sarah’s body arrived on a gurney escorted by the two orderlies at that moment. Several small pieces of equipment linked to tubes and wires kept her bodily functions working. Leumas, not wanting to leave anything else to chance, took control.

“I would like to thank you and your most efficient staff for your help in expediting this transfer. I have to go. Every second is vital, you know,” he said, pushing the body toward the exit doors.

The two orderlies looked at Nurse Johnson questioningly, as if waiting for her to say something. It was not normal procedure to let a body go without an escort by a hospital staff member. Sensing the momentary confusion, Leumas continued on diplomatically, “I will be sure to contact your supervisors at the first opportunity, and tell them that all of the people here this morning were extra cooperative, caring, and probably saved a little six...ten...” he blinked, and fumbled through his brain.

Nurse Johnson perked up at this confused statement, and looked at him with a question on her lips. Leumas, sensing her intense interest, quickly corrected his statement.

“I mean, of course, the twelve-year-old girl’s life! There are just so many in need,” he said confidently. “Thanks again, and have a good day.”

“Call me,” the nurse called as the door closed.

Finally outside with his subject, he wiped his brow, and let out the breath he had been holding. Fortunately, at this early hour of the Earth morning, there were virtually no people around to interfere with him once he was outside. He slipped easily back into his ship and quickly placed Sarah under life stasis.

“As fresh as a daisy on the Exalta moon,” he said, satisfied after checking all the monitors he had hooked Sarah up to. He informed the *Blessed* to proceed to the next and last destination of his voyage

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on Earth, to a city further south called New Orleans. The computer acknowledged and estimated his destination would be reached in approximately fifteen standard Earth minutes.

Leumas took the opportunity to review the current political, economical and religious climate on Earth by scanning the media reports. Nothing of any significance caught his attention immediately, but, as he continued to scan the report, one item caught his eye. For some reason he felt he should keep in his mind for future consideration.

The country within the Earth's North American continent, the United States, had a major political election coming up. The commentator spoke on how people were looking for change; he called it an opportune time to set the course for revitalization and out-of-the-box thinking. Leumas liked that expression; he would have to remember that in the future. He thought it was a good way to describe his attitude, out-of-the-box.

That is why you were given this assignment, an arrogant voice inside of him asserted.

Yes, you're probably right, he agreed with himself cockily as he tucked away the information for future reference. It might be useful in this game of Copolla's he had been thrown into. His thoughts were interrupted by the *Blessed*.

Destination achieved. The Earth city known as New Orleans.

Leumas followed pretty much the same procedures as he had in New York, including using the same clothing and appropriate paperwork. This time he even made sure he had legal verification, which was produced and ready as Leumas left the *Blessed*.

He noticed on arrival that finding a spot to park his ship in the near vicinity of the hospital was much more difficult. There seemed to be numerous monstrous things all over the place. He did some quick research that stated the things were called "floats" and were part of some Earth ritual or holiday or something. There were also many more people about at the early hour. He ended up leaving his camouflaged ship suspended in the air around the corner from the New Orleans Mercy Hospital's entrance. Clutching the paperwork, he entered the hospital, found the information counter, and presented his information to the duty nurse.

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This nurse was certainly not like the one in New York. She was young and...

His attention was immediately drawn to the string of large—very large—beads around her neck. The beads immediately sent Leumas's mind to thoughts of a ritual performed on Alco Seven, one of the planets he had made initial contact with. The large beads were worn by females who were, well, what could be called more promiscuous than most. The size of the beads on Alco Seven was indicative of their activity level.

He was gazing almost dreamily at the over-sized beads with an ingrained smile on his face when the woman spoke.

"Can I help you, sir?" she asked distractedly, her hands unconsciously working the beads through her fingers.

"Ah, yes you can," he began slowly, still unable to take his eyes from the beads making their way through the opening and closing of her fingers.

"I'm from the, uh... Donor Collection Institute," he began, trying to clear his throat. "We were called that a donor was being held here for pickup, a Mister Greg Carlson," Leumas said as he handed the paperwork to the woman, trying not to stare at the huge moving beads hanging provocatively around the nurse's neck.

The nurse glanced up after reading the paperwork. "Yes sir, it all looks perfectly in order. You can have the body first thing tomorrow morning." She smiled, one hand going back to the beads.

"Fine, that..." Leumas suddenly stopped as he realized what she had said. "Tomorrow morning? That's impossible. I have to have the body immediately," he said with urgency, his mind racing. What was it he had told them in New York, a 16-year-old?

"Sorry, I can't do it today. You will have to come back," the woman said, unconcerned, looking back at the magazine she had been reading.

Leumas looked at the woman, "Why can't I have his body now? You yourself said that all the paperwork is fine," he said in a pleading voice.

"Yes, the paperwork is fine but, you know, this is Mardi Gras, which you should have realized before coming. Everyone in New Orleans

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is involved, including half of our staff and, like I said, there can be no releases until tomorrow morning. Those are my orders. I'm sorry. Besides, the body isn't going anywhere, you know. He's dead and on total organ support," she said as she grinned, obviously amused with herself.

Leumas's impatience began to grow with this unconcerned nurse, beads or no beads. But he knew he would have to be careful. So he started to tell the New York story again, and even used the puppy dog eyes thing, but the woman wouldn't budge. He was on a tight schedule, and he saw no other choice, even though it was expressly forbidden in the Council's charter.

He drew himself inward and concentrated on his thoughts, drawing on energy that surrounded him and molding it to one single thought. He silently mouthed out each syllable of the images inside of his head until a pattern was complete, and then gently pushed it into the woman's brain, massaging it into her synaptic pathways, gently, very gently. *::I understand the urgency of this man's situation and, under my own authority, I will release the body of Greg Carlson to him. I understand that it may be a matter of life and death.::*

The nurse appeared suddenly taken back as the influence sank in. She had a glassy-eyed and slightly dazed look as she spoke. "Yes, of course... I will have the body brought immediately. What was I thinking? I feel so ashamed. This is a life-or-death matter." She immediately called two orderlies and made all the proper arrangements, shaking her head dazedly.

"Don't be so hard on yourself," Leumas said, smiling sympathetically. "We all have our jobs to do, and we wouldn't want anyone to get in trouble but, in cases such as this, we have to use our own judgment."

The nurse smiled foggily at him. "Thank you for being so understanding."

Within a few moments, Greg's cold, white, waxen body was rolled out into the corridor on a gurney similar to Sarah's, with the entire organ-supporting equipment still attached. Leumas stepped forward to accept custody of the body and to make his quick departure.

"Well you all have a nice 'Marty Gra' time and stuff," he said, throwing up his hand in farewell. "I'll take my friend here and buckle

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him in for the ride.” He hustled Greg’s body toward the door and stopped. He looked back at the nurse with the large beads, pointing. “You know, I really love the beads,” he said, sighing, as he went out through the doors, pushing the gurney.

At first, the nurse smiled at him as if seeing an old friend from a memorable past, but once he had departed, her look changed to one of confusion and disorientation. She turned to one of the orderlies who had brought up the body.

“Weird one, there,” she said, thumbing toward the exit. She rubbed her temples and said to the other orderly, “How about you do me a favor and swing by the pharmacy and pick me up some aspirin. I’ve got a wicked headache.”

Leumas placed Greg next to Sarah in the stasis chamber on board the *Blessed*. He stared curiously at them both. Normally, the life forms chosen as subjects were unique in some way, either very intelligent, compassionate, natural leaders, or something. But he didn’t sense any of these things as he looked into both of their faces. The female subject did seem to have some pretty qualities. *She’d probably look better if she wasn’t so pale though*, he thought.

As he returned to the control center of his ship, Leumas wondered why they had been chosen. He felt it was a key part of the puzzle. Surprisingly enough, a little voice from earlier returned and sounded in his mind, *Ask Copolla*. Leumas chuckled at the simplicity of the answer. The more he thought about it the more humorous it became, and now he was almost in hysterics.

“Yes, that sure would be the direct approach,” he said as his laughter subsided. “If things were only that simple.” He checked his hair in the ship’s small mirror, and retrieved his Zirean clothes from the synthesizer. He then directed the onboard computer to begin the journey back to Zire.

Upon his arrival, Leumas placed Sarah and Greg into two separate rooms at the indoctrination facility. He would start conditioning them alone at first after the rejuvenation process before he allowed them to be together again. His assistants were now in the process of applying minimal feed to each brain. This early stage began by laying the groundwork in their minds, making the existence of other races

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and the UCDW plausible, just enough to get them thinking about it so that they would come to gradually accept the fact. After that, Leumas would bring them further along until they reached the point where they believed what they were being told, and their understanding level reached a point to make rational decisions. Or at least the decisions that the Council or Copolla more likely wanted to hear.



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C H A P T E R S I X
C O P O L L A ' S W A Y

Copolla was seated in his plush chair that complimented his huge desk and overly ornate decorated chambers. He exhaled deeply and closed his eyes. Council meetings had a way of draining him of his energy.

“All talk, that’s all they ever want to do,” he said disgustedly as he rubbed his eyes with his fingers. “It takes forever to get things done going through these fools. They remind me of a bunch of Sevithian squawking hens.”

His mind drifted off into thoughts about the plan he had set into motion to discredit Leumas, who could pose a threat to his leadership as older members were replaced with younger ones. Copolla was not going to lose his position to anyone, especially not to Leumas. He couldn’t stand the vain and arrogant bastard. To this end, he had orchestrated Leumas’s new assignment, which involved, ironically, the planet Earth. The last time Copolla and the Council had dealings with this planet, the results had been disastrous, and no one knew this as well as he did. Earth was still far from ready to join the Council, but that was what made the plan perfect for what he had in mind.

Leumas had been shooting off his mouth for months now about reforming procedures regarding initial contact. He had many ideas about how things needed to be changed. All were centered on his concept of making the Council better and more efficient. Several members had even voiced their agreement with Leumas, and considered his ideas innovative and creative, a breath of fresh air. Copolla knew that these kinds of feelings amongst members could be the beginning of a movement to boost Leumas higher in his position within the Council, and Copolla did not want Leumas any higher than he already was. In fact, he thought it was time for Leumas to suffer a minor career setback.

Clip his wings and bring him back down a couple of notches, Copolla thought menacingly.

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The beauty of the plan was that it would also take care of some loose ends that had been thorns in his side for years. That was where Leumas came in. Copolla had not worked this hard, and clawed his way to where he was, to be hindered by a speck of dust like Leumas. He had seen this before, when he was much younger, and had vowed to never fall prey to it himself.

Copolla had been born on the planet Sevith and, from birth, everything had been a constant struggle. Born to a middle-level family unit, he quickly saw the differences between those that had and those that had not. He also knew he would someday be one of those that had, no matter what it took.

He discovered early on that power was the key to everything. Everything. He learned the advantages of having an edge over someone physically or mentally. This realization had started during his young education, and he had nurtured it throughout his career. His philosophy was simple. Never take an assignment that was too risky, never come between two different political views, and always—always—know everything he could about life forms he dealt with, either publicly or privately. He had also found that, in most cases, the more private the information, the better.

Copolla rose quickly to the position of delegate's aide on the Council. He moved through the ranks quickly by keeping his eyes and ears open to what was going on in the Council, as well as outside of it. He stuck to his philosophy and made it his business to know everything about anyone he dealt with. All, interestingly enough, usually had some type of skeleton in their closet, if they didn't, he would masterfully put one there for them. He had used this method throughout his career, and still continued it. That was how he had become the Leader of the Council. Now that he had the power to control and manipulate through fear and intimidation, he planned to keep it.

He swiveled his chair to face the window, and reclined into a position where he could look out into the night sky as the Zirean atmosphere glowed in its strange colors. The stars couldn't be seen through the mixture of gases that remained in the poisoned atmosphere. He missed the stars and the travel to other worlds, he thought in a rare burst of nostalgia.

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But that's going to change, he said to himself as he slammed his fist down on the desk. *I have some plans for this Council and for this galaxy. It's time for me to become innovative and creative.* He then laughed evilly at his own humor.

He returned his concentration to the matter at hand, his plan to take down Leumas and tie up some loose ends at the same time. These loose ends could hurt his position as Leader if anyone ever found out about them. But no one was going to find out because he would take care of all of them at once.

"Damn historians," he snorted derisively. "They have to record every little thing. I'm surprised they missed my nosebleed back in ninety-four."

When Copolla had discovered that records existed of his supposed secretive dealings in the previous contact with the planet Earth, he had had the majority of the incriminating documentation removed. He ensured that he left just enough data to carry out his plan, or enough to be perfect bait for someone, more specifically someone like Leumas.

"Happy fishing, Leumas," he chuckled. He felt quite proud of himself in the way he had maneuvered the Council into the selection of the two subjects from Earth.

It had almost been too simple, he thought, smirking. *Plant a member here, a member there, promise them a little something they want or something they don't want to get out. How gullible some of these Council members were*, he thought cynically.

Earth's computer records were so primitive that the normal Council criteria could not be used in selecting the two new subjects. Of course, he had known this; so he formed a committee to presumably search archival records in order to locate two subjects who did meet the criteria.

The subjects had to represent a viable cross section of Earth's sociological and cultural beliefs and had to have the potential to adjust to the assignment as directed by the Council. He had handpicked the committee, so when he suggested two individuals, the selection was already made. It had required some minor substantiating and adjusting of files before presenting the information to the Council. He had

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expended quite a few resources and used up plenty of favors in locating the two Earth subjects he wanted.

He rose from his chair and walked around the desk to his liquor cabinet. He poured himself a stiff drink of Antarian whiskey, and watched the yellow liquid steaming briefly as it left the protective safety of the insulated bottle. He raised the glass in a toast to himself and then downed the drink in one quick gulp, closing his eyes in pleasure as the liquid warmed his massive body. He placed the glass down on a table and moved to the center of the room.

He spoke aloud to no one, an evil smile playing about his lips. "Once my plan comes to fruition, all the loose ends will be tied up, and I can move on to the next phase. I, and I alone, will redefine the UCDW's role in the cosmic scheme of things." Nodding his head in agreement with himself, he continued, "And yes, Leumas, I have some initiatives that I also want to pursue. But, unlike you, I have the power to do something. And that, my good friend, is the key to success."

Copolla checked the time; he was waiting for the arrival of one of his agents. His agents were essentially personnel not found on anyone's payroll or employment records who completed certain tasks for him when necessary. They could move unnoticed within certain circles, ones not commonly frequented by those of prominent stature. They were paid extremely well, but only if they conformed to the rule of employment: the insertion of a tiny loyalty device into the cerebral area. It was an item designed and perfected by Copolla. If the agent performed his job as directed and remained emphatically loyal, all was well. If not, their services were no longer required, and he would then press a certain key on his computer, and poof, no more loyalty problem.

He walked around his immense, ornate office humming a disjointed tune, contemplating his next move. He chuckled ironically when he realized the song was from a Zirean funeral procession. His plan to rid himself of Leumas was still in its early stages, but he wanted to make sure things were going as scheduled. Copolla had sent for the agent he'd directed to oversee this little operation, and he was now impatiently anticipating his arrival, wanting the progress report.

Besides his personal reason for his selection of these particular Earth subjects, Copolla knew that they would be very difficult to indoctrinate.



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Their temperament and dispositions alone would slow down Leumas' progress. Also, he had some other little stumbling blocks of his own that were going to creep up in the process, compliments of another one of his agents. He would then use these presumed faults in Leumas' abilities to indoctrinate the subjects to prove Leumas' ineptness. This would show the members of the Council that their dear Leumas possessed shortcomings that would not be worthy of a higher position.

"You have a visitor," his computer notified him in a cold metallic tone. "Identity, visiting emissary from Celtic 3."

He chuckled at the term emissary as he released the lock mechanism on the door. Agent Journo entered his chambers cloaked in a dark robe that was certainly befitting of an emissary paying a courtesy call to the Leader of the United Council for Developing Worlds. It always amazed him how Journo came up with these false identifications that could fool even his most advanced computer.

Well, that's what I'm paying him for, he thought as he observed Journo's approach.

His large humanoid frame was not as impressive as Copolla's but it still advised caution, being six feet in height and two hundred pounds. Journo removed the cloak that hid his head from view, revealing the bleached white skin of his face, his veins clearly visible as they crisscrossed over his skin. His eyes were completely black, and no pupils could be seen within them.

Copolla liked Journo because he behaved more like a robot than a living being. Tell it what to do and it was done, and that was exactly how he wanted it. Copolla moved to his enormous chair, and sat leaning back, staring at Journo.

"Report, Journo," he said curtly.

"I have an inquiry," Journo stated in a monotone voice.

Copolla, who was in no mood for questions, spoke vehemently. "The report Journo! Do not waste my time! I'll ask the questions around here."

Journo's face showed no outward sign of fear at the outburst. Instead, he proceeded in the same unemotional voice he always used.

"Leumas has succeeded in retrieving the two subjects from Earth. I laid some minor obstacles to increase his difficulty, but he was able

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to maneuver around them. I took no further actions as I did not want to give myself away, or make it obvious that someone was trying to hinder his progress.”

“As were your orders,” Copolla said. “You were to do just enough to get him thinking, just enough to make him a little paranoid about all of this. I want to keep him on the edge,” he said with a menacing smile, as he envisioned Leumas stumbling over himself around Earth.

Journo continued his report. “His ship left Earth’s orbit about two standard hours ago. He has the bodies of the two humans stored in cold stasis.”

“So you made him squirm. That’s good. Very good. Is there anything else?”

“You might be interested in knowing that Leumas used influence on an Earthling, a woman. From what I understand, it was a nurse in the hospital who was not going to release one of the bodies as quickly as he would have liked.”

Copolla began to smile as if someone had just given him a gift. Tapping his chin thoughtfully, he said, “Yes, that is very good news, Journo. Using influence without prior approval from the Council, tsk—tsk—tsk. Oh yes, that little fact may surface again. But not just yet. We’ll save that for later.”

He went on, speaking more to himself than to Journo. “His next move should be to begin the indoctrination process of the two subjects. I would like to know how he will proceed, especially on such primitive aliens. He certainly will have his hands full, won’t he?”

Not waiting for any answer, Copolla said, “Earlier you asked something? What was your question?”

“Nothing of any noteworthy importance for a life form with stature such as you,” Journo said, with an unusual hint of sarcasm.

Copolla reddened a bit and almost challenged the tone of the comment, but he had other things to concern him at the moment. He did, however, make a mental note of the impertinence. He waved his hand, dismissing Journo. Journo, understanding that he was done, turned on his heels, replaced the black hood over his face, and left the chambers.

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Copolla turned toward his computer and began furiously to enter data. He was smiling smugly as the screen's illumination added eerie shadows about his face.

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C H A P T E R S E V E N

**NEXT STOP:
THE PLANET
ZIRE**



Greg opened his eyes with the strangest feeling. *What the hell is a U-C-D-W?* He thought as he remembered a strange voice he heard in the dream. He licked his lips and rolled his tongue across his teeth, noting that his mouth had a really bad taste in it, more than just the usual morning breath. It had a metallic type taste.

UCDW, never heard of that one before, he thought as he blinked the sleep out of his eyes.

As his eyes focused on his surroundings, he realized he was not in the bedroom of his apartment, the one with the massive laundry pile in the corner. This room was plain and white and possessed a cold and sterile feeling to it. He felt a lump of fear settle in the pit of his stomach.

“What the hell is going on?” he said, in a loud voice meant to attract someone’s attention. “What did I do last night?”

He struggled to recall the events that might have led to his waking up in this strange place. He didn’t think it was one of those too many beers from the night before mystery, but right now he wasn’t sure of anything as the adrenaline sped up his heart rate. Suddenly his mind conjured up the image of the large refuse truck in the parking lot at work.

“The truck!” he screamed, his voice echoing in the sterile room that was completely empty except for the bed he occupied. He took a survey of his body, moving his eyes up and down the various body parts, looking for any signs of missing or mangled limbs. But he saw none, no bloody bandages or steely stitches oozing all over his body. His body was fine, and it was enclosed within some sort of blue jumpsuit made of a material that reminded him of silk, or something close to it.

“I must be in the hospital,” he said, trying to convince himself. “It all looks so clean and sanitary. That must be it. Nurse? Nurse?” he

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questioned the little room, hoping someone would hear, but there was only silence.

He tried to sit up and, in sudden panic, realized that he could not. He tried to force himself up, but he couldn't budge. There was no sign of any straps or rope of any sort. It was as if hundreds of tiny invisible fingers held him from the neck down. "What the hell is going on? What kind of place is this? Hey!" he continued, the bile rising in his throat, a mixture of both fear and anger. "Is there anyone here? Hey!"

Silence.

He craned his head as far as he could, looking for something, anything that was holding him to the bed. Still, he saw nothing, but he could still feel those non-existent hands holding him, keeping him immobile. The more he tried to get up, the more pressure was exerted to keep him in place. He resigned himself to the fact that he wasn't going anywhere, at least for the moment, anyway. As he ceased his struggles, the pressure became minimal, but was still evident.

He forced his mind and body to return to some kind of calmness. His heart had been beating so quickly with panic that he could still feel his heartbeat throbbing in his head.

"Okay," he began, trying to rationalize. "I need to reason out what is going on here. I need to talk to someone. Someone has to be here. Someone put me in this place to begin with."

Once again, he craned his neck as far as he could and shouted, "Is there anyone here? Hello? I'm in here! Can anyone hear me?" His voice seemed to die in the room. There were no sounds and no one was coming. He laid his head back in despair as the silence engulfed him. Then, suddenly, he heard it, a small sound. His head snapped back up.

"I knew it. There is someone here. Hello?" His voice lifted in hope.

He looked around the room for the source of the noise and didn't see anything. He did it again, this time more slowly, and noticed that a panel in the wall was opening up. He turned his head as far as he could and looked closely. There weren't any seams in the wall or any natural opening, but regardless of this fact, it was opening up just the same. A strange apparatus began coming out of the opening. Coming

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out might not be the best way to describe it; rather, it was unfolding itself from the wall. He stared at the opening intently as the device revealed itself to his widening eyes.

“What the hell is that?” he asked the empty room.

The device firmly planted its wheels on the ground. Then, what appeared to be the top portion came through the opening and attached itself to the rolling base. This piece-by-piece assembly sort of reminded him of an erector set his dad had bought him for Christmas one year. They’d spent many hours building things, or just putting odd pieces together just to see what they would make when they were done.

Greg’s mind came back to the present, but, during those few seconds of memories, the unfolding thing began to take form. *It’s a robot, he suddenly knew, a robot with some kind of helmet on its head!* At first, he was pleased with himself for solving the mystery, but his pleasure soon turned into panic again as his eyes focused on what it carried.

He stared and whispered, “Needles! It has needles attached to its metallic fingers!”

As if the word needle had been a cue, the robot’s fingers squirted liquid from the end of one of the syringes. As the robot made its slow yet deliberate way toward him, a new sound came to his ears, a loud click followed by the sound of air pressure being released.

The robot’s awkward helmet detached itself from the main body and began to slowly make its way toward the bed. The helmet reminded Greg of one of those virtual reality headgear sets he’d seen at the more expensive arcades or electronic shows. It moved through the air without any apparent mechanism of propulsion that he could see. Then he noticed there was not one, but two sets. They separated, one coming toward him and the other disappearing in the opposite direction right through the wall where he saw no opening.

“What the hell is this place? This can’t be real!” he said aloud, pasting a not-so-convincing smile on his face.

“Okay, very funny. It’s a good joke, but enough is enough already,” he said, chuckling nervously. But instead of the joke ending as he’d hoped, the nightmare continued.

The object continued its unwavering trip and the closer it came, the more he had a sinking feeling that he was not going to have any

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choice of whether or not he wanted to wear this thing. Then again, he thought, he was able to move his head; perhaps he could confuse it or something. But the momentary hope waned as he knew he could only move his head for so long. He wondered where the other headset had gone. Could there be someone else here? Were they going to go through the same thing?

The device now hovered precariously over his head. He craned his neck backward as he tried to discern the features of the object more closely.

“Ouch!” he yelled, as he felt a mild pin prick in the back of his arm. The robot backed away as if it feared some form of retaliation, even though the extent of Greg’s capacity for movement was raising his head.

“You little son of a...” he winced as a burning sensation from the injection erupted. “Great. At least with real nurses you have a warning about this kind of thing, and they have better legs.” Almost immediately, he felt his eyelids become heavy. Whatever was in that needle worked quickly.

“Must have...been...some...kind...of...drug,” he slowly gasped as his eyes tried to close while he fought to remain conscious. The device landed softly on his head, making a snug custom fit. He felt a curious feeling on his head followed by a sudden warmth, and then he fell fast asleep.

Greg never felt the small incisions that allowed the sensory input device to stimulate his brain directly. As the device began to stimulate parts of his brain, a chain reaction occurred in a region of the human cerebrum that was not part of the planned stimulus. This section of the brain was not used by most humans and was little understood by modern medicine. It was as if a door had been opened, a door into a new frontier waiting to be explored.

He could smell perfume and recognized it immediately, which caused a small smile to appear on his sleeping face, as he saw *the woman* again.

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In another chamber, Sarah's eyes fluttered as they opened to the brightness of the white room.

"The UCDW? What is that? I don't remember doing any work for them. Uhm...no, can't say that I...wait a minute! Where am I?" She glanced around the sterile room.

All at once, her brain showed her images of the wrinkle remover and then the sudden jolt that had raced through her entire body. She remembered her body jerking about, almost like she was dancing a weird dance, as the current forced its way through her. Her brain began to analyze the situation.

"First, I have to figure out where I am now," she said.

She lifted her head up from the pillow and carefully surveyed the plain room, trying to find something that would give her a clue as to her whereabouts. All she saw were plain white walls.

"Hospital, I must be in a hospital," her analytical brain informed her, and then she said, "Thank God, I'm alive, at least. I didn't die."

As the initial realization passed, she saw that she was wearing something that didn't belong to her. *It must be a hospital garment of some sort, but, if so, they sure had changed from those exposing gowns with the simple ties at the back.*

She was wearing a one-piece blue jump suit but didn't recognize the type of fabric, silk maybe, but the thought vanished quickly when she attempted to touch the material. Sudden panic rose in her throat when she realized she couldn't move. It was as if invisible fingers were holding her body hostage.

"Why am I restrained?" she said. Then louder, "Excuse me, I want to speak to someone. Doctor? Nurse? Can someone please help me?"

She struggled harder to move, but to no avail. Her brain told her it was futile, so she stopped and just laid still. Time to analyze. Unwanted tears began to emerge, but she knew this was neither the time nor the place, and she scolded herself for the moment of weakness and fought them back.

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“Whoever or whatever has control of this place wants to be sure that I am not going anywhere,” she said, almost becoming angry. She thought about yelling again for help, but hesitated as a small movement caught her eye.

At first, she thought that maybe someone had come in to check on her now that she was awake. Then she wasn't sure what to think when she saw what was heading toward her. First there was a thing floating in the air that seemed to come from nowhere. She recognized it immediately as something similar to a helmet used as a virtual reality device, because she had handled a client who manufactured them. Then there was another thing, except this one was on wheels moving more quickly toward her. It looked like a robot. A robot with a handful of hypodermic needles!

“I must be dreaming,” she said calmly. “This can't be real.”

She continued to watch the apparatus as it moved toward her. She repeated her thoughts over and over in her head. Her heartbeat became the only sound she heard as the device moved closer.

“Ouch!” she said, as she felt a pin prick in her arm. “So much for the dream theory. You don't feel...pain...in...a...dream.”

Her heartbeat began to slow as a sense of calm enveloped her. Drifting, she soon found her eyes closing, not caring about the device that hovered over her head, or anything else for that matter. She gave in to the encompassing darkness as the device situated itself exactly where it needed to be on her head and inserted its pointed probes into her brain.

Sarah suddenly felt *him*. He was leaning on the back of her chair with his hands. She could hear him inhaling deeply.

Greg heard music in the background, a soft tranquil music as the images became sharper and more distinct. He was in the nightclub again, standing next to *the woman*, who was sitting on a barstool. His hands were on the back of the stool, and he leaned over toward her and inhaled the wonderfully fragrant perfume she wore.

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“So tell me...” he began to say, but stopped in mid-sentence. He looked around the bar and realized he was back in the dream again. But this time, there was hardness to everything, instead of the dream haze he had associated with it before. He gave himself a quick jab in the gut to ensure he was awake. The sharp wince of pain that came to his abdomen confirmed his suspicion. It was real, all right.

“What the hell is going on?” he asked himself, his mind racing. “One minute I’m being run down by a truck, and then I’m in a strange room with little robots using me for a pincushion. Now I’m awake in my dream?” His solo conversation came to an abrupt end as the woman spoke.

“What am I doing here?” she questioned him, anger flashing in her eyes. “Who are you?” She pointed at him.

He opened his mouth to answer, but her tirade continued on as her voice began to rise in alarm.

“This dress! I don’t even own a dress like this! I wouldn’t even consider wearing a dress like this!” she said, eyeing her black sequins and revealing neckline.

Greg couldn’t help perusing the same territory.

She appeared to not notice his scrutiny as she continued to speak, frustration growing in her voice. “This place, I don’t belong in a, well, a bar of all places, and I certainly don’t know you!” Her voice broke as her eyes began to shimmer with tears. “I was in a hospital...or that’s where I thought I was.”

Greg could only stand there, hoping her tirade was over. He wasn’t sure what he was going to say anyway and, in her current emotional state, he would have to be careful. *Heck, I don’t even know what’s going on myself.*

Looking away from him, she turned her barstool in a complete circle to get a good look around the place. Greg could see the same awareness on her face that he had when he first saw the images; it was exactly as it had been in the dream. *But if that was a dream—then this is a dream—then why do I feel like I am awake?*

She swiveled on her stool toward Greg so quickly that he instinctively ducked.

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“Excuse me,” she said in an angry and sarcastic tone. “Am I awake? What’s going on here?”

“Hey, let’s take it easy and slow down,” Greg said. He raised his hands, palms up, to indicate his own confusion. “I know exactly where you’re coming from. I was in the hospital, too. You remember all this, don’t you? From a dream?”

“Yes,” she said, perplexed, nodding in agreement.

He stared into her dark eyes in that moment of her confusion. He’d never really had a chance to see her close up before, so he took a few moments to study her features. Even though she was stressed, she looked gorgeous.

“What’s going on here?” she asked in a trembling voice.

Before Greg could answer, she poured out her story. “One minute I am almost run over by a truck, and then, in my office, I’m shocked by my wrinkle remover. Next, I’m in a hospital, or at least that was where I thought I was, and there’s this airborne thing, which is a robot with needles for fingers, coming towards me. To top it all off, there are these dreams I don’t understand. I’m in a bar in a slinky black dress. I’m going crazy!” She finished by putting her hands over her face in utter confusion and frustration.

“Hey, you’re not any crazier than I am,” Greg offered, seeing her look of skepticism. He cleared his throat and continued. “And don’t worry. What’s your name, by the way?” he asked, surprised at his boldness.

“Sarah,” she whispered in a low voice as she moved her hands away from her face.

Greg could see that her eyes were still darting wildly about as she tried to make sense of her surroundings. He held out his hand to her, and she hesitantly took it. The warmth of her hand felt wonderful, and he saw a moment of calm come over her. It was as if the touching had relieved some of the tension. He was also savoring every moment of it; her fingers were so smooth and warm. It had been a long time since he had felt that kind of warmth.

“I’m scared, too, you know,” he said in a low voice, looking into her eyes. He thought for a moment, then decided maybe a little humor might help. “I know this is going to sound strange, but I guess we’re having a dream together. I’ve never heard of it happening before, but

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I guess it is possible, because here we are. One dream for the price of two. Get it, one dream...”

Greg stopped, and immediately felt awkward about what he'd just said. Although it was not uncharacteristic for him to say something like that, it felt out of place for him now. His eyes moved to where their hands were still joined. It was then that he realized that, even after all this, he still had not introduced himself.

“Well...how do you do, Sarah,” he said, smiling nervously. “I’m Greg.” He performed the quick act of shaking hands again, and then they mutually parted their grasp, much to his chagrin.

“Hey, I know this is all real strange, but...ah...it looks like we’re somehow tied together in this thing, so I guess we’ll have to figure it out together,” he said, trying his best to sound as calm as possible.

She looked up and gently smiled at him, and this made Greg melt into his sneakers. He thought to himself, as he savored her smile, *You sure are beautiful, Sarah.*

“Well, that appears to be the best part of this...whatever is happening to us so far,” she said, as she turned around on the rotating bar stool to gaze at the people in the room. Obviously possessing more confidence now, she appeared to become curious about their surroundings. She turned back to him. “Greg, who are all these people, anyway? Do you know them? Maybe they can help us.” The new thought lit up her face.

Greg looked around, shrugging. He hadn’t been paying attention to any of the other people because his full attention had been centered on her.

“I don’t recognize anyone. Let’s see if they recognize us.” Greg walked up to the nearest person, a man wearing a plain black tuxedo, holding a cigarette loosely in his right hand and a drink in his left. The man was actively involved in a conversation with a small group of people, all dressed in appropriate evening attire.

Greg cleared his throat and ventured, “Excuse me, sir?” There was no response, so he raised his voice slightly, and said again, “Excuse me, sir?”

Still there was no response. Greg looked back at Sarah, who made the motion of tapping someone on the shoulder. He nodded in

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understanding, then turned toward the man and tapped him on the shoulder. Or, at least, he tried to tap him on the shoulder, because his hand simply passed right through him.

“Holy shi...!” Greg yelled, jerking his fingers back as he saw them disappear into the nothingness of the man’s shoulder.

Leumas picked the lint from his neatly tailored clothes as he watched his staff run preliminary tests on the newly revived subjects from Earth. For some strange reason, he found himself having difficulty remembering their names. “Greg and Sarah, Greg and Sarah.” He repeated the names aloud several times in the hope that it would make his mind remember. His chants drew a few odd looks from his staff, but they just shrugged at each other. They were all accustomed to his strange ways and accepted his actions.

The bodies had been slowly warmed and the brain activity restarted. He had seen this performed on numerous aliens with relatively few problems, but each time he still felt nervous. His staff, monitoring the vital signs on the screens in front of them, confirmed that both were doing fine.

Leumas sat down and took a break. He had been quite busy the last couple of days. He thought about his plan to acclimate the humans to their new positions but, at the same time, he tried to piece together the plot that Copolla was conniving, and this drove him back up to his feet. He rose and began to pace the control room. His staff ignored him while he paced; they had also seen all this before, too often. Stopping by a mirror, he used his fingers to comb his hair, and then straightened his shirt. Satisfied, he began to prowl the room restlessly again, his mind churning.

He knew he could not take this as just another routine Council action. Copolla must know something, something he did not. He would never embark on something unless it had a very high probability of success. This whole attempt on the planet Earth’s admission into the UCDW was somehow all wrong, yet Copolla had managed to slide it past the Council. *Surely he can’t—*

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“Sir, we have a slight problem.” A voice interrupted Leumas’ thoughts. Leumas turned toward the voice that belonged to a young technician.

“How slight?” Leumas asked harshly, staring at the alien, a Sentrifica whose head was only about the quarter the size of his own.

“There has been a miscalculation. Somehow, the two subjects’ time of unconsciousness has been underestimated. They’re, uh...awake,” the technician said as he stared at the floor.

“Now?” Leumas shouted. “Do you realize how dangerous that is? Put them back under, immediately! Use the Med robot!” Leumas’ nostrils flared as he continued to shout. “They are not supposed to be conscious until the third phase! Do it now! Initiate the dream sequence before the whole thing is screwed up!”

The technician should have planned for this situation, he thought, trying to control his anger. The Sentrifica alien slunk away without saying another word to accomplish what Leumas had demanded.

Leumas rubbed his head with his hands. “What else can possibly go wrong?” he asked, but then raised his hands skyward. “No, no, that’s okay. I should know better than to ask that question, especially if I don’t want to know the answer.”

But he would know the answer because not ten minutes had passed before he saw the image of Greg on the simulation screen, attempting to touch another person.

“There is not supposed to be any interaction between the subjects and the holographic images!” Leumas cried in surprise and anger, pushing his way through his five assistants. He studied the view screen carefully and checked the subjects’ thought processes. “Nor are their memories of their deaths supposed to be so prevalent and intense!” he yelled, pointing to colorful spikes displayed on the screen.

“Come on, team!” he said, clapping his hands together. “Somebody tell me what’s going on here!” He pointed at one of the nervous technicians. “You! Let me see the program for the dream sequence.” He shook his head, speaking more to himself than to his startled assistants. “Damn it! They should have ignored all the other people. They shouldn’t have tried to touch them!” He brought up the programming sequence of events for the bar scene on his console display.

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“This was supposed to be a smooth transition process in a casual atmosphere, not one full of conjecture and speculation,” he said, banging his fist on the terminal. His assistants watched him guardedly, their eyes darting from him to each other. The screen glow illuminated his face, which was now glistening with new sweat that highlighted his forehead. As he scanned through the images on the screen, thoughts of concern raced through his mind. The whole simulation process could be compromised if the subjects lost their confidence in the images provided to them. It would lead to a lack of credibility in any future attempts in providing information to them.

He stopped at one screen, pointing. “Here it is! This is why the subject tried to touch one of the images. Someone has altered the program, which created doubt in the credibility of their surroundings.” He turned away from the screen, tight lipped, and faced his assistants. Four out of the five were there. He mentally ticked them off in his mind. Wers, Derg, Pler, Greta. But no Biom. He looked at each one carefully, and asked in a dangerously calm voice, “Where is Biom?”

The remaining four assistants offered no response while they intently stared at the ground, with the exception of Greta. Greta stared Leumas straight in the eye.

“Does anybody here want to tell me anything?” Leumas asked, his eyebrows rising questioningly.

The sound of silence was deafening as nearly fifteen seconds ticked by.

Leumas sighed heavily. “You are all dismissed. Except for you, Greta. Please stay.”

The other three assistants crept out of the room. Leumas faced Greta. He knew her very well. She’d been a trusted assistant and his friend for many years. If Leumas trusted anyone, it was her.

“How bad is it, Greta?” he asked her.

“It’s bad, sir,” she replied as she let out a sigh of frustration. Her thin hand moved to her head where she ran her bony fingers through her shoulder-length green hair. “Very bad.”

Although Greta’s humanoid body appeared malnourished, this was characteristic of the people of her home world of Setam Seven. A light gravity planet, she could lift over five times her weight.

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“Copolla has a lot of influence with many people,” Greta began. “Whether they are willing or not. It is almost common knowledge that this assignment you have been given is destined to discredit you, and your assistants along with you.”

“Unless, of course, you are willing to help Copolla by sabotaging or providing information,” he added flatly.

“That is probably a correct hypothesis,” she responded in a toneless voice, her dark eyes looking into Leumas’ face.

“I had no idea that Copolla was this intent on getting rid of me. I have underestimated him, a deadly mistake.” Leumas sighed. A moment of silence passed as Greta stood still as to not disturb him. Leumas turned toward her suddenly, and asked, “Where is Biom?”

“According to the security check I made a few minutes ago, he has not left the building. I have suspected him but until now, I was not sure enough to act.”

Leumas was running for the computer terminal. “If he hasn’t left the building yet, he must be planning other things to slow me down.” He looked back over his shoulder to Greta and yelled, “Find him! I am going to have to go into the simulation to try to get it back on course again. It will be very tricky, but I won’t give up without trying.”

As Greta left the control room, she removed a stun weapon from the security locker that only she and Leumas could open. Leumas hurried to his desk and placed a headset similar to the one that Greg and Sarah were wearing as they slept peacefully in their beds. Placing it on his head, he activated the tie-in to the central computer.

“Here goes nothing,” he said, sighing again. He sat back and tried to think about what he was going to do. At the moment, he didn’t have a clue.

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C H A P T E R E I G H T

**GREG & SARAH
MEET AN ALIEN**

Greg caught Sarah just before she fell out of her chair in a dead faint. “Sarah! Sarah!” he yelled, wrapping his arms around her limp body in an effort to keep her from plummeting to the floor. He had to admit the sight of his hand disappearing into a person was a bit tough for even his mind to comprehend. He wasn’t exactly sure what to make of it.

He gently cradled her light body in his arms, feeling her warmth. He was genuinely concerned about her, but holding her was also nice and it gave him a feeling he enjoyed and probably could get used to very quickly. A sudden thought sprang from his subconscious. *Am I thinking about some form of commitment to a woman?*

This was a new one for him. He had never thought he could feel something for a woman...not like this. But, whatever it was, it would have to wait, as Sarah suddenly stirred in his arms.

“Sarah, come on now. Wake up. It’s okay,” he said in a soft voice, as his eyes drifted over the smooth features of her face. Her eyes fluttered opened briefly as she struggled back to consciousness. He lifted her gently and placed her into a chair. He began to gently rub the sides of her face with his hands to help her circulation return to her pale face.

“Come on, Sarah, not now, don’t do this to me! I need you awake to help me figure all this stuff out. Please, Sarah!”

“I’m okay, Greg, really. Just give me a minute,” she said as she blinked her eyes, trying to focus on his face. She stared at him for a few seconds, and once again, her first thoughts amazed her. *You know, he is kind of cute, and such a kind face, too.*

Under normal circumstances she would have never considered such a bold thought. But there was something about him she found different from other men she had known. Clearing her eyes and mind, she looked back in the direction of what had caused her to faint.

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She shook her head and smiled wanly, “The disappearing hand into the man thing just caught me off guard a little. I’ll be okay.” Then she spoke more gently, looking into his eyes. “Thanks for helping me out, Greg.”

“You’re very welcome,” he returned, blushing as he realized their eyes had locked on each other. During that brief exchange, he thought some kind of understanding of what each was thinking or feeling toward the other, passed between them.

Seated back in her chair, her color returning, Sarah began organizing her thoughts in her usual methodical manner. She knew she must have answers to figure this situation out.

“What do you really think is going on here, Greg?” she asked.

Greg stroked his chin, and then said simply, “I don’t know. I guess these people are like projections, holographs or something. Someone has added some sort of background, I assume, for us. Then we appear as the center attraction for whatever is going on. I guess everything else is just for decoration.”

“But why?” she asked, still puzzled.

He shrugged and again said simply, “I don’t know.”

A thought suddenly came to him. “Earlier, when you were upset, you were talking about what had been happening to you recently, all these near accidents. It sounds oddly similar to what has been happening to me too.”

“What do you mean?” she asked looking at him with an expression of inquisitiveness.

“Listen and then tell me what you think.” Greg began as he got up and started to pace. “First, I almost lose my head to a flying box of file records. Then, I’m getting ready to leave work; I head to the elevator and almost step down into an empty shaft. Then, when I walk down the steps to the parking lot, a three-hundred-pound door coincidentally breaks its hinges and almost nails me, just as I come by. Then comes the climax of the whole day as some garbage truck takes me out in the parking lot. What a way to go!”

He stopped long enough to suck in a large breath and then continued. “The next thing I know, I wake up from this God-awful dream in a hospital or something. I can’t move and there are some pretty odd-

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looking devices coming toward me. Then I'm here, in a 1940s club of some sort that I've been dreaming about. I don't have any idea where any of this coming from. But out of all of this, there is you, which is undoubtedly the best part of it all," he said, smiling at her.

Sarah returned the smile and said, "Why thank you Greg, that's really sweet." She paused for a few seconds, considering what he had said, then continued. "Well, it sure sounds like we both had a full and interesting day. But I would propose that there must be a common denominator to all of this. Like you, I had several similar incidents that were peculiar. A truck also entered my life abruptly this morning, and then a slight electrical problem tried to give me a permanent wave. Perhaps if we list all the occurrences in their chronological sequence, we can narrow the probabilities down some, perhaps even solve this mystery."

Greg wasn't paying attention to what she was saying. He had drifted off into his own private space to consider all of this. Then, suddenly, he turned toward Sarah, startling her, and said, "Don't you see it, Sarah?" He looked around the room as if searching for something.

"See what, Greg?" she asked, also looking around, trying to see what he was talking about.

"The coincidences! Don't you see it? I may not be a master sleuth or anything, but it doesn't take Sherlock Holmes to figure out that something weird is going on here and that we're both connected to it in some way."

"Greg, weren't you listening to what..." she began, but then stopped. *Perhaps he has a different perspective*, she thought. "Can you please explain what on Earth you mean," she said, frowning.

He continued. "Okay. Look, we both have several near-miss accidents, and then I suppose the real thing actually happens. You know, me with the truck and you with the, uh...curler."

"Wrinkle remover," she corrected him.

"Yeah, that's what I meant, wrinkle remover." He cleared his throat and continued. "Well, as I was saying, we both had a mysterious accident today. Then we both wind up in some hospital. We both have a strange dream the day before and now...we're both here."

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“It’s as if this is all being arranged,” she said with sudden cognizance. Her fear appeared to wane slightly with this newfound theory, but even this brought about another barrage of unanswered questions.

“Now, the next logical question would be, by whom?” Greg said. They pondered the question in silence, gazing around the room, searching the faces of the images that shared the space with them.

“Do you think there is a real, well—person among them, or are they all just images?” Sarah asked as she continued to peer around the room.

Greg shrugged his shoulders. “We could go up to each one of them and tap their shoulders until we found one that was solid,” he suggested. Sarah shook her head at this idea.

While they were debating this idea, the sound of footsteps came from behind them. They turned in that direction simultaneously. A man appeared, seemingly from nowhere. Judging by his dress, Greg assumed he was the bartender. His red-and-white striped vest and black bow tie made him appear as if he belonged in a barbershop quartet.

They both stared at the man and followed him with their eyes as he headed toward them. He stopped mid-way to check his bow tie in the mirror, tugging at both ends to ensure it was tied tightly and was level under his chin. He patted his blond hair, which appeared to be coated with oil or something. Finally satisfied, he winked at himself in the mirror, smiled and continued toward them.

He stepped up to the opposite side of the bar, taking his place as bartender. He removed a rag from underneath the counter and began to wipe the surface in a circular pattern for several seconds as he hummed a tune in a deep tenor. He replaced the rag back under the counter, and then lay down two crisp white napkins on the bar in front of them.

Greg and Sarah stared, stupefied, wondering if the bartender was real or not. All the other images had pretty much ignored them up to this point. As the bartender continued to hum his tune, the two of them stared at one another, waiting for something to happen, or someone to speak. Sarah motioned to Greg with her hand, indicating that he should try to touch this figure as he had done earlier. He shook his head and pointed at her, clearly indicating that it was her turn.

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Resigning herself, she sighed, and began to reach toward the bartender's red-striped shoulder when, suddenly, he smiled at them and spoke.

"Can I get you folks something?" he asked, startling them. "So, what will it be?" he continued, smiling congenially at Sarah. "We have a special tonight, ladies drink free," he said tipping an empty glass toward her. Seeing her look of disdain, he continued, "How about a Shirley Temple or something? Contains no alcohol at all. Glass of soda, perhaps?"

No luck there either so he turned toward Greg, smiling the same congenial smile and offered, "How about a beer for you, sir? Best draft anywhere. That's your favorite, isn't it?"

Neither of them said anything and they continued to simply stare at this new addition to their dream. Greg had to admit this surprise interaction had caught them both completely off-guard.

Sarah suddenly poked Greg in the ribs, hoping the bartender didn't notice. He looked toward her, befuddled. She motioned him to move away from the bar. Fearing another jab, he responded promptly.

"Would you, uh, well, uh, excuse us for a minute?" he stammered to the bartender, as they backed a few steps away from the bar.

"Take your time," the bartender said, still smiling, "We have...some time."

Sarah directed him to a small table in the corner of the bar. She motioned him to sit by her. She leaned closer and whispered, "What do you think we should do?"

"Hell, I don't know, Sarah." He saw her earlier calmness and enthusiasm drain from her face. Seeing her look of distress, he continued more assuredly. "I guess it wouldn't do any harm to talk to him. What do we have to lose? Maybe we can get some information from him."

She glanced back over her shoulder at the bartender, and then turned back to Greg and whispered, "Do you think he is real?"

Greg touched her shoulder gently. "Sarah, at this point, I don't know what is real and what isn't anymore...except for you. But I am going to check him out before we go any further." Then, with obvious concern for her, he asked, "Okay? You up to this?"

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“Sure, let’s go,” she said, determined. “I just wish this whole nightmare were over and done with, so that I could wake up in my comfortable bed. I’m ready for another normal workday in my nice ‘real’ office with ‘real’ people...like you.”

Greg smiled and reached for her hand as they slowly made their way back to the bar.

Reluctantly releasing Sarah’s hand, he offered his to the bartender, smiling carefully. “Excuse me, we haven’t introduced ourselves. My name is Greg, and this is Sarah.”

The bartender took Greg’s outstretched hand, returning the gesture. Greg squeezed the man’s hand slowly, gradually increasing his grip. His hand met warm, firm flesh. It left no doubt in his mind that the bartender was real. He nodded toward Sarah, hoping she would catch his meaning. She did, and smiled slightly.

“Well, it’s a pleasure to meet you, Greg, and you, too, Sarah,” the bartender said, releasing Greg’s hand. He then lightly grasped Sarah’s hand and shook it as well. “The name is Leumas.”

“Okay,” Greg began, feeling a surge of confidence that even surprised him. “Now that the introductions are over, Mister Leumas, and you seem to be a flesh-and-blood person and not an image, who the hell are you?”

Before Leumas had a chance to reply, Greg continued, “And don’t tell me you’re just the bartender and you just work here.” Then, with a sarcastic edge to his voice, he added, “And by the way, while you’re at it, how about explaining where exactly here is.”

Leumas sighed. “I can see this is going to take a while,” he said as he looked from Greg to Sarah. Tipping a glass toward them again, he asked, “Are you sure you two don’t want to have a drink before I begin explaining all this? You may need one.”

Greg’s anger mellowed at the offer of the beer, which seemed a nice gesture. *Lord knows, I could sure use something to drink*, he thought. He nodded toward Leumas. “Well, if you insist.” Then, quickly embarrassed by his rudeness, he turned to Sarah. “Would you like something?”

Sarah shook her head, not looking at him. He thought she was probably wondering how he could be thinking of drinking at a time like this.

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“If I were you, Sarah,” Greg began, “I’d have a drink, because I think it’s going to get kind of deep in here in a few moments.”

“I’ll have a glass of water,” she said quickly.

Leumas turned away from them and busied himself, humming the same tune he had earlier. In a few moments, he placed two glasses on the napkins in front of them.

“The floor is all yours,” Greg said to Leumas, taking a large gulp of beer.

“Thank you, Greg,” Leumas began, rubbing his hands together. “Let me start by introducing myself again.” He pointed at his chest, and continued. “As I mentioned earlier, my name is Leumas. No mister, just Leumas. I am part of an organization...that tends to the welfare of other organizations, you might say. As to where here is, that is a two-part answer.” He looked each of them in the eye. “But, for now, I will answer your question by stating that you are presently in a form of virtual simulation.”

“And why exactly are we in a virtual simulation?” Sarah asked with a hint of skepticism, then nervously sipped her water.

Leumas, sensing her doubt, spoke in his most professional tone. “We, that is, the organization that I represent and myself, felt that this would be the best method to use in this particular situation based upon the customs and rituals of your people. I guess you can say that it lends a sense of familiarity, or common ground. This allows room for an open discussion. Subsequently, this eases us into an introduction of the information that I have to share with you and—”

“Cut the crap, Leumas,” Greg cut him off. “If you haven’t noticed, Sarah and I are tired, frustrated and want some real answers. Tell us the whole truth, straight up and right now!” Sarah nodded in agreement.

“Please, Greg, Sarah, let’s not rush into anything,” Leumas said, waving his hands, trying to calm them. “These things need to be done slowly and in a manner that is comfortable to you both. To rush into this may lead to irrecoverable complications. Believe me, I know what I’m talking about. I have been doing this for quite a while.”

He straightened and grinned, back in his bartender role again, “How about another drink, folks? Would you like some peanuts or something? I would be more than happy to get something for you.”

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“Now, Leumas!” Greg shouted.

Leumas exhaled in frustration as he looked at them, shaking his head. Then he came out from behind the bar and sat on a stool next to them. In a resigned voice, he continued.

“Okay, as you wish. Here goes nothing. Where shall I begin? Okay...” he mused with his finger under his chin. “Let’s start with when you were both dead, well, temporarily dead.” He tried to smile but, getting nothing but blank looks in return, he continued. “Then we brought you back to life. All your people back on Earth, I mean in your home towns, thought you both had actually died, you know, well, in freak accidents.”

They both began to interrupt, but Leumas held up a halting hand, and then offered, “A logical question at this point would be why have we done this? Well, we did it because we need you two in our organization.” He paused. “More on that later. In answer to your other question about where you are, you are four point three light years from Earth, on a planet in the star system of Alpha Centauri, called Zire.”

They suddenly became slack-jawed, gaping. Greg spewed out a mouth full of beer. Sarah’s glass of water crashed to the floor.

Leumas continued, trying to ignore their reactions. “And, yes, I am actually what you people would consider an alien. However, I look amazingly like you humans except for these,” he said as he held up his hands showing them the webbing between his fingers.

He turned toward the mirror, patting his slick hair. Then, turning toward them again, he pointed. “But don’t get too comfortable with the idea that everyone in the organization looks human, because a lot of my associates, well, they, uh...don’t.” Leumas leaned on the bar, and looked at them seriously. “If you think back to a dream you had a little while ago, the implanted memory waves in your brains will release additional information about the organization to which I belong. It is called the United Council of Developing Worlds or the UCDW or just Council, for short.” He paused and poured himself a drink from a bottle that contained an odd-looking pink substance. He sipped it and continued. “Well, as the phrase goes, you know what I know. Any questions?”

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Sarah and Greg continued to stare with gaping mouths at him, unable to utter a sound at his question. Then, virtually simultaneously, they both dropped to the floor, unconscious.

Leumas stared at the still figures on the floor, shaking his head. “Humans! Always in a hurry. See, you should have listened to me.”

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C H A P T E R N I N E

W H O O P S . . .

T H E R E G O E S

A N O T H E R A L I E N



Biom carefully slipped out of the control room during the confusion he had caused by tampering with Leumas' assimilation program on the two Earth humans. He searched his memory, trying to picture the layout of the facility, looking frantically for a terminal that could be used to transmit the data Copolla wanted. He finally located an unused wing of the building that contained the terminal he needed. He loaded the crystal data disk and began transmission of his report detailing the sabotage and its results.

He chuckled as he thought about the reaction Leumas' two subjects were having right at this moment. His subdued laughter caused the rolls of skin that layered his body to shake and quiver. The additional layering of skin was a protective coating from his home world, where the sun's light was very intense.

Talk about being mentally screwed up! That's putting it mildly. Those two aren't going to know what's real and what's not after my tampering with the sensitive indoctrination sequence and raising additional doubt in their minds. With this increased doubt, the process will become much more complicated. Leumas is going to have to work a long time to straighten that mess out, if he can at all.

The orders from Copolla had been quite specific. The words echoed in his mind in the same tone in which they'd been spoken, reminding him of the price of failure.

"Do what you have to do, Biom. Any hopes you have of aspiring to any position with the Council depends on your success," Copolla had told him. He remembered, shuddering, the cold red eyes that stared into his as Copolla had continued. "Leumas must be stopped. Do whatever it takes. But I don't want him physically harmed. Just ensure his attempts with the Earth subjects result in failure."

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Biom had been in Leumas' service for only a short period. He had been studying at the Zirean University, a student of high promise in the field of computers and artificial intelligence, when an ugly incident threatened to cause his expulsion under less than honorable circumstances. Then one day, he was approached by a life form named Journo that worked for Copolla. The alien offered to help him out of the sticky situation in which he found himself. Cheating on an exam was a serious offense and, not having any other options available, he went along.

The University mysteriously and very quietly cleared him of any wrongdoing in the incident. Copolla's agent wasted no time in requesting his services for a matter of the utmost urgency that required his special talents. Further, it was a Council matter and the request could not be refused. When Biom tried, he was informed that certain illegal documents had been obtained with his handwriting on them that would easily implicate his wrongdoing and reverse what had been done to exonerate him.

Copolla's agent, Journo, was very thorough and arranged for Biom to be planted flawlessly inside Leumas' organization. Computer records were altered, life forms were bribed to vouch for his character to ensure his acceptance, and it was all bought with Copolla's money.

Biom felt no strong allegiance to Leumas and, as long as no physical harm came to anyone, he saw no problem with the situation if it would release him from the heavy debt he found himself burdened with. Moreover, Copolla had even promised him a good position with the Council if all went well. Most of Leumas' assistants' loyalties swayed whichever way the current situation turned. If Leumas' standing with the Council was good, they were true blue loyal. If not, they would let Leumas swing in the breeze on his own. All with the exception of Greta; he thought it was best to stay clear of her. Greta maintained some type of personal relationship with Leumas, so he only approached her on official matters, and rarely then.

Biom doubted that anyone would be able to trace what he had done to the program directly, but there was still a risk involved. As the newest addition to the team, he would probably fall suspect first. He would have to cover his tracks well; he suspected Greta was keeping

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an extra close eye on him. He checked the display indicator. The transmission uplink of information was almost complete. With the time delay and encryption precautions, it would be several minutes before the information reached Copolla. He added a note in the last details regarding the probable suspicion that he would fall under, and let Copolla know he might not be sending any more communications for a while, if at all.

He had received Copolla's personal assurance that, if he were taken into custody, a rescue would be initiated. He wasn't sure if he truly believed that, but he felt some reassurance from the stun weapon he had placed beneath his jacket before he left the simulation room.

The uplink indicator reflected that the transmission was ninety-eight percent complete. He stood and drew his weapon, preparing to destroy the information disk as soon as it reached one hundred percent. The indicator now flashed ninety-nine percent complete.

A flare of light and heat buzzed by him as a laser beam struck the transmitting device. It destroyed the entire unit and with it, the information crystal. The explosion that followed threw him several feet from where he had been standing, his weapon lost in the confusion. His scared and dazed young face looked up and he found himself face to face with Greta, who held a stun weapon pointed squarely at his chest. Biom threw his hands in the air. As he stared at Greta, his facial expression changed from scared to one that suggested that his initial surprise and fear had been replaced with the realization that he still was not in an unrecoverable from situation. He said to Greta with a smug smile, "You may want to hear what I have to say before you use that."

"Why should I listen to you?" Greta asked calmly, as she kept the weapon pointed at him. "What could you possibly have to tell me that I don't already know?" Then, tight-lipped, she continued, "What I do know is that you have been feeding Copolla updates and sabotaging our entire operation here. I hope you had a chance to spend the money he is paying you."

"I always make sure that I have something to negotiate with, Greta," he said casually, placing his hands in his pocket. Greta's raised her weapon and pointed it directly at his head. Biom slowly removed his hands from his pockets, and said, "Oh, sorry about that, forgot. Didn't

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mean to make you nervous. I am still new to this espionage game, fresh out of school and all.”

She relaxed her trigger finger slightly but kept her aim true.

“As I was saying,” he continued, clearing his throat. “I have no deep-rooted loyalties to Copolla. He is, or will be, I should say, paying me well. But, as I look down the barrel of your weapon, I realize that money is not everything. So... I would like to propose a trade.”

“A trade?” Greta asked sardonically. “Why would I possibly want to trade with you? I would rather just see you dead or severely mutilated, so you won’t bother Leumas anymore.”

“Information is a valuable commodity,” Biom said, slitting his eyes. “One always wants to know what the other side doesn’t know, and vice versa.” He smiled at the sudden interest he saw in Greta’s eyes.

“Go ahead. I’m listening,” she said skeptically.

“First, we need to agree upon terms. I offer valuable information and, in exchange, I want freedom and a ship to get far beyond the reach of Copolla,” he said with confidence, liking the new feeling of having the upper hand.

“I will consider your requests after I hear the information.”

“That’s not much of an assurance. How about this?” he said, beginning to smile smugly again. “Suppose I were to tell you that Copolla has more than one reason for doing what he is doing to discredit Leumas, and that this reason could seriously damage the credibility of Copolla if it were known.” He paused for effect, then added, “Interested now?”

“You know that I would be interested in anything that would discredit Copolla,” she said, thinking of Leumas and how this type of information could help him. “I’ll grant your request. However, I hold final judgment if the information is useless or unsubstantiated. Then the deal becomes null and void.”

“Fair enough,” he conceded.

Greta sat down in a nearby chair, still keeping a cautious eye on his movements. “Talk.”

“I was one of the members of the team that removed the records from the archives about the Council’s involvement with the planet Earth,” he began. “The records were obliterated when it was discovered they contained information that could harm Copolla’s position. Historians

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are a funny lot, but they don't miss much. The funny thing is, they never understand or really care about the data; they reserve their opinions and just record it. But, somehow, this time certain information got into the archives that shouldn't have."

"Such as?" she asked impatiently.

Ignoring her tone, he continued. "A long time ago, maybe fifty or sixty years, Copolla ordered two agents placed on Earth to learn more about the people after the big mess up with a human leader, I can't recall his name. But, from what I understand, Copolla didn't exactly send the cream of the crop, as far as agents go." He paused again, catching his breath. "To make a long story short, those agents became so adjusted to the Earth's environment that they decided to stay, and integrated into the local populace. One thing led to another, as it does with any species, and they produced offspring."

"That is strictly forbidden by the Council Charter!" she said incredulous.

"That's correct," he stated, liking the feeling of seeing her surprise. He continued. "There is another reason why it was so important for the information to be removed from the history files. The two agents eventually contracted some form of disease that they had not anticipated. At that time, inoculation procedures were still in the early stages of development. The agents died about forty Earth years after their arrival."

"What happened to the offspring?" she asked, her curiosity apparent in her voice.

"I assume, then, that we have a deal?" he asked.

"Yes, yes," Greta agreed, wondering how she was going to pull it off. "I promise to deliver the ship as soon as we finish this conversation."

"Very well, then. There was...ah...!" Biom suddenly screamed in pain as his body turned bright red and began to burn within a matter of two to three seconds. Greta dove behind the chair she was sitting in to avoid the fire that consumed the body. She could not have done anything that would have saved his life.

As Greta rose from her place of refuge, she surmised what must have happened. She shook her head sadly as she went over to the pile of ashes that had been Biom. Using the toe of her boot, she sifted through the

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ashes until she found what she was looking for. It was a small circular device, about the size of her fingertip. An implanted loyalty device. *Copolla's handiwork, no doubt*, she thought.

"A very unfortunate occurrence," she said, shaking her head sadly. "I wonder if Biom even knew it was there."

For a brief moment, Greta felt remorse over Biom's death. He was young, and probably didn't really understand the dangerous game Copolla was playing with him. Biom would never have won. *He wouldn't even have come close*, she thought.

"Copolla's reach is getting longer and longer. Soon there won't be anywhere left to hide," she said as she re-holstered her weapon. She took one last look at the pile of ashes, shook her head again, then turned and walked away through the deserted wing of the building.

Leumas was tired and frustrated. Those two words best described his mood at the moment as he sighed heavily, trying to decide how he was going to handle this mess. Things had never been this difficult before. But there had never been so much interference either.

He sat back in his chair, placing his feet up on his desk, trying to relax and clear his mind. In all the excitement, he realized he had not heard from Greta. He started to get out of his chair to go and look for her. But before his feet made firm contact with the floor, the display lit up on his terminal, indicating a secure communication.

"What now?" Leumas said aloud, rubbing his head. He composed himself and clicked the receive button on. The image of Copolla suddenly filled his screen, and Leumas felt the acid in his stomach begin to churn.

"Leumas," Copolla began, in his usual condescending tone. "I need an update on the progress of the two humans. Please be so kind as to brief me now."

"Is that really necessary, Copolla?" Leumas sneered back. "You probably have all the information already. You seem to be well informed these days. My people are searching for Biom as we speak," he said with a final sting.

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Copolla phrased his next words carefully, yet smugly. “One has to do what is needed in order to stay informed. You of all people should understand this, Leumas. But I wouldn’t waste too much of what precious time you have left looking for him.”

“Yes, I do understand,” Leumas snapped back, wondering what Copolla meant by his remark of wasting time looking for Biom. “More than you could possibly know. But let’s get to the heart of the matter, shall we? What do you want? I am a very busy individual.” Leumas sniffed in disdain.

Copolla, ignoring Leumas’s tone, said, “There is going to be a special Council meeting concerning your progress. Is there anything you would like for me to say in your absence?” Copolla snickered at his own words. Then, in a venom-filled voice, he said, “Perhaps admitting defeat now may save you some embarrassment later.” A smirk returned to his face.

“Does it really matter? You will say and do what you want anyway,” Leumas shouted to the screen, losing his patience. “You have gone out of your way to ensure that I will fail. I just want to know why!”

Copolla replied, still smiling, “There are things we all desire in our lives, Leumas, and we fight to achieve them. We do whatever we have to do to keep them. Then—”

“But at what price, Copolla?” Leumas shouted, cutting him off. “Are you willing to jeopardize the entire integrity of the Council because of your sick ambitions? Is maintaining your position as Leader of the Council that important to you? Or is it something else? Something more?”

“Yes, Leumas. It certainly is more than just that,” Copolla said, his voice becoming thick with anger. “The Council is wallowing in its petty concerns over which planet is doing this and which planet is doing that. It is time to live again, and I am going to be the one to breathe life back into the tired lungs of the Council!”

The screen went blank.

As Copolla’s image and discussion abruptly ended, Leumas cursed under his breath. He cuffed the side of his terminal with his fist.

“The damn fool! Playing games with these life forms’ existence. Whole planets for that matter.” Leumas continued to rage, rubbing the

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inside of his hand that was now crimson. “How the hell did we allow him to have so much control?” he asked, pondering this and many other questions as Greta entered the room.

“Where is—” Leumas anxiously tried to ask but, before he could finish the question, Greta interjected a straightforward answer.

“Biom is dead,” she said flatly. “Someone, or, should I say, Copolla, planted a loyalty device inside him. I don’t believe Biom even knew it was there.” She shook her head sadly. “He was so young and naïve. He didn’t understand the ways of such an evil and vile person as Copolla. He was a victim more than he was a conspirator.”

“I understand,” Leumas said simply, feeling sympathy for Biom as he heard the usually absent emotion in Greta’s voice.

“I just finished having an interesting conversation with Copolla,” Leumas stated as he cleared his throat, trying to change the stream of conversation. “I mentioned that we were onto Biom and that we were searching for him. He indicated it was a waste of time, which only confirms that he killed him.”

“Copolla didn’t activate the device soon enough,” she said plainly, looking directly into Leumas’ eyes.

“What do you mean?” he asked, his interest piqued.

Greta sat in the chair in front of Leumas’ desk, folding her thin hands in her lap. “Before he was killed, Biom and I were discussing...terms, so to speak. A deal that would have consisted of sparing his life and letting him go. In exchange, he would divulge information that we would find very useful.” She looked down in disappointment. “Unfortunately, I only got part of the information.”

“Which was?” Leumas asked curiously, hoping for some sort of a break.

Greta began to relay the conversation highlights. “The missing data from the archives included incriminating information regarding the fact that Copolla placed agents on Earth after a botched attempt at altering their history. The placement was done without the knowledge or consent of the Council.” Greta stopped for Leumas to take all of this in, then continued. “But something went wrong. The agents defected to Earth and neither returned nor carried out their assigned task.”

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“Interesting,” Leumas said, as a small smile edged its way onto his face.

“Further,” she continued, “the agents intermingled into the human society and produced offspring.”

“Oh, how very interesting. Copolla sure has been a bad boy, hasn’t he?” Leumas said, drumming his fingers together. “I can see why he may be a little edgy about that kind of information falling into the wrong hands. The Council would love to have something like that on him. Unfortunately, without any proof, no one will believe it.”

He began to pace slowly, thinking of how he could use this information. Turning to Greta, he asked, “Did Biom say what happened to the offspring? Did he say how many there were? Are they alive?”

“No, he never got the chance, but I believe he knew,” she said confidently.

“Interesting,” Leumas said, as he walked over to the window, looking out into the atmosphere in thought. “This certainly changes the rules of the game, doesn’t it? Copolla must have realized somehow that I was getting too close to his secret because of my involvement with the Earth case. Yet he’s the one who got me involved in the first place. Either he’s pulling out all the stops, or he’s gone completely mad.”

Greta nodded. “I would tend to agree with your last scenario. What would you advise for our next step?”

“I think Copolla doesn’t know that we learned this information from Biom. I think he believes he killed him before he could say anything. This could be our big break.”

“How?” Greta asked.

“I’ve got to stay here to work on our two Earth subjects. I have to find out what kind of damage Biom’s meddling has done,” he answered. “But I want you to take a trip to the archives for me. Someone there may have information we can use. The librarian, an old man named Robise, and you can’t miss him or, should I say, you can’t miss his personality.” Leumas smiled as he thought of the crotchety old man. “He’s the custodian of the facility. I have a feeling that Biom may have compromised all of our systems here in some way. We can’t afford to take any more chances by using more simulations so I am going to deal with the two subjects on a real time presence.”

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Greta's brows drew together. "Isn't that risky? Considering all the errors that have occurred? Council policy would dictate against taking such action."

Leumas felt Greta's concern. He nodded. "You're right, of course, but our options are running out fast. I don't feel that I have much of a choice at this point. And besides I've already started."

Leumas knew that Greta would not try to dissuade him. It would be an unwise use of time.

"I will leave at once," she said firmly as she turned and started toward the door.

"Greta," Leumas called, causing her to stop mid-stride as she turned back toward Leumas with her usual stolid look.

Leumas took the few steps to where Greta stood. He touched her shoulder and said with genuine concern, "Watch your back, my friend. I have a feeling this is going to get a lot worse before it gets better."

Greta said nothing, but her silence acknowledged the presence of their unspoken friendship. She gave Leumas a rare slight smile, then turned and walked away.

Upon arriving at the archives, Greta wandered through the seemingly empty aisles of the facility searching for Robise, but found no one at all. She consulted a map of the facility; studying the layout, she tapped her finger on the map as she located the central processing area. She turned and set off in that direction.

Greta assumed that, if she could not locate the custodian, she could perhaps access the central database herself and attempt to retrieve the information she needed. One thing she knew for sure was if someone wanted to hide something in a vast facility such as this, it would be very easy.

Her steps echoed in the empty halls, reverberating in her ears, sounding like there were several life forms pacing her. She tried to walk softly, but the echoes disturbed her, causing her to look over her shoulder frequently. This business with Copolla, and Biom's sudden demise, was enough to give anyone the jitters. She kept replaying the vision of the

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flames which consumed Biom, leaving nothing but ashes. Ashes that were once the young and naïve Biom. She picked up her pace.

Following the directions on the map, she found herself exactly at the entrance to the central processing area. With mixed feelings, she saw that the door to the central core area was open. She frowned. Her eyes shifted to the sign posted to the right of the door: "This door is to remain closed at all times. Access by authorized personnel only."

Trouble, she thought, frowning deeper as she felt for the stun weapon she was carrying under her jacket. Her fingers caressed the cold metal, and she checked to ensure that it was fully charged. Then, slowly, she moved toward the door, gun at the ready.

Stepping over the threshold, she crouched, quickly scanning the room, senses at a heightened level, prepared for trouble. Immediately, she wrinkled her nose as she sensed an acid smell. Looking around quickly, her eyes came to rest on a figure sprawled on the floor. Her hand tightened on the gun, and she knew she had to get moving before she became the next target or victim. She forced herself to secure all the other rooms in the immediate area before she went back to investigate the body. For the moment, it was not going anywhere. She filed the strange acidic smell in the back of her mind to research later; she didn't think it posed an immediate danger. She continued around the room, checking behind doors and under desks. Once satisfied that no one else was in the room, she returned to the body.

Kneeling down, she placed her weapon back into its holster. She touched the white-coated individual's wrist, but felt no pulse. The body was very cold, dead for quite a while, she surmised. *Must have died a painful death, judging by the expression of ultimate horror left on the face*, she thought. She peeled the white lab coat back, and was revolted by the seared flesh exposed below the neck area. It appeared to be a full blast to the chest cavity and at close range.

The person's ID badge had been seared by the weapon's blast. The only readable part that remained on the badge was a name, Robise, confirming it was the custodian of the archives Leumas had given her to search out for information. Greta exhaled, a long, angry sigh. "One step ahead of us again, Copolla," she said.

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Greta rose from the body and stepped toward the central core. It was then she realized where the acidic smell was coming from. Whiffs of smoke rose from the central processing unit. The core appeared to have been totally destroyed.

An acid worm, she guessed, wrinkling her nose in disgust. An acid worm was an actual living creature that exuded acid naturally. Once inserted into the core, it would worm its way through the system, secreting its dangerous fluid until there was nothing left. Then it would die quickly and disintegrate. It was one of the surest ways to ensure that every bit of data would be wiped clean, and only professionals could afford it. *A price Copolla could afford easily*, she thought angrily.

She reached for her communication device and accessed Leumas' coded channel, sending a brief message summarizing this new turn of events. The message would take minutes to reach Leumas, slightly longer than usual because of the scrambled relays he had installed that would hamper any attempt to trace or intercept the message. The message complete, she pocketed her transmitter.

She prepared to leave, but suddenly stopped. She cocked her head to the side. "Was that a sound?" Greta murmured softly as she continued to listen. There it was again. A sound...footsteps...a person. Someone was coming!

The footsteps were approaching quickly. Greta turned, searching frantically for cover. She settled on hiding behind a large stanchion, which offered her a partial view of her immediate surroundings. Once again, she removed her weapon from its holster, trigger finger ready.

Endless minutes dragged by as she waited to see who the mysterious intruder was, and her thoughts drifted. The weapon she held had rekindled thoughts of her youth, growing up on Setam Seven where she had participated in many of the family plays that reenacted the great conflicts that had taken place on the planet Zire. There were specific ritual days of remembrance and celebrations held to honor those who had perished in the Great War. Millions and millions of life forms, whole species and cultures, had been lost forever. All this had occurred before the UCDW had come into being. Like everything else, though, anything was subject to change.

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The footsteps came closer. They were almost on top of her now. She poised herself, finger still on the trigger, ready for conflict. Slowly, a shadow drew itself out of the darkness. It was shortly followed by the appearance of an old humanoid form, slightly hunched over. Deciding that the figure did not look ominous, and seeing no obvious weapon, Greta stepped out of hiding, weapon still at the ready.

“Stop right there,” she yelled forcefully. “Now, tell me who you are and what you are doing here.” She tightened her grip on the weapon in an obvious fashion to emphasize she would not hesitate to use it, but this old humanoid did not seem alarmed.

The man drew in a deep breath, and placed a gnarled finger on his chest. He stated simply, “I am Robise, the Custodian of this once unscathed establishment. Until these damn Council agents started running all through the place destroying my records.”

Greta raised her eyebrow at the tone of the life form. She thought about the body nearby, and looked at him suspiciously. “You do look similar to the life form Leumas described as the custodian. But you cannot be Robise, unless you are the twin of the dead body on the ground in the next room,” she said, pointing her weaponless hand in the direction of the body.

Robise smiled smugly. “That is, or was, I should say, my assistant, Toun. You see, I caught wind of his plan to help someone destroy the main computer core, and to dispose of me. I switched identification badges this morning before he arrived just in case. I took a gamble that whoever it was had never seen his accomplice in person. These Zireans today, they think they know everything and us old cronies don’t have a clue. No offense,” he tittered nervously, noticing that Greta’s finger was still on the weapon’s trigger.

Greta smiled wanly. “None taken. Please, continue.”

Robise cleared his throat. “Well, the accomplices finally did show up. They looked at the identification badge, and killed Toun, thinking it was me. Then they proceeded to destroy the main core of the computer by releasing an acid worm into the system. Whoever they were, they were professionals. The squad of saboteurs was in and out in a flash,” he finished, shaking his head.

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“So you did nothing to stop them?” Greta demanded, nostrils flaring in anger.

“There was nothing I could have done and still be alive to tell you this!” Robise snapped. “Besides, I doubt that anyone else knows how to work the old core that I downloaded all the information to,” he finished smugly.

“You saved the core?” Greta asked, surprised.

“What kind of historian would I be if I let some low life saboteurs destroy all I have accumulated and been entrusted with over all these years?” Robise placed his hands on his hips defensively.

“Sorry, I meant no disrespect,” Greta said, with new admiration.

“None taken,” Robise smiled. “I’m too old for this kind of stuff anymore.” He shook his head and pointed toward the destroyed core. “Anyway, back to the core. I had an old one in storage, been meaning to dispose of it for years but, like everything else, I just couldn’t part with it.”

He sighed as if remembering his many years of putting data into the core, and continued, “After seeing what’s been going on around here lately, I have spent the past several days downloading as much information as possible. There won’t be any way to tell how successful the download was until I try to access the data.” Robise glanced back toward Greta, taking note again of the weapon. “Now I need to find a safe place to store it.” He showed her a device about the size of a small box, easily held in one hand.

Greta noticed how he held onto it tightly, almost as a mother would hold onto an infant.

“These thugs obviously had authority from high up and may be back to ensure they got everything,” Robise said.

“True,” said Greta, placing the weapon back into its holster. “The information you have managed to save may be of the most vital importance to the Council. I know where we can take it to keep it safe. Leumas has a secure area at his facility.”

Robise looked at Greta and nodded his head in agreement to the offer.

“The faction that destroyed the main core is trying to discredit Leumas so that the Council will lose faith in him,” Greta told him.

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“Copolla is losing control through his reign of terror and lust for more power. Leumas seeks reform and has been quietly working to this end. Copolla will stop at nothing to maintain his control.”

Greta peered around, feeling uneasiness build in her, as it had earlier with the approaching footsteps. She said suddenly, “We should go now, while we still have the chance.”

Robise again nodded agreement. They walked down the long, deserted hallways of the facility in silence, both in deep thought. Robise reached out and rubbed his aged fingers along the counters and walls, almost lovingly, as he passed. He acted as if it would be the last time he would see his archives. Greta watched him in a questioning manner.

Noticing Greta’s perplexed look, the custodian explained, “I’ve been here my entire life. My father before me was the custodian and then I followed in his footsteps. He would tell me over and over again that you must be thorough in everything you do, and always have a backup plan. Always.”

He continued to walk, staring ahead, remembering, “We would sit here and correlate all the data that came in. Sort it and place it away forever. At least that is what we had hoped.”

“It is an immense responsibility,” Greta said sincerely.

“Yes, yes, it is,” Robise replied, his voice fading.

Unknown to either of them, perched above along a storage access catwalk, a lone shadow sat in the darkness. The figure was pointing a weapon directly at them, the sight moving back and forth. His dark-within-dark eyes peered at the image the laser sighted device produced. As his head rested against the stock of the gun, his lips parted in an evil smile.



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C H A P T E R T E N

**COPOLLA'S
FAR REACHING
GRASP**

Journo whispered, “You almost fooled me, Robise. Yes sir, old one, almost. But I make it a point to know who my adversaries are. And yes, it certainly does pay to be thorough.”

He watched the two figures approach as the cross hairs on his target scope confirmed that they were just barely outside of the guaranteed kill range. “Just a few more moments should do it,” he said softly.

As he waited, his thoughts began to drift as his finger seductively played with the trigger. A cold feeling suddenly settled upon him. *No. No. Not now, I have to concentrate*, he said to himself harshly. But his thoughts betrayed him and began to take him on a trip that was all too familiar to him. The images came as he fell into his old role again, seeing himself only a few years ago. He saw the simple individual who was not a hired thug who spied and killed for a price. He saw himself as a husband and a father. He saw his wife and child. He saw them living together happily on their home world of Narcissus 5.

Not again...

He was not home when it happened. He returned from a business trip to find his wife and child dead in the beds. The investigator’s report noted the cause as a faulty environmental unit. His wife and baby were exposed to toxins released through the vent ducts. His family had gone to sleep, unknowingly, forever.

The investigation revealed the company made the unit with less-than-quality parts to maximize their profits. As a result of the deaths, there was supposed to be a trial regarding the negligence of the company, but it never happened. The company had bribed and wrangled its way out of any wrongdoing. They were free. Free to kill again. Free to churn out profits at the price of innocent lives. Journo vowed, out of grief

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and anger, that this injustice would not go unpunished. They had to be stopped, somehow, somewhere.

Journo's mind had hardened, and he knew what he had to do. He studied the blueprints of the company owner's complex. Then he methodically re-rigged the owner's environmental unit after he was sure the company owner was alone. The man was dead in a matter of an hour, and no money or contacts could help him anymore.

Journo disappeared after that. He had nothing to hold him to Narcissus 5 anymore. No family and no friends. He knew that no one would miss him. So he left his soul and conscience behind and entered into another life. It was a life that was constantly fueled with the rage that had become his insatiable ally. He sold himself for a price; a person for hire for whatever needed to be done. It didn't matter whether it was right or wrong, sabotage or murder.

After a while, he developed an underground reputation as a life form who could get things done, for a price. Life forms talk. A name gets dropped here or there, and that was how this latest arrangement had been made. Copolla had searched Journo out based on his reputation and offered him permanent employment on retainer. It was good pay and easy work. The only hitch was the internal loyalty device that had to be implanted. He knew it was Copolla's fail-safe measure, but Journo didn't really care anymore, anyway. He knew that he was living on borrowed time. Occasionally, he even toyed with Copolla, hoping that he would go right ahead, push that little button, and end the suffering Journo constantly endured.

Beads of sweat suddenly rolled into his eyes, causing them to burn and momentarily force him back to reality. Slowly, his mind returned to the matter at hand. He had been here earlier with a few members of his team and they had killed, or thought they had killed, Robise and then destroyed the main core with the acid worm. Journo sent his team back to report, but he remained behind just to be sure. In this instance, it had paid off.

"An ingenious decoy, old one, I'll give you that," he whispered to himself, sneering. "And it almost worked. Almost."



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Journo squinted into the gun's sights. The luminous distance numbers in the sighting unit decreased as his targets slowly moved into optimum range.

"Almost there," Journo said, pleased.

He felt the moisture leave the two tongues in his mouth and perspiration run down his scaly skin underneath his clothing. His finger itched as it felt the reassuring presence of the firing trigger. Suddenly, a voice came to assault his mind.

Is this right? Don't you even care about what is really going on here? What really is at stake?

The fresh onslaught from his conscience was almost overpowering. He felt his finger loosen from the trigger as the distance numbers blurred in his eyesight. His head began to suddenly throb.

Is this right thing to do? What have these people done to you? Do they really deserve to die?

In a sudden moment of hesitation, he pulled his finger totally off the trigger. Blinking quickly, he raised his head from the gun's sights just as the luminous numbers turned green, indicating that his targets were in range for a guaranteed kill. He gazed at the two figures, which were now directly in his line of sight.

Last chance, Journo. What are you going to do? The internal voice demanded an answer.

Shut up! he ordered, gritting his teeth.

It only took a moment to decide. His head returned to the gun's sights and he pulled the trigger. There was a momentary flash of light, and then immediately the coppery smell of burnt flesh. "There, it's done," he said out loud, his eyes returning to their cold blackness. "And be damned to everyone, conscience or no conscience."

He replaced the weapon in its carrying case, then stood and headed for the stairs leading down to the area where the two bodies smoldered. Standing at the point of incineration, he kicked through the remaining ashes relentlessly with the toe of his boot, inspecting his work. There was no doubt about the kill.

Journo noticed, off to the side, the small box Robise had been carrying had amazingly escaped the brunt of the explosion. The old fool had placed something into some kind of protective box. He picked it

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up, opened it, and studied its contents, turning it about in his hands. “A computer core, old one,” he said. “Now what could be on this.” He smiled, and then placed it inside the case with his weapon. He then turned his back on the ashen forms and headed out of the archives.

His words echoed in the now deserted building. “You never know when something like this might come in handy.”

Scrav, the delegate from Bernard’s Star, sat in the chair opposite Copolla’s desk. The orange smoke from his cigarette exited his mouth and reentered the breathing apparatus attached to the side of his head. Bernard’s Star possessed an atmosphere that contained no oxygen, thereby requiring its inhabitants to wear the breathing device outside of their personal quarters.

Copolla turned from his terminal to face Scrav, as if he had just remembered he was there. His eyes momentarily fixated on the curling orange smoke.

“So, Scrav, have you called for the emergency session of the Council yet?”

“Yes, it is done,” Scrav said in his raspy voice, nodding. “The meeting will convene in one standard hour.”

“You know what to do?” Copolla asked.

“Yes,” Scrav stated simply. “I am to question the errors in the indoctrination process conducted by Leumas, and to make it appear to the Council that he is incompetent. Also, I am to plant the seed that the whole plan to bring Earth into the Council is in jeopardy because of his actions.” Scrav’s voice rasped on as the orange smoke continued its flow. “I have informed my associates to spread these rumors as soon as the announcement is made regarding Leumas’ procedural errors.”

Copolla smiled evilly, placing his hands under his chin in steeple fashion. “That sounds absolutely perfect.”

“You are aware that there are those who, if they heard of this arrangement, would possibly side more favorably with Leumas, and not with you.” Scrav’s voice carried a tone of arrogance within it.



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Copolla gave Scrav a withering look, not speaking immediately, but allowing his look to be embedded into the alien's memory. It was a look that transferred a murderous feeling, one that commanded fear within the receiver.

"There may possibly be some truth in that statement, Scrav," Copolla stated in a controlled voice. "But you know what? I am willing to bet that no one will find out anything. I have confidence in the *loyalty* of those who serve me." He emphasized the word "loyalty" for Scrav's benefit.

"Sometimes, the promise of fortunes or great power can corrupt those of limited means and destroy what loyalty they may have possessed." Scrav said.

"You know, Scrav, if I didn't know better, I'd say this sounds like an attempt to get more money out of me," he said, with his brows raised in question. There was a dangerous sparkle in Copolla's eyes, one that Scrav didn't like, not at all.

Scrav scratched his head above where the breathing device rested and nervously smiled. "My service to you has always been based on loyalty and trust. If you wish to reward me for that, I will gladly accept it."

"That's good to hear, Scrav. Why don't we discuss this further after the Council meeting?" Copolla said, almost too pleasantly. "Better yet, why don't we dine together this evening, say in about four standard hours? Then we can discuss these issues at our leisure and in more detail. How's that sound?" His facial expression attempted to reflect amiability, but his eyes stayed cold and held that strange gleam.

"Very nice," Scrav said with mixed emotions. "I will see you then."

Copolla sat and watched as Scrav scurried out, thinking what a silly creature he was. He hummed an old familiar tune, one that always soothed his frustration, allowing his anger to subside. It wasn't working. A voice inside his head suddenly spoke.

Careful now. Don't do anything that will any attract unnecessary attention. You'll end up regretting it. Allow this to pass. The voice faded.

Ignoring the voice, Copolla swiftly turned to his computer and began to type furiously. Screen after screen scrolled by, each requiring

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a password of its own. He quickly moved through each one until he reached the screen he sought. He stopped and stared.

His face was cast in an eerie green light from the terminal, making it appear to be a pure contortion of evil. He pressed the final key with such force he nearly ripped the keyboard away from the terminal. He waited a few seconds, his breathing erratic, and then sat back in his chair. He was calm now, and he felt the comfort of the chair's material caress his body.

He smiled as he read aloud in pure pleasure. "Loyalty device termination has been scheduled. Subject: Scrav, Bernard's Star. Termination time: Four hours. Mode: Slow disintegration."

The voice in Copolla's mind worked its way up from the dark depths it had been shoved into. *See... I told you...*

Copolla immediately squelched the voice. "Shut up!" he exclaimed, as he swiveled in his chair to look out of the window.

The Council members scurried to their seats for the impromptu meeting that had been called by Scrav. As the roll call was completed, the ominous Copolla entered and was seated.

I love watching them scurry about, Copolla thought to himself. *Something unplanned disrupts their little slithering daily routines. How complacent they have become.*

The Council settled down to business. There was only one item on the agenda for this emergency meeting: the progress on the installation of the two new delegates from the planet Earth. Scrav initiated the discussion.

"Leader of the UCDW and fellow delegates, I have seen the preliminary reports on the initial indoctrination process of the new members from the planet Earth. It does not appear as promising as what was laid before us on the original premise of this endeavor." He paused, looking around the room at the faces that had now turned toward him attentively. "If it would please the Council, I move that the current status of the new delegates be explained to us."

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Copolla stood from his seat and began in his booming voice. “Delegates, I will speak on this subject myself due to the lack of the head representative, Leumas, Initial Contact Agent, leader of the indoctrination team.” He spoke slowly and carefully, placing emphasis on certain words he wanted to embed in their small minds.

“Leumas is very involved in this indoctrination process and was unable to be here. I have spoken directly to him to learn of his progress. He has ensured me that everything is going along fine. There have been a few minor technical difficulties, but nothing that he hasn’t been able to handle.”

He almost smiled, but managed to keep it hidden. “As you all know, this was Leumas’ plan from the very start. He even volunteered for this assignment, based on his new hypotheses and procedures for handling difficult assimilations. I have received from many of you glowing praise of Leumas’ work, and he was perfect for such an important assignment as this. Leumas has not failed us before.”

He swept his arm around the room to emphasize his next words. “I am sure that each one of us here has the utmost trust in Leumas, even in an important event such as this one. Leumas will not fail us!” Pausing for effect, looking hard at each one of the delegates, he continued. “Again, I want you to know Leumas has assured me personally that the subjects will be ready to take their place as delegates within the UCDW soon, barring any more unforeseen delays.” Pausing again, and smiling congenially at the delegates, he said, “I expect that they will join this unique group on the floor of this noble hall in a very short time period.”

The member from Sirius A stood and addressed the Council in a serious tone, “What are these minor problems that Leumas is encountering?” he asked and then sat back down.

Copolla spoke slowly, enunciating each word clearly. “Problems in their specific details are not the major concern of this Council due to their technical aspects.” He tried to sound grave. “However, in layman’s terms, I believe the Earthlings were given too much data too quickly. This occurred before they were given a firm base on which to build. In essence, they reached a saturation point before their brains could correlate all the new data.”

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The sudden buzz that ensued among the delegates was music to Copolla's ears. It was exactly what he wanted to hear.

The delegate from Sirius A stood up abruptly. "But Leader, is this not the basic concept point of all indoctrinations? Are they not required to examine the subjects carefully before going to the next level so that they are not damaged?" The delegate had begun to wave his arms in questioning motions. "Is not damage at this point possibly irrecoverable?"

The murmurs within the hall now became rampant.

"Leumas should know better..."

"What was Leumas thinking?"

"Perhaps we praised him too hastily..."

"Overestimated his abilities..."

Copolla waited a few moments to allow all the damaging comments to circulate completely throughout the Great Hall before he continued.

"Yes, this is all true," he said, planting his words like tiny seeds. "But remember, Leumas is using new techniques which, I am sure I don't need to remind you, have met with overwhelming favorable endorsement from this Council." Arching his brows for emphasis, Copolla continued. "As I said earlier, this is merely a minor setback. Leumas has not failed us before, has he?"

The delegate from Wolf 359 stood to be recognized.

"Leader of the UCDW," he began.

"The Leader of the UCDW recognizes the delegate from Wolf 359," Copolla answered.

"The urgency of the Earth subjects' attendance within our circle will reach a critical turning point soon, as it is so stated in the Council's report." The delegate's voice rose in concern. "There is an opportunity here we must take advantage of. Any delay could cause further damage! If Leumas should fail—"

The delegate was cut off abruptly by Copolla's thundering voice. "The issue will wait until they are ready. This Council has decided that the time is appropriate for Earth to have its own delegates for representation. Leumas has assured this Council that their presence in this hall will happen as planned. He has personally staked his reputation on it. We

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will wait.” The finality in his voice brooked no further questions. “That is the ruling of the UCDW.”

Copolla ended the statement with a long stare at the Council members. “Now, are there any more questions?” he asked with extreme sarcasm. Silence greeted him.

“Then this meeting is adjourned.”

Copolla removed his robes and hung them up with a casual toss from a few feet, ringing the hook on the wall. He was feeling very pleased about the Council meeting; it had gone extremely well. Everything was going according to plan. “Perfectly,” he said out loud, as he sat down in his chair. He had learned through the years to try to allow for every possible contingency. The sabotaging of the indoctrination process had caused Leumas’ loyalty, abilities and integrity to fall under question and scrutiny by the Council. It was just what he wanted.

He knew Scrav was openly spreading rumors about Leumas’ failings as he had been instructed. He would add significantly to the concerns of the Council members on Leumas’ competence. Unfortunately, Scrav would coincidentally, but mysteriously, disappear this very same evening.

“More gloom and speculation about Leumas. How tragic,” he said, smiling and clucking his tongue. “Then, when the two subjects from Earth reject the Council’s assignment, Leumas will be finished for good.”

The only thing he had not figured on was Biom’s leakage of information. *I miscalculated him—I didn’t think he was smart enough to try and barter his life for information*, he thought, shaking his head. Because of this, he had opted to send Journo to the archives to ensure that the custodian had not kept any duplicate records of those that had been originally removed.

“Don’t want any loose ends. Been burnt once too many times on that kind of sloppiness,” he said, suddenly looking thoughtful. “If only

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I had thought about that so many years ago when I sent those two excuses for agents to Earth.”

He began to redden, thinking of the incident. They had both been supposedly loyal agents. Even if the loyalty device had existed then, the thought of placing the devices in them would have been speculative at best. The situation itself had been the catalyst that had caused him to have the device secretly developed in the first place. That was also around the same time that he broke another Council rule of removing dangerous life forms from their natural habitats, such as the acid worm.

Fate has a strange way of wrapping up loose ends sometimes, he thought, chuckling evilly. “It was a real shame that disease accidentally took those agents’ lives. It was so unfortunate that no bacteriological tests were done on them before they left Zire,” he said sarcastically to the empty room.

Copolla had studied the psychology of the Earth’s inhabitants intently. He knew this particular race of humanoids would reject the idea of any type of outside controlling influence because they were too stubborn. He also knew that, if a choice were placed before them, they would categorically deny membership to the organization on principle alone. He had the Council’s reports regarding the subjects’ background falsified so that this attempt to place the members on the Council would be expedited.

“Now, all I have to do is deal with these offspring from the two agents. How stupid could they have been?” he said shaking his head as he continued to reflect. “Did they actually believe they could hide from me forever? Maybe so. At that time, we did not have the observation satellites like we do today.”

The Council had sent one of those devices to Earth to observe the planet in preparation for their indoctrination to the UCDW. Part of the scanning process included the study of DNA patterns of the inhabitants. Two strange patterns had appeared. Fortunately for him, the tech reviewing the satellites’ data thought he should take this information directly to Copolla because he was on the Council Leader’s payroll. The DNA patterns were linked back to the two agents who had been



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assigned to Earth by Copolla, but they also included Earth DNA as well. Two hybrids had been formed.

He hid the data from the Council and devised the plan to get rid of the two offspring, who were now Leumas' subjects. "Well, what was done, was done," he said without any hesitation, rubbing his hands together. "I have a plan to deal with them now. After they refuse membership in the Council and opt to return to their precious planet, there will be an accident." He leaned back in his chair, pleased.

He continued thinking aloud. "Let's see. It will happen during the process of wiping their memory, an overload perhaps. Unfortunately, the two humans will die an irrecoverable death and, of course, the person in charge of performing all this will be Leumas. My good buddy Leumas, he just can't seem to get anything right these days."

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E L E V E N

**THE EDUCATION OF
GREG AND SARAH**



Centuries ago there were three planets that dominated the galaxy in the technology of space travel, the voice continued on within the dream-state of Sarah and Greg. They realized their competition for expansion, replenishment of their raw material, and energy resources would become inevitable. With much difficulty, they resolved to meet and develop an equitable system whereby they would enter into an agreement to share the resources found on other less developed or uninhabitable worlds. Each wary of the other from previous encounters and engagements, they met on a neutral planet under very tense and nervous circumstances.

As freak chances of nature are at times unpredictable, an unusual disturbance occurred on the surface of the neutral planet, which caused the area in which they met to be surprisingly and swiftly demolished by seismic quakes and eruptions. All members on the negotiating teams for the three planets were killed.

Immediately, the corresponding ships in orbit above the planet assumed that one of the other races had developed a new weapon of superior strength that could induce instability within a planet's core. Such strength would be a decisive edge to galaxy supremacy that would have to be destroyed immediately. The ships opened fire upon each other and began a war, one that would last a very long time.

Eventually all the inhabited planets of the Galaxy were drawn into the continual war, which almost led to their own annihilation. Once the fighting fervor had set in, their original motives for the fighting changed to one of total extermination of the other species. They fought over and on the less-developed planets in the system for military position, raw materials, slave labor and, most of all, power.

The strong survivors moved from planet to planet, leaving a path of destruction. Wasted worlds reduced to rubble, civilizations decimated. The

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inferior planets were stripped of their resources, their life forms impoverished, reduced to simple slavery or killed. Innocent life forms, technologically lacking, were caught in the middle. All were dying for the unknown cause of the more powerful races.

The final battle took place on and around the planet Zire, a small world of no major consequence, with the exception that it was located dead center of the approximate dividing point between the major faction systems. All of the major powers had laid claim to this insignificant centralized planet, like little children fighting over the last scoop of ice cream. As with little children, they were each determined the other would not have it. The strategic importance was insignificant; they had been fighting for so long that they had forgotten why.

For a standard year, they fought every day, every hour, every minute. Reinforcements, ships, equipment and supplies were sent from the homeworld planets to support this battle. They stripped their planetary coffers clean in order to keep fighting over a planet that was not worth one-one thousandth of the effort or materials that had been expended in its taking. Yet they continued to fight. Smaller races that had thrown in with the major races were virtually wiped out during the intense fighting.

When it was all over, Zire lay in ruins, and the superpowers were reduced to mere shadows of their former selves. They had committed major resources to this battle solely on principle, only to be left with nothing. Seeing the futility and inevitable destruction to which they had been blind for so long, the forces agreed to meet on the planet's surface to discuss a cease of hostilities. They were all humbled, their resources depleted, and they agreed to take this first step toward peace.

They met in one of the few structures left on Zire that still had a shape identifiable as a building. It was symbolic in a way, because it was the only one still standing. They hoped it would serve as a reminder of the atrocities that had been committed in this futile war. Their discussions were simple; if the galaxy and those species that inhabited it were going to survive, the fighting must cease immediately. In a show of unity, they would form an allegiance, a Council of members who would decide the best way to jointly develop their collective cultures and those of other planets as well.

This place where they held their first meeting would now serve as the new home of this Council. This world in which they fought the final battle would

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be a memorial, in order that they not forget what had driven them to this point, their greed and mistrust of different life forms.

One of the bedrock principles that sprang from these ruins was that the lesser-developed planets would no longer be ravaged for their resources. Instead, they would be helped along in their development to ensure that what had happened before would not happen again. Those that knew of the new alliance would be helped outright. Those that did not would be helped secretly in order for them to develop without knowing of direct outside influence. The galaxy would live in peace, ruled by all, but yet none. They named themselves the United Council for Developing Worlds.

Charter of the United Council for Developing Worlds

The United Council for Developing Worlds, hereafter referred to as the "UCDW," shall be formed through membership by those planets and systems that have met to develop this charter. Members from said planets will be added to the Council only after their progress is evaluated in order to provide insightful input into their planet development. Members shall be selected by the Council to ensure coverage of the main beliefs and social structure of said worlds.

The purpose of the UCDW is to guide less developed worlds toward a productive development both socially and scientifically so as to coexist peacefully in the galaxy. This mission shall be accomplished by using influence (see Policy regarding the Act of Influencing) to assist in the decision making processes of the planet, thereby allowing individual traits of the planet's policy makers to gauge said decisions.

The existence of the UCDW shall be kept secret from non-member planet societies until they reach the level of comprehension to understand the basic concepts and guidelines of the UCDW, both in the spirit of this charter and technological advancements deemed worthy of membership.

Upon attaining such level of comprehension, two selected members shall be chosen to become delegates to the Council. They will be removed from their society by completing their life cycle abruptly, thereby allowing explanations of their disappearance. These two members must represent a true cross section of the potential member planet. Upon their arrival to the Council planet, currently Zire, the tentative members will be re-animated. In the event of a

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failure in the assimilation of members to the Council, memory erasure will be instituted and a non-interference policy may be imposed on said planet.

Under no circumstances will members/agents of any alien races be allowed to mix with the population of a planet that has not yet been approached by the Council in an official capacity. Offspring produced by the joining of mixed alien races is of paramount concern, whereas this procreation could possibly harm the normal sociological development of the planet and this association. This would be in direct violation of the basic principles of the UCDW's charter.

*The United Council for Developing Worlds
The Act of Influencing*

Influencing is defined as the act by which a member of the Council, normally an Initial Contact Agent (ICA), places an alien being (non-UCDW member) under influence. This Agent, who has been born, created or so altered to attain this position, when specifically directed, shall place an alien being (non-UCDW member) under influence. This shall be done by the transference of thought from the agent to the alien species. Influence shall never be applied to an active member of the UCDW.

Transference shall be accomplished by the conversion of the agent's thoughts into sub-atomic particles, transported through electrical stimulus and inserted into the alien species. Brain pathways and neural connections are not to be altered in any way that will pose a threat of possible neural damage. The thought shall be endorsed by the Council before insertion, and shall be pertinent to the stated order and direction of the Council. No thought will be specific in order to bring about a specific result but will simply open possibilities to the aliens, thus allowing them to conduct themselves in a way to produce a desired result based upon the interpretation of the influence by said aliens.

Influence applied in a way not in accordance with this intent shall lead to punitive punishment of that member and immediate removal from the UCDW.

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The United Council for Developing Worlds is the Savior of the galaxy, as we know it. Without their continued support and guidance, the stability of numerous worlds would falter. The ideology of the...

Sarah and Greg slowly opened their eyes in their new surroundings as the voices in their minds ceased their relentless dictation.

"We're not in the bar anymore," Sarah said groggily as her eyes scanned the room from the plush sofa she now found herself on.

"Where is this Leumas guy?" Greg asked, shaking the sleep from his head. "I wasn't through with him yet!" He looked around, but Leumas was nowhere to be seen.

"Please, Greg. You weren't through with him yet?" she said sarcastically, then smiled at him.

"Okay, well, maybe he was controlling things a little," he agreed, returning her smile. For a moment, their eyes made contact and, as they looked at each other, Greg felt himself drawn into her eyes. *She's so beautiful...* he thought. He felt his body temperature rising, and he knew he was beginning to blush. He felt embarrassed by his overt display of feelings, but couldn't help noticing that she too appeared to be having a similar reaction.

"So...ah...where are we now?" she said as she turned her face from his. Before she completely turned from him, Greg saw the smile that played upon her lips and how she coyly tried to hide it.

"It looks like some kind of a study or library," he said as his thoughts returned to their new surroundings.

The walls were lined with bookcases teeming with books, and there was a crackling fire in the fireplace. The mantle above it held numerous photographs, but they were too far away to make out any detail. Three large, antiquated wing back chairs sat on a plush Oriental carpet in front of the fireplace, inviting comfort and warmth.

Greg scratched his head as he turned to Sarah. "Here we go again. Every time we wake up, we're someplace new."

"What about all the crazy stuff Leumas was laying on us? And the dreams we're having about this UCDW. It's so odd." Sarah stretched her arms out, yawning. "But, I guess if you think about it, it's not really that far-fetched. We constantly worry about our own government and



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their secret organizations spying on us and stuff. Why couldn't a superior alien race be doing it?"

"I guess they could," he said, shrugging. "You saw the same thing I did in this last dream. The organization, what was it called...the UCDW? It's not that unbelievable. We've always thought there's more intelligent life out there in the galaxy."

Sarah arched an eyebrow. "On the other hand, there's always the possibility that we've just been kidnapped, and this guy is just messing with our heads." She appeared to reconsider that statement. "But what would be the point in someone doing that? It's not like someone will pay a handsome reward for our return or anything."

"Maybe he's doing it just for kicks...who knows. There are a lot of crazies in this world." Greg shrugged again.

She leaned against the back of the couch and sighed. "Well, what's our next move, Greg? I don't think we're in control anymore."

"I think it's time we forced this Leumas character to show us some credible proof about this alien thing," he said, standing up.

"Like what?"

He began to walk around the room, touching objects as if trying to make sure they were real.

"I don't know, but he must be able to do something to prove he's not human. Hell, even just show us anything to back up his story. You know, these dreams could all be just drug-induced. Their simulation technology doesn't seem to be that advanced. I've read about simpler devices used all the time. I mean, look at the stuff at Disney World."

"I agree," she said, nodding, but appeared to have something else on her mind. She began hesitantly. "But, um, Greg, there is something else I want to ask you. It's something that I'm not quite sure how to explain. Maybe you've been feeling it to. It's probably not important, but it's starting to bug me more and more."

"What's that?" he asked warily. He felt himself beginning to blush again, thinking she was going to mention something about them and their feelings.

Sarah saw his expression and, suddenly, she blushed too. They looked at each other and laughed. Greg thought it was wonderful to be able to share this feeling with someone.

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“You were going to say something?” Greg asked, when he got his laughter under control.

“This is going to sound strange, but I’ve been getting a strange sensation in my head. It’s like, well, like *deja vu* stuff,” she said, unsure of her words.

Greg stopped in mid-stride, and looked at her intently. “You mean like when someone says something, you could almost have sworn that you knew that they were going to say it?”

“Sort of, but more like knowing what someone is thinking,” she said.

“I know,” he said. “I’ve had those same sensations. I’m not sure if it’s just a feeling, or if it’s some sort of reaction to all that’s been going on.” He paused, sighing. “Right now, I’m not sure what’s fact and what’s fiction. Let’s just leave that for now and deal with Leumas first. Okay?”

“Okay,” she agreed, briefly touching his hand with hers. He was about to reach for hers when the sound of the doorknob turning and the door slowly opening into the study drew their attention from the moment.

Leumas strode into the study, carefully closing the door behind him. He strolled across the immense room. He wore a red smoking jacket and a comfortable looking pair of gray wool trousers.

“What’s this?” Greg said, nudging Sarah. “We’ve gone from bartender to lord of the manor?”

Sarah stifled her soft laughter as Leumas sauntered around the room. He ignored them as he glanced at himself in the mirror over the mantel. Finally satisfied, he moved in front of the fireplace and motioned Sarah and Greg to join him. He nodded toward two of the wing back chairs. They hypnotically stood up from where they had been sitting and moved toward the chairs. They sat down on the overstuffed cushions facing Leumas.

“Well, now, Greg and Sarah, how are we all feeling this fine day? Ready to have some more fun?” His demeanor was calm and collective, not exactly what Greg remembered from their last meeting. He sat and leaned back in the chair, getting comfortable and then said, “We’ve got several hundred years to catch up on.”

“What do you mean, several hundred years?” Greg said, frowning.

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“Come on now, do you really think these dreams you have been having about the UCDW are all bogus?” Leumas asked rhetorically. “Well, they aren’t, and you had better start paying attention. There’s a lot at stake here. More than you can possibly imagine.”

“What is this, school or something?” Sarah asked angrily. “Pay attention! Listen to me! It’s all important! I don’t know what to believe anymore,” she finished, her frustration showing clearly as she folded her arms across her chest.

Greg stood from the chair, pointing at Leumas. “One minute you tell us we’re dead. Then we’re back to life. Which is it? Is any of it true? Space aliens and Councils that control the destinies of planets?” he sneered. “Give me a break already!”

Leumas gently tempered his voice, and spoke to them like he was dealing with two ill-tempered children. “I understand that you’re both confused at the moment. We can only move so fast.” Then his voice softened further. “I’m sorry about what happened earlier. I told you too much information too quickly.” He shook his head. “You should have listened and let me gradually feed you the information. It’s a wonder that you haven’t suffered brain damage. The sooner you both start trusting and believing me, the better off you’ll both be.”

“Trust you, ha!” Greg exclaimed. “I’d trust a stripper to give me change for a ten quicker than I would trust you!”

Sarah frowned at Greg, obviously not amused by his metaphor.

Suddenly feeling her gaze, he became embarrassed. “Uh, sorry, Sarah. But this guy, or whatever he is, has gone far enough with his UCDW crap, or whatever the hell it is he’s been rambling on about. I’ve had enough and I know you feel the same way.”

Greg turned back to Leumas. “Give me one good reason why we should believe you!”

Leumas exhaled deeply. “I wondered when we would get to the show-and-tell scenario,” he said, shaking his head. “So now you require some kind of proof about what I say.”

Sarah and Greg nodded in unison, staring at him skeptically.

Leumas stood, and pointed to himself. “Well, let’s start with me. Do you believe I’m an alien?”

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Before they could say anything, his appearance suddenly changed. He became tall and lanky as his shape changed into Abraham Lincoln, “Four score and seven years ago...” he said in a deep resonant voice, stroking his long dark beard.

Seconds later, he was Albert Einstein, his white hair spreading in a corona. “E is equal to M C squared.”

Next, Richard Nixon, “I have done nothing wrong, I am not a crook,” he said with his fingers in a “V.”

Next, John F. Kennedy, in a thick Bostonian accent, “Don’t ask what your country will do for you...”

Next, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in a voice filled with conviction, “I have a dream...”

Leumas continued, on and on, in a blaze of familiar Earth personages in less than a minute.

They were still shocked and speechless as they stared at what appeared to be a misshapen lump of clay where Leumas had just been standing. Suddenly, an unmistakable grin appeared in the lump, and they had no doubt that, whatever the form, this was definitely Leumas as he struggled back to his initial shape and appearance. He looked fatigued.

“Whew...that’s a lot of work,” he said, gasping for air as he limped over to the mirror, smoothed his displaced hair and straightened his smoking jacket. He turned to them, bowing like a master showman. “Well, how’s that, kids?” he said, obviously amused. “Still have doubts? If you’d like, I could replay your deaths for you. A little gory, perhaps, but maybe it would drive the point home!”

They were still unable to speak, but they shook their heads negatively to that suggestion.

Leumas pointed at them. “You’re not asleep either. You are both very much awake.” He swept his hand across the room, “This is real! It is all real! What I have to tell you yet is very real! So you’d better wake up and listen to what I have to say!” Silence settled in the room, allowing them to regain their composure after seeing the strangest things they had ever seen in their lives.

“Are we clear on this alien thing now?” Leumas asked. “Do I have your full attention now? This is not a dream or a simulation, folks. This

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is real time...the real thing. There cannot be any doubt in your minds from this point on," he finished firmly.

"Ah, excuse me," Greg began in a somewhat befuddled voice.

"Yes, Greg, you have something you want to say?"

"I just want to make sure that I have all this now," Greg said, wanting to put some organization into what he'd just seen and what was going to happen next. "So, the deal is that you are an alien, which I must say, you have displayed quite wonderfully for us."

Leumas nodded and smiled, pleased.

Then more seriously, Greg raised his fingers and ticked off each item. "Okay, now then. So Sarah and I were killed, then somehow rejuvenated, and brought to this planet." He paused, scratching his head as Leumas nodded again. "Okay, so there's this organization called The United Council for Developing Worlds, which controls the development of planets in the galaxy. Have I got it right so far?"

"That is a very good start," Leumas said. He turned toward Sarah. "Sarah, do you agree with that summary?"

Sarah thought he sounded like a schoolteacher again, checking the comprehension of his students. "Yes, I think so."

"Good. Now we need to move on," Leumas said, gesturing as if he was inviting them along for a little stroll. "I do not wish to alarm you, but I don't think either of you have realized the seriousness of your situation yet. That's what I am here for. I'm from the Council and I'm here to help."

"I think we see that now," Greg said, and saw confirmation in Sarah's eyes.

"Good. Now, as I was saying," Leumas continued, clearing his throat. "I am here to help you and guide you along in the indoctrination process, and then to prepare you for your new assignment. I am what is called an Initial Contact Agent. I bring in new members from different planets and gradually indoctrinate them into the Council's processes, their responsibilities and/or any assignment the subjects may be immediately tasked with."

"You mentioned an assignment. What assignment?" Sarah asked skeptically.

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“We’re coming to that,” Leumas said quickly. “But you must trust me, or we won’t get anywhere. Unfortunately, there is more going on than just getting you two on the Council. Some internal squabbles are making this process a whole lot more complicated than it would be normally. But we’ll leave that out of this conversation for now.”

“That sounds like Earth politics a little bit,” Greg said.

“In some ways, we do have similar problems in our organization,” Leumas agreed. “Now, to get back to what is expected of you. I have fed into your minds the basic principles and structure of the UCDW. It will become clearer to you as we discuss it further. Basically, you have been given the enormous honor to represent Earth as delegates within our organization.” He smiled congenially. “Representatives of your entire race, even. You will be deciding on the what, where, and when regarding your planet. The fate and destiny of your species,” Leumas said, ending his statement, trying to show the enormity of their responsibility with a broad sweep of his arms toward Greg and Sarah.

They stared at each other in awe. The words “fate of your species” repeated in their ears.

“Why us?” Sarah asked, perplexed.

“I don’t know the answer to that question,” Leumas replied. “I did not participate in the selection process. The Council did that.” He shrugged. “From the data I have been given, I assume that you both possess a broad spectrum of qualities that are indicative of your species.”

“I still don’t get it,” Sarah said.

Leumas paused his pacing and pointed at Sarah. “For instance, take yourself, Sarah. You are dedicated, loyal, determined and you are a very work conscious individual.” He turned to Greg. “You, Greg, on the other hand, are a very, uh, well, subdued individual who leans more toward the pleasure or enjoyment of things.” Leumas began to pace back and forth, like a teacher explaining a math problem. “In comparison, you two are opposites. However, your attitudes or outlooks will ensure the equal representation of the lifestyles of your planet’s culture. That is why you are here. You will set the guiding principles for your planet.”

“No...it still doesn’t make sense,” Greg began. “There are a lot better choices than us; we are average and common. There are leaders, statesmen, diplomats, who would all be much better suited for this kind

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of thing. They have been trained for years, some of them all their lives, to perform these type of duties.”

Greg’s voice began to show his frustration. “How are we going to set the guiding principles, as you call them? No one will listen to us. We are only small people with a small voice. We have no money or resources to attain a position of leadership.” And then, bitterly, he added, “Besides all that, we’re dead thanks to you and your fellow Council cronies.”

Ignoring Greg’s sarcasm, Leumas explained, “That is not relevant. We, the UCDW, have the ability to shape the direction of a planet’s development by placing influences or suggestions into the minds of other species and races.”

“But—” Sarah began.

“Shh...let me go on first,” Leumas interrupted. “Then you can ask questions.” He paused to ensure they understood. They reluctantly nodded their heads. He continued, “At times, we will even insert a member of the UCDW into the actual planet system to enact a specific change. However, in Earth’s case, due to the majority of Council members who are non-humanoid in appearance, except for a scant few others and myself, it has been deemed too risky at this time to insert one of us. Not everyone has my kind of skills, you know.”

Leumas stopped, checking his appearance in the reflection of a silver vase, then finished. “Therefore, we expedited the time frame of our meeting with you so that you could assume your new position and status as delegates. This you will do until the appointed time in which the Earth is judged to require no further influence from the UCDW. Up to this moment, the Council has been influencing events on your planet in the best interest deemed by them. Now, you two will assume that role of decision making in the UCDW. Questions?”

“Ah, excuse me Leumas,” Sarah said. “Can you please explain how this influencing thing works a little more clearly?”

He sighed, then began to explain carefully. “We place ideas in the minds of life forms that are in the position to cause a certain event or outcome. It could be a leader of a country, or it might be a street urchin. It’s all a matter of place and time, whatever it takes to get something to happen.” Seeing the bewilderment in their eyes, he continued, “For instance, suppose Government A is voting on a proposal to go to

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war with Government B. Well, the UCDW may not think that this is a good idea, so we influence the proper leaders to discourage this. If that doesn't work, we go to people who could possibly influence the decision indirectly, such as other powerful lobbying groups or even spouses of government officials, for that matter." He hesitated, then said, "Or perhaps Candidate President A has qualities that we feel are better than those of Candidate President B. We could influence a small populace to swing their vote to one side or the other, for the planet's best interest, of course."

Greg could no longer hold in the frustration from what he was hearing. "Hold it a minute now, Leumas! Do you mean to tell us that through all these years somebody has been controlling the actions of what we do on Earth?"

"To a certain degree, I would have to answer yes to that question," Leumas said matter-of-factly. "However, remember that, of all the millions of people on the Earth, the number that we actually influence is minute, almost insignificant."

Sarah's voice jumped in with a cutting tone. "But the number wouldn't matter if you influenced just the right people, now would it?"

Leumas smiled. "Very good, Sarah. I'm glad to see you agree with the process."



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T W E L V E

**GREG & SARAH
TAKE A STAND**

Sarah quickly stood from her chair and held up her hand in protest. “Hold on just one minute, Leumas!” she shouted, her face flushed with anger. “I’m not saying that I agree with any of this, only that I understand it. The truth is I don’t like it at all. ‘Big Brother is watching’ does not appeal to me. Who is to say that the UCDW knows the right way for Earth to go? It’s like playing God or something with an entire planet!”

“Now, now, let’s not make any hasty decisions,” he said nonchalantly, ignoring her anger. “I think you are taking the extreme side of the position. I’ll concede you are correct to a certain extent, but look at all the good things that have come out of it. We’ve probably saved your planet from chaos and destruction numerous times. Although we might not be directly influencing events, we always maintain observation of less-developed worlds such as Earth. From what I have seen in the records, without our assistance, you might not even be here today,” he said proudly.

“But then again, maybe you haven’t,” she challenged pointedly as she sat back down. “Perhaps your intervention screws history up too. Look at all the conflicts we’ve had. How many people may have died because of your influence? Are these bad decisions on your part?” she finished, raising an eyebrow sarcastically.

“Some decisions have been made that have had adverse effects,” Leumas conceded. “But the simple fact that the planet is still here, with living life on it, could very well be a result of our intervention. Remember your nuclear buildup? Your Cold War? Do you honestly believe that, with all those weapons, there was never an error by some careless technician? How about just an honest mistake? We intervened

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on several occasions, which is why you are here speaking with me right now and not a pile of glowing ashes!" he said, defensively.

"Okay, Leumas, we're going in circles now," Greg stated, trying to relieve some of the tension. "I understand how Sarah feels about this, even though the reason you said you picked us was because we were so opposite. However, even though we are different in our lifestyles, I think you will find that the people of Earth join together on issues such as this." He continued with his patriotic stand. "We have a natural resistance to being controlled against our wills. It is against all of our personal beliefs and our individual lifestyles. We have fought to retain these rights and to be free of outsiders telling us what to do. I feel very confident that the consensus will go that way. We will not be subservient to anyone."

Greg glanced over at Sarah, who gave him a quick thumbs up, and then he pointed his forefinger toward Leumas. "You will get no agreeable vote out of us." He turned back to Sarah. "Am I right, Sarah?"

"That's right, Greg!" she agreed wholeheartedly. "This cannot go on. Earth must be allowed to make its own decisions. Good or bad, it's our right to make our own choices as long as we do not screw up any other planet in the process. Maybe in a couple of hundred years or so, our answer might be different. But, judging by the way we are today, I wouldn't think so." She looked toward Greg, and he smiled at her. She smiled back and then spoke to Leumas very calmly. "If the Council were to control us without our knowing about it, obviously there is nothing we could do about it. However, if Earth did know, I think you would run into a lot of resentment and non-compliance. We need to be free!"

Silence echoed among the group.

"So now what?" Greg asked Leumas.

Leumas stared at them, carefully choosing and composing his words. "Be careful what you are saying here. You have to be sure about this, more than anything else you have ever had to make a decision about in all of your lives." He continued with sincerity. "This is a golden opportunity to bring your planet and its people forward into an alliance that promises a definite future. Your world has a long way to go. Do you want to have more conflicts, more people dying needlessly?"

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“You don’t know if that is true or not, and not even you can predict the future, Leumas!” Greg challenged.

“Or can you?” Sarah inserted speculatively, her eyes narrowing as she stared at Leumas. “Is there more that you have not told us about your abilities?”

“No. We cannot predict the future,” Leumas said in a voice that showed his frustration. “However, we estimate that, with the UCDW’s growth rate, due to the new introduction of life forms, there will possibly be a blending of genetic material at some point. This, in turn, may lead to a species that will develop the type of ability you refer to. But, right now, we utilize prediction analyses based on logic triangles. They are not perfect, but they are within normal parameters of acceptance.”

“Define normal parameters of acceptance regarding the Earth predictions,” Greg asked warily.

Leumas began to explain, clearing his throat nervously. “Well...with Earth, the path is rather difficult to see. There are several variables that we have not dealt with before. You Earth people are such a diverse lot. We estimate a fifty/fifty ratio of success in our endeavors.”

Sarah and Greg looked at each other in disbelief. They were both shocked that with such a low percentage chance of success, any meddling would still be attempted.

“You—” Greg started to speak, but Leumas held up his hand for silence.

“I know, I know,” he continued. “Those are crummy odds, and yes, it could go either way. But why take the risk if you don’t have to? Let us help you to ensure that the direction is the correct one.”

Once again, they were about to say something, but Leumas placed his finger on his lips for silence. He moved closer and spoke in a soft voice. “Listen carefully. The Council is monitoring your progress. If you both truly agree to refuse the positions that they are offering, they will render some sort of decision immediately. They could possibly scrub the entire plan of installing delegates from Earth to the UCDW for another hundred years.” Leumas paused, hoping the impact of his words would hit home.

He looked at both Greg and Sarah, and neither seemed to be swayed by his arguments. He continued, “The effects on Earth could

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be devastating, not to mention what would happen to my reputation. The Council will not stand by and let the Earth annihilate its entire population. If things get too bad, they might send me to Earth to directly influence and I must not go to Earth! That's exactly what they want, to get me out of the picture. There's no telling what will happen if I am not here to watch the Council's activities. Members have been having unusual accidents lately." He chastised himself for this outburst, but secretly hoped the personal slant might have some kind of impact on them. He was mistaken.

"We're truly sorry about your internal problems, Leumas," Greg began. "But let me assure you wholeheartedly that neither Sarah nor I want you to go to the Earth either. We want it to be 'hands off' to all of you!" he finished coldly.

Leumas pleaded with them, shaking his hands in the air in frustration. "Please! Greg, Sarah, think about what you're doing here. One of the main reasons why you were brought here ahead of schedule is that there may possibly be a critical turning point on your planet. The next United States Presidential elections—"

"Will go on perfectly well without any influence from you," Sarah said, as she crossed her arms on her chest and then gave Greg a wink. When she did that, all Greg could do was stare at her in admiration of the woman, but Leumas' voice brought him quickly out of it.

"Okay...okay, I get the point," he began, sighing in resignation. "But, remember, some things are out of my control." His face took on an apologetic look. Greg wasn't sure if it was real or if Leumas was just changing his facial features to make them believe it was an honest expression. "Look, I know the process of your indoctrination was a little shaky and all, but maybe we could compromise."

"What did you have in mind?" Sarah asked in a very diplomatic voice, as if she were a qualified negotiator.

"Perhaps in a couple of years you will change your minds about all of this. I'm sure you understand it's not every day that an offer such as this is made to a non-UCDW planet so early in its development. Let's leave an opening in case you want to come back," he said, smiling genially.

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Sarah and Greg rose from their chairs simultaneously, as if they'd had the exact same thought at the same time, to talk about his offer. Greg turned toward Leumas. "Can we have a moment alone, please?"

"By all means," he answered, and walked to the other end of the study, stopping at the mirror and carefully straightening his collar.

Greg waited until Leumas had moved far enough away so they would not be overheard before he began to speak. "Sarah, I know that we agree to not let them into our affairs, but then again, if something strange should happen, we may want to come back to see what they are up to. We could probably do more good here on Zire than on Earth. Maybe we should leave an option open. What do you think?"

She looked at him as a number of emotions passed over her face, then glanced back at Leumas, who was now combing his hair in a mirror, and then back to Greg. "I guess we have been offered a opportunity of a lifetime, after all. Deep down, I think Leumas means well and probably has gone out on a limb or two for us."

They looked at one another, nodding understanding of their unspoken agreement. Greg motioned Leumas to come back over, then offered his hand to him as a show of their good faith in trying to compromise. "Exactly what did you have in mind?"

Leumas smiled at them. "I always pride myself on having options readily available. You need to leave the option open of joining the UCDW. Let's say, for instance, that you change your mind," he noticed the looks they were giving him, and held up his hand again. "I know, I know, not likely. But, for argument's sake, let's just say that you do want to belong to the UCDW one day after all. Considering all the effort that goes into this kind of indoctrination, the Council would need, well, some type of reassurance that you really mean what you say." He stopped pacing, and stood directly in front of them, arms akimbo. He stared into their eyes, and stated matter-of-factly, "So, in order for you to show your sincerity, you will have to go out and say...well, kill yourselves."

Their mouths dropped open in unison.

He continued, ignoring their shock. "Now, remember, it must be together. It cannot be done separately, or at the same time in different places. You must be physically together, at the same place. That way

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we will know that you really want to come back, and all we have to do is rejuvenate you later. Not an unreasonable request, I don't think?" He smiled congenially.

"A little harsh, wouldn't you say?" Sarah asked sarcastically.

He shrugged. "Well, sure it is. But look, we have to be absolutely positive about these things. It can't be just a freak occurrence. You both are mentally stable and rational people." He stopped, as if reconsidering his last statement, smiled and scratched his head in thought, and then continued in an authoritative voice. "The chances of both of you taking your lives at exactly the same time are about ninety-nine point ninety-nine against. With these odds, we have a fail-safe built in and nothing can possibly go wrong."

Greg and Sarah looked at each other skeptically.

Ignoring the glances, Leumas finished, "Secondly, your consent will show your diplomatic spirit, and you can leave with the UCDW still on your side. Maybe over the next couple of hundred years or so, your planet might change its mind, who knows? But for now, I am just dealing with you two and the immediate future."

Greg turned toward Sarah. "I guess the odds are in our favor, Sarah. I can see his point about being sure if we wanted to come back, for whatever reason. What do you think?"

As Greg was waiting for her response, he suddenly heard her voice whisper inside his head, *::Let's do it, Greg. It sounds okay to me.::*

He was momentarily taken aback by the sound of her voice as it sank into his mind. She hadn't moved her lips, he was sure of it; he'd been staring right at her.

Sarah had a nervous, yet inquisitive expression on her face. Her eyes conveyed an understanding that indicated she knew he had heard her. They both realized that something significant had happened, and it was something Leumas did not have to know about. Not yet, anyway. He nodded his head, turned from her to face Leumas.

"Sure. Ah, it sounds like a reasonable request to me," Sarah agreed, trying to keep her voice steady so as not to alert Leumas to anything.

"It is done then. I will make all of the arrangements. Leumas said sounding pleased, turned on his heel toward the door. "The next step is the Council," he said aloud, thinking about his next plan of action.

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He turned the doorknob to head out, but stopped suddenly and moved back toward Greg and Sarah and spoke softly. “Just one more little thing. Remember earlier when I mentioned that little internal political problem I’ve been having?”

They both nodded, recalling the conversation.

Leumas cleared his throat, choosing his words carefully. “Well, it may get a little, sticky around here. Just remember that I’m on your side. Just go along with me, even if something seems a little strange or unreasonable.”

“Strange and unreasonable? And if we don’t agree to go along?” Greg asked, becoming wary.

“Well, let’s see, how can I put this so you’ll remember,” Leumas began, tapping his finger on his chin. “How about, if you don’t, well, it might get you killed. But this time there won’t be any rejuvenation.”

“Well, how’s that for a little bombshell?” Sarah said. “Leumas’ little ‘play my game or else’ deal. Apparently, there’s no room for discussion on that issue.”

“I think that’s just the effect Leumas wanted to leave us with. A ‘no choice’ bluff, if you ask me,” Greg said confidently. “I don’t know how I know that, I just do.”

::Just like when I was able to talk to you without verbalizing anything, :: Greg heard Sarah’s voice in his mind say. The words were soft and quiet, feeling as if they were just out of reach of the normal audible level, but he understood. Exactly, he thought to himself, and then imagined sending that thought to Sarah, *::Exactly.::*

Sarah staggered back a few steps, as if she had momentarily lost her balance. Greg stepped forward to steady her.

Shaking her head, she said aloud, “Wow, what did you do, scream at me or something? It felt like a ton of bricks falling on my head.”

“Sorry. I just said the word in my mind. Are you okay?” he asked, obviously concerned that he had caused her pain.

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“Yes, I’m okay,” she started to sit down. Greg placed his hand under her elbow and eased her into the chair. “It was just the shock of it all. It was so loud. Do I sound like that?”

“No, not at all. I have to strain to hear your words,” he responded, puzzled as he sat next to her. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yes, I’m okay, don’t worry.” She placed the palm side of her hand up to the side of his face. He grasped her petite fingers and gently squeezed them. She squeezed back, and they smiled at each other like two little teenagers.

“Well,” she said after a few seconds. “It appears that your mental strength must be greater than mine.” She released his hand as he stood and began to pace.

“I don’t know what’s going on, but something weird is happening to us,” he said, looking away from her. “Maybe it’s not directly related to what’s happening with the Council issue, but possibly indirectly.”

“What do you mean?”

“They’re playing with our minds, Sarah. Maybe it’s triggered something.”

She touched his arm as her thoughts reached out to him. *::Whatever it is, we’re developing abilities that are not normal for humans, being able to talk to one another telepathically. And you even mentioned ‘knowing’ what Leumas really meant earlier. Is it possible to develop the ability to read minds?::*

Greg concentrated on sending his thoughts back to her, but at a bare whisper this time, trying to ensure the volume was turned down so it wouldn’t hurt her. *::Kind of makes you wonder, doesn’t it? Dealing with these aliens at first, and now developing these strange powers.::* He watched her face closely for any sign or expression that he was too loud. *::Is the level okay?::*

::It’s fine now. Thanks,:: she responded appreciatively.

He nodded and continued. *::Sounds like an episode of some science fiction show or something.::* He stuffed his hands in his pockets and watched her face for some reaction. He felt a smile form on his lips.

She smiled back with a grin that warmed him from head to toe. It amazed him how she could do that with just a look and that twinkling in her eyes.

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::We have to be careful though,:: she said seriously. ::We don't know if Leumas is watching us or not, so I suggest no more verbal communication about the telepathy, agreed?::

::Agreed.::

“You know, Sarah,” Greg resumed their normal conversation. “Something has been gnawing at me. Ever since we started this whole thing, I’ve been wondering, why us? There has to be some common link as to why we were chosen. There are millions of people on Earth like us, so why did they pick us? What’s the common denominator?”

“That’s an interesting question,” she agreed, thinking. “Let’s keep that in the back of our minds. Perhaps if we compare our pasts, or the way we conduct our lifestyles, something will reveal itself.”

“Right,” he said, and then sent a gentle reminder to her mind. *::Let’s make sure we keep these new powers to ourselves. I have a feeling that, if our ‘friends’ knew about it, it might complicate the issue even further.::*

::Yes, I agree completely,:: she thought, then quickly added verbal dialogue in order not to draw attention to their apparent silence. “What are we going to do at this Council meeting? What are we going to say when we speak to this Leader?”

“I say we stick to our plan, at least for the moment. Let’s see where this Leader fella and Council stand on us going back to Earth. If I understand correctly, with what Leumas has stuck in our minds, their rules say they have to send us back if we don’t agree to join.”

“But didn’t Leumas indicate it might not be that simple?” she asked, then added, *::I wonder, when we go back to Earth, if the power will stay with us?::*

Sarah’s question lingered in Greg’s mind as he stepped up to her and placed his hands gently on her shoulders. *::That’s an interesting point.::* Then aloud, “Sarah, remember, there are basically two ways they can send us back to Earth to fulfill their obligation. Let’s hope they select the one that gets us back there alive.”

“I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t scared Greg.”

“Me too.”

She took his hand in hers and gave it a gentle squeeze. The warm sensation produced a passing of their innermost thoughts on their developing feelings for each other. They turned toward each other as

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they felt the excitement of the moment as their bodies were drawn together. When their lips met for the first kiss, it was soft and gentle, almost playful yet serious and indescribably wonderful.

As they drew apart, they hugged each other for several moments, each languishing within the warmth of the other.

“That was nice,” Sarah said breaking the silence.

“Nice doesn’t even begin to describe it,” Greg said, and then added, “No matter what happens, remind me to thank Leumas for bringing us together.”

“What if...” she began, but stopped.

“What?”

“What if they make us forget...I mean each other? Make this all appear as if nothing ever happened?” Sarah asked.

Greg loosened his hold on her and held her at arms length. “Not possible. We won’t let them,” he said with confidence. *::For the first time in my life, I have never been more sure of any one thing::*



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C H A P T E R
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THE ACCIDENT

The Great Hall was filled with the low hum of many different conversations between the delegates. All the Council members had received a special dispatch from Copolla containing the dismal progress reports of Leumas and the humans. Although it did not flatly accuse of failure, it implied that Leumas' impending screw-up with the two human subjects was a foregone conclusion. The rumors had spread quickly, and Leumas' credibility was sinking fast.

Copolla still insisted the announcement be done formally and in front of all the Council members. The few supporters Leumas had left were somewhat subdued; the others that had always doubted his methods and abilities were frothing at the mouth in pure pleasure. They thought it was about time that Leumas was brought down a peg or two, and that was just fine because it would appease Copolla, and that meant that his attention would remain focused on Leumas and not on any of them.

Copolla entered the chamber, sweeping past the delegates. Immediately, the members fell silent and took their places.

"Bring in Leumas and the two subjects from the planet Earth." Copolla's voice echoed in the immense, silent hall. As he waited, he surveyed the facial expressions of the Council members, reveling in their sour appearances. Soon it would all be over. Leumas would be gone in disgrace, and the two mistakes from his past would never be seen or heard from again.

Leumas, Greg and Sarah entered the hall, walking silently down the center aisle. Greg and Sarah stared in awe at the variety of different aliens they walked past on their way toward the center area. They spoke to each other through their newfound capacity.

::Greg, can you hear me?::

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::Coming through loud and clear, Sarah. Will you get a look at these... things? It's like a conglomeration of the ugliest and weirdest things I've ever imagined.::

::It's like Leumas said, there aren't very many humanoid types, are there?::

They stopped as they reached the raised podium where Copolla awaited them.

::Get a load of this guy. He's huge!:: Greg said in awe as he stared at the huge creature. Copolla's skin and physical appearance reminded him of a mountain of rock.

::Big, yes...but all I 'feel' from him is evil,:: Sarah responded, suddenly feeling fear churning in her stomach.

The huge alien Leader shook his head in disgust, gazing at Leumas for several moments before he spoke. "Leumas, what is the decision on the Earth subjects?" he demanded in a voice that boomed throughout the chamber.

Leumas stared at Copolla with barely concealed anger. He clenched his fists at this circus Copolla had orchestrated to oust him from his position.

"The Earth subjects refuse membership at this time," Leumas began, his voice unwavering. "However, they do reserve the right to—"

"Stop!" Copolla said, cutting Leumas off. Around him, an outburst of indignation rose from the members as Leumas admitted his failure.

Copolla did nothing to halt the uproar from the Council. Instead, he merely sat in his seat, smiling a menacing and sarcastic smile. He let the Council's anger run its course, adding momentum for what was still to come. When the mass had satisfied itself, he began in a calm and clear voice.

"According to the Charter of the UCDW, if the subjects from a home world planet chosen for membership refuse to join the Council, the issue shall be tabled until such time as we feel it should be revisited. Is this the case?" He looked toward Greg and Sarah.

::This is it then,:: Greg thought to Sarah. *::Here we go!::*

Greg faced the Leader of the UCDW, this Copolla. He did his best to square his shoulders and speak confidently.

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“We will not vote on any issue that decides what will happen on Earth. It’s neither fair nor part of normal evolution. The people of Earth have a right to make decisions for themselves. Right or wrong, this is our prerogative.”

Sarah stepped up next to Greg and grasped his hand. He could tell she was trying not to look directly at the menacing figure of Copolla; instead, she looked toward the conglomeration of aliens and spoke.

“Learning is a valuable part of human development. We learn by our mistakes, even if we make the wrong choices sometimes. We feel it is improper for those decisions to be made by a group of outsiders for another planet or species. We therefore refuse the invitation at this time from the UCDW. We also forbid any actions to be taken toward Earth until such time as the inhabitants accept this organization.” She finished strongly, and Greg felt a reassuring tightening of her grip as they looked at each other, both feeling they had made the right choice.

Copolla began to speak, ignoring them as though they were too insignificant to warrant his gaze.

“It is a disappointment to this Council that the subjects from Earth have taken this stance. This Council sent its best representative to them, and it appears there has been more than one failure this day.”

Leumas remained silent at the direct accusation. He saw no point in saying anything. An outburst at this point would only make Copolla’s case appear stronger, and his own weaker.

Copolla went on. “In accordance with our charter, the proposition to have the planet Earth made a member of the UCDW is hereby revoked.” He then gazed directly at Greg and Sarah with piercing eyes. “Perhaps at another time the opportunity to join this Council will be offered again,” he said, and quickly looked away from them, avoiding eye contact. Then he finished in a thunderous voice, “The subjects will be memory wiped and returned to their planet. That is the ruling of the Council.”

Copolla rose and left his seat, brushing past Leumas. Leumas thought he heard a chuckle from Copolla as he passed by.

“One day, Copolla,” Leumas said softly, “One day.”

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Council personnel escorted the three of them out of the Great Hall. As they walked to some unknown destination, Sarah spoke to Greg telepathically. *::Well, that wasn't so tough, was it?::*

::No, and that's the part I don't like. It was too easy. The Leader can't stand us; I could sense it. For some reason, we pose some kind of threat to him,:: he thought to her gravely.

::Threat? How could we be?:: she asked, her stomach beginning to churn again.

Leumas interrupted their mental conversation as he looked about the room. "Keep your wits about you now. This is where it gets a little tricky," he said in a low voice not to be overheard by those that were escorting them.

They were taken into a large area labeled "Cerebral Alteration Facility," which was a short distance from the Hall. The door thudded closed behind them, leaving the three alone. Back in the control room area, a technician appeared to be running checks on the equipment. Leumas waved at the short alien, whose skin color was a light fluorescent blue. The technician acknowledged the wave with one of his own and returned to his work. Leumas turned back to Greg and Sarah and motioned them to come closer as he spoke quickly. "In a very short period, you will be sedated and I shall complete the memory wipe. You will have no recollection of this entire affair."

Sarah and Greg exchanged furtive glances.

Leumas further explained, "It's a painless process. You will awake back on Earth and explanations regarding your disappearances will be implanted. You will resume your lives as they were." Then he paused, and his tone turned grave. "At least, that is the way the process normally goes, but I don't think that will be the case."

"Why not?" Sarah asked.

Leumas began to rub his head, speaking carefully. "There are too many unexplained circumstances. My few sources that remain true tell me that apparently the effort to discredit me is *not* the only reason that Copolla has done all of this," he said as he loosened his Council garb he had donned for the session. "Too many life forms have been disappearing, and the explanations are just not there. There is something else here that involves you two. I just don't know what it

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is yet. And I have not heard from my assistant, Greta. I sent her to investigate another possibility, but now I can only assume she is dead, murdered. That seems to be the trend lately,” he finished bitterly.

“And you think this Copolla is behind it?” Greg asked, although he felt somehow that the Leader certainly was.

“Most certainly,” Leumas responded.

“How do we come into play in all this?” Sarah questioned.

Leumas shrugged. “It has something to do with Earth. I would assume it involves the past, because most of the records have been conveniently lost and/or destroyed regarding your planet. I have my suspicions, but no proof. I had a contact at the archives working on finding the information, but no one has seen him either. I now must assume that he also is dead.”

He sighed, and looked at them both. “None of this is your concern once you return to Earth. I will keep probing into it and, if I find out anything that indicates your lives are in danger, I will somehow communicate with you.”

“Do you think that Copolla will try to strike before we’re back on Earth?” Greg asked, stuffing his hands into his pockets, one of his usual signs of nervousness.

“If anything happens,” Leumas said. “I believe it will be during the return trip. I have prepared a little surprise just in case that happens. But, for now, we must complete this process. The Council will check to ensure that it has been done prior to you two going back.”

His mood suddenly changed from serious and grave to one of compassion. He stepped closer to them with his hands outstretched, smiled and said in a pleasurable tone, “It has been a pleasure to meet both of you. I wish we had more time, but we don’t. Of course, the prospect of having you both back here will be embedded into your minds. It will be triggered at the appropriate time if your thoughts move in that direction. Our little arrangement will remain a secret between us.”

“Will you be all right? This Copolla doesn’t seem like the forgiving type,” Sarah asked Leumas with concern.

“For the moment, he is satisfied; he has gotten what he wanted, my head on a platter,” Leumas said bitterly. “Don’t worry; I’ll figure out

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something. I always do. Now, you two must get going.” He gestured to the two reclining seats in the center of the room, and said, “Please have a seat and we shall begin.”

They moved toward the sterile white chairs.

::Sarah, listen. This whole story...there’s something here that’s just not right. I really believe there is more here that involves us. Copolla knows what it is. I’m not sure about what Leumas knows, but I think he is holding his own ideas in his mind.::

::What do you think we should do?::

::I want you to concentrate, and try to set up a mental block to the memory wipe process.::

::How do I do that?:: .

::I think I know how. Just envision a wall in your mind. Fixate on that one thought. Nothing else. Concentrate on the wall!::

::Okay, I think I can do that. A wall.::

::Good. If it works, I think we’ll remember enough so that, when we get home, we can contact each other and decide what to do. Got it?::

Greg began forming the image of a wall in his mind. A large thick wall that encircled him protecting him from anything trying to break in.

::Got it,:: she said quietly.

::Sarah,:: he began softly.

::Yes, Greg?::

::It’s been a strange experience. Yet I couldn’t imagine doing this with anyone else.:: He was suddenly glad he had the ability to send this to her without speaking. He didn’t want to share that thought with anyone else but her.

::Same here,:: she said, smiling at him as they laid down in the reclining chairs.

Leumas began, not knowing of their conversation. “You won’t feel a thing. You’ll just fall asleep and wake up back in your homes. Once again, I would like to say it’s been a pleasure. So long, and have a safe trip.”

They looked at him and nodded. But inside their minds, they concentrated on building the mental walls. Two med robots quickly appeared and injected them with a sedative. In a matter of seconds,

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they felt drowsy, their eyes closed, and they were quickly asleep, at least physically.

Leumas began the memory wipe process. The equipment was brought up and running by the standby tech that maintained its ready state. It was virtually an automatic process after the computer was programmed to identify the area of the brain that held the memories of the past couple of days. Once these were located, these images were subsequently erased. In their place, harmless substitute memories would be left.

While the process was beginning, Leumas remembered the communiqué he had received moments before the Council meeting. There had been an explosion in the archives. From what the examination team could discern, two life forms had been killed... murdered by a laser blast weapon; the distinctive trademark of Copolla's henchmen. Because he had not heard from Greta or Robise, he could only assume they had been killed. *When will this nightmare come to an end? How many have to—*

His thoughts were suddenly jarred from his head as an alarm blared. He quickly glanced up at the display console to see what the problem was. It was the neural overload alarm. He searched frantically for the med tech that had powered the equipment up, but he was nowhere in sight. Part of the technician's responsibility was to ensure that the fail-safes were all operable and functioning.

The readout indicated that the fail-safes had been disengaged and the equipment was malfunctioning by sending too much neural input into the humans. He reached for the emergency cutoff device and activated it. The electronic hum of the equipment wound down and then completely stopped. The power register indicated that the current sent through Greg and Sarah's brains was more than ten times the normal level required for a memory wipe. Leumas opened an emergency communications channel.

He yelled, "Alert... Alert! I have a medical emergency in the Cerebral Alteration Facility! Get somebody in here *now!*"

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Leumas silenced the overload alarm. He moved over to check the life signs monitor. Incredibly, both Greg and Sarah's vital signs were still okay. Their respiration and heart rates were still all within normal parameters. But it was their brains that he was concerned about. *How could they have withstood this kind of overload*, he wondered.

He accessed the brain-scanning computer and instructed it to check for neural damage; this would take several minutes. As he waited, he confirmed the extremely high levels of neural input that had shot through Greg and Sarah.

"Damn," he said out loud, shaking his head. "No brain should be able to handle that much. They have to be brain dead." Silently, he still hoped for a miracle of some sort. As he examined possibilities as to how this could have happened, a lab technician entered the room. Leumas looked up and quickly observed that this technician was not the one who had been in the room when he had first arrived. Instead of being short and blue as Leumas remembered, this one was tall and pale as a ghost.

"Who are you?" Leumas demanded.

"I am the technician assigned to this equipment," the alien answered nervously as he observed Leumas's disposition. "My presence was requested at another lab. When I arrived there, nobody knew why I had been called," the technician explained, shrugging.

"Do not touch anything at all," Leumas commanded, tight-lipped. "I will handle this investigation myself."

"Understood, sir. I shall stand by to assist you," the technician responded, moving off to the side of the room.

Leumas continued to weigh the odds of an equipment malfunction against someone actually sabotaging the program. He would have to check the program sequence. *If it had been tampered with, the evidence would be there. But why try to kill these two? They could have simply been sent home with no memories. Or was this about discrediting me even further by the deaths of the two humans?*

His thoughts were interrupted by the monotone computer voice that indicated the test completion of the brain scan. He looked at the monitor and read the results aloud, "All brain activity normal. Memory

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wipe complete. Subjects normal.” Surprised and shocked, Leumas read the three phrases over again in his mind.

“How in the blazing moons of Gimsom could that be?” he asked incredulously. “Ten times the normal level of neural input was fed into their brains. There should be nothing left but mush. Thank goodness they’re not harmed, but how?” Before Leumas could take all this in, his eyes riveted on the red flashing sign of the main memory wipe program terminal. It flashed in bold red letters: Program sequence erased.

“How can that be?” he shouted. “The program was intact only a few minutes ago!”

Leumas yelled for the lab technician who had been quietly observing him. “How can that be? How can...” he began, but the lab technician merely shrugged his shoulders.

Leumas sat down in a chair and rubbed his temples with his hands. He was so tired. Once again, Copolla’s thugs had outmaneuvered him. But somehow, amazingly, Greg and Sarah had survived.

He walked over to where they slept peacefully and was glad they didn’t have a clue about what just happened to them. He spoke softly to the two sleeping bodies. “I don’t know how, but you two must have a guardian angel of some sort looking after you. Destiny definitely has something else in store for you. But what?”

His pondering was interrupted by the sound of footsteps. Someone was entering the facility. Leumas turned and saw several of the Council’s security force entering the room. They were Arcularians, an alien race that was loyal for life to whatever cause was impressed upon their minds at conception. They had non-descript features within faces composed of skin like pancake batter before cooking. As the head guard approached, Leumas asked with annoyance, “Where have you been? I could have used your assistance a few minutes ago!” Before the guard had a chance to answer, Leumas continued, “You didn’t by chance see any suspicious-looking lab technicians on your way in, did you?”

“Is something wrong here?” the officer asked, utterly perplexed. “Suspicious lab technicians? What are you talking about?” The officer continued in confusion. “We were not aware of any problem. There were no alarms.”

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“Why am I not surprised,” Leumas said, cynically, shaking his head.
 “They probably saw to that also.”
 “Who saw to what, sir?” The officer began, taking out a note pad.
 “What’s going on here?”
 “Forget it,” Leumas said disgustedly, then looked at the officer warily,
 “So, if you are not here to respond to the alarm, why are you here?”
 “The Leader of the Council requests your presence immediately. I was sent to escort you.”

::Are you there, Sarah?:: Greg whispered through his mind, even though he lay physically unconscious in the chair in preparation for the memory wipe. Apparently, the ability to communicate remained even while his body was physically asleep.

::Yes, I’m here,:: she responded, warily followed by, *::Wherever here actually is.::*

::We’re asleep physically, yet our minds are still able to communicate.::

::This is really strange.:::

::Strange maybe, but interesting.:::

::I wonder how far this power is going to go? Where will it level off? How much will we end up with, and—:::

::You’re scaring me a little, Greg,:: she cut him off. *::You’re starting to sound obsessed by this thing. We need to get back home, for now anyway. Then we can sort through all this stuff.:::*

::Okay, okay,:: he began, apologetically, *::I understand, Sarah, and I’m sorry. I don’t mean to get wrapped up about this power stuff. It’s just kind of exciting to me.::* He tried to explain further, wanting her to understand. *::You know, I’ve always been a run-of-the-mill kind of guy, and now I’ve suddenly got this great gift. It’s just so exciting! And then meeting...you...it’s the best thing that has ever happened to me.:::*

::I’m sorry about getting tense,:: she thought to him softly. *::But with this memory wipe thing and all, and trying to concentrate on a wall to block the effect, it just makes me nervous. But you...you have been wonderful throughout all of this. I don’t think I could have made it alone.:::*

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::You've been the strong one. I feel like when we're together, we can do anything.::

::Yes. Same here. We make a great team.:: Sarah agreed. ::But if the memory wipe should work...::

::I know. I've been thinking the same thing and I have an idea. We still have to concentrate on the wall thing to try and block the affect, but I also want to try to set up some kind of code word just in case we do get mentally wiped. That way, a certain word will trigger a response that might revive our memories. Or, at least, enough so we know to meet or get together or something. How does that sound to you?::

::It sounds reasonable. I'm impressed—good thinking. So what is the word going to be?::

::It has to be a word that will mean something to both of us. Yet it also has to be something that wouldn't be used in an ordinary conversation. Hum, let's see...::

::How about Leumas?:: She offered. ::I mean, use his name. I doubt that a word like that will ever show up anywhere.::

::Sounds great to me! Leumas it is. Whether the word is spoken or written. Same effect. Implant this into your mind. Got it?::

::Got it...::

::Okay, Sarah, we have to be ready now. The wipe is probably going to touch us at any minute. Remember, concentrate on the wall. The wall. Okay, do you have it, the wall, Sarah?::

::Got it.::

::Now concentrate on the word LEUMAS being behind the wall. Just picture it sitting there, right behind that wall!::

A sound suddenly began to go through their minds. At first it sounded like ocean waves sloshing along the side of a ship. Then the gentle, brushing sound quickly began to grow in intensity to a low roar. Then it turned into the sound of water rushing over a tremendous waterfall.

Neither of them wanted to admit it, but they suspected what it was. It was a tremendous surge of neural energy approaching. It roared toward their minds, rattling and clanking loudly like a wild train hurtling down the tracks with a hundred freight cars.

::Greg! What's that?:: she asked faintly, her thoughts quivering.

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::It must be the mind wipe! But it sounds a lot worse than what I imagined it would be. It sounds a hundred times louder. Something's wrong, Sarah, I can sense it!::

::I think you're right! It sounds like someone is trying to do a lot worse than just memory wipe us. I think they're trying to fry our brains!::

::I thought we could trust Leumas!:: Greg screamed above the tremendous sound, which was getting louder. *::SARAH!::* He shouted through his mind as loud as he could. *::Focus on the wall! Sarah, focus on the wall. The wall! The wall! The wall! Remember Leumas behind the wall! Remember Leumas behind the wall!::*

The roar vanished, leaving only an eerie silence. Inside their minds remained a cloud of debris and the scattered remnants of a wall.



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C H A P T E R
F O U R T E E N
**LEUMAS TAKES
A TRIP**

Copolla and several of the Council members sat around a large conference table in his chambers. The group was somber, even though Copolla struggled to hide his good mood beneath a mask of false concern and worry of recent events.

“Such a shame. A real pity,” Copolla said, offering a round of drinks to his fellow colleagues by raising the bottle in his hand. “We all had so much faith in him,” he said as he shook his head, appearing greatly disturbed. The other members around the table watched him cautiously as they refused any refreshment. He shrugged, and poured himself a large drink.

He had called the meeting with the Council’s top advisors to initiate a policy regarding the planet Earth or, at least, that was what he had told them. Of course, this policy would also ensure that Leumas was out of the picture forever; the final stroke to rid himself of the meddling fool. He took a large gulp from his glass, sighing with pleasure as the liquid warmed his stomach.

He began his oration. “It is very unfortunate that our plan to install the two subjects from Earth has failed. It was not a lack of effort or a desire to succeed that hindered us; but the bottom line is that this tragic failure may prevent us from helping this world.” He paused for effect, hanging his head as if greatly saddened by this catastrophic change of events. Slowly raising his head, he continued, “I’m not sure how we should proceed from this point. Are there any suggestions as to where we should go from here?”

The representative from Sirius A, a birdlike/humanoid combination of a creature, squawked through the universal translator, “It is unthinkable that these Earthlings would turn down such a prestigious position.”

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“Yes, it most certainly is,” Copolla agreed quickly. “They were given the opportunity to ensure that their species would survive and avoid unnecessary violence and death. They could have shaped their planet’s future.” He sighed, trying to bait the other members in the direction he wanted.

“What are the chances of Earth surviving for the next one hundred years?” The reptilian representative from Sirius B asked, as its long skinny tongue danced through the syllables.

“Well, I hear the going prediction is ten to one odds against,” Copolla said with seeming remorse and a grim face.

“Is that a fact? Ten to one? I’ve heard twelve to one.” Sirius A shrugged its shoulders.

Copolla rubbed his temples in irritation. “Whatever the odds, they aren’t very favorable. We may lose the entire planet.”

Silence settled over the group. Copolla impatiently waited for one of them to respond to his baiting.

“You know, a little influence or shaping of their culture could probably help those odds,” the delegate from Wolf 359, a bi-colored, half blue-half white, humanoid added.

Copolla and the delegate from Sirius B looked at him in sudden interest.

“What did you have in mind?” Copolla asked, secretly pleased that his plan was working.

Wolf 359 straightened in his chair, proud of the interest in his suggestion from Copolla and his colleague.

“This year is an election year for some of the Earthlings, is it not?” the delegate asked, a thin smile casually spreading across its face, half blue and half white.

“Yes, I believe it is. An election in their most powerful country, the United States,” the Sirius A representative answered, nodding.

“So tell me, which candidate looks like the one to best lead the planet on a path toward reconciliation and space exploration advancements?” Sirius B asked, seriously.

Copolla began rubbing his hands together as the path he wanted had been chosen.

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“Well, neither of their major parties has anything new to offer. Their politics have become more important than the people they represent,” Wolf 359 said cynically. “This might just be as good a time as any to get what they call an independent, a third party candidate, in there.”

Copolla phrased his next words carefully, to ensure he did not falter. “So are you suggesting that we have someone influence this third party candidate so the Earthlings would see things in a different light, so to speak?”

Wolf 359 stroked his chin in thought, and answered. “I think this situation is too volatile for simple influencing. We need a presence on the planet itself to ensure that they immediately assume their correct path. Influencing is required, I agree. But I feel this stronger measure is needed.”

“This is not normal protocol!” The delegate from Lalande 21185 suddenly exclaimed, drawing stares from the other members. An asexual creature resembling a sloth, their skin changed colors, similar to a chameleon, but indicative of mood instead of camouflage. Now it was showing red, for frustration and anger.

“This is not a normal situation either,” Copolla answered quickly, trying to control his anger at the interruption. “Drastic times call for drastic measures! To lose an entire planet would be much more devastating than what we are proposing. Our main goal is to save lives, is it not?”

Copolla turned back to Sirius A, effectively dismissing the comment from Lalande 21185.

“Who did you have in mind to oversee this operation?” he asked, already knowing the answer.

“Why not send Leumas? He is perfect,” the delegate from Sirius A proposed.

Silence settled over the table. All eyes fell upon Copolla.

“After all that has happened?” Copolla questioned, seemingly incredulous but laughing inside. “Are you actually suggesting that we risk such an important event on someone who failed on a simple assimilation process? I just don’t know.” He made the appearance of being deep in thought, greatly concerned. He patiently waited for someone to agree with the delegate from Sirius A.

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“I stand with the delegate from Sirius A,” the delegate from Wolf 359 announced, standing from his seat and looking at the other members around the table. “Leumas may have made a mistake in judgment, but he is still one of the best. He deserves another chance.”

The other members nodded their heads in agreement, except for Lalande 21185.

Copolla hesitated for a few moments as if considering the request but, in his mind, his true thoughts were conveyed. *This was just too easy*, he thought smugly. *This group was so predictable.*

“I am the Leader of a very wise and compassionate group,” he began congenially, as he placed his hand on his chest. “You all have such creative insight and wisdom that my decision is made without any hesitation. I want you to take this proposal to the other members of the Council for final approval. I am sure that they all will agree that this is the way to proceed.” He raised his fist in the air, and finished, “It will be done. Leumas will be sent to the Earth to personally take control of the situation and hopefully save the planet from its own destruction!”

As the last syllable rang out, Leumas strode into Coppola’s chambers. The room became deathly quiet as he entered.

“Thank you for your wonderful and efficient service,” Leumas turned and said sarcastically to the security guard. “Without which I no doubt would not have been able to find this room.” He made sure he said it loud enough so that everyone heard it.

He stood in front of the Council members, slowly making eye contact with each one of them. He wanted to say so many things to them, but he chose to bide his time for a more appropriate setting and under better circumstances. Above all else, he swore that he would not lose his dignity, no matter what this was about.

“Good day, Leader of the Council and Council members,” Leumas began with a sarcastic gleam in his eyes. “I apologize for my delay, but there was a slight problem in the Cerebral Alteration Facility.”

“Oh, a problem?” Copolla asked, arching his brows and putting his fingers underneath his chin in steeple fashion. “What kind of problem?”



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Leumas cleared his throat, and stared directly into Copolla's evil eyes. "Equipment. There was an unexplained surge in the neural input of the memory wipe on the two Earth subjects. It was extremely high."

"What is the status of the subjects?" Copolla asked, with a glimmer in his eyes.

"The subjects from Earth are..." Leumas hesitated as he suddenly realized an opportunity had presented itself. Perhaps he could use Copolla's own presumption to his advantage to buy enough time to allow them to get away.

"Yes, Leumas?" Copolla asked anxiously, wanting to hear Leumas announce his latest catastrophe to the Council, and to him.

Leumas continued in a grave voice, "The two subjects from the planet Earth are alive, but their brains have ceased to function any further. They have no neural activity whatsoever." *Why should Greg and Sarah have to suffer because of Copolla's evil plans? he thought. I gave them a vow that I would return both of them unharmed to their homes, and that's what I'm going to do.*

Leumas continued, still staring at Copolla, "The overload caused a massive shutdown of all of their neural activity. The overload was caused by a program deviation, which removed all safeguards from the procedure. The program then erased itself."

"That is very unfortunate," Copolla said slowly, secretly applauding himself for his cleverness. He then looked at the Council members, making eye contact for a few seconds until those he looked at turned away from his gaze. His facial expression was saying, *See, I told you so. Leumas is becoming more irresponsible by the moment. Now he is blaming his mistakes on the equipment, of all things.*

Copolla stared at Leumas, not outwardly gloating. *I have you, Leumas,* he thought. *I outwitted you with every move. Every step. Now I am going to finish it once and for all.*

Copolla offered to the Council, "I personally will look into the equipment malfunction after we have concluded our business here today." He chuckled inwardly, knowing he damn well wouldn't. Then, smiling ruefully, he looked into Leumas' eyes and said, "I assume, Leumas, that you will see that these Earthlings are treated in accordance with the customs of their home world in these matters."

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“I will see to it personally,” Leumas responded affirmatively, with compassion. *You bastard*, he said to himself. *You’re gloating over the deaths of two innocent humans. Have you no shame?*

“The Council and I thank you,” Copolla said without feeling, then addressed Leumas in an authoritative voice. “Now, returning to the business for which we have summoned you, Leumas. The Council has decided to give you a chance to redeem yourself, even considering the present circumstances. Through their gracious request, which I endorsed, of course, they have decided to send you to Earth to take control of the situation on the North American continent.”

There it is, Leumas thought. *The final slap in the face*. He was being sent away from the Council so Copolla would be free to do whatever he wanted. Leumas’ anger grew inside but outwardly, he stood straight and tall.

Copolla’s voice continued on, wanting so badly to see a reaction from Leumas. “You will use whatever measures necessary to take control of the current political situation and ensure that our interests are represented on Earth.”

“I will have to remain on Earth indefinitely?” Leumas asked in a tight-lipped voice.

Copolla smiled, sighing. “I’m afraid so, Leumas. Hopefully, you will be back sometime in the near future, after you have completed your mission. We have confidence in you, Leumas. That, of course, is the main thing. After you return the two humans, you will assume your new duties on Earth.”

“But if I stay on Earth permanently, there are only a handful of initial contact agents with any experience available. How will you handle the situations that may occur involving other worlds?” Leumas asked heatedly then cursed himself silently for falling so easily into Copolla’s trap. He tried to quell his anger, for he had known this all along. It was the perfect ending to Copolla’s plan.

Copolla waved his hand dismissively. “We do not have any current need. When the situation arises, we will resolve it, somehow. We have many initial contact agents in training. Do not worry about that, Leumas. Your new assignment is to take full precedence. Nothing else. Is that c-l-e-a-r?”

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“Yes. It is perfectly clear,” Leumas said, his fists clenched tightly.
“When shall I depart for Earth?”
“Immediately,” Copolla said with finality.

“Back to Earth again,” Leumas grumbled as he entered orbit around the planet. He had Greg and Sarah in cold stasis as when he had picked them up the first time. He directed the computer to begin the awakening process so that, when he placed them back, they would become coherent at the appropriate time.

He thought about his fate, being condemned to this planet. His frustration had finally simmered down to a boil, instead of the eruptive outbursts during the trip. He vowed to get back to Zire somehow in the very near future and, to that end, had run numerous scenarios through his computer, searching for the one with the best probability of success.

“First things first,” he said aloud, trying to clear his head. “I need to get these two returned to the living, as I promised.”

Records had to be fixed regarding Greg and Sarah’s sudden rejuvenation. It would appear as an unexplained medical occurrence, which he would adeptly document with proper paperwork and a touch of influence on a doctor or nurse here and there to support their sudden reappearance in the world of the living. As luck would have it, they both came from highly populated areas where errors such as this occurred, not on a regular basis, but just often enough to lend credibility. Shifts of personnel who were overworked and underpaid also helped in this explanation of the error. Greg and Sarah would have to remain in their respective hospitals for a while.

“How did they say it?” Leumas asked aloud. “Oh yes, they would be ‘under observation.’ Another of the oddities these Earth people have in their strange ways of doing medical things.”

After the ordeal was over, they would simply return to their Earthly routines and their friends and get on with their lives. Of course, there would be an initial flurry of media attention. “Back among the living”

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the headline would read, or something like that. But it would all die down in time.

If only I could have convinced them to cooperate, Leumas thought, shaking his head. How different their lives would have been, not to mention my own life. I would not be stuck here on Earth, conveniently hidden away while Copolla has free rein on Zire. He sighed heavily; there was no sense in dwelling on it. What's done is done, but what happens from here on in, is another story.

Greg sat up in his hospital bed in New Orleans, staring at the food tray that held a gray substance that he supposed was some sort of mystery hospital meat. He felt his stomach roll with disgust. Lying back in bed, he ran his hands through his tousled hair. "I need to get out of here soon. Get some real food. A good burger and a beer." He drooled at the mere thought.

He looked toward the window as thoughts returned of that horrible moment that had put him in the hospital. He remembered the truck and knew it had hit him, but after that he couldn't recall anything except waking up in the hospital. Miraculously enough, all he had were a couple of bruises, and now he was relaxing peacefully in the hospital.

"One hell of a lucky guy I am, I guess," he said aloud, pleased with his fate and all the attention he was getting, especially from all those nice nurses. To think that he had been declared dead for almost an entire day and then found to be alive in the morgue, lying amongst all the corpses. He shivered at the thought and remembered how cold he'd felt when he woke up. Then he had to chuckle at the poor orderly who'd been there when he sat up. It had scared the poor guy so badly that he looked like one of the corpses.

"Now, if I can just fall back to sleep and dream about that babe from the bar, it will round the day off quite nicely," he said. No sooner had the words left his mouth when he felt a strange tingling sensation all over his body, kind of nice, but he also felt...well...almost ashamed for using the word "babe."

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“Weird stuff,” he said as he laid back, fluffed the pillows and closed his eyes as he went off in search of the woman of his dreams.

Sarah awoke in a community hospital not far from her office in New York. The nurse told her the story about the mix-up while she took her vital signs.

“Yes, it sure is a strange case,” the nurse said, pumping the blood pressure cuff. “I can’t imagine anyone being pronounced dead by mistake. They say the equipment was faulty. I guess they’re right, but it’s still weird stuff.”

The nurse suddenly looked at Sarah, appearing embarrassed. “You don’t mind me talking about it, do you, sweetie? If you do, I can shut my trap.”

Sarah looked up from a daydream she had been having, and said distractedly, “Sorry? Mind? Oh, no, of course not. It was a mistake. That’s all. It turned out okay. That’s what counts,” she said, lying back against her pillow. Her thoughts returned to her work. She wondered if anyone had remembered to turn her report in. She hoped it hadn’t been lying on the floor of her office since the accident. It would be late.

She closed her eyes and tried to sleep. Her last thought was an order she gave to her mind. *Okay, this is sleep time, no dreams about hanging out in bars, talking to strangers. Got it? Last time you did that you ended up trying to fry yourself.*

Then the strangest thought entered her mind, and a tingling sensation warmed her body. The warmth felt so good, almost too good and she blushed with the association it immediately brought to her. Still, she smiled at the feeling, and her voice spoke in her mind as she closed her eyes to sleep.

He’s not a stranger anymore—remember?

“The political climate in this country is shaky at best,” Leumas said aloud as he scanned through the reports his onboard computer had

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prepared for his review. His main point of interest: the United States of America.

“The possibility of a third party will not be taken seriously while the domination of the two major parties continues to exist,” he said as he continued to read the reports.

He determined that his plan would have to begin with an event that would affect the standing of both the United States, the leading Earth power, and its current established political parties. Something that would discredit or hurt their images and thereby allowing the smooth entry of a third party.

He read articles that dealt with the constant party squabbling over who was doing what to whom and how. It seemed the parties had only their own interests at heart, and not that of the people they supposedly represented. Both parties were distinctly different, and represented a variety of opposing views on many social and economic issues. Perhaps these differences were the dividing factor. The parties survived based upon their ability to disagree on the major issues.

“What if the parties joined together?” he asked. “If their existence depended upon their separate and very distinct preambles, would the humans who supported them turn away if it appeared that the two parties had joined forces? Would the people feel betrayed? Would they look elsewhere? Hmm...this may possess some good possibilities,” he said, inputting his hypothesis into the computer.

He tapped his fingers on the shiny display console, angling his head to catch a look at his hair in the reflection as the computer silently digested and dissected the raw data. He continued to tap his fingers, impatient for the computer’s mathematical response. The computer voice announced its answer and flashed it in green neon words on the screen, “Chances of success are sixty-five percent.”

“Not bad odds,” he said. “Still seven months to go before the big election. There may be just enough time.”

He had already determined from his reading that the best way to communicate something to the masses of this planet was through their medium of journalism. He knew instantly that they existed—no, *thrived* on sensationalism. Only the bizarre, horrific or stories reeking of intrigue grabbed their interests. Truth or falsehood was not the key, but just who

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actually printed it or announced it to the world first and, if they distorted the facts to make things more interesting, all the better. Moreover, if they were wrong, they could simply retract the information later quietly. However, that would be done only after the monetary or rating points system they used for their visual stimulation was gained.

He voiced the headlines he imagined: “Parties Unite! Common Goals?” Or “The End of Differences, Have We Come This Far?” Or even better, “Parties In Bed Together. What Strange Bedfellows!”

It would begin the stir, the unsettling rumble in the bellies of the humans and their politics. They would wonder where and when it had happened. Two parties who historically were divided since their conception and whose differences kept the United States divided, finally unite.

The press would conveniently supply the answers to these questions for all of this powerful country to see and hear. There would be disclosures of secret meetings, and strange retreats to the mountains, all done secretly. They would all occur behind closed doors, in dark, smoke-filled rooms.

“Then the people would ask, ‘Why were we not told of this plan? We are the people who elect you into office, yet you felt that we could not be told? It is a matter of public information!’” he said, loudly and with authority.

There would be denials by the government. However, doubt would exist in the people’s minds, and this doubt might be just enough to get a foot into the stronghold of the human’s political hearts. Then the third party would arise. “A true party of the people and for the people, a true servant of human rights, a true representative of the...” he paused and said slowly, “United Council for Developing Worlds.”

Leumas was quite pleased with his plan as he smiled. “It just might work.” He began to carefully prepare and draft the statements that he would leak through the media. He knew he would also have to perform a little influence on some of the politicians to make these rumors even more believable. It would be the result of some fumbling at a press conference or some little remark dropped at a cocktail party, all heard by the right people.

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As he composed his statements, his thoughts drifted off in a different direction. In his mind, he kept a little file cabinet filled with what he considered unanswerable events. He would often take a folder out of this mental drawer and mull it over in his mind; it was a game he liked to play with himself. Everything was explainable, and he knew that with all his heart. After he had eliminated all the possible things that could have caused an event, whatever remained had to include the answer, regardless of how absurd or ridiculous it might be.

One of the things that continued to plague his mind was the incident with the memory wipe process of Greg and Sarah. His brow creased in thought. Why had they not been killed? There had been enough mental energy to destroy a brain ten times over. But these two had survived. Why? The answer eluded him. He added another mental note for his filing area. When he got the chance, he would follow up on them and see how they were readjusting to life back on Earth. He smiled and mentally replaced the file in the drawer. Perhaps the answer lay within their minds and just needed a little coaxing, or maybe just a tad bit of influencing, to bring it to the surface.



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C H A P T E R
F I F T E E N
REVELATION

Copolla felt especially pleased with himself. Everything was going perfectly according to his plan. “Life is good,” he said, thinking how he had carefully and precisely set Leumas up to fail. “I didn’t even have to kill him,” he said, and then smirked. “Well, not yet anyway. Now that he is on Earth, any kind of accident could happen. These humans are such an unpredictable group, an unstable life form.”

He decided he would wait a while before moving on to the next phase of his plan; let the dust settle, so to speak, as Leumas became something of the past. His next step was to move the galaxy into a new era, a new beginning. He was tired of being the watchdog of all the little insignificant and backward worlds such as Earth, he thought with disgust.

“Let these Earthlings be. I can deal with them later,” he said out loud as he stood from behind his desk and walked over to where he kept his liquor. There were other galaxies full of hundreds of little planets like Earth, all still groveling in the mud of their development. Exploration and expansion was the direction he saw. The Council had been at a standstill far too long, and they were becoming stagnant and complacent.

He poured himself a large glass of Alberian whiskey and downed it, quickly savoring its warmth. He had reviewed the reports from his exploration department months ago. This was another little group that worked explicitly for him and not for the Council. Long-range probes had revealed a multitude of planets in the neighboring galaxies, planets rich with resources beyond his wildest imagination. Just rest stops on their way to wherever their... no, *his* destiny would take them.

He would make it appear as if the Council was just expanding its mission. Reaching out and helping more and more young worlds stand on their feet and offer protection and aid. Underneath, though, they would be utilizing these planets as bases along their new path, keeping

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the Council tied up with the multitude of new planets that needed help while his forces kept moving on. The Council would reach a point of saturation and realize they couldn't help everyone. That would trigger a harsh and bitter round of policy making, trying to develop a fair method to decide which planets were more in need of help than others. It would become an ethical and moral issue, factions would be torn as to which side to plant their allegiance, and then the bickering and feuding would begin.

He smiled evilly as he thought how he would then step forward as savior of the "new" UCDW. He would lead the defunct Council into disbanding and form a new government, one that took a more moderate view—his view—and one that would be filled with his own handpicked delegates. He, of course, would become the all-powerful leader of the galaxy.

The plan would take years to carry out, but Copolla was not in any hurry. Many tiny steps had to be taken, slowly and carefully. "But that's okay," he said, taking a second gulp of his drink. "The first phase has been accomplished very smoothly. It was only the beginning—only the beginning."

Copolla's thoughts were interrupted by the announcement that he had a visitor. He checked his monitor. It was Journo, dressed in his ambassadorial guise as he had been on his previous visit. Copolla felt his temper notch up. He didn't like it when Journo came here, especially when not summoned. He slapped the button to open the door to his chambers with the same annoyance as he would to kill an insect or pest. It was best to get Journo out of the passageway as soon as possible so that he would not draw attention. It was a risk that he did not want to take, nor did he have to. His temper continued to rise a little higher in intensity.

Journo strode into the chambers, his ambassadorial robes dark and billowing around him as he approached. Copolla spoke before Journo had a chance to reach his desk. "Why are you here? I have not summoned you!" His tone reeked of distaste and annoyance.

"I have come here to ask a question," Journo said calmly, noticing Copolla's annoyance. Journo began to think maybe he had made a mistake coming here after all. Inside the robe's large pocket, his hand

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glided over the old computer core that he had initially brought here to give to Copolla. Having reviewed portions of what was contained on it, he surmised that there was some sort of valuable information about the two humans and past dealings with the planet Earth.

Copolla boomed, finally allowing his temper to dominate him, “A question? You came here risking detection to ask a question! Do you not have a communication device?”

“Yes, I have a communication device,” Journo responded nervously. “But I thought—”

Copolla’s fist slammed on the desk as he shouted, “I don’t pay you to think! I pay you to do things, the dirty filthy things that you are so good at. Things that others will not do.” His rage was reaching its peak, and his voice became patronizing. “You are an insignificant thing in the great scheme of things, Journo, a thing that can be squashed and stepped on. Do you want to be stepped on and squashed, Journo? This can be arranged quite easily.”

Journo heard these biting words resound in his head. *The D-I-R-T-Y things that I have done. The things that nobody else would do.* He had always known this and accepted it as his new way of life, but hearing Copolla say the words made him sick to his stomach.

Journo opened his dry mouth to answer, hanging his head in humiliation. “No, Copolla, of course not.”

Copolla looked down at his desk, dismissing Journo. “Good, then we have an understanding. Do not come here again, unless you wish me to deem your services are no longer required. Do you understand?”

“Yes, I understand,” Journo whispered, fighting to keep the bile down his throat. “May I leave?”

“Yes,” Copolla said simply and, as he saw the humiliation in Journo’s face, a smile began to replace his angry sneer.

Journo reached the door and was about to exit when Copolla called to him distractedly. “Journo, what was the question you came here to ask?”

Journo turned to face the Leader of the Council, his face sickened with the vomit residing in the base of his throat. “It wasn’t anything of any significance, Copolla,” he said in a dejected voice. His right hand

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gently caressed the computer core and he whispered under his breath, “Maybe there is another place for this.”

Journo sat in the pilot’s chair of his ship, wishing that his body could float and drift in space like his ship, going nowhere in particular, and having no control over what was going to happen next. He needed some time and a place to think where there would be no distractions.

His ship was coming dangerously close to an asteroid belt that resided on the edge of perimeter space of the star system that the planet Zire occupied. He had disengaged the computer safeguards, which by now would have altered his course out of harm’s way.

“I could end it right now,” he said to himself dejectedly. “Just be done with it.”

His gaze rested upon the multitude of asteroids as they came closer and closer, any one of them a potential disaster for the ship.

“A decision. When was the last time I actually made a conscious decision on my own, and not one that was made for me?” he asked himself.

He couldn’t remember, and found this disturbed him greatly. It was as if he had awakened from a deep sleep, and a portion of his life had been cut away. He rubbed his eyes and exhaled deeply.

Since the disturbing conversation with Copolla, Journo had begun an insightful and critical look at himself, and he didn’t like what he saw. He had compared the life he had been living to the time before the accident that took the lives of his wife and child and his soul. He saw them in his memories, giving way to moisture around his dark, tired eyes.

The asteroids were getting closer, but he still ignored their precarious approach.

“What have I done? How could I have?”

Copolla’s view of him as a mere “thing” that would do unthinkable tasks had triggered something within him. “I was a good life form,” he said, his voice cracking, “Once I was good, not the evil thing I have become.”



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The black background and stars filled the portside view port. He ignored the decreasing view on the starboard side where the asteroid filled that view port with its immensity.

He had entered a period of rage and self-hate, and remained there in this fog of an existence he called life. Doing things without thinking or without conscience as his own hate and rage consumed him. Now his conscience was back with a vengeance. The onboard computer reminded him, "Collision impending in thirty seconds."

Copolla had not given him any assignments that were too demanding in the past couple of hours. Just screening and selecting members as Copolla began placing his life forms in key positions that would begin the process of reshaping the UCDW. Journo saw clearly what he had in mind, even though Copolla was not openly sharing that information. His plan would dismantle the UCDW and start a new era of conquest and expansion of the entire galaxy. Those that got in Copolla's way would be removed, regardless of cost. This plan worried him and just that fact alone was cause for reflection. The feeling of concern for other life forms was an emotion that he had not possessed for a long time. The Journo of these past years would not care, for he was just waiting for the inevitable end to all the madness that had consumed him.

Now, since he had begun having these attacks of conscience, he was worried because, if he understood the plan, he might outwardly show signs of concern. Copolla might realize this, and possibly terminate him and his services before he could do anything. Terminated had been a word that he looked forward to before. However, now it meant something else to him. He didn't want to die knowing that he had helped Copolla to succeed in his slaughter of possibly millions of life forms. He had enough blood on his hands already.

Suddenly, his hands jerked towards the console with amazing quickness, re-engaging the autopilot, which immediately moved the ship out of the asteroid's deadly path. The sudden lurch of the craft caused him to be thrown out of the pilot's chair. He picked himself up off the floor slowly, as if he was being resurrected from some dark depth to step forward and begin a new life. He sat back down, his heartbeat resounding loudly in his ears with new life and renewed purpose. One

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final chance to do something good again, as the old Journo might have done.

He didn't know exactly how much time he had, but whatever he was going to do, it had to be soon. Copolla didn't take chances, and once he realized that he had left, terminating his services was only the push of a button away. He had seen many others just disappear from sight after displeasing Copolla one way or another. He knew ultimately that this would be his fate also, but now he wanted to do something to stop Copolla before that inevitable end happened.

His plan would center on the incriminating events that Copolla had brought about on the planet Earth and then tried to cover up. Journo had been instrumental in the removal of the information from the archives the first time and he knew exactly why it was so important to Copolla. If any of that leaked out, Copolla would be done, finished. He would be removed from his precious position on the Council and shoved off into some insignificant corner on a faraway planet. Journo had been given a second chance now and he would do the right thing this time, the right thing for himself and for the inhabitants of the galaxy.

"That's it then," he said aloud, his plan decided, as his hands moved along the console tapping various keys. He input his destination into the computer and executed the program. The ship responded immediately and headed toward Earth. He found it curious that making the decision made him feel so different. *Almost good*, he thought, a rare smile appearing on his face. He hadn't felt that way in a long time. This would be his last chance to try to atone for the things he had done. His past was strewn with the bodies of innocent victims. Suddenly, it seemed he could remember all their faces, one by one.

He leaned back in his control chair and again slipped into deep contemplation. He tried to work out the finer details of how he would complete his plan when he reached Earth. He knew that whatever he did would have to be done quickly and effectively. Knowing Copolla and all of his sources, he would have only a standard Earth day, maybe two at best, before his absence was discovered.

Unconsciously, his right hand moved toward the pocket of his jacket. Inside that pocket, he patted the object reassuringly, its presence offering him comfort. It was the old computer core he had taken from

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the archives, the one the custodian had used to save the information that Journo had destroyed initially. He had not let it out of his physical possession since that day.

Realizing what he was doing, he removed the core and placed it on the console in front of him. He stared at it with a child's bewilderment.

"Yes," he said, staring at the core sitting in front of him. "You are the last string that ties me to what I really am inside, or what is left of what I once was. If that string is to be severed for good, I will be the one who cuts it. And I assure you, Copolla, it will be of my choosing and that will finish you."

"The planet called Aristead 7 is more in need of assistance than Core 6," the delegate named Wuser from Luyten 726-8A said, a look of disdain on his face. This sour expression was a permanent affliction of his species, whose body was similar to an arthropod, its multi-arms and legs covered with hair. Yet its face was comparable in shape and form to that of a human except that it did contain numerous eyes that peered in all directions.

"I totally disagree," said Cret from Luyten 726-8B, smiling happily. Although he was from the sister planet of Wuser, he possessed an opposite permanent smile affliction from the sister planet. "Core 6 is at a crucial stage in its development that could go either way. Our resources must be placed there, instead of on Aristead 7," he said firmly, indicating that he would not be swayed in his decision.

The discussion had been going on for well over two hours. Copolla sat and listened with a face showing outward concern as the two opposing sides debated which planets deserved assistance and which did not. Internally though, he struggled with the boredom of the moment.

Allowing himself some relief, he laughed inwardly. *This is so perfect. Disagreement and indecisiveness much sooner than I ever expected. Perfect. I might even be able to speed up my timeline a little. Just perfect.*

This controversy erupted over the last review of the status reports regarding the progress of several planets. Some of the reports were correct, but the majority of them had been written to cause the effects

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that Copolla wanted—division and cracks within the Council. He had accomplished this by having Journo replace members of the Council Planetary Monitoring Teams and altering their reports. This was necessary because it made things so much easier for the upcoming changes he planned.

Reports were coming in from numerous planets, announcing that their current situations were critical or reaching a point that required immediate action on the part of the Council. Unfortunately, the Council's hands were tied on trying to make a decision on where to apply their quickly-depleting resources.

Copolla raised his hand to silence the vicious cycle of debate that had gotten out of hand over the past few moments. He spoke in his most conciliatory manner possible. "Members, please, we seem to be at an impasse. Perhaps we should adjourn until tomorrow so that tempers may calm down and we may look at these issues refreshed. Hopefully, we will be able to reach a mutually agreeable situation for all concerned."

The members looked at each other warily, the fatigue showing in their eyes. They appeared thankful to Copolla for calling an end to the grueling session. As they gathered their documents that were strewn about the table and stuffed them into their respective receptacles, the members prepared to depart. Copolla was waiting for just this moment to add to their controversy. He wanted them tired and irritated.

He held up his hand. "Before you depart, may I please offer some advice on what I have observed."

The members who had gotten up returned to their seats. Copolla rose and began to pace around the room, stopping behind each delegate. "There are many worlds that require our assistance. In the beginning, the decisions were easier, simpler. Now, they have become harder. And I ask myself why? Is it because of the vastly increasing number and our dwindling resources? Or is it because the issue is becoming more of a moral and ethical issue? Are we questioning our actions in what we do? Have we made the correct choices?"

He made eye contact in turn with each member. He wanted each word he said to be embedded in their minds like a screech worm burying into the sands. "What I want to leave you with today is a single question," he said, sending his last salvo. "Should we continue

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in the direction we have been going? Or is it time to re-evaluate our position in the grand scheme of the galaxy? Should we make changes in our entire organization?"

Silence. The members looked at each other, then back at him. He saw hidden anger in one, and that was okay; he expected that. But the others were nodding their heads, agreeing that they, too, had similar thoughts. But he could also see the fear in their eyes. *This is very good*, he thought. Fear and anger was just the combination he wanted.

Before anyone could answer or question what he had said, he dismissed them with a wave of his hand. They hurriedly scurried out of the room as if Copolla had released a disease into the air and they didn't want to be infected.

Minutes later, he sat alone in the conference room, leaning back in one of the large leather chairs. "Yes," he said, a pleased smile spreading across his face. "Things are going quite well." Things were going so well he predicted that, in a matter of months, he might have enough of the Council on his side to move ahead with his plans. He would need to have Journo move onto the next phase. He moved to his terminal and pressed the access code to summon Journo immediately.

As he waited for Journo to answer to his summons, he wondered to himself how his "good friend" Leumas was doing. He laughed. He and Leumas had never shared that relationship, and never would.

His terminal lit up and he slid his chair over to be in front so he could see Journo's image as he spoke to him. The expression on Copolla's face soured from his earlier humor as it now turned into one of anger. To his disbelief, the screen flashed the same message repeatedly, "Out of communication range."

He banged his fist on the terminal. Journo knew the rule; he was not to go outside of Zire's communication range or do anything without Copolla's express consent and permission. He began to chant aloud, "Where, oh where is Journo? Where could he be?" He did not feel comfortable with any of the possibilities that he saw. He always felt that Journo was a rogue of sorts, always hiding something within those black eyes.

Copolla tapped the console pads with his fingers and displayed two options: Communication message to another one of the agents in his

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employ, or termination of Journo. His large finger swayed back and forth.

Greg was flipping through a magazine as he waited his turn for a haircut, the sound of the electric clippers humming in the background. He was studying the picture of a pretty woman in a cosmetic advertisement until a blaring car horn drew his eyes from the photograph. He looked up at the sound, but had to squint his eyes against the warm sun's glare that came through the large window.

It was Saturday, and the barbershop just outside of the French Quarter in New Orleans was very busy. The shop was full, already six people waiting for a haircut, and there were two more people ahead of him. As his gaze returned to the girl in the magazine, he realized that the item she was advertising, some brand name cologne or something, was really dated and already on the downswing of its short market life. He turned to the front page and checked the date; the magazine was nearly a year old. Disgusted, he put the magazine down, the pretty girl forgotten.

"You would think the least they could do is have a current magazine or something to read," he said to the old timer sitting next to him. The old man smiled and nodded.

The hum of the clippers continued to drone on as he looked out of the barbershop's window where the passing traffic offered no interest. He sighed in boredom, wishing he had picked up a newspaper on the way over to read while he waited. As if his mentioning the newspaper had conjured up its appearance, he saw that another guy, three seats down on his left, was reading today's newspaper.

Greg could make out some of the headlines in the reflection of the mirrors in front of him. If he turned his head just right, he could almost read it. It was reversed in the reflection and took some effort to un-reverse the letters to understand the words. He might look a little strange, but what the heck, it passed the time.

He had been passing time quite a bit by reading the newspaper ever since he had had his brush with notoriety. It had been a couple



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of months since his “return from the grave,” as the papers called it. His friends had called it a miracle, and yes, he had made quite a few new friends since the accident. He smiled as he thought about how some of the ladies were calling him their good luck charm now. They figured he must be good luck because he had survived a meeting with death itself.

An orderly had brushed past Greg’s body accidentally in the morgue of the hospital where he had been brought after being pronounced dead on the scene. The orderly said what attracted his attention was that the body still possessed a flesh tone color, so he checked and found a weak pulse. Finding him alive caused quite a stir in the hospital.

He supposed they were worried about him filing a lawsuit or something. Anyway, he decided to settle for their offer of lifetime medical care instead. It seemed the sensible choice, although it had surprised even him that he had not attempted to sue them for everything they had. He just felt that he had changed somehow because of the incident; his outlook on life was different now in some way.

He returned to the game of trying to read the newspaper backwards in the mirror, squinting to make out the smaller print. Before he could continue, however, the process was momentarily interrupted as the barber finished up his current customer. The man had gotten up from the chair, and was reaching for his wallet, blocking Greg’s view of the newspaper’s reflection.

“Next.” The barber groaned as if in pain, as he waited for his previous customer to pay. The guy sitting next to him got up from the waiting chairs and moved into the barber chair.

“How would you like it?” the barber asked, his voice containing hope that maybe this person would respond with something unusual.

“How about a little off the top, and trim the sides,” the customer said, using his hands to indicate how he wanted his hair to be cut.

“Sure thing, friend,” the barber responded, sighing.

“Going to be a hot summer. Can feel it in my bones. Ain’t I lucky?”

“Well you know what they say...”

Greg focused again on reading the newspaper in the mirror reflection. It took some getting used to, but it became easier the more he tried and

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it helped to break the monotony of waiting for his turn. The guy with the paper was reading the sports section at the moment. Greg didn't much care for sports. He wanted to see the front page, the big news.

The newspapers had been concentrating heavily on the upcoming presidential elections. He found himself unusually curious about what this third party candidate fella was talking about now. Samuel was his name. Edward Samuel. Greg wasn't too keen on politics either, but everyone at work was talking about this guy, and current events sometimes impressed the girls. Samuel was "a man of the people, someone you can trust," they were all saying.

This new third political party had named itself "The Future of the Earth Party," and had risen out of the humiliation and blatant distrust of the two major parties. The newspapers had blown the whole thing wide open when they came upon certain evidence that supported the accusations that the two major parties had actually started agreeing on certain issues and were said to be conducting secret conferences together. Many things had come to light over these past couple of months that held too many unanswered questions and behind-the-scenes secret bipartisan stuff. People felt deceived. Couldn't trust the old party system anymore. In a way, Greg found it amusing how it couldn't have picked a worse time to surface with this being an election year and all. The irony was almost too much.

Finally the person with the newspaper turned so that the front page was reflected in the mirror. He corrected for the backward reflection by imagining the letters in his mind and reshaping them. Headline: DRIHT equals THIRD. Next word: YTRAP spells PARTY. Next word; SI equals IS. Next word: NI equals IN. Next word: LEUMAS equals SAMUEL...

Greg stopped on that last word. The letters in the image of that word turned and moved on their own. They settled into an organized line and inverted themselves into a new word. This new word flashed in his mind, LEUMAS—LEUMAS—LEUMAS.

He looked away from the reflection, but the letters felt as if they were burning themselves into his mind as they reverberated in his thoughts over and over again. Suddenly, he felt lightheaded, almost faint, as images raced before him so fast they were a blur. As they slowed and

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became stationary, there were images of people he didn't know, but felt he should for some reason.

Sarah, and... Leumas...an alien? Lots of aliens? UCDW, United Council for Developing Worlds...Copolla...Leumas...Leumas...

Greg shook his head to try and clear the barrage of information he had been assaulted with. When his normal sight returned, he looked directly at the newspaper the man held out in front of him as he read. Everything was the same and, as he looked further down the page, he noticed a picture of Edward Samuel with another figure. Greg's eyes suddenly grew wide as he recognized the man next to Edward Samuel! It was the alien called...Leumas!

He stood up and walked out of the barbershop in a daze to the strange stares of those who were waiting for their turn. He looked down the street, his eyes searching frantically. Finally, he saw what he was searching for—a pay phone across the street. He stumbled toward it, still feeling lightheaded and overwhelmed by the images that were now becoming clearer with his understanding of what it all meant. He was almost hit by one of the many horse-and-buggy tours of the French Quarter. A horse moaned in protest as the driver pulled up on the reins.

“Hey, man, what you trying to do?” the carriage driver yelled angrily in a thick Creole accent.

Greg ignored the man as he fumbled through his wallet and removed his telephone credit card. He dialed the number for information. As he waited for the operator, the images fell into perfect sync: Copolla, the huge evil alien and leader of the Council, Leumas the slippery alien initial contact agent that had arranged their deaths and sudden rebirths. Sarah. Beautiful Sarah. The puzzle was coming together perfectly, and he now had total recall of everything.

“Information, what city?” the emotionless female voice asked.

Without hesitation, he answered, “New York City, Sarah McClendon.”

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Sarah's alarm beeped her into awareness as she rolled over to silence it. Its glowing red letters indicated the time, 5:00 AM, like a bright neon sign in the night. She slipped out of bed and headed to the bathroom.

While she fumbled through her early morning grogginess, she turned on the shower water as she brushed her teeth. Her workday did not begin until 8:30, but she liked to rise early so she could plan her day. "The most efficient use of time," one of the management courses had touted.

She stepped under the soothing hot water as it gently caressed her skin with warmth, one of the things she had learned to appreciate after her brush with death. The thought of not being around to appreciate the simple things in life had heightened her awareness of these simple pleasures, and was reinforced when the hospital had told her that there was no way she should have been able to live after receiving such a large jolt of current through her body.

"Yet I did," she said aloud, turning the hot water up a notch. The wrinkle remover that zapped her was not faulty, and no explanation could be given as to why they thought she was dead. The best they could do was say the electricity caused some kind of overload that had placed her in some kind of suspended animation. She had been declared legally dead by the on-site paramedics who swore that there had been no vital signs whatsoever. However, by a freak chance, while performing an inventory of the bodies the next day, the morgue orderly swore he saw what he first perceived as a reflexive flinch from the body. Thinking it was uncommon with corpses this many hours old to have any reflexes, he called a buddy over to examine her. They stood over the body, shrugged, and were about to call it just a case of morgue jitters when suddenly Sarah gasped for air. The attendants ran for the doctor immediately. The doctor confirmed that she was indeed alive and transferred her to intensive care. "A miracle," he had called it.

Sarah groped for the towel as she turned the water off. She dried herself off and began to put the clothes on that she had picked out last night. The whole series of events around her supposed death had left her with a feeling of renewed energy. She didn't quite know how to put it into words. She was glad to get back to her office and delve into

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her work, but couldn't help but feel that something was missing. Also her work didn't satisfy her as much as it used to.

Now dressed, all that remained was for Sarah to dry and style her hair, and apply a little makeup. Before she entered this phase of her morning ritual, she walked into the kitchen and turned the coffeepot on. While it brewed, she retrieved the morning paper that had been placed at her doorway of her apartment.

She would peruse through the main headlines and the business section while she finished her hair and makeup. She liked to be well informed on matters because her work relied on that. Marketing analysis in any form was based on current trends and the economy.

As the two-cup coffee pot hissed to its completed dripping cycle, Sarah poured the brew into her cup and added her two precise teaspoons of sugar substitute, along with a dash of low fat cream. Taking a fast sip, she headed back to the bathroom with the cup of coffee in one hand and the paper in the other, just as she would juggle the rest of the process of makeup, hair and reading the paper at the same time.

Another touted ethic she remembered: *use your time wisely; the person who does one thing at a time is single-minded*. She chuckled at the statement. Instead of single-minded, she always wanted to substitute "simple" minded. It had been her own private little joke, made up while she was attending one of the management seminars for the third time in a row.

She now faced herself in the mirror as she picked up the blow dryer. She looked at it twice, as she had also developed a bit of a phobia about electrical devices, and went to work drying her long hair. The newspaper still lay folded in thirds on the counter, teasing that little voice to come back with another reminder. Once her hair was dry, she took a large swig of her coffee and started to digest the information from the newspaper.

The newspapers had been full of political uproar since information about the two parties working together had created such a stir, a loud stir heard around the world. Today, the headline indicated that the new third party had enough backing now to be a serious contender in the upcoming election.

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“THIRD PARTY IS IN! SAMUEL AT THE HELM!” the large black letters blazoned across the paper.

“Well, it’s about time,” she said out loud. “Maybe we’ll get some long overdue changes around here.” She casually flipped the paper over and looked at the bottom half. Nothing caught her eye of any significance but, before putting the paper down, she glanced at herself to decide on whether or not to curl her long hair or let it hang straight down today. Something caught her eye. The newspaper headline was reflected in the mirror, backward but readable. One word flashed out to her.

“SAMUEL.” But, in the mirror, it appeared as “LEUMAS.” The letters danced in her thoughts as they rearranged themselves and formed the word: LEUMAS. Suddenly, she felt weak, and her vision blurred as images began to flash in front of her eyes. Images of strange people passed with such speed she couldn’t focus on any one of them. Her stomach became nauseous. She gripped the bathroom counter with both hands as the paper dropped to the floor. She closed her eyes and tried to will her stomach back into this world. She concentrated on the barrage of blurred images to stop. They finally slowed and came into focus.

The images brought instantaneous familiarity, and the pieces all came together. She saw Greg, feeling an intense emotional warmth at seeing him again. Then there was Leumas, the man, or alien, whose name had triggered all these visions. Copolla, the Leader of the Council of alien worlds in his ornate robes. A huge hall full of strange-looking creatures that comprised an organization that led planets and whole civilizations by the hand to a future that they deemed appropriate. *The United Council for Developing Worlds, the UCDW*, she said in her mind.

She looked into the mirror and stared at her flushed face. She remembered the last moments with Greg. *Build a wall*, he had said. *Leumas’s name will be the signal.*

“That’s right,” she said out loud in a faint voice, touching her face with her hand for reassurance that she wasn’t dreaming all of this. She turned and looked toward the telephone that sat on the table next to her bed. It was going to ring; Greg would be calling her from New Orleans. Strangely, she almost giggled at the thought of hearing his voice again.

Seconds later, the phone began to ring.

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“Now how did I know that?” she asked aloud. “Greg is more than fifteen hundred miles from me.” The phone continued to ring.

She picked up the telephone, and confidently said, “Hello, Greg.” As she spoke, her eyes were closed and she imagined seeing him smiling at the other end of the line. She giggled like a little girl receiving her first phone call from a boy. She twirled the phone cord around her fingers and realized that the feeling she had, the one about something missing, had been resolved.

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C H A P T E R
F I F T E E N
THE AWAKENING



Sarah got it exactly right. Greg was indeed smiling. The sound of her voice had an almost intoxicating effect on him.

“Hello, Sarah,” he said. “It’s good to hear your voice again.” Greg suddenly realized how difficult it was to contain his enthusiasm at the sound of her voice. He imagined her pretty face as she smoothed her hair to one side as she spoke. “You saw it, too, didn’t you?” he asked, already knowing the answer. “His name? Leumas?”

“Yes,” she answered excitedly. “It was in the newspaper. I saw his name there, well, actually the reflection of it, in the mirror. It caused this guy’s name ‘Samuel’ to appear like ‘Leumas.’ After that, it all came back so quickly, everything. Your idea worked, Greg. You did it!”

He smiled and blushed a little bit at the appreciation. “Thanks. I just had a ‘feeling’ that it might come in handy for some reason.”

“Apparently your feeling was correct,” she said, proud of him. “But what now?”

Greg’s voice took on a serious tone. “We need to put an end to our planet being used by this puppeteer Leumas and the Council. We need to expose him for what he is and what the UCDW is doing! I saw him in a picture with Samuel. He’s weaseled himself into a position where he can influence the outcome of this election.”

“Do you think people will believe us?” Her voice sounded cautious. She continued before he could answer. “I don’t think they will. The article in the paper says this guy Edward Samuel is gaining popularity at an uncanny rate. His appeal to the working masses is almost mesmerizing.”

“More like his appeal is being influenced by Leumas, both figuratively and literally, I’d bet,” Greg said derisively. “I see your point, though. We can’t just go to the press and say, ‘Excuse me, but I need to tell everyone that this guy Leumas is an alien and is part of an organization that is controlling what is happening on our planet.’” He paused, and then

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said, “I might as well say that there are gigantic seed pods all over the world and they’re taking control of us and growing new aliens.”

Sarah cupped her hands around her mouth and giggled. “I’m sorry Greg, it’s not funny, but your seed pods are profound. The direct approach is obviously out.”

“Look,” he began, liking the sound of her tinkling laughter. “Why don’t we try to confront Leumas on the side somehow. He’s too popular and probably too well protected by now to reach by just walking up to him, even though we could try. But I think we need to infiltrate his organization somehow and try to get close.”

“Agreed. We need to find out what Leumas is planning. His use of Samuel is only the tip of his celestial iceberg,” she said.

“Celestial iceberg? And you have room to talk about my choice of words? Where did you dig up that one, Sarah?” he said, laughing at her lightheartedness.

“Samuel is coming here!” Sarah exclaimed into the receiver, suddenly remembering what she had seen in the newspaper. “I read in the paper that he’s coming here to open up a larger campaign headquarters. He should be here tomorrow. Greg, can you come here?”

His heart suddenly jumped at the thought of seeing her again. He could almost smell her perfume and see her soft blue eyes. “I’ll be on the next flight out of New Orleans,” he said firmly. “I’ll try and think up a plan on the plane, while you scope out the area and see what you can come up with. Okay?”

“Okay,” she responded. He could tell from the sound of her voice she was also excited at the thought of seeing him again.

There was a moment of silence between them. Neither had mentioned anything about the mental powers they had begun to develop before the memory wipe occurred.

Hesitantly, Greg asked, “Sarah, have you experienced any of the mental abilities that we had before the memory wipe process?”

“No, not really,” she said, a little unsure. “I haven’t felt a thing or at least I don’t think so. There was a moment when the telephone rang and I kind of knew it was you. But that was right after seeing the name in the paper. It could have just been a coincidence.” She paused, then said in a quiet voice, “I wonder if the memory wipe process did

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something to the powers, or if they will they come back again after a while? Have you felt anything?"

"Nothing with certainty. Just a feeling or instinct about certain things," Greg said. "But who knows for sure? Maybe with our memories back, the power will return. But for now, one step at a time and we'll see what happens. I'll call you with the flight information as soon as I have my tickets in hand."

"Great," she said, a small flush creeping over her face. "I'll get to work on my end and I'll see you when you get here."

"See you soon, Sarah, bye," he said softly.

"Bye," she said as she placed the receiver back into its cradle.

Sarah walked slowly into the kitchen and poured herself another cup of coffee. She sat down at her small table to organize her racing thoughts.

My life has certainly changed these past couple of months, she thought a little bemusedly. From conservative and high strung, she had now started becoming more relaxed. Just little things here and there she had started to notice. She was finding amusement in things much more often now instead of trying to just analyze everything. And now...there was Greg. She smiled. She liked him immensely. Even though she had been memory wiped, her newly relocated memories pleasingly haunted her thoughts. She smiled and felt a warm sensation bathe her body as she imagined the first kiss she had shared with him. She embellished the feeling and let it take her where it...

"Time for those thoughts later," she said regaining her composure. "I need to figure out what we and I need to do." She picked up the newspaper and read the article slowly and thoroughly to ensure that she had as many of the facts as possible. Then she grabbed a small pad of paper and pen and began to make a list of things she needed to do. She wrote down places to call and visit. Then she added another item to the list as she spoke aloud, "Pick up Greg at airport, 7:00 PM." She stared at it and wondered why she had written it. "Too many thoughts crowding into my mind all at once, that's all," she said.

Sarah tapped the pen on the table, trying to find an excuse to be late for the office. She smiled, because she never could remember playing "hooky" before. She called the office secretary, who connected her to

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her boss. Sarah made some excuse as to how she thought she should get some rest today, “you know, after the incident.” At the mention of “the incident,” her boss quickly agreed she should take as much time as possible and not to come in until she was sure she was fine. Sarah found it difficult not to laugh as her boss ran on about her welfare and how she should sue the hospital. She thanked him for his concern and hung up.

Sarah placed her list in her pocket, grabbed her jacket and headed out the door to do some reconnaissance of the area where the paper said the rally was going to be. When she returned home from her mission, several hours later, she noticed the light on her answering machine was flashing. She pushed the “play” button and listened as Greg’s gentle voice told her that he would be arriving at LaGuardia airport tonight, at 7:00 PM.

Sarah stopped and checked the monitor in the airport concourse to confirm the arrival time of Greg’s flight. She found the flight number and gate number and continued to read across the screen, “on time.” She still had about twenty-five minutes to wait so she grabbed a Diet Coke from one of the little airport shops and found a seat near the gate and sat down. *Three bucks for a Coke, what a rip*, she thought, and shook her head.

Her feet ached, despite the comfortable shoes she had put on that morning; she had done quite a bit of walking today. She removed the shoes and rubbed her feet trying to massage away their soreness. As she did this, she noticed her clothes, a blue skirt and white blouse and how it matched the pattern of the airports’ seat covers. *Great, I have the airport décor down pat*, she thought to herself, and chuckled.

It had been a tiring, but eventful day. She had planned to check out the area near Samuel’s campaign headquarters during her outing. It turned out to be fortunate timing, and she had been more successful than she could have imagined. She had a lot to tell Greg, she thought, raising her hand to her mouth to stifle a yawn. She closed her eyes momentarily and tried to relax, clearing everything from her mind.

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First, the hustle-and-bustle noise of the airport, which she replaced with the sound of Greg's voice from their earlier telephone conversation. *It will be nice to see him again*, she thought, as a small smile played about her lips. It seemed as if their paths were destined to cross again, and that was okay in her book, she thought, blushing. *I'm becoming quite fond of him*, she said in her thoughts and lingered on those words for several seconds

::Why, thank you Sarah. Same here, :: his voice said inside her head, sounding amused.

Her eyes flew open. She thought she had fallen asleep and would wake to see him standing directly in front of her. But no one was there. She turned and looked around, but there was no Greg.

"What the heck?" she said out loud, as heads turned toward her. "It can't be, or can it?" She suddenly stopped wondering about what had just happened and then said in her mind, *::Greg? Was that...is that you? ::*

::It's me, the one and only, :: he said. *::Can you believe it? I'm in the plane, still about twenty minutes away. I, well, uh, I guess I felt your thoughts. She could almost hear the blush in his voice. ::So, I concentrated and they came in real clear. ::*

::The power, it's back? :: she asked, with excitement.

::Yep, it sure seems so. It seems to be growing as we get closer to each other. Oh and nice outfit, Sarah. It blends in really well with the airport decor. ::

::Thanks, Greg, :: she said nonchalantly. The words sunk in and she wondered how he could know that. *::Wait a minute. How do you know what I'm wearing? ::*

::I saw it in my mind. :: he said.

::But, how? :: she asked, bewildered.

::I just did, :: he said, trying to find the words to explain. *::I closed my eyes, listened to your voice, and sort of, well, followed it I guess. It took me into the airport for a couple of seconds, then it vanished. ::*

Sarah was both amazed and pleased to find out that the power had returned to both of them. *::Well, this certainly could help our plans, but I'm concerned about this new vision you may be developing, ::* she said wryly. *::Where is it going and why is it happening to us? ::*

::I don't know all the answers yet. We may have to just wait it out and see what happens. ::

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::I guess we don't really have a lot of choice in the matter, :: she said with a hint of sarcasm, but then added seriously, ::I just want to be able to understand all this.::

Her request to understand suddenly and strangely provoked a memory of her father. The times when she didn't understand things, and the way he would gently and patiently explain them to her. She missed him.

::Sarah,:: he began, ::I don't mean to interrupt, but I just heard your thoughts. I really didn't mean to 'thought drop' on you. It seems I haven't learned control of the power well enough yet to find the on and off switch as quickly as I would like sometimes.::

::That's okay, Greg,:: she said understandingly. Then, softly, she said, ::So you really heard my thoughts about my father?::

::Yes, and you're not going to believe this, but I had similar thoughts earlier today about my father. Almost the exact same thoughts,:: he said, placing strong emphasis on the word "exact." ::It seems like we have something in common after all.::

::And that is?:: she asked, letting the question hang.

::We both lost our fathers at an early age, and in the same year. How is that for coincidence?::

::Interesting,:: she said as her mind chewed on this new piece of information. ::I wonder if there is some significance behind it?::

::I think so, because it gets even more coincidental.::

::Oh? So, go on.::.

::I saw in your memories that your father died of a severe respiratory infection.::

::That's right. And?:: She was amazed at the scope of his power.

::So did my Dad. Same thing, severe respiratory infection.::

::This is getting really weird,:: she said with frustration. She just couldn't put all the pieces together. ::Okay, so we know our fathers had something in common, but that doesn't explain a whole lot. This is so strange.::

::Sarah?:: His voice was hesitant.

::Yes, Greg,:: she said absently, as her analytical brain was churning on this new information.

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::There is something else,:: he began slowly. ::I didn't tell you earlier because I didn't want to upset you anymore tonight, but something else has happened.::

::What is it, Greg? Go ahead. Tell me.::

::I just found out a little while ago,:: he continued carefully. ::It was an accident. I don't know how I did it. It just kind of happened while I was sitting around waiting for the flight to board.::

::Out with it already, Greg!:: she shouted, her impatience suddenly flaring at the thought of yet another occurrence defying explanation.

::I think I'm developing Leumas' ability to influence people.::

Silence.

::Sarah?:: he called, alarmed. ::Sarah, can you hear me?::

Greg hurriedly exited the plane, exclaiming "Excuse me," and receiving evil glances from several of the passengers as he jumped in front of them. He was afraid he would find Sarah lying incapacitated on the ground. His eyes searched the waiting area for a crowd of people that would have encircled her if she had fainted.

He spotted her sitting in the same seat where he assumed she had been while they had mentally conversed earlier. She looked a little pale and withdrawn at first, but when her eyes met his, her face brightened and relief washed over him. He hurried over to her.

"It's really good to see you, Sarah," he said, beaming, and then he hugged her. As they drew apart, he placed his hands on her shoulders, looked into her eyes and said gently, "Sorry about that little bombshell I dropped on you about influencing."

"That's okay," she said, smiling into his eyes. "I just wasn't expecting it. But lately, nothing would surprise me. I'm okay now." She looped her arm through his and they began to walk down the large expanse toward the signs that read, "Ground Transportation and Luggage Pick-up."

Sarah sent her thoughts to him. *::We'd better not talk out loud about these powers. I guess I may be getting a little paranoid, but I think someone would send us back to the hospital for observation if they caught wind of it. We can talk out loud about other things, though. Okay?::*

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::Agreed. I was thinking the same thing, no pun intended,:: Greg responded, impressed, as always, with her intuitiveness.

::No, of course not silly,:: she said. *::So, tell me about it, how did it happen? You know, the influencing part while you were waiting for the flight?::*

He thought for a few seconds and began. *::Well, I was sitting and going over the things that had come back to me in those memories about the Council and Leumas, the ones they thought they had erased. I tried to concentrate to see if there was anything there we might be able to use to our advantage. Well, after a while, I decided to take a break, I was feeling, you know, brain tired and I saw this kid walk by with an ice cream cone. I guess I had a thought that it looked good and I would sure like to have one. The next thing I know, this kid was trying to give it to me.::*

She looked at him strangely. *::Well, maybe it was just a coincidence or something.::*

::That's what I thought, too, but when the kid starting bawling because I wouldn't take the ice cream, his big daddy came up and wanted to know what I had done to his kid.::

::Uh-oh. What did you do?:: she asked, a smile threatening upon her lips.

::Thinking quickly, I suggested that big daddy go and buy us both an ice cream cone because, somehow, I reminded him of an old Navy buddy. I ended the thought with a once-upon-a-time-we-were-real good-friends kind of deal.::

"And?" she said out loud, forgetting to think inside, as her patience ran out. They glanced around to see if anyone else had noticed her strange outburst.

"Oops, sorry," she whispered aloud. *::I forgot. Please continue.::*

Greg chuckled, amused that she had whispered. *::Anyway, I had myself an ice cream cone and some casual conversation that I made up as I went along.::*

::Incredible,:: she thought, shaking her head.

They were passing a coffee shop, and Greg decided it would be as good a place as any to have a conversation and not be noticed. "How about some coffee?" he asked, and was a little surprised at the sound of verbal communication after they had exchanged thoughts for so long.

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“Sure, sounds good to me,” she replied. He saw a similar reaction on her face to the verbal shift.

They entered the coffee shop and found a table back in a secluded corner that overlooked the runways. As they sat down, a waitress immediately approached them. “Watch this, Sarah,” he said, mischievously.

“What can I get for you two?” the waitress asked unemotionally as she kept her eyes on her pad of paper in her hands.

“Two coffees, please,” Greg responded. The waitress nodded, without looking up, turned and left.

Sarah looked at him, a question on her lips. “Well, what was—”

He cut her off by sending a little mental thought to her. *::Just watch.::*

The waitress returned with three cups instead of the two Greg had ordered. She looked from the two of them to the three mugs she had brought.

“Mister, didn’t you say three coffees?” she asked as her confused eyes moved from Sarah to Greg and back again.

“No, I just asked for two,” he said, smiling.

The waitress looked at her pad of paper. “Yea, that’s what you said. I must be getting tired and hearing things. Sorry for the mix up.”

“That’s okay, just leave the third anyway.” The waitress put all three mugs on the table and left, still shaking her head in confusion.

::You suggested that she bring three cups, didn’t you?::

::Sure did,:: he responded inside her mind, a huge grin on his face.

::There’s no doubt about it anymore. I’ve got it, the ability to influence.::

::This will come in handy in dealing with Leumas.::

“Speaking of Leumas,” he began aloud, sipping his coffee. “What have you been able to find out about his visit tomorrow?”

“I went down to the Edward Samuel campaign headquarters and signed up as a volunteer to help. I’m scheduled for an interview tomorrow.” Looking pleased with herself, she glanced at her watch. “Samuel and Leumas should be arriving, or should have arrived already, in the city. This should allow me to get close to Leumas and try to separate him from the crowd at the headquarters. Perhaps you should

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stay back a little bit in case he tries to immobilize me by applying influence or brushing me off as a security problem.”

“Sounds like a plan to me,” he responded eagerly. *::But what if Leumas doesn't go along with our little idea of him getting off Earth?::* he asked, switching back to telepathic communication.

::I don't know. Maybe you can change his mind,:: she said, grinning playfully as she turned to gaze out the window at a plane taking off.

“Nice weather we're having,” he said, smiling and reaching for her hand.

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C H A P T E R
S E V E N T E E N

THE
PRESIDENTIAL
ELECTION
&
LEUMAS' PLAN



Was it coincidence or fate? Leumas wondered, as he sat on board the commercial flight to New York City. Edward Samuel, the independent candidate for President of the United States of the newly formed third party called, “The Future of the Earth Party,” sat across from him, asleep in his seat.

If he ever had to describe this human, he could have summed it up in one word, “average.” One of Samuel’s strengths was this “average” image the majority of people in this country could associate with. Average height of five foot nine, average weight of one hundred and sixty pounds, and a kind face everyone felt comfortable with. Now, with his average off-the-rack suit jacket slung across the empty seat to his left, his tie undone, he was fast asleep.

Leumas stared at him curiously. *How is it that your last name spelled backwards is the same as mine spelt forward?* he asked himself this question, still feeling the irony of it all. He chuckled as he tried to get more comfortable in the seat of this planet’s archaic form of transportation. He had resigned himself to the fact that it must be fate; after all, his computer had picked Edward Samuel out from the hundreds of possibilities.

“Would you like anything else, Mr. Wright?” the flight attendant asked Leumas. She used the name he had assumed for his Earth mission—David Wright, a.k.a. Leumas.

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“No, thank you,” he responded with the warm, beaming smile he had been polishing over the past several weeks. He’d also been perfecting his crowd wave along with his handshake.

“Mr. Wright,” the stewardess whispered, leaning over his seat. “I just wanted to tell you that I and a lot of my coworkers are firm supporters of Mr. Samuel.” She pointed toward the button she wore on her shirt, and read it aloud, “Samuel’s Our Man.”

“That’s good to hear,” he said, again using his perfected smile. “We need all the supporters we can muster.”

“It’s time for an Independent middle class American to become president,” she said firmly. “We need to get rid of all those special interest people.”

“I couldn’t agree with you more, my dear,” he said, yawning. “Oh, excuse me.”

“Well, I had better let you get some rest. I’m sure you must be a busy man,” she said, patting his shoulder. “You two have a packed couple of days in the Big Apple coming up. Good night.” The stewardess strolled to the back of the plane to point Mr. Wright out to her co-workers. Leumas tried to pick up his thoughts from earlier.

“What was it?” he asked softly, searching his sleepy brain for the train of thought he had earlier. “Oh yes, Samuel’s last name is Leumas spelled backwards and how the computer had picked him from hundreds of possibilities.” Leumas was not superstitious or deity-minded like these Earth people. He was a realist. What was—well, was, because it was, and a scientific premise or explanation backs everything up. That was where he parked his conversation with himself as he dozed off to a restless sleep.

Edward Samuel was a middle income American, fifty years old, who specialized in labor relations. His popularity came from speaking engagements he performed around the country to various labor and management consortiums. He was often used as an arbitrator on difficult stalemates between labor and management, possessing the skills to find that middle ground. A true diplomat at heart, he had earned a reputation for caring about the people he tried to help.

He was a typical American—married, with three children, a dog, a cat, mortgage and car payment—an average middle American family

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that people could easily associate with, right down to the braces on his teenage daughter's teeth. His wife and children were on the West Coast, drumming up support for the campaign, while he tackled the East Coast, including New York City.

Edward Samuel had also dickered in the political arena, mostly locally in his home state of Idaho, and even then had shied away from the two major parties. When speaking, he emphasized the limited choices that the two party-system dominance offered.

His saying, "A lack of a credible choice is virtually the same as no choice" became a rallying cry of the people during his campaign.

Leumas, now David Wright, possessed a background of impeccable character and was a pillar of society, the perfect resume to become Edward's advisor. Well, at least that was the way it looked on paper and in the old computer files, anyway. Leumas, with the help of his ship's onboard computer, had falsified all the necessary records so he could acquire a well documented and squeaky clean past.

According to available records, David Wright had been born and raised in a small Midwest farming community. Leumas had actually visited it to influence the inhabitants in the town, just in case anyone checked or asked him questions. He couldn't afford any slip-ups at this stage of the game.

David Wright had worked his way through college, and done a short stint in the military. He had always been interested in the Middle American, and that was documented by his participation in various associations and his employment in a number of agencies dedicated to that end. Some influence applied in just the right corners of society caused David Wright to come highly recommended as an advisor to Edward Samuel. "Just the man he was looking for," was the way it had been phrased.

Leumas had run numerous computer simulations and searches to find just the right person to become the country's "savior." It had to be someone who would be accepted by the majority of Earth people, a true representative of the working class. It had to be someone who was like them, but who was educated enough and with a position to do something about the current political situation.

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Edward was the catalyst Leumas needed, the way to get the ball rolling and add credibility to the new third party movement. This movement was going to shake up the entire continent, maybe the entire world, and this was only the beginning. He sought out Edward Samuel and influenced him to step up his touring lectures, and to make his main topic the frustrated current political environment. All of this was highlighted by the latest controversies that had suddenly swept through the country regarding the current two parties.

Leumas carefully orchestrated little leaks of information to the media regarding the unbelievable collaborating of the parties, and this just happened to coincide with Edward's touring engagements. Controversy had been the key to Edward's success, for it was through this controversy that he had arisen from the ashes of the disintegrated two party system to become a viable presidential candidate who possessed an admirable top advisor—one David Wright.

David Wright paralleled Edward's theories and sought out the "true pockets" of American society, the working class. He encouraged, and from time to time, influenced Edward to visit key major areas of the populace to drum up further support. He concentrated on labor unions, manufacturing associations and anywhere else where the "grunt" labor force was concentrated.

Every leader, or person of power, was gently influenced to ensure their continued support of Edward, along with monetary contributions to the campaign movement.

"Yes, things are going quite well," Leumas mumbled, shifting his weight again in a futile effort to get comfortable. There were only four months to go before the big election, and he was ahead of the schedule that he had organized for himself. That schedule would usher in a new era to the space program of this world, even though Edward didn't know it yet. That, too, was only the beginning. He had to remember that it had to be done one step at a time. He had to be very careful in New York tomorrow, and then...

Leumas drifted off to sleep with a sheepish grin on his face.

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George Smirno, the party's area representative for New York, greeted Edward Samuel and David Wright when they arrived at campaign headquarters in the city. George was a forty-five-year-old executive with one of the largest retailers in the city who had fallen in with the charm of Edward's movement. He had been placed in charge of organizing a volunteer force to operate the campaign headquarters and to put together pockets of supporters in key areas.

George gave Edward and Leumas a quick tour of the office and introduced them to the volunteer staff. As they greeted each one, Leumas gave a little added "push" to each member. It wasn't much effort, because these people already had the right mind set about what they were doing. They believed in their candidate. Leumas just made them feel extra good about it.

George explained to them that they were still significantly short on the numbers of volunteers needed to cover all the City's districts. They were hoping that, with Edward's speaking engagement coming up, it would be a good opportunity to sign up some more people to help with the campaign.

"That shouldn't be a problem," Leumas stated, smiling with confidence. "After Edward speaks tomorrow, you'll have more volunteers than you know what to do with. I personally guarantee it."

"I hope so," George said, holding a file marked "Interviewee Information" in his hands. He tapped the folder. "David, we have several volunteers coming in today for interviews. Perhaps you would want to sit in on them? Sure could use your expertise in the matter."

"Be happy to," Leumas responded with a sincere smile. "You know, I'll do whatever I can do to help. You only have to ask."

"Great. I would really appreciate it," George said over his shoulder, as he was called over to answer a question from one of his people. Before George departed, Leumas reached out for the folder that contained the interviewee information that he had referred to. Edward, who had been talking to some of the volunteers walked up to where Leumas was standing.

"David," Edward said, as he began rubbing his temples, "I think I am going to go to the hotel and get some rest before the rally tomorrow.

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I'm feeling a little tired and I know it's going to be a long event. How about you?"

"I have offered to help select some volunteers," Leumas said, holding up the thick folder. He smiled at Edward, and shooed him out the door. "I feel fine, Edward. You go ahead, and I'll be along later."

Edward conceded. "Okay, Dave. But do get some rest yourself." He put his hand on Leumas' shoulder. "Dave, I don't know what I would do without you. You have been with me since the beginning of all this. If it wasn't for your drive and perseverance, we would not be where we are today."

Leumas saw the honest appreciation in this man's eyes, and it made him glad of the choice that he and the computer had made. "Please, Edward. All I have done is talk to the right people and let you do the rest," he said humbly, yet sincerely.

"But it has worked. That's the key. It has worked. We are on the way to making history. We have the momentum for change," Edward said earnestly.

"Save it for tomorrow, Edward," Leumas said, laughing. "This crowd may not be as easy as the others have been. You know what they say about New Yorkers. They're a demanding and meticulous bunch. Probably one of the toughest crowds on Earth."

"Okay. I'll save the patriotism for the masses," Edward said, yielding. "I'll see you later."

Leumas waved good-bye, and then sat down at one of the many campaign headquarters desks. They were all plastered with Edward Samuel paraphernalia. He knew he had picked well with Edward. This human had the right mind-set to lead this country and maybe this planet. Personally, he liked him and envisioned a good working relationship for the future as they made history as they moved out into space.

He opened the folder and began looking through the many applications. His process was interrupted by one of the volunteers, asking him if he would like a cup of coffee. He politely refused. His gaze then shifted toward the window, which reflected the people walking by and the traffic in the street. George soon came over with another problem that drew Leumas to another area of the building. While

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he was with George, one of the volunteers saw that Mr. Wright had the application folder that she had been using earlier. This particular volunteer, Sally, had been calling the applicants and assigning them time slots for interviews later today and tomorrow.

This efficient young lady had gotten hold of all but one potential volunteer, and she needed the telephone number from the application sheet. She removed the form she needed and left the folder where she had found it. She returned to her desk and dialed the phone number. There was no answer, but she left a message. She decided to keep the sheet on her desk until she received a confirmation or could try to contact the person again.

Leumas soon returned to the folder and continued to review the applications where he had left off. He flipped through the stack, not really being able to tell anything from the handwritten information. He needed to see these humans in person; once he met them, he could tell immediately if they were the influencing type.

However, if he had scanned the one application that now lay on Sally's desk, he might have been able to quickly determine that particular person's abilities. The name that was written on the top of the application in distinctively neat handwriting was Sarah McClendon.

The morning sun brightened the Earth's horizon as it began its ascent on the clear day. Leumas watched in awe from the limousine window. On the planet Zire, the atmosphere was never clear enough to see their star in this way, and Zire was located much further from their main star, as compared to Earth. Sunrises would not be as dramatic as this one, even if they could see it.

Today is going to be a busy day, he thought, as he and Edward were driven to the campaign headquarters. They still had a couple of hours before the rally actually began, but the crowds were already beginning to form in little pockets up and down the streets. Also, he had promised George that he would finish helping with the selection of additional volunteers.



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They arrived with early cheers and wishes of good hope from Edward's supporters. Edward smiled and waved, shook hands and kissed a few babies along the way. He genuinely enjoyed greeting his supporters and seeing their enthusiasm.

George and some of his staff greeted them as they entered the small office spaces that served as their campaign headquarters. They were quickly hustled inside the building, as security was always a concern when politics came into play.

Leumas took Edward aside and briefed him on the agenda for the day. He was to meet with some local labor leaders in about forty-five minutes. He handed Edward a brief regarding the details about the leaders and the key issues they were interested in. He had been told the three key things to remember was to always remember their names, speak on the issues they want to hear about and always wave goodbye.

Edward was kept well informed by Leumas on details such as these. In the big scheme, they seemed inconsequential, but they would pay enormous dividends on the day of the actual vote. *It didn't take much to sway these humans*, he thought with amusement. As George escorted Edward to a quiet area, he looked up at Leumas and waved his "see-you-later" wave.

Leumas was given a desk tucked in a quiet corner to interview the personnel interested in joining the campaign. He had discovered from his readings about Earth politics that this was one of the more popular methods for the other side to insert spies and informants into opposing organizations. He wanted to keep Edward's organization as clean as possible, so if the volunteers seemed genuinely interested, and their background appeared clean, they got the job. Of course, a little touch of influence for good measure; just a little push to nurture their loyalty and dedication along as they entered into what was going to be the upset election of the century.

The interviews went well. Leumas selected all that had applied so far, and he was pleased at the number. He still had about a half dozen or so more to go before he was finished. He glanced at his watch to check the time. Edward was still involved with his labor group appointments for another twenty minutes or so.

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In the outer offices, outside of Leumas's view from his private corner, Sarah McClendon entered the building for her scheduled appointment. As she surveyed her surroundings, she thought to Greg, *::I'm in. I don't see Leumas anywhere though.::*

::He's there. I can feel him,:: Greg said from his location outside the office as he mingled in with the massing crowd. *::Go ahead with your appointment. Just keep an eye out for him. He'll no doubt be near the head guy somewhere.::*

Sarah approached a desk where a young woman sat. She wore a volunteer nametag on her blouse that had "Sally" written in bold black letters.

Sarah said politely, "Excuse me, my name is Sarah McClendon, and I am supposed to be interviewed for a volunteer position. Can you tell me where I am supposed to go?"

Sally immediately recognized Sarah's name as the one person she could not get in touch with the day before to confirm the appointment. She also realized that she had forgotten to put the sheet back into the folder with the rest of the applicants. Realizing her mistake, Sally asked Sarah to wait there while she went to check on the interview's progress and to return the application to the folder. Sarah sat in a chair and continued to look around the offices.

::Greg?:: Sarah called.

::I'm still here, Sarah. How are you doing? Any luck so far?::

::No, none yet. But there are so many people in here. He could hide anywhere very easily,:: she thought, scanning the crowd.

::He won't be hiding,:: Greg said confidently. *::He'll be in the midst of everything. He's really running the whole thing, and I can tell that he has influenced most of these people. Not a lot of influence, but just enough to convince them.::*

Sally returned to her desk.

"You may go in now, Miss McClendon," she said, smiling at Sarah.

"Thank you, Sally," Sarah said, rising from her seat.

::Sorry, got to go, Greg,:: Sarah thought hurriedly as she headed in the direction Sally indicated.

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::You be careful, Sarah and watch yourself.::

::I will. You be careful too, Greg,:: she thought as she rounded the corner. Entering the room, her gaze went to the man sitting at the desk and felt her breath escape. She found herself face to face with Leumas.

“Hello, Miss McClendon. May I call you Sarah? We are very informal around here,” Leumas said, smiling a very wide smile at her that gave her the impression that he was not surprised at all to see her. She found it amazing how she lost her ability to communicate because she had found exactly what she had been looking for.

“You lied to us, Leumas!” Sarah said angrily to a startled Leumas, as she pointed her finger accusingly at him. “You said that Earth would be left alone. We refused membership in your damned Council. Remember?” She instantly regretted her harsh words, but her rage over the injustice had taken her over. It dawned on her that Leumas probably still believed that the memory erasure had worked and that her presence at the campaign headquarters may have just been a coincidence. She wished she could take back the words and start over.

Leumas’s congenial smile had completely disappeared as the realization of Sarah’s memory wipe failure hit him. He had recognized her instantly, but assumed she would have no recollection of him. *What a coincidence*, he’d thought at first.

“Amazing!” he said aloud, shaking his head. “In all my time, I have never known the wipe not to work.” He looked at Sarah in awed appreciation. “How did you manage to defeat the process?”

She ignored the question, her anger still with her. “Never mind your memory wipe stuff. What’s going on here, Leumas?”

He hung his head, and tried to explain. “Sarah, I know you are not going to believe me, but it was not my choosing to come here. I, like you, had no choice in the matter. I was forced into this situation by Copolla.” Then he continued defensively. “But since I am here, I am going to complete my assignment as soon as possible so I can go home. If spreading influence so that Edward Samuel will become the next President will get me there, then that is the path I will pursue.”

But Sarah had no interest in Leumas’s problems at this point. She wanted answers. “How much of this campaign thing is real, anyway?”

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she demanded. “Is Samuel doing anything on his own or is that you doing all the mental tweaking?” Sarah pointed to her own head.

“Edward’s intentions were always along the lines of this campaign,” he replied. “I have just placed a little nudge here and there in the right direction and organized a network of support.”

She looked at him skeptically. “There is more to this, I can feel it. Anyway, that’s not how it’s supposed to work. You are giving him an unfair advantage in the political arena, which goes against your promise.”

“Who says it’s not the way it’s supposed to happen?” he countered, his own anger rising. “Look, this is the way it is. I am going to get this planet headed in the right direction, no matter what it takes. So just accept it. If using Edward Samuel gets it done, so be it.”

Sarah watched as he took his eyes from her and looked to see if anyone had overheard their conversation. She assumed he knew that if this type of information got to the media, it could end Edward’s campaign. That was something to keep in mind.

“I have some unfinished business back on Zire with Copolla,” he began again. This time his voice lower and calmer. “Believe me, I don’t want to be here any longer than I have to.” He sat down behind the table and massaged his forehead with his hands. “My head...a terrible headache,” he said. “Can you give me a minute please?”

“Of course,” she immediately agreed, her compassion kicking in. “Take two,” she added. She turned her attention toward the window, her analytical mind formulating more questions to throw at Leumas. As she stood there waiting, she felt something odd happening. Her mind felt as if it was being infiltrated or touched by something or someone.

::You will calm down and be receptive to my—::

::NO!:: she shouted back. ::Get out of my mind!::

Suddenly, Leumas’s head jerked back from where it had been resting on his hands. His face appearing shocked and stunned.

Sarah turned toward Leumas, with slit eyes. “Don’t waste your time trying to influence me, Leumas. I seem to have developed an immunity to it. A little leftover benefit from all the mental manipulation you have been performing on us.”

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Leumas's face continued to show surprise. Sarah, enjoying his confusion, said, "If you think this is surprising, just wait until you talk to Greg."

Leumas, still perplexed, asked, "What exactly do you mean by that?"

"You'll just have to wait and see," she said, smiling.

Leumas felt an unexplained chill settle over him.

Greg felt Leumas' presence nearby. He didn't know how to explain it, but he just knew that he was there. But there was something else he sensed. Another presence that he did not know, but felt it was alien, also.

He slowly maneuvered his way through the thickening crowd, his senses at a heightened state. It was still hours from the start of the rally, yet the crowd was growing at an amazing rate. *Samuel apparently has many followers*, he thought. *Or was it just Leumas's doing?*

Greg hoped that he would find Leumas before Sarah did. He was very concerned about her safety, and Leumas had turned out to be unpredictable in some instances. Earlier, when they were on Zire, Greg had thought Leumas was a pretty honest and sincere alien. But Leumas had told them Earth was going to be left alone and, in light of the present circumstances, that was obviously a lie.

As Greg became more aware, his senses became more acute, and he firmly sensed Leumas' presence. However, the other alien presence was still there, and it was very strong now. This added more controversy that they didn't need right now.

"I just wish I knew what all of this was," he said out loud, causing a stir from the guy next to him.

"Excuse me, fella?" the man standing next to him asked with mild annoyance. "Did you say something to me?"

"No, not me," Greg responded, shrugging and moving off.

Suddenly, the unexplained other mental presence hit him, almost knocking him off his feet. Greg sensed that it was very close. The thought struck him that possibly this other presence had the same

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intentions that he did, to seek out Leumas. Greg closed his eyes and focused all his mental energy to this other visitor. He immediately experienced a myriad of images, shapes and forms that sped through his mind like a freight train. He wobbled from the instant dizziness, fighting to gain control of the images. He leaned against one of the building's cement pillars for support as the visions came in bits and pieces, like flashes of a movie and a strobe light.

As the images became more focused and clear, his heart began to pound so hard he could hear it in his mind. He fought to calm himself and, as he did so, the images became still. He saw images of a dark-haired young boy and a man who was his mirror image. As Greg concentrated on their faces, he realized it was his father and himself. They were walking along, carrying fishing poles, whistling, happy. Then they were playing catch in the backyard, a birthday party, and glimpses of various other events that had occurred while he was growing up before his father died.

Then the images suddenly changed. Greg now saw a man and a young girl, her raven hair pigtails swinging as they walked along hand-in-hand. He gasped, although he was not truly surprised that the young girl looked amazingly like Sarah. There was no mistaking that hair and that smile. It was a young Sarah, and a man he assumed must have been her father. The man playfully tossed her in the air, then took her his arms, tickling her and making her laugh, the love between them shining on their faces.

Why are these images coming to me now? he wondered, perplexed as he recalled the conversation with Sarah earlier about why they had been chosen to represent the Earth in the UCDW. *Is the common link our fathers?* he thought. *But how?*

The other presence was on top of him now. He looked around and his eyes locked upon a stolid figure. The man had his right hand jammed into the pocket of his long overcoat, almost as if guarding something inside that was very precious. Greg let himself slide into this person's aura and immediately felt the non-human thought patterns, leaving no doubt he was definitely not an Earthling, but an alien.

As he slipped deeper into this alien's thoughts, Greg found the answer to why he was there. He was there to locate Leumas, just as he

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suspected, and his reason was to deliver something special to Leumas. Somehow, Greg felt, or knew, it was something the alien believed would atone for things he had done in the past, misguided things that his anger and hate had blocked from his morality.

Greg felt he had harnessed control of his thoughts, and moved from the pillar to get closer to the alien. He studied the bulging coat pocket, concentrating. He wondered, *This thing that the alien has brought for Leumas, what is it? And how does it fit into the grand scheme of things?* Greg gently massaged the alien's brain within his mind. He wanted to learn more about its thought patterns, its emotions and, especially, the precious item that would be the last chance in this creature's hope for any salvation.

He closed his eyes as images and information flowed through his mind like a raging ocean. Greg harnessed them, one by one, first seeing the Leader of the Council and his dangerous anger in full wrath, demanding whatever it was that this alien had. He realized that this thing or device possessed indisputable proof that the Leader had made tremendous mistakes in his mismanagement of the Council and Earth. Then he had worsened the situation further by the placement of two agents on the planet, an action not sanctioned by the Council.

Greg drew in his breath, soaking in the information that was being shown to him. The two agents had decided to defect to Earth, not to go back to Zire or to the Leader, Copolla. They settled on Earth and met two Earth women. They fell in love, and produced children, violating the policy strictly forbidden by the Council regarding procreation whereby there is a mixture of different DNA.

Greg suddenly felt as if he had been punched in his stomach and all the air was evacuating for a safer haven. He was shocked when the pieces of the puzzle fell together. Now he knew the truth about why Copolla and the UCDW had selected them. He found it difficult to believe, but he tried to put these thoughts in a back corner of his mind so he could address the matter at hand—the alien and his package for Leumas.

Realizing that he needed the information this alien possessed to complete the puzzle, Greg sensed that the proof was somehow contained in the mysterious item the alien held so securely in his pocket. The

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image of an information storage device, or computer core, formed in his mind.

Greg also knew the alien would not hand it over to him willingly and, if he didn't act quickly, the core would end up in Leumas' hands or possibly be destroyed.

He carefully maneuvered closer to the alien form standing only a few feet away and applied some influence to its thoughts. He wasn't too sure of his newfound ability except for what he had done in the airport, so he had no idea if he could accomplish this goal.

Greg directed telepathically, *::Give the core to me! I will see that it gets to where it needs to go. Give the core to me! I will see that it gets to where it needs to go.::*

He repeated it several times over, hoping the thoughts had broken through the alien's subconscious. He suddenly realized he didn't even know the alien's name, even after all the tinkering he'd been doing within its mind. Maybe it would make the directive seem more credible, more believable, if he used it. He searched the alien's neural pathways looking for it, grasped it and reapplied it to his influence.

::Give the core to me, Journo! I will see that it gets to where it needs to go.:: He repeated it again. *::Give the core to me, Journo! I will see that it gets to where it needs to go.::*

The alien's eyes suddenly turned toward Greg, and he stared into their fathomless darkness as he reiterated the mental chant over and over again.

Journo now took purposeful steps toward Greg.



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WELL**

Sarah's attention was suddenly drawn away from Leumas by Greg's voice coming through in her mind. *::Sarah, you need to come out here. I have someone I think can help us.::*

::But I'm here with Leumas,:: she responded, quickly.

::I know. Bring him along, too. He will be very interested in what this person has to offer.::

::And if he doesn't want to come along?::

::Don't worry. He'll come. Just tell him one of Copolla's loyal subjects is here and wants to talk with him. Tell him it's Journo.::

At the mere mention of Journo's name, Leumas was more than eager to go with Sarah. Leumas knew the critical role Journo played in Copolla's organization, and knew the alien's hands had dirt and blood permanently smeared all over them. However, he also was greatly interested in finding out why Journo had come to Earth. He quickly deduced there could only be two reasons. He was either here to kill Greg, Sarah or himself, or he was running from Copolla. If it was the latter, Journo could possess a wealth of knowledge that would help Leumas in his quest to go back to the Council and get rid of Copolla. If the former reason applied, he felt for the weapon he had under his suit jacket.

Sarah was amazed at all the people who had gathered since their arrival. It was difficult just to move, and nearly impossible to find Greg. She sent her thoughts to him. *::Greg, we're outside. Where are you?::*

::We're to your right, by the large circular pillars. See them?::

::Yes, I see them, but not you. I'll head in that direction,:: she said, grabbing Leumas's arm to pull him along.

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Leumas stopped and looked at her strangely. “You can communicate with him, can’t you? Telepathically. That’s what you meant by what you said earlier, about talking to Greg, isn’t it?”

“Congratulations, Mr. Leumas. You win the bonus prize,” she said sarcastically. Then angrily, she began, “And all because of you. All of your messing around in our heads has created some interesting side effects. Where does it all end, Leumas? Will Greg and I turn into some kind of freaks or something?” Her face had become red with indignation, and she continued, “Will Barnum and Bailey be our next resume stop? You can’t go messing around with other people like they are toys or something!”

Suddenly, the file that Leumas had placed on the side in his mind opened and the pieces all came together now. He thought about the information Greta had gotten from Biom and he saw the truth about Greg and Sarah. There was no other plausible explanation. He said pleadingly, “Sarah, you must believe me when I say that I had concerns about all of this all along. Things were not made known to me until after this whole affair had begun.” He wrinkled his brow, still thinking. “And some things I didn’t realize until just a few seconds ago. If I had known earlier, I would have proceeded differently. Apparently, my suspicions were correct.”

“Suspicious about what?” she asked, her anger suddenly replaced by interest as she nodded to indicate their direction toward the pillars where Greg waited with Journo.

He announced suddenly, “You’re a hybrid. A mixture of two cultures, one human and one alien.”

Sarah abruptly stopped, nearly knocking over one of people in the crowd. “What do you mean, I’m a hybrid?” she asked with angered bewilderment. “What the hell are you talking about, Leumas? Don’t you know when enough is enough? Do you think this stuff is funny, playing with people’s lives?”

Leumas said calmly, “Your father was an alien, and so was Greg’s. Copolla sent them to Earth. While here, they decided to stay. They met two human women and then, well, you know the rest.”

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Sarah was speechless and suddenly pale as she struggled to whisper, “How could it be? That’s impossible. I, ah, would have known or suspected something. My father was a great—”

Her distress was broken by Greg’s thoughts. *::Sarah, please hurry. I have a feeling that we don’t have much time!::*

He received only silence, and then thought with concern. *::Sarah, can you hear me?::*

Sarah, trying to regain her composure, thought back, *::Uh, yes, Greg. We’re coming.::* She resumed walking quickly with Leumas in tow. Silence between the two was the only conversation, both deep in their own thoughts. *::Greg?::* Sarah called. *::I have to tell you something that Leumas just told me. It can’t wait. My, I mean our, fathers...::*

Calmly Greg said, *::I already know, Sarah. Yes, and it’s all—true. I just found out. Both of our fathers were not human.::*

::But how could it—::

::Sarah, I know it hurts and it will be hard not to think about it now. But we’re going to have to deal with the matter at hand first. Just keep coming and please hurry.::

She sensed the urgency in his voice, and they picked up their pace. The crowd was thinning somewhat as their distance from the campaign headquarters increased, making their headway somewhat easier. As her analytical mind returned, she suddenly asked Leumas, “The reason we were picked for the UCDW was because of our mixed heritage?”

“That, I’m sure, was half the reason,” Leumas replied. “The other half was because you were a mistake that had to be removed. Copolla didn’t want to leave anything to chance.” He continued to put his suspicions into words. “He probably suspected that I might find out about it and exploit the information. And if I divulged it to the Council, he would fall from favor. As far as the Council knows, you were chosen randomly based upon your beliefs and characteristics.”

“Why not just kill us?” she asked simply.

Leumas, elbowing his way through the crowd, continued, “Copolla wasn’t sure of how much of a risk you and Greg were. Plus, I think he was waiting to see if you did develop any interesting abilities because of the mixtures of DNA. When he didn’t see any and you became a risk, he saw an opportunity to get rid of you. In fact, as far as Copolla

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knows, you two are dead. He thinks you were killed during the memory wipe.”

“So how did we get back here?” she asked.

“I brought you here,” he responded simply. “I felt you deserved to resume your lives here on Earth, and I just didn’t mention it to anyone.”

Sarah smiled appreciatively, her feelings for Leumas softened somewhat from earlier. But that still didn’t explain his presence. “Why are you here on Earth?”

He cleared his throat. “Because of my failure to indoctrinate you successfully into the Council, I was sent here under the premise to move the planet Earth forward into space exploration and development.” He smiled cynically and continued, “At least, that is what the Council was lead to believe, anyway. Copolla knows that it will probably take the rest of my life to accomplish that. I realize now that the people of Earth are not ready just yet for that big of a jump.”

Leumas paused, and shrugged. “So, you’re out of the way, Greg is out of the way, and I am out of the way. Copolla has free run of Zire and the Council, and he does not have to worry about his past.”

“So your sentence is to serve your time here on Earth,” she said.

Leumas nodded. “That’s it.”

Sarah seeing that they were nearly to the meeting point, quickened her step, tugging at Leumas’s shirtsleeve.

He chuckled, “Sentence is a kind word. This is Copolla’s way of eliminating the competition, you might say. I am, or was, too well known to be suddenly killed, so this is the next best thing, banishment from Zire.” He smiled and continued. “But, hey, you never know, I have a better than fifty-fifty shot at making this work. Perhaps I can move Earth forward in unity to the exploration and utilization of space and its vast resources.” Then, sarcastically, “I might make it back to the Council and pursue Copolla when I am old and decrepit. That is, of course, if I can accomplish this before the Earth kills itself directly in conflict or depletes its resources beyond a safe point of return.”

Sarah was about to comment, but they had stopped. They were now at the point that Greg had mentioned, at the base of the pillar. They scanned the crowd, not seeing Greg or Journo.

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Greg's amused voice surprised them. "Well, well, well. If it isn't our good alien friend and neighbor, Leumas," he said as he walked toward them with Journo by his side. "Allow me to introduce my good friend Journo. He has come to help us—" Before Greg could finish his statement, there was a sudden blinding flash of bright light and intense heat emitting from Journo.

They shielded their eyes against the momentary flash of light and heat. In an instant, where Journo had been standing, there was now nothing but a pile of black ash lying on the cement. Sarah and Greg stood in speechless horror. They had never seen what happened when an internal loyalty device was activated. Leumas had and he immediately realized what had happened.

"Is this what membership in the Council brings?" Sarah asked. "Death!" Her voice full of fear and anger.

"This is not the work of the Council," Leumas began, angry over this senseless loss. "This is Copolla's filthy doing."

Greg silently shook his head in disbelief and sympathy for what had just happened. He knew the curiosity of the crowd would bring them to the site in a matter of moments. What had to be done had to be done quickly.

"Well, that's it, then," Leumas said, disgustedly, staring at the pile of ash. Inside, the glimmer of hope was extinguished, along with his plans of using Journo to bring about Copolla's downfall.

"Maybe not, Leumas," Greg said. "I know what you wanted from him."

Leumas looked curiously at Greg, then asked skeptically, "Do you now? And how, might I ask, do you—"

Greg jumped into Leumas's mind and answered his question loud and clear. ::*The computer core from the archives with the information about Copolla's wrongdoing.*::

Leumas grabbed his temples, wincing from the pain that Greg had inflicted unmercifully to ensure he understood. Greg quickly turned toward Sarah. ::*Just follow along, Sarah; you're going to have to trust me on this one.*::

::*I do,*:: she replied. ::*With all my heart.*::

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“Now look, Leumas, we only have a minute, if that,” Greg said out loud, eyeing the curious crowd starting to meander its way toward us. Telepathically, he said, *::You want what Journo had. I have it now. We can either make a deal, or I can erase this with a mere thought.::* He held up the computer core and watched Leumas gaze at it with envy, knowing this was the answer to all of his problems.

::But does it have all the...:: Leumas began to think in his mind.

Greg finished the thought, *::Yes; it has all the information that you need to end Copolla’s dictatorship.::*

Leumas knew Greg wasn’t lying. He was also amazed at the amount of telepathic ability Greg possessed. Leumas had not met a Zirean or any other alien in all of his travels who possessed such strength.

“What do you have in mind, Greg?” he asked, trying to feel out his motive.

Greg looked Leumas dead in his eyes and said, “I will give you the core if you agree to get off the Earth and not come back until you are explicitly invited.”

“Is that all? It’s that simple?” Leumas asked, smiling at the irony.

“Almost. You also have to assume Journo’s appearance so that the mysterious disappearance of Mr. David Wright will be a mystery that will never be answered. This will take care of the influence problem and eliminate your identity all in one clean swoop.”

“My...we’ve thought of everything, haven’t we?” Leumas said, impressed, as he stared intently at them.

“More than you can imagine,” Greg responded, looking at his watch. “You have about ten seconds to decide.”

Leumas responded by quickly turning into Journo. It was a perfect replica, even down to the dark, fathomless eyes.

“Fair enough?” he asked, smoothing back his now dark shiny hair. “Now, give me the core, and I will be on my way.”

“Perfect,” Greg replied, extending the core to Leumas/Journo. He accepted quickly and turned to leave, but Greg grabbed his shoulder, stopping him in his tracks. He stared into Leumas’s eyes and said, “Now, remember, not until you are asked to return. Earth is to be left alone! Do you understand?”

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Leumas/Journo saw the new look of confidence and power in Greg's eyes. This was certainly a change from the Greg he had met only a few months earlier. By the look on his face, he wondered briefly, as he glanced towards Sarah, if it was just the telepathic power that caused such a difference in Greg's attitude, or if there was more to it than that.

"Yes, I understand completely," he responded carefully.

Greg released his firm hold on Leumas's shoulder, and watched as he quickly disappeared into the crowd. Sarah touched his arm and rested her head on his shoulder.

"Where did all that come from?" she asked with a certain amount of admiration in her voice for the way he had handled Leumas.

Greg shrugged, liking the feel of her warmth on his shoulder. "It just seemed to flow into me spontaneously. Anyhow, it worked. Leumas is gone, and Earth is back on its own. No influence required." However, in his own thoughts, he had to admit that he had changed. He was no longer the simple and unmotivated person he had been. He felt like he had a purpose, and it felt so right to be here right now with Sarah and having just saved the world from whatever Leumas and his Council cronies had in mind.

The crowd had now reached them, and curious eyes searched about for the source of the flash of light that had claimed Journo's life. Questions were voiced, but were left unanswered. Sarah and Greg decided to blend into the crowd, and then they slowly drifted off in the opposite direction.

The ashen remains of Journo were scattered by the scuffle of the crowd's feet, and taken aloft by a gentle breeze. The site of those ashes made Greg feel sad, because he knew from Journo's mind that all he had wanted was to try and atone for all the sorrow he had caused while he lived in his sphere of anger and hate. He had traveled down the halls of Journo's mind, searching for the key to help unlock his buried feelings. He had been able to assure Journo that he would help him, and he would help this world. Journo had known that Copolla realized that he had fled, and his time on Earth and his life was short.

As the ashes blew around into the wind, Greg still felt a great surge of sorrow for Journo, but he also felt happiness for the alien. Journo

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was now released from all the pain and sorrow he had felt inside for so long.

Greg shared his thoughts with Sarah, and he saw her eyes fill with moisture, and then her lips broke into a beautiful smile. He had almost forgotten what a lovely smile she had. Maybe it was time he remembered.

Everything that could possibly be done had been done, Leumas thought, as the *Blessed* now entered inside Planet Zire's communication range. Even though he relished the thought of what he was about to do, he was still worried. Sometimes one could not predict what a wild animal would do if it was backed into a corner, and that was exactly what he planned to do with Copolla—set a trap to snare him.

He had carefully and methodically reviewed the entire contents of the computer core and had recorded the information he would dangle in front of Copolla, with the rest to be stored for later. He took a deep breath and dialed up a secure communication channel. Moments later, Copolla's ominous visage appeared on the screen. His face was a mixture of surprise and disgust.

He scowled, and said, "Leumas! What do you want? You are in violation of the Council's decision by being off the planet Earth!"

Leumas smiled, and said clearly and slowly, "I want to do something for you that you did not do for me, Copolla."

"And what might that be?" Copolla sneered.

Leumas still smiled and said simply, "I want to give you a chance to resign before you are disgraced in front of the entire Council."

Copolla's facial expression never changed. Instead, he just stared at Leumas, the same sneer still playing about his lips. Leumas never lost eye contact with him and was now ready to play his cards.

Leumas moved closer to the screen, and continued, "I have the archive records that show everything. It proves your mishandling of the entire Earth affair, from the very beginning." He paused for effect, wanting his words to sink in one by one. The silence hung in the air



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like a thunderstorm ready to burst wide open. The sneer had now left Copolla's face, and was replaced with a tight-lipped frown.

Leumas finally continued, "It clearly documents your positioning of agents on Earth after the Hitler catastrophe, and the violation of the rule of alien/human contact. Also, it proves all you have done to cover your tracks and mislead the Council all these years. And, it shows your attempts on the lives of the two Earth subjects', and your implication in the murder of Robise, Greta and several others."

Copolla's face turned a deep red. "You're lying, Leumas!" he yelled. "This is just some kind of bluff. What are you trying to pull? Those records were all destroyed!"

Leumas's fingers danced over the keyboard. Images suddenly appeared in the lower portion of his screen; they appeared on Copolla's as well. Leumas sneered into the screen. "Look for yourself, Copolla. They seem to all be here."

The images verified everything Leumas had said. All the records and file reports that had been in the archives were stored on this computer core. Incriminating signed directives from Copolla flashed across the screen. After a few moments, the screen returned to its full view of each of them and the two adversaries faced each other. Copolla's eyes now carried a new expression that Leumas had never seen before—fear.

"I can make you a very powerful man, Leumas. I can give you anything you want. Yours for the asking," Copolla said in desperation as his entire empire was crumbling around him. Leumas had him trapped.

Leumas said with disgust, "You have nothing I want, Copolla, except your resignation from the Council. My terms are simple. I won't expose the data if you go away quietly. Make up any story you like. I don't care. Just go away from Zire, forever."

Copolla screamed, his face turning into a contortion of rage. "I will have you killed!"

Leumas smiled wanly. "You may, but that won't stop the Council from getting this information. I have secured copies with certain contacts on several planets for safekeeping. If I die or disappear suddenly or mysteriously, they release the information to the Council. Plain and simple."

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Copolla stared blankly at Leumas, then said almost dejectedly, “You seem to have covered yourself pretty well, Leumas. I admire such thoroughness.” His face showed dullness that Leumas regarded as an acceptance of defeat. But there was something else in Copolla’s eyes that Leumas just couldn’t put his finger on.

Leumas snorted in pure disgust. “I don’t want your admiration, Copolla. Like I’ve already said, I just want your resignation from the Council, and your absence.”

Copolla was silent for several seconds, which felt like hours to Leumas, who wanted to end this whole thing quickly and get on with his life back on Zire.

Copolla’s eyes had suddenly regained their evil light, and he said menacingly, “You have won this skirmish, Leumas, but I am not going to crawl out of this office in shame. It has taken too much time, money and effort to get where I am. I will not allow scum such as you and the other Council members to dictate terms to me.”

Leumas saw something in Copolla’s eyes that caused chills to run up and down his spine. Madness maybe?

“I never have been a very good loser, Leumas,” he chuckled evilly. “So, you want the Council, do you? Well, you’ll have to go out and get your own. That is, after you finish explaining how the first ones were all killed because of your rash presumptions.” His chuckles turned into hysterical laughter.

“You wouldn’t,” Leumas said, his breath catching in his throat. “Not kill the entire Council. Not even you can be that sick, Copolla. Think about all the worlds that are represented and the importance of the diplomacy—”

Copolla screamed, “Who cares about that lump of useless alien flesh? You? Yes, I guess you would.” He began to laugh, and then said, “Well, too bad, you cocky piece of alien trash! Just remember, whatever happens will be on your head.” He turned his head to do something out of Leumas’ view, but he turned back to look at the screen as if he had forgotten something. He had a child-like smile on his face, the madness now making itself clear. “One more thing, Leumas. After spending so much time on the sniveling planet Earth, you must have

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become familiar with their literature. There is a rhyme that I have come across. Would you like to hear it?”

Leumas continued to stare at Copolla, realizing that he had finally gone over the edge. “Have you lost your mind, Copolla?”

Copolla’s lips slowly spread into a tight smile. He shrugged, and said amusedly, “Maybe so. But it doesn’t really matter any more, does it? Now, where was I? Such foolish human things, these rhymes, yet they have some truth in them.” He seemed to think for a moment, and continued, “I can think of one that fits this situation just perfectly. Well, with some minor modifications. Shall I recite it for you?”

Leumas realized that whatever strands were left of Copolla’s mental stability were quickly snapping. He said carefully, “Now listen to me, Copolla. Just step aside quietly. We can get you some help.”

Copolla screamed, “It’s too late for that now.” His face then changed back into his little child look. He continued smiling. “Just humor me for a few more seconds.”

He began to chant in a singsong voice:

*“The great Council sat on the wall,
the great Council had a great fall,
all the aliens in the galaxy
couldn’t put the Council back together again.”*

He laughed hysterically at the little rhetoric he had so joyfully brought forth. He then moved away from the screen, which shortly winked out.

Leumas stared at the blank screen in pure fear. He had no idea what to think about Copolla’s mad performance, and he suddenly broke out in a cold sweat. He did not know what Copolla might do next, and that scared him more than anything else.

Leumas quickly checked his navigational display for the distance to Zire. As he read the illuminated numbers on the screen, he slammed his fist on the console. He was still too far away to do anything. His attention was then drawn to the ship’s planetary monitor that had just registered a very large seismic explosion on Zire.

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“Damn it, Copolla! What have you done?” he cried, as he watched the intensity monitor continue to grow. The monitor showed that the center of the explosion was exactly where the Council hall was located. The register finally leveled off and began to drop. The high point on the scale glowed where the measurement had peaked.

Leumas continued to stare at the screen in horror, his stomach beginning to churn dangerously. He knew that an explosion of this size would take out the entire Northern continent, along with its three million inhabitants. “No!” he cried, as he continued to pound the console, tears streaming down his face. Finally, exhausted, he collapsed on the floor and he wept for the innocent victims of Copolla’s madness.

“You bastard!” he cried. “You bastard!”



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C H A P T E R
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THE PLAN

As Leumas neared Zire, the readings from his computer displays showed him that Copolla had been very thorough. The entire continent that had been the site of the Hall of the UCDW for centuries, along with its three million inhabitants, was gone. Checking the computer-scheduling screen, he was appalled to discover that the full Council had been in session at the time of the explosion. With the exception of a few members who were absent for illness or who had to attend to more serious business, the entire Council, plus at least three million inhabitants, had all been killed. He was sickened by the thought that one person could be so evil, so vindictive, as to cause the deaths of so many innocent life forms.

He landed at an alternate spaceport on the southern continent and made his way to his old quarters, a small compartment he rarely used anymore but had never disposed of. He needed time to think. The Council must be reorganized as soon as possible before a total breakdown occurred in the galaxy. He did not want a reoccurrence of past history, when a communication breakdown caused more damage than actual fighting did. It was a sad fact that history had a way of repeating itself, no matter of how severe the consequences.

Through the use of his personal communicator, he linked with the central communication control and contacted many of the other worlds that were members of the UCDW. Word travels fast, he learned, even when light years separated the planets, for most already knew what had happened and were hesitant to reform the Council. *How deep had Copolla's influence gone*, he wondered.

Splintering was already occurring. Many who Leumas contacted regarding reformation questioned what would be done to prevent this same type of thing from happening again. Leumas could offer no solid answers at this point. From what he could learn from his contacts, the

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agents in Copolla's employ had hastily left the solar system or had gone underground for fear of retribution for what he had done.

Leumas realized whatever he was going to do, it would have to be something that would draw all the worlds together, and fast. The longer the UCDW was without a unified body, the harder it would be to put it back together again. The galactic implications of this catastrophe were phenomenal.

Such a mess, he thought sadly, shaking his head. He had been looking forward to returning to Zire from the moment he had been sentenced to his duties on Earth. To come back to this disaster was not exactly what he had in mind.

He downloaded the data from the old computer core, sending pertinent data to all of the Council Worlds that had not received it from his earlier transmission. He thought that maybe if he proved how evil Copolla's veins ran, his arguments might sink in and serve as a catalyst for the reformation. There was indeed many a lesson to be learned from this information and, at least with Copolla gone, the Worlds would have a chance for a clean start.

He sat in a chair and leaned his head back as far as he could, pressing his fingers on the base of his neck, seeking to relieve the enormous cramping in his muscles from all the stress. He tried to relax his body and mind for a few moments as he closed his eyes.

Fate and chance had thrown the galactic world he had known into utter chaos. The chances of Copolla destroying the entire Council along with the entire continent had been miniscule, not even one of the scenarios he had considered possible. He shook his head sadly; it had been too severe an action, even by the most deranged individual's standards.

Then again, he thought, *look at what had happened to Greg and Sarah. Who could have imagined this development of their telepathic powers by the freak mating of two aliens with humans? Yet it had happened.* Leumas made a mental note to himself that he needed to get a better look at those two later. *Remember your promise*, he reminded himself. Was there some deep meaning to all of these occurrences? Yes, the long shots had come home. And that was exactly what it was going to take to have the Council reassembled again, a long shot.

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He tried to imagine the situation and the type of conditions that would be required to bring new Council members together. First, they would have to find a safe place for the Council to conduct business. Zire was obviously out of the question since it had already been almost annihilated twice. They would have to rebuild again somewhere else. Leumas stretched his neck, continuing to massage his tense muscles as thoughts raced through his mind.

Second, they would have to elect a leader. Probably the toughest choice they would face. He could envision a lengthy process; psychological profiles would have to be a priority this time, and they'd have to know where that life form had stood during the reign of Copolla. All in all, this life form would have to be virtually untouched and unknown by the Council or any of its past actions.

Third, they would have to redefine the Council's charter to limit the authority of the leader, once they agreed on one. They would also have to devise explicit controls and safeguards to avoid what Copolla had done for so long without the Council's knowledge, a check and balance system that was incorruptible.

He thought wryly that he might even have a chance of taking over the Council himself. He was the one who had found the proof that the whole scheme with the Earthlings was purposely staged by Copolla to discredit him. A plan designed to fail on purpose by Copolla, and was not caused by any incompetence on his part.

But, after thinking about it, he decided not to pursue that path. There were still unanswered questions lingering in the air that could possibly hurt his credibility. He couldn't take the chance of his own ambition hindering the Council from being reformed as soon as possible. There was just too much at stake.

The reformation of the Council would demand that the leader be an impartial selection, and not a member that may have secretly subscribed to Copolla's ideology. It would have to be someone from one of the more distant worlds, perhaps even a non-member world.

What about...a sudden thought worked its way into Leumas's mind. He began to smile. He chuckled aloud wondering why he had not thought of this before then said, "Odds. I wonder?" Suddenly, he began to key information into his computer terminal, then sat back and

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waited, his eyes never leaving the screen. Seconds later the percentages flashed before him and, as he read them. He smiled thinking it might just work.

Leumas began to prepare a message to send to all the Council worlds. He carefully phrased the message, wanting to ensure that he addressed as many of their concerns as possible. "This may be the last chance, a make or break evolution," he wrote, a phrase he had heard used on Earth.

Not wanting to divulge too much in the message, he was brief and to the point. Too much information might lead to questions that would have to be answered now and he did not want the process to get bogged down too early. He wanted this message to prompt action, not bring about questions and speculations. Reading it for a third time, he felt satisfied with what he had prepared and pressed the send button, thinking, *The dice have been cast.*

With his words now flowing throughout the galaxy, he stood and looked slowly around his old compartment. He looked at the room as if he would not see it again. He shrugged and said, "Back for such a short time, and now off again." He ran his hand along the wall as he walked toward the door. He opened it and walked out, never glancing back. He hoped, for once, that the odds would work in his favor.

Sarah and Greg returned to her apartment to sort the day's events out. Once inside, he knew it was time to explain more fully what was on the computer core. He especially wanted her to know about the information he had discovered regarding their fathers. They sat down on the sofa and Greg began to explain.

She was both amazed and angry, but even learning that her father was an alien didn't detract from her loving him, nor did it affect Greg's opinion of his father. She was angry because she hadn't known, but she understood why he had not told her. Still, she would always wonder if maybe she could have done something had she known.

"Do you want me to go on, Sarah?" he asked, hesitantly.



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“I have to know,” she answered. The sad expression on her face made Greg unhappy.

He continued, “Apparently our fathers, who were the two agents from Zire, originally had not intended to stay on Earth for the rest of their lives.” He looked into her moist eyes. “It happened for two reasons. The first and foremost was that working for Copolla was not exactly the most desirable employment for them. So, when they saw the opportunity to fade into a society of millions, defection looked very appealing. They were both humanoid in appearance, so it was a golden opportunity to blend in.”

Greg paused, gently grasping her hands. “The second reason was that, after being on the planet for a while, they met and fell in love with two beautiful Earthlings, our mothers,” he said, watching a smile spread over her face, one he mirrored as he remembered his own mother.

“Their downfall was that the mission was only supposed to last a short span of time, so apparently a few corners had been cut. Certain important tests were skipped regarding the long-term effects that Earth’s atmospheric bacteria might have on a Zirean’s physical system. If they had planned their permanent departure from Copolla’s service prior to arriving on Earth, they might have conducted further simulations on the Earth’s atmosphere and diseases that Zireans could contract.”

“Or maybe Copolla didn’t want them to have protection, just in case they did decide to leave his service,” she added.

“That’s possible,” Greg agreed. “That’s the real shame of it all because, if proper procedures had been followed, our fathers would have seen the bacteria and probably received inoculations that would have saved their lives. It took thirty-eight years to kill them, but it did, eating away at their immune systems slowly every day.”

Sarah leaned into his arms and sobbed. They both shared sorrow over the senseless loss of both of their fathers. At least, now they knew the truth and that made all the difference.

Greg had been able to retain some of the images from the core, and he mentally sent them to Sarah. They were happy images showing family outings and memorable moments that Sarah and her father had shared. She stopped crying, and began to smile as she drifted with the images in her mind, finding a momentary peace and calm in them.

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After they sat in silence, just holding each other for a few moments, she suddenly asked the inevitable question, “So what about us? Are we human or alien?”

“Both,” Greg said, and explained. “As Leumas said, we are basically a human-alien hybrid; physically we are virtually identical. Mentally, though, is another story, along with the telepathic abilities we seem to have inherited.”

“I guess you’re right,” she responded. “We have both undergone numerous physical exams, blood tests and all that good stuff. Nothing has ever been said about anything being odd.”

“Regardless, these things are in the past now. We have our futures to consider,” he said, exhaling strongly. He smiled at her and then kissed her.

When they moved apart, she smiled into his eyes and said, “Look at it this way, if all of this hadn’t happened, we would never have met, would we?”

“Probably not,” he chuckled, squeezing her hand. “Leave it to you to find that silver lining in all these clouds.” They laughed together at the statement, and felt some of the earlier tension dissipate. Feeling more relaxed than he had in an awhile, Greg moved his face towards her and kissed her again, this time with a bit more passion behind it.

“Well, it’s about time, young man,” she said as they parted from the kiss.

“I guess we’ve both been a little preoccupied with everything else going on,” he said, and they both laughed deeply.

Sitting on the sofa, they talked a while longer as Greg tried to remember as much as he could from the images of the computer core. When he was tired from trying to recall information, they decided to take a break and check out the news to see what they were saying about the disappearance of David Wright.

The breaking news about what had happened at Edward Samuel’s campaign headquarters was garnering the top stories. Theories ran from political party sabotage to blackmail and, amusingly enough, there were even speculations about an alien abduction. They burst out laughing at that one, and it was several minutes before they could speak rationally.

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“Maybe we should call the National Enquirer or something. Inquiring minds want to know,” Greg said jokingly. Sarah got up from the sofa and switched the TV off.

“Well, that’s enough for me for now. I think every channel is covering the mysterious disappearance of David Wright and the disastrous effect on Edward Samuel’s political campaign,” she said, as she headed toward the kitchen. “How about something to eat?”

“Sure,” he said, although he didn’t feel terribly hungry.

“I know a half-hearted appetite when I hear one. Stop thinking about this election stuff for a while.”

A thought jumped into Greg’s mind and, without even thinking, he said, “It won’t matter. Samuel is going to win the election anyway.” Whether it was from Leumas’ influence or from Edward’s honest appeal, he wasn’t sure. “I know he will.”

His thoughts left Edward Samuel and Leumas, and he was suddenly confronted with the realization of what was really out there in the galactic universe. Other worlds and civilizations, the cultural aspects alone were mind boggling, yet Earth didn’t have a thing to do with it. These were exciting thoughts, given the potential of what they could be involved with, but not in the clandestine way that was Copolla’s current mode of operation.

But our position is still the same, he thought defensively. No planet should be led in any particular direction; it should be allowed to develop on its own.

But, a little voice entered into his thoughts, there were certain advantages to helping a planet develop to a certain extent if the right individual was in control of it.

The last part of his thought surprised him. Maybe knowing there were other worlds out there made the situation appear in a different light. Either way, it was a very interesting concept.

Sarah came back into the room and sat next to him on the sofa, placing a plate of sandwiches on the table.

“You’re really down deep somewhere, aren’t you?” she asked.

He smiled, but said nothing.

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She returned the smile and said, “I’m getting to know you too well, Greg. I’d gamble that you were wondering if we did the right thing or not...weren’t you?”

He chuckled at her intuitiveness. “Well, yes, kind of. I know we did the right thing, and our point of non-interference is still a valid one. But think of all those other worlds and alien races out there. How long will it take Earth to reach their level? Twenty years? Fifty years? Maybe even a hundred years? Maybe never if we continue to squabble amongst ourselves and between countries. It just seems like such a waste to have to wait that long.”

“It’s only a long wait if you know about it. Ignorance is bliss, they say. Right now, we’re the only two Earthlings who have asked to join that club, remember?” she said teasingly.

“I know,” he said. “Yet I feel that we should do something to get the people of this planet moving in the direction of the tremendous future of expanding out into space. The economic implications alone are staggering.”

“I agree,” she nodded. “But it must be a conscious decision by the people and not one where influence is applied to make them do things they wouldn’t normally do.”

“What if...” Greg began. “Well, what if we went to Edward Samuel and explained the whole thing. Start to finish. Tell him everything that has happened. Tell him about the UCDW and who David Wright really was, or is.”

“He’d probably have us locked up!” she said incredulously. “But you know, on the other hand, if he did believe just a little of it, it might start something at least. And if he believes us about Leumas, or David Wright, he might believe the rest of our story.”

“We should at least try, Sarah. It just seems like the right thing to do,” he said.

“But what if he just dismisses the entire thing?” she asked. “Do we form our own expand into space movement?”

Greg shrugged. “Maybe. It’s always a possibility. At least it would be something.”

“What about these powers? These telepathic abilities?” Sarah pointed at her head with her index finger.

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“We’ll play that one by ear for now,” he said, then changed the subject. “Do you think you can get us in the campaign center again?”

“I’ll call and tell them my interview was interrupted by the events today and let them know that I still want to join the campaign. Hopefully, I can get close enough to Samuel to set up a conversation between us.”

“Sounds like a plan to me,” he said, leaning back on the sofa.

The sudden ringing of the telephone interrupted their silence.

Sarah picked up the phone, and said, “Hello? Yes, this is she.”

There was a long stretch of silence, as Sarah listened intently, her face passive. Greg looked at her questioningly, but her attention was focused on the voice at the other end of the line.

“Yes, I understand perfectly. Tomorrow morning. Yes, I know the place. We’ll see you then, Mr. Samuel.”

The coffee shop Edward Samuel had selected for their meeting was quiet and deserted. Greg and Sarah entered and were directed by the waitress to a booth in the back. They both assumed that Edward had chosen a seating area that would offer them some privacy, where they would not be overheard. When they reached the booth, Edward looked curiously at them through tired eyes that showed the fatigue and stress of the past several hours.

He rose, and greeted them with a half smile. “You must be Sarah and Greg. I am Edward Samuel.” He paused and shook hands. “I’d say that I am glad to meet you, but to be honest, I am not sure yet. This is all so mysterious.”

Sarah looked at him warily and said, “As it is to us as well. What we don’t understand is how or why you contacted us.”

He ignored the question. “Well, please be seated. No sense standing and drawing undue attention. I need to be careful after all the publicity yesterday, with those mysterious flashes of light, and then David’s mysterious disappearance. It’s a media dream come true.”

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They were all seated, and a waitress came over to take their orders. After all the formalities were done, Greg leaned forward and looked directly at Edward.

“So, why did you call us, Mr. Samuel?”

Edward cleared his throat and replied. “Let me begin by telling you what has transpired. Apparently David Wright knew or suspected that he might have to leave abruptly, or that he may disappear, through no fault of his own.” He removed an envelope from his suit jacket and laid it before them. “David left an envelope with a courier service to be delivered to me in the event of his disappearance.” Edward paused a few seconds, and tapped his fingers on the envelope. “It names you both as people that I can turn to for help and to possibly get an explanation as to what the hell has been going on. It doesn’t say why you two were selected or give any explanation at all regarding his disappearance.”

Sarah and Greg looked at one another and then back to Edward. They were both as surprised as he was at the unexpected move from Leumas.

“Well?” Edward said impatiently. “Look, folks, I’m at a critical moment in this campaign. Without David Wright, I’m lost. He handled a lot of the campaign affairs and dealt with many of my supporters. I haven’t got a clue as to what I am going to tell them. How about a little help here?”

::Sarah, what do you think?:: Greg asked in his thoughts, still trying to figure out what kind of game Leumas was playing.

::I don’t know how much we can or should tell him. Can we trust him?::

::Well, if we tell him everything, he’ll either get up and leave or maybe, just maybe, he’ll believe us enough to give us a suggestion on which way to go.::

::I guess we have nothing to lose at this point,:: she said, a hint of skepticism in her voice. *::You tell him,::* she quickly added, as a smile appeared on her face and her hand touched his. *::You have such a way with words.::*

::Hmm...:: he thought as he smiled in return.

The impatience on Edward’s face increased, and he asked, “Well, is anybody going to say anything?”

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“Interesting choice of words, Mr. Samuel,” Greg said, smiling at the irony. “But before I begin, let me ask you something.”

“Go ahead.”

“Mr. Samuel, I would ask that you be open-minded and listen to what I have to say before you comment. When I’m finished, if you get up and walk out of here, I’ll understand. Deal?”

“Fair enough,” he said, shifting to get more comfortable.

Greg began at the very beginning with the accidents and from there went in order of the events as they occurred. The only exception was that he did not mention anything about their telepathic abilities or about his ability to influence.

Edward was an excellent listener. He sat there expressionless, listening to every word as if he was soaking in each syllable. There was no way to tell if he believed any of it, because his expression was unreadable.

Greg finished the story by mentioning the phone call they received requesting this meeting. Edward still did not say a word. He just sat there looking at them, taking an occasional sip of his coffee.

“Well?” Sarah asked, at the end of her patience.

“That’s a very interesting story. Perhaps we should go public with the whole thing,” Edward said.

“Do you really think so?” she asked, surprised.

“Oh, sure. No doubt that will help my campaign immensely,” he said, the sarcasm dripping in his voice. “I can see the headlines.” He waved his hands in the air. “Alien Aid to Samuel.” His voice rose in anger, “What kind of fool do you take me for? This is some ploy by one of the other parties to discredit me, isn’t it?”

“It’s the honest truth, Mr. Samuel!” Sarah said, her voice cracking with frustration. “We have no reason to make it up. We’re looking for your help.”

“Please, say no more,” he said, holding up his hands. “I’d love to stay and hear more about my friends in outer space but I have to get back. Please excuse me.”

Edward gathered up his things as an awkward silence hung over the table. He was preparing to rise from his seat when the waitress stepped up to their table with the coffeepot in hand to fill the cups.

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“A refill, sir?” the waitress asked Edward in such a manner that made the coffee suddenly appear irresistible to him. He stopped getting his things together and slid his cup toward the edge of the table as if he had been mesmerized by the voice of the waitress.

“Yes, I would love some,” he said, as his eyes moved from his cup toward the waitress.

As the waitress poured the coffee, she continued to talk. “Isn’t it a wonderful...

Greg noticed it first; her voice was changing, somehow. It was becoming deeper, almost like a man’s voice. Then suddenly, her image became fuzzy and unfocused. All eyes turned toward this mysterious change occurring before them.

Although Sarah and Greg soon realized what was happening because of their previous experience, Edward didn’t have a clue. The image of this person became suddenly clear as Edward watched with his mouth gaping wide open.

“Hello, Edward. It’s good to see you again,” Leumas said jovially. “Mind if I join you?” he asked, as he sat. Edward, his pale complexion slowly returning to its natural color, was still confused, but he seemed pleased to see his campaign manager.

Never losing his grin, Leumas still held the coffeepot in his hand from his initial waitress appearance and gestured to fill the cups of those who desired more. He received no response from his offer, but he went ahead and topped off all the cups, including his own, and returned the pot to the edge of the table.

“Well, here we are, all together once again,” he stated jovially.

“What are you doing here, Leumas? I thought we had a deal,” Greg said, the annoyance and impatience showing clearly on his face and in his voice.

Leumas became serious and said, “There have been some rather interesting developments that have warranted my return.”

“Such as?” Sarah asked skeptically.

Before Leumas could answer, Edward woke up from his shock and exclaimed, “It’s true, then!”

“Every last word,” Greg answered grimly.

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“So, you’re an alien, David, or whoever you are.” Edward began slowly, looking at Leumas. “And, uh, this ‘Council’ is a real organization?”

Edward looked around the table at the serious faces in front of him. He put his hands on either side of his head, which was shaking in confusion. At first, he was glad to see David or, uh, Leumas. His first thoughts were thinking about getting the campaign back on track. Then he thought how he had always suspected that life existed on other planets, but to finally hear that it was true, and from an alien, was a little too much to take in all at once.

“The Council *was* a real organization might be a better term for the moment,” Leumas said in a grim voice.

“Why the past tense?” Sarah asked.

Leumas closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and stated sadly, “Copolla killed the entire Council, including himself. He knew that the information I had gained possession of would end his time as Leader of the Council and his future plans. I never thought he would do such a terrible, drastic thing, though.”

“All the members...killed?” Sarah asked in horror, her voice quavering.

“Along with the continent’s three million inhabitants,” Leumas replied, pain showing in his eyes.

“So all that I have been told is no longer?” Edward interjected, finally coming to grip with the situation. “This great organization has been destroyed? What happens now? Is that it? Finished?”

“The principle of the organization shall always remain,” Leumas stated strongly. “The organization must be rebuilt. The Council represents many things, but mostly it serves as a reminder to most races not to travel down the terrible path that our ancestors did so many millennia ago. War to the brink of destruction.”

“An amicable purpose,” Edward agreed. “At times I fear that this planet will also travel that path and destroy itself. We’ve given it a good try on numerous occasions.”

“How do you intend to rebuild the Council, Leumas?” Greg asked, still trying to piece these latest events together in his mind.

“That will be the tricky part,” Leumas responded, exhaling.

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“Why is that?” Sarah asked, confused. “The members can be replaced. The hall can be rebuilt. What stands in the way?”

Leumas said slowly, “The chance of it happening all over again. Copolla’s conspiracy, members murdered, Council chambers destroyed. It has produced tremendous skepticism in the other worlds if it can work.”

“That is understandable,” Edward said, his political mind working. “After such a traumatic event, you will need a new beginning with the premise that you will avoid something like this happening again. Precautions and policies will have to be instituted. A new Council in a new environment with stringent controls.”

::Sarah, I don’t like where this conversation is going,:: Greg suddenly thought to her.

::Why? What’s wrong?::

::Because I think Leumas is maneuvering this conversation.::

::To what end?:: she thought, looking at Leumas’s face.

::To the end that he wants,:: Greg thought to her.

“I couldn’t agree with you more, Edward,” Leumas said as he smiled. “As always, we think a lot alike. I think that is why we got along so well. Which leads me to my proposal.”

“Proposal?” Greg asked cynically. “Or ultimatum? I would like to know exactly where we stand before we go any further.”

Leumas held up his hands. “A proposal, of course. A mutually agreed upon proposal that helps us both.”

“Go ahead, Leumas, we’re listening,” Sarah said skeptically.

“We have two problems as I see it,” he began, holding two fingers up. “Problem one: I need to find a new home for the Council to call its own. Secondly, you Earthlings have concerns about your planet’s advancement into space yet you do not want the alien influence. Is this correct so far?” He asked sounding like a used car salesman presenting a pitch to a potential buyer.

They all nodded half-heartedly, waiting to hear more. Edward, having quite a bit of experience in the art of negotiating, was observing how carefully Leumas was choosing his words. He could tell that Leumas wanted his proposal to be phrased just perfectly to sell his idea. He had himself used the same art on many occasions with his constituents. Most

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of which usually meant that it was something that was very risky, very innovative or that the chance of failure was very high.

“Good,” Leumas replied to their unspoken consent. “Let’s move on. I think I have a plan that will help both of us. I propose that the United Council for Developing Worlds find its new home here, on Earth.”

Blank stares came from all three of Leumas’ audience, then shock at such a suggestion registered, which quickly turned to disbelief, followed by anger.

Greg spoke first. “You’ve got to be kidding me, Leumas. This planet has barely been exposed to space travel, and you want to plop a bunch of aliens on this planet and think it will be okay? Get real, my friend!” His anger was apparent. “What ever happened to gradual introduction and indoctrination? You, based upon your experience, would be the last person, excuse me, last alien that I could imagine throwing something like this out!”

Sarah quickly followed. “The people of this planet would never accept the thought of superior alien races here on Earth. The overwhelming thought of planet takeover would always be at the forefront of their minds.”

Edward was nodding in agreement. “I have to agree with them both David, er...sorry, I mean Leumas. The people of this planet would never accept an organization here. I myself would be receptive to the idea, but I would be in the minority. Some humans would also agree but, as with most things, a majority is needed.”

Leumas looked at them and smiled. “I have more to propose yet. I would also suggest that to quell the fears...”

::You’ve got to be kidding me!:: Greg suddenly said in his mind, sharing the thought with Sarah.

::What’s wrong, Greg?::

::Leumas is going to suggest that you and I chair the Council!::

::What?::

Leumas’s voice returned through their thoughts, “...that, to quell the fears of the human populace, Greg and Sarah lead the Council in the new order of dual leadership. They will be of this planet and in charge of all the races that belong to the Council. The other races would be

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bound to obey them,” Leumas stated clearly, as if it was so perfect there would be no need for discussion.

Again, Leumas had managed to render them speechless. He poured himself another cup of coffee.

“Any thoughts?” he asked.

“You can’t be serious, Leumas,” Sarah said, watching as Leumas stirred his coffee in a meticulous counter clockwise and then clockwise motion.

“I am quite serious, Sarah,” he responded quickly. “And it would work, too. Wouldn’t it, Greg?” He said as he turned toward Greg. “You know it would, so why be silent?”

“What does he mean, Greg?” Edward asked, his confusion showing.

But Leumas continued before Greg could answer his rhetorical question. “Greg has developed some unique abilities. I don’t know about them all, but I believe that, if given a certain situation, he can see what the outcome will be before it happens. Am I right, Greg?”

Hesitantly Greg spoke, “To a certain extent, yes.”

“What kind of—” Edward began, but was cut off by Leumas.

“What do you see in this particular instance, Greg?” he asked, staring into Greg’s eyes.

“I’m not sure,” Greg began warily. “The outcome is not easy to see, and too many variables come into play.”

“This is the best way and you know it,” Leumas said harshly. “You want a solution that gets this planet moving toward space, but you feel that you’re not ready for it. This way I bring space to you. Right here at home on Earth. With you two controlling the Council, you can move at the speed you wish as far as Earth is concerned. It’s a win-win situation.”

“Why should Greg and Sarah control the Council?” Edward asked.

Leumas, admiring Edward’s astuteness, answered. “Well, Edward, for several reasons. Greg and Sarah have developed some powers that make them unique, at least for the moment. No other species has developed what they have. This gives them an advantage in analyzing intricate situations and possibly even foreseeing the outcome. Their existence

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is a result of an inter-species relationship, a symbol of the unity of the Galaxy, and they have no private interests or affiliations that would affect their decision-making process.” Leumas paused, took a sip of coffee and continued. “They know about the Council already, and the precepts under which it operates. Plus, they are already on file with the Council as a species that speaks its mind when it feels it is right. They have the courage of their convictions.”

“So that makes them the perfect neutral and unbiased party,” Edward said, nodding. “Makes sense, I have to say, right down to the rich symbolism.”

“You’re agreeing with him?” Greg asked, not sure of his own position anymore.

“I didn’t say that. I just said the plan makes sense.”

“It’s absurd!” Sarah said heatedly. “It’ll never work!” She looked to Greg and squeezed his hand under the table. “Right, Greg?”

Greg was momentarily silent as his thoughts slipped away from the conversation. He squeezed Sarah’s hand back, and then responded slowly, yet confidently. “As absurd and strange as it may seem, the plan actually has a pretty good chance of working. I assume you have already discussed it with the other Council worlds already, Leumas?”

A grin slowly began to spread across Leumas’ face as he said, “I have mentioned it. I believe that they will agree to it if you will.”

“Hypothetically, if they were to agree, all of this will be placed in written context and not interfere with planet politics, I assume?” Edward asked.

“Yes,” Leumas responded coolly. “The UCDW would be treated as a neutral and separate country, similar to your Vatican in Rome. Its affairs would be its own, as will be those of Earth.”

“Technology and scientific advancements for the Earth’s benefit?” Sarah asked, her anger abated as her logic took over.

“Released in a slow and controlled manner, of course, that would enhance your own efforts. Make it appear as if your own people developed them and at their own pace,” Leumas responded matter-of-factly.

“So, Greg, what do you say?” Leumas asked, as they all turned toward him to hear his answer.

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“Landslide victory never seen before in the history of the United States,” the newspaper’s headline read. “A clear two-thirds majority has overwhelmingly elected Edward Samuel President. He is the first third party candidate or, as they are more commonly known, ‘The Vision Party,’ in the history of the United States to be chosen to hold the office.”

In his acceptance speech, President Samuel spoke to a record audience both in attendance at the ceremony and those at home viewing him on television. He spoke with confidence and assuredness. “We have many problems that face the people of this country. We have a long hard road to travel to reach our destination. Yet, let us not fool ourselves: our goal is not a perfect country or world. It is a country that provides the opportunity to its inhabitants to live a life free of the impediments of those that would deny us our heritage. We must address the needs of the people and not the special interest groups,” he vowed this most vehemently above all other issues.

“We have immediate plans to fix some of our problems with conventional methods, those which you have heard me address in great detail throughout the campaign. But remember these conventional fixes are big Band-Aids that we apply to the wounds of the American society. They are only temporary solutions.”

He paused, looking slowly at his audience, noting the looks of renewed hope and anticipation. Then, in a loud booming voice, he continued, “We, you and I, have to do more! Government can’t fix everything. People fix problems. People take care of people. People are our future. People must have vision, for without vision, we are nothing.”

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Cheers and applause rang out at this last statement. It was the slogan that had developed the last few months of the campaign as Edward's outlook for a new America.

Edward described his vision. "We need jobs. We need more efficient energy sources. We need room for our booming population. We need the chance to begin again, and to regain our heritage as explorers. The solution to many of our problems is in space and the exploration of the planets, our new frontier."

He went on to explain that it was inevitable, that no matter how the Earth conserved its resources on this planet today, at some point in time, which was a lot closer than they had suspected, the resources would be depleted. Once that happened, an obvious chain of events would come into play, all of which were bad unless they began to address these issues now.

He continued. "The population explosion is continuing, and new generations, our children, will need jobs and the opportunity to achieve their vision, as we have had. That is the key. Opportunity. A word that means fairness to each and every person to become what he or she might. Equality for all."

Again, Edward paused his speech. Slowly he looked toward the sky, raising his hands in that direction. He then looked back into the eyes of his supporters. "Our direction is outward. Not for a few chosen, but for the masses. The vastness of space is the answer that fits the question of the future. If people are to be allowed to reach for that dream, we need to begin an aggressive program with all nations to expand into our solar system and beyond. The solutions to our problems here at home are out there, waiting. Those who sit and think about it are just dreamers. Our dreaming days are over!"

Almost immediately, his acceptance speech ignited serious discussions around the world and led leaders of many countries to offer their support for a joint space exploration effort. In the United States, he had raised the fervor of the people into anticipation that had not been seen since the first lunar landing on the moon.

Edward was a man of his word; it had been a key principle in his campaign. He instituted a process that placed novices rather than experts in influential positions. His approach was that new and

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innovative ideas usually did not come from so-called experts, but rather from people who were totally detached from the area. Experts were too close to it day in and day out, and often developed natural roadblocks in their minds. By the placement of those who saw things in a simplified manner to feed the imagination of the experts, renewed vigor would be inserted and could be maintained. Eyebrows were raised regarding this theory by some of the stalwart conservatives. Nevertheless, the consensus and Edward's successes quieted them.

An appointee named to head the ambitious plan of "Vision for Tomorrow through Space," was a woman who had no experience in space exploration, but who possessed an exact working business knowledge on how to get a quality product marketed in the most cost-effective way. Also, she had the drive to sell the idea and make it appealing to even the most conservative person. Her name was Sarah McClendon.

Greg wasn't sure the robe looked appropriate; it felt big and awkward on him. It reminded him of the robes worn by a judge. He turned sideways in the mirror and looked indifferently at the image. Chuckling, he raised his arms upward, the large awkward sleeves flopping about his elbows made him appear to have wings.

Giving up on trying to decide about the robe, he walked over to the window. He looked out of the large plate glass window that offered an excellent panoramic view of the mountain range, the scenic woods and beautiful horizon that surrounded the facility that he and the newly formed UCDW now called home.

The facility was carefully tucked away in a valley in the mountains of West Virginia. It was ideal. It had breathtaking views and was totally isolated from the outside world. Leumas, Edward, Sarah and he had spent many months searching for the perfect location, and had unanimously agreed upon this location.

Using Council technology, they were able to shield the area from any type of detection by conventional radar systems and satellite surveillance. This shielding allowed spacecraft to come and go without

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detection by creating an impenetrable funnel that the spacecraft traveled into to land at the site spaceport.

The entire site covered several thousand acres of wilderness and included a security force provided by the United States military. They military and senior officials understood this to be a retreat for high-level officials who were never, never to be disturbed. If the military ever got curious, the Council had set up a fake compound that could be spied upon to satisfy curious eyes. They had covered all the possible contingencies with no less than three fail-safe stopgap precautions for every possibility.

Everyone agreed with the idea of Earth's expansion out into space, but they also were convinced that a favorable reaction from the public regarding the UCDW being stationed on Earth was very doubtful, so they compromised. The Council would be here on Earth, but not announced to the public, not yet anyway. That would come sometime in the future, after Sarah had ingrained the idea into the public's head that expansion into space was self-sustaining and would make available tons of opportunities for jobs, save the planet's resources and ensure the future growth of the Earth's heritage and culture. Then there would be hints of other alien races. Then initial contact and from there...well, that would have to be seen. Edward would have to stay in office for as long as possible to carry out the plan to fruition.

Greg's stomach churned between nervousness and anticipation. Today was to be the first meeting of the Council, and Sarah and he were to begin their role as the co-leaders of the UCDW.

Sarah had returned late last night from her Washington Headquarters for Space Development. They snuck away from all the commotion of last minute details and discussed the demanding dual role that she had committed to. Greg selfishly tried to get her to change her mind, but it was what she wanted. She was totally dedicated and dove into her work with an insatiable appetite. They'd agreed that he would handle the day-to-day activities of the Council, while she worked on the space program concepts and marketing them to the American people.

Greg thought about Sarah and how their relationship had grown. He didn't think it would ever be possible to feel so much love toward one woman as he did for her. But both of them being realists, and having

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accepted enormous responsibilities, they knew that time together would become a very precious commodity. *I'll have to make up things to get her out here more often. Otherwise, she'll work herself to death. Besides, it will be nice to see her as much as possible.*

His thoughts drifted to the curvature of her gentle face and the laugh that always made him smile. A knock at the door caused the image to fade.

"Come on in," he called.

Leumas entered, dressed in his own Council garb. Greg greeted him with a warm handshake. "Is it time?"

"Not yet, Greg, but soon," Leumas answered, eyeing Greg speculatively. "Nervous?"

"No, not nervous. Very nervous," Greg smiled. "Hey, what do you think of this sheik's robe thing?"

Leumas laughed and adjusted the robes. "Don't worry. You look fine and you'll do fine. Is Sarah here yet?"

Greg's eyes glazed momentarily. "She's coming down the hall right now."

Seconds later, there was a knock on the door and Sarah entered. She was wearing her Council robes as well, but Greg thought they looked a heck of a lot better on her than they did on him. He looked appreciatively at the way the white folds fell softly about her figure.

She took several steps into the room and smiled at them both. "Hi, Greg, Leumas," she said, and then fixed her gaze on Greg, looking up and down, and then said coyly, "Nice outfit. I think I know the tailor."

"Cute, Sarah," he responded playfully.

"You know, you two make a cute couple," Leumas interjected.

"Thanks," they both said simultaneously, which caused an outburst of laughter from all three of them.

"Okay, you two, it's time to go. The Council members will be waiting." Leumas said as he moved toward the door.

"Ready, Sarah?" Greg asked, looking into her eyes.

She exhaled. "As ready as I am ever going to be. Let's do it."

The three of them walked out of the room and headed down the corridor to where the new hall of the Council had been carved into the interior of a mountain. All one hundred and fifty-six new members

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of the Council were present today for this inauguration and opening session of the new UCDW.

Thoughts ran through Greg's mind about the last six months and how it had changed their lives, his in particular. His lifestyle had changed one hundred and eighty degrees from what it had been. He'd gone from virtually no responsibility in his life to carrying the weight of the entire galaxy on his shoulders. The strange thing was that it didn't feel that way. It felt like this was what he had always been meant to do. The thought gave him a warm feeling that washed away his earlier nervousness.

He glanced at Sarah walking beside him, and sent a little thought to her. *::Good luck there, lady.::*

::Thanks, and the same to you. I know you will do well. I'm just here for show; my work is back in D.C.::

::I know, and I've been thinking about what we discussed last night.::

::Was that before or after you made passionate love to me?::

::I...ah...:: Greg's thoughts stuttered.

::It's good to know I can still surprise you once in a while. You always seem to know what I'm going to say so I thought I try and catch you off guard.::

::Well...it worked,:: Greg said finally. *::It was wonderful.::*

::Yes, it was,:: Sarah agreed.

::Which brings me to my point. I think you need to get back here more often. You know, 'planetary affairs' and all that stuff,:: he said teasingly.

::Uh-huh,:: she said sarcastically. *::Is that the only reason?::*

::Maybe, maybe not. I guess you'll have to come around and find out.::

::That almost sounds like a proposal to me.:: She glanced up at him, teasing him with her eyes.

::The Council awaits us,:: he thought, trying to sound serious while avoiding a direct answer.

::Oh, well then,:: Sarah thought, *::if that's the way you want to be. I guess I'll have to talk to you later...on one of my many visits.::*

He smiled at her but did not respond, verbally or mentally. There was no need. They understood each other perfectly.

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As they came closer to the Great Hall, the immensity of the ceiling and the size of the gutted-out area of rock were overwhelming. Greg's first thought was the goldfish perspective, from inside the fishbowl looking up. It appeared as if the entire inside of the mountain had been carved out and only the tiniest bit of shell remained.

The three entered and approached the center podium, which was the place of the Leaders of the Council. The murmuring clash of alien races speaking different tongues quickly died away at their entrance, replaced by a deafening silence as the members stared at them intently. Greg could feel the mixed emotions of the members.

Leumas stopped at the base of the steps that would take Sarah and Greg to their higher positions. He looked and indicated with his eyes that this was their step to take, not his. He then gave them a thumbs up and a large smile.

Proceeding up the six steps to the podium area, they reached the top and took a deep breath simultaneously. Their position commanded a full view of the Council area and its members, which encircled them. This was one of the new arrangements adding to the symbolism of the UCDW. The members encircled the leader. Nothing would ever be hidden behind their backs. Everything would be out in the open for all to see.

They stood silent and still at the raised podium, feeling the representatives' eyes search their faces. Greg knew, as he approached the speaking and translating device, that the first words would be critical. He spoke slowly and clearly.

"Welcome to the delicate beginning of a new era. A beginning can be such a fragile thing, but ours will be one that keeps the past in reverence and holds it in our outstretched hands for all to see. A beginning that will lead us out of the dark past and into a bright future, a future based upon a fellowship and unity that the Galaxy has never experienced before, a future of truth that the Galaxy has never seen before. A future that will keep all of our unique cultures alive and thriving."

He held out his hand to Sarah. She grasped it proudly, and stepped to his side as he continued. "This planet, Earth, shall serve as an example of what cooperation can accomplish in the organized and controlled introduction of technological advancements. This Council,

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in conjunction with representatives from Earth, will move the planet to join its alien brothers in the cosmos.” He paused and looked out at the Council members. “We are here to serve this Council to the best of our abilities.”

Silence. The translation was virtually instantaneous, so that was not the cause for a delay in their reaction. Then a sole life form stood and began to clap. It was Leumas. He clapped hard and slowly, and was gradually joined by others that also began to rise and applaud. Soon all of the one hundred and fifty-six members of the United Council for Developing Worlds were all standing, their applause resounding through the great hall.

Sarah and Greg stood at the podium, overwhelmed by the sound that echoed in their ears. It was deafening.

::You know what, Sarah?::

::What?::

::It's just the way I knew it would be. I saw it and...:: he suddenly paused, his face contorting in what appeared to be confusion.

::What's wrong, Greg?::

He hesitated, and then said, *::It's nothing. I just saw a flash of something. Something in the future.::*

::How can you...er...tell? Is this another mutation of some sort you're going through? What did you see?::

::I saw us standing here with our successors,:: he said slowly, mixed emotions in his voice.

::Successors? In the future...:: her voice trailed off.

::Yes. And the successors...:: he began.

::What about them, Greg? What's wrong?::

Greg's expression slowly returned to one of contentedness and joy of the moment as his mind settled back into the present and he interpreted what he had seen.

::Nothing. Nothing at all,:: he said simply, smiling at her and squeezing her hand tightly.

::Are you sure?::

::Yes, I'm sure. Let's just say that the future holds some interesting surprises both good and bad. But either way, we should wait until that particular moment and let the natural course of time flow its own way.::

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Sarah looked at him, perplexed. *::Huh?::*
*::Don't worry; it will be an interesting story. That, I most certainly can
promise you.::*



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Excerpt from the personal log of the Leader of the United Council of Developing Worlds, (UCDW). Earth Year 2227: Recorded and logged into the Planetary Archives on the Planet Zire. Archival note: Reference for historical data and research: This entry was made two hundred twenty-five years after the Great Catastrophe.

The plan is risky. It may jeopardize all that we have accomplished.

The Council has judged it a worthy risk. To do nothing will result in nothing. If we can change one small part, the entire disastrous outcome may be changed.

But, to do nothing at least results in a certainty that is known. What the Council is suggesting may backfire with horrendous consequences.

You obviously have strong feelings in this matter. I will allow you to project your opinion and concerns before I pass final judgment.

Thank you. I would first like to review this historical scenario in its entirety.

You may proceed, but please be brief.

The two-human/alien hybrids have accepted their heritage, although the knowledge of this was just made known to them two standard Earth years ago. They survived all attempts on their lives during their indoctrination into the Council under false pretenses, and defeated the former Leader of the Council, Copolla. Copolla sought only his personal gain by destroying the Council and its members, which would have resulted in certain upheaval throughout the galaxy.

Leumas's proposal to establish the new Council on Earth because of its unbiased position and under the leadership of the hybrids has been a resounding success. The hybrids tactfully associated themselves with the most powerful leader on the planet, the President of the United States, and developed a global network of mutual cooperation. They have assumed control of the United Council for Developing Worlds and are making excellent progress. Why do we tempt fate?

There is an opportunity that would allow us to repair the great rift that has occurred in our society. You speak of history, so you must be aware that we lost the critical leadership of the Council at a crucial time period. Imagine what we could have done if he had been saved,



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if the Leader of the Council had been taught the techniques to survive what was to come.

But, what if something goes wrong? What if—

There will be no further discussion on the matter. You have presented your position in an excellent manner, but I see this issue as an opportunity to avoid years of fighting, death and destruction of civilizations, as does the Council. You will proceed with the mission as planned.

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C H A P T E R O N E

“Dreams and visions are the things I fear the most because I have no power over them.”

Greg Carlson

Earth Year 2002
West Virginia
0600 EDT

The pain was excruciating. He felt his thoughts being ripped from his mind and scattered across the dark voids of cold space. It was a psi-rape of his innermost thoughts that left him feeling shocked, empty, and violated. His life force was slowly dwindling to nothingness as each strip of consciousness was peeled away. Everything that defined his physical existence was gone. Now his very thoughts dissipated into darkness...

Greg Carlson awoke bathed in sweat, his chest heaving. Each time the dream came it was stronger, more intense. There were images along with the pain, and he was frustrated by his inability to understand what they meant. He was being consumed by glimpses into things he could not share with those close to him because he did not understand them himself.

He gave up trying to go back to sleep, got out of bed and went to the bathroom. His baggy shorts and T-shirt hung on him. His lack of sleep and his frustration were beginning to seriously affect his health, causing weight loss, irritability and an inability to think clearly. His five-foot-eight-inch body was comfortable at one hundred and sixty pounds; now, at one hundred and forty, his clothes hung loosely. As he stared in the mirror, he decided the dark circles and pouches under his eyes made him look older than his twenty-five years. A touch of gray was beginning at his temples.

Drained from the dream, he walked over to the window in his living room and gazed out at the view of the mountainous West Virginia skyline. In the pre-dawn light, the peaks stood like giants surveying their great realm. They would never change, he thought, not in the

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short time he would gaze at them anyway. Change to them would be agonizingly slow, but that was their nature. The sense of change he felt in these dreams would be so catastrophic; he feared the inevitable turmoil and destruction of the stability of Earth and the rest of the galaxy might be something from which they may never recover.

When the dreams first began two years earlier, he had tried to fool himself into believing they were just dreams, not images of what was surely to come; but he soon learned that was not the case. Since his awakening to his true heritage—half human, half telepathic alien—he never had “just dreams.”

Those first ones had started as fleeting images, but then became more clear and precise. He had clearly understood what they meant and used them as a tool in guiding the Council. Now, he failed to understand these new dreams. They remained vague and unfocused no matter how he concentrated on them, yet he sensed a dread foreboding from them, as if there were a dark culmination of some kind coming soon. One he could not see or comprehend.

He wanted to call Sarah and talk to her, but she was in Washington D.C. tending to her advisory position to President Edward Samuel on space-related matters. She was spending too much time there and not enough here, he thought selfishly. But she was a perfectionist in everything she did. It was one of the things he loved about her. So there were short, stolen meetings here at the hidden headquarters of the United Council for Developing Worlds, but most of the time she was in Washington.

Greg left his contemplation of the mountains to turn on the coffee machine. Since he had assumed the role of leader of the UCDW two years earlier, his quarters had slowly undergone the transformation from a sterile environment to one in which he felt comfortable. He had added personal touches to his quarters that amused his good friend Leumas: the Mickey Mouse clock in his kitchen, the Coca-Cola bottle memorabilia and the antique kitchen tools. But his favorite addition, and one that always received an evil stare from Sarah, was his Marilyn Monroe poster that hung in his living room. The famous still from *The Seven Year Itch* with her dress billowing up around her thighs. It always seemed to hold Leumas' interest for more than a casual few seconds, too.

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Leumas might have been able to offer Greg some help with his current nightmares, but he was on the planet Beta-747 investigating some unusual occurrences in the planet's development. A team of initial-contact agents was currently "influencing" some of the inhabitants to ensure a stable progression toward space flight. The latest and most disturbing event was the mysterious loss of communication with the team.

The sound of the coffee machine beeping brought Greg back to the moment. He poured a cup and returned to the window. He turned his view from the mountains to the radar-cloaked landing area for the ships of the Council members. It was illuminated with lights that gave the unique shapes of the crafts an eerie appearance.

Like creatures poised to attack, Greg thought. The silent ships arrived and departed at all hours. It used to offer Greg some amusement at times just to sit and watch them come and go; now they were only the images of some dark and impending doom.

Dawn was approaching, the sky lightening to pinks and red. *Those were the colors of death and war in ancient times*, Greg thought as he stared and sipped the warm coffee. Death and war? What was happening to him? These chaotic and morbid thoughts of his dreams were consuming him. His hand began to shake, the coffee spilling over the sides of his cup and running down his hands. Now even his conscious thoughts were preoccupied with death and destruction.

This sense of impending disaster had begun six months earlier, replacing the images of positive future time lines he had seen up to that point and which were likely if the correct decisions were made in a timely fashion. Although there were numerous scenarios he could normally explore, now they were obscured from him for some reason he could not understand. He was beginning to feel he could no longer lead the Council effectively if he could not "see" clearly; if these strange premonitions were not dispelled from his sleeping—and now waking—thoughts. Perhaps his sanity was breaking. Another result of the human/alien hybrid? A mental overload? The feelings were gradually increasing in intensity and if they didn't stop soon...

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“Why? Why does it have to happen?” he said aloud, as if speaking to someone on the other side of his window. “We have come so far in this short time. Made wonderful progress. And for what?”

He placed the cup on the end table. Forcing all thoughts from his mind, he allowed the warmth of the sunlight to soothe him into a momentary sense of calm. He closed his eyes and let the light bathe him. He drifted off, but not into sleep.

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C H A P T E R T W O

"I never doubted my decision the day I became a partner with the alien race and the United Council of Developing Worlds. I hope history feels the same."

President Edward Samuel

Washington D.C.
0900 EDT

"Are you ready?" Edward Samuel, President of the United States, asked as he straightened his tie and finished his last-minute check of his appearance before the press conference.

"Sure," Sarah McClendon said confidently as she organized her notes. Her conservative business attire accentuated her slim and petite figure. Her green eyes were clear and sharp, a startling contrast to her dark hair, and carried within them a glow of determination that had become her trademark amongst her associates.

"Some of these reporters can ask some pretty strange questions, Sarah," he said, knowing he sounded a bit overprotective. "Just stick to the facts of the announcements. Don't let them sidetrack you into other areas. Once they get you off the subject, it's like a pack of wild animals in a feeding frenzy."

"Yes, Dad." She laughed. "I can handle myself, you know. I think you're more nervous than I am."

"I know," he confessed, chuckling. "It's just that this is our first real public announcement and I want it to go perfectly. After all, this was a major issue that got me elected."

"It will go just fine, Edward. This is really great news." Sarah hugged him.

The president's obviously nervous press secretary, Robert Monroe, a short stubby man whose brow was dripping perspiration, gathered them together and ushered them toward the entrance to the stage.

"Okay, here's the schedule," Monroe murmured, sounding winded. "Mr. President, you will make the preliminary announcement of the successful test of the new space drive engine, then you turn it over to



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Ms. McClendon for the details. And please, Ms. McClendon, don't forget the economic implications. Got it?"

They nodded.

"Then let's do it. Mr. President, you come out as soon as you hear your introduction. Ms. McClendon, you follow one step behind." He headed out on stage, looking as if he were on the verge of a heart attack.

"Is Robert going to be all right?" Sarah asked, noting the little man's face had escalated in redness at least two shades in the past ten seconds.

"Oh, sure. He's always like that."

They laughed.

"How's that young man of yours?" he asked.

"Fine." Sarah felt her cheeks flush at the thought of Greg.

Since the first time they'd met, she had always had that reaction about him. Just the mention of his name would fill her with warmth and an anticipatory excitement. They had been through so much together over these past two years, and their bond had become increasingly strong.

"I haven't been able to get back there in the past couple of weeks with all of this going on and his busy schedule with..." She stopped in mid-sentence and looked around to make sure she was not overheard. "With Council business. I sure do miss him," she added wistfully. Although she understood the commitment and importance of their jobs, she wished they could spend more time together.

"After this is over, take some time off. You deserve it," Edward said, seeing the longing in her eyes.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the President of the United States," the press secretary announced from the podium, giving them a sharp return to the present.

The president and Sarah made their way onto the stage. The room was brimming with reporters, television cameras and radio microphones. Edward walked to the podium while Sarah claimed a spot beside and just a bit behind him.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the president began. "When I took office two years ago, I promised we would begin our movement out into space as part of our social and economic development program. Ms.

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McClendon, my advisor for public relations for our campaign to move us out into space, and I are here today to share with you the major accomplishment we have made.” He paused for a few seconds. “Our scientists have successfully tested the new space drive that will propel us to the stars. Not only did it meet our expectations, but it exceeded them by over one hundred and fifty percent.”

There was a large murmur of approval from the mass of press as hands began to rise.

“Before we open this up to questions,” he continued, stilling the reporters, “Ms. McClendon, who has had major oversight of the developmental project, will share the details of our incredible success. Ms. McClendon.”

Sarah replaced Edward at the podium. “The new space drive, developed by a consortium of scientists from the US and our allies, has successfully passed the test requirements for its application for a manned rocket flight. This new design will allow us to travel within our own solar system at first, and then will be improved to expand our boundaries for travel even further out. The new design improves our speed capacity by over three hundred percent.”

She paused for effect. “The economic forecast for the construction of these engines and associated equipment will increase the global employment market by a minimum of fifteen percent in the beginning and then settle off somewhere around twenty-five percent. We anticipate educational and technical requirements to invigorate the educational base of many countries and spur tremendous economic growth through the next century. Are there any questions?”

Hands rose again from the crowd of reporters.

“Mr. Caper.”

“Ms. McClendon, the original timetable suggested that this type of space drive would not be invented for another two to three years. What occurred to accelerate the development?”

“We attribute this to the sharing of knowledge among all the countries associated with the project. Again, it serves as proof of what we can accomplish when we work together. Ms. Longetti.”

“Ms. McClendon, how soon before we actually see the effects of this development?”

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“The next phase is to develop a hull for a spacecraft that will be able to withstand the force and speed of the propulsion unit. Our estimate is that we’ll have the design in six to nine months and begin production of the prototype. Mr. Schume.”

“Ms. McClendon, don’t you find it a bit strange that, all of a sudden, scientists who didn’t have a clue about what they were doing are producing these giant leaps of technology?”

Sarah was caught a bit off-guard by the question. She took in the appearance of the reporter, quickly equating him with an old television show, *Kolchak: The Night Stalker*, where the reporter always looked like he had just rolled out of bed. Schume had the same wrinkled clothes, tousled hair and the remnants of an old, unlit, half-chewed cigar clamped between his yellowed teeth.

She looked directly into his eyes. “As I indicated earlier, Mr. Schume, the joint effort of scientists has—”

“Please, Ms McClendon, spare us that ‘joint effort’ babble,” he sneered. “What do you have to say about the allegations that there are forces—outside forces—involved with this project helping the scientists?”

Sarah felt her heart thudding in her chest, but managed to answer calmly. “What forces are you speaking of, Mr. Schume?”

“Mr. Schume,” Monroe began, his face once again flushed. “Will you please—”

“I’ll tell you what I mean.” Schume ignored the press secretary with a confidence that said he was ready for any answer Sarah might have. “That this president, you and a secret organization, for some unknown reason and without the knowledge of the people of this planet, have made some pact with aliens to develop our space program.”

Sarah was unable to answer. Schume smiled at her, obviously knowing full well what he had done and enjoying every minute of it. The other reporters remained poised for her response.

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C H A P T E R T H R E E

“At times I find myself thinking I am human. But when I look in the mirror and see my good looks, the original thought vanishes. That’s a joke.”

Leumas

Planet Beta-747
0930 Earth EDT

Leumas checked his appearance in the mirror while his ship, the *Blessed*, descended to planet Beta-747. He removed the newly-acquired item Greg had introduced him to, the pocket comb, from the inside pocket of his jacket. He marveled at the simplistic, yet invaluable way the device combed his thick blond hair into place. *Humans*, he thought, *a bit slow in sophisticated matters, but light-years ahead in their cosmetic care.*

Satisfied with his hair, he did a sideways glance to check his clothing. He was getting on in years, but his stomach was still flat and his shoulders broad. He considered himself not too tall, but not too short either, the perfect height at slightly less than six feet tall. He smiled and winked at himself in the mirror.

The inhabitants of Beta-747, the Rigusians, were a plain people, humanoid in appearance. No color in their clothing. The traditional garb for the area was brown pants, a low v-necked brown shirt and a light three-quarter-length jacket; of course, brown in color. Although the clothes were rather drab, he smiled at how good they looked on him. But more importantly, he felt confident he would blend in with the culture if he were to encounter any of the inhabitants. Lastly, over his hands he slipped flesh-colored gloves that hid the webbing between his fingers, his one obvious sign of alien heritage.

He was descending, shielded from any detection devices, into an area outside of one of their major cities where he hoped he would meet his agents. They had been assigned the task of influencing the Rigusians by placing the introductory concepts of an early design for spacecraft engines into the minds of native researchers who had become stymied



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in their progress. Until a few days ago, their assignment had been progressing with satisfying steadiness.

The key to successful influencing was to be very subtle about it; to make the subject feel that the thoughts were their own. No matter how many races Leumas encountered in his job as initial contact agent, he always found that pride was always very strong in each one. It was best to let them believe they had done it on their own which, in most cases, was true. They just needed to be nudged in the right direction.

This process had become standard operating procedure for initial-contact agents once the inhabitants of a world passed the preliminary review for further introduction of technology. The Rigusians had done extremely well and had all the attributes of a fine race that, in time, would bring excellent qualities to the UCDW. Once they ventured out into space, and if they still were a peaceful race, they would be introduced to the Council and its guiding principles and offered a chance to join. If they declined, they would be left alone, as long as they did not harm any of the other member planets.

All reports Leumas received up to a few hours ago had indicated all was going as planned. He had trained this team personally, and one agent in particular stuck out in his mind. He had taken Scarg, a fellow Zirean, under his wing because the man excelled at all aspects of his training. That fact had more than outweighed any potential accusations of favoritism that might have arisen from Leumas' being old friends with the younger man's family.

Then, suddenly, there had been indications of total failure of all influencing attempts, and shortly afterwards, communication was lost with the team. He refused to think the worst because his confidence in his agents would not let him. Maybe they just had equipment problems or curious visitors that precluded a transmission. Nevertheless, Leumas had decided to check on them when the loss of communication occurred. That loss was highly unusual, especially given the almost perfect success record of the influencing process with a civilization possessing the characteristics of this one.

The computer readouts indicated he would land within one hundred yards of the base camp the agents had established.

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::Touchdown in ten seconds.:: He felt the decrease in acceleration as the craft neared the surface. Five seconds. *::What could have gone wrong,::* he wondered as he waited for touchdown confirmation.

::Touchdown,:: the computer's voice said in his mind.

::What's the weather like, Dora?::

Dora was the name he had bestowed on the computer, the name of a woman of a favorable past acquaintance.

::A comfortable seventy-two degrees Fahrenheit.::

::Thank you, Dora. I'll be back in a little while. Don't go anywhere without me,:: he teased, then added, *::and don't go fooling around with any hardware, okay?::*

::I shall place all operations in standby,:: the unemotional voice said.

::That's my girl,:: Leumas praised and gently caressed the side of the craft.

As the door slid open, yellow-orange sunlight filled his vision. The rural landscape was composed of red soil, the horizon a mountainous terrain of the same color. Shrubbery and trees were a distinct blue with white flowers in bloom upon them. The air was scented with a cinnamon-like smell. He breathed deeply and thought that, under different conditions, he would have liked to enjoy the colorful scenery and scent of this world.

He quickly headed toward the makeshift shelter his agents had called home for the past six months. The shelter was designed to look like similar dwellings in this area; octagonal in shape and built from the red stone that was abundant. All the sides were of solid stone, the roofs from formed metal. Windows were not included in their homes because of the meteorite storms that frequently occurred.

It was eerily quiet. Leumas's unease deepened when no one came out to greet him. He had been transmitting the message of his pending arrival continuously for the past several hours. Even if their communications equipment were inoperable, they would have heard his ship's arrival. The lack of anyone to greet him indicated no one was here or they had encountered some form of trouble. He hoped it was the former.



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He felt for his small hand laser under his jacket, fingering the switch to ensure it was in stun mode. He left it under his jacket and continued on.

Stepping up to the entrance, Leumas touched his hand to the security plate on the door. It quickly slid open under his touch. A stench assaulted his nostrils; he gagged, removed a handkerchief from his pocket and held it over his face. The smell was uncomfortably familiar, burnt hair or something similar. Leumas tried to remember where he had smelled it before in order to associate the smell with an image, but decided his first priority should be to get some light.

The automatic light did not come on and the darkness enhanced his trepidation. He placed his hand to the right of the inside doorway to where he thought he remembered the manual override light switch was located.

He felt something wet on his hand as it followed the contour of the wall to the switch. Leumas hoped it was just condensation from the lack of air circulation, but the sticky feel of it left him uneasy. He took out his weapon with his other hand.

Soon, he felt the reassuring shape of the wall switch and slid it to on. Bright luminescence filled the room, and Leumas raised his hands to shield his eyes from the glare. Seconds ticked by as his eyes adjusted to the clean white light. Slowly, he began to lower his hands. His eyes focused on the bright red blood that covered them.

The sight of the blood triggered his memory of the origin of the smell—the burnt flesh from a laser blast.

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C H A P T E R F O U R

“At times I believe that we are comprised of two different egos, the one when we are awake and the other when we are asleep. But which is correct?”

Greg Carlson

Greg waited in the Great Hall of the Council, dressed in the long black robe he wore for meetings, as the Council members took their seats. The immensity of the facility amazed him each time he entered. The hall had been carved from the interior of a West Virginia mountain, its ceiling rising several hundred feet above his head. There was a display of the galaxy on the ceiling, symbolizing the Council’s mission: the promise of life to all the races that inhabited the galaxy, a life of peaceful coexistence.

The walls were adorned with each member’s contribution, a symbol of their individuality—a piece of art, writings, architecture, clothing—whatever they wished to contribute. Those walls were a symbol of their unity that flourished despite their diverse and unique backgrounds.

Greg was in his usual place at the podium on the center dais where he had a full view of the Council chambers. Everything appeared to be as it should. The delegates, at last count one hundred and fifty-six, sat, stood, hovered or whatever was the case for his or her particular species at designated tables. There were two representatives per planet per table with their planetary designation clearly displayed.

Although the room was full, it was disturbingly and unusually quiet. Normally, the mixed babble of alien dialects was rampant as the universal translators raced to keep up with the conversations. This time the Great Hall was silent.

Can I be dreaming? Greg thought, his insides quivering as he stepped down from the podium and proceeded toward the member areas in the eerie silence.

He neared the closest table where the members of the Colupian delegation sat. Colupia was a water world, its people evolved from sea creatures. Their physical features were those common to a water species: scale-like skin that was always wet, oval mouths and slim head



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and body. They could live outside of a water environment for a short time, but either had to return to the water or don a breathing apparatus that allowed them to saturate their lungs with water within a few hours. Greg remembered the first time he had seen them and how badly he had wanted to ask where their fish bowl was.

Now, he addressed them in a casual tone. “Members from Colupia.” He waited to be acknowledged, but no acknowledgment came. Instead, the two fish-like delegates sat perfectly still. He stepped nearer.

“Delegates of the planet Colupia?” Greg said again in a louder voice, but still there was no answer. They remained sitting, staring straight ahead without any movement or recognition of him. He looked closer, this time noticing they appeared molded in their positions, unable to move.

Their skin was normally lubricated with a liquid that kept their skin damp. He could clearly see the beads of moisture on their bodies. He turned and looked at the adjoining tables; the other members in the near vicinity appeared to be in a similar state. Frozen in time, unmoving. Perhaps dead? *Maybe not even real*, he thought.

It has to be a dream.

He reached toward the Colupian. As his finger touched its skin, its body collapsed as if ignited by some fuse. It shattered into pieces and fell in a perverse harmony, forming a pile on the ground at his feet. He stepped back quickly, feeling queasiness sweep over him.

My touch caused his death?

He dashed to the next table of delegates, a humanoid group from Zire. He received the same reception. He reached out his hand and touched the still figure. It, too, shattered with an exact precision.

Greg’s heartbeat quickened. He ran from table to table in a panic; each time, the result was exactly the same. His touch caused the aliens to fall apart. He made a complete circle of the chamber and ended up where he had started. His Council robes were soaked with sweat as he was inundated with fear and revulsion. The message was clear. Whatever had happened to the Council members, it was caused by something he had done or failed to do.

All my fault! My interaction with these alien races will cause their deaths!

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“What is happening?” Greg screamed out loud in frustration and rage.

A sound answered him, a soft laugh that sounded like a little child, but then rose in intensity and depth as the seconds passed. The laugh soon became a long, drawn-out howl of someone who was mad; completely and wholeheartedly mad. The sound sickened him.

“Who are you? Where are you?” he screamed as his eyes jumped nervously in his head, searching for the source of such sickness and madness.

Who could possibly laugh at what was happening?

“Did you really think that you could pull off this sham of yours?” A voice from the darkness demanded. “You and your little group? The crazy alien, Leumas, and your female friend?” The deep voice was frothing with indignation. Greg thought he recognized something in that voice.

“Who are you?” Greg demanded. “Why don’t you step into the light where I can see you?” His heart felt like it would pound its way out of his chest. *Just a dream.*

The voice came again from the darkness, this time mocking him again in a childlike singsong.

*“The Great Council sat on the wall.
The Great Council had a great fall.
All the aliens in the galaxy
couldn’t put the Council back together again...
...and certainly not a half-breed the likes of you.”*

The voice ended its recitation and resumed laughing. This time, it sounded utterly out of control and shook the ground Greg stood on. A great fissure opened in the floor and Greg was thrown toward it. He grasped the edge and barely managed to hold on.

Suddenly, there was a burst of light from the galactic display overhead. It looked as if the galaxy itself had been split by some tremendous release of energy. However, the energy had a warm, calming effect on him, as though its emanations were life itself. Entranced, he stared at the glow

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so far above him, and even as his fingers groped for a better hold, he felt a strange sense of calm envelop him.

The laughter stopped for a moment; voices shouted in his mind, hundreds of them. He couldn't understand what they were screaming.

Am I going mad? Is this the way it ends?

His fingers were slipping. He peered below; the crevice was dark and he couldn't tell where it ended or if it ever did.

"Take my hand," the evil voice said. "Take my hand and you will live, but you must hurry before the light overtakes us."

"What does the light signify?" Greg asked as his grip weakened.

"You worry about the light above instead of the darkness below?"

"I must know!"

"Then die," the voice roared as Greg felt each finger slowly releasing its hold. He began to fall into darkness...

"Noooooo," he screamed as he opened his eyes to face a red sun climbing above the mountains to begin another day.

He looked around his quarters to assure himself he was actually there and not in another dream. His hand reached for the cup of coffee sitting on the table. It was ice cold.

It was another dream! Another damn dream!

He closed his eyes and wept in frustration.

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C H A P T E R F I V E

“We all die at some point, but when murder is committed upon someone we know, it becomes very personal. It changes even the calmest of a species to a raving lunatic who seeks nothing but the act of revenge.”

Leumas

Leumas felt his stomach lurch at the sight and feel of the sticky blood covering his hands. He turned back toward the door he had just entered, trying to regain some sense of calm, fighting back the vomit that rose into his throat. If he met an intruder at this moment, he would surely get himself killed. Better to regroup before going any further.

Just outside the door, he knelt, scooped up some dirt and rubbed it between his hands, trying to remove as much of the blood as possible. As he scrubbed, he tried to refocus his thoughts. There were three agents assigned to this planet—three agents *he* had assigned to the planet. Until the sudden silence, there had been no indication anything at all was amiss. The influencing process had been advancing according to schedule, the agents confident they would complete the task right on time. The reason for the bloodshed eluded him.

He knew the men were dedicated and qualified for the task. Yes, they were still a little green, but this planet was almost textbook perfect for a beginning assignment. Whatever had gone wrong was not of their doing, he was sure of that much.

When he had mustered enough control, Leumas went back inside and began a search. Nothing had been left untouched. Furniture was overturned, drawers emptied onto the floor. Paper littered the area, some also stained by blood. A desk lay on its back, one leg broken off and nowhere in sight. He found the first body on the other side of a sofa that had been overturned and lay skewed with its back facing the door. It was Snarg; his chest had been burned away by a direct burst from a laser weapon. Leumas felt his stomach protesting again, but fought the feeling back with another, stronger feeling. Anger.



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Why? He slammed his fist on the wall. *Why would someone do this?* He felt his rage trying to wash him away. Tears were burning his eyes, but he fought them. *Time to mourn later.*

Returning to the search, he quickly checked the remaining two rooms. They were in similar disarray. The other two agents were nowhere in sight, but there was enough blood and signs of a battle to indicate that they, too, had likely been killed here.

But why kill them and take the bodies away? Why leave this one—my friend? Perhaps to taunt me?

He placed a blanket he found over Scarg's body. Before he covered the young man's face he murmured some words, some little things that he remembered of their times together and remembrances of his family. He also said he would tell Scarg's parents their son had died for the betterment of this planet. He would explain the death had not been for nothing and that other agents—Scarg's colleagues, his friends—would learn vital things that would help them do their jobs better and possibly save lives. He ended the eulogy in a broken voice.

"I'm sorry, Scarg."

He picked up the body as gently as he could and carried it to his ship, placing it in storage for the trip back to Earth. He returned to the facility knowing what he had to do next. After all, he had written the procedures for such a situation, never thinking he would ever have to use them.

He opened the control panel for the shelter and keyed in his master override code. His hand moved slowly and nervously, his fingers pressing the number pad, his mind struggling to remember the codes in between thoughts of Scarg and the fate of the other two agents. He paused as he prepared to enter the last sequence of the destruct process.

The rules were quite specific if a planet's inhabitants or other races had discovered the presence of agents and it was likely hostilities were possible or already had occurred. All evidence of the Council's presence on the planet was to be destroyed and a thorough review conducted by the Council to determine what had happened and what the future direction of action might be regarding the influencing or development of the planet.

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Leumas keyed the last numbers in the sequence; the red display lit up with the numerals indicating two minutes remained before destruction. However, instead of immediately moving off to a safe distance, he stood staring, eyes mesmerized by the numerals as they marched downward.

Suddenly, a cloak of paranoia covered him. Whoever had done this might still be here.

There is someone watching me! Watching me right now, waiting to kill me as soon as I move away from the facility so they can get a clear shot.

He turned around, keeping his back to the facility wall. He stared off into the distance, scanning the area, looking for any signs of his sensed observer. He saw nothing; yet the fearful sensation unnerved him so much he began to shake uncontrollably. He grasped his head with his hands. Looking down, he closed his eyes, trying to control the shaking.

Watching me right now, waiting to kill me as soon as I move away from the facility so they can get a clear shot.

When the shaking subsided, his closed eyes jerked open and saw the time display. Sixty seconds remained on the clock. He looked to the left and then to the right. He pivoted around in a half-circle, again scanning the area for any signs of movement.

Watching me right now, waiting to kill me as soon as I move away from the facility so they can get a clear shot.

Thirty seconds. A warning sounded; a low shrill followed by a monotone voice: “Evacuate to safe distance, this is the final warning. Evacuate to safe distance, this is the final warning...”

He couldn’t move. *Watching me right now, waiting to kill me as soon as I move away from the facility so they can get a clear shot. Better to stay here, they can’t get me if I stay here. They want me to move out into the open and then—*

::Leumas. Can you hear me?: Dora’s voice called.

The voice entering into his mind was familiar.

::Leumas::

The paranoia and fear began to leave his thoughts, washed away by the reassuring voice in his mind.

::Dora?:

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::Yes, Leumas. You need to move away from the facility. Do it now.::

::I can't; maybe in a little bit.::

::You must move now, Leumas, or you will be killed. There are approximately fifteen seconds until the hut explodes. While monitoring you, I determined you have been under the influence of a powerful delayed mind push. It took considerable time and effort to initiate a neural block and weaken the push. Now, get out of there.::

His mind cleared enough to understand what Dora was telling him. There wasn't any threat. He was only led to believe there was one. He glanced back at the time display. Ten seconds. He ran.

Once in place, a delayed mind push sat in the mind until activated by some thought or action. His initiation of the self-destruct device had triggered his. Whoever had done this to him had probably affected him on arrival. *Someone who knew Council procedure.*

Leumas felt time ticking away as he reached an outcropping of rock and jumped behind it. The explosion followed a second later, causing his ears to pop, not from the noise (since the explosion was silent to avoid attracting any attention) but from the release of pressure from the explosive. Fiery debris flew over and around him, disintegrating as it moved away from the blast center.

He stood on wobbly legs and looked. The facility was totally obliterated, all traces of its existence gone. *I was almost part of it*, he thought. It was too much to comprehend. One agent dead, two missing but probably dead also, a delayed mind push used and he himself almost killed by an explosion he had initiated.

What the hell is going on?

Still, there was nothing else to be accomplished here. Best to return to the Council and make them aware of what had happened and inform the loved ones of the agents that they had been killed. Sadness attacked him once again, but his anger forced the door on his grief closed. It would remain so until he found out who was behind this.

Leumas began the short walk back to his ship, wanting to put distance between himself and this planet as soon as possible. *Whoever is behind this is very clever and demented*, he thought. Pausing at the entry port, he turned back one more time to look at the surrounding area.

"Damn you, whoever you may be," he said aloud. "Damn you."

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Later, Leumas reclined in his chair on board the *Blessed* after he'd finished programming the coordinates for the return flight to Earth. As he sat, he tried to organize what had occurred on Beta-747.

Why was Scarg killed and where were the other two bodies? *Lay out the facts*, he told himself. Was it possible that the attackers came from the planet's population? All reports indicated the inhabitants were a peaceful race; one of the major reasons why they were approached. They revered life and all creatures. He doubted strongly that the murderer or murderers were natives. Did they come from off-world then?

But what purpose could it serve to murder the agents? Who knew we were there? Just the Council. And the delayed mind push... The research of the planet showed no telepathic capability. Could they have been wrong?

He rubbed his forehead. He was tired, angry, sad—a veritable hodgepodge of emotions. He needed to rest his mind from the images of his dead friend for a while so he would be able to think clearly. There was something he had missed, something just inside the shadows waiting to be exposed; he could feel it. He closed his eyes and willed his thoughts to another direction.

Influencing through thoughts had initially developed as an hereditary ability on Zire after war-induced radiation produced a useful mutation, but the natural ability to influence other species had eventually been lost. Now it required physical cerebral alteration followed by a strict mind-training regimen in order to control the ability and to keep the altered life form from going mad. The odds of success were less than two percent on a good day. Still, having more time now to focus on the task, Leumas' success rate in developing new agents had been gratifying. With the help of Dora, his computer, he had—

"Dora," Leumas called aloud, breaking his own train of thought. Now that his mind had cleared from his earlier troubled and confused state, he wondered why he had simply not asked Dora in the first place.

"Yes."

"Do you have all the background data on Beta-747?"

"Yes."

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“What is the probability that the inhabitants of Beta-747 discovered the agents and killed them?”

“Working...” Dora stated. “The probability of such an event is twenty-one percent.”

“What is the possibility the inhabitants have the mental abilities and equipment to produce a delayed mind push?”

“Working...” the female voice said again. “The probability of such an event is eleven percent.”

“Dora, what is the probability of both those events occurring simultaneously given those same inhabitants?”

“Working...the probability is nine percent.”

“It has to be an outside party, then,” Leumas said. “It’s the only thing that makes sense, considering how perfect everything was up to this moment. Someone from outside this world has done this. But why?”

Then, as if a giant light bulb had gone off in his head, the factor he had missed came to him. If someone were able to procure the equipment to perform a delayed mind push, even possibly possess some mental capabilities, they might have been capable of using influence on the agents. It was a long shot, but if this turned out to be the case then their problems were only beginning.

All those capable of using influence were supposed to be under the Council’s cognizance or so they had thought. If a person or group had developed this ability or was surgically altered and was outside the control of the Council, they could do a great deal of damage.

“Dora, in the cargo hold area is a body. I want you to scan the brain and determine if there was any mind tampering, altering or influence applied. If so, try and establish a record of the brain pattern that applied the outside influence.”

“Working... The solution to your query will take approximately ten-point-two-five hours to compute.”

“I’ve got time.” Leumas began to contemplate these revelations he did not like. He tried to imagine what a rogue that possessed such power would be capable of.

“Incoming message from the Leader of the Council,” Dora said, startling him.

“Patch it through.”

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“Leumas?”

“Greg, we’ve got problems,” Leumas began without even any form of greeting. The nervous energy inside him engendered by what he was considering was consuming him. “The agents on Beta-747—”

“Are dead,” Greg said, finishing the statement for him in a nonchalant manner that shocked Leumas so much he was silent for several seconds.

“How did you know?” he asked finally.

“Get back as soon as you can. We’ve got trouble. Big trouble,” Greg said, ignoring Leumas’ question.

“I’m on my way. ETA is in five hours.”

“Good, I’ll see you when you get here.”

“What kind of trouble are you referring to?”

“Communication terminated at the source,” Dora said. “Do you wish to reestablish?”

“No,” he said, wondering at Greg’s abruptness. That was not normal for him. On the other hand, given the circumstances, normalcy would seem to be the least of their problems at the moment.

Leumas exhaled deeply and closed his eyes. The fond memories of the past two years faded from his mind.

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C H A P T E R S I X

"I've never liked reporters who feed the populace a mixture of scum and discontent. However, at times I wonder if they are fulfilling a need of the human psyche?"

Sarah McClendon

"I don't understand what you mean, Mr. Schume," Sarah said, trying to hide the fact his accusation had caught her off-guard. She needed a few seconds to regain her composure, so she opted to let him talk and find out exactly how much he knew. More importantly, though, how did he know—and from whom?

"I think you know exactly what I mean, Ms. McClendon," Schume replied, smiling sardonically. "And I believe President Samuel knows what I am talking about also."

Edward stared at the reporter without any sign of emotion.

Schume turned to the other reporters and announced, "I said it once and I will say it again. I claim that the president and a select group of individuals have developed an alliance with some secret organization staffed with aliens. This organization's headquarters is here on Earth." He paused for effect, then continued. "They conduct clandestine meetings to decide the fate of this world and many others. In fact, this organization has been tampering with the progress of several planets in order to ensure they develop in accordance with some alien blueprint. Our own lives at this very moment are being altered without the people's knowledge or consent."

Sarah maintained an outward look of disdain, but inside she was appalled at the level of the man's knowledge. She looked out of the corner of her eye at the president.

"Perhaps we should stop right now," he murmured.

Sarah shook her head. She knew it would be best to disprove what the reporter had said. They couldn't end the conference on a note of indecision or doubt. It had to be a freak coincidence that Schume knew, but damn, he was pretty accurate.

"Do you know how absurd that sounds, Mr. Schume?" she said with a look of disbelief, smiling and rolling her eyes toward the ceiling.

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“Yes, I do. But, Ms. McClendon, I haven’t heard you say that it is not true,” he rejoined calmly.

He’s trying to catch me in a lie in front of everyone. “Of course, it’s not true,” she stated. “Why do you believe such a story? Who has told you this outlandish fabrication? Inquiring minds want to know, Mr. Schume.”

She had to talk with Greg. The reporter’s knowledge was too close to the truth. It indicated there was a deeper problem, perhaps even a leak of information from within the Council to discredit Greg, her and even the Council’s future.

They had feared there might have been some leftover Copolla followers on some of the Council worlds. He had been extremely well-connected, but most of those who had joined him in his plot did so out of fear rather than personal loyalty. It was possible someone might try to step into his established network and take over where he had left off, but if there were any covert followers, they had been hiding and not drawing any attention to themselves.

Leumas had assigned a team of trusted agents to keep an eye out for such events. He wanted to ensure that any elements of Copolla’s reign were identified and ousted before they could do any harm. It was the only assignment the team had.

Sarah concentrated on contacting Greg. She summoned all the mental powers her alien/human body and mind possessed. She focused all her thoughts on this one endeavor, drawing into herself.

::Greg,:: she called. ::Greg?::

“My sources of information cannot be exposed at this time,” Schume was saying. “However, I have indisputable proof to verify my story.” The statement pulled Sarah back to the press conference and out of her attempt to contact Greg.

“What proof?” she asked, knowing she had to turn this around. Schume was the one in control and leading the press conference now. “That’s impossible! This is some hoax or charade you’re pulling to grab media attention. We will not allow your outbursts to quell our exciting scientific achievement with a lot of false accusations.”

“But I assure you, they are quite true,” Schume stated.

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She saw amusement in his eyes and knew she was in trouble. He had some damning evidence and she had nowhere to go until she knew what it was. A moment later, she did.

“I’ve come into possession of an alien body,” Schume called to the other reporters, his voice slapping Sarah like a whip. “One of the spies who sneaks onto other worlds and changes people’s minds by influencing their thoughts to do someone else’s bidding. It’s being delivered to a hospital for examination at this very moment.” He smiled triumphantly at Sarah. “Now, Ms. McClendon, do you have a comment?”

“I have no comment regarding a subject on which I have no knowledge, Mr. Schume,” Sarah said as calmly as she could while panicking inside.

Where the hell did he get an alien body? It was a setup and I followed along perfectly.

Seeing Sarah was at a loss for words, Edward stepped forward and stood by her side, placing his hand on her elbow, gripping it firmly but gently. His expression indicated for her to be silent.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he said, projecting a calm and confident image. “Unless there are any more questions relating to the original press conference topic, we’ll leave these unsubstantiated accusations until there’s proof they actually have any basis in fact. We thank you for your time.” He turned and led Sarah toward the exit.

“Mr. President, how do you respond to these allegations?”

“Mr. President, is it true? Have there been secrets kept from the American people?”

“Is this related to the alien autopsy video? Mr. President? Mr. President?”

Once she and Edward were backstage, Sarah took a deep breath, trying to quell her nerves. “What the hell was that all about?” she asked Edward.

“I don’t know, but let’s not discuss it here,” he said as he saw his press secretary heading toward them.

“Mr. President,” Monroe began with a worried look. “We should rebut the reporter’s accusations immediately.”

“First things first,” Edward said calmly. “Let’s find out what that reporter is talking about. He said the body is going to a hospital for

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examination. Let's find out if there's any truth to that before we say anything. Find out which one. Get a team over there to check it out. Otherwise, we'll stand out there in front of the country playing guess-my-next-move with those vultures from the media."

"Yes, sir," Monroe said stiffly and hurried off.

Turning back to Sarah, Edward said in a low tone, "There's a secure room over here where we can't be overheard."

Sarah nodded and headed toward where he had indicated. The president's White House security escort followed at a discreet distance and took post outside of the room after they entered. His personal escort always included a detail of six personnel. By his own choice, one of them was always a member of the UCDW, picked by Leumas and trained through normal Secret Service channels. He gestured for the agent to come over to him.

"Make sure you're on the team that checks out this body at the hospital," Edward ordered in a whisper. The young man nodded once and left.

As soon as the door closed with a resounding thud and evacuation of air indicating the airtight seal, Sarah said, "You don't think there can be any truth about the body, do you?"

Edward sighed. "I'd like to believe not, but Schume is too close to the actual truth about everything else to be making it up. Besides, we both know that as much as we dislike Schume, he has a track record of breaking a big case every once in a while."

"Agreed, but he also has long periods of pure sensationalistic reporting as well. The overall consensus with most of the public is a wait and see attitude when he reports things. Still, it's best if we talk to Greg," Sarah said, her lips tight. "I tried to get hold of him earlier, but my concentration was so frazzled from that reporter, I couldn't make contact."

"We also need to develop a contingency plan to combat the leak," Edward added. "Someone must be spying on us. That's the only way he could've known. If the body is truly an alien's, that'll take a lot of explaining, but we can talk our way out of it by just acting as surprised as everyone else."

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He paused, considering the implications of what had just happened, breathed in, and then continued. “But if he has any hardcore evidence of the existence of the Council and our involvement, that may be slightly harder to explain.”

“‘Slightly harder’ is putting it mildly,” Sarah said. “We may as—”

::Sarah. Sarah, can you hear me?::

::Yes, I’m here, Greg::

::I need you and President Samuel back here as soon as possible. We’ve got a problem::

::We’ve got problems here, too. A reporter claims to have the body of an alien and also knows a lot about the Council and their mission. He’s on the mark too much for it to just be a coincidence::

::It’s begun then. Come as soon as you can:: He broke contact abruptly, sending a wave of dizziness through her mind and causing her knees to momentarily buckle.

“Sarah, are you okay?” asked Edward as he steadied her.

“Yes, I’m fine,” she said, wincing and confused by Greg’s abruptness. “That was like a telephone being slammed down on my head instead of in my ear. Greg wants us to get back to headquarters as soon as possible.”

A knock on the door sounded. The president opened it and was greeted by his press secretary.

“What have you learned?” Edward demanded.

“They have someone...something at Walter Reed,” Monroe answered breathlessly. “The body has been dead for a while. They will be autopsying it later tonight.”

“Great. It’s going to turn into a media circus around here.” Sarah sighed.

Many of the reporters turned toward Schume, unsure of what to make of his accusations. He had the reputation among them for being brash and sometimes too eager to jump the gun on issues. He had his moments in the spotlight, but usually the odds were running sixty-forty against him. They knew they had to be careful. But with a story this

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earth-shattering, perhaps literally, no self-respecting reporter could afford to ignore Schume's accusations lest he or she be caught flatfooted should it all prove to be true.

Raymond Schume's firm belief was that everyone had something to hide...everyone. He was quite adept at finding those things and using them. He loved being in the limelight, but he also needed the money. Having two ex-wives and a current girlfriend required substantial alimony payments and shopping expenses respectively. The bottom line was good, scandalous stories paid well. This one would be the climax of his career. He envisioned television shows and a book deal before he was done, as long as his mysterious informant kept him going.

He watched with smug delight as he saw the look on his colleagues' faces. Those who had scorned him in the past he refused to acknowledge at all. *Piss on them*, he thought. His response to other eager queries was short and succinct.

"Sorry, folks, strictly exclusive on this one."

The other reporters backed off and went their own ways, many hurrying to find a phone and track down to which hospital the alleged alien body had been transported.



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C H A P T E R S E V E N

*“What we see in our dreams, we shall see again
in life.”*

Greg Carlson

Greg awoke to a gentle shaking by his personal assistant, Reveb.

“What time is it?” Greg asked groggily.

“It is 1400 hours and there is a session of the Council at 14:15 which requires your presence. I stopped by to ensure you did not forget.” Reveb’s soft voice sang softly.

“I must’ve dozed off.” Greg yawned. “I didn’t sleep well last night.”

“I am sorry,” said Reveb.

Reveb was a Monoc, humanoid in appearance except smaller, barely five feet tall and weighing no more than one hundred and ten pounds. His facial features were half the size of the average human. He had no hair on his face or head. His duties were to schedule all of Greg’s activities and appointments, and see to his personal comfort. His quarters were near Greg’s and he was available whenever needed. It was not in the Monocian nature to be abrupt or voice sentiment. They were extremely soft-spoken, which made him perfect for this job—inconspicuous but available. There could be no accusation of a Monocian’s attempting to sway anyone.

“I am sorry,” Reveb stated again, although the tone in his voice only indicated his usual blandness.

Although Greg did not wish to have a personal assistant, the members of the Council had swayed him through the tireless necessity of having to reschedule their appointments with him continuously. Reveb had come highly recommended by planetary officials; most Council members had at least one Monocian on their staffs. He had been with Greg for the past eighteen months and Greg was glad to have him. At least now he was usually on schedule.

“Thank you for checking on me. I’ll prepare for the meeting,” Greg said as he rose from the chair. “You may let them know I will be there.”

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“As you wish, Leader of the Council,” Reveb replied, and departed.

Leader of the Council, Greg thought. No matter how many times he heard it, he still could not adjust to the sound of such a prestigious title. He stood in front of the mirror in the bathroom staring at his face. He looked haggard, but there was not much he could do about that at the moment. He splashed water onto his face, quickly shaved, then combed his hair.

As he gazed into the mirror, it suddenly transformed into a landscape as if he were looking out of a window. He saw moons in the sky, lots of them, maybe eight to ten small ones with a larger one in the center that filled half of his view. There was water, a big lake or an ocean that lay ahead in the distance. He saw a small island, its grassy banks forming a distinct boundary with the water’s edge. It was sunset with red clouds on the horizon. But it was a narrow horizon that quickly turned dark and stars filled the night sky. Then it was gone and Greg saw his face again in the mirror.

There was a moment of disorientation as he fought to keep his balance. He placed his hands on the mirror, feeling its cold emanating from the glass. He removed his hands, leaving warm impressions that quickly dissolved into nothingness.

Am I dreaming awake now? Seconds passed. Finally, he rubbed his face with his hands. “No, just tired, that’s all.”

He went back into the bedroom and removed his Council robe from where it hung on the door. He slipped it on and headed to the Council chambers. As he entered, he heard the members conversing, unlike his dream where there had been nothing but silence. The translators were off, as was customary until the start of the meeting. The voices were a cacophony of sounds, music and words all mashing together.

His arrival announced, the room fell silent and the members rose. As he reached the podium, he indicated for them to be seated. He scanned the room, looking at the different life forms represented: one hundred and fifty-six members, representing seventy-eight planets scattered throughout the galaxy. They came in all shapes and sizes. Many had the basic humanoid form; others reflected a totally different

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evolution: aquatic, reptilian, avian or arachnid. Some he wouldn't even know how to classify.

Today, the members' tables encircled the podium; everyone could see Greg. As part of the new Council on Earth, his position at the podium was symbolic that nothing would be hidden from this group. The circle that surrounded him was cut into quarters with aisles between each quarter for members to move about. His entrance had been made at one of the two side entrances that divided the area in half.

Greg received a nod from the chamber guard signaling that the translators located in each delegate's table had been activated. He cast one final look around the chambers to see if any members were absent. His eyes stopped when he saw the transport container in the center of the aisle that led to the tables. He had been so consumed by his thoughts of the past he hadn't noticed it before. It was a rather large container, six feet long and two feet on each side. Normally members of the Council used them to move their personal articles to and from their ships, but they never left them in the Council chambers during a meeting. He caught Reveb's attention and motioned for him.

"Reveb, what is that container in the middle of the aisle?"

"I do not know, Leader of the Council. It was here when I arrived. I assumed you had requested it be brought here."

"No, I didn't. I don't know anything about it." Greg felt suddenly uneasy. "Have it removed."

"Yes, Leader of the Council," Reveb said and moved off.

Greg addressed the Council. "Members of the Council, please begin the day's business."

The delegate from Aetea stood.

"The delegate from Aetea is recognized," Greg said.

"Thank you, Leader of the Council."

With the running translation of the Aetean's comments buzzing in his ear, Greg watched as Reveb ushered in three security guards to remove the box.

"...the matter of the planet Crosican, which has altered from its planned development..." the delegate continued.

The security guards gripped the corners of the box to move it. He felt an unexpected mounting tension, as if a static electrical charge

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suddenly filled the air. At that moment, as though the body heat of the guards had activated something in or on the box, one of the sides collapsed. Silence filled the hall as a body rolled out and thumped loudly onto the floor.

Greg leaped to his feet and raced the steps to where the body lay. On closer examination, it was apparent it was horribly mutilated. Whoever this person was, he had not died easily or quickly. Council members began to gather around the body to get a look.

Greg motioned for Reveb. "Bring an ID scanner."

The security guards moved closer to Greg, one on either side of him, their eyes fixed no longer on the body but on the Council members, as if fearing a possible attack on their leader's life.

"Sir," the one on his left said, "we should leave until this matter is cleared up. There may be danger here."

"I don't think so," Greg replied. "If someone was able to slip this box in, they had opportunity to kill me already."

Reveb returned with the scanner and was going to hand it to Greg, but Greg nodded for him to proceed. As his assistant scanned the body for identification, Greg noticed a piece of paper clasped in the dead alien's hand and bent to retrieve it as Reveb announced his findings.

"It is, or was, Peric, an initial contact agent. He and two others are supposed to be on Planet Beta-747."

"Peric," Greg repeated as he unfolded the piece of paper and quickly read its contents.

He swallowed slowly, staring at the words as seconds passed. When he lifted his gaze from the paper, he directed the security guards to remove the body for examination. Returning to the podium, still clutching the bloodstained paper in his hand, he stared at the delegates as they wandered back to their seats. He waited until they were all seated before he spoke.

"Members of the Council, in light of what has just happened, I am ending this session immediately. We will reconvene when we have more information." He quickly stepped from the podium and headed for his chambers. Reveb accompanied him.

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“Leader of the Council, was there any information in the note that may help us find out what has happened?” the Monocian asked tentatively.

Greg answered the question as he reached his chamber door, his voice vague and distant. “It says—what it says, Reveb,” he began, then stopped. “As far as shedding light onto what has happened, there is only darkness these days, darkness and confusion.”

He stepped into his room and closed the door.

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C H A P T E R E I G H T

“Politics is just one ruse after another. The key is to make the deception work in the favor of the people, not the politician.”

President Edward Samuel

The President of the United States and Sarah McClendon were en route to the site of the United Council for Developing Worlds compound. Their official destination was logged and documented as a high-level retreat in a secluded area of the West Virginia Mountains reserved for senior government officials. The site was often used for meetings with representatives of other countries where a need for secrecy or discretion was required. Its capabilities were equal to that of Camp David, but less publicly known.

When developing the site for the UCDW, it had been understood there would be times when Edward or Sarah would need to be there. So the facility had to have a dual function: access to the UCDW and official use in a governmental capacity. Originally a secure communications base for the U.S. Navy, a large portion of the compound had several floors constructed underground. Its walls were concrete several feet thick built to withstand electronic snooping and eliminate any possibilities of destruction by usual means. The base had been shut down in the numerous rounds of closures that had swept the country in the mid-1990s. A military caretaker staff was already in place, so reopening it as required was not a problem, especially when accompanied by a Presidential Order.

It had then been connected by the Council's engineers to the UCDW site about seventy-five miles away in government-owned, unoccupied territory of the Blue Ridge Mountains. An underground shuttle that would only operate when a complete bio-scan of the passengers had been completed connected the two sites. Only four bio-scans were in the computer system: Leumas, Greg, Sarah and Edward.

When the president, Sarah, staff members and the Secret Service contingent departed the helicopter, Edward always stopped to look at the landscape. The view was a panorama of mountains and valleys.



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“Beautiful, isn’t it?” he said to his staff.

They stood for several minutes taking in the view until the Secret Service agents asked them to move into the facility. They were ushered into the underground compound. The staff at the compound consisted of approximately one hundred, mostly military. Edward always made it a point to talk with some of them to make sure they understood what they were doing was important for the country. He knew that being president meant that the campaigning was never over.

They entered the large elevator and began their descent. There were three levels to the facility. Level one contained administration and security. Level two was the communications and monitoring group. Level three contained the living quarters and conference accommodations. The individual living quarters held all available secure electronic equipment and telephone communications. They had been designed as a working environment where a person could not be disturbed, but could still remain in contact with those they chose to. It was not unusual for people not to be seen for days, with the exception of meals, and even those had the option to be delivered. The rooms were periodically monitored in the event of a medical emergency. The president held two daily meetings with his staff in one of the conference rooms located near the living quarters.

As the contingent exited the elevator, they walked to the end of the corridor along the polished white cement floor. There they branched off to their respective suites. Secret Service agents took up their lonely posts directly outside of the doors of senior staff members.

The rooms for Edward and Sarah were at opposite ends of the corridor. In each, their bathrooms had been modified to provide access to the tunnel located behind a cement panel that would only open if the correct bio-scan had been received. Edward and Sarah could then enter the tunnel, and in their places, the Council provided two robots that looked exactly like them that remained in the quarters carrying out simple movements to indicate occupation. There was no intelligence in the two machines and all movements were controlled by robotic link back at Council headquarters.

In the event of an emergency, the president could be shuttled between the two sites in a matter of minutes. His quarters at the Council

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site were linked to all of his communication equipment at the facility, so for all practical purposes, he was not seventy-five miles away but in his own quarters where he was supposed to be.

Sarah and Edward each headed to the shuttle along the tunnel, which was large enough for two people to navigate and retained the feel of an old mining tunnel. Lumber appeared to shore up the walls and ceilings. There were even the creaking sounds of dried wood and dirt drifted down; all simulated in the event someone who was not supposed to be in the tunnel found their way in. The only lights were motion sensor and bio-scan connected. As long as the correct body was detected, low amber lights illuminated the way. Otherwise, it was totally black.

The shuttle station consisted of one large area cut out of the rock. Two enclosed chutes, like large pipes, jutted from the solid rock wall. The shuttle contained two seats side-by-side. The overall shape was torpedo-like, only much larger. A clear canopy covered the top when it was sealed.

“Ladies first,” Edward said as he helped Sarah into her seat.

“Thanks.”

Edward sat in the other seat.

“Bioscan in progress. Please stand by,” said a computer voice.

Ten seconds later, the shuttle was underway, quickly accelerating to the Council headquarters. The trip would take five minutes. Although the speed of the shuttle was several hundred miles per hour, gravitational dampers eliminated all effects of the speed.

Edward was silent as he flipped through some papers he had brought with him. Sarah closed her eyes and allowed her mind to drift back to that odd sensation she had felt earlier talking to Greg. She couldn’t put her finger on it, but something clearly was not right.

Normally, the anticipation of seeing Greg would inspire thoughts about how their relationship had been moving toward a serious state. She smiled at that which momentarily relieved her of the empty feeling.

What’s that--a serious state? Come on, Sarah, you’re in love with him and he with you, the inner voice said.

The only reason they had not married before this was because of their commitment to the Council and Earth’s future. It was an understood

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thing between them. They had talked about it several times and thought it best to hold off until things settled down.

“Pleasant thoughts?” the president asked with a smile, bringing Sarah out of the depths of her thoughts.

“Does it show that much?”

“You might say that. You’re thinking about Greg, aren’t you?”

Sarah blushed. “As a matter of fact, yes, I am.”

“You two make the perfect couple,” he said with honesty and sincerity. “Just one thing.”

“Yes,” Sarah asked, amused.

“I reserve the right to give the bride away,” he said as he touched her hand.

Sarah blushed again. “Consider it done.” She tried to return to her thoughts, but she couldn’t. The empty feeling had reappeared twice as strongly as before.

What is it making me feel this way? The uncertainty... I’m missing something. What?

The shuttle slowed into the docking bay and came to a stop. This shuttle bay was much larger; the area was open to accommodate the number of tubes that entered into it. Its appearance was similar to a large train station or yard, with tubes instead of tracks. There were many shuttles parked, indicative of the level of Council activity.

The president and Sarah got out and were greeted by Reveb. It was customary for Reveb to welcome them on arrival and escort them to Greg.

“Greetings,” he said in his usual unemotional voice.

The president and Sarah were accustomed to his demeanor and took no slight at his voice mannerisms or disposition.

“Reveb,” Sarah said. “It’s good to see you.”

“And you, Ms. McClendon, and Mr. President.”

“Where’s Greg?” Sarah asked, noticing his absence. She had been hoping that he, too, would be here to greet them.

“He is in his quarters,” Reveb said, then indicated they should follow him.

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ALIEN DECEPTION

As Sarah took two steps, she suddenly felt her legs become wobbly and her energy escape from her body. She staggered slightly. Edward, seeing her falter, grasped her elbow.

“Are you okay, Sarah?” he asked.

“I’m fine.” She began trying to compose herself. “I probably just need to eat something. I’m feeling a little drained and light-headed.”

They began to walk again. Sarah could now place the empty feeling she had inside. It was the feeling that a vital part of her was...missing. Something she had grown accustomed to over the past two years which provided a constant emotional comfort and a sense of belonging.

Greg had broken their psychic connection, the one they had maintained since it had developed over two years ago.



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C H A P T E R N I N E

*“Fear, and the power to use that fear,
is all that matters.”*

Copolla

“It has been done as you asked,” Ren said to the silent, cloaked figure only known by the name of Carnis sitting across from him.

Ren’s nose moved nervously back and forth, the moisture glistening off of his elongated ursine snout. Tufts of unruly hair stood out from the sides of his chubby face as tiny insects crawled through the hair looking for a place to nest. Although his large body found it difficult to fit on the small chair, he carefully balanced himself on it by using his short stubby legs.

“Do you have the other half of my money?” he asked, his large pointed teeth nipping at his bottom lip.

Ren could not see Carnis’ face, but it was obvious he was humanoid. The long brown robe had a hood that overhung his mysterious face, causing it to be completely enveloped in dark shadow. Without a word, Carnis slid a pouch across the table as a musical accompaniment played in the background in the smoke-filled bar.

This dive was located in the seamiest part of the main spaceport of the planet Acuba, a planet that did not belong to the UCDW. It was a place where anything could be found for the right price and it accommodated the dregs of all aliens. The rest of the galaxy didn’t care as long as they confined themselves to this world.

“The bodies were placed in a conspicuous spot? You were not seen?” Carnis asked, his voice a deep resonating sound that startled his companion into pricking up his long hairy ears.

“The two bodies will be found easily. In fact, by now I am sure they already have been found,” the bear-faced thug said confidently, having no modesty about his ability to do a job correctly.

“Good. Very good.” The deep voice sounded pleased.

Ren opened the pouch and took a cursory look at its contents. It was not his way to count the money in front of customers. He would count it later. This procedure usually brought him much repeat business,

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which kept him well-fed and fairly pampered in a business that tended to be quite sporadic.

“Nice doing business,” Ren snipped and turned to leave.

He had taken a step away from the table when he suddenly felt compelled to turn back. He did not know his erstwhile employer’s name, yet felt compelled to ask a question that had been bothering him. This, too, was something he usually avoided, since it was his business protocol to know as little about things he didn’t need to as possible. But there was something very strange about this employer, something that drew Ren to ask a question he normally would not.

“You obviously have the resources to do something like this yourself,” he said. “After all, you provided a ship impervious to the detection devices of the Council. Why pay me all this money? And why mess with the UCDW? They’re a pretty powerful outfit.”

“What an intriguing question. Did you formulate it all by yourself or did someone write it down for you?” Carnis sneered.

“I—”

“That is none of your business, my friend.”

Ren thought he heard a laugh from within the shadowy hood. Was the guy drunk?

“But since you ask...” The cloaked voice sounded calm and at ease. “...I will tell you. Please, sit down and have a drink.”

Ren hesitated. Carnis grabbed his beefy arm and easily forced his massive body into the chair; his forearm ached where he had been grabbed. He had never seen the move coming, it had happened that quickly. Carnis’ hand was definitely humanoid, but hard as stone and without hair. *It was also quite powerful*, Ren thought as his bruised arm throbbed.

Carnis waved to the waiter who quickly attended the table. “Two Careuben whiskeys.” They sat at the table silently as they waited for the waiter to return. Ren suddenly and uncontrollably shook his head from side to side. It felt as if he were being jabbed by hundreds of tiny needles. By the time he raised his hand to rub his head, the sensation had passed.

The drinks were brought and Carnis paid the waiter and downed his in the same motion. Ren did the same.

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“Ahhhh, that hit the spot.”

“Thanks for—”

“Now, as to your question,” Carnis began. “I am not ready to go near that planet yet. There is someone there who would’ve been able to tell if I had done what I have so handsomely paid you to do.”

“How would they know you would be there?” Ren asked as he saw this conversation going places he had no desire to be. He wanted desperately to leave, but couldn’t make his body move.

“However, I think that is all about to change. Yes, I think so.”

Silence.

Again Ren felt the urge to leave. He almost felt like running just to get as far away from this cloaked figure as possible.

“Well, whatever you’re up to, you know how to reach me if you need something else done,” he said, knowing he wanted nothing else to do with this creature that somehow managed to scare him in a way he did not like.

“I think your services are no longer required.” Carnis said and then resumed his silence.

Ren took a last look at him and then headed off quickly toward his ship. As he walked, he felt extremely glad to be putting distance between himself and the creature. He looked over his shoulder once and saw Carnis still sitting in the same spot, the hood pointed in his direction, watching him.

The being that called himself Carnis watched Ren depart. A low murmur rose from inside the shadow of his hood. It grew into a low laugh, one that was rooted well down in the evil depths of something insane and perverse. He withdrew a device from his pocket and depressed a button that shone green. There was a muffled *wrump* from the terminal. Then a voice screamed that someone had just blown up.

Carnis shook his head and laughed as he re-pocketed the small device.

“You were fun to play with, Ren. It’s a shame we won’t play together anymore. I was having so much fun manipulating you. Should you stay

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or should you go? Should you ask a question or not? Pins and needles are a real bitch, aren't they?"

Then, raising his glass to his lips, he patiently waited for the last lonely drop of the alcohol to reach his tongue. At first the drop evaded him, but he shook the glass violently with his hand and eventually tasted satisfaction.

First rule: if it's out of character for you to do something and you do it, then someone else is controlling you. You missed that one, you piece of Denarian shit.

Finished, he placed the glass on the table. He stood, looking toward where the yelling had come from.

Should've counted it, my friend. It's things like stupid ethics and silly codes of honor that get you killed. If you had, you would have seen the little surprise I had in there for you.

Sarah and Edward met Leumas in the passageway on their way from the shuttle as they headed to Greg's quarters.

"Leumas," Sarah said as she hugged him. "It's good to see you again."

"It's better than good," Leumas replied with a smile. "Have you decided to marry me yet?"

"Hmmm, I'm still thinking about it. Maybe in a hundred years or so or when your ego shrinks—whichever comes first. Check back with me then, okay?" She laughed.

Leumas extended his hand to Edward. "Mr. President."

"What's with the Mr. President stuff?" Edward said as he clasped Leumas' hand firmly. "Whatever happened to 'Edward?'"

"Excuse me—Edward. It's good to see you also. After they shook hands, Leumas handed Edward an envelope. "This just arrived for you."

"Thanks," Edward began. "It's—"

"The Leader of the Council is waiting." Reveb interrupted, his tone conveying impatience.

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If they had not known Reveb, they may have found his interruption a bit brash. Instead, they exchanged quick smiles and continued down the passageway.

At Greg's door, Reveb knocked, and then opened it. The three entered and Reveb closed the door behind them without a word. Greg was sitting in the chair near the window gazing out at the mountains. Either he was deep in thought or asleep, but he did not appear to realize they had entered.

"Greg?" Sarah called, but there was no answer. "Greg?"

His gaze slowly turned toward them, but it was as if he did not recognize who they were or that they were even there. The look scared Sarah and added to her concerns about Greg's behavior lately. Something was going on with him and she was determined to find out what. Then, slowly, recognition appeared in Greg's eyes and he rose to greet them.

"Sarah," he said as he hugged her warmly, and then greeted Edward and Leumas.

Sarah noticed the worn and disheveled look about him. He looked extremely tired, his eyes glazed and bloodshot. "Greg, are you okay? You don't look well." Sarah said, touching his elbow.

"I haven't been sleeping well lately is all," he said quickly. He indicated the small conference table in his living room. "Please, everyone, have a seat."

After they were seated, there was an uncomfortable silence for several seconds until Greg began.

"Okay, we've got some problems. A quick summary before we move on will probably be the place to start. Leumas?"

Leumas described what he had found on Beta-747 and about his suspicions that influencing may have been used. He told them he was still awaiting results from his computer on tests on the dead agent's body.

Sarah then briefed them on what had happened at the news conference and that the preliminary results from the hospital indicated the body might, in fact, be an alien.

Edward reviewed reports from his people at the hospital that included a photograph of the body. He slid it onto the table.

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Leumas grasped the photograph and felt his heart sink again.

“That’s one of the agents assigned to my team on Beta-747. That accounts for two of them. One is still missing.”

“Is this him?” Greg asked as he passed over a photograph of the body inside the box in the Council chambers.

“Yes,” Leumas said quietly, his voice filled with disgust. “That’s the entire team.”

Silence again filled the room. Sarah saw the profound sympathy and frustration in Leumas’ eyes. She reached across the table and touched his hand briefly with a look that said she understood what he was feeling.

“It would appear our position here has been compromised,” Greg said. “Someone or something is out to discredit the UCDW and our role here on Earth.”

“But why?” Sarah wondered. “We’re not inhabiting where we’re not wanted. We offer help to those who need it. Who could possibly be against us?”

“Perhaps someone on the Council is not in agreement with our progress?” the president suggested. “Have there been any outright objections?”

“I can’t think of anyone on the Council who has voiced any objections to what we’re doing,” Leumas said. “Unless some of Copolla’s followers are still around and are trying to reinsert themselves by making us look bad and leaking the secret to the press or something.”

“My people have found nothing to support that,” Greg said. “That’s their only job: to keep on the lookout for any dissention that may jeopardize our position.”

“But are they looking in the right areas?” Edward asked. “Sometimes we’re convinced what we look for is in one particular area and ignore the rest, thereby missing what we search for.”

“They have been staying mainly in the realm of the Council worlds,” Greg admitted.

“Maybe this threat is from a non-Council world,” Edward suggested, just as Greg had the same thought.

“Perhaps I have something that may shed light on this puzzle.” Greg slid his hand into his pocket, removed a piece of bloodstained paper and

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unfolded it slowly. He placed the bloodied note he had retrieved from the dead body in the Council chambers on the conference table.

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C H A P T E R T E N

*“What does deceit have in common with the Galaxy?
It comes in many forms, as do the species which inhabit
the Galaxy.”*

Leumas

The tall, thin man entered the hospital and made his way to the locker room area conspicuously marked “hospital personnel only.” His forged identification badge said he was an orderly named Robert Dickerson. But he wasn’t. His name was Kerlov and he was a small-time alien thug hired to do a job. He had taken the ID from the real Robert Dickerson, whom he had killed a short while ago in the parking lot. He had chosen Dickerson because they were similar in appearance, as long as no one looked too closely.

He easily walked past the few nurses and technicians on duty at this hour. Near the end of a shift and in early morning, they paid him only cursory glances. His employer had been correct. Security was minimal, with no bio or retinal scans. This was going to be easy money.

Once inside the locker room, he acquired an orderly’s uniform from an open locker and changed into it. He moved the forged ID badge to his scrubs. He retrieved the map he had been given of the facility and studied it. Satisfied he knew where to go, he stuffed the map into his pocket and left the locker room.

As he walked, he smelled the archaic odors of the human healthcare facility. They were fraught with the miasma of death. He looked forward to getting this job done, collecting the other half of his money and returning to his own world.

Turning into a corridor, he found three men sitting at a small table blocking any further progress. Obviously, they were the security personnel assigned to keep reporters and the curious away. They looked extremely uncomfortable and tired. Their suits were wrinkled, ties undone, and empty food containers and cups littered the area around them. Well-thumbed magazines were strewn across the table. His intelligence had confirmed they were working twelve-hour shifts around the clock. Arriving at the hour he did, ten hours into their shift,



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they would be less likely to question him. He presented his badge to the one who rose to meet him.

“Long night, huh?” Kerlov asked.

“Yeah,” the security guard said as he looked at the badge.

“I’m going to get some sodas from the machine. Can I get you any?”

“Sure, that’d be nice of you.”

“No problem. I know how it is to work long hours.”

“Thanks.” The security guard stepped aside allowing Kerlov to pass.

“Be back in a jiffy.”

Kerlov entered the outer room that led to the morgue. It was a small office area with three work spaces, all of which were empty but one. There was only one person still there—the doctor who had tended to the alleged alien body case. He sat at a desk under a bright fluorescent light that made the mound of papers on his desk appear to be glossy white. On the wall was a series of x-rays displaying the body in question

The doctor was talking to himself. “Remarkable organ structure. More advanced development in the ability to filter out harmful bacteria in the air. Wherever he’s from, his world must have an atmosphere with many irritants in it...”

He raised his gaze from the paper.

“Yes, orderly, can I help you?” the doctor asked, irritated by the disruption to his work.

“Yeah, Doc,” Kerlov drawled. “I was told to come down and pick up some lab reports?”

“Which ones?” The doctor was beginning to sound more perturbed.

“How should I know?” Kerlov said, shrugging his shoulders.

“Well, who sent you?” The doctor started to turn red.

“Doctor Blake in administration.”

The doctor angrily turned away and placed his hand on the phone. Kerlov moved toward him and swung his arm in an arc, his fist coming down square on the man’s head, knocking him unconscious and out of the chair.

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He moved toward the body on the table. Kerlov didn't look at it very closely. He didn't care who it was; besides, the guy was already dead. He removed a small device from his pocket and placed it on the corpse, then used his fingers to press the keypad. When he finished a green light glowed.

Kerlov turned, took two steps and had to stop. It felt as if his body weighed a tremendous amount. He struggled against the immobility and felt it strengthen as the intensity of his effort against it increased.

Double-crossed.

He had heard rumors that the creature paying huge sums of money for jobs was insane—or maybe something even worse. There wasn't any proof, but some said those he hired were killed to avoid any link between himself and the crimes, but they were just rumors. Even so, the sum of money offered had stroked the flame of greed in many, including Kerlov. He had thought he could avoid any pitfalls after the job was done, but he had not anticipated anything would happen until then. Whoever his generous employer was, he was well connected. This type of device was not sold on any open market, even on Acuba. The only place Kerlov imagined something of this advanced technology could be had was from the UCDW.

“May whatever God that watches over you rip off your head and spit down your neck, as he sends you to whatever Hell there is,” he cursed his employer.

The explosion ripped through the morgue, disintegrating everything in the entire wing. It ensured, however, that sufficient remains of the incendiary device would be left to be detected, even by the simplistic Terrans' methods.



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C H A P T E R
E L E V E N

“Sometimes we refuse to see with our eyes what our heart is telling us.”

Greg Carlson

Leumas picked up the note Greg laid on the table, trying to handle the piece of paper without touching the bloody areas. Finally, he gave up as he saw that the majority of the paper had absorbed the blood, its pinkish-red color seeming to flow within the fibers of the document.

His eyes scanned what it said in a matter of seconds and then he read it again. After the third time, he placed it back in the center of the table. He felt his confusion flow over his face.

“What does it mean?” he asked Greg as Sarah picked the bloody note up and began her perusal of it. Edward peered over her shoulder.

“I’m...not sure,” Greg said, shaking his head.

“It’s like a riddle,” Sarah stated. She read the note aloud.

*“Before there was one.
Then there were four.
Now there are three.
If the reunion is a warm one
then all will be right.
But if not—all will end.
The one shall be as it was before.”*

Leumas rose from the table and exhaled strongly. “A rather strange one, I might add. I’m not good at these little ditties, so I won’t be much help.”

Edward picked up the note. “And this was attached to the body?”

“Yes, in his hand.” Greg said.

“It doesn’t even hint at why the agents were murdered,” Leumas noted, “but it does mention the number three in it. There were three agents.”

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“Nor does it seem to refer to the reporter’s claims that were made today,” Sarah added.

Greg reached to take the note from Sarah. “I don’t think that the ‘three’ has anything to do with the agents. In fact, I think killing the three was just a way to get our attention and create a media nightmare.” He paused. “Look at the results. Earth is running around wondering about the alien body revealed by the reporter. The Council has a dead body brought right into its midst and is crazily speculating in all different directions about what is going on.”

“Total chaos,” Sarah said.

Leumas began to pace. “But, again, the question is ‘why?’ And if the note doesn’t pertain to the agents or what else is happening, then what does it pertain to?”

“I don’t know,” Greg admitted. “But I’d be willing to guess another message will be in our future. I don’t think anyone would send something like this unless they were planning to draw the suspense out. Taunt us with these so-called clues, no matter how meaningless we may think they are. Until we figure something out from this, we need to settle the brush fires that have already been set.”

He rubbed his eyes, red from exhaustion.

Sarah looked at him, concerned. “You need some rest.”

“I know.”

Sarah thought perhaps his fatigue was the reason their mental link had been broken. She wanted to talk to him alone, away from the others. She thought she could suggest a break or something and was about to when the president’s secure communication laptop indicated an incoming priority message.

Edward keyed in his code and read the message. As he read, his eyes and facial expression reflected it was not good news.

“Not good,” Edward said unnecessarily as he typed in his response.

“What is it?” Leumas asked.

Edward looked up from the computer. “The body of the agent that was in the morgue?”

“Yes?”

“It’s been destroyed. Some type of explosion blew up the morgue and half of the hospital wing. Destroyed all the evidence that had

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been gathered, killed the security guards, a doctor and possibly an orderly. They have no idea what kind of device was used or how it was brought into the facility. The blast zone is something they've never seen before."

"Perfect," Leumas grumbled. "More of a mystery."

"Not a mystery. More like a conspiracy," Greg stated.

"What do you mean?" Leumas asked.

Sarah understood the meaning of Greg's comment. "Who had the most to fear from the body if it was real?"

"We did," Edward replied. "And now it will look like we set off the explosion to get rid of the evidence. I'll have Agent Brahm check the site and get samples."

Greg rubbed his hands over his face, and then grimaced. "And the unknown device will add to the accusation that maybe there is an alien or outside source directly involved in Earth affairs, thereby giving credence to the reporter's claim."

Sarah bit her lower lip. "Whoever it is, they're keeping us on the defensive."

"Which is—" Greg sighed, "—exactly where they want us."

The FBI, Secret Service and local law enforcement officials were sifting through the remains of the wing of the hospital that had been destroyed. It consisted mostly of ash and small debris. However, it was devoid of any evidence an alien body had been there.

One of the Secret Service agents, Special Agent Charles Brahm, was one of the president's personal guards as well as one of the four secret attachés for the Council. President Samuel had requested Brahm investigate and report any significant findings to him so the president could, in turn, relay the information to Greg and the Council.

"Not much left, is there?" Agent Brahm asked the fire marshal who had responded.

"No, not at all. This'll be a tough one to figure out," Fire Marshall John Hanna said, scratching his head. "We've sent samples to the lab to try and determine the type of explosive used. But I can say this

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much. I've never seen this type of destructive force before or this type of incineration, and I certainly have seen my share. Spent some time in Desert Storm, saw a lot of explosions, but none come close to the devastation of this one."

"Neither have I." Brahm, however, suspected evidence would reveal the explosive was a substance familiar to him and the UCDW.

"Whatever it is, you can bet the press will be all over this and the president will be in some deep shit."

"What do you mean?"

"It's too convenient. All this shit at the press conference and now this. I wouldn't want to be in his shoes."

"I see your point. You'll let me know if you come up with anything."

"Sure."

"Thanks."

Deciding it was time to head back and make his report, Brahm moved in the direction of his car. As he walked, he noticed a gaggle of reporters were massed just outside the cordoned-off area, waiting for the opportunity to unload their barrage of questions at any passerby who might possess some information and be willing to share it. Agent Brahm gave them a wide berth. *They have the scent of blood already, he thought, and they're ready to leap at anything that seems vaguely interesting.*

There was nothing else he could do here except forward his report immediately and get the sample of debris for analysis to the Council. The president would have to come up with something. Not only were the people of the United States looking for answers from him, the rest of the galaxy also wanted to know from the Leader of the Council what was happening.

Raymond Schume stood in the front of the crowd as he jotted descriptive comments in his notebook as to what the site looked like, and described in words what the stench of the burning debris smelled like. He couldn't see much because the cordoned area was several



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hundred feet away from the nearest activity. Out of the corner of his eye, he recognized Agent Brahm heading away from them.

One of the President's personal guards here? That's kind of unusual.

"Agent Brahm," he shouted. "Can you talk with us?"

Brahm kept walking, not acknowledging him or the other reporters.

"Asshole," one of the reporters said, causing a chuckle from the group. Although they would gladly cut one another's throat for the big story, they still managed to share a moment of occasional humor.

Schume knew no one would be talking for a while. In cases like this, where there were many investigating agencies involved, the coordination of releases took much longer. Everyone got nervous about stepping on the toes of one agency until it was confirmed by at least three separate independent sources. He decided to walk back to his car where his laptop and other associated equipment were. He could use the time to think and plan his next move in light of this most recent event.

Sliding behind the wheel of the Ford Explorer, he closed his eyes for a few moments.

This couldn't get any better. I'm just rolling in credibility. I have them all scrambling around their assholes to find out what I know. Big pay raise time! And just in the nick of time, too, with the creditors talking about suing. Damn women keep me in hock, but that's about to change also. I'm going places. Book and television contracts will be coming my way after I break this baby wide open.

Two months earlier when he'd turned fifty, he'd learned that not only was he half a century old, but on the verge of losing his job, being sued by several credit card companies and being thrown out of the apartment he shared with the cockroaches. How had his boss put it? No job in his future unless he got hot—real quick.

As usual, Ray took the shortcut approach. He bought a gun. Just as he had convinced himself that suicide (after he shot his two ex-wives) was the way to go, he stumbled onto—no, not onto but *into* something.

About a month ago, he had started receiving email messages from an anonymous source. He thought for sure it was a prank when this person said they didn't want money or their name mentioned in any

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of the stories. In fact, his caller offered him money, lots of money, if he would help. Schume gladly accepted. What did he have to lose? All they wanted was for the truth to come out about President Samuel and how he, along with others, was misleading the American people.

Schume was skeptical at first, but the money showed up in his checking account so he checked out what he was being told. In the beginning, the information was nothing earth-shattering, but each tip turned out to be correct, proving the credibility and the reliability of the source.

His latest tip about the new space-drive engine was disturbing. He interviewed several of those involved and found “gaps” in who was actually responsible for certain phases of the project. Scientist One would claim Scientist Two had done something, and Scientist Two said he actually hadn’t. The end result was they created an engine years ahead of schedule, but couldn’t tell you how.

Then, about two weeks ago, new information had come via the telephone with the caller’s voice scrambled. Short and to the point, the details his anonymous informant laid out were precise about the secret collusion between humans and aliens. The list of personnel and agencies involved in the conspiracy was long, but the top names included President Edward Samuel and Sarah McClendon. The caller referred to a secret alien organization, the UCDW, and how it was being purposely kept out of the public eye. Not even the top investigative services knew about it. The reason for this was clear—total domination and takeover of the planet Earth.

After that phone call, Schume had been ready to dismiss the whole thing as a hoax, regardless of the accuracy established up to this point. Frustrated at losing what he had come to consider a great source and the money he received, he went out for a breath of air and was standing in the alley behind the office building. He always thought best when he closed his eyes and leaned his head back against a wall. He called it meditation.

“Got a smoke?” a voice said to him.

“No. Gave it up. Sorry,” Schume said, not paying attention to this member of the endless parade of homeless alcoholics who always managed to find him. He continued his meditation.

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“How about a quarter?”

Schume reached into his pocket and felt for a quarter, found one and held it out. “Get lost.”

The quarter disappeared from his fingers, then he felt the largest static electrical charge he ever imagined. When he opened his eyes, he looked up and down the alley, but saw no one.

When he returned to his office, he sat in his chair and knew as clear as rain what he needed to do next—check into the background of Greg Carlson and Sarah McClendon. And he did. He found many things that didn’t sit right. Supposedly, the president hadn’t known either of these two people until after he was elected, but Schume found photos that said something different. Sarah was frequently visible but this Greg... Nobody had seen or heard from him in about two years. It became obvious somebody was hiding something. Then came the anonymous tip about the location of the alien body.

He had made it to the location his tipster had indicated before anyone else and was able to photograph the body and make initial observations before police and other local agencies arrived. The figure was humanoid in shape, but there were many features that indicated it was not of terrestrial origin.

Now, he rummaged through his photos, studying them for anything that might be useful. The creature’s skin was marked with spots around the neck and the ears were smaller than any human ears he had ever seen. The fingers were short, about half the length of his, and seemed to have three joints instead of two. He flipped through more photos, carefully looking for things he may have missed earlier.

These would have been worth a fortune if they had been substantiated by physical evidence, but unfortunately, that would not be possible any longer and that pissed him off. Schume could have made some big bucks selling his photos anonymously to several papers. He could still get some money, but only a fraction of what he could have gotten if the body was still intact.

Son of a bitch, that cost me a bundle.

His source had made all the right calls up to this point, so Schume was surprised he hadn’t seen the bombing coming.

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His laptop, plugged into the cigarette lighter, beeped to indicate he had incoming email. He set the pictures off to the side. Keying in his password, he accessed the message.

“The authorities will not be able to determine the explosive used. The reason why is obvious. It is not of this world. This alien invasion is trying to cover their tracks with the assistance of the human collaborators. Do not let them cover this up! Expose them for what they are! They have destroyed the proof for now, but there is more and I will help you find it. Together we will expose these traitors. And, at the same time, you will be the most famous reporter on the face of this planet. I will contact you later with more details. Do not discuss this with anyone else. Have transferred funds to your account to continue our battle. End Message.”

There was no indication of who had sent the message or where it was sent from, just as it usually happened. Whoever his friend was, he had extensive IT background. However, Schume felt a resurgence of his earlier exaltation that things might be going his way again after this minor setback.

Ray Schume leaned back in his seat with a large smile on his face. “The most famous reporter on the planet.’ That sure has a nice sound to it.”

He started to write down some notes. A press conference was sure to be in the future if things kept going this way and, somehow, he knew they would.



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C H A P T E R T W E L V E

“Out of the filth and the scum of the universe, comes the most motivated life and dangerous life forms...they have nothing else to live for. These are the tools by which great things can be accomplished.”

Copolla

Carnis sat alone in a room in a cheap hotel in the spaceport district on the planet Server Three. The room was empty except for a bed, a table, and the chair he occupied. A bottle of Corsican whiskey, half-empty, and a glass sat on the table. His right hand was clenched tightly around a second glass as he thought about returning to Acuba and the continuation of his plans.

He had found it necessary to come to this planet to arrange an event that required more secrecy than even Acuba could offer. There were still spies on Acuba who could lead to him being prematurely exposed. After this trip, things would be ready on Acuba to move ahead and secrecy would be maintained. Here on this member world of the UCDW, he would not be expected or watched for. No one would look for a dead man.

“Being dead is hard work.” His shoulders shook with his high-pitched laughter as spittle ran from his lips and fell in droplets on the table and his clothing. “I have them all running crazy. They don’t have a clue what’s going to happen next or from what direction I will move. The fools.”

He poured more of the Corsican liquid into his glass and drank it down quickly. He grimaced as it burned his throat, but quickly warmed to the sensation as it worked its way into his blood. He basked in its heat as he once more went over the details of his next move in a mind battered by surging waves of anger and a hunger for revenge. A knock at the door interrupted his enjoyment of his own cleverness.

“Come,” he yelled.

A small, misshapen alien, a Cartorian, entered and slowly approached the table. The alien, Kartom, hesitated, obviously intimidated by the

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larger figure. His nose switched back and forth, his long whiskers probing the air for any sense of trouble. He grasped his short thin tail and held it close to him.

“I have arranged all as you requested,” Kartom piped in a trembling voice. “But the price... Ah...negotiations became a...ah...problem.”

“How so?”

Unseen in the shadow of his hood, the stranger scowled. Carnis had come to this world throwing large sums of money around to get what he wanted, as if he possessed a bottomless purse. That was necessary to attract the talent he required. The money was not what mattered, but the insolence of these lowlife alien scum attempting to trick him did bother him. It bothered him a great deal, but his irritation would end soon.

“They wanted another five hundred thousand credits for what they considered an extra risk. Murdering a life form involves additional danger. Murdering life forms who occupy roles of political importance attracts much more attention.”

Carnis laughed. “And what did you tell them?”

“That you would pay it,” Kartom said with obvious fear in his voice.

“That was a bold move on your part.” Carnis sneered. After a few moments of silence, he continued. “But you are correct, I will pay it gladly for a well-performed job.”

“The money...my money...will be deposited in the account I specified?” Kartom asked, trying to keep the quiver from his voice.

“It’s already there. When will they attack the ship?”

“Soon. They are already tracking its trajectory.”

“Wonderful,” Carnis bellowed. “Just wonderful.”

Kartom breathed a sigh of relief. “Then we have concluded our business?” the Cartorian asked, scurrying closer to the door.

“Just about. We must have a drink to conclude our arrangement.” He gestured for Kartom to step closer to the table and poured a measure of the yellow liquid into the empty glass. Carnis picked it up and handed it to his guest, who accepted it with a trembling hand. He then filled his own glass and set the bottle back on the table with a thump.

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“To a wonderful job,” Carnis barked, then raised his glass to his lips.

Kartom sniffed the glass contents and said nothing as he waited until his host had drunk.

Carnis drained his glass and dropped it on the table. Kartom did the same, then quickly placed the glass on the table.

“If there is nothing else, I shall take my leave of you.”

“As you wish,” Carnis said, and waved his arm in dismissal.

Kartom left without looking back, his little feet shuffling quickly down the corridor. Carnis sat in silence and stared at the tumbler Kartom had used in their toast. It was slowly collapsing as the acid implanted in the matrix of the glass, released by the warmth of the alien’s hand, dissolved it, as it was no doubt doing to the stomach of the misshapen alien.

“I hate to drink alone, but we can’t have any loose ends,” he said as he poured the remainder of the whiskey into his glass and drank deeply. A scream sounded from the street below and he started to laugh.

The Arcturian spacecraft came out of hyperdrive and slowed to space-normal in the outlying reaches of the Earth’s solar system. The ship contained Arcturia’s two ambassadors, a pilot and navigator. The Arcturians were an affable race and it was reflected both in their actions and appearance. Physically, they were virtually identical to each other, most closely resembling Earth’s pandas. On the outside, their thinking and movements appeared slow, but they were very prompt in their actions when they needed to be.

The ship was a standard ambassadorial vessel with minimum weaponry, but with the stealth mechanisms for entering and departing Earth’s atmosphere without detection. The ambassadors were returning from their home world ahead of schedule in order to resume their duties with the Council because of the incident of the dead agent’s body in the great hall. The call for information had gone out for any reports of suspicious activity in their own sectors of space that possibly might be related.

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The pilot informed the ambassador when they were less than one standard hour away from Earth.

“Do you think this information means anything?” Ambassador Krolugue asked.

“Possibly,” his fellow ambassador, Calo, responded. “It definitely should be followed up. The agent who reported the events is a reliable one and I see no reason to dispute it. Someone or something is maneuvering into a position of power and utilizing some of the worse scum in the galaxy to do it.”

“To what end?” wondered Krolugue.

“That’s what needs to be further investigated,” Calo said. “To try and determine what the ultimate purpose is behind these incidents.”

Krolugue read through the report again.

“Someone is assembling the best criminal talent under a retainer system of some sort. It’s as if the intent is to have access to a broad spectrum of expertise. In addition, there are indications of disappearances of individuals rumored to have accomplished assignments of a very discreet nature. The most damning insinuation, however, was that the UCDW was, or would be, the target of some of these assignments.” Krolugue looked from the piece of paper. “Will you report these findings to the Council?”

“Yes, immediately on our arrival. An investigation team needs to be assembled to take a closer look at these allegations. They could be related to what is happening.”

“Why didn’t we bring the agent along with us to personally explain what he thinks is going on?”

“Because he was killed shortly after transmitting the report,” Calo snapped. “I still don’t understand how he was discovered. He was a deep-planted agent with impeccable false credentials. Either this person or group has excellent intelligence or...” Calo paused.

“Or?” Krolugue asked, not liking the look on his colleague’s face.

“Or we have a traitor in the UCDW,” Calo sighed.

The ship suddenly lurched to one side, throwing the ambassadors from their seats. As they tried to stand they were thrown to the opposite side.

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“What’s going on?” Krolugue shouted into his communication device.

“Under attack,” the pilot reported. “Trying to evade now!”

Another shudder shook the craft.

“Unknown craft! No markings! Refuses to answer our hail,” the pilot shouted.

“Call for help,” Calo ordered. “Call the Council!”

“Local communication channels jammed!”

“Krolugue, transmit the data to Leumas on the encrypted channel,” Calo commanded.

“But it takes hours...” Krolugue stared at Calo, the realization of what was going to happen to them on his face

“Do it now!” Calo screamed.

Krolugue fumbled as he tried to place the transmission crystal into the slot of the transmitter while the ship shook violently. Finally, he managed to insert the crystal, key up Leumas’s code and press send. He smiled. “At least it’s on its way to—”

The Arcturian ship exploded from a direct hit and disintegrated into space debris and tiny particles. The attacking pirate ship immediately turned and fled. Moments later, as they activated their hyperdrive, their ship, too, exploded.

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C H A P T E R
T H I R T E E N

“In life, there can be difficult and unfair choices to be made but nevertheless, they must be made, even at the cost of one you love.”

Sarah McClendon

“What’s going on, Greg?” Sarah asked as she walked up behind him where he stood looking out the window. They had taken a break from their meeting after discussing the note and not really getting anywhere with it. Sarah thought this might be the only chance to talk with him for a while.

“You’re acting like you’re somewhere else,” she continued. “And your health is suffering. You have sleep deprivation written all over your face and your weight looks like it’s dropping too. When was the last time you ate a normal meal?”

“I’m just tired,” he said, not taking his gaze from the window. “I haven’t been sleeping—”

“Come on, Greg, it’s me, Sarah. You can’t lie and you’re starting to scare me. Talk to me. I know you’ve broken our connection. I feel so empty and alone.”

He remained silent, still looking out the window.

“Greg, will you please talk to me?” Sarah asked raising her voice.

He turned toward her, but only to look to where Leumas and Edward sat at the conference table. They were still discussing the note and apparently had not heard Sarah’s exclamation. He warned her to be quiet by placing his finger to his lips, then motioned her into the kitchen. She followed him, though she found it odd he would want to hide anything from the others.

“I don’t want them to hear any of this,” he said. “I don’t want to worry them. They have enough on their plates already.”

“What is it?” she asked, her face lined with concern.

“Sarah,” Greg began, then paused as if searching for the right words. “You know the last thing I would do is hurt you or allow any harm to befall you.”



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She touched his arm gently. “Of course, I know that, Greg.”

Greg stared into her eyes. “Well, these dreams I’ve been having are crazy! I don’t know what’s going on anymore. I broke the link with you because I thought they might filter through me and get to you. I didn’t see any sense in us both losing sleep or maybe even our minds over whatever this is. They come any time they want; sometimes when I’m not even asleep.”

Sarah reached out for his hand and raised it to the side of her face where she caressed it. “What are the dreams about?”

Greg shook his head. “I don’t know. They’re just images that don’t make any sense. It varies immensely. Sometimes it’s glimpses of places I’ve never been before, faces I’ve never seen before, and other times I’m right here in my quarters or in the UCDW chambers. There’s no pattern to them I can make out. At least not yet anyway.”

“Is that everything?” She looked deeply into his eyes. “No more heroics, Greg. Tell me the truth. Are there more changes you’re undergoing from our original experience two years ago? Is it some delayed side effect of that process?”

He pulled his hand back from her and rubbed his face.

“I honestly don’t know,” he said. He shook his head and let the full extent of his fatigue show for a moment. “Look,” he went on, “we have enough to worry about without dragging my dreams into this.”

“Yes, I suppose we do,” she sighed. “But I want you to let a doctor examine you. And tell me if these dreams get any worse. Okay?”

Greg didn’t answer. He looked at Sarah and felt his burden lift for a moment.

“Okay?” Sarah repeated more insistently.

“Okay,” he agreed as he put his arms around her.

Sarah hugged him tightly. “And I want you to call me whenever you have these episodes. Keeping it bottled up inside of you might drive you mad.”

“You can be so determined when you want to be, can’t you?” Greg smiled.

“Relentless,” she answered, smiling back and kissing him.

They held each other for several moments. Greg enjoyed the feeling of holding her close; it was the best feeling he had had in quite a while.

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Her warmth seem to seep into his body, relaxing every muscle and giving him hope that maybe he could take it easy for a while as long as he held her.

“Do you ever wonder what our lives would’ve been like if we hadn’t gotten involved in all of this?” Sarah reflected.

“Probably pretty dull, especially for me,” he said. “I’d still be pushing boxes in New Orleans. Now, you—you’d be the up-and-coming marketing queen of the Big Apple.”

“Maybe so,” she responded, “but I wouldn’t be as happy as I am right at this moment.”

“We probably would have never met either.” He smiled. “I guess we have a lot to be grateful for as far as the way things turned out.”

They kissed again.

“How is he getting the information?” Leumas’ voice asked as he paced near the door, his voice dragging Greg and Sarah back into the present, though they still held their embrace.

“There has to be a leak somewhere,” Sarah suggested loudly. “Someone is feeding this reporter information. The details of what we’re doing are too accurate to be coincidental.”

“And killing our agents. Why would anyone want to interfere with our planetary affairs?” Greg added.

“Greg, with all the abilities you have, can’t you get a feel for what’s happening? Maybe even a hint who might be responsible for all of this?” Sarah asked once they were alone again.

“No idea,” Greg answered, turning away so she would not be able to see his eyes.

Then, anticipating she would move to confront him, he turned back to the conference room before she could ask any more questions.

She always could tell when he was lying.

“Greg, Sarah,” Leumas called. “You’d better come and get a look at this.”

Greg and Sarah returned to the conference room where they found Leumas and Edward watching the video monitor.

“What’s going on?” Sarah asked, puzzlement on her face.

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“It’s your favorite reporter from the *Washington Tribune*,” Leumas said sarcastically. “He’s off and running again. This time he’s moved on to television, instead of just writing for the papers.”

Sarah and Greg sat down silently to watch as Leumas increased the volume.

Schume’s smirking visage appeared on the TV screen as he announced, “I have learned from sources that the explosion at Walter Reed Hospital was caused by a type of explosive not known to any law enforcement official. Although when interviewed they say they are still ‘examining the evidence,’ I have learned from a reliable source they will never be able to determine its type because it is not of this world.”

“What intelligence do we have on the explosion?” Greg asked grimly.

“My agencies are totally stumped,” Edward admitted, shaking his head. “We’re waiting on the results from the test of the sample Agent Brahm delivered.”

Leumas accessed the terminal near his seat and punched in some numbers. “It’ll be a few minutes.”

They turned their attention back to the video screen. The reporter continued, the smirk still lingering around his lips. “Ladies and gentlemen, as you may recall, I was the one who brought the issue to the president and his space advisor, Sarah McClendon, that there was evidence to support an alien collusion with the White House.

“Now, mysteriously, the evidence has been destroyed. Vanished from sight. I submit to you, does that not sound a little suspicious?” Schume paused for effect, then continued, “I vow to continue my investigation until the truth is out in the open for all to see.”

“Well, that’s just great, isn’t it?” Greg groaned. He slumped back in his chair and rubbed his face with his hands.

“Right now, it’s just unsubstantiated gibberish,” Edward said through tight lips.

“That may be,” Sarah acknowledged, “but he is getting information from somewhere.”

A beep emanated from Leumas’ monitor. “It’s confirmed. The explosive is of off-world origin,” he reported. “There is not enough of

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it remaining to trace, but that very lack indicates it was a professional job.”

“Which lends credence to the theory someone’s trying to bring us into the open and expose what we’re doing,” Sarah concluded.

“And again, ‘who’ becomes the main issue,” Greg sighed.

“‘Why’ is another question,” Edward said.

Leumas’ monitor announced the receipt of another report. He quickly scanned the contents. “There’s more,” he said, looking grimmer. “And it’s not good.”

“What is it, Leumas?” Edward asked with obvious reluctance.

“The results of the examination of the agent I brought back with me from Beta-747 are complete. His mind was definitely tampered with.”

“How so?” Greg asked. He drew himself up from his chair and looked intently in Leumas’ direction.

“He was influenced to kill himself.”

“Influenced to kill himself?” Greg repeated in disbelief.

“Well, that certainly makes this whole thing much more complicated, doesn’t it?” Sarah said with sarcasm.

“Okay, Leumas,” Greg demanded. “How can this be?”

Leumas rubbed his brow. “Obviously, someone else is capable of high-level influencing. I find that hard to believe, but it must be true.”

“But how?” Edward asked. “I thought you were the last fully-trained life form capable of applying more than basic influence?”

“As I believed also,” Leumas said, shaking his head.

“This’ll complicate things tremendously,” Sarah added grimly.

“We have to find out who it is,” Greg pronounced. “And before whoever it is gets too far.”

A knock at the door halted their conversation. Reveb entered with a piece of paper in his hand.

“Leader of the Council, a message has arrived marked for your eyes only,” he intoned.

“Who is it from?”

“I do not know. It came through the secure channel, but the communication watch officer could not determine its source.” He handed the note to Greg, then turned and left.

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Greg's eyes moved across the paper as he read. When he got to the bottom they returned to the top and began the process again.

"What is it?" Sarah asked, touching his arm.

Slowly, he withdrew his attention from the note and silently handed it to her.

"You might as well read it out loud, Sarah," Greg said, his lips in a thin line.

Sarah focused her eyes on the note and began to read:

*"The time of the reunion draws closer
and trepidation is on the rise.
There are those who would seek to
ruin what is meant to be a surprise.
But they have met a horrible fate
in the cold vastness of outer space.
Their loss is but a trivial moment
in the overall scheme of things that
will soon undo what has been done,
and set things back to the way they were."*

"More damn riddles!" Leumas slammed his fist on the table. "I hate riddles!"

"Someone's having fun at our expense," Edward said, the anger in his voice evident.

"Well, be that as it may, if we can figure out what they really mean, hopefully it will all become clear," Greg said. "Let's start looking for similarities between this riddle and the first one."

"Reunion," Sarah said after a moment. "It's listed in both."

"Okay, what does 'reunion' symbolize?" Greg asked.

"Well, if it is a reunion, everyone knows each other already," Edward said.

"Good point," Leumas agreed.

"It's a start," Greg began. "Now, let's—"

The beeping sound of an incoming message on his communications unit from the security watch officer interrupted him. He pushed the receive button.

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ALIEN DECEPTION

“Yes, Security Watch Officer?”

“Leader of the Council,” the man reported, “we were tracking the Arcturian ambassadors on their approach to Earth.”

“Yes,” Greg said, impatient and anxious to get back to the note.

“Their ship has been destroyed by another vessel,” the watch officer reported.

“Any survivors?” Greg asked, closing his eyes, already knowing the answer.

“Negative.”

“Identification of the attacking vessel?”

“None. They blew up when they entered hyperdrive.”



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C H A P T E R F O U R T E E N

“On Earth, there are predatory creatures called wolves. They roam in packs and there is a dominant one they call Alpha. It is the strongest and smartest of the pack; such a simple rule that many species cannot comprehend, but I embrace it.”

Copolla

“I welcome you all to this little organizational meeting,” Carnis said to the group that sat around the table in a secluded compound on the planet Acuba. He adjusted the hood of his robe so he could see them clearly while still hiding some of his own features.

The group consisted of twelve of the most ruthless aliens from throughout the galaxy who, for a price, would do the most cold-blooded work without a second thought. Some of them would do it just for the sheer enjoyment of watching others suffer.

“Why don’t we cut to the chase of this little meeting, Carnis,” said an alien whose face was scarred so heavily it was difficult to place his features in perspective.

“Don’t be impatient...my friend,” Carnis said as his eyes locked on the brash figure who had dared to interrupt him. “You are Suer?”

“That’s right,” Suer said, proud he was known far and wide as a formidable foe, someone not to be crossed. His time was valuable and he would not have it wasted. He sneered. “Your message said you have a mission that will pay extremely well, enough we all can walk away with so many credits we’ll never have to work again.”

“That’s right,” Carnis answered. “Just one little mission to be performed at a designated time, at a designated place.”

“What about details?” Suer demanded, his impatience showing.

“All in good time,” Carnis replied, ignoring Suer’s demeanor. “You see, I don’t want any security leaks of these details. There’ll be no information until we’re ready to go. I’ll supply the necessary equipment, spacecraft and such for you to train on and become familiar with. No one will be allowed to leave the compound area. Living, eating and

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training areas will be provided. There'll be no communication with the outside at all."

"So what do you expect us to do in the meantime?" Suer asked. "Play games and wait for your 'permission' to do whatever? We don't work that way."

Murmurs of approval rumbled from the others around the table. Suer smiled with satisfaction at their support.

"You do now," Carnis said with a smile full of disdain. "You all do." He swept his hand in a wide arc to include everyone in the room. "When you came through that door today, you were committed to this project, whether you knew it or not. You can only leave this room by joining me or dying."

Silence ensued for a few moments as Carnis's remarks died on the air. Suer stood, a weapon pointed directly at his host.

"The hell with what you say," Suer said as he prepared to squeeze the trigger, his face set into a grin of pure satisfaction.

Unperturbed, Carnis focused his eyes on Suer. The smile on the scarred alien's face quickly began to fade, then he dropped the weapon as he grasped his head with his hands and fell back into his chair.

"What are you doing?" he shrieked. Carnis just smiled. "Get out of my mind!" Suer screamed as he reached under his robe and removed a smaller laser pistol he kept hidden as a spare. He slowly began to raise his arm to point the weapon at Carnis. Then, suddenly, obviously fighting his own actions and thoughts, he slowly turned the weapon toward his own head.

"Do we have an understanding, Suer?" Carnis mocked, his eyes glowing in the shadow of his hood.

Suer, unable to speak, nodded his head in agreement.

Carnis nodded. "Good. Now are there any more questions from the rest of the members of my merry band?"

Silence shrouded the table as the rest shook their heads quickly.

"Well, then, I have just one more thing," Carnis continued, still smiling, "I don't believe in mercy for those who don't follow my orders. There can be no questioning of what I ask and there'll be no second chance."

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He returned his attention to Suer who sat with the pistol still touching his head. “Isn’t that right, Suer?”

Suer nodded.

“I have a plan that must be followed right down to the minutest detail,” Carnis explained. “There will not be the slightest deviation from what I say for you to do. Any such deviation will be dealt with swiftly and painfully. Those that do well will be rewarded for their efforts. Isn’t that right, Suer?” Carnis again turned his full attention back to Suer, whose body trembled as his hand still held the pistol to his head. Suer again nodded his head and squeezed the trigger.

His head was vaporized, the remaining parts of his body collapsed into a heap, some in the chair and some on the floor. The pistol fell to the ground and slapped against the floor several times before falling silent. The stench of burnt flesh permeated the air. Carnis took a deep breath and exhaled as if he had just sniffed a fragrant bottle of newly-opened wine.

“If there are no further questions, I think we’re done,” Carnis watched as Suer’s remains oozed onto the floor from the chair. He turned at last to look at the stunned faces of the others, and his lips curved.

“Welcome aboard.”

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C H A P T E R
F I F T E E N

"I have seen many things that have frightened me...yet they come from my own mind."

Greg Carlson



As Greg opened his eyes, he saw a large moon above him instead of his familiar ceiling. He didn't recognize anything before him. Frightened and confused, he tried to assess his surroundings.

He was lying on his back above a marshy beach along a coastline. The vegetation had a bluish tint to it in the fading light of the day. Several smaller moons, none of which matched in size, also came into view as the sky slowly darkened. The sounds of birds chirping and shrieking began to fade away as blue darkness settled upon this world.

Greg stood and took a few steps. He was barefoot and the coolness of the sand and water increased his awareness of everything around him. He heard the insects that buzzed around his skin as he walked. He glanced up at the largest moon, its features becoming more distinct as the sky darkened further. He was drawn to it for some reason.

Why? Where am I? Why am I here? Almost instantaneously a realization dawned. I have seen this place before, in my mirror in my quarters. In my dreams? So, am I dreaming again?

An animal somewhere off in the night barked. Several more moons rose, blotting the dark night sky with circles everywhere he looked. There was an ominous feel to them.

So many of them. They look as if they might collide with one another.

Again his eyes were drawn to the largest moon. It demanded his attention, but not by its size alone. There was something else. Its features became sharper and he felt a chill run through his body. He suddenly felt scared at what would be revealed in the face of this moon, something he did not want to see.

A face of...someone? What is happening to me? Am I going mad?

A sound. Something moved through the tall weeds and brush, heading in his direction.

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There was no answer.

“Hello,” he yelled again.

Still he heard no response. The sound stopped as suddenly as it had begun. Silence returned, but with it a new sensation, the feeling of being watched.

He turned around in a circle, his eyes scanning in all directions. There was nothing there. Once more he felt drawn to the sky and the moon. He slowly turned his head upward...

“Greg! Greg, wake up!”

“Yes...wait, I need to see... Wait...” he pleaded.

“Greg, wake up!” The shout made him wince.

Greg opened his eyes to see Sarah nervously leaning over him. Her eyes were filled with distress.

“What’s wrong, Sarah?” he asked groggily.

“You were having a dream or something,” she said, her brow lined with concern. “You were calling out to someone.”

“Oh...well, I’m awake now. I must’ve dozed off for a few moments.” Greg looked around the room, noticing that Leumas and Edward were gone. “Where is everyone else?”

Sarah gently touched his arm. “We decided we could all use some rest. It’s been a long day...and not a very good one.”

“I’d agree with that assessment. Any more developments?”

Sarah shook her head. “No, thank God. I think we’ve had enough bad news for one day, don’t you?”

“Yes, probably so. How about you? Aren’t you going to get some rest?”

“I will in a little bit,” she said, then changed the subject. “Greg, what did you dream about?”

“I don’t know,” he told her hesitantly, carefully weighing his thoughts. “There’s this place I have gone to twice now in my dreams. The exact same place. There’s water, a lot of moons in the sky and a distinct blue tint to everything. But there’s this one large moon, huge compared to the rest. There’s something...something really strange about it.”

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“Greg, tomorrow I want you to share this with Leumas,” Sarah said seriously. “He may be able to recognize it from the description of the place.”

“Okay,” Greg said, then kissed her. “I will. Now, come to bed and get some sleep.”

Sarah slid into his bed next to him and held him closely. The warmth of her body was comforting and eased away his earlier trepidations. He kissed her.

“Good night,” she whispered. “No more dreams tonight.”

Sarah fell asleep quickly. Greg quietly got out of bed, walked over to the window and looked out at the dark, starlit sky. He imagined the large moon again as he had seen it in his dream. He squinted his eyes, trying to force the image to sharpen, but instead it blurred and vanished.

A voice murmured in his mind. *::The day of reckoning approaches::*

The following morning Sarah, Leumas, Edward and Greg sat together eating breakfast in Greg’s quarters. The conversation was subdued; the previous day’s events still fresh in everyone’s minds, and it was apparent that no one had slept well.

“I’ve got to get back to Washington. The pressure is on to hold a press conference,” Edward announced, then turned toward Sarah, “You’ll need to come back also.”

“Yes, I suppose so,” she said, glancing toward Greg. *::I don’t want to go back, Greg,::* she thought to him. *::I want to stay here with you.::*
::I understand, but you have to go back. I’ll be okay.:

Sarah smiled with pleasure that Greg had reinstated their telepathic connection.

“Leumas and I will work on the notes some more to see what we can find out,” Greg said aloud. Leumas nodded in agreement, although his frustration at being unable to solve the riddles was evident.

“Make sure you tell Leumas about the dream, Greg,” Sarah reminded in a low tone.

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“I will,” he said. Then, as he received a stern look from Sarah, “I will, I promise.” Leumas looked at him questioningly, but Greg indicated he would explain later.

Edward rose from the table. “Come on, Sarah, time to go.”

She gave Greg a quick kiss on the cheek. *See you soon,* she sent.

Never soon enough.

Edward and Sarah departed for their subway ride. Reveb entered at the same time, offering his usual emotionless wish for a good trip.

“Leader, excuse me.”

“Yes, Reveb,” Greg said, watching Sarah walk down the corridor. He missed her already.

“Council meeting in one-half hour.”

“Thank you, Reveb,” Greg said and smiled.

Reveb left the room without further comment.

“That should be an interesting meeting,” Leumas said. “I’m sure the word about the Arcturian craft and the mysterious other ship being destroyed has been thoroughly disseminated by now.”

“You can be sure about that,” Greg added. “Just like—”

He was interrupted by the signal indicating an incoming communication on Leumas’ private line.

“Excuse me for a second,” Leumas said as he turned toward the terminal and entered his security code. Greg went to get more coffee.

“That’s odd,” Leumas commented, a perplexed look on his face.

“What’s that?”

“It’s a transmission from the Arcturian vessel that was destroyed,” Leumas said, surprised.

“But the explosion was hours ago. Why did it take so long to get here?” Greg asked.

“Two reasons. First, that is part of the encryption process I chose. No one monitors the older-style frequencies anymore. It’s a simple form of deception and effective, but there’s a significant time delay involved.”

“Why the delay?”

“That’s the second part. In case there’s a chance of the message being traced, it’s routed through communications networks scattered

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throughout the galaxy before coming here,” Leumas explained without taking his gaze from the screen.

“Very sly,” Greg said with a wry smile. “What’s in the message?”

“It’s horribly garbled. I can run it through the computer and try to reconstruct it.”

“Why garbled?”

“According to the time of transmission, it was sent at almost the same moment the ship was destroyed. But because of the encryption process, there’s a delay in transmission. It was never completed. It should take a few minutes, but I don’t think we will get very much out of it.”

“A break would be nice right now. Just a little bit of information to begin with.” Greg sighed.

“What was Sarah talking about before she left? Something about your dreams?” Leumas asked as they waited for the computer to interpret the remains of the radio message.

“I’ve been having strange dreams lately,” Greg said, shrugging. “I dream I’m on a strange planet and all alone. It’s very weird.”

“Describe it.”

Greg scratched his head and complied. “Well, it’s night, and there are several moons in the sky, one much larger than the rest.” He paused as he tried to recall more. “Everything has a bluish tint to it and there is water, an island, and a marshy area.

“But there’s something peculiar about the large moon. It’s as if there is something embedded in the face of it. And the longer I’m there, the sharper the figure becomes, but I still can’t make out what it is. Then there are sounds, as if something or someone is approaching, but I don’t see anyone. It’s almost as if I am meant to see something, but someone is—”

A beep from the computer announced the message reconstruction was complete. Leumas studied the screen and his face showed his displeasure. “It’s worse than I thought. Only one word came through.”

“What is it?”

“Acuba.” Leumas had a puzzled look on his face. “I think it’s the name of a planet in a sector at the far reaches of the galaxy. It’s an area where the majority of the non-aligned worlds are.”



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“Let’s see what it looks like,” Greg said. “Computer, display the planet Acuba on main viewing screen.”

The computer responded and the image steadied and became sharply focused. Greg and Leumas stared intently.

“Well, well, well,” Greg said as he stared at the image of a planet where the light had a bluish tint and which had several moons, one of which loomed in size compared to the rest.

“That’s it—the planet from my dreams.”

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C H A P T E R
S I X T E E N

*"I have been asked: when a lie resides close to the truth,
does that make it almost truth? I respond that almost truth
is better than a lie, especially when it fits the situation."*

President Edward Samuel

Greg and Leumas entered the great hall of the UCDW. Greg took his seat on the dais. Leumas took the position reserved for him as Interstellar Planetary Affairs Coordinator: slightly below, but close to Greg.

The tension is very thick, Greg thought, as he scanned the faces of the delegates.

Although the aliens who made up the delegations were of assorted races and different body characteristics, fear obviously knew no physical limitations. Greg felt his stomach sour and he hesitated to begin. Leumas cleared his throat rather noisily to get his attention. Greg called the meeting to order.

"Members of the Council," Greg began, struggling to keep his voice even. "I know you have questions regarding certain events that have recently taken place. I've called this meeting to discuss them and share what information we have." Greg paused for a few seconds. He wanted what he said next to be understood very clearly. "I would caution you to not read more into things than is there. If there is something to fear, we'll face it together, but it will be something substantial and not our own imaginations leading us to believe in rumors and innuendos."

He let those words hang for a few moments before proceeding. *They must understand this before anything else*, he thought. "Due to the unconfirmed reports already circulating, it'll be better to start with your questions. Who will begin?" He sighed quietly as he prepared for the onslaught he was sure would follow.

"I shall begin," the ambassador from Iris 5 said, and stood. Her thin and petite figure appeared so fragile it seemed just the motion of standing would harm her. She used her wings and turned momentarily toward the other members, as if receiving their consensus on how the questioning



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should begin. “The body gruesomely displayed in these chambers...” she began, gesturing with her four arms to indicate the surrounding area, “...that was one of our contact agents from Beta-747?”

Right to the heart of the matter, Greg thought. “Yes, it was,” he answered quickly with obvious sadness in his voice.

He glanced toward Leumas and saw his face reflect the sadness again at the loss of the three agents he had trained. “All three agents were killed on Beta-747 and two of the bodies were moved. The third body was found on the planet by Leumas, where an attempt to take his life was narrowly averted. One of the missing agents was mysteriously delivered here to our chambers, and the other was placed on Earth and found by humans after a mysterious communication leaked the information to the media.”

“Why were they killed and displayed so horrifically?” The harsh voice of a Braxian sounded through the armor plate that covered his body in an intricate weaving of thousands of little pieces, like the scales of a fish.

“I don’t know,” Greg answered, his frustration evident. “I suspect it’s a message of some sort intended to scare us. The only clue we’ve found so far was a note—a riddle of some sort. We’re studying it to see if we can determine anything from it, but so far have come up with nothing. To further complicate matters, the facility on Earth where the body was being examined by the humans was mysteriously destroyed, adding further controversy to the discovery.”

“How was the body brought into the Council chambers?” The delegate from Hoposes 7 asked, its two-lobed head (half-male, half-female) twitching in anticipation of the answer.

“We don’t know how they got it past security. We’re still looking into that.”

“Someone in this Council must be involved,” shouted a member from the delegation from Sigma 354. Rhino-shaped, it leaped upon its table, stomping its heavy feet in a ceremonial ritual of anger.

“We don’t have any evidence at this time to support that,” Greg assured him. “Until we do, I will not support or address that issue and I don’t think this Council should either. All it will cause is suspicion and a breakdown of trust.”

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“Is it true the ambassadors from Arcturia have been killed?” the robotic humanoid shape used as a receptacle by the energy life forms of the inhabitants of Segworth 2 asked.

“Yes, that is also correct. Their vessel was attacked as it entered this solar system. We don’t know who the attackers were or why they attacked. The ambassadors’ ship was completely destroyed. Again, another riddle of some sort was received and we are working on that one also.” Greg paused as a momentary silence ensued, then continued. He knew he had to show them something positive from all of this. “If nothing else, we can draw one conclusion. All the events are related and are very likely the work of the same life form or group. It would also appear their goal is to destabilize this Council and this planet.”

“Leader,” the Iris 5 ambassador said, “what are we to do about this incident?”

Greg had assumed someone would ask this question. It would be the most difficult to answer. He felt fairly sure there was more to come yet, and it would not be good.

“First and foremost, we must let cool heads prevail. Be rational and work together, and be prepared for further developments. The life form or group responsible will be brought to justice.” Greg could feel the group settling somewhat, but it was still shaky ground.

“We have one piece of information that may produce some results,” he continued and noticed many delegates’ interest become aroused. “The Arcturian vessel transmitted a message to us as they were being destroyed. Unfortunately, the majority was garbled too badly to make any sense of it. However, there was one word of the message that was comprehensible. The name of the planet Acuba.”

The conversations and exchanges among the ambassadors rose to a furor. Greg could hear the fear in their voices at the name of the planet; its reputation as a harbor for criminals was well known.

“It’s just a planet,” Greg said in a stern voice, trying to dispel their fears. He had to yell it several times to get them to be quiet. While he waited for them to settle down he heard the name he had known someone was going to bring up—Copolla. His stomach soured at the thought of his old enemy. Some of these delegates actually believed

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Copolla was not dead and was only waiting for the right time to emerge again and take over the galaxy.

“Yes, Leader,” the ambassador from Iris 5 noted, “but it is a planet that is not a member of this Council and is reputed to harbor some of the worse criminals of the galaxy.”

“We shall see,” Greg said as he turned toward Leumas. “Leumas is going to pay Acuba a visit and conduct a fact-finding mission for the Council.”

All eyes in the Council chamber turned to the Interstellar Planetary Affairs Coordinator. Leumas slowly stood, nodded to Greg, and then faced the members.

“If there’s anything on Acuba that concerns these bizarre events, I’ll find it and bring it back for the members to evaluate,” he said.

He sat down amidst murmurs of approval. He looked toward Greg and smiled, yet in his mind were the words he had not said, *I hope*.

Edward and Sarah arrived in Washington DC and immediately met with his chief of staff, security advisors and press secretary regarding the press. The media were all frothing at the mouth for information regarding the alleged cover-up and the destruction of the hospital where the supposed alien had been held. The mood was full of tension and tempers were running extremely high. Everyone was worried about the disastrous effect this kind of bad press could have. Edward needed to clear the air and get his people’s concerns out in the open.

“Well, what do we have?” he asked, his lips tight.

“Not much,” Clyde Barnes, the head of the Secret Service detachment, answered grimly. “This reporter, Schume, has some photographs, but there’s no way to validate them. The explosion eliminated every trace of what was in the morgue. The explosive...” he hesitated in embarrassment. “We’re not able to identify it and neither can any of the law enforcement agencies around the world.”

“Well, then, what’s the next step?” Edward asked.

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“Mr. President,” Monroe began. “We need to make a statement on what we know to the public before Mr. Schume or any other reporter says something else in an attempt to discredit you.”

Monroe was obviously in a frenzy trying to figure out how they were going to address the matter. His nervousness was apparent to the rest of the members assembled in the room, but Edward knew he was an excellent thinker when the pressure was on. More than once when things were looking extremely bad, he had brought them through by finding a way to explain the inexplicable in the most sensible of ways.

“I can see your point,” the president said. “But what are we going to tell them? We don’t have any answers, just further questions and speculation. Monroe, you’ve been creative on many occasions. Don’t you have even a wild idea?”

“We could...twist it around on them,” Monroe said, with a sudden look of excitement in his eyes. “They keep accusing us, but isn’t it convenient for them?”

Edward looked at him with a confused look. “I don’t understand.”

“Suppose the body turned out not to be an alien, but some hoax the media initiated. Perhaps Mr. Schume has put together some plot to make us look bad. Right now, there’s no way we could prove him wrong and he has nothing else he can use against us. Maybe *he* destroyed the evidence.”

“I like it,” Edward said. “It’s a little ugly, slinging mud and all that. But what about the explosive? How do we get away from that one?”

“It’s new, that’s all. We’ve just not seen it before. Does that mean that it comes from outer space?” Monroe chuckled. “It could’ve just been developed by some group of terrorists or something, maybe another government, and no one wants to take credit for making it.”

“That part may backfire if we’re not careful,” Edward cautioned. “If something is new or unidentifiable, people immediately suspect secret organizations or hidden conspiracies, usually involving political connections. But there isn’t a whole lot we can do about that. It’ll have to be enough for now.”

The president looked from advisor to advisor, all good people he had handpicked, and asked, “Are there any other comments?”

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There were none. Edward stood and slowly paced the room. He knew they looked to him for strength and determination. It wasn't about his giving orders, which they, like little robots, went out and followed to the letter. He knew these people did what they needed to do based on the trust and encouragement he bestowed on them.

"People, I hope you see what's happening," he said. "We announce our breakthrough in space travel and immediately someone or some group wants to create a strange liaison with aliens. I ask myself 'Why?' and the answer I get is 'People still don't trust people.' This was a cheap shot at trying to derail our success.

"I want you all to coordinate with Ms. McClendon to increase our media campaign of awareness of how our successes will help our great country. I especially want the statement we were blindsided by the reporters reiterated again and again. I won't have cheap journalism or people who think cooperation is another word for 'conspiracy' to think they have a victory here. Is that clear?"

Heads nodded in unison, indicating new vigor in their determination. This team had always possessed confidence in their commander-in-chief and shared his enthusiasm, but now they were ready to rally to his call, charge out and do what he needed done.

Sarah admired Edward for his speaking abilities. It was almost like the ability to influence, in a sense, the way he could sway a group or individual with his passion for speaking. This was one of the qualities that made him a great president. Nobody had to talk for him and, when he did speak, it was from his heart with sincerity and understanding.

"Okay, then," he told the group. "What're you all standing around for? Let's get to work. We have a press conference to prepare for."

Ray Schume sat in his office at the *Washington Tribune* composing the story of the government cover-up on his computer. He played with the wording to be speculative, but to leave the reader wondering. Always leave the reader wondering was his cardinal rule, even if he had to stretch the truth a bit. That was how he had made his name in the news world—his ability to make the most open-and-shut case seem

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controversial, thereby causing people to question what they thought to be true and indisputable.

Schume's work during the last presidential campaign two years earlier had been critical to the fall of the two-party political system that had dominated the country. There again, an anonymous informant had given him information leading to breaking news that garnered him a spot in the world press. From these sources, he had received information that proved there was a party collusion in full swing and totally without the knowledge of the public. That had opened the gates for President Edward Samuel to get elected.

But things had slowed down since then and Schume had hoped he would soon get lucky again. It was certainly nicer to be on top.

He was placing the final touches to his story on the explosion at the hospital which had destroyed his evidence that would have blown the whole story open. Now, he was speculating recklessly, which was bound to raise the eyebrows of even his staunchest reader. *Perfect for circulation*, he thought.

However, there was nothing substantial enough to prove his accusations against the government either. It was a word-against-word scenario and he knew he would not win.

Glancing up at the clock, he returned to his typing as the hour grew nearer for the press conference the White House had called. He surmised they would rebut all of his accusations which was exactly what he wanted. Trying to regain his train of thought, he lost it entirely as the telephone began to ring.

"Yes," he answered, his frustration evident.

"The president has called a press conference in one hour," the familiar voice said.

"I know and so does everyone else in the country," Schume said curtly. "If you have something, it needs to be better than what we've got so far. Otherwise, we have—"

"I'm the person who's going to make you famous, remember?" The voice dripped with sarcasm. "I sent you a note about the explosive being from 'off-world,' I believe the term was."

"A lot of people tell me they're going to make me famous," Schume sneered.



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“Let’s not forget the advance notification about the body’s location. So, shall we move on?”

“Okay, so maybe you can do what you say you can,” Schume stated nonchalantly. “So far, I have no credible evidence I can use. I need proof. Something substantial I can lay before the masses.”

“All in good time, my friend. In good time.” The sneer was evident even through the electronic distortion.

“Do you have anything for me or not?” Schume asked, his impatience obvious. “I have to get going to the press conference.”

“Be very careful, Mr. Schume. I do not take to rudeness well. It has always been a weakness of mine.”

Schume moved the telephone to his other ear, somewhat nervous about the dangerous undercurrent in the mysterious voice. He had heard the hidden anger and ruthlessness in that tone, and realized suddenly this association could be extremely dangerous to his health.

He had dealt with many mass murderers and killers, talked with them for hours and hours on the eve of their deaths. He could hear the insanity in their voices that convinced him if they ever were released, they would kill again. This conversation was beginning to feel like one of those.

“Please, go on. I’m listening,” he said.

“Very good. I am glad to see your...change of heart.” The caller chuckled. “Now, what I want you to do is to look in a slightly different direction.”

“Different direction?” Schume asked in confusion. “I don’t understand what you mean.”

“Sometimes the past can be very revealing about what’s happening in the present. In particular, I have an individual in mind.”

Schume felt a cold chill go down his spine. However, despite his apprehension, he felt once again strangely compelled to follow up on any lead he could get related to this story. He reached for his notebook and pen and prepared to write. He hoped he wasn’t making a mistake he would regret.

“Go ahead, I’m listening.”

The sound of his fax machine as a piece of paper slid into the output tray caused him to jump with nervousness, as did the sudden dial tone

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ALIEN DECEPTION

in his ear. He wiped his brow clear of the beads of sweat that had accumulated there and hung up the phone.



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C H A P T E R
S E V E N T E E N

“When we accept a position of authority, we immediately give up ourselves to the greater good of the organization. When we can no longer do that, it is time to step aside and let change take its course.”

Greg Carlson

Greg stood in the marshy area underneath the blazing glare of a moon so bright it blotted out the bluish tint he had observed on his earlier visit. *Back again*, he thought.

He squinted and stared at the moon, hoping to see in its face that almost-understood message he had seen before, but now there was nothing. Nor was there any sound; none at all. Only silence accompanied him on this trip to this place in his dreams—or was it his nightmares? He wasn't sure how to classify it any longer.

Suddenly, the ground shook and a wave of nausea wracked him, doubling him over. He thought he might vomit, but he didn't. Then, as suddenly as it had assaulted his senses, the feeling was gone and he felt all right. He looked up, and to his surprise found himself in a desert, standing atop a dune that was one of many spreading out as far as his eyes could see. His bare feet did not feel the texture of the sand. The sky above him blazed with stars that filled every inch of blackness with startling clarity, but there was not one moon in the sky.

This is not the same place.. But where am I now? What is happening to me?

A circular cluster of bright stars caught his attention as he struggled to identify the constellations. A moment later he called out, but there was no answer from the desert. There was no sound at all.

Again the ground shook and the nausea returned; however, the upsetting feeling was less than the previous occurrence. This time he did not double over and maintained his field of vision. The dunes blurred, as if they were water flowing across the vastness of the land in front of him. When his vision cleared, the sand had actually become water. He was now standing atop a yellow-orange ocean that stretched from

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horizon to horizon under a bright daytime sky with a crimson moon about midway to zenith.

He was standing on the water, yet his feet were not wet and he did not sink. A sense of brief amusement arose in him as the astonishing nature of his position settled into his mind. It was quickly replaced, however, with anxiety.

What is happening? It makes no sense.

Again the sense of movement, but this time there was no accompanying physical discomfort. The image blurred and he was back where he had started, staring up at the familiar bright moon that filled the sky. Hearing had returned. Someone or something was approaching as he stared at the moon in the sky he was confident held the secret to all that was happening. The sound was so clear that whoever or whatever it was had to be very close now. He knew he should look toward where it was coming from, but he could not take his eyes from the moon that hung ominously in the sky above him.

The sight began to fade, and he first imagined the strange transfer was happening again, transporting him somewhere else.

No...No...not yet! he screamed in his mind. *I have to see what's there!*

Before the words fell silent in his mind, he opened his eyes and found himself in his own familiar quarters, lying on his bed and staring up at the ceiling. Not the strange sky of another world where oceans or sand covered its surface, or where a moon in the sky foretold of a coming of some unknown destiny. It was just his ceiling in his quarters on the planet Earth. He got up, feeling extremely tired and weak but happy for the reassuring hardness of the cool floor against his feet.

"At least I'm in a real place again," he said. "Or is it? I'm beginning to wonder what's real anymore and what isn't. But if it's all real, where have I been?" he asked the vacant room.

"Computer," he said and then described what he could recall from the two new places he had seen. The mental images in his mind were amazingly clear and easy for him to recall as he fed the information to the computer. "Correlate data from descriptions for identification of the planets."



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As the computer worked, Greg wondered if he was not chasing mental ghosts or even if perhaps his own mental faculties were not collapsing around him. Could all of the alterations he had undergone in his mind have caused a failure in his reality conceptualizations? Was he going...insane?

The thought frightened him, but he dismissed it quickly, not sure whether it was out of fear of the idea or the realization it might be true. The computer's voice thankfully ended his confused reverie with its findings.

"The planet with the yellow-orange ocean has a ninety-eight percent probability of being the planet Deloria. The planet with the sand dunes has a ninety-seven percent probability of being the planet Arcturia."

"Interesting," Greg mused aloud. "The ambassadors in my dream, the ones that fell to pieces at my touch, were from Deloria, and the ambassadors from Arcturia managed to let us know Acuba is somehow involved in all this mess when their vessel was destroyed."

He walked to the window as he thought about the information. "Why are these images, these places being shown to me? What does it all mean?"

He sat down in frustration, his weariness showing as his shoulders sagged and his eyes burned. "What does it all mean?" he repeated, his voice frustrated.

::*Because you need to see,*:: a voice answered in his mind, jolting him as if an intense electrical charge had been run through him. Greg was suddenly wide-awake and very scared.

Ray Schume casually strolled into the White House press conference room. Most reporters were already seated and anxiously awaiting the arrival of Robert Monroe, the press secretary. Schume carried a notebook in his hand that he was reading very intently, between watching where he was going and looking at other pieces of paper. Eyes watched him and his fellow reporters talked about him with the image of the earlier press conference and his vicious attack on the president and Sarah McClendon still fresh in their minds.

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Outside of some kind of disaster or threat to national defense, press conferences were usually not short-notice events. The fact this one had been hastily called and the events of the past twenty-four to forty-eight hours had piqued the curiosity of the media. They were anxious to begin, and when Robert Monroe emerged from behind the curtains and urged them to take their seats so the conference could begin, they did so quickly and quietly. Edward and Sarah appeared and took their positions at the podium.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the president began, “there has been an unusual chain of events over the past several days. Although somewhat bizarre, these events are not related to anything in which this administration is involved.” A flurry of whispers and camera shutters followed the remark. “Let us look at them with open minds so we can dispel the rumors they’ve caused together.

“First, as you may recall, Ms. McClendon and I made the announcement of the early completion of the space-drive platform.” He kept his voice under perfect control, even and calm and fraught with honesty. “There are those who might want to detract from such a momentous event by making an announcement of such a proportion as to draw us away from this heroic achievement and dump us into a quagmire of innuendos.”

“But, Mr. President,” one man began, drawing a look of admonition from the press secretary and his fellow reporters.

“Please, let me finish,” the president said. “There’s no proof of this alleged alien cover-up beyond the word of one man, a member of the media. As you all are aware, the explosion at the facility where the body was being examined completely destroyed all evidence of the supposed alien. This event, I suspect, was an attempt to keep us from finding out, not about a cover-up here at the White House, but a ploy by a person or group of persons who were about to be caught committing fraud against the American people by their fabrication of this unbelievable and bizarre story.”

He paused and carefully phrased his final words. “Ladies and gentlemen, I submit to you that this was part of a plan to deceive the American people by those who would seek to draw attention away from our goal of achieving space flight. This is because of their antiquated and

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outdated beliefs that cooperation among countries means the downfall of the democratic system we all believe in so strongly.”

The air was still and the room was silent. Once again Edward’s talent for speechmaking had soothed the crowd, at least for the moment. It was time to move on to the harder part now—the questions. “Are there any questions?”

“Mr. President,” a fresh-faced reporter from one of the wire services jumped in first. “What about the type of explosive used in the bombing at the hospital? Has there been a determination as to what type it is?”

“The CIA and FBI are still trying to determine that, but it appears to be of a type we have not seen before. We suspect it’s a new design used specifically to discredit our efforts in the areas I mentioned earlier.”

“Is it a group or individual?”

“We have no substantiated information at this time.”

“Why haven’t we heard about this person or group before? How long have they been under investigation?”

“We had no prior warning of any attack. Neither has anyone stepped forward to claim responsibility.”

“Do the FBI and CIA have any leads? Where are they looking?”

“Nothing conclusive yet. We’re coordinating our efforts with local authorities and other agencies, including our foreign allies.”

“How soon do you expect to have information about this group? Have the military been alerted?”

“We hope to have more information soon. The military has been briefed, but no further action has been taken. Until we know what the threat is or who the threat is from, we will not create panic by speculation.”

“What kinds of security precautions are being taken?”

“Until we know whether there is an actual, credible threat of more incursions or if this was an isolated event, I would advise caution at this point. As soon as we have more information, we’ll make a decision about heightened security measures.”

“Mr. President, I have a question for Ms. McClendon, if I may?”

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“Of course, Mr. Schume,” the president said as he made way for her to step up to the podium. As she passed him he whispered, “Watch out for him. He’s too anxious.”

She smiled and nodded as she took his place and stared at Mr. Schume with what she hoped was well-hidden trepidation.

“Ms. McClendon,” Schume said. “How do you respond to the statement there’s an alien organization on this planet and that this administration is conspiring with them to enslave the people of Earth?”

“Normally I would not respond to such an absurd question, Mr. Schume, but in your case I’ll make an exception in the interests of dispelling the rumor *you* have conveniently started,” she replied.

“Thank you.”

“There is no alien organization I am aware of that’s planning to enslave the people of Earth.” She turned away from him. “Are there any more—”

“You don’t see any possibility there may be even the slightest amount of truth in the allegations I’ve made?”

“As I said, no, I do not. This bizarre story goes beyond the realms of logic.” She wondered where he was going with this repetitious line of questioning.

“Ms. McClendon, I would think a woman of your...background would give a little more leeway to a theory such as mine. I mean, stranger things have happened that contained as little or less chance of being true,” he said as he scanned his notes.

“What does my background have to do—”

“Your own past contains a pretty incredible incident that defied logic. Yet you won’t budge a bit on my theory?”

“I don’t follow what you mean, Mr. Schume.” She was worried now as she began to suspect where he was leading. The question was how far was he going and how much did he know? A moment later, she learned the answer to both questions.

“Why don’t you tell us all about your experience two years ago when you supposedly died, but then miraculously returned to life? Wouldn’t you call *that* a little strange, Ms. McClendon?”

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“It was a mistake...a misdiagnosis by the hospital,” Sarah said as she composed her words cautiously. “There was an error in the diagnosis, but fortunately, everything turned out all right. It is an event that caused me much personal and emotional stress. I don’t like to talk about, Mr. Schume.” She hoped he might be steered away.

“That was one heck of a mistake,” he commented, unaffected by Sarah’s statement. Rather, he appeared to relish the opportunity it presented like a wild animal that has gotten the scent of blood. “Yes, a rather bizarre incident; yet you still will not concede there is the possibility of truth in what I’m claiming.”

“That was something totally different. Much more explainable than what you’re claiming. Really, Mr. Schume, alien conspiracies and governmental cover-ups?” She said it with an air of confidence, hoping to throw the focus back on him by suggesting how ridiculous his claims were. “Now, if you don’t mind, let’s keep the questions to the subject you brought up originally and not my personal life.”

His savage expression faded as the crowd of reporters saw her confidence. Schume and Sarah stared at each other as she waited for the next attack. Schume made no indication of continuing. Instead, he remained quiet and returned his gaze to his notes. President Samuel stepped back up to the podium.

“Ladies and gentlemen, as you can see, we have supplied explanations to all of the relevant events that have occurred. I hope we’ve put to rest the questions of alleged alien plots and, for some of the American people, the fear that venturing out into space will destroy our identity as a country if it’s achieved through the cooperation of many nations together. Are there any other questions?”

There was a long moment of silence, followed by the sounds of TV equipment being dismantled and the departure of the print and radio reporters to file their stories.

“Thank y—”

“I have one more for Ms. McClendon,” Schume said loudly over the sounds of the other reporters. By the time he finished his statement, the room had become quiet again. The gaze of the other reporters spilt between Schume and Sarah.

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“Mr. Schume, I think we’ve entertained your notions enough today,” Edward said, careful that his voice now showed frustration at this line of questioning.

“I’ll be brief, Mr. President,” Schume said as he turned toward Sarah. “Ms. McClendon, do you mind?”

“Ask your question, Mr. Schume,” she said, trying to appear impatient despite her trepidation.

“I understand your wish to not go into that tragic past event you experienced, and I assure you I’m very sympathetic to that. You claim this alleged ‘misdiagnosis’ was easily explainable and I’ll unwillingly concede to you on this point. But what about the coincidence of two such events occurring at the same time?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Sarah said, but felt herself beginning to perspire again with fear. *Now what?*

“Were you aware, that while you were recovering from your near-death experience in New York, a man in New Orleans was going through the exact same thing at exactly the same time?”

“No, I wasn’t aware of that.” She immediately regretted her response. He wouldn’t be asking the question if he didn’t know she very well did know. *We have to get out of here.*

“Now, that’s interesting, Ms. McClendon. But I’m afraid I’d have to disagree with you. I did some investigating into this and learned that the hospital has conveniently lost the records concerning a certain young man. I found them in the newspaper’s archives. Both ‘misdiagnoses’ occurred within an hour of each other... Exactly the same type of cases. The young man’s name is Greg Carlson. Does it sound familiar?”

“One has nothing to do with the other, Mr. Schume.”

“So, you don’t deny it then?”

“I’m not denying anything, Mr. Schume. There are some things that are better left alone when it deals with the personal welfare of—”

“Ms. McClendon, would you like to reconsider my question about the government’s involvement in a conspiracy with aliens?”

“Thank you, ladies and gentlemen,” Edward interjected. “We have another appointment that requires us to leave at this time. Thanks for coming,” the president said as he grasped Sarah by the elbow to escort her off.

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“Oh, Ms. McClendon,” Schume shouted as they began to walk off.

The other reporters watched him carefully. His rude and boisterous behavior was inexcusable, but he had something and their curiosity made them stay.

“I’ll leave this picture of you and Greg Carlson. Maybe it’ll refresh your memory.” He placed the large brown manila envelope at the base of the stage, then stepped back. “But you know what? This whole issue gets stranger by the minute,” he continued, shaking his head from side to side as if in disbelief.

“It’s very odd. Since Greg Carlson’s release from the hospital, no one has seen him and no one has a clue where he is. It’s as if he has disappeared off the face of the earth. Yet, here he is in a picture with you. You don’t think that could be connected to my ‘conspiracy theories’ now, do you?”

Sarah felt her whole body go numb. Her legs were no longer willing to keep her moving, but Edward increased his pressure on her elbow and kept her moving.

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C H A P T E R
E I G H T E E N

“If I am to be remembered for something, it is that I saved the Council in a time that there was no logical way by which it could be done. Yet I...how do the humans say...cast the dice and let them fall where they may.”

Leumas

After Greg saw Leumas off to Acuba, he made his way back to his quarters. He passed other members in the corridors and quietly acknowledged their presence even though he was deep in thought. It troubled him to have to send Leumas to Acuba, but there was no one more capable and they needed answers fast. Down deep and hidden from the watchful eyes of the Council members, Greg was concerned for his friend's safety. Nothing good was going to come from Acuba. He was sure of it in his mind and soul, but no other choices presented themselves at the moment. He wished Sarah was here to talk and be with, but she was still busy with Edward in Washington.

Once inside his quarters, he felt his fatigue kick into overdrive. All these events plus the inability to get any undisturbed sleep were wearing him down mentally and physically. He felt as if he had no strength left. He was dead-tired and his inability to understand what was going on was worsening the fatigue. He barely made it to his bedroom before he collapsed and drifted off.

He didn't know if it was minutes or hours later when he felt a tugging at his awareness that brought him awake. He thought his eyes were open, so he was shocked with fear when his physical sight told him everything around him was black. Not just darkness, but an exclusion of any type of light.

Am I blind? All I see is darkness!

::You are inside your own mind,:: a voice answered calmly in his mind.
::There is no reason to be concerned. You are in no immediate danger and I mean you no harm. I am sending my thoughts to you telepathically as you are accustomed to.::



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Although alarmed by this intrusion into his mind, Greg felt a reassuring calm in this voice. He forced himself into a less agitated mood so he could converse with this mysterious visitor.

::Who...what are you? Are you human or alien? Where are you from?::
Greg asked.

::I am neither and I am from many places. I don't have what you call a home.::

::I sense you're a type of being I haven't encountered. You're very different, yet I feel some kind of trust or friendship with you.:: Greg wondered if it was wise to share those thoughts right now. *::Can you not tell me more about you or your people?::*

::Not now, maybe never.::, the voice answered without emotion. *::It is not relevant to the things that must be done.::*

::You say that I am in my own mind?:: Greg asked, trying to return to a point where his questions would be answered. It was obvious only certain areas of discussion were going to be allowed.

::That is correct. You perceive it as dark because you have only begun to learn how to...see.::

::To see what?::

::Everything.::

::I don't understand,:: Greg persisted. *::I thought I possessed a certain ability that allowed me to predict or see somewhat into the future.::*

::You see only one path when there are many to choose from. Imagine you come to a point where tangents originate at various angles. The number of tangents may be infinite. You only see one tangent in the field of many.::

::Who are you?:: Greg asked in awe.

::I am many things and I am nothing.::

::I don't understand?:: Greg grumbled. *::Do you have a name?::*

::Some have called me 'the one of many faces.' Others call me 'the shifting sands of time.' You may call me what you like.::

::Are you always so direct in your answers?:: Greg asked. *::Still, I must call you something, so how about... Vague?::*

::I answer the best I can so you may understand. If 'Vague' is what you have chosen, then that is what you may call me.::

::Why are you here?:: Greg said, feeling exasperated.

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::To teach you how to see,::, Vague repeated. ::To see is to experience the all-encompassing forces of the universe or to observe the insect that crawls along the floor with only survival its concern. But, for now, we will concentrate on one level. Behold...::

Greg was suddenly enveloped by images of the planets he had seen earlier in his dream. It was as if a bright floodlight had suddenly been turned on in his mind as the visions flooded his senses with such force he felt as if he had lunged into the image itself. He saw them all: the planet with the large moon, the one of sands and the other with oceans. Then, as suddenly as they had appeared, they were gone. The darkness slowly settled upon him again.

::You caused all that?::

::No, you did, with a little help from me. You have the power, but not the tools to harness it.::

::How is it done? Do I actually travel? Or is it just my consciousness?::

::We have done enough for now; we will talk again later,:: the voice said.

::Wait!:: Greg demanded. *::When will we talk again?::*

::Later.::

::Why are you here? Why do you want me to see?:: Greg pleaded, and for the first time, the voice hesitated.

::There are things you must do, if you don't get yourself killed before we finish. But you must do what you must do, even if it changes everything—or maybe nothing.::

Shocked and confused at the last statement and wanting to ask what his strange visitor meant, Greg felt himself being drawn back as his heightened senses dissolved and his mind slipped into sleep. He knew he would not dream anymore for a while; he needed rest and that was what he would receive. He understood that Vague would make sure of it because they had a long way to go and only a little time in which to do it.

Time was always an adversary that was hard to control.

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Leumas arrived at the spaceport on Acuba not having a clue where to start looking or even what he was looking for. However, if there had been any doubt in his mind on how corrupt this place was, it was removed within a few minutes of landing. An argument between two Rigusians, a race with snake-like characteristics, culminated in one being shot by the other right in the middle of a busy thoroughfare. The victor casually replaced its weapon under its skin and slithered away.

What was so awkward and bizarre was not the lack of law enforcement officials, because he knew there were none to really speak of, but the indifference. The other passers-by just continued casually along as if nothing had happened. *It would be easy to disappear on a planet like this and never be heard from again*, he thought.

He would have to be extremely cautious not to step on anyone's toes or attract any attention. This, he knew, would be extremely difficult in his case. Information came from questions, but questions asked on this planet weren't welcome from outsiders.

The Arcturian ambassadors had included this planet in their message, Greg had seen it in a dream, and now he was here. All they knew was this planet might be linked with the attack on the Arcturian ambassadors' ship and maybe something else. Leumas decided he would snoop around the spaceport before going too far away from his ship in case he needed to make a hasty departure. He almost told himself to look for anything odd, but that applied to the whole place, so he decided careful conversation was likely to be the only way to find anything out.

He stopped outside the first establishment he encountered after leaving the spaceport, less than a kilometer away. The sign designated it as the "Social Club." He snickered at that designation. These were grungy bars, mere holes-in-the-wall for one to acquire things through far from legal channels. He stepped through the entrance.

At first, he thought the place was closed because everything was dark and silent; but as his eyes adjusted to the low light he could make out objects, including the extensive glass light-sound shield he was standing in front of. This device kept all sounds from leaving. Whatever happened inside here was not for outside ears. Stepping around it, he entered the club for the second time.

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The large room he moved into was amazingly quiet. He suspected portable sound shields were located around the room to eliminate overheard conversations. To his left, he saw environmental rooms. These were adjustable chambers where one could set the atmospheric conditions to whatever the occupant chose. Price determined the size, anywhere from closet size to a small room. Most appeared in use and, in some cases, by more than one occupant.

Anything for a price, especially the pleasure of companionship.

To his right was the bar, where every seat was filled by some of the ugliest clientele he'd ever seen. On those that wore it, clothing was filthy and tattered. Many showed signs of previous battles: missing limbs and eyes, heavily-scarred flesh. As he took a step further into the bar, his nostrils were greeted with the smell of the stale air fermented with the stench of the unkempt customers. He fought back a gag and finished his observation from his previous location.

The bar crowd sat and drank under the watchful eyes of a Simosa Night Walker. A multi-armed and multi-eyed creature, it made the perfect bodyguard. In its seven hands rested various weapons from one with a low stun grade for more subtle troublemakers to the higher level weapons that killed for the more serious offenders.

Since his arrival, Leumas had noted not one of the customers had looked in his direction. Nor were any of them engaged in any conversation. Apparently, this place was not for socializing, despite its name. An unlikely place to find information, but he was here so he might as well try.

He caught sight of some secluded tables and made his way toward them. He selected a table in a corner where, if he were to engage in conversation, he would not be overheard.

"What can I get you?" the waitress asked, her yellow phosphorus eyes peering at him ominously while her hair changed color in streaks every few seconds.

"I'd like an Arcturian brandy," he said as he studied her. He could swear he saw lumps move in numerous erotic directions under what little clothing she wore.

"Oh, such a gentlemen's drink," she mocked him. "Are you sure you're in the right place?"

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“Most definitely,” he answered as he placed a twenty-five-credit chip into her hand. The waitress eyed the chip and looked at Leumas cautiously but with an amused smile.

“And what might we be in the market for, my...friend?” she asked as she rubbed up next to him. “My name’s Carlotta.” The moving lumps appeared to converge at this point and he felt them press against him in a rhythmic action that immediately caught his attention.

“Just information, Carlotta,” Leumas responded as he moved away from the electrifying contact, though not because it had caused him any physical discomfort.

“What kind of information?” She didn’t appear to be slighted in the least by his reaction. She was probably used to people and their moods and adjusted quickly to their needs. He was clearly not in the market for pleasure, but something else.

“Is anything unusual going on here lately?”

“Now, that’s a great question!” She laughed. “When is there *not* anything unusual going on around here?” She placed her hand under her chin and posed as if in contemplation. “Let’s see. Yesterday we had only two murders. That’s unusual. Normally we average four per day at least. I’ve seen it get as high as ten if we’re really crowded. Then there was the joker who refused to pay my friend for her—”

Leumas frowned and quickly interrupted her. “Okay, Carlotta, I get your point. How about a strange ship or someone bragging about destroying another vessel? More specifically, an Arcturian vessel?”

Her disposition changed slightly after he asked the specific question. She stared at him with those yellow eyes as if appraising if it was safe to say anything to him.

“I might remember something... But I can’t just seem to...”

Leumas placed another twenty-five-credit chip in her hand.

“Okay, now I remember. There was someone in here just last night talking about that. He was bragging how he did it right under the Council’s nose. Big guy in this long cloak with a hood.”

“Do you know who he is or where he’s staying?” Leumas asked with renewed interest.

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“I don’t ask any questions. But he did mention he was staying at the old Acuba Hotel, out the door, two sectors to the right. Can’t miss it.”

“Thanks, Carlotta,” Leumas said and at once was moving out the door without even giving the female another glance.

Carlotta watched as Leumas departed hastily. After a few moments, she regained control of herself and shook her head as if to clear the haze from it. Glancing down at her tray, she noticed the two twenty-five-credit chips. She tried to remember where it had come from, but could only recall someone asking something. She just couldn’t quite remember what it was. She pocketed the coins, then suddenly rubbed her temples. She winced at the pain of the headache beginning to throb unmercifully as she headed for the med dispenser.

As Carlotta gulped the tablets, the second part of the delayed mind push went into effect. She walked over to the Simosa Night Walker, right past the warning sign that stated any interference with this creature would result in death, and grabbed at one of the weapons in its many hands. The creature showed no mercy in its many eyes as it casually pointed the weapon and killed her. The smell of burnt hair and flesh mingled with the other obnoxious smells of the Social Club.



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C H A P T E R N I N E T E E N

"If it looks dangerous...it probably is."

Leumas

As Leumas walked in the direction the waitress had indicated, he sensed he was being followed. Wanting to dispel or confirm this feeling, he made casual stops along the way to peer into shop windows like an interested shopper. He glanced to his left and right and saw only other potential customers who also appeared nervous by their actions and their response to the surroundings.

He passed a weapons dealer whose special was a stunning device no larger than a man's index finger. He didn't need to pretend interest as he listened to the weapons dealer boast about the effectiveness and accuracy of the device. He tried again to see if he could spot his shadow. He saw nothing and moved along, receiving a disgruntled look from the disappointed arms dealer.

Maybe I am just imagining this, he said to himself trying to lay his fears aside, but he still kept one of his hands inside his coat pocket next to the stun weapon he had brought with him. It was sad; his trust and confidence now lay with an indiscriminate weapon in his pocket against something he could not see, but only sense.

He found it odd such a place as this existed in the era of galactic cooperation the Council had brought to the majority of worlds. The UCDW would not—or could not would be a better assessment—intervene in the affairs of a planet as developed as this one. Its organization and stability, as nonexistent as they were, was based on the illegal trade and commerce conducted here. There was virtually no government to run the planet, just an overseer of affairs who was paid by numerous criminal organizations. It was known as one of the last strongholds for those who preferred to reside outside the law of civility and peaceful coexistence.

But on a bright note, it was good to know the majority of criminals and black market trade was concentrated in one area instead of scattered among hundreds of planets. As far as the general clientele of the planet,

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many came here to make their fortunes in the illegal markets that always seem to exist. Some came, made their fortunes and left; others came and failed, either remaining because there was nowhere else to go or killed by their own ambitions that drove them here.

Leumas reached his destination. The Hotel Acuba was a large structure of thirty floors. Its architecture would be considered old by most planet standards, in that it was a square box and ascended upwards. It did not have any fanciful curves or similar displays of newer construction. It appeared well-kept given the shabby condition of the surrounding shops he had passed. They even had their own security force that was quite conspicuous at the front entrance, probably to relay the message they would not tolerate problems and that they could handle them quite efficiently and quietly.

Glancing back one last time, he entered the facility and approached the front desk. He knew the proprietor was probably not going to be willing to point him in any direction that would reflect negatively on the establishment's reputation for secrecy and animosity. But Leumas was ready to coax them along, if necessary, by applying influence if the situation warranted it. The Council expressly forbade it, but every once in a while rules needed to be broken for the better good. He doubted he would have any problem convincing the Council of that if the need should arise.

"Excuse me," he said to the multi-limbed Dracarian desk clerk. If it had possessed more hair, it would have resembled a spider. Leumas shuddered at his own thought.

"May I help you?" the alien inquired in a friendly demeanor as it took a long look at Leumas as if categorizing him for future use.

"Yes, I am looking for—"

"I don't know," the alien responded before Leumas could even finish the sentence.

"I haven't even told you what I am looking for."

"If you wanted a room, you would've asked for a room. Since you did not begin the question that way, I'll assume you're looking for something else. In that case, I will not know your answer. Good day, sir." The clerk turned his back.

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It appeared this desk clerk had much experience in this type of encounter; further discussion would probably bring the security force and result in a less-than-polite removal of Leumas from the premises.

Leumas was quite surprised how swiftly he had been reduced to a nonentity. Not that he had expected anything less in a place like this, but this left him with no other choice. He focused his thoughts and directed them at his unwilling friend.

::I'm looking for someone who may have been involved with an attack on a spacecraft, an Arcturian vessel. I have reason to believe they may be staying here. Have you heard anyone speaking of the event or have you heard any rumors as to whom it might be?::

Leumas repeated the questions over and over in his mind and pushed his thoughts onto the desk clerk. The desk clerk appeared to be mesmerized by the mind influence momentarily, but after a matter of seconds he moved toward the computer screen and punched a few keys. A small printout appeared from a slot in the top of the counter. Leumas took the paper which held a name and a room number.

::Thank you for your assistance. Now, why don't you have a seat and take a little rest, and don't forget to wish me to have a nice day,:: Leumas pushed to the clerk's mind.

"Have a nice day," the clerk said as he sat down in the chair and closed his eyes. Leumas chuckled and had to admit his almost-spider friend had redeemed his earlier rudeness.

Leumas headed for the lift in the lobby. He pressed the call button and stood back a few steps to look around as he waited. He couldn't shake the feeling someone was watching him. The adjoining lift, for employee use only, opened and security personnel carrying what appeared to be a body exited and headed down a corridor toward what Leumas assumed was the rear entrance. The indicator of the lift reflected the last stop point was the thirteenth floor. He glanced at the piece of paper the clerk had given him, then shook his head as he confirmed that he was going to pay a call on someone named Carnis on the thirteenth floor.

"It's just a coincidence," he murmured as the lift doors opened for him. "Just a coincidence."

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C H A P T E R
T W E N T Y

“How do you know when something has changed—you compare your memories to what you now see. But when you lose that perspective, you can no longer tell what is real and what is not.”

Greg Carlson

Greg awoke slowly as the morning sun was making its appearance in his room. He stretched, slid out from under the covers, and immediately noticed that he felt different this morning. He was rested and actually felt very refreshed. He walked into his kitchen and turned on the coffeepot. He headed to the shower and languished in the warm water for several minutes as his mind emptied the sleep from it.

He thought about Leumas and Acuba. Obviously, he would have been awakened if there had been any communication from him. It was early to be alarmed but, all the same, he was still concerned. He would check with the communications center later anyway. He also needed to follow up with Sarah about the press conference. He liked the thought of talking with Sarah again and it warmed him. Lastly, there were always the mysterious poems to look at and try to interpret. As he stepped from the shower and toweled himself off, he began to think about the evening’s...dream?

Was it really a dream or was it something else. Was it real? Had some life form that would teach him how to...see, which he did not understand... actually contacted him?

But that life form didn’t explain exactly what he was supposed to be seeing. It all was extremely vague? Vague? There was something in that term that struck a chord he should remember, but didn’t. *It was probably a dream*, he thought, trying to convince himself. But the planets he had seen or thought about had seemed so real he had felt as if he had actually been on them. There must be a common link somehow, somewhere in all of the craziness that was happening.

Greg poured the coffee and fixed it with cream and sugar. He decided to cherish the early morning solitude as he took the coffee and



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sat in his chair looking out over his favorite view of the mountains. During sunrise, they looked their most dramatic and the view was intoxicating.

I wonder if the view is as good from the other end?

His thoughts were abstract as his gaze remained fixated on the mountains. No sooner had he finished the thought than he felt his perspective of the view slowly begin to change. He was suddenly outside the building, looking back at his body sitting in the chair holding a cup of coffee in his right hand. He stared at himself rather dumbfounded. Then he began moving across the landscape at a height of several hundred feet, he guessed, and heading away from where the UCDW was housed and toward the mountaintops. He was momentarily nauseous, but it passed quickly as he marveled at what was happening. His body was not traveling, but his consciousness was.

He felt no temperature change and there was no feel of wind in his face from acceleration. *The feeling was just like it had been in the dream, he thought, as I moved from planet to planet!*

After a few startling seconds, Greg wished he would stop and he did. His thoughts were commanding his locomotion. It left him hovering between the UCDW and the mountain. He looked back over the distance he had traveled. From here, he could barely see the facility and wondered how fast he had traveled in those few seconds.

I should go back now.

As before, within a split second of the thought, he was heading back to his room. He saw his body sitting in the chair, and in a blink of an eye, he was back in the room, sitting in the chair and looking out of the window just as he had been less than a minute ago. The cup of coffee was still in his hand, steam rising from the top, and he felt its warmth.

Did I do that? I thought about it and it happened. No dream, no imagination. I was there on the mountaintop, well over a hundred miles away and in a matter of seconds!

::Yes, you did,:: the now-familiar voice answered. ::That was your first cognizant use of the abilities I've been helping you with. You did well for a first attempt, even though you were slow in your movement.::

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::Then, it is real? All of it? Our meeting last night, and this trip? It's real?:: Greg asked.

::Yes, it is. But you have much to do yet if you are to master the abilities you need.::

::Will we ever meet in a physical state? Do you have one?:: Greg somehow felt it important that they should.

::I can assume one if necessary. But for now, it is better for us to keep our contact on a mental level.::

::As you wish, Vague,:: Greg agreed, remembering at last that was what he had decided to name this alien.

::Precious time is wasting,:: his visitor said impatiently. *::Let us begin our next lesson. We shall go on a trip together today, but you must move yourself. I will not help you unless I really must. Do you understand?::*

::Yes, I believe so. Where are we going?::

::A short trip around this solar system.::

::The solar system,:: Greg said incredulously. *::I can't possibly--::*

::Yes, you can,:: Vague contradicted him sharply. *::You can do it and you must.::*

::What if I can't?::

::There will be no more talk of it. If you think failure, then you will die!::

“Where the hell does he get this stuff from?” Sarah said as she and Edward left the platform and headed backstage.

She was trying to control her voice and demeanor in front of the entourage of assistants and advisors milling about. Her legs still felt weak and she was grateful for his hold on her elbow as he guided her along to the Oval Office.

She was not a weak or timid person by any means, but this reporter had a way of asking the most pointed questions. And, she had to admit, she had been caught off-guard and had not expected this new tack he had taken, bringing Greg and their mysterious life/death experiences out in the open.

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Edward maintained a casual look of impassivity as he quickly told his advisors he would meet with them shortly to discuss this new assertion after he spoke with Sarah for a few moments. He did not appear overly concerned, even though inside she knew he was steaming.

“He’s really starting to piss me off,” he snapped once he and Sarah had some privacy. “Every time we think we have things under control, he brings up another obstacle for us to jump over. We had this licked until he started making it personal with you and Greg. I’m getting real tired of performing for his private amusement.”

“What’re we going to do now?” Sarah asked.

“He’s thrown down the gauntlet. We can ignore it or we can face it. Apparently, he has the information on Greg, so it’s only a matter of time before others start to look for him now that his name is out in the open. You can bet the phone lines are buzzing for any background information they can find on him, and what they have in their files about what happened to you both. They’ll have a circus with that one.”

“Just more sensationalism.” Sarah sighed. “But it’s what people love to hear, mystery around controversy. They’ll not rest now until we address these latest allegations.”

“Notice how his attack has changed? He’s moved from alien conspiracy to you. He’s centered his attention on you and Greg.”

“He couldn’t go any further on the alien issue because there was nothing hard he could use against us.”

“No, there’s more to it than that. I can feel it. There’s no pattern. It’s like randomness running amok.”

“Maybe he’s just confused or something.”

“Exactly,” Edward said. “It’s the way a confused or possibly unstable person might approach something. Moving from object to object with no explanation or rationale for doing so.”

“Is that a polite way to say a crazy person?” Sarah asked sarcastically.

“Yes, it could be, now that you mention it,” Edward replied.

“So you think he’s crazy? I have no doubts in my own mind about that!”

“I don’t know, but either he or whoever is feeding him this information might be. I’ve checked up on our friend, and in all honesty,

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he's just not smart enough to put it all together by himself or to be in the right spot every single time, as he has been lately." Edward breathed an exhausted sigh. "It has to be the contacts he's using, but we haven't been able to learn anything from his usual ones."

"That has us back to square one again. Trying to figure who's behind all this. They have us going crazy on several fronts all at once. This is a very effective war they're waging."

"Well, there isn't anything more we can do about this issue right now. I've got some other things to take care of. Why don't you brief Greg and see what he thinks. And find out if he has heard from Leumas yet. We'll get together later and see what we can come up with for a course of action."

"Good enough," Sarah said as she squeezed his arm affectionately and headed to her office. Once inside, she exhaled strongly and plopped heavily into her leather chair. She was exhausted and frustrated over the past couple of days' events, not to mention she was still very concerned about Greg. Her intercom sounded, interrupting her thoughts.

"Ms. McClendon, I have several calls from the press and—"

"Just tell them 'no comment,' Mrs. Jones, and hold all calls for the next hour," she said and clicked off before her secretary could edge in another word.

Her thoughts returned to Greg. He had become terribly stressed and worn from his lack of rest and the disturbing dreams he was experiencing. She so much wanted to take care of him and she yearned for the closeness their duties prohibited. He would push his mental and physical capabilities to the limit often, but she had never seen him fail to rebound and come back after a while, looking renewed and ready to move on to the next problem. She felt something was wrong, and that he still was not telling her everything about the dreams.

She still had her other concerns about the way his abilities had been mutating ever since their indoctrination. Had the changes stopped? Even Greg didn't know that answer. How far would they go and what would they do to him and his mind? More questions without answers. This was turning into one of those times when she wondered what life would have been like if they had never gotten involved with the UCDW. However, she quickly rejected that question, for no matter

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what happened, their involvement was crucial to the development of this world and all its inhabitants. She couldn't think of just her own and Greg's feelings; there was too much at stake.

She closed her eyes and sent her thoughts to him.

::Greg, can you hear me?::

Several seconds passed without a response; she felt a cold chill shiver down her spine.

::Greg, are you there? Can you--::

::Yes, Sarah, I can hear you I was in the middle of a... Well, a bit of work and I had to finish... It's kind of hard to explain.::

::Is something wrong, Greg? Where are you? Do you feel okay?:: She sensed something unusual in his voice.

::Nothing's wrong, Sarah. I'm fine. I was just...wandering in my mind.::

::Huh?::

::Nothing. Just woolgathering, I guess. What's going on at your end?::

::We need to talk.::

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C H A P T E R
T W E N T Y - O N E

“When all else fails...tell the truth.”

President Edward Samuel

“There’s only one way to put this Schume’s claims to rest,” Greg told Sarah and Edward when they returned to the UCDW headquarters. All three of them were seated at the conference table in Greg’s quarters. “I’ll come to Washington and address the reporters. Otherwise, he’ll continue to use a lack of a response as a way to keep his story going.”

“What about the other reporters?” Sarah asked.

“They’re riding his shirttail at the moment. He falls and they all follow,” Edward inserted.

“But this going head-to-head worries me,” she said.

“I see no other way to get him off our backs short of kidnapping this guy and hiding him away,” Greg joked, but then quickly resumed a serious expression. “However, I won’t do it with you two. I’ll do it alone, claiming to be responding to the accusation I’ve disappeared.”

“Why do it that way? I mean, not admitting to knowing us,” Sarah asked.

“In case something goes wrong. I won’t drag you two down with me. But I don’t think that’ll happen.”

“And what about the photo he has of you and me?”

“I’ll just say you and I met after the similar experience we had, and we agreed not to pursue any media exposure. After that, we went our separate ways. You became involved with the president’s campaign. I decided to pursue my dream of becoming a writer and moved to a secluded area in West Virginia. It’s plausible and based on historical data that most people who have a near-death experience turn to writing. And I do actually own a home here. We purchased it in case something like this ever happened.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Edward said. “And I concur with doing it away from the White House and all. Makes it appear you’re on your own and acting of your own volition. But how are you going to approach it?”



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“Simple,” Greg replied. “I’m going to give Mr. Schume everything he wants.”

Silence fell as Edward and Sarah considered what Greg had just said and tried to imagine what he meant.

“Look, don’t worry. I have it all worked out,” Greg said. “I’ll make the announcements for the press conference before I leave for DC, and then you two need to be ready for the next accusation this reporter guy will come up with.”

“I still think he’s just a puppet for someone else. We need to get to his source to put an end to all this,” Sarah stated, then shifted topics. “Any word from Leumas yet?”

“No, nothing yet.” His concern was obvious. “But it’s still too early to get worried. I’ll wait a while longer before we take any action.”

“Let us know if you hear anything,” Edward said. “I have some other business I need to take care of. I’ll talk to you later, Greg. Sarah, I’ll wait for you at the shuttle.”

“How are you feeling, Greg?” Sarah asked once they were alone. She moved close to him and brushed his hair away from his forehead “You sounded kind of strange before, especially the way you said that you were wandering around your mind. What was that all about?”

“Just a little joke. And I feel much better. I finally got a good night’s sleep.” He tried to make it sound like the truth, which in a way, it was.

He did feel better, but it was not from a good night’s sleep. It was from the anticipation he might get some insight into what was happening to him, and possibly what lay ahead in the future. He gently grasped her hands and held them in his.

“Well, I’m glad to hear it. You really had me worried. You’re not just telling me that to make me feel better, are you?”

“You’re such a worry-wart. All this fussing over just a few dreams. It’s just a reaction to all the stress we’ve been under lately. I’m fine.”

“I just miss you,” she said as she placed his hands around her waist. “We haven’t been together for more than a few hours for weeks.”

“I know. I miss you, too. Remember how it was before all of this? We spent days together—some really fun times.” Greg kissed her gently on the lips. As he pulled back, he gazed into her eyes. He allowed himself

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to be drawn into their depth as he felt his love for her fuel his desire for her. He kissed her again, this time deeply. After some time, they slowly drew apart.

“Now, there’s the Greg I remember,” she said as she hugged him tightly.

“You remember when we were stargazing a few months ago, the bottle of—”

“Greg! Stop! You’ll make me blush,” she said, feigning embarrassment. “You bet I do. It was one of the most wonderful nights of my life. I wish every day could be like that.”

“Me, too. I love you, Sarah,” Greg said as he hugged her again.

He closed his eyes and remembered that night. It was a rare thing for the two of them to be together and even more rare to be alone from the UCDW and its mission. This particular night, they had snuck off like two schoolchildren and stayed away for hours. They lay upon a hill as darkness settled around them. They made love under the starlight while they forgot, for a little while, that they carried the weight of not just one world on their shoulders, but hundreds.

“And I love you,” Sarah said.

“Next time you’re my way, I’ll buy you dinner. I’ll get hold of another bottle of your favorite wine. How’s that sound?”

“You can count on me being there. The only question is when?”

“I know it’s hard, but we’ll get through this and make the time somehow,” Greg said. He felt so guilty at times for the way they attempted to manage their relationship through all of their responsibilities. He kissed her again and then they held each other. The chiming of the clock caught Greg’s attention.

“Okay, then, I guess I need to make some travel arrangements and get on my way so we can settle this,” he said, reluctantly letting her go.

“Greg, please be careful. This guy always seems to carry a bag of tricks with him. We’ll be watching from our end in Washington.” Sarah kissed him. She touched his face and smiled. Greg saw the moisture glisten in her eyes. “One day we’ll be together, all the time,” she said, then turned and headed to the shuttle.

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Greg's earlier feeling of contentment slowly faded as he watched Sarah leave. He wondered if the day she mentioned would ever come.

::Greg,:: a voice called in his mind. He recognized it as Vague's.

::Yes.::

::Time to go.::

::Where?::

::Close your eyes and think about the planet Saturn.::

::But--::

::Just do it. It will be all right.::

Greg closed his eyes and began to replace the image of Sarah with that of the planet Saturn.

Leumas arrived on the thirteenth floor and hesitated as the doors to the lift opened. He tried to dismiss the earlier sight of the body being carried out from his mind, but the image replayed itself over and over. If one wanted to ensure someone had an accident or vanished, this was definitely the place it could very easily happen. He wished he had brought someone along with him. Strength in numbers was definitely a psychological benefit at a time like this.

Stepping out of the elevator, he checked to the left and right. There was no one else in the corridor. Trying to look as calm as he could, he cautiously proceeded to the room indicated by the Dracarian desk clerk. Leumas imagined his Dracarian friend was probably going to have a nasty headache for quite a while when he woke up—a downside to influencing. The effects varied, but most developed a headache that would throb unmercifully for quite a while. *Still, some things were necessary to get the job done*, he thought. *And besides, the alien had needed an attitude adjustment.*

The corridor was not well-lit. Only half the lights appeared to work, causing shadowed pockets where the corridor seem to be eaten up by the darkness. Although Leumas was unnerved by it, given the hotel's location and reputation for confidentiality, it was probably purposely lighted that way to ensure privacy of and for its guests. Still

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he stepped cautiously, his feet feeling the sponginess of the carpeting as he passed doors looking for the number he sought. Old paintings hung on the wall, a contrast to the more modern-day holographs that displayed continually changing views. The more he saw, the more he was beginning to feel he was in a museum rather than a hotel. The word “tomb” came to mind, but he wished it away quickly.

Leumas had performed much undercover work in his role as initial contact agent for the Council, but very rarely had it involved the searching out of an adversary or someone who could possibly harm him in return. Training was more about how to blend in and not be noticed—more defensive than the offensive tactics required at this moment.

Arriving at the room, he was unsure of what approach he should use. He checked his stun weapon and ensured the safety was off as he prepared to knock on the door. His stomach soured at all this cloak-and-dagger routine. He cleared his throat and then took deep breaths, trying to calm himself so he would be ready for whatever happened next. He knocked three times on the door. There was no answer. He knocked again in the same way and achieved the same results. He gripped the door handle, turned it and pushed. The door didn’t open.

Taking his stun weapon, he set it on its lowest setting for a pulsating burst. He pressed the muzzle of the weapon up to the lock mechanism and pressed the trigger. A crackle similar to the static electricity sounded and a small arc of light appeared. He retested the door mechanism and it turned freely now.

Slowly, and as quietly as he could, he pressed the door open all the way to get as clear a view as possible. There was no movement. He proceeded into the room, silently closing the door behind him. He began his search.

He was in a sitting room, surprised to find that the room’s furnishings, although old, still possessed a sense of elegance that he even found appealing. High-backed chairs surrounded a small table, and there was a sofa with intricate wood trim that curved along the its back reminding him of a serpent. There were some modern additions—communications portals and a vid screen—but, on the whole, the rooms maintained their old yet quaint appearance.

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He scanned every foot of space looking for any telltale sign of an occupant. He saw nothing. No suitcase, papers, magazines, clothing or any other indication of an occupant. He moved toward the entrance into the next room. He flattened himself against the wall to the side of the doorway and listened. Nothing. He moved through the doorway and crouched while he scanned the room. Nothing. No sign of anyone.

The bedroom was simply furnished: a large wooden dresser, a bed and two night tables with lamps upon them. The bed was made and showed no signs of any recent use. No suitcases or clothing. He moved to the closet and opened the partially ajar door with the toe of his shoe. Empty hangers swayed back and forth on the pole, disturbed by the air he had let in.

A door led to another room, probably the bathroom. He repeated the same tactic he'd used entering the bedroom. The bathroom yielded the same results. No toiletries except for the usual hotel items on the counter. Clean towels sat on the shelf.

Lowering the gun, Leumas wiped at the sweat now dripping down his face and exhaled strongly. Pocketing the weapon, he opened some of the dresser drawers. Like everything else in the rooms, they were empty and showed no signs of use.

Could the Dracarian on the front desk have lied? he wondered. No, he couldn't have lied under influence. The only way that could have happened was if he had been given false information to begin with.

That could only occur if he had been influenced to provide me false information!

Just as he realized how easily he had been maneuvered into the trap, he heard a hissing sound. Glancing up he saw vapor exuding from each air vent in the room. Covering his nose with his arm, he moved toward the door. He found it difficult to maintain his balance; the room swam before his eyes and his legs felt numb. He withdrew the weapon from his pocket only to drop it as his motor skills evaporated. He collapsed to the floor and thought he heard muffled laughter coming from very near where he lay.

The laughter scared him and sent chills through his body as they reverberated off the walls and his mind. He thought that laughter was familiar. He struggled with the dream-state trying to drag him under so

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ALIEN DECEPTION

he could try and place where he had heard it before. Just before losing consciousness he thought he had it.

But that can't be true. He's dead!

With newfound horror, he succumbed to a dreaded sleep and the nightmare he knew it would contain.



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C H A P T E R T W E N T Y - T W O

"I opened my eyes but refused to see."

Leumas

Leumas slowly opened his eyes. He was still in the hotel room to which he had been so easily maneuvered and gassed to unconsciousness. He was lying on the bed instead of the floor. At least his captors cared somewhat for his comfort. He attempted to lift his head, found it ached immeasurably and took back the thought that anyone cared about his comfort. *Must have been Sironian immobilizing gas; it always leaves a nasty headache afterwards*, he thought.

Suddenly getting the skin-crawling feeling he was being watched, he rolled to his side and sat up on the edge of the bed. A very large humanoid shape sat in a chair about twelve feet from the bed; the backlight from the window behind darkened all but the outline of whoever it was. Leumas knew he was outmatched physically. Reaching for his stun weapon, Leumas was not totally surprised to discover he no longer possessed it. He remembered he had dropped it. He remembered laughter, and he recalled thinking he knew that laugh.

"And you might be?" Leumas tried to sound calm as he raised his arm to block some of the bright light in hope of seeing more of his captor.

"I am Carnis. But it is you I believe owes me an explanation, sir, seeing as how you are in my room," the shadowy figure said in a bland, almost robotic tone.

Leumas recognized the manner of speech. Carnis was speaking through a device that would make all voices sound the same, thereby eluding detection. Did he know this person? Is that why he was hiding his voice? His attempts to see any detail of his captor were useless and he lowered his arm. He didn't recognize the name Carnis, but he also doubted it was a real name in any case.

"I'm here investigating an incident you may've been involved with. You were bragging at a bar down the street about destroying an Arcturian ambassadorial vessel. As far as my name goes, I'd rather not reveal that at this point, if it's all the same to you."

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“Dispense with your crap! I know who you are, Leumas! I knew you were coming before you even left Earth, and you fell for all the bait I planted. You’re getting sloppy in your old age.”

How did he know I was coming? Our suspicions of a spy within the UCDW must be correct.

“And I have every right in the world to kill you for being in this room,” Carnis continued. “No one would ask any questions. The computer entry system would have all the proof necessary if anyone did care. And before you get any smart ideas of trying to escape, my associates are monitoring the room. “

“Did you have something to do with destroying that vessel?” Leumas doubted Carnis had any intention of letting him leave alive. But perhaps that confidence would make him talk. His last chance would be to attempt escape using his influence power.

“Of course, I did. Well, not directly. I did pay to have it done. Does that still count?” His voice quivered as if he were fighting back a hilarious outburst.

“Why?” Leumas asked. “You must’ve known the ship was ambassadorial and would not have any substantial weaponry. Why did you murder those helpless people?”

“Because they were there,” Carnis said with an air of indifference. “The snooping Arcturian fools had gotten hold of some information I didn’t want them to have. They could have interfered with my plans, and nobody will do that. Nobody will live one second after just *thinking* about interfering with my plans. Do you hear me?”

Even through the voice-disguising mechanism, Leumas heard the insane rage in the voice of his mysterious captor.

“So what are your plans? Some scheme to get rich? Terrorizing a sector of the galaxy? What?”

“My plans? You want to know them? Well, I have many; I have plans within plans. Where shall I begin?” His voice rose in volume. “I’m going to have a reunion with some old friends of mine, maybe travel a little bit. You know, visit some strange new worlds, have a little fun, maybe destroy some planets and, best of all, kill. I’m going to kill one hell of a lot of people if they don’t see things my way, and



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even if they do, I might kill them anyway.” He finished with a fervor that scared Leumas.

After the maniacal tirade, seconds passed that stretched into minutes as Carnis said nothing more and appeared to have calmed. Leumas wondered if perhaps he had even gone to sleep or suffered some type of seizure from his outburst.

Leumas wanted to leave and he wanted to take this madman with him. But someone with this much power wouldn’t work alone, so it might prove a lot harder getting out of this place than it had been getting in. Leumas couldn’t tell if Carnis had any weapons, although the massiveness of Carnis’ body was more than enough of a defense. Either way, if his plan failed, he’d probably wind up dead. He prepared to put his last-resort plan into action as he began to arrange the thoughts in his mind and to push them into the mind of Carnis.

::I am going to leave now and you will come along with me. I am going to leave now and you will come along with me.::

“No, you’re not.” Carnis’s apparent stupor was over and he was angry. “You’re not going anywhere and neither am I!” He shouted with such animal rage that the voice-disguising device stopped working. The sudden change in voice smashed into Leumas with such force his ears throbbed with pain while an icy chill clamped his stomach.

Shocked at the outright defiance of this alien, Leumas began to push harder. He felt resistance and pushed as hard as he could, a level that would have killed the average person by causing a massive cerebral hemorrhage.

::I am going to leave now and you will come along with me. I am going to leave now and you will come along with me.::

“Stop it,” Carnis screamed and threw the energy back into Leumas’ mind.

The overload slammed into Leumas’ brain; he blacked out and fell back onto the bed.

Carnis sat in his chair smiling.

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Leumas groaned as he woke, grabbing his head to ease the throbbing that pounded in his temples. As he opened his eyes, his vision was slightly blurred from the assault his mind had taken. All his senses must have been overloaded by the power behind the tremendous influence that had poured into his brain; a cerebral rape.

What was that? More importantly, who was it? He sat up and tried to focus his eyes in the darkness. Night had come to Aruba. *How am I going to get out of here? Not even my ability to influence will... Wait—that voice. I know that voice. It sounded like—*

The sound of a glass being placed abruptly on the table caused him to jump. He groped for the lamp on the bedside table. Clicking it on, he winced from the light. Shading his eyes, he looked toward the sound. As his vision cleared, he saw that his captor was still with him, sitting in the exact same spot he had been before. In that moment of recognition, Leumas found it impossible to breathe.

I was right about the voice. My God.

“Have a nice nap?” his captor asked as he picked up the glass and filled it from a bottle of yellow liquid. He downed the contents in a large gulp. Rivulets of the liquid dripped from the corners of his mouth and down his chin. He made no move to wipe it away.

Leumas gasped as he recognized the face of the man who had so easily overpowered him. He took in the impressive figure whose physical appearance was usually enough by itself to ward off any thought of confrontation. That large frame, close to seven feet tall and massively muscular, seemed to dwarf even the large chair he sat in. His face, with its complexion of a stone-like texture, was twisted into an evil smile.

I'm not getting out of here alive.

“My God,” Leumas exclaimed, his voice weak and disbelieving. “It can't be!” *The miserable son of a bitch was dead. I saw it happen!*

“Don't trust your own eyes, old friend?” Copolla grinned broadly at him, his large teeth yellow and stained.

‘Old friend’ was something this creature had called Leumas on several occasions, most notably when he had banished Leumas from the Council on Zire. The phrase burned in Leumas's mind, rekindling levels of hatred and anger he thought he would never feel again.

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“Copolla,” Leumas said, though it was hard for him to speak that name, let alone to even imagine he was still alive. “You’re dead. You have to be dead! This is some kind of sick trick. You can’t be here! Who are you? What did you do? Surgery? DNA alteration?”

“It’s me, Leumas. I am not dead as you hoped.”

“You were at the Council when you...blew it all up. I was talking to you.”

“That is partially correct. You were talking to me, but I was not at Council headquarters. I was elsewhere and just had my calls relayed.” He said it smugly, as if it should have been obvious. “You dealt me a serious setback and I needed time to regroup. If you were convinced I had died, you would feel that all was resolved and I would be able to do what I needed to do quietly.”

“You killed all those people on Zire. For what?” Leumas demanded. “Millions of innocents died from that sick act. The only redeeming thing to come out of it was your death.”

“Sometimes sacrifices have to be made.” Copolla yawned as if he felt no concern for Leumas’ obvious hatred. “I needed time to reorganize and regroup,” he went on. “You and your merry band caused me quite a bit of trouble. Upset my plans for the future. Not to mention that traitorous fool, Journo. Tell me, Leumas, did he die a painful death? I surely hope so.”

“He died a meaningful death by giving me the information I needed to remove you from the Council,” Leumas snapped.

Journo had sacrificed his life by delivering to Earth the computer core that held the information needed to force Copolla from leadership of the Council. He might have been just another henchman of Copolla’s for years, but his final act of redemption had saved his soul.

“Oh, well.” Copolla sighed, as if he were becoming bored with the conversation.

“When did you get the power to influence?” Leumas asked guardedly. He knew he was no match for his old enemy and hoped he would experience no further examples of his power.

“Always had it. I just didn’t let anyone know.”

“But it’s different, isn’t it?” Leumas pursued, wanting to know the source of such tremendous power.

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“You could say that. It carries a fairly large bite, doesn’t it?” Copolla smiled like a child proud of his accomplishment. “I had the ability artificially implanted with specific instructions of how I wanted it to work. Do you like it?”

“It fits your personality. Evil and twisted,” Leumas growled.

Leumas knew those who attempted the implanted technique usually wound up quite insane. At that thought, the puzzle pieces began to fit together.

“So, you were the one who killed the agents on Beta-747 and tried to kill me with the delayed mind push.”

“Those three were pathetic,” he screamed abruptly, unsettling Leumas even further. “They needed to be killed. Besides, it helped start the ball rolling. As for you, I just wanted to give you something to think about. My power will come in handy when I resume my position on the Council.”

“You can’t be serious. If the UCDW learns of your existence, they’ll bring you to trial for what you’ve done.” *You know he’s serious and you know he will destroy the Council again if he has to.*

“Oh, yes, I’m quite serious. The Council is just a group of sniveling fools! I have plans, great plans, for the future of this galaxy. I am a dreamer. Haven’t you realized that, Leumas?” He raised his arms above his head and gazed upward. “I am a visionary who knows no boundary of space or time. I am the weaver of plans within plans. I am destined for a level of greatness never seen before.”

Leumas watched this display quietly. With each word and sentence, he became more sure that his old enemy was, indeed, quite insane. And more dangerous than ever before. If he still maintained his contacts and his following, the trouble could be worse than any of them imagined.

Copolla slowly lowered his arms and his eyes settled on Leumas. He rose from his chair and moved to within inches of where Leumas sat on the bed. He raised his large hand with the index finger extended as if it were some type of weapon. He pressed it against Leumas’ chest, pushing firmly until Leumas was backed up against the bed’s headboard. Copolla continued to push and now twisted his finger, jabbing his sharp fingernail into Leumas’ flesh. Leumas could smell his fetid breath as he spoke and felt a warm trickle of blood down his chest.

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“I can assure you, those not part of my vision are in the way. And if they are in the way, they shall be removed. Removed forever.”

Leumas stared into the eyes of a madman, eyes wild and uncaring. Copolla’s last statement about removing those in his way was more than just an idle threat; in fact, he felt fairly sure Copolla hoped for a conflict and the bloodier the better.

Copolla removed his finger from Leumas’ chest and sat back down again. Leumas took a breath now the stench of Copolla’s madness was away from his nostrils. His chest hurt where Copolla had pressed his finger into it and his heart was beating wildly in his chest. His shirt was sticking to his chest where he had bled.

What was he to do? Obviously, Copolla outgunned him in the mental abilities department by an enormous amount, and physically, he could do nothing without some kind of weapon which he no longer possessed. The best he could do was learn as much as possible in the event the opportunity to escape did arise. He only hoped that opportunity came very soon. There was no telling when Copolla might go off the deep end and kill him for the pure delight of it.

“What’s to become of me now?” he asked, his voice shaky.

“For now, you may relax in the comfort of this suite. Enjoy the peace and solitude, order anything you wish from the bar,” Copolla said with a sweeping motion of his arm as if he was the proprietor of a resort.

“And later?”

“We will have to see about that.” Copolla scrutinized the fingernail he had pushed into Leumas’ chest. There was a red spot on it—blood. He ignored it, then continued. “Once your friends get here, when they try to rescue you—”

“Greg and Sarah,” Leumas said weakly.

“Yes, Greg and Sarah. I haven’t heard those names in a while. I have grown accustomed to using the term ‘them.’ It sounds so unemotional and detached, does it not?” He went on without waiting for an answer. “The female doesn’t really matter; it’s the male hybrid I want.”

“Why?” Leumas asked. “To kill him and flaunt his body to all the other worlds to prove how senseless your violence is? That is how you maintain your leadership, isn’t it? By fear of reprisal?”

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“Oh, no, certainly not. I don’t want to kill him,” Copolla protested with a sour emotion in his voice somewhere between sarcasm and half-hearted concern. “Obviously, you have not deciphered the true meaning of my little notes, have you?”

“Riddles to hide behind, that’s all they are. You tried to kill him before, when I brought him to Zire. What’s changed your mind?”

“That was then and this is now. Let’s just say everything in the past was a proving ground, of sorts. Certain things, or certain influences, had to be applied to the young human to make him...become. The damn fool Journo fouled everything all up. Progress had gone so smoothly up to that point.” He shook his head, making a tsk-tsk-tsk sound.

Leumas detected a strange moment of rationality and logic amid the man’s ravings. He made a mental note to come back to what Copolla had said about “becoming.” “You can’t tell me all of that, all that happened during the indoctrination, was a plan you had devised. There were too many variables.”

“Oh, but I did,” Copolla said with an air of arrogance. “As I said, it all worked with the one exception. If Journo had never gotten that computer core to you, things would be quite different today. Yes, quite different. It has been a small setback, but nothing I cannot overcome.”

Leumas wanted a way out of this conversation. The more they talked about it, the more plausible it became and the more scared he became as well. Could Copolla have lured the power out of Greg and Sarah by arranging for the indoctrination, knowing what the outcome would be? But why? All he did was come up with more questions and he didn’t like it.

“No, I wouldn’t kill him,” Copolla repeated to no one in particular. “That would be like killing my own child. I feel as if I have raised him, brought him along in life and pointed him in the right direction to follow.” He turned his gaze toward Leumas, his eyes focused. “You know, I knew the boy’s father quite well. He was a good friend...right down to the end.”

“He ran to Earth to escape you,” Leumas said mockingly, but he was surprised at this assertion. “He saw an opportunity to escape your tight leash and start a new life for himself.”

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“That was what I let him believe,” Copolla stated. “I applied gentle influence so he and his compatriot would never tell the real truth because he would never know the real truth, the real reason, why he and the other were sent to Earth. But that is all in the past. They accomplished their mission perfectly—two children, one a control and the other the true test.”

“I don’t understand,” Leumas said. “Tests and controls? You make it sound like some kind of damned experiment or something.”

“That’s okay. Greg can explain the whole thing to you. He knows it all,” Copolla said as if it was a simple statement of fact.

“Become what?” Leumas asked, returning to that curious statement earlier in their conversation. “You said to ‘make him become.’ What will Greg become?”

Copolla smiled and sat back in his chair. His eyes appeared glazed, as if he were deep in some narcotic trance. He didn’t answer, only mumbled the words over and over: “to become...to become...to become...”

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C H A P T E R
T W E N T Y - T H R E E

“With beauty there can also be an ugly truth.”

Greg Carlson



Greg opened his eyes. *The rings are so beautiful*, he thought with awe as he gazed upon the magnificent rings that spun around the planet. Glittering in the sunlight, the particles that comprised the rings looked like diamonds and jewels.

::Saturn has always been one of my favorites; its appearance so tranquil. Now I can come any time I want, to think or just to see it for the sheer beauty of it.::

::Concentrate on what you are doing,:: Vague commanded sternly. *::A wrong thought could cause your immediate death. You cannot allow yourself to be distracted. You do not completely comprehend what is happening. Do you understand?::*

::Yes...yes, I do,:: Greg replied. *Why is he so adamant about my concentration? Unless the danger factor is extremely high and without resolution, or is it something else?*

::Now, pick another planet to visit,:: Vague ordered, then added, *:: Concentrate on it.::*

All right, I want to go to Mars now.

Greg visualized the red planet, the white polar caps on its ends, and the cratered surface with its patterns of canals that had always intrigued the best scientists. The image of Saturn blurred momentarily, then elongated as if being sucked through a tunnel by tremendous force. At the other end of the tunnel a circular red dot slowly appeared. At first, it was small and unfocused. As it increased in size, the image became sharper. He felt no sense of time passing as this happened. The transformation might have taken a second or hours. He couldn't tell. The process both amazed and amused Greg as he looked down upon Mars from space.

I want to go closer.

As he thought the words, he proceeded toward the planet at a frightening speed.

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Slower!

His speed decreased to a more comfortable level as he approached the surface.

Hold it right here.

He'd reached a level he wanted: approximately a hundred feet above the surface. He took in the view of its surface; several craters marked the red landscape. His gaze stopped at an oddly-shaped and very deep crater.

I want to go there.

He moved toward the crater, its depth and vastness increasing with every foot as he approached it. He left the bright sunlight behind as he entered the darkness of the vast crevice, going deeper and deeper. He studied the walls, the jagged rocks and wondered about the massiveness of the meteor that caused the formation of such a crater.

He returned to the surface and looked out over a plain of red soil. He thought this would be a good site for a colony. He envisioned structures built, solar greenhouses with earth plants growing inside, water plants and pipelines to move melted water from the icecaps to support the life that would come here.

The northern icecap. I want to go there.

Again he moved, and within seconds, found himself over the massive ice fields over the northern pole. They stretched as far as he could see in all directions. He wanted to see more.

::Enough for now,:: Vague called.

::But--::

::You are not used to this traveling yet. You will tire quickly and it will become dangerous.::

Greg returned to his earlier position above the planet's surface. *:: Vague, how does it all work?::*

::The mind travels and the body remains behind,:: his instructor explained. ::There is a vital link maintained with your physical body so you may return and your mind can travel without harm. However, you must go only to one place at a time. You must remember that. It is very important. Otherwise, you could be separated from your body and not find your way back, ever.::

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::I understand. But is it possible a mind could go to more than one place at a time? How does it work?::

::Certain minds possess the proper orientation to travel this way. They have... It is hard to explain, but it is a conduit that is open only to them::
Vague ignored the other half of the question and fell silent.

::That doesn't help very much,:: Greg pointed out.

::The majority of the minds in the universe are very similar in their neurological abilities. Few are different in shape, construction or genetic makeup, but the ability to rationalize what is happening is a necessity for this activity. Most would go mad traveling in this manner::

::I won't say I understand what you said, but maybe that's better for now anyway,:: Greg thought, then remembered what Vague had said earlier.

::About what you said about teaching me to see, is this what you--::

::No more questions for now. You must rest. I will come for you when it is time to continue::

Greg envisioned his quarters in his mind, and when he opened his eyes he was there and face-to-face with Reveb.

Reveb's hands rested on Greg's shoulders as if he had been shaking the body. He jumped back as Greg opened his eyes.

"Yes, Reveb, can I help you?" Greg hoped the unruffled tone of his voice would calm the fearful expression on Reveb's face.

"Oh, Leader, you gave me such a scare! I called and shook you, but you wouldn't answer me," he said, out-of-breath from the shock.

"It's okay, Reveb. It's a new kind of...meditation I'm trying. It helps to relax me," Greg tried to sound convincing. "I'm sorry if I scared you."

"Yes, Leader," Reveb replied in his customary neutral manner, but Greg thought he saw something he had not ever seen before in those heretofore emotionless eyes. For a few seconds, the two men just stared at each other without saying anything.

"Is there a reason why you're here, Reveb?" Greg asked, trying to return to a sense of normality.

"I have brought you your plane tickets for the flight to Washington," Reveb said, placing them on the table. "I have also made all the arrangements for the press conference as you requested. I have rented the space and notified the agencies you specified. It was as you thought. They were extremely anxious to come to the meeting."

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“Great job. Has there been any word from Leumas?”

“No.”

“Thank you, Reveb.”

Reveb nodded, turned and made his way toward the door.

Greg moved toward the window; it was a beautiful day outside. He felt...good. Refreshed from his traveling. His gaze shifted to the dark mountains; he compared them to the ones he had seen on Mars and thought the red ones were more beautiful than these. As he gazed outward, he caught the reflection in the glass of Reveb standing at the door to his quarters. Greg thought he had left already.

Greg’s attention was drawn to the look of revulsion on Reveb’s face. It was such a strange and twisted grimace on a face that had never before shown any sign of emotion.

As he started to turn around to confront Reveb, he was greeted with the closing of the door and the sound of footsteps moving quickly down the corridor.

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C H A P T E R
T W E N T Y - F O U R

“When you have all your shit in one sock, it might stink some, but it will always lead to greater things.”

Reporter Ray Schume



As the reporters began to arrive for Greg’s press conference, those affiliated with the broadcast media set up their cameras and radio links to have full coverage of the event. One of the cameras was already on, sending images back to the White House where Sarah sat watching.

Sarah was nervous. Greg had never been in front of the press before. Sure, he was always in front of the Council and she was confident he would be all right, but the image of Schume and his surprising questions still daunted her. She checked her watch; there were still a few minutes before the official start time. She closed her eyes and focused her thoughts on Greg.

::Greg::

::Hi, Sarah, can you hear me?::

::Got ya, Greg. How’s it going? All ready for your big press conference?::

::Sure. Are you watching?::

::Have been. We have our coverage of the event. You know, special crew from the White House.::

::I should’ve guessed. Well, I’ve got to get started. I have a plan, so if it seems kind of weird, you know, gotta be me and all that.::

::Should I be worried?::

::No, of course not.::

::Remember, all Schume wants to do is prove you and I know each other. There isn’t any way he can prove anything else. Don’t let him sidetrack you. He’s very good at that.::

::I know.::

::Keep the link open. I’ll coach you through.::

::Okay.::

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Sarah watched the rest of the reporters take their seats as Greg stepped up to the podium. For several seconds he just stared at the audience, letting the silence settle in.

::Don't overdo it, Greg. Get going. Clear your throat like you're nervous.::

Greg cleared his throat several times. "Good afternoon, my name is Greg Carlson and I am here to answer questions the media has raised. But first, I'd like to state a few things for the record, to clear up any impression of impropriety."

::Do you see Schume?:: she sent.

::Yes.::

::Give him the evil eye or something. Make sure everyone knows he's the reason you're there.::

::Got him.:: Greg's gaze settled on Schume.

::Good. Now get started. Slowly...::

"It is my understanding Ms. Sarah McClendon was placed in an awkward situation in regards to having met me before. For the record, I want to state we have met; it was after our similar experiences of being misdiagnosed in hospitals in different parts of the country. Our mysterious 'deaths' garnered the media's attention. The nature of the events and the exact same timing caused us to be a curiosity for a while a few years back," Greg said.

"I'm a private person by nature; this publicity was not to my liking. I asked Ms. McClendon to deny any knowledge of my existence in order for me to return to my life of seclusion. This is why she denied ever having met me. It was simply honoring my request for privacy."

The room buzzed with conversation. Reporters talked to each other, nodded and shook their heads; some in confusion, others in anger they had wasted their time attending this event.

"Are there any questions?" Greg asked.

Several of the reporters raised their hands and shouted their questions.

::Wait for Schume...:: Sarah sent.

"Mr. Carlson," Schume began as he slowly rose from his seat. "May I call you Greg?" He smiled, not looking at all nervous or upset about having his allegations disproved.

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“Sure,” Greg said.

“First, I’d like to offer the media’s thanks for coming forward so quickly in response to the allegations raised just the other day.”

“As I said, I just want to set the record straight.”

“Well, we certainly appreciate that, and that’s what I am trying to do also, Greg. Do you understand that?”

“Of course I do. That, and make a living.” Greg smiled.

::Nice touch.::

Some of the reporters chuckled. Schume showed no reaction.

“Well, yes, that also is correct. Now, would you tell us where you live?” Schume asked, looking at a sheet of paper he was holding. Obviously, he had prepared his specific questions, probably with help from his source.

“In West Virginia,” Greg answered.

“But the incident that drew you and Ms. McClendon together was in New Orleans, correct?”

“No. My incident was in New Orleans. Hers was in New York, I believe. We met later on in New York.”

“Ah, yes, thank you for correcting me. So, after the incident you moved?”

“That’s correct. After the incident, I moved to West Virginia.”

“Why West Virginia?”

“I’ve always thought about writing as a profession. The incident that occurred made me feel the time was right for a career change. Where I’m at, it’s scenic and quiet, no distractions; the perfect environment for me to work.”

Sarah knew Schume was setting him up for the big question any minute now. She wished he’d just ask it already and be done with it.

::Get ready. He’s winding up!::

“And where do you live in West Virginia?” Schume asked.

“I’d rather not say,” Greg answered. “For privacy reasons.”

“Is that right?” Schume demanded. “Privacy, you say. Or perhaps, is it because you are hiding something there?”

::Here it comes.::

Schume’s voice picked up in tempo and became strident. “Isn’t it true you live in a secret compound and have the prominent role in a

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certain alien organization with influence over the planet that involves the highest level of the American government?”

::Damn him. Greg, he knows everything. Call for a break or something. You have to get out of there. Don't answer any more questions! Greg? Greg, answer me!::

Silence greeted her.

::Greg, can you hear me?:: Sarah screamed in her thoughts. *::You have to get out of--::*

::It's fine, Sarah. I know what I'm doing, but I have to focus to make it look perfect.::

“Are you going to answer the question, Mr. Carlson?” Schume asked, his voice sharp and direct.

Greg just stared straight ahead, his face emotionless as his eyes darted back and forth wildly.

The question hung in the silence that encompassed the room. The crowd was becoming anxious. Sarah sat on the edge of her chair gripping her television and squeezing it.

“I—” Greg began.

“Isn't it also true,” Schume continued, cutting him off, “that you have been dealing with these aliens for over two years now, corrupting the American government and political system?” Before any answer could be given, Schume fired off another scathing accusation. “Isn't it also true the president and Ms. McClendon have been directly involved in this plot since its inception?”

Greg's brow furrowed and his eyes became glassy; he began to tremble like a man on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

Sarah tried to remain calm, but Greg's appearance made her flesh crawl. All eyes in the audience were on him as his lips began to move, uttering sounds as he tried to form words.

“I—I—I...promised...I...wouldn't...tell,” he began, his voice low and wavering. “Yes...yes, it's all true,” he went on, almost blurting it out as if he wanted to shed it from his thoughts like some grotesque abomination that inhabited his body. “I have been working with aliens to overthrow everyone, not just the American people, but the entire world.”

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::What? Where are you going, Greg?:: Sarah shouted in her thoughts to Greg.

Schume smiled broadly at this admission as a stunned gasp was released from the others in the room. Cameras flashed. It was now his moment in the spotlight; he had his prey running as he moved in for the kill.

“And Ms. McClendon has been involved with the whole thing also, hasn’t she?” Schume pressed again, his voice oozing contempt and confidence.

“No,” Greg said adamantly as strength returned to his voice. “She’s not strong enough for the cause, not like me. They came for me. They faked my death. They wanted her, but she was weak and would not succumb to their ways. It was all a plan to make everyone think I was dead. Then they took me to another planet and brought me back to life. And then we began our plan to take over the Earth, but then we...” His voice faded as if he were again struggling with the words.

“What, Mr. Carlson? What happened next?” Schume encouraged him.

“We...it was awful, simply terrible. We played cards to see who would control the Earth and I won.” Greg was smiling now. “Then you know what? I picked me out a cute little alien. She was green and had the prettiest big black eyes you ever saw. We’ve already picked names out for our kid.”

::Oh, Greg...you’ve got to be kidding me.:: Sarah said, trying to hold back her laughter.

“Mr. Carlson, what are you talking about?”

The hushed gasps of horror and astonishment were quickly changing along with Greg’s story. Murmurs and chuckles of laughter were beginning to rise steadily in the room. Schume’s face began to redden.

“Well, I thought you wanted to hear my alien abduction story,” Greg said. “They came and took me away to another planet and then we came back to Earth after we saw everything.” He paused. Then, looking around the room with a huge grin he yelled, “Elvis said to say hello to everyone. We talk at night when it’s clear. We don’t talk when it’s raining outside. But if it does rain, we talk every other Wednesday.

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And you know what? My doctor says I am making excellent progress, Mr. Schume. He says I don't take my medication as often as I should and sometimes he says that causes delusions or something like that. But isn't that good?"

::What an act, Greg. Oh, how I do love you. But—Elvis?::

The realization of his utter and disastrous defeat settled on the face of Raymond Schume.

"Great, Mr. Carlson. Just great," he said as he threw the papers he had in his hand up in the air and fell into his seat. He sat there, head in hands, looking down at his shoes.

"Does that mean we're through?" Greg asked.

::We're not...but Schume is...:: Sarah thought to Greg.

::He wanted answers. I just gave him different ones than the ones he wanted...::

There was no response to his question as the crowd began to dissipate rapidly, shaking their heads and laughing in amusement. As some of the other reporters were departing, they slapped Schume on the back.

"Great job, Ray."

"What's next? Three-headed monsters?"

"Sex around Uranus?"

More laughter accompanied the comments.

Schume was clearly furious as he cursed himself, his supposed source and this whole damned affair. He had set himself up for this bashing. Greg Carlson's approach had been simple yet brilliant, and definitely not that of the insane person he portrayed. Schume had underestimated his opponent.

Sarah watched as Greg descended from the podium and began to gather his things. She saw Schume approaching him.

::Watch out, Greg, here he comes...::

"So Greg, nice act," Schume began. "You made me look like a complete idiot, which was exactly what you wanted, isn't it?"

Greg looked around to ensure no one would be able to hear them. His half-wit demeanor vanished and he stared at the reporter with a serious and stern look.

"Yes, thank you. Maybe you better look for another story, Mr. Schume. I think the well has gone dry on this one for you."

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“No, I don’t think so. I’m like a terrier when it comes to a real story. Once I latch my teeth into it, I don’t let go. So you can expect to be hearing from me again.”

“Perhaps I can influence you to change your mind,” Greg said.

“I don’t think so.” He started for the door.

Greg formed the thoughts in his mind and gently pushed them toward the reporter’s mind.

::The story has not panned out. You will forget about this and move onto something else. The story has not panned out. You will forget about this and move onto something else.::

The reporter turned toward Greg looking perplexed at first; his eyes momentarily glazed.

“Well, they all don’t work out now, do they?” Schume said. “Heck, if they did, it would make it too easy, wouldn’t it.” He turned away from Greg and left the room.

::Come on, tell me what he said,:: Sarah asked.

::Oh, he just wanted to let me know he won’t be pestering us for a while.::

::That sounds like the condensed version.::

::Close enough. So what do you think?::

::I have to admit you had me wondering there for a while. But I think it worked perfectly. You almost sounded like you really have lost your mind. But there is one thing....::

::What?::

::Who’s the cute little alien you’re shacking up with?::

::Huh?::

::Close enough to the right answer. So, my half-wit, alien-chasing friend.

What’s next?::

::Now, the rebuttal from your office should be you were always aware of my failing mental state and, for privacy’s sake, you felt it was best to not bring out in public that you knew me for fear of embarrassment and ridicule and so on and so on.::

::Already working on it,:: she said.

::I’m out of here and heading back to the Council. I’ll talk to you soon.::

::Love you.::

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::Love you, too.::

Greg slept on the airplane as it cruised back to West Virginia. He figured a little rest after the successful press conference was well-earned now all indications were that Raymond Schume had been encouraged to direct his attention elsewhere.

Leaving his body to its much-needed rest, he traveled in his mind to the planet Acuba. Things appeared different from before; everything much more vivid and in sharper focus. He assumed that as he mastered the powers he did not yet understand, his perceptions would become more and more precise. There was still so much he needed to know from Vague.

You must concentrate on what you're doing, and only on one place at a time, he remembered Vague telling him. *There was another mystery. Why did the process require such intense concentration? Save the questions for later*, he thought, as he returned to concentrating on what he was doing.

The moon's features slowly became visible to him as he began to make out some of the contours and geography of the surface. He realized what he was seeing was not just the layout of the mountains and craters but a face. He had always suspected this image held a key to something he needed to know, but previously its meaning had been blocked from him. Now, as the details became clear to him he wondered, why now?

A familiar sound off to his right momentarily diverted his attention. He could see someone coming toward him, a humanoid of considerable age from what Greg could tell by its sure and carefully measured steps. Time seemed to stand still as the distance slowly decreased between them. The man had long, wispy white hair dangling around his shoulders. His face was heavily wrinkled, but his eyes had a youthful glow. He was wearing a white lab coat similar to that of a scientist or researcher, the pockets overflowing with items.

The man stopped a few feet away and Greg poised to flee, until he reminded himself that physically he was not present. All he would have to do was withdraw his mind in a split second.

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“Who are you?” Greg asked. The old man smiled at him with a genuine pleasure that would have warmed even the most pessimistic person.

“You have been calling me Vague. This physical shape belongs to a librarian from the planet Zire Archives named Robise. It was Robise who saved from destruction the computer core that enabled you to thwart Copolla’s plans. He was killed by Journo.”

“So why have you taken his image?”

“We can discuss that when we get back to Earth,” Vague said. He suddenly appeared nervous and anxious to leave.

“No, not yet. There’s something I want to see first,” Greg said as he began to turn to look at the moon.

“Perhaps that is not such a good idea,” Vague warned.

“Why?” The image was so clear and sharp there could be no mistaking what or who it was. “Copolla,” Greg murmured. “It’s Copolla’s face, but why? He’s dead. Been dead for two years.”

Despite his own protest, Greg had harbored a suspicion that might not be so. There was something about the riddles that had suggested Copolla’s hand, but he hadn’t said as much to anyone else because he had hoped he was wrong.

“He’s on Acuba, isn’t he?” Greg turned and asked Vague.

“We should go back and...talk.”

Greg turned back to the moon; Copolla’s face had been replaced with a scene that chilled him. The image was of Copolla, pointing a weapon at Leumas’ head and laughing...

Greg abruptly awoke as the plane landed at the airport. He was anxious to get back to his quarters where he could think and figure out what he was going to do now. *How many terrible things can happen at once?* he wondered, and then wished he had never had the thought.

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